



OH, MY BRAMHALL LANE OF LONG AGO BY MARTIN HOWE

It was a cold wet evening on 15 March 2005 and I was at Bramall Lane watching Sheffield United and Preston North End play out a 1-1 draw, a result that would satisfy neither team as they strove for a place in the play-off positions of the Coca-Cola Championship (or the second division of English league football, as effectively it is). Opposite my vantage point, loomed the cantilever South Stand, its towering rows of red bucket seats only half full for this important match. But the football match was not engaging my attention.

My mind wandered to the Bramall Lane I had known many years before, when football had to share the ground with cricket. It had begun, of course, as a cricket ground. In 1854 a group of Sheffield cricket enthusiasts had formed themselves into the Sheffield United Cricket Club to build and manage a ground worthy of housing cricket matches at Bramall Lane, then in the pleasant outskirts of the rapidly growing industrial town. The opening match was between Yorkshire and Sussex and Bramall Lane immediately became the 'home' of Yorkshire cricket as well as the favoured ground of leading local cricket clubs (though there was not to be a Sheffield United cricket team until 1892). The Club's intention was that the ground should be used exclusively for cricket, but financial pressures forced it to allow in other sports: by the 1870s Bramall Lane was a regular venue for football matches. In 1889 a football section of the Sheffield United Cricket Club was formed. Ten years later the Club was converted into a limited liability company with cricket and football sections co-existing, not always happily, in the one business and with a shared ground.

In my reveries, from the John Street side of the ground I would have looked across the broad expanse of turf (thicker and coarser at this football end) to the solid Victorian pavilion, opened in 1898, its red brick soon dulled to black by Sheffield's (then) notorious smoke and grime. To the left of the pavilion, from my position, was the squat and rather inadequate score-box from where the concrete terracing with its hard wooden seats stretched round to the Spion Kop end of the football side of the ground (where no seating was provided, even when the ground was full). To my right, on the Bramall Lane side, was the concrete, roofless terracing known as the Grinders' Stand where, at least in days gone by, men from the nearby cutlery and tool-making workshops would habitually watch the cricket – and pass on their pithy or pungent comments to players and other spectators alike.

It was not an attractive cricket ground, far from it. But it was the birthplace of Yorkshire cricket and it held a warm place in the affections of many who played there as well as of many followers of the game whose first experience of first-class cricket was at this grimly urban stadium rather than some picturesque ground in the leafy countryside.

So it was with me. And as the football match wound on towards its conclusion, I recalled particular games in the first seasons after the war and then the last sad game when the shutters finally came down on cricket at the historic ground.

The first game I ever saw at Bramall Lane was the Roses match in August 1947 (when an earlier John Street football stand still stood half wrecked from

German bombs). On the first day (a Saturday, of course), the young left-hander Gerald Smithson scored a wonderful 98 before lunch – yes, in a Roses match and, of course, he was reprimanded for getting out how and when he did. Smithson went with the MCC touring side to the West Indies in 1947/48 and played in a couple of Tests but he was never to fulfil his early promise.

My hero, as for most Yorkshire lads in their early teens, was Len Hutton. How we boys dreamt of following in his footsteps as we played our makeshift games in the fields and lanes around our homes, perhaps even of breaking his world record highest Test score of 364. An even more commanding figure on the world cricketing stage was Don Bradman and I recall the excitement with which we looked forward to Yorkshire's encounter with the Australians at Bramall Lane in 1948.

My brother and I arrived at the ground a full two hours before start of play. Even so, I recall, our seats in a packed ground were nearer to the football end than the pavilion end of the ground. Not to worry, we were seated in good time to see big Ron Aspinall bowl Sid Barnes with the third ball of his first over. The roar that erupted from 22,000 throats subsided into an excited buzz of anticipation as Don Bradman walked to the crease. He scored 54 runs, enough for us to admire the skill of his batsmanship, few enough for Yorkshire supporters to rejoice at his relatively cheap dismissal. Australia scored a modest 249 in their first innings and Yorkshire replied with 206, Len Hutton top scoring with 39. But in its closing stages the match descended into near farce. Bradman declined to declare the Australian second innings early enough to set Yorkshire anything approaching a reasonable target, and, as the innings dragged on, Yardley responded by using his occasional bowlers (Hutton, Halliday and Yardley shared 13 overs in the final stages). In the end, Yorkshire were set 328 to win with only three hours or so remaining. Yardley held back Hutton and promoted his lower order batsmen, and when an end was called to the proceedings Yorkshire had scored 85 for 4. The Bramall Lane crowd on the final day were not well pleased.

In these early post-war years, there was great rivalry, at least among cricket fans but certainly stoked by the media (essentially in those days the newspapers), as to the respective merits of Hutton and Denis Compton. Compton had been the outstanding batsman in 1947 with his record aggregate of runs and number of centuries and he had carried the fight against the fiery fast bowling of Lindwall and Miller in 1948, his technique less orthodox than Hutton's, his bravery beyond compare. But there was no question where a Sheffield boy's loyalty lay. In 1949, Yorkshire played Middlesex at Bramall Lane. In a high scoring match in which Frank Lowson scored his first century for Yorkshire, Denis Compton also scored a hundred for the visitors and was warmly applauded for his efforts. But many, including most youngsters, cheered again when the Brylcream Boy was bitten on the hand by a scruffy stray dog and had to retire to the pavilion for repairs; mild partisanship by today's standards but enough for a rebuke from the loftier cricket writers.

The 1950s were unhappy times for Yorkshire on and off the field, though we younger supporters had little inkling of the dressing room disharmony. Surrey won the championship in seven successive seasons from 1952 to 1958. It was not that Yorkshire did not have talented players. As well as Hutton and the captain Norman Yardley, the team could include the likes of Johnny Wardle and Bob Appleyard, Vic Wilson and Willie Watson, Brian Close and Fred Trueman, to mention just the leading lights. But, in contrast to their Southern rivals, it seemed that all too often on the field of play, the whole was less than the sum of the individual parts.

This shortcoming was put right in the 1960s. After the perhaps surprising return to championship-winning ways under Ronnie Burnett in 1959, Yorkshire were to win the championship six times in the 1960s under the captaincy of first Vic Wilson and then Brian Close. The Yorkshire team that won the championship in 1968 was one of the finest ever to appear for the county. Brian Close was a combative and inspiring captain, his talents complemented by the tactically astute Ray Illingworth. The batting was strong, with Boycott, now a world class opening batsman, Phil Sharpe and Jackie Hampshire the leading run scorers. Boycott had scored his first hundred for Yorkshire in the Roses match at Bramall Lane in 1963, and a hundred in each innings at

Bramall Lane against Nottinghamshire in 1966. In the 1968 championship season, he carried his bat for the first of what were to be eight times for Yorkshire in the match at Bramall Lane against Leicestershire. Not for nothing was Bramall Lane Boycott's favourite ground. The redoubtable Fred Trueman, now sadly in his last season for the county, was still the spearhead of the bowling attack and he was well supported by the under-rated Tony Nicholson, Don Wilson and the off-spinners Illingworth and Close. The team regularly included no fewer than nine Test players.

I was not at Bramall Lane for Yorkshire's finest win that 1968 season when Yorkshire, captained by Fred Trueman standing in for Brian Close, defeated the Australians by the astonishing margin (for those days when touring teams treated their matches against the leading county sides with great respect) of an innings and 69 runs, Yorkshire's first victory over the Australians for 66 years. With restrained under-statement, Wisden described it as "an impressive display of purposeful cricket."

We were not to know it, but 1968 was to be Yorkshire's last championship for more than 30 years. Yorkshire cricket entered a period of decline and internal strife (much of it centred around Geoffrey Boycott). It was also a period of decline for Bramall Lane cricket ground. The ground was in urgent need of a face-lift and, not least, an improvement to the woeful facilities for the paying spectators. Crowds dwindled. Expenditure on the cricket part of the ground was cut but a new stand was built at the Bramall Lane end of the football pitch. Pressure was growing within the Sheffield United Cricket and Football Club to discontinue cricket at Bramall Lane and create a four-sided football stadium worthy of one of the country's leading football teams and better able to exploit the increasing commercial opportunities offered by top league football. As the 1960s came to a close, and Yorkshire cricket began its downward slide, few doubted that the end of cricket at Bramall Lane, for both Sheffield United Cricket Club and the county side, could be far away – and, it has to be said, few in a position to perhaps do something about it in Yorkshire cricket shed any tears at the prospect. The decision finally came in 1971. Cricket would end in two years time.

The last first-class match at Bramall Lane was to be the Roses match on 4, 6 and 7 August 1973. I had to be there, at least on the opening day. I had expected there to be something of a celebration of Bramall Lane's illustrious history. The local newspapers did their bit with souvenir supplements, and a few booklets appeared, mainly after the event. There was a black-tie dinner at the City Hall, Sheffield on Monday 6 August, attended by an array of Yorkshire cricketers past and present; but, except for a souvenir version of the scorecard, there seemed to be no official recognition that this was to be the last first-class cricket match at Bramall Lane as far as the ordinary supporters were concerned. There was a crowd of around 4,000 on the first day, larger than for most of Yorkshire's championship games in 1973 but hardly a big crowd for the last of 42 Roses matches played at the Lane since 1871. As it happened, and by unfortunate chance, the start of the game was marked with something special – a memorial service for Wilfred Rhodes who had died on 8 July 1973 at the age of 95. He had first appeared for the county at Bramall Lane in 1898, he had his benefit match there in 1911, and he announced his retirement from first-class cricket in the course of a match at the Lane in 1930. With George Hirst, Rhodes appeared for England against Australia in Bramall Lane's only Test match in 1902.

How one wished that Yorkshire had players of Rhodes' stature to call upon in 1973! They were having a wretched season with only three victories out of 14 games played at the start of this Roses match. Yorkshire's rebuilding after the break-up of the championship winning side of 1968 was far from complete in 1973. Indeed, the side for the Roses match included no fewer than five colts. However, the previous match, against Derbyshire and also at Bramall Lane, had been one of those victories, Yorkshire (without Boycott) scoring 192 in 140 minutes in their second innings to win by four wickets, with David Bairstow hitting the winning run off the first ball of the final over. But if the spectators thought that this was a harbinger of better times, they were to be immediately disappointed. Batting first, with Boycott back in the side, Yorkshire were dismissed for 99 of which Phil Sharpe scored 35. That the Bramall Lane wicket had something to do with Yorkshire's abject performance was shown when Lancashire slumped to 74 for 7, with Tony Nicholson, whose fitness for the match had been in doubt up to the last minute, taking four of the wickets. At the end of the first day, it therefore looked certain that there would be a result (21 of the 41 Roses matches at Bramall Lane before this one had been drawn or abandoned), and good reason to hope that it would be the White Rose that

was triumphant. The Gods decided otherwise. Heavy rain over the weekend and on the Monday meant that no play was possible on the second day. On the third day, Lancashire took their score to 111 for 8 and after a further 2 hours and 29 minutes had been lost to rain, David Lloyd declared the Lancashire innings. (Stephen Gott, a youngster from Barnsley, substituted in the field for Hampshire who had been injured playing in a benefit match at the weekend and hence can say that he appeared in Yorkshire's last match at Bramall Lane.) By the close at 5.30pm, the game had petered out into another draw, Yorkshire finishing with 114 for 2 with Sharpe 62 not out. Jack Simmons bowled the last ball to Colin Johnson, and that was that – except for the spectators who invaded the playing area to dig up a patch of turf for a souvenir. Geoff Boycott, who had ordered 22 square yards, would have hoped to have marked his last appearance at the Lane with more than the 9 and 6 that he had scored in Yorkshire's two innings.

Far from being an exciting finale to 118 years of history, the last act at the famous old ground was therefore played out on a note of heavy anticlimax. In a way it was a fitting end. Yorkshire's cricket fortunes were at a low ebb – they were to finish 14th in the championship in 1973 – and the neglected cricket part of the ground was in an increasingly run-down condition. The total number of paying spectators for the match (effectively for only two days) was a mere 5,704 (compared with 51,834 for the 1948 fixture with the Australians). Football reigned supreme, nationally and at Bramall Lane. Within two years, the Sheffield United Football Club had built the cantilever stand across the cricket square and cricket at Bramall Lane was but a memory. The Victorian pavilion was left standing in forlorn isolation until 1982 when it was pulled down to make way for – a car park.

I leave the last word to a better wordsmith than I can ever be. In the Wombwell Cricket Lovers' Society's Tribute to Bramall Lane, September 1973, there appears the following:

The Lane – A Farewell by Irving Rosenwater

No trees, no picnic lunches on the grass;
Just chimneys, row on row on row.
No social graces for a special class,
But honour done alike to friend and foe.

Sounds that no aesthete would salute
Just noises - a loud factory hoot,
And tramcars on their routine clatter
Adding grist to local chatter.

Bombs did not still the game at Bramall Lane:
Just two-day wins brought temporary halt.
Now pungent memories alone remain,
With Bramall Lane we found no fault.

Oh, my Bramall Lane of long ago.

