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## **Taking the Field: The Everyday Stories of Cricketing Folk**

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### **Background**

Between 2010 and 2012 researchers at Falmouth and Glamorgan Universities in the UK collaborated with the Marylebone Cricket Club at Lord's to explore the potential of producing digital artefacts for the Lord's Museum that focussed on the oral histories and everyday narratives of people involved in local cricket clubs. 'Taking the Field' was a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (a programme designed to support collaboration between universities and business and/or non-academic organisations in the UK) and supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It worked with a large number of local cricket clubs across England, Wales and Sri Lanka to create digital stories based upon the memories and personal photographic archives of their members. These stories now sit on an ever-growing bespoke website ([www.talkingthefield.com](http://www.talkingthefield.com)) and are used as material for screening in the cinema of the newly-refurbished museum at Lord's.

As a form of practice 'Taking the Field' emerged directly from an earlier pilot project called 'TaleEnders', which saw the team of university researchers working with Glamorgan Cricket Club to capture the oral narrative heritage of club cricket in Wales. It was through an engagement with the results of this work that the MCC saw an opportunity to address a particular challenge that it was facing.

Marylebone Cricket Club was founded in 1787 and is arguably the world's most famous cricket club. As well as being a club in its own right (and fielding teams to play competitively both in the UK and overseas) it is responsible for safeguarding both the Laws of the game and what is called "the Spirit of Cricket"

(by which is meant the principles, attitudes, indeed the *culture* of competition and fair play). It is also responsible for maintaining and managing Lord's Cricket Ground in London, known as "the Home of Cricket" and also runs an extensive education programme, promoting the sport to young people. Through the Museum and Library at Lord's, the MCC is also the guardian of cricket's heritage and history. Its obligations are international in scope and it has been particularly active in recent years in promoting cricket as a tool of community regeneration in Tsunami-hit areas of Sri Lanka.

MCC is, however, a membership organisation and, like many membership organisations it has an inherent conservatism that can be an obstacle to organisational change (it has only admitted women members since 1999). It may come as no surprise to learn that the MCC as an organisation faced particular challenges in engaging with the grassroots cricket community throughout the UK and this lack of engagement was reflected in the exhibition material in the Lord's Museum, which was focussed on the 'famous names' and the 'Greats of the Game' and did not reflect the extensive local club culture that underpins the game at all levels. This is not a challenge unique to the MCC, of course. It is the case that most sports museums tend to 'celebrate the celebrated', to draw upon the sport's own iconography which is invariably drawn from 'the greatest sporting moments'. The issue for the MCC was primarily one of modernisation, that is of introducing digital artefacts into the museum for the first time and moving it away from its old-fashioned, exclusive, class-based image to a more contemporary and inclusive one that sought to celebrate not only the great moments of the professional game, but also recognised the importance of the grassroots game and the diversity of its community.

It was on this basis that 'Taking the Field' set out to work with a range of self-selecting cricket clubs across the UK and in Sri Lanka. The MCC was keen to include an international dimension to the project, not only because of its existing work in Sri Lanka, but also as a way of engaging the diaspora in the Lord's Museum (another challenge for the MCC was how to better to engage with the large diaspora communities in the UK from cricket-playing nations). Over a

period of two years more than fifty digital stories were created that now form part of the Museum's holdings.

## **Digital Storytelling**

Digital Storytelling as a practice originally emerged from the community arts work of Joe Lambert in California in the early 1990s as ways of enabling individuals to use emergent technology, that was becoming increasingly available and affordable at the time, to capture and share their personal stories and memories. Typically, digital stories are short films of less than five minutes in length, with the single, authentic voice of the storyteller and utilising a series of still images, often taken from the storyteller's own personal collection. Whilst it is usual for there to be some kind of professional intervention in the process of making the digital story, editorial decisions and actions are nearly always made by, or in consultation with, the storyteller themselves. In this way the storyteller retains control and ownership over their story and they are encouraged to acquire the technical and creative skills to make their own digital stories from scratch. This is one key difference between digital story making and oral history collection – the nature and level of the intervention.

Digital storytelling was brought to the UK in the late 1990s by Daniel Meadows, an academic from the Cardiff School of Journalism, and the idea was quickly adopted by BBC Wales who launched their pioneering (and now iconic) Capture Wales project. Capture Wales is a useful lens through which to consider digital storytelling in the UK, not only because it was the first project of its kind, but also because of the scale of its ambition. Emerging from the context of post devolutionary Wales, the project set out to redefine the national identity through the stories of those people living there. Hamish Fyfe from the University of Glamorgan explains:

The BBC's *Capture Wales* project has set out to explore the tapestry of stories that exist in communities of interest, experience and location across Wales.

The story of Wales and its people that the project tells is very different from the story that is often told about Wales or the one you might expect to hear. The deceptively simple idea at the heart of the project is that everyone has a story to tell. The project seeks to provide this opportunity and often works with people, who, because of the increasing gap between rich and poor in this country are excluded from the benefits of the 'digital revolution'. This is a project that doesn't have a totalising aim. It aims to provide an overarching narrative by creating myriad individual and separate stories.

For Daniel Meadows digital storytelling, as a practice, is merely the latest iteration of humanity's instinctive need to narrate itself:

Once upon a time we sat around the fire and told each other stories, now 'young or old' we can do it with computers. We call this Digital Storytelling and it's made possible by the new tools of media production. We don't need a studio anymore to make television. If we want, we can make it on the kitchen table. And this is our desire, for ours is a voice that must be heard. Until now our personal stories have been shared only with our family and friends, but our process is about collecting all these invisible histories together ... about assembling the jig-saw that is the bigger story of our time, the story that defines who we are.

Mandy Rose, formerly editor of the New Media Department at BBC Wales, focuses more on the story, rather than the storytelling, in her analysis. What Meadows describes as 'digital haiku' can, for Rose, be traced back to a much longer tradition in British public service broadcasting of democratising the airwaves and capturing the voices of the so-called ordinary people of Britain that goes back to "the BBC tradition of 'listening to the voice of the people' – a project pioneered in radio by Olive Shapley in the 1930's and continued after World War 2 in the Radio Ballads of Charles Parker." One might also think of the documentary film-making of Humphrey Jennings and even the work of Mass Observation in the 1930s. Interestingly, Rose was former editor of *Video Nation*, a BBC programme from the 1980s which sought to cover similar territory.

So, rather than being an entirely new form of practice that has emerged in response to the availability of new, affordable technologies, digital storytelling is the inheritor of a rich tradition of media practice in the UK that owes much to the democratizing zeal of early pioneers. It is the quality of this pedigree that makes digital storytelling an effective method for addressing the challenges facing the MCC in engaging with the wider cricketing community.

## **The Stories**

As of May 2013 Taking the Field has generated fifty-six digital stories from twelve English and Welsh cricket clubs and four Sri Lankan clubs (plus one charitable foundation – The Foundation of Goodness) and that number continues to grow. In fact, the true number of stories is much greater, as many of the digital stories themselves contain multiple narratives – either actual or suggested. There are a number of recurring themes that occur across the entire corpus and the stories could be categorised into seven categories thus:

1. *Extraordinary and Memorable Events* – This category includes stories that tell of triumphs and disasters (or near disasters) and might include stories such as the story from Astley Bridge Cricket Club in Bolton and their triumphant league win in 1970. Or it might include the story from Montgomery Cricket Club, told by Brian Purslow, of the bowler who took seven LBWs in one innings – with the help of his father-in-law who was the umpire.
2. *Heroic actions* – This can also include stories of unsung or unexpected heroes, such as Dan Willoughby from Rodley's poignant tale of the player who, having not bowled before, stepped in to bowl the last over in a critical game. He finished by bowling three dot balls and saved the club from relegation. It was the last cricket he played before unexpectedly

dying. It might also include Sashi's story of her raising through the ranks to play for the Sri Lankan Women's National side due to the heroic action of her family in resisting the dominant cultural view in her community that girls should not play sport.

3. *Brushes with the famous* – Such as Fred Guest's story of playing against a young Gary Sobers or Brian Mulholland from Chorleywood's story of being drafted in from the crowd to score a test match, when the official scorer was taken ill.
4. *The sustainability of generations* – This category covers the many stories from all clubs that tell of the importance of youth cricket and the role of dynasties of families in maintaining the sustainability of clubs and communities.
5. *The context of the wider community* – stories that tell of the cricket clubs role and position within the wider social community, such as Chorleywood's annual 'Cricket on the Common' event, which brings together the whole community (and particularly non-members) at a 'village-fete' type event.
6. *The context of national (and international events)* – This category would include Chandra Schaffter's story of playing cricket for the Tamil Union at the time of the Sri Lankan Civil War or the story of how cricket in the mining village of Blaina in South Wales helped maintain the community during the year-long bitter miner's strike in 1984-5.
7. *The context of social change* – These stories set local cricket against the backdrop of broader social change, such as the growth of women's cricket or the impact of Asian communities in Astley Bridge on both raising the standard of the game in Bolton, but also the role the club had played in promoting multiculturalism. Likewise there is the story from Bill Finch and John Jenkins from Chorleywood, who tell of the days when they were not being able to play home games on a Sunday because of the religious objections of the local 'Lord of the Manor'.

Interestingly these categories map on very easily to those identified in Amy Kotkin and Steven Zeitlin's important study of family narratives from 1983,

where they identify a similar range of ten narrative categories within a corpus of family narrative lore.

The stories in the 'Taking the Field' collection work in two main ways. On the one hand, they are indeed stories about cricket – the everyday stories, the trials and tribulations, of cricketing folk and, as such, constitute a significant oral history of those individual clubs. On the other hand, cricket is just the vehicle for a set of stories that concern themselves with what Hamish Fyfe has described as 'the habits of the human heart'. These are stories of everyday heroism; triumphs and failures; high comedy and tragedy; community, rivalry and solidarity; change and continuity; wit and wiliness. They are windows into the social lives, attitudes and aspirations of both individuals and communities. Perhaps even more importantly these stories challenge perceived hierarchies of knowledge in sports history, celebrating the everyday experiences of grassroots participants, rather than the extraordinary achievements of the famous and the celebrated and giving voice to those who by sitting at the bottom of the game, rather than at the very top, are sustaining it and its culture for future generations.

### **Outcomes and Benefits**

Whilst 'Taking the Field' was conceived as a project primarily aimed at enhancing the collections of the MCC, the main beneficiaries of the work have arguably been the participating clubs and individuals themselves. In some cases the work has inspired the clubs to begin collecting their oral histories and to understand their history in a different way. For others, participation in the project, and association with the MCC (enhanced by the imprimatur of the universities) has given them improved media coverage, either through local press reports of the project or by providing them with additional material for their own websites and increasing their number of hits. Some enjoyed the limelight – for example, members of Blaina Cricket Club were invited onto BBC Radio's *Test Match Special* to talk about the project during the England Vs Sri Lanka Test in Cardiff. Representatives from Spondon Cricket Club in Derbyshire came to the MCC Summer Party at Lord's. In all cases the participating clubs

reported positively from their involvement in the project and felt their histories and cultures had been validated by the wider cricketing community.

In terms of the MCC the benefits were more expected but nonetheless significant. In addition to the digital artefacts acquired by the MCC, they also had developed relationships with local clubs and an established methodology for creating further artefacts and developing relationships in the future. During the lifetime of the project, the MCC has also witnessed a significant increase in visitor numbers in terms of both website hits and footfall within the museum itself, which has in turn led to increased revenue. In addition the success of the project has had a significant impact on way that the MCC now thinks strategically about its collections and its role as the international guardian of cricket heritage.

### **Future plans**

The MCC has already invested a significant amount of resource in the project and it is indicative of the value that they have placed on it that they have agreed to support its continuation through its next phase ('Second Innings') with a dedicated staff allocation for the next few years. In addition it is hoped that next year a PhD student will begin work on developing the project, especially by growing its international dimension and evaluating and analysing the work in far more depth than has been possible through this modest paper. In the meantime, additional digital stories continue to be added to the website and new clubs are queuing up to become participants in 'Taking the Field'.