

In the beginning – 1894

When the Taranaki Cricket Association was first formed in 1894, Taranaki had already been settled by Europeans for over 50 years. With the great majority of those settlers being English, and more particularly from the West Country (Devon, Cornwall, Somerset), undoubtedly the playing of cricket would be part of the social fabric of the life that came with them. This was reinforced by the Land Wars of the 1860's, in that cricket was seen by the English military as a way of providing recreation from the tedium of redoubt duties. Colonel G. Hamilton – Browne in his book 'With the Lost Legion in New Zealand' tells of a cricket match played at Waihi (Normanby) between the Pigskin Polishers (troopers) and the Foot Sloggers (rangers), watched by hostile Maoris from the surrounding bush, who intermittently enlivened the game by firing at the soldiers. Following the cessation of hostilities in Taranaki, and the replacement of the Imperial forces with New Zealanders, Armed Constabulary posts were located throughout lowland Taranaki – Pukearuhe, Tikorangi, Patea, Mokoia, Manaia, and Opunake.

One of the features of Taranaki life in the 1870's was for parties to travel on horseback and buggy between these settlements, and engage over a couple of days in cricket, shooting and athletics. Significantly the first two presidents of Taranaki Cricket – Major Tuke and Captain Cornwall had an Armed Constabulary background.

The playing of cricket received a boost in 1877, when James Lillywhite's All England XI, who were touring Australia and New Zealand, were enticed to play a match at New Plymouth. Public subscriptions provided the financial backing for the match, which was played on 12th and 13th February at the Recreation Reserve. 500 people attended on the first day, with All England winning the toss, and inviting the Taranaki XXII to bat. In an innings which lasted only 105 minutes, Taranaki were dismissed for 32, with A. Langley top scoring with 5. Shaw took 6 for 11 from 100 balls, and Lillywhite, with his left-arm deliveries captured 13 for 19 from 98 balls. All England replied with 80, Ulyett top scoring with 18, and Fitzpatrick taking 6 for 41 from 88 balls. Favourable comment was made on the quality of the Taranaki fielding and bowling. Taranaki began their second innings at 5:30pm on the first day and had lost 4 wickets for 7 runs at stumps – some 25 minutes on. Before play began at noon of the second day, the pitch was realigned to run East-West, for running originally North-South; it had been difficult for spectators in the grandstand to fully see the play. The changing of the pitch worked to Taranaki's advantage, as they scored 47, and only failed by 1 run to make England bat a second time. Byes were top scorer with 14, and the English bowlers again returned outstanding figures. Hill took 7 for 5 from 120 balls, and Southerton 12 for 25 from 98. Of the latter's bowling it was recounted 'that the batsman were at a loss how to play him, and before they could make up their minds, they were bowled'.

With the game ending at 3pm, England agreed to a scratch match between 6 of their players and 11 from Taranaki. In 45 minutes Taranaki raced to 54 for 5, with Armstrong scoring 24, but then the game ended as the England players had to catch their steamer.

The newspaper report noted alongside each batsmen all his scoring shots, and for bowlers there was no noting of overs bowled, only balls bowled and maiden balls.

The impetus given to cricket by the visit was seen in the formation of cricket clubs at Hawera and Tikorangi within 12 months. It was however to be another 26 years before a team from England played in Taranaki again.

In 1882, an Australian team played a West Coast team at Wanganui, with Taranaki providing 5 players – Riddeford, Barrington, G. Bayly, Beresford and Coutts. Played on a ground described as disgraceful, being hard and bumpy, Australia lost by 1 run, and at the end told the locals that 'if you carried the ground around with you, you'd beat us every time!' In typical Australian fashion, the visitors offered to play the locals at football the next day (an attempt to even the score).

In 1888 a cup was presented for competition between the West Coast centres – Palmerston North, Wanganui, Hawera and New Plymouth, but the contest was ended in 1891. The cup was then presented to G. Bayly, captain of Hawera, in 'recognition of his many services to the club and cricket generally'. (This cup came into TCA's hands in 2000, being gifted by the Bayly family).

The two brothers, G and A Bayly were outstanding bowlers, meriting descriptions such as '[the batsmen] was bowled by an insinuating fraud'; 'cannon speed bailers'; and 'both bowlers cast the sphere with deadly aim'.

So by 1894, when cricket in Taranaki became organised at a provincial level, the game had long been an important part of summer activities (though tennis was seen as a threat to this) and there were in existence district clubs of recognised stature. What needed to be appreciated, from the distance of the 21st century, is the tenacity and enthusiasm of those 19th century cricketers who found time to play and sustain the game amidst the challenges of developing Taranaki from bush to farmland. The foundations they laid are our inheritance and the games continued existence our responsibility.