

# Wodehouse and Cricket

by Ollie Randall

For the youthful P G Wodehouse, 1903 was a year that opened the door to two important new worlds. Not only was it the year in which he discovered Emsworth but it was also when he joined the celebrated Authors XI cricket team. Joining the team was a new high point for Wodehouse, both in terms of literary prestige and connections, and of his relationship with cricket, a game about which he was fanatical. Wodehouse's time as a member of the Authors XI lasted for a similar timespan to his life in Emsworth: he was one of Authors' keenest members, playing for the last time in their final pre-war match in 1912.

After leaving school in 1900, Wodehouse had set about building a writing career for himself, carving out a niche as a writer of school stories – with a heavy specialisation in cricket. He happily wrote about other games too, but, in his own words, 'cricket ranked a long way in front of all other forms of sport'. This comment came in a lively essay called 'Now, talking about cricket –' which was published in 1901. Wodehouse was using cricket themes to hone his craft. In September 1902, his first novel, *The Pothunters*, was published: its plot revolves around the mysterious burglary of a school cricket pavilion. (It's a curious fact that the perpetrator turns out to be a redheaded man called Stokes.)

Then in May 1903, on the strength of *The Pothunters*, Wodehouse was invited to play for the Authors XI at the village of Esher in Surrey. Wodehouse was a handy player: a reasonable batsman and a very capable bowler. But his excitement about the actual cricket was surely eclipsed by the fact that the captain of the team was Wodehouse's literary hero, Arthur Conan Doyle. This was a thrilling meeting for the twenty-one-year-old Wodehouse: an opportunity to get to know one of the most successful writers of the day, whom Wodehouse personally revered. The team included other hugely



Members of the Authors XI cricket team with their opponents, the Artists, at a 22nd May 1903 cricket game. Prominent authors in the photo include P G Wodehouse (back row, third from left), Arthur Conan Doyle (back row, sixth from left) and J M Barrie (seated on bench, third from right)

successful writers, including J M Barrie, who would write *Peter Pan* the following year – but there can be no doubt that it was Conan Doyle whom Wodehouse most looked up to.

The cricket-field meeting clearly went well: less than a week later, Wodehouse authored a lyric in *Punch*, entitled ‘Back To His Native Strand,’ predicting the resurrection of the temporarily-dead Sherlock Holmes. Conan Doyle was indeed working on some new Holmes stories, which began to be published in the *Strand Magazine* that October. Wodehouse must have found this out during the match, and presumably got Conan Doyle’s permission to publish this scoop. A couple of weeks after that, Wodehouse managed to arrange an interview with Conan Doyle on behalf of *V.C. Magazine*.

Their new cricket bond helped the conversation to flow: Wodehouse recorded Conan Doyle’s observation that ‘a man who can manage a cricket team on tour and see that they don’t think the match is next week and don’t lose their cricket bags and don’t let their wives get ill the day before a match, is fit to govern a colony.’ Conan Doyle’s other gems included the encouraging advice that ‘the life of an author is divided into two

parts. During the first he goes to publishers. During the second they come to him. Then he begins to get a bit of his own back.’

Things began to go increasingly well for Wodehouse, and cricket was a critical part of this trend. Throughout that summer and autumn of 1903, he filled his notebook with ideas for cricket-themed stories. Most of these were school stories, but some of them showed signs that he was still daydreaming about his new role with Conan Doyle’s Authors XI:

‘Mems for *Punch*

a) Man who made money by selling literary ideas and titles to authors, e.g. ‘Man with the Single Spat’ to Conan Doyle. (Might bring this into ‘Lodgings in Belgravia’)

b) Advice to Journalists: (Story book) (e.g. playing v editor in cricket match and bowling to suit him if he’ll take article, or offering to run him out).’

Many of these cricket ideas made it into print, such as ‘My Cricket Drama’ and ‘The Cricketer in Winter,’ both published in *Punch* in September 1903. Then in November, his

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second book came out: *Tales of St Austin's*, a collection of sixteen of Wodehouse's school-themed pieces. Twelve of these sixteen featured cricket, including the essay 'Now, talking about cricket –'

For the rest of the decade, Wodehouse continued writing about schoolboys (and especially their cricket escapades) and playing for the Authors XI. He proved to be one of their best players – not too difficult a feat when compared to some of his teammates, perhaps – but not quite as good as the ever-magnificent Conan Doyle. Wodehouse and his captain became such fast friends that Conan Doyle invited him to stay for several days at his home, Undershaw, near Haslemere in Surrey. The occasion was a private cricket week, in which all the team members were Conan Doyle's personal friends.

Until 1907, the Authors always spent a weekend in Esher, playing the locals and a team of Artists. But from 1905 until 1912, they played an annual match in a much more awe-inspiring venue: Lord's Cricket Ground. First came five matches against the Actors,

and then – when the Actors dropped the fixture – they played three matches against a team of Publishers instead. Wodehouse played in six of these eight matches, in front of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of spectators. For a cricket lover, there could have been nothing more magical than playing at Lord's – and as for his writing career, his place in the high-profile Authors XI guaranteed him a certain level of recognition. Wodehouse had definitely arrived.

In 1909, *Mike* was published: the last and greatest of Wodehouse's schoolboy stories, it starred a teenage cricket prodigy learning the sacred code of public-school life. *Mike* turned out to be Wodehouse's farewell to the theme of cricket. Having perfected the school story genre, he set his sights on new topics – and left Emsworth for the shores of America.

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