

The background to Old Citizens cricket is an interesting one, and the account that follows will give an outline of what has happened over more than a century of playing. A club that relies on one school for its membership has obvious limitations, nevertheless not many cricket clubs can claim a respected captain of England and two Presidents of the M.C.C. among their past playing members. OCCC even provided a fast bowler for the Rest of the World XI that played against England.

THE ORIGIN

The history of our cricket club goes back a long way. The official date the club was founded is 1893. A meeting of Old Citizens took place with the main idea of forming an OC football club. This was agreed.

At the same meeting it was then proposed we should also start a cricket club. By the time the meeting concluded, it was agreed to launch cricket and Eton fives clubs for the old boys too. However, by then annual cricket matches between the school and the old boys had been taking place regularly since 1877. The very first game took place in 1864. There were some subsequent games in other years but these died out before the restart in 1877.

THE CLUB – *Getting Established*

The official formation meeting took place in September 1893, and the fixtures grew in the following seasons. RC Cole was the first captain of the club, and when Percy Hale was recruited we could turn out a fairly useful side for some years. We even undertook our first visit to Sussex, which included playing the strong Hastings & St. Leonards Priory club.

The Sussex Gazette dated August 24th 1899 reported that the Old Citizens played Arundel CC and lost by 45 runs. Apart from RC Cole, others mentioned were, JE Dent, JH Barnett, J Page, PW Hale, and JM Mirylees.

Later, the side found itself relying on two good players. WFJ (Thommo) Thomson, a good opening batsman and wicket-keeper who recalled in the Gazette “R Gill was a good, accurate, and intelligent fast bowler, who mixed magnificent inswingers with balls that went straight on, but other players consisted of a few ferrets and some rabbits”.

The Old Citizens was a wandering club, with no home ground. Indeed, the school did not have its own ground either, but hired pitches. Travel was difficult and very reliant on public transport, and many possible players were lost to their local clubs. In 1913 numbers became so short that the latter half of the season's fixtures were cancelled. Then World War I started, and sport forgotten.

THE SECOND INNINGS – *After the Great War*

The cricket club restarted in 1919 after the devastation of the war. FC Hawker, known by his first name of Frankie in those days, was the main figure responsible for starting to run a Saturday side again. In 1921 a second eleven was started. Stuart Chiesman, an Old Citizen who owned two large department stores (shopping emporiums), one at Lewisham and one at Maidstone, allowed us to use his company sports ground at New Eltham, which became our first home ground.

The cricket and other sports thrived in the twenties, with five football sides, lawn tennis, swimming and water polo, and the golf society. After ten years of running two sides a third eleven was added

for the 1930s.

This was a good time for our cricket club with a strong first eleven. Frankie Hawker played a bit for Essex CCC, John Bowden soon became a respected fast bowler on the club circuit, and Freddie Pearson was an attacking batsman and good left arm spin bowler, and an extrovert and popular character. We earned a reputation as being an interesting club to have on the fixture list. The team had a one armed bowler who had climbed the Matterhorn, and the first eleven were known for their social side and playing a few pranks.

Clubs such as Southgate, Richmond and South Hampstead featured in the season's programme. Apart from the school of course, Southgate is our oldest continuous opponent, an association going back over seventy-five years. The OC cricket reached a peak, and a few Sunday games started to be included for the first time by the end of the decade. War stopped play again after 1939.

ANOTHER INNINGS – *Another Re-building Task*

FC Hawker, now known by his middle name of Cyril, was still on the scene, but the person who got the cricket back on the field in 1946 was W Hubert Ollis, one of the prewar younger players. People were gradually being demobbed from the forces, and we managed a number of games helped by some players who had been too old for conscription.

There was a full fixture list with two Saturday teams and one Sunday side in 1947. Chiesmans sports ground had received a direct hit in the war, killing the groundsman, Jarvis. We could use it a bit with temporary changing facilities in 1946, but found a new home at Lazards Bank ground at Sunbury-on-Thames in 1947.

By 1950 we were running three Saturday sides, but the first eleven was not quite up to the strength it was before the war. We did retain many of the old clubs on the fixture list, such as Old Whitgiftians, Ealing, Lensbury, and Southgate, and there were even some good additions, like Woodford Wells, Sidcup, and Wimbledon.

During the fifties we usually had around the same number of players as we had before the war, but not quite enough good first team players regularly around to put out such consistently strong first elevens, so our target of reaching our earlier strength was not quite achieved. Good players from earlier years were past their peak, the younger element was not so talented. There were notable exceptions of course, including Mike Symons, and slightly later Graham Chidgey, son of Charles, and others such as Ian Brown who were well up to that standard.

A SUDDEN COLLAPSE

The end of the fifties saw many retirements, particularly from the second eleven that had been a strong side. There was a shortage of players. In 1960 we were forced to combine the second and third elevens. In 1961/2 we decided to run a single side during August, and two Saturday sides for the rest of the season.

One exceptional cricketer, Mike Brearley, who was the son of senior cricket master Horace Brearley, emerged from CLS. He went on to captain Cambridge University, and subsequently, England. Obviously we could not hope to see much of him playing for the Old Cits, but Hubert did his best to encourage him, and he played for us fifteen times in total from 1960 up to 1964.

We were fortunate to see much more of Graham Chidgey who developed into a very good

cricketer indeed, and even captained the Cits, in spite of being selected to play for the Club Cricket Conference, and also playing for Surrey CCC second eleven and invitation “fancy hat” and representative cricket.

However, the lack of players had become serious, and the club was lucky that Chris Dicker, one of the young team secretaries, realized we were in danger of folding up completely, and contacted any OCs he knew to try to get them to play. He was successful in attracting a few players who helped him by using their contacts, to fill the ranks over a few years.

We had to work hard in the bar after matches to drink back fixtures. Our sides became quite expert at various bar games in this before the breathalyzer period, and Peter Busby entertained with his “Death of Nelson” routine.

Dick Thatcher, John Petzold, Tony McPherson and Philip Lacamp did their best for the firsts, who were forced to carry many below standard team mates. Players starting at that time included Chris Peer, Tony and Peg Sawell, Bob Burnet, Geoff Bates, Peter Fuzz Stiles, Roger Radford, Jimmy Mackie, Trevor Brooks, Alan Sacks, players who turned out regularly, with many of them becoming stalwarts of the OCCC. In the end we managed well enough to keep the club going until we had just about sufficient new members.

FOLLOWING ON

Another important thing happening at that time was having to leave our ground at Sunbury. Lazards priced us out and had the idea of selling the ground for housing development. In the end their plan was refused planning permission, but in the circumstances we sought a new home venue. We looked at a number of options, including the possible purchase of the Avorians ground at Cobham, which was a bit ambitious in the financial circumstances, before moving to the Junior Sports Ground at Grove Park.

Like the main school sports ground it was in Marvels Lane. The school authorities thought the ground was really under used. It had once been the Mercers school ground, and offered good facilities. Two cricket pitches in the summer, changing over to two rugby and two football pitches in winter. The existing pavilion, used by the school, and temporarily by ourselves, was unlicensed but had a good specification.

Having our own ground helped recruit players from the school, and playing numbers improved. Initially we had reservations about pitch availability at the ground. The Old Mercers still used the ground for cricket and football, although the Mercers School had closed about five years or so earlier. The City Police also had an agreement to use the ground, but this was often during the week. Sunday use was difficult because the groundsman had not been employed to work on Sundays.

A SOLID BASE – *Settling Down and Home Advantage*

The existing clubhouse used by CLS could not be licensed, so we decided to go ahead and raise money to build our own next to it. The appeal just about raised enough funds for us to ask OC architect Peter Jones to design the building. McAlpine, another OC connection, offered to build it.

It was opened in 1967. There was a large tea room that could act as a function hall, with a skittle alley running down the side, a good sized bar which had an attractive tiled floor, a home dressing room, two smaller visitors dressing rooms, showers and two plunge baths. Outside there was a

covered veranda. Excellent for us. We formed a Pavilion Committee to run the ground. Bar rotas, catering, bar stocking, events, and outside lettings all had to be sorted. It worked pretty well even though many volunteers lived some way from the ground.

We got on so well with the Old Mercers cricketers, we asked the JCC if they could be made honorary Old Citizens, and this was agreed, and in 1968 they formed the basis of our new third eleven, captained by Brian Landers.

The school had an exceptional first eleven in 1969, and we had an excellent boost in playing strength when several joined us on a regular basis. Our cricket peaked again in the seventies and early eighties. Peg Sawell did a great job getting the sides together for many seasons. A few families used to come down to the ground and there was a good atmosphere which all helped to make it a real home ground for the club.

Three supporters who were regular visitors to Grove Park formed what players referred to as the Pissy Pa's Drinking Club, the fathers concerned were Edmonds, Sawell, and Dowdall. We attracted useful cricketers from CLS. The OCCC thrived again, numbers and first team strength were good, with new players coming in. Historically, OC bowling has usually tended to be stronger than its batting.

Fast bowler Saeed Hatteea joined us, so did Philip Sharnock and fellow left hand batsman Gerald Wainwright. A little bit later Mark Signy was able to make an impressive opening bowling pair with Saeed (known as Sid and Siggers). Others included Richard Vaughan, Steve Ringer, and Bruce Todd, and a couple of years later a good batsman, Martin Lewis.

Other elevens were bolstered by people like Andy Mitchell. Playing strength and numbers peaked, and there was plenty of socializing. A Sussex Tour was started in the late sixties and proved popular, lasting throughout the seventies. We also undertook two tours to Corfu. Tours were replaced by a Home Cricket Week in the eighties, and Bexhill CC came up to play in our week because they enjoyed hosting us on our Sussex tour. These were generally good times.

GROUND TREMORS

The late eighties was a sad time for OC sport. The imminent loss of our home ground hitting cricket, football, and dealing another blow to rugby. Added to that we learnt that the new school building would not include any fives courts. What had happened was that the school authorities decided that the senior school sports ground was sufficient for the needs of school sport, and the City Corporation offered the freehold of the ground to the JCC at a price that was attractive and somewhat less than the full market value.

The JCC was presented with a difficult challenge. The sports clubs wanted to take up the offer for Old Citizens sport, but the JCC feared that we could not afford to run it. The Pavilion Committee fought to retain the ground, pointing out that if in the event we could not afford to run the ground, we would still have the freehold to sell. In order to raise income to cover costs we discussed the situation with people that hired the facilities already, such as Hoares Bank, Swiss Bank and other firms that ran sports sides, and received encouraging promises for future support.

The effort proved to be of no avail. The JCC considered it to be too much of a financial gamble. They decided the best course of action would be to take advantage of the Corporation's offer, but look for a leisure company to purchase the ground from us, but with a guarantee that we could

continue to use the playing surfaces and our clubhouse. However, there were obviously going to be dangers if the buyers wanted us out afterwards.

The purchasers were not an established leisure company. At first the difficulties were predictable, for example, getting them to authorize buying materials to keep the ground in good condition. Then the owners expected the groundsman to spend too much of his time in their complex, rather than tending to the playing surfaces. The situation gradually deteriorated. We lost players, and so did the winter sports.

A SPRINT FOR THE BOUNDARY – *Blues and Twos*

Suddenly the Grove Park ground was in the news, but not for the right reason. There was a police raid. Mr. Rose, one of the directors, was seen sprinting towards the boundary of the second cricket pitch, and out the far end of the ground. It was a police raid concerning an investigation into drug smuggling.

It was believed Rose's wholesale grocery services had not restricted sales to the sort of goods traded by Tesco, Morrisons, Asda and Sainsbury etc., and the police were anxious to see if he could help with their inquiries. He was equally keen to take a secret hideaway holiday in Cornwall. The other director, the owner of a sound systems company, was left stranded, and needed to sell up.

Our own exit was in September 1988 at the end of the cricket season. It was a disappointing end to something that had promised so much for Old Cits sport.

A FALSE HOPE

One possibility arose for a new home ground that could have been an ideal solution. The Maori club, owned by the P & O Group made us an attractive offer. If we agreed to pay for a new extra cricket square on their ground, £25,000, we could use their lovely facilities at Worcester Park. We thought this idea was good, and the JCC went along with it. Unfortunately the company directors decided to sell their whole ground off to save money, just as many other big firms had done in the previous years.

ANOTHER HOME GROUND – *The UCL Decade*

We were lucky to find that the UCL (University College London) group had sports facilities available for hire at Shenley, Herts, and Chislehurst, Kent. At first the cricket club used both venues. The pitches and facilities were of a high quality, Shenley near London Colney, comprised 104 acres including four cricket pitches.

Cricket soon settled at Shenley, and rugby at Chislehurst. This continued until 1995, but in 1996 we had to use some other pitches owned by the group at Myddleton House because of extra demands made by Arsenal Football Club who paid a lot of money to use Shenley as their training ground.

Arsenal wanted to build a state of the art medical and treatment building on the ground. UCL did not like the idea because they were freeholders and wished to continue to own the ground and thought it could cause complications. It resulted in the football club deciding they would have to have a training facility of their own.

In the end they purchased an area next to the UCL ground. UCL missed the income from Arsenal, and looked for a replacement. Watford FC took their place but made demands for training areas that meant that two of the cricket pitches were lost for use. So in 2001 we had to leave Shenley

soon after Watford started training there.

THE TRAVELLERS XI – *Moving On*

In 2002 we hired two grounds, Woodside Park, and Botany Bay CC, at North Finchley and North of Enfield respectively. Pitch availability was limited, because we had to share with other clubs at Woodside Park, and were using spare pitches on Botany Bay's second pitch. In 2003 we got sufficient pitches for Botany Bay to become our home ground, but by 2006 we had to use Rowley Lane Sports at Arkley for a season in addition to get sufficient pitches, because of increased use by BBCC, who moved their youngsters development eleven from Sunday to Saturday.

In 2007 Rowley Lane became unavailable and we were embarrassingly short of home grounds. The following year we got a couple of extra pitches from Old Owens CC at Potters Bar. In 2010 we managed to hire a few pitches from Old Albanian CC at St.Albans, lovely facilities but expensive, and St. Albans was not an ideal location.

In 2011 we hoped we had found a long term solution. Winchmore Hill CC agreed we could share their third square with Hampstead third eleven, and just use Old Albanian's ground for a couple of dates. The situation did not last long, as WHCC gave Hampstead permission to increase their bookings for 2013.

We are now using some pitches at Mill Hill Village CC, and still seeking a good long term home.

A.G.S