

Ashes 2015: A game of village cricket showed how close we are

GIDEON HAIGH THE AUSTRALIAN JULY 07, 2015 12:00AM



Australian cricket team the Reds on tour in England. Source: Supplied

In the next seven weeks, the cricket publics of Australia and England will hear ceaselessly of their differences — their many decades of mutual antagonism, their innately antipathetic temperaments. Yet in the village of Stoneleigh on Sunday, a church service and a game of cricket conveyed how deep is their shared heritage.

Stoneleigh Abbey, 8km from Coventry, was founded by Cistercians in the 12th century. For 350 years it was the seat of the Leigh family, whose ancestral lands at one time covered a third of the county of Warwickshire, farmed by numberless small-scale tenants.

One of them was Thomas Parkes, the last of whose seven children, Henry, was baptised in Stoneleigh's St Mary the Virgin Church 200 years ago last week. After briefly attending the village school, he worked in a sweatshop making ropes, then apprenticed as a bone and ivory turner.

His father, however, was shortly to fall on hard times as corn prices plunged with the cessation of the Napoleonic Wars. The Leighs turned him off his farm, and the family were scattered, Henry as far away as the colony of NSW, where he arrived in 1839.

Serially improvident Henry was no luckier with money than Thomas, but he had a knack for politics, and between periods as a bankrupt served as premier of NSW on five occasions. And if any figure is identified with the cause of federation, it is the "Australian Colossus", who in portraits and photographs stares down from his 2m like an Old Testament prophet, exuding

patriotic destiny.

Yet part of Sir Henry Parkes, as he became, never left Stoneleigh, as the local history society discovered whilst researching his life for a bicentennial celebration. Memories of England festoon his six volumes of verse. "Tomorrow's sun will beauteous rise/in Australasia's summer skies," he wrote in *My Native Land*. "But more than beautiful to me/Would winter's wildest morning be/In that dear land!"

The regard was reciprocated. On his only return trip to England, in 1882, Parkes was feted in Stoneleigh by descendants of those who had beggared his father. He was greeted by a fife and drum band, travelled in the Leighs' private carriage. A lifesize portrait of him was unveiled.

There were multiple ironies in commemoration of Parkes' bicentenary with a game of cricket on the ground at Stoneleigh Abbey, 12 years ago judged England's most picturesque. For a start, Parkes deplored the "inordinate appetite for sports and amusements" as a "danger to a sound and healthy public spirit in Australia".

"Outdoor exercises and indoor recreations are excellent within rational limits," he wrote in *Fifty Years in the Making of Australian History* (1892). "But man in a civilised state has capacities for something more, and lives under obligations to use his capacities for much higher objects." To help Stoneleigh CC celebrate the "crimson thread of kinship", moreover, came competition of a suitable shade: Melbourne's Reds, one of two clubs to emerge from social matches between the Communist Party of Australia and the International Socialists in 1979, and currently touring England. Their first decade, as club historian Tony Roberts has noted, consoled members through the trauma of the last decade of the Cold War: "The thwack of bat on ball was a more appealing sound to the average Reds cricketer than the clunk of your own head against a brick wall." They today lay proud claim to being "the only known sporting club in the Western world that consciously supports left-wing principles".

Disclaimer alert: I play cricket in the Mercantile Cricket Association against the Reds and their impresario Alec Kahn, a club administrator of unflagging industry and an opening batsman so legendarily dour that he has inspired his own *Downfall* video.

In said video, Alec responds apoplectically to his selection committee's suggestion that he drop down the order: "When I was 40, I batted for 61 days straight. Not one hint of a false shot! Give me No-Doz, a saline drip, I'd bat for a fricken year! There's not a club in the Mercantile I haven't bored the arse off!"

Sunday's spectacle was perhaps slightly enhanced by Alec doing a day's umpiring, in tie and butcher's coat, although his handiwork was subtly evident in other ways.

When the History Society suggested that the church service beforehand be graced by a guest speaker, Alec politely vetoed the first two suggestions: former prime minister John Howard and High Commissioner Alex Downer. The eventual guest, frankly far more appropriate, was Ian Thom, Parkes' great-great-grandson, who read a passage from the family's King James Bible underlined by the Colossus himself, 1 Psalms sounding like a benediction for Adam Gilchrist: "Blessed is the man that walketh...."

Thom, a retired engineer and manufacturing executive, is deeply steeped in his family's folklore, 86 antipodean descendants. In May, 212 of these descendants gathered to toast their forebear amid another of his earthly works, Centennial Park, whose creation Parkes sponsored in 1888. Alec here having no say-so, Tony Abbott was the family's guest.

Now Thom, after speaking movingly of his family's connectedness to its heritage, unveiled a plaque next to the 900-year-old font in which not only his great-great grandfather but his great-great-great grandfather and great-great-great-great grandfather were baptised. Some of Parkes' verse was ably read by a local schoolgirl, and Advance Australia Fair and God Save the Queen were sung consecutively by a congregation of locals and visitors, cricketers and otherwise.

The game? Given that Parkes himself might have struggled to know for whom to barrack, what else could it be but a draw? The elements diplomatically closed in just as Stoneleigh began threatening Reds' total.

The ersatz Ashes, a bail partly burned in a barbecue on Saturday night and protruding from an old perfume bottle, were therefore shared. And it's the sharing, of course, that will make the differing of the next seven weeks so enjoyable.

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