



HENRY BLOFELD: THE FIRST 'YOUNG CRICKETER OF THE YEAR' BY DOUGLAS MILLER

'It beats cover's outstretched left hand and races over the ropes in front of the Tavern, and that's his hundred, his first against Australia...' This is the stuff of day dreams, the fantasy world into which many a Cricket Society member must surely have slipped. Perhaps the mind's eye commentary is in the distinctive, reassuring tones of John Arlott; or maybe it is the more effervescent Brian Johnston at the microphone. It is a world in which reality has no part to play. No matter that the pinnacle of playing achievement was the occasional appearance for the school third XI – in fantasyland there are no such barriers to international success.

It was much the same for the young Henry Blofeld. He, too, dreamt of following Denis Compton and Bill Edrich, the childhood heroes of his earliest cricket-playing summer, that marvellous year of 1947 when they carried all before them. But for Henry there was one great difference – it need not have been fantasy. A schoolboy prodigy, how far might he have travelled in the game had he not sustained the accident that nearly ended his life at the age of 17? We shall never know, and it will always be as the inimitable 'Blowers' that we shall remember him rather than for any deeds on the field of play.

Born shortly after the outbreak of war, Henry Blofeld enjoyed the privileged upbringing of a family who had been landowners of the Hoveton estate in Norfolk since the 17th century. With a sister ten years older and a brother, destined to become a High Court judge, seven years his senior, Henry was the youngest of the family. A fearsome grandmother still lived in the big house surrounded by servants, while Henry's parents occupied the Home Farm, where their latest addition was kept in place by a nanny. They, too, employed a cook and parlour maid and, notwithstanding Hitler's predilection for Norfolk as target practice for his bombers, there was a pattern of life into which Bertie Wooster could have dropped without obvious discomfort.

With a host of estate workers to share the secrets of their crafts and to introduce him to the birdlife of the Broads, Henry developed a love of the countryside and of the ways of nature that still sustains him whenever he can return to his Hoveton home. A special childhood friend among his father's workers was Freddie Hunn, who looked after the cattle feeds. His day job over, Freddie assumed the duties of groundsman for the estate's cricket pitch. It was there that Henry first became aware of the game that would shape his life.

The love affair began in earnest when he was shipped off to preparatory school at Sunningdale at the brutally early age of seven and a half. A term of very junior cricket with underarm bowling and no pads, all presided over by a hearty mistress, was enough to whet the appetite, and a highlight of the summer holidays was to be taken to watch the Norfolk team in action. The following year Henry enjoyed his first visit to Lord's when his parents took him to the Saturday of the Second Test. The long opening partnership between Barnes and Morris in Australia's second innings eventually came to an end and Henry's day was made as he saw Don Bradman come to the crease. Uncharacteristically, the Don got within sight of a century before being dismissed for 89. Henry saw the whole innings.

His own play was soon developing apace. An early talent as a leg break bowler took him, as a nine-year-old, into the top game at Sunningdale. In 1950 he won his school colours, but by this time fate had taken a hand, a shoulder injury allowing him to find that his true metier lay with the wicket-keeping gloves. A life-long friend, Edward Lane Fox, was another precocious talent at Sunningdale. A gifted left-arm spinner, he lured schoolboy opponents down the pitch and, as the cliché goes, Henry did the rest.

Edward Lane Fox looks back over 55 years and remembers that his friend's wicket-keeping was 'superb', but he chuckles as he recalls one match in which they had humbled the opposition for only five, 'but it shouldn't have been that many. Henry let one through his legs for two byes!'

As had always been planned, Henry duly moved on to Eton. There his cricketing talent soon took the eye. By 1955, when he was still only 15, his wicket-keeping brought him a place in the Eton Eleven. Tom Pugh, three years Henry's senior and later to captain Gloucestershire, was the school's leading batsman. He saw the young keeper from the vantage point of first slip and now recalls that Henry was "an absolutely brilliant wicket-keeper??. Moreover, Tom stresses, with over 600 boys playing cricket in those days – more than opted for the river – 'you had to be exceptional to get picked as a 15-year-old. It was frowned upon to be chosen so young. The team really had to need you.'

In that more leisurely age the Eton and Harrow match was still one of the highlights of the Lord's calendar. By tradition Eton used the home dressing room, where Henry watched the match begin well enough for Eton. Then there was a collapse and, with the score on 110 for six, he was making his way through the Long Room to join his captain, Clem Gibson. The pair added 46 runs, of which Henry's share was 22, the third highest score of the innings and runs that were to prove vital in a match that Eton eventually won by 38 runs.

With his prep school friend Lane Fox claiming five for 33, Harrow were dismissed for 105 to concede a first innings lead of 56. The Eton middle order then collapsed for a second time and, when Henry arrived at the crease, the score was 115 for six. Rex Neame, Harrow's captain and a guileful off-spinner, stood on the verge of a hat-trick. Blissfully unaware of this, Henry charged up the pitch attempting an overambitious pull to mid-wicket. Only when he was back in the pavilion did he realise that he had played his part in creating history. Tom Pugh was in the dressing-room when he returned. 'If I'd known I was on a hat-trick I'd have tried harder', he remembers Henry saying. 'Nowadays we'd call that cool!' Tom reflects.

His second summer in the Eton Eleven saw Henry opening the innings and heading the averages with 585 runs at 41.78. Wisden adds that 'he was the best wicket-keeper to play for Eton for many years'. It was his glove-work that was primarily responsible for his selection for the Public Schools Eleven to play the Combined Services. In a strong batting side Henry came in at 81 for six. At 97 for seven the crisis was deepening when he was joined at the wicket by Simon Clarke, a future scrum half for England. Together they added 81 as Henry, in particular, enjoyed the occasional leg-spin of Stuart Leary and Raman Subba Row. The quicker bowlers returned, but Henry was now set and Yorkshire's Bob Platt received the same aggressive treatment as the spinners. With number eleven for company, Henry reached his hundred. His undefeated 104 had taken him just two and a quarter hours.

There had been only two previous schoolboy centuries in this traditional fixture – by Peter May and Colin Cowdrey. Henry had chosen the right stage on which to hit the headlines, for among those who witnessed him putting the Combined Services' bowling to the sword will have been influential figures in the Cricket Society. Thus it was that the 16-year-old Etonian became the first recipient of the Society's award for the most promising Young Player of the Season.

Henry remembers a dinner in the old Tavern. It was quite a stuffy occasion for a youngster. 'I do remember there was great disapproval of this teenager smoking!' Ronnie Aird made the presentation. 'It was a copy of Altham's history bound in green vellum, and they gave me the cricket ball off which I'd scored my century.'

There were games for Norfolk that August, and for the next summer Henry was appointed captain of the Eleven at Eton. The season was barely a month old when he and Edward Lane Fox were racing on their bicycles towards Agar's Plough, where the Eleven played their matches. Henry's attention was distracted as they were about to cross Datchet Lane. His friend remembers vividly how he crashed into a passing bus, hitting it just behind the front wheel and being carried along for yards before being thrown back onto the road. Henry can now speak of the accident in jocular vein, enjoying the revelation that the occupants of the bus were members of a French Women's Institute; but at the time he was close to death.

Henry's cricket at Eton was over, but his recovery was swift enough for him to play a few more matches for Norfolk, though with little success. In truth, the accident had changed his life for good. It was some years before his full mental faculties returned, yet he was able to go up to Cambridge that autumn, King's College having waived the necessity for an entrance exam. The summer brought a few games for the University under Ted Dexter, but the incipient genius was no more. There was no place available behind the stumps, batting was not as easy as he had once found it and Henry did his cause no favours in his first match by returning to Cambridge on the milk train after partying in London.

His form for Norfolk confirmed that he was not the player he had once been, but 1959 brought him one of the last batting places in a weak Cambridge side from which Ted Dexter and Ossie Wheatley had now departed. "We were not a great team", the captain David Green reflects, 'but Henry was a delightful chap to have in one's side – a supportive and loyal team member. And when you are a poor side you need people who will keep the spirits up.'

With exams looming, Henry had escaped the early matches in which a succession of young batsmen were tried out and found wanting against the likes of Peter Loader, Alec Bedser and Les Jackson. Life became a bit easier for those who were called up later. Runs against the Free Foresters and then a decent knock against Hampshire ensured that Henry was taken on tour – nine games and then the Varsity match. Though sadly unproductive against Oxford, he had registered his only first-class century in the previous match with 138, also at Lord's, against MCC.

A college more sympathetic to sport than King's might have allowed Henry to return for a third year without imposing disconcerting restrictions, but after just two years it was decided that he should seek his future in the wider world. He would play on for Norfolk until 1965, but his first-class cricket was virtually over. Without his accident Tom Pugh believes that Henry would have played 'at least 30 Tests'. He recalls a glimpse of the unfulfilled potential – against Radley in the Cricketer Cup, when Ted Dexter, a recent first change for England, came on to bowl. 'Henry hooked him in front of square for four, picked him up on the legside – just a nudge off the front foot for six. I've never seen that shot played before or since. Another hook for four and it's 'Thank you very much, Ted'.'

Edward Lane Fox is less certain of his potential. He agrees that Henry was a fine player of fast bowling: 'He had a very good eye and a tremendous ability to pick up a fast bowler off leg stump, and he was a very good cutter'. But as a player of spin he was less convincing and, in the weeks leading up to his accident, his Eton friend had noticed that 'his batting was wobbling a bit.'

After Cambridge young Blofeld needed to earn a living, and a job was found for him with a merchant bank. This had just one major drawback: it bored him to tears. The following summer he absconded and turned his back on a career where his Etonian background would have served him well. As he strove

to string together a living from sundry reporting assignments, Henry still had useful connections, not least through playing for E.W.Swanton's Arabs, where John Woodcock was one who proffered early help and advice.

Henry was moving into a world where he would be judged on merit. The dilettante image he may appear to have cultivated is deceptive: the early years were not easy and a hallmark of his success has been his willingness to work hard. Thus it was only after cobbling together a package for the Guardian and the Sketch that he was able to make his first overseas tour, to cover M.J.K. Smith's team in India in 1963/64.

An irony of this tour was that Henry Blofeld's childhood fantasy almost came true. He was within an ace of becoming England's most improbable post-war cricketer. On the eve of the Second Test in Bombay various stomach disorders had reduced the touring party to ten fit men. Both wicket-keepers had already been inked in to play and Henry was the closest approximation to a player with recent first-class experience. Only Micky Stewart's plucky struggle onto the field from his hospital bed denied him. By teatime on the first day Stewart had retired for good. Perhaps the selectors made the wrong decision!

Henry Blofeld is now a national institution, so it is surprising to learn that he had worked as a cricket journalist for ten years before being enlisted into the Test Match Special Team in 1972. There he has become the member to attract most E-mails. 'Nobody is indifferent to Blowers', says the long-serving producer Peter Baxter. 'It was the same with Fred Trueman'. The fans had their say in a recent Wisden Cricketer poll: invited to choose their dream team for television with at least one member drawn from a list that excluded the established Sky or Channel Four commentators, readers' most popular choice from a list of 24 outsiders was Henry Blofeld. His 1,334 votes dwarfed the 423 given to Jonathan Agnew and the 408 assigned to Christopher Martin-Jenkins.

What is the secret of Blowers' popularity? Why should it be that so many cricket lovers echo the feelings of David Green when his old Cambridge captain says, 'I can't wait for him to come on'. 'The great thing is easily identifiable voices that bring something different to the table', says Peter Baxter. 'He's the lighter side of TMS, yet he's a chap who has made a first-class hundred. He knows what he's talking about.' A literate man, Henry's special passion is the books of P.G.Wodehouse, first read to him by his rather austere father at Hoveton. He has subsequently collected first editions and in his commentary, says Peter Baxter, 'he uses phrases from Wodehouse almost subconsciously.'

Henry's time with TMS came to an end when he was beguiled by the Murdoch purse to try his hand with Sky in 1989. It was not his natural home and when, for a time, Sky's share of the English cricket market fell away, Henry was of no fixed abode. The death of Brian Johnston in November 1993 heralded his return. 'They'll have to bring the dear old thing back now', said a great cricketing sage I was with at the time. The unique qualities of John Arlott had long been lost, the carefully modulated words of Don Mosey had been consigned mercifully to history, but the joie de vivre that was the essence of a Johnston commentary – the best of them all – had to be replaced. The ever enthusiastic Blowers, with his determination that we should all share his pleasure in watching the greatest of games, was Johnners' spiritual successor. As with Johnston, the Blofeld words flow effortlessly. With his special talent for painting a picture, he will always be wasted on television.

Of course he has his critics. If there are sometimes too many pigeons or buses, with Johnners there may have been too many cakes. His plummy voice may fuel the class divide, and his frequent, almost characteristic, slips provide further ammunition for his detractors. But, in Peter Baxter's view, 'Blowers highlights his own mistakes, where others try to cover them up.' And, Peter adds in his defence, 'Nobody gives the score more regularly than Blowers.'

Henry remains in the saddle, having survived serious heart surgery, and despite rumours that his absence from the team for the Oval Test spelt the end of

his TMS contract. Peter Baxter emphasises that only three commentators normally work on a match: Aggers, the visiting commentator, and one or other of Blowers and C.M.-J. 'And Blowers was never scheduled for The Oval', he points out, adding that 'at The Oval he likes to get round the corporate boxes!'

And for the future? 'I'm hoping to be there as long as they'll have me,' Henry says immediately. 'I love it!'