

1977 EPILOGUE : THE CENTENARY TEST MATCH

The Centenary Test Match played on the Melbourne Cricket Ground from 12 to 17 March 1977 (with a Rest Day on 15 March) was a memorable culmination to 100 years of Test Cricket. All but a few of the many living players who have represented Australia against England, or played for England in a Test Match in Australia, gathered at the Melbourne Cricket Ground to witness a remarkable game of Cricket with an extraordinary finish.

Between the time that the first English team visited Victoria in 1862 to play its first match on the Melbourne Cricket Ground and the historic First Test Match in 1877, the visiting Englishmen had played against odds of 15, 18, or even 22—such was their strength as compared with that of the local players.

When Lillywhite brought out the 1877 side, the overstrength teams that opposed it played so well that the idea was mooted for selecting a team from the best players in Victoria and New South Wales who might meet the visitors on equal terms. This suggestion was taken up and a combined team comprising six Victorians and six New South Welshmen was selected. The final team, however, ultimately contained six Victorian and five New South Welshmen with a Victorian twelfth man. Because of the nature of the Australian team, the game was called a "Combination Match". Although the games played by the 1862 English side against odds were called "Test Matches", the name lapsed after that tour and was not revived until 1890. It then reverted to the 1877 game and all the matches played between 1877 and 1890. The games between Australia and England have been so called ever since, as are all games now when played between the full strengths of the competing countries.

The organisation of the Centenary Test Match was the outcome of skilled co-operation between the Australian Cricket Board, the Victorian Cricket Association, and the Melbourne Cricket Club, and grew from a suggestion made at an MCC Committee meeting by Vice-President Hans Ebeling in 1973. Considerable assistance in staging the game was given by two Australian airline companies who flew some 95 former English players to Australia and brought the former Australian players from other States; by the official sponsors of the match; and by a Melbourne hotel which assisted in accommodating the visitors. As a result, over 200 former players and officials were able to gather at the Melbourne Cricket Ground for the Match.

The game coincided with the Silver Jubilee visit of Her Majesty The Queen and His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh to Victoria and it was arranged that the Royal couple would attend at 3.10 p.m. on the final day.

At the end of the first two days the game gave every indication of proving a great disappointment with little or no hope of lasting until the visit of Her Majesty and His Royal Highness. Australia, sent in to bat on a perfect wicket, inexplicably collapsed for 138 runs before the end of the first day. England did worse and was all out for 95 midway through the second day. It appeared certain that the game would be all over before Her Majesty and His Royal Highness arrived.

Interesting theories were put forward to account for the batting failures. The one most generally accepted by past and present players was that the substantial pre-match publicity and the presence of so many former "greats" had placed a much greater strain than usual on the players and that this affected their batting.

Whatever the reason, the players settled down in their second innings when, with the match well under way, their nerves had calmed somewhat. Rod Marsh became the first Australian wicketkeeper to score a century in a Test against England and, when Australia later took the field for the second time, passed the previous record of the number of dismissals achieved by an Australian behind the stumps. Australia finally declared at 9 for 419 at noon on the fourth day.

Fears persisted that the game would not see the arrival of Her Majesty and His Royal Highness, but they were misplaced. England, inspired by a brilliant 176 by Randall, playing his first Test against Australia, gradually reduced the enormous margin of 462 runs. In fact when the Royal Party arrived at 3.10 p.m. England was in a strong position to win the game.

Her Majesty and His Royal Highness watched the match until 4.20 p.m. when tea was taken. Before leaving the field both teams were presented and immediately following the break Greig (the English captain) was dismissed. Over the years it has been noted that a number of wickets, Australian and English, have fallen after presentation to Royalty.

During their time at the Ground Her Majesty The Queen and His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh were entertained by the Australian Cricket Board, the Victorian Cricket Association, and the Melbourne Cricket Club. They were shown through the Club rooms, Museum, and Gallery by MCC officials before descending to the MCC Long Room where Her Majesty created Australian history by carrying out an investiture, when she bestowed the Knighthood of Australia on the Rt Hon Sir Robert Menzies. It was an historic occasion in the midst of an historic match.

Before leaving the Ground Her Majesty The Queen unveiled a plaque commemorating the Centenary of Test Cricket and the Royal couple were then escorted to the waiting car and bidden farewell. It was noticed that His Royal Highness, a former President of Marylebone Cricket Club, turned on the car radio even before it had moved off. The Royal couple would have been on the way to HMY *Britannia* when they heard the last English wicket fall in the final 45 minutes of play—a remarkable event after the first innings collapses.

And the extraordinary finish? Australia had won the 1977 Test Match by 45 runs; Australia had won the 1877 Test Match by 45 runs.