

When WG made 400 not out at Grimsby

Of all the Victorian personalities WG Grace was the most easily recognised, even in an era without television and with photography in its infancy

WORDS: John Shawcroft

THE IMAGE remains familiar. Flowing black beard adding majesty to a magnificent physique which leaned towards corpulence in his later years. And the favoured red and yellow MCC cap, perched on a head which towered above his contemporaries, just as his talent dominated three cricketing decades. WG Grace's career figures are awesome, even when set against those of more recent players who established them in times when some of the game's statistics have been devalued. In comparison with the players of his day, they become staggering. During the 1870s his batting average was almost double that of his rivals; his bowling on a par with the best. Only four batsmen have made more runs - and most of them on far better pitches than WG ever enjoyed: only five bowlers have taken more wickets and only one fieldsmen has held more catches in the history of cricket.

It is now over 150 years since his birth at Downend, near Bristol, on 18th July, 1848. Like his father, WG qualified as a doctor and employed a locum during the summer when he was playing cricket. WG was the driving force behind the formation of the county club, captaining the team from its beginnings until he left in 1899, when he went on to guide the fortunes of the short-lived London County who played their matches at Crystal Palace.

Although WG had a parish practice near Bristol, socially he tended to fall between two stools. Not of a public school background and not quite

county, he was however, as a physician, a person of some standing. To the cricketing public and beyond, he became 'The Champion' and later on 'The Grand Old Man'.

Small wonder that the news that Grace was playing in a match would double the gate. There are few better illustrations than his appearances for the United South of England against odds which did much to popularise the game in the 1870s. So his arrival in Grimsby with the United South XI in 1876 was eagerly awaited.

At the age of twenty-eight, WG was at the peak of his powers although he had been concerned about his failure to discover his best form in the early part of the season. By the time he booked into the Yarborough Hotel for the match at Littlefield Lane to be held on 10th, 11th and 12th July, matters were improving. Immediately before the game he had been engaged in a trio of Gentlemen versus Players encounters at the Oval where he made 90, Lords (169) and at Prince's, where he fared only moderately. After Grimsby was to come the famous trinity of 344 at Canterbury, 177 at Clifton and 318 not out at Cheltenham in consecutive innings within seven days. Grace was to finish the season with 2,622 runs and an average of 62, more than double the next best first-class aggregate and half as much again as the next best average of his contemporaries in 1876.

Grimsby, fielding twenty-two against the United South's eleven, approached the game in confident mood. From the town itself came two clergymen,

Reverend Charles Warren who was captain and Reverend J P Young. Other Grimsby representatives were G H Clark, J Ellis, I Good, J Gorbutt, S T Haddelsey, R Lincoln, P Martindale and J North. Grantham provided P Dethier and W Parke and from Hainton, E Hibbert and W Scott. Others in the team were John Senescall (Sleaford), F Paley (Northwold) and another clergyman, Reverend J W Loft of Swallow. There were three professionals, Anthony and May from Nottinghamshire and McLean, a wicket-keeper from Yorkshire. Completing the twenty-two were T Aitken and R Hodder who were from the Galatez, a ship stationed at Hull.

There was some disappointment when the United South team was announced. It included WG, his brother Fred and their cousin, Walter Raleigh Gilbert. Henry Jupp remained among the best batsmen of his day but others were past their best.

WG was no stranger to Lincolnshire. In June 1870 the United South met Twenty-two of Sleaford, Grace making 115 and sharing an opening partnership of 166 with Fred Grace.

Olay began slowly after WG had won the toss and opened with Humphrey. When he was on six Grace survived an appeal for lbw, the umpire's sympathy being with the crowd which had come to see WG bat and not Grimsby bowl. By close of play, the United South had made 217 for two, Grace being 130 not out.

The second day was very much a family matter. WG celebrated the receipt of a telegram saying his wife had presented him with another son with a break for champagne. By the end of the day he was still there with 314, Fred having scored sixty and W R Gilbert 104 not out in a total of 537 for six. Grimsby had had enough, both on the field and off it. Few bothered to watch the final day, when United South were dismissed for 680, Grace carrying his bat for 399, including four sixes and twenty-seven fours. Grimsby lost eleven wickets for eighty-eight in the remaining ninety minutes, six of them to Frank Silcock, the Hertfordshire fast-medium bowler, four to Fred Grace and one, the captain, Reverend Charles Warren, being stumped off WG.

There followed a little bit of history when Sam Haddelsey, a Grimsby solicitor, suggested the addition of a single to make WG's score a round 400. Thus the scorebook was amended: United South 681, W G Grace 400 not out. Grace later recollected that he did not feel half so tired at the end of the Grimsby innings as he did in the following epics at Canterbury and Cheltenham.

I can just remember that the Twenty-two thought our team rather a weak one; that the "wicket was perfect and that the grass was closely cut for about forty yards square but the rest of it a little bit long."

But if posterity gained from WG's three days in Grimsby, the financiers didn't. The guarantors lost money. □

