

Tasmanian Cricket History

Part 1 – Early Days: The 1800's

Although little evidence has survived of Tasmania's early days, cricket was probably played on the island soon after its European settlement in 1803. Certainly by 1814, when the colony's chaplain Robert Knopwood noted in his diary the popularity of the game during the holiday period around Christmas, the game was well established as a pastime, although the extent of its organisation remains a doubtful quantity.

Contemporary publications of the late 1820s indicate no club organisation, but rather matches arranged by hostelry proprietors with an eye on improving bar receipts. Thus, in March 1826, Joseph Bowden of the Lamb Inn in Brisbane Street in Hobart was moved to advertise a match for 50 guineas between "Eleven Gentlemen from the Counties of Sussex and Kent against the choice of the whole Island of Van Diemen's Land".

There is also little evidence of a well-defined cricket season as we know it. It may have been a desire to follow the English calendar that motivated the staging of a game between teams of English and native origin at Hobart in June, 1832. The recorder of the play in a contemporary newspaper was moved to comment that the ground was "remarkably slippery", but that nevertheless, a "large concourse of people" assembled to watch proceedings.

Parallel to, but lagging somewhat behind, developments on the mainland, cricket clubs were established in the mid-1830s. John Marshall, recently arrived from England, was a prime mover in this respect. The Hobart Town Club was formed in the spring of 1832, and three years later, a breakaway group formed the Derwent Club. The Launceston Club, now among Australia's oldest surviving cricket clubs, was founded in 1841.

Matches between clubs were occasional rather than regular, with much of the cricket activity happening within clubs. Cricket was not necessarily confined to the main centres of Hobart and Launceston. Occasional forays by the town clubs to the outlying districts of Richmond, Kempton, Sorell and Clarence Plains (now Rokeby) in the south, and Westbury, Longford, Evandale and Hadspen in the north always discovered stern opposition from country players, while the more isolated Macquarie Valley west of Campbell Town in the northern Midlands had its own self-contained cricket fraternity. Scorecards of matches played between the early settlers of this agriculturally fertile district have survived, and tell of all-day matches followed by sumptuous banquets at the various homesteads, the surnames of whose owners can still be found in the area today.

Contact between the residents of Launceston and Hobart, 200 kilometres apart, was difficult to establish, and the first North-South cricket match was not played until 1850, after an abortive attempt in 1841. This first match was played at Oatlands, halfway between the two centres, and indicated a spirit of compromise that was not always evident thereafter. The Launceston cricketers were indeed more inclined to look over Bass Strait for their intended opposition, and it was the Launceston Club that negotiated Australia's first inter-colonial match at Launceston, against Victoria in early 1851. Hobart was unable to entice the Victorians south for another seven years, and the cricket played on that occasion indicated such a disparity between the skills of the various settlements that the Victorians felt disinclined to regularly play Tasmanian teams on equal terms for another 30 years.

Nevertheless, the presence of the powerful Victorians in Tasmania gave the game a much needed impetus, and the Southern Tasmanian Cricket Club, a loose amalgam of the Hobart clubs, was formed soon after. This evolved in time to become the Southern Tasmanian Cricket Association, the forerunner of today's organisation, established on 1 February 1866.

Tasmanian cricket in the 19th century was beset by a technology-lag that badly inhibited its development. While Tasmanians were clinging to their belief that they ought to be represented by amateurs, the mainland colonies, particularly Victoria, were developing apace through the employment of skilled professional cricketers. The round-arm bowling of the Victorians in 1858 comprehensively did for the Tasmanians, who disallowed such liberties with the bowling arm in their own game, and even as late as 1863, Thomas Hogg was no-

ballled for bowling above the shoulder at the same time as that mode of delivery was being legalised in England.

The evolution of the game in the 1860s and 1870s that characterised cricket in England and in the mainland colonies largely passed Tasmania by, a direct consequence of the population stagnation on the island colony as the population of the mainland grew exponentially. The lure of the Victorian goldfields resulted in a drain of young men from Tasmania, whilst the stain of its convict past acted as an effective disincentive to potential free settlers. Representative cricket was confined to a series of unsatisfactory "odds" matches against Victoria, in which the occasional victory was attributed more to weight of numbers than to any inherent superiority of the Tasmanian cricketers.

Even contact between the north and the south was ephemeral and fragmented; occasional matches between the two centres were played, but were overshadowed by differences in philosophy, especially on the question of the use of professionals and the issue of odds matches.

Despite the forces working against Tasmanian representative cricket, another source of competition in the form of the first English team to visit Australia presented itself. The English tour of 1861-62 included a game against a Tasmanian XXII, in which the touring side won the four innings game by four wickets despite an apparent generous handicapping system. Of interest, the bat presented to Tasmania's highest scorer, Thomas Whitesides, by the tourists will be a prize possession on display in Cricket Tasmania's museum at Bellerive Oval.

Apart from three eleven-a-side matches between 1869 and 1873, all won handsomely by Victoria, Tasmania played no first-class cricket between 1858 and 1877, when a Tasmanian team travelled to South Australia. The status of Tasmanian cricket may be gauged by the fact that club sides Albert (from Sydney), and East Melbourne felt themselves able to take on the best from Tasmania in the 1870s. The South Australian trip itself was overshadowed by a dispute between two members of the team, captain WH Walker and JA Ferguson, which was allowed to boil over into open confrontation between the north and the south on the team's return to Tasmania.

Through the efforts of JG Davies, owner of the Mercury and a keen cricketer, Tasmania's fortunes turned for the better in the 1880s. Frequent visits by the plethora of England teams that toured Australia in those years revived local interest in the game, as did the engagement of a coach, Tom Kendall, in Hobart. A tour of the South Island of New Zealand was boldly arranged and successfully executed in 1884, and a first-innings win against the English tourists of 1887-88 prompted Victoria to resume first-class cricket against Tasmania in 1889. By this time, Hobart's cricketers had a ground that they could call their own, high on the Queen's Domain, and improved organised competition between the clubs gave the players regular and competitive practice.

With similar developments occurring in Launceston, this improved organisation threw up players of the quality of EJK Burn and CJ Eady in Hobart and EAC Windsor and JH Savigny in Launceston.

Tasmanian thus entered upon a new era in its cricket evolution, in which games against Victoria almost every season, and even New South Wales occasionally, gave welcome exposure to the island's cricketers, and even allowed the best of them to seriously vie for national selection.

Compiled by Ric Finlay