

## From Lewisham to Leyton: Essex County Cricket Club and the Freemans, Brewers and Russells

Essex County Cricket Club was founded in 1876 by “a small but influential meeting of gentlemen” at Chelmsford. For the first few years the club’s headquarters was an attractive but rather remote ground at Brentwood. Although the club employed professionals on a match-fee basis, its teams were predominantly amateur. Essex’s rapid development from an amateur and amateurish club into a professional and well-run organisation was due largely to the irascible but whole-hearted Charles Ernest Green. He became chairman and captain in 1883, and was from the outset ambitious for his new club. The county championship had rather haphazardly become established with nine first-class counties<sup>1</sup>, and Green realised that if Essex were to join the elite they would have to move from Brentwood and establish themselves on a more organised basis.

Green therefore negotiated, during the 1885 season, a move to the Lyttelton ground in the rapidly developing suburb of Leyton. The old professional match-fee system was no longer workable and the club began to recruit its own staff who were, in summer at least, given regular contracts. This reinforced the trend, common with skilled working-class jobs in the nineteenth century, for professional cricket in Essex to develop hereditary tendencies. On the ground staff in 1888 were representatives of three families which had migrated from Lewisham - then administratively in Kent, now in south London - where they had already known one another for at least twenty-five years. Members of the Freeman, Brewer and Russell families were to play an immense part in Essex cricket for nearly half a century.

### The Freemans

In the 1830s two brothers, William and John Thomas Freeman, moved from the Oxfordshire village of Great Haseley to Rushey Green, in the south of Lewisham. The London suburbs were growing and the brothers were probably in search of work. Lewisham remained fairly rural for a while and William worked all his life as a market gardener, but by 1841 John Thomas had become a bricklayer. In 1842 he married Mary Ann Sales, with whom he first had four girls and then five boys. In about 1857 the Freeman brothers moved with their families to Hanover Street in Lewisham village, where among their neighbours were a bricklayer named Joseph Brewer and his wife Margaret, who in 1868 had a son called Walter. According to the 1871 census, Mary Ann Freeman and Margaret Brewer were both born in Bromley, and so may have known one another even earlier. John Thomas and Mary Ann’s two youngest sons were Abraham George (1858-1936) and Edward Charles (1860-1939), and their third daughter was Mary Eliza, who in 1864 married a carpenter, Thomas Marychurch Russell.

By 1871 John Thomas and Mary Ann Freeman had moved to 8 Railway Terrace in the Ladywell area of Lewisham, but ten years they had died and their

<sup>1</sup> Eight in 1888-90, after Derbyshire dropped out for a few years and before Somerset came in.

two youngest sons were married with young families of their own. Abraham married Louisa Mary Archer at St. Paul's Deptford on 14 July 1878, six weeks after the birth of their eldest son, George. Over the next five years they were to be found at several addresses in the Ladywell area, but by 1883 they had settled at 13 Railway Terrace. Edward married Emily ??? in 1878, and in 1881 was living at 18 Railway Terrace. Abraham followed his father's trade of bricklayer, while Edward became a stonemason. The Russells had moved into 8 Railway Terrace and the Brewers were nearby at 8 Mercy Terrace. Just across a footbridge at Ladywell station, on the other side of the railway, was a cricket ground where, according to Abraham's grandson Herbert, WG Grace played. Doubtless the future Essex stalwarts learnt the game there.

The crucial change for the Freeman family, as for Essex County Cricket Club itself, came in 1885. Essex needed a head groundsman for their new ground, and the man appointed was Edward Charles Freeman. It would be fascinating to know how a 24-year-old from Lewisham with no obvious qualifications persuaded Essex that he would be the right man for the job. He would probably have been interviewed by CE Green and the treasurer, JJ Read, but unfortunately the relevant minute-book is missing. Perhaps Edward learnt the necessary skills by helping his uncle William in his work as a market gardener. Within four years, his brother Abraham, his nephew Tom Russell and his friend Walter "Bung" Brewer had joined him on the staff. It seems likely that, long before the days of equal opportunities employment legislation, Edward used his influence to help them obtain jobs.

Certainly in appointing EC Freeman Essex made the right decision, for mutual respect between employee and employer can be glimpsed throughout the minutes. On 19 November 1889 the committee gave him permission to undertake a contract for laying down a new ground at Denmark Hill, two miles west of his old home at Lewisham, provided that he employed as many of the cricket staff as possible. Winter employment was a major problem for cricketers, because many London workers were seasonally employed and work was hard to come by. This stipulation by the committee suggests concern for the welfare of the players who, unlike the ground staff, were not employed all year round. Evidently Freeman's work was satisfactory, because the club captain Cyril Digby Buxton wrote to suggest that he should be employed to make the new ground at Hackney Wick for the Eton Mission. Leave was granted, with the same proviso that the ground bowlers should also be used. On 19 August 1890 the committee generously agreed to give Freeman "a gratuity of 2 guineas for his services in connexion with the Australian match", a hastily organised additional game between the tourists and Cambridge University Past & Present on 7-9 August. He began at 30s a week but when in 1897 he wrote to ask for a rise to 35s it was granted without further discussion - by no means an automatic response to such a request. When JH Douglas, father of the Essex and England captain Johnny, moved from Clapton to Wanstead in 1900, he employed Freeman to supervise the complete relaying of the club wicket<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> LEMMON, David. Johnny Won't Hit Today: a cricketing biography of J.W.H.T. Douglas. Allen and Unwin, 1983, p11.

Most ground staff were also useful cricketers, and from 1887 to 1896 Freeman played for Essex as a middle order batsman and occasional bowler. He and his nephew Tom Russell both played in Essex's inaugural first-class match. On the 1891 census he described himself as a professional cricketer but in 1901, having retired as a player, he was listed as "Supervisor, County Cricket Ground". Like HGP Owen and OR Borradaile, who described themselves respectively as Captain and Secretary of Essex County Cricket Club, he seems to have been rather proud of his connection with Essex.

Even when he had been in post for more than a decade, Freeman was not above taking advice, although on one famous occasion his misunderstanding of it proved disastrous. Early in the 1899 season there were problems with the wickets so he consulted Sam Apted, the groundsman at the Oval where the pitches were excellent. Apted advised Freeman to apply a liquid mixture "three days before the match", but the Essex man applied the mixture on each of the three days rather than just on the third day before. The pitch was ruined, Essex were bowled out for 37 and Surrey won by nine wickets in two days. Freeman learnt from his mistake and by 1902 Wisden was suggesting that the Leyton pitch was "so superlatively good that it was almost impossible in fine weather to play a game out". The consequent high proportion of drawn games had lessened interest, so Wisden commented that "perhaps the ground keeper should be instructed to follow the old methods".

Edward Charles Freeman soon became such an institution that the minutes invariably used his surname only, even when there were others of the tribe on the staff. Among them was his son, Edward John Freeman, who in June 1900 came on to the ground staff at £1 a week. Each year his weekly wage increased by a shilling, until he reached what appears to have been a maximum of 25s a week. Between 1904 and 1912 he played 55 times for Essex as a middle-order batsman and occasional wicket-keeper and bowler. He never became a fixture in the side, however, and in October 1910 was one of four ground staff sacked in one of Essex's all-too-frequent economy drives.

Early in 1911 EJ Freeman accepted a post at Sherborne School as cricket coach and head groundsman. The committee gave him a testimonial (reference) for which he wrote to thank them, stating that he was starting a residential qualification with "Dorsetshire", the minor county for whom he later played. EJ seems to have inspired the same kind of slightly patronising respect that his father had in Leyton: the Sherborne Pilgrims were a travelling Old Boys' team, and a report of their 1928 tour stated that "we left Sherborne at 9am on Tuesday for a 50-mile run to Tiverton by car, our baggage going by lorry under the command of our umpire, the ever faithful E.J. Freeman"<sup>3</sup>. EJ's son Douglas Percy continued the family tradition, like him playing for Dorset and once for Kent. Another son, Edward John, also played for Dorset. He was appointed Town Clerk of Sherborne in 1936 and remained in post until 1974, being awarded the MBE for his services<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Report by BWB Clarke, found on Sherborne School website in 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Information from Mrs V Holt, Town Clerk of Sherborne in 2003.

In 1917 EJ Freeman was called up so his father left Essex to take over at Sherborne until EJ was able to resume his duties. The committee accepted EC Freeman's resignation with regret and wished him success in his new appointment, but did not forget about him. In 1930, when he was almost 70 years old, they consulted him about the preparation of the festival grounds at Chelmsford and Clacton. After his death in September 1939 the club sent a letter of sympathy and a wreath to the family.

EC Freeman lived next to the ground at 10 Richmond Terrace, an end-of-terrace house later known as 563 High Road. It was more or less a tied cottage, and Freeman was rather at the beck and call of the committee. After deciding to ban cycles from the ground, for example, they agreed that he would look after them at "Freeman's cottage". What he and his family thought of this arrangement is not recorded. Sometimes a young member of the ground staff lodged with them, perhaps so they could make a little money from rent or because he was billeted on them by the club. In 1891 their lodger was Charles H. Bull, a 21-year-old ground bowler from Derbyshire, and in 1901 it was William Reeves. Bull never made the grade at first-class level and left in 1894, which is when Reeves joined the ground staff. Reeves, who made his Essex debut in 1897, was born in Cambridge and needed a residential qualification, which he may have begun in 1894 by replacing Bull as the Freemans' lodger.

The Freeman dynasty was further extended in 1901 when EC Freeman's eldest daughter Emily Henrietta married Bill Reeves. Like his brother-in-law EJ Freeman, he was sacked from the ground staff in the economy drive of 1910. He continued to play for the county and in 1920 aged 45 took 12 for 59 to help Essex beat Northamptonshire by 10 wickets. A journeyman all-rounder of the type that forms the backbone of English cricket, he served Essex loyally for 25 years and the award of a benefit in 1921 was scarcely premature. Reeves was given the Middlesex match on 15-17 June but the attendance was disappointing, even though the beneficiary was playing in what proved to be his last game for Essex. After retiring he worked on the Lords ground staff and as a coach but was best known as an umpire, who officiated in five test matches including the last in England before the Second World War. A genuine character, he was the first umpire to advise a batsman protesting against his dismissal to look in the paper the next morning and see whether or not he was out. In 1938 and 1939 Essex paid him £5 a week to do three weeks' pre-season coaching, and in 1940 the Advisory County Cricket Benevolent Fund sent £25 for him to the club which duly passed it on. He continued coaching for Essex during the war and when in 1944 he died after an operation the club sent a wreath and a representative to the funeral.

EC Freeman's brother Abraham<sup>5</sup> came on to the ground staff in 1889 at 24s per week. In that year he moved to Leyton<sup>6</sup>, perhaps to 6 Jasmine Cottages

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<sup>5</sup> On the 1861 and 1871 censuses and in the Essex County Cricket Club minutes he was called George or G, which may well have been how he was usually referred to, but in order to distinguish him from his son George I have stuck to Abraham.

<sup>6</sup> His son Alfred Percy was born in Lewisham on 17 May 1888 and his next child, Florence, in Leyton on 11 March 1890.

(now 625 High Road), where he was living by the time of the 1891 census. In June 1892 his wages were increased to 30s but then on 11 October 1892 he “gave notice that he wished to leave the ground after next Saturday, 15 October”. Two weeks later he wrote asking to be reinstated but his timing could scarcely have been worse, for only a month later came an Extraordinary General Meeting where CE Green announced that the club needed some £3,500 and unsuccessfully proposed that it be wound up. Furthermore, the committee meeting that received Abraham’s resignation also considered a letter from the promising young bowler Walter Mead asking for employment on the ground. Abraham’s request was therefore “declined as the Committee had made other arrangements”. Essex did not employ him again, although on the 1901 census he gave his occupation as professional cricketer and in 1915 he was still living close to the County Ground, at 2 Coopers Lane<sup>7</sup>. According to Herbert Freeman, he became groundsman at the Pendennis Ground in Streatham, and later at the Portland Cement Ground, Woodford.

Abraham and Louisa Freeman had fourteen children, eleven of whom survived to adulthood. Four of their sons earned their living from cricket, for a while at least. The 1901 census lists 22-year-old George as a professional cricketer and 15-year-old Arthur as a “cricket ground boy”, although neither ever played at first-class level. Herbert Freeman said that George later became groundsman at Streatham CC.

Abraham and Louisa’s third surviving son, John Robert “Jack”, was in 1901 aged 17. He was shown on the census as a baker’s assistant, although he had already been taken on to the ground staff at Leyton. He started at 10s a week, rising by 2s 6d each year until 1903. When next recorded in 1910, he was a ground bowler as well at 27s 6d per week. His pay remained unchanged until December 1914, when he was one of three professionals given notice that “the committee could not see their way to employ them after December 31<sup>st</sup>”. Jack Freeman played for Essex from 1905 to 1928 as an unstylish but effective right-handed batsman who often opened the innings. Against Lancashire in August 1914, a few days after war was declared, he and his captain, Johnny Douglas, put on 261 in a partnership that remains an Essex record for the seventh wicket. He showed the versatility typical of professionals, bowling medium-pace if needed and turning himself into a competent wicket-keeper when Essex had problems in that department<sup>8</sup>. In 1926 against Somerset he at first kept wicket claiming five victims, and then when Joe Hipkin was injured handed the gloves to Captain Frederick Nicholas (grandfather of Mark Nicholas of Hampshire and Channel 4) and had a bowl, taking a career-best 3 for 31.

Jack Freeman’s best years were after the First World War. In 1919 aged 35 he scored a thousand runs for the first time, and then passed that mark in each

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<sup>7</sup> Leyton electoral register. His daughter Edith was still there in 1930, when she was a seatholder at Leyton parish church. KENNEDY, John. *History of Leyton*. Augmented edition by Robert BREN, v6 p636. Held at Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow.

<sup>8</sup> He first kept wicket in the absence of his cousin AE (Edward) Russell against Kent at Leyton on 27-29 June 1907, holding three catches. Edward had been groomed to take over from his brother Tom but failed to come up to expectations. Kenneth Gibson, Colin McIver and Frank Gilligan were all fine amateur wicket-keepers but not always available.

of his last six seasons, from 1921 to 1926. His 286 against Northamptonshire in 1921 remains the second-highest individual score for Essex. In 1926 the committee awarded the Middlesex match scheduled for 24, 26, 27 July as a benefit to “one of the most consistent and hardworking players who has ever played for the county”. The first two days were washed out but “insurance of the Gate again saved the situation. In addition to the gate the response on the Subscription list was very satisfactory, the total amount from all sources being £1070”. That was his last full season and his best; he kept wicket until Frank Gilligan became available in the school holidays and scored 1958 runs at an average of 41.65, with six centuries. He then retired to become coach at the Merchant Taylors’ School, twice returning to help out Essex in an emergency. He was a well-known and popular figure in the Leyton area, becoming a sidesman at the parish church of St Mary the Virgin<sup>9</sup>.

The best known and most successful cricketer of the family was JR Freeman’s younger brother Alfred Percy, known as Tich<sup>10</sup>. He joined the Essex ground staff in 1906 and played two games for the Club & Ground XI, but did not do enough to persuade the county to keep him and in 1909 he left to become undergroundsman at the Upper Tooting club. Playing for them, he was spotted by McCanlis, the Kent coach, who invited him to join their staff at the nursery in Tonbridge. Being the last of Abraham Freeman’s children to be born at Lewisham, he was already qualified for Kent and made his debut for them in 1914. The First World War meant that his career did not really get going until he was 31 years old, but like his brother Jack he enjoyed his best years in his 30s and 40s, when he became the most successful county bowler in the country. A consistently accurate leg-break and googly bowler, he was in 1928 the only player ever to take 300 wickets in an English season. He claimed over 200 victims in each of the next eight seasons, and was then sacked for “only” taking 108 wickets. Many of his best performances came against the county that had discarded him twenty years earlier, including his career best - all ten wickets for 53 in 1930 - and fourteen wickets or more in a match four times. In the remarkable Brentwood game of 1934, when Kent declared on 803 for 4 and won by an innings and 192 runs, he took 11 wickets for 176 at an average of 16, while the other bowlers in the match took 13 for 1238 at 95.23.

An Alfred Freeman did appear for Essex, but he was rather less successful than his cousin Tich. Alfred James Freeman played one game against Gloucestershire in 1920, scoring one run and taking 0 for 95 with 24 overs of innocuous left-arm medium pace. He was the son of Abraham and Edward Charles’s older brother William Henry, who in 1881 was following the family trade of bricklayer and living at 1 The Terrace Lewisham, three doors away from Abraham. By 1901 William had moved to 169 Beaumont Road Leyton, via Bowes Green and Tottenham. Like Frederick George Freeman, who was listed as the head of a separate household at the same address<sup>11</sup>, William was described as a “groundsman labourer”, although neither worked for Essex.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy/Bren, v2a p63. In 1930 Freeman donated £1 towards a memorial window for the Bishop Thornton-Duesbury Memorial Fund (Kennedy/Bren v3 p428).

<sup>10</sup> I read David Lemmon’s book about Tich before I realised its significance for my own research, but will revisit it when I get hold of a copy.

Alfred James assisted and then succeeded his father as groundsman at Hampstead CC, where he worked for 47 years. From 1956 to 1964 he was groundsman at Ilford CC, following in the footsteps of his cousin Edward Russell.

It is commonplace for migrants to join older members of their families in a new location, but the case of the Freemans is curious in that they moved in reverse order of age. The pioneer in Leyton was the fourth and youngest surviving son, Edward Charles, in 1885. He was joined by the third son, Abraham George, in 1889 and by the second, William Henry, in 1900. Abraham left the Essex staff in 1892 and William was never on it, but both apparently found cricket-related work in the area. Only John, the eldest of the four brothers, stayed in Lewisham.

Tich Freeman was not the only young player rejected by Essex in the early 1900s. John Berry Hobbs was not even given a trial and tried his luck with Surrey, where he rapidly established himself as the finest English batsman of his generation. It was a time of financial hardship for Essex, but it is nevertheless hard to escape the conclusion that their recruitment policy left something to be desired. If they had had Hobbs with the bat and Freeman with the ball, they might not have had to wait until 1979 for their first championship success<sup>12</sup>.

### The Brewers

EC Freeman's assistant and successor, Walter "Bung" Brewer<sup>13</sup>, also came from Lewisham where his father and elder brother, like Abraham Freeman and his father, were bricklayers by trade. Brewer's nephew Leslie Allsop recalled that the Freeman and Brewer families were still very friendly in the 1920s. Bung Brewer had joined Essex by 1888, when he was paid £1 a week to look after the lawn tennis courts, which were situated at the opposite end of the ground from the pavilion. He was a ground bowler and played for the Club & Ground XI, primarily as a bowler. He seems, however, to have been employed chiefly for his curatorial rather than his cricketing skills, for on the censuses of 1891 and 1901 he described himself as a cricket groundsman, and in 1900 he was appointed as EC Freeman's principal assistant.

In 1892 Bung Brewer married Alice Maud Allsop and their eldest son was born in lodgings at 5 Jasmine Cottages (later 617 High Road, Leyton). Most of the Essex professionals lived within a few minutes' walk of the ground and Jasmine Cottages seems at that time to have been colonised by Lewisham exiles, because for a while Tom Russell lived at no. 2 and Abraham Freeman at no. 6.

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<sup>11</sup> There is something rather odd about this. The 1881 census shows that William has a 4-year-old son called Frederick G, which more or less fits with Frederick George, who was said to be 23 in 1901. However, Frederick George's birth place is recorded in 1901 as "not known", which contrasts with the other Freemans who all knew exactly where they and their children were born. Furthermore, William was listed as having a 15-year-old son Frederick, a driver for the Great Eastern Railway. William was born on 19 November 1854 but his age was given as 29 in 1881 and 42 in 1901. It is therefore possible that these references are not the same person, but it seems unlikely that the neat fit of locations and trades is just a coincidence.

<sup>12</sup> Although Kent with Freeman never won the Championship, and Surrey with Hobbs only once, in 1914.

<sup>13</sup> "Bung" is a fairly obvious nickname for anyone called Brewer, and his son Walter Charles was called Bung by his workmates at the Lea Bridge District Gas Company.

After a brief sojourn at Capworth Street, a little further from the ground, they returned to Jasmine Cottages and set up their own household at no. 1 (625 High Road). In 1910 Alice Brewer died of tuberculosis and the following year Bung married Amelia Doull, who in 1913 moved with him to 67 Coopers Lane. In 1918, when EC Freeman moved to Sherborne, the Committee thought that Bung Brewer was the most experienced man for the job, although Freeman's nephew Tom Russell also applied for the post.

Brewer duly moved into the head groundsman's house at 563 High Road. Leslie Allsop remembered sitting in the shade of a mulberry tree there, and watching the cricket. When in 1926 the house was sold along with 30 other local properties, the sale catalogue stated that it was "let to the Essex Cricket Club on a Quarterly Tenancy at the low Rental of £19 10s. per annum, tenants paying rates and being responsible for Inside Repairs"<sup>14</sup>. This was indeed a low rental, being less than half that paid by neighbouring tenants, although they were not responsible for rates and repairs. The minute-book for 1920-8 is missing but the club must have bought the house, for in 1933 - as soon as Essex left Leyton - "Brewer's Cottage" was sold for £450.

Leyton under Bung maintained its reputation as a batsman-friendly wicket which was "eloquent testimony to the zealotry with which he did his job"<sup>15</sup>. He refused to countenance mechanical methods and continued to cut the grass with a mower and a pony. Accompanied by his faithful old black dog, he was first out to the middle during the lunch and tea intervals, going over the pitch with a twig broom and then supervising its rolling. "There had to be a very keen 'nip' in the air before he sallied forth in his jacket; for his usual dress was shirt-sleeves rolled to the elbow, a straw hat if the sun was hot and an old panama if it was extra hot."

The central square "was his pride and delight, and woe to those whose actions might threaten its perfections especially on the Leyton schools' sports day". On one occasion a team of doctors was playing a team of clergymen, and one of the players retrieved the ball by jumping over a rope intended to fence off the pitch that Bung was preparing for a county game; he rushed out to the middle and reprimanded the culprit in language that is unlikely to have found favour with the clerical gentlemen<sup>16</sup>. "Even members of the team were censured by him for inadvertently damaging the wicket," commented Johnny Douglas, who thought him the best groundsman in the country. Doug Insole, named after Douglas and one of his successors as Essex captain, attended the County Ground as a boy and reckoned that one reason why the pitch was so good was that Brewer used a cow dung mix to quieten it down.

Bung Brewer had long been as much of an institution as EC Freeman, and was regarded as a real character. Once in the 1890s the professional James Burns broke his bat and asked for a wider replacement from Brewer who, to the great amusement of the crowd, produced a specimen that was 10 inches wide

<sup>14</sup> Vestry House Museum Walthamstow, Local Studies Collection 72.2 HIG.

<sup>15</sup> Quotations in this and the following paragraphs from a newspaper article whose writer obviously knew Brewer well and was very fond of him.

<sup>16</sup> Information from grandson Ken Brewer.

rather than the standard 4½. Brewer was very proud of the bat which, he explained, had been made in the early days at Leyton as part of a none-too-serious bet. His many friends “always looked to him for a smile and a cheery wave when things looked black”, and he “was always ready to relate stories of cricketers and their performances”.

In 1999, as part of a successful bid to obtain Lottery money for the restoration of the pavilion, Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop interviewed over twenty people who remembered the County Ground. Two of them recalled Brewer. George Love, who himself became groundsman in the 1970s, went to the school sports days, and claimed that Bung would “get drunk and sleep underneath the cover on the field”. Frank Rist recalled Brewer’s dedication to his job: “He was the sort of chap, if there’s a drop of rain, about three o’clock in the morning, he’d get up and roll the pitch or do something, you know, he was a complete nutter...”

Tragically, that commitment proved Bung Brewer’s undoing. During the 1927 season he told his journalist friend that “he had been under hospital attention and was, as he put it, ‘nearly full of arsenic’, owing to his extensive use of weed-killers”. Essex’s unending financial problems had in 1922 forced them to sell the County Ground to the Army Sports Council and, although the club continued to play there, the Essex Times for Saturday 21 April 1928 reported that their tenancy of the ground remained “in an unsatisfactory state of suspended animation”. On the following Monday, three days after his sixtieth birthday<sup>17</sup>, Brewer went to the LMS station at Leyton and jumped in front of a train. He was taken to Whipps Cross infirmary where he died of shock and injuries. His youngest son, William Richard “Dick” Brewer, who worked for him on the ground staff, told the inquest that “for the last three months his father had worried about the ground because it would not be ready in time for the opening of the season”. Glowing newspaper tributes revealed the affection in which Bung Brewer was held and the shock at his death.

Bung was succeeded by his son Dick<sup>18</sup>. Frank Rist, who came on to the ground staff in 1932, remembered using a motor-mower, so Dick must have been more open to new-fangled ideas than his father<sup>19</sup>. Dick Brewer’s annual pay for 1930-33 was recorded in the Essex wage-book and varied from £174/4/- to £187/11/-. This was roughly half the income of the capped players but twice what was paid to the young members of his ground staff, and he also had “Brewer’s Cottage” rent-free. When Essex left Leyton the committee gave him a gratuity of £10 “in view of his long and satisfactory service”. He continued to be employed by the Army Sports Council, and sometimes went to supervise local

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<sup>17</sup> The newspaper report of the incident said he was 61 and the family obituary card that he was 62, but his birth certificate gives his date of birth as 20 April 1868.

<sup>18</sup> The Essex minute-book for 1920-8 is missing, so we do not have the Club’s perspective on its relationship with Bung and Dick Brewer or its reasons for appointing Dick, although as by then the Army Sports Council owned the ground they may have made the appointment.

<sup>19</sup> The 85-year-old Frank Rist, who was recalling events that had occurred some 70 years earlier, may at times have got confused between Bung and Dick. He spoke about Bung’s suicide as though he was on the ground staff at the time, although he did not in fact join until four years later. Ken Brewer, Bung’s grandson and Dick’s nephew, reckoned that Rist’s affectionate “nutter” comment could have applied equally well to either man, since both were exceptionally conscientious.

groundsmen preparing pitches such as Southend and Colchester for Essex festival matches. Before and after the Second World War, during which he was wounded at the D-Day landings, he was head groundsman at the Metropolitan Police ground in Chigwell. In the 1950s he moved to the Co-op sports ground in Walthamstow, where he stayed until his retirement.

After the war, the ground was taken over by Leyton Borough Council and it was sometimes less than immaculate. On one occasion Bung's grandson Ken Brewer overheard a spectator bemoaning the state of the ground and wondering what Bung would have thought of it. Ken has always regretted not taking the opportunity to introduce himself.

## The Russells

Thomas Marychurch Russell junior, the eldest son of Thomas Marychurch Russell senior and Eliza Russell nee Freeman, was born in 1865<sup>20</sup>. Soon after his own appointment, EC Freeman invited his nephew - only four years his junior - to come on to the ground staff as an undergroundsman. Tom, who had played at Leyton as a boy<sup>21</sup>, recalled that

One day after Mr Green and one or two other gentlemen, as well as Frank Silcock [senior professional] had been watching me at the nets, Mr Green asked me if I would like to have a trial, and as I said I didn't mind he gave me a chance<sup>22</sup>.

He made his debut for Essex Club & Ground in 1887 and for the first team a year later, when he also became a ground bowler at 30s a week. In 1890 he went to the Broxbourne Club in exchange for Walter Mead, and later to Buckhurst Hill to take over from an injured wicket-keeper. When Essex heard that he was doing well they invited him back on to the staff, and in 1892 he established himself as their first choice wicket-keeper. He had the unenviable task of keeping to the formidably fast Charles Kortright, and his fellow-professional Edward Sewell commented: "I don't think any other wicket-keeper had to stand for so long a period what Russell's hands had to take from Korty"<sup>23</sup>. With the flimsy-looking gloves he wore, it is amazing that he apparently never broke a finger. The county's annual report for 1899 made special mention of "the splendid services of T. Russell as wicket-keeper".

In 1901 Tom Russell wrote to the committee asking for a benefit. They replied that they "could not see way clear to grant a benefit next year but that his name should be placed first on the list". He again wrote in 1903 and it was granted for the 1904 season, provided that his conduct in the interim was satisfactory. He by his own request did not have his benefit in 1904, because the club had

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<sup>20</sup> According to Cricketarchive, or in 1868 according to the Who's Who of Cricketers. Both are agreed that it was on 6 July. The year may still need checking as his age as given in the 1881, 1891 and 1901 censuses (16, 26 and 36 years respectively) would indicate that he was born in 1864. 1868 is almost certainly too late, but 1863 seems too early since Eliza would only have been 15. My guess would be that his age in the censuses was rounded up and that he was actually born in 1865.

<sup>21</sup> This statement is made by Lemmon in Essex cricketers. It may suggest that the Freeman and Russell families had links with Leyton even before Essex moved there, earlier than I have so far unearthed.

<sup>22</sup> The cricketer, 1897 p390.

<sup>23</sup> Charles SALE, Korty. Ian Henry, 1986 p41.

undergone one of its frequent financial crises and he asked for a postponement, a gesture that was appreciated and agreed. It may have been a kindness that the committee chose the Middlesex match of 6, 7 and 8 August 1905 for him, because at least he could not reproach himself for picking the wrong game. He had by then dropped out of the side<sup>24</sup> and Essex did not re-engage him at the end of the season, but he remained on the Lords ground staff. He was also a most efficient first-class umpire from 1920 to 1926, when he retired through ill health. He died early the following year and the annual report paid tribute to “an old and trusted colleague [who] rendered many years of valuable service to the County”.

The proviso about Tom Russell’s behaviour was no idle threat, as his younger brother Albert Edward - usually known by his second Christian name - was to find out. When the 1891 census was taken, Edward was staying with his uncle EC Freeman, perhaps with the intention of qualifying for Essex by residence. The following year he was appointed as a ground bowler, aged only 16. Edward made his first-class debut in 1898 and early in 1903 took over from Tom as wicket-keeper, but after a game at Trent Bridge in early June did not play for the rest of the season. He may have been dropped for disciplinary reasons, because in October the minutes recorded that “E. Russell’s conduct was not satisfactory and the committee decided to dispense with his services”. The nature of the misdemeanour is not revealed, but in January 1904 his case was referred to the Ground Committee and initially he was not re-engaged. He nevertheless kept wicket for eleven of the first thirteen games in the 1904 season but then dropped out - whether through indiscipline reasons, injury or loss of form is unclear<sup>25</sup>. He became the main wicket-keeper when Tom retired but failed to achieve his brother’s high standards, for the club’s 1905 annual report bemoaned “the lack of a really good wicket-keeper” and Wisden in 1908 recorded a similar problem.

Essex considered and rejected the idea of signing EJ (“Tiger”) Smith from Warwickshire, but it was yet another financial crisis and the appearance of an excellent homegrown wicket-keeper that ended Edward Russell’s Essex career. The newcomer was the Old Etonian amateur Kenneth Lloyd Gibson, who made his debut in 1909 and was able to play fairly regularly in 1910-11<sup>26</sup>. Russell only appeared in three games in August, when Gibson was unavailable. Like his cousin EJ Freeman, to whom he bore a considerable physical resemblance, Russell was sacked in the economy drive of 1910. Russell never played for Essex again and Freeman was selected only once, even though in the wretched season of 1912 the county used no fewer than six wicket-keepers in 18 matches<sup>27</sup>. Edward Russell later became groundsman at Valentine’s Park Ilford,

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<sup>24</sup> He played two games in 1904 when his brother Edward was not available, and his last game was against Surrey at the Oval in May 1905.

<sup>25</sup> His brother Tom, the amateurs AJ Turner and Rev. CG Littlehales, and the young professional JH Inns (who tragically died aged 29 the following year) all replaced him

<sup>26</sup> In 1911 Gibson appeared for the Gentlemen in a match regarded as a test trial, and for Essex against Derbyshire claimed nine victims in the game - a club record that has never been beaten, and only equalled by David East.

but before leaving Essex played in the same team as the best of the Essex Russells - Tom's son Charles Arthur George.

CAG Russell appeared in contemporary records as AC Russell and was known - with a lack of imagination not untypical of cricketers - as Jack. His daughter has told how he used to bunk off school to watch his father and uncle play on the ground prepared by his great-uncle. In 1908 aged 20 he was taken on to the ground staff and made his first-class debut for the county. It took him a while to secure his place in the side but in 1913 he scored over 1000 runs, a feat that he was to repeat in every season of his career bar the last but one. He established himself as Essex's regular opening batsman and, with Colin McIver against Hampshire, put on 210 - a first-wicket record partnership that stood until 1946. In 1920 he became the first Essex batsman to score over 2000 runs in a season, passing that landmark twice more and falling fewer than 100 runs short three times. His highest score of 273 was made in the same year, 1921, and in the reverse fixture against the same opponents, Northamptonshire, as Jack Freeman's 286. The cousins were at that time Essex's leading professional batsmen, and Joe Powell in his interview for the Waltham Forest Oral History Society vividly remembered both men:

On one side of [Buckland Road] was a factory and on the other side...ordinary small houses. Just opposite his house was a lamppost in the pavement and we used to play cricket there, hoping that Russell would come out and see us. And Freeman who was the wicket keeper and opening bat...lived about ten doors away from me in Sedgwick Road. I used to go to Freeman's house, father would take me there.

Russell was to become the only Essex batsman before the championship-winning era to achieve a career average of over 40.

Jack Russell was never the luckiest of cricketers. The First World War robbed him of four of his best years. The peak of his career came from May 1922 until February 1923 when he scored more runs than anyone else in England and rounded off a good tour of South Africa by becoming the first Englishman to score a century in each innings of a test match. He defied doctor's orders to do so, and throughout the 1923 season was never fully fit. By the time he recovered, Jack Hobbs and Herbert Sutcliffe had established themselves as England's finest opening partnership ever, and despite a test average of 56.83 Russell never played for England again. Even when selecting him as one of their five cricketers of the year, Wisden damned him with faint praise as "rather too utilitarian to rank among the great ones". The writer could not "imagine people jumping into taxi-cabs and rushing off" to see him but, as David Lemmon points out, he played for a weak and unfashionable county whose largely working-class followers "climbed on to the trams to Leyton to support 'Jack' Russell".

Russell had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with his England and Essex captain, Johnny Douglas. Douglas valued the experience of his senior professional and consulted him more than most, but believed that Russell

<sup>27</sup> Freeman was selected for the game against Derbyshire at Leyton, but the game was washed out when Essex were 48 for 3 and he did not get on to the field. According to Cricinfo he would have kept wicket, in which case he would have been the seventh keeper that season.

frittered away his natural ability, that his achievements would have been even greater if he had practised more. Douglas, who always insisted that all amateurs and professionals should turn out for 45 minutes of pre-match training, spotted before the 1927 game at Leicester that Russell was absent. When Jack O'Connor explained that Russell was "a little tired and stiff", Douglas let fly: "Tired? Stiff? What nonsense! Go and tell him that I expect him to be out here within five minutes." Russell appeared well within the five minutes. Charles Bray, who recounted the story, added that Russell had scored a century the previous day, but if he had it was not for Essex: their cricketers had had a day off after losing to Nottinghamshire in two days, Russell contributing 8 and 3 to Essex totals of 100 and 117. The rather cavalier attitude to practice might, paradoxically, suggest more of the amateur than "Pro" Douglas's sternly puritan work ethic, but Russell's dragging himself from a sick-bed to bat for his country shows that he too had true grit, even if it expressed itself in a slightly different way. The Gooch v Gower debate of the 1980s indicates that names and labels may change but attitudes do not.

The committee granted Jack Russell the Surrey match of 16, 18 and 19 June 1928 as a benefit, telling the members that "This player deserves a record benefit and your committee feel that this will be obtained". Russell had in the otherwise miserable season of 1927 scored 2062 runs at an average of 66, but the committee's optimism was not to be justified:

During the season Russell had his well-deserved benefit match, but your Committee regret that the inclement weather entirely spoilt the gate receipts. The net result of his benefit is £834, which is not a large sum for one whose long service to his county has been so invaluable.

There is something rather curious about this excerpt from the 1929 annual report. Little or no time was lost to rain and, even if it had been, insurance would presumably have covered the gate, as happened with Jack Freeman two years earlier. It seems more likely that because Essex played so wretchedly on the first two days, hardly anybody bothered to turn up for the third. It took them 127.3 overs to grind out 220, while Surrey need only 6.3 more overs to knock up 506 for 4 declared. On the third day Essex were bowled out for 137 to lose by an innings and 149.

Whatever the reason for the disappointment, "Russell worried over a benefit that did not bring him any considerable reward", so it was all the more important that he should ensure his financial security. In May 1929 the committee agreed to pay him £10 rather than £8 for home matches, but he also had to look to his future after retirement. In the winter of 1929 he took up a coaching post with the Red Circle Cement Company at Osterley Park, and at the start of the 1930 season Essex rewarded his "excellent service" with a six-week coaching engagement.

Russell then resumed his place on the playing staff and, though in his 43<sup>rd</sup> year, contributed his usual thousand runs. The committee expressed their appreciation by making him an ex gratia payment of £5 when he had to miss a

couple of matches, ignoring one petty-minded member who complained. They recommended that

When in the mutual opinions of the Committee and Russell he is no longer fit to play County Cricket, he be offered the position of coach, and employment on the ground. The Committee expresses the hope that Russell will remain a member of the County side for some years.

This hope too went unfulfilled. Russell, perhaps on the bird-in-the-hand principle, accepted the post of coach at Westminster School and retired from first-class cricket. His generally harmonious relationship with the committee ended on a sadly sour note: they immediately suspended his winter retainer of £2 10s, and only achieved the return of previously paid fees after sending a "stiff letter". He seems to have had little further contact with the county that had been at the centre of his life for over thirty years, although he was very moved to be one of the 26 professional cricketers elected as members of the MCC in 1949.

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David Pracy, September 2003

## The Brewers in Leyton

- 1885 EC Freeman appointed groundsman
- 1888 First mentions of W Brewer in Essex County Cricket Club records - paid £1 a week to look after the lawn tennis courts, and played for Club & Ground XI
- 1891 Lodger at 5 Jasmine Cottages (later 617 High Road, Leyton).
- 1892 Marriage to Alice Maud ALLSOP and birth of eldest son Walter Charles.
- 1895 Briefly at Capworth Street, a little further from the ground
- 1896 Moved to 1 Jasmine Cottages (625 High Road)
- 1900 Appointed Freeman's chief assistant
- 1902 Umpire in 2<sup>nd</sup> XI game [photo]
- 1910 Death of Alice at 625 High Road
- 1911 Married Amelia DOULL from 1 Jasmine Cottages
- 1913 Moved to 67 Coopers Lane
- 1918 Moved to 563 High Road when Freeman went to Sherborne
- 1928 Suicide
- 1934 Death of Amelia at 1 Jasmine Cottages - suggests that for a while both names were used for the house and that the family continued to live there after Bung moved to 563