

HISTORY

# Keeping our end up: Part one

**Louis Gatt** charts a brief history of the game of cricket in Malta.

Cricket, that most English of games, has been played in Malta for well over 100 years. It was originally brought to our islands by British servicemen, so it is logical to assume it has been alive here since the early 19th century. Records trace the game played at the now Marsa Sports Club ground back to the year 1900, when the club was known as The United Services Sports Club, primarily for the leisure of British army, navy and air force officers.

I have divided this history of the game in Malta into two sections, this article will deal with cricket here up to the departure of the British services in 1979, while the second part will chart its progress from 1979 up to the present day.

At the height of the British period there were more than 30,000 service personnel and their families resident on the

island. There were also a few more cricket pitches scattered around Malta than our current single one. The game was also played on the parade ground in Floriana, at the Pembroke barracks, at Hal Far, Kalkara and even Ta' Qali. In fact, until very recently the concrete cricket pitch could still be seen on that former wartime airfield. Sadly it was surrounded by a small copse of mature trees, so staging any sort of a match there would have been impossible anyway.

The first half of the 20th century was arguably the heyday of the game locally. Apart from the obvious services sides in the major cricket league, there were a number of indigenous Maltese elevens. Floriana always seemed to be able to field a formidable team, with players like Victor Miller and Harry Samuel prominent. Miller was a very fine all-rounder who was still playing to a very high standard

in the late 1960s and beyond. The Miller family contributed a couple of other fine players in two of Victor's three sons, Stephen and Norman, with whom I myself played. I also knew the late Tommy Costa who was, by all accounts, especially his own, a demon fast bowler and prodigious hitter, who turned out for Kalkara during and after World War II.

The 1940s and 50s saw a number of world class cricketers perform here. For example, Miller once told me that the Australian team, on their way by sea to tour the UK, used to stop in Malta to play a game at the Marsa. In fact, probably the greatest batsman of all time Don - later Sir Don - Bradman once scored over 300 runs in a day at the Marsa, a Malta record that stands to this very day.

There were also a number of inter-departmental services teams that played in various minor cricket leagues also around at this time. Hence the



The great Sir Don Bradman.

pitches at Hal Far, Pembroke and others.

I began my own cricketing career with a major league side called The Malta Civilians in the late 1960s. At the time the team was captained by Miller and contained some formidable indigenous players. Albert Borg was one of the finest, a batsman who would have got into many a top-rated UK club sides. I once saw him score a ton (100 runs) against some very good bowling and at the end he came off the pitch - on an extremely hot day - without even breathing heavily. Another terrific cricketer around at this time was Roy Swift. Originally a seam bowler who could bat a bit, he turned

into an extremely handy all-rounder who struck the ball a long way and who modified his bowling action to become a very economical off spinner. One of the Civilians' most stylish batsmen was Tancred (Teddy) Vella who rarely had a bad day at the crease. He was also a brilliant fielder and later became a useful wicketkeeper. The Civilians keeper at this time however was the neat and athletic Kit Ripard. We could also boast a comparative rarity cricketwise, a left arm seamer in Eddie Xuereb.

After the aborted British withdrawal in 1972, the United Services Sports Club was turned over to Maltese administration and renamed the Marsa Sports

Club. The services returned later that year and the major cricket league also returned. At this time it comprised eight teams: two army regimental teams, two RAF teams - flyers and ground crew, one naval side based at Fort St Angelo, one team of army departments (pay corps, catering corps etc...) and two civilian teams. Of the last mentioned, the Overseas, composed mainly, but not entirely, of UK school teachers from Tal Handaq services secondary school - and finally the Marsa Sports Club team. This was the team I played for occasionally and comprised the remnants of The Malta Civilians, plus a fair smattering of ex pats.

The major cricket league ran from 1972 right up to 1978, the year before the British services finally left for good. The standard of cricket played during this period was pretty high and I would put it at decent UK club level. We entertained a number of touring sides, mainly from the UK, every year and managed to acquit ourselves very well overall. Probably the best touring side was The Incogniti, led by the legendary Oliver Batcock. Oliver was an actor by profession and ran the "Incogs" for many years. He was a wily medium paced seam bowler who played well into his seventies. It was said that he took more wickets between the age of 50 to 75 than he did in the first 50 years of his life.

The development of the game in our islands has not always been well handled. Since the early part of the 20th century only one school, St Edwards actually played the game and there has been a dearth of qualified coaches here since day one. During the 1980s De La Salle school could put out a side, which was mainly made up of Asian lads whose fathers were working in the oilfields of Libya. Latterly there has been a little more emphasis on cricketing development, but we will deal with that aspect in the second part of my contribution, when we cover cricket in Malta from 1979 to the present day. •



The Marsa Sports Club team, champions of 1976. Rear, left to right: Peter Attrill, Colin Easton, David Faulkner, Richard Gwynn, Robin Gill, Riaz Ahmed, Charles Mizzi. Front: Roy Swift, Ash Khan Zada, John Appleyard, Jon Rosser, Teddy Vella, Stephen Miller.



A group photo of a 1970s St Edwards cricket team.



A wartime inter services cricket match in Malta.