Gambling and press coverage

Cricket certainly thrived after the Restoration in 1660 and is believed to have first attracted gamblers making large bets at this time. In 1664, the "Cavalier" Parliament passed a **Gambling Act** which limited stakes to £100, although that was a fortune. Cricket had certainly become a significant gambling sport by the end of the 17th century. We know of a "great match" played in Sussex in 1697 which was 11-a-side and played for high stakes of 50 guineas a side. Our knowledge of this game came about because, for the first time, cricket could be reported in the newspapers with freedom of the press having been granted the previous year. But it was a long time before the newspapers adapted sufficiently to provide frequent, let alone comprehensive coverage of the game.

Eighteenth Century cricket

Patronage and players

Gambling introduced the first patrons because some of the gamblers decided to strengthen their bets by forming their own teams and it is believed the first "county teams" were formed in the aftermath of the Restoration. The first game we know of in which the teams use county names is in 1709 but there can be little doubt that these sort of fixtures were being arranged long before that.

The most notable of the early patrons were a group of aristocrats and businessmen who were active from about 1725, which is the time that press coverage became more regular, perhaps as a result of the patrons' influence. These men included Charles Lennox, 2nd Duke of Richmond, Sir William Gage, 7th Baronet, Alan Brodrick and Edward Stead. For the first time, the press tells us something about individual players like Thomas Waymark.

The oldest cricket bat still in existence is dated to 1729. Note the shape of the bat, which is closer to that of a modern-day hockey stick than to that of a modern-day cricket bat.

Cricket moves out of England

Cricket was introduced to North America via the English colonies in the 17th century, probably before it had even reached the north of England. In the 18th century it arrived in other parts of the globe. It was introduced to the West Indies by colonists and to India by East India Company mariners in the first half of the century. It arrived in Australia almost as soon as colonisation began in 1788. New Zealand and South Africa followed in the early years of the 19th century.

Development of the Laws

The basic rules of cricket such as bat and ball, the wicket, pitch dimensions, overs, how out, etc. have existed since time immemorial. In 1727, we first hear of "Articles of Agreement" to determine the code of practice in a particular game and this became a common feature, especially around payment of stake money and distributing the winnings given the importance of gambling. In 1744, the Laws of Cricket were codified for the first time and then amended in 1774, when innovations such as lbw, middle stump and maximum bat width were added. These law stated that 'the principals shall choose from amongst the gentleman present two umpires who shall absolutely decide all disputes.' The codes were drawn up by the so-called "Star and Garter Club" whose members ultimately founded MCC at Lord's in 1787. MCC immediately became the custodian of the Laws and has made periodic revisions and recodifications subsequently.

Continued growth in England

The game continued to spread throughout England and, in 1751, Yorkshire is first mentioned as a venue. The original form of bowling (i.e., rolling the ball along the ground as in bowls) was superseded sometime after 1760 when bowlers began to pitch the ball and study variations in line, length and pace. Scorecards began to be kept on a regular basis from 1772 and since then we have an increasingly clear picture of the sport's development.

An artwork depicting the history of the cricket bat. (Click on the image for larger view)

The first famous clubs were London and Dartford in the early 18th century. London played its matches on the famous Artillery Ground, which is still there. Others followed, particularly Slindon in Sussex which was backed by the Duke of Richmond and featured the star player Richard Newland. There were other prominent clubs at Maidenhead, Hornchurch, Maidstone, Sevenoaks, Bromley, Addington, Hadlow and Chertsey.



But far and away the most famous of the early clubs was Hambledon in Hampshire. It started as a parish organisation and first achieved prominence in 1756. The club itself was founded in the 1760s and was well patronised to the extent that it was the focal point of the game for about thirty years until the formation of MCC and the opening of Lord's in 1787. Hambledon produced several outstanding players including the master batsman John Small and the first great fast bowler Thomas Brett. Their most notable opponent was the Chertsey and Surrey bowler Edward "Lumpy" Stevens, who is believed to have been the main proponent of the flighted delivery.

It was in answer to the flighted, or pitched, delivery that the straight bat was introduced.