



Simon Cook: a stalwart of the Kent game and now overseeing men's professional cricket

‘It’s about playing POSITIVE, SMART CRICKET’

Jeremy Blackmore talks to both the new director and the new captain at Kent Cricket, to find out more about their plans are to ensure the county’s game reaches team reaches consistently greater heights

Change is in the spring air at The Spitfire Ground, St Lawrence, as a new management team gets ready to lead Kent Cricket’s drive for silverware and produce more homegrown cricketers like England stars Zak Crawley and Tammy Beaumont.

With former England wicket-keeper Paul Downton retiring as director of cricket, the county has appointed another stalwart of Kent Cricket as his successor in Simon Cook, with prolific batter Daniel Bell-Drummond succeeding Sam Billings as men’s club captain. Simon has a long pedigree with the club, first as a player between 2005–2012, making over 200 appearances and winning two trophies before rejoining as bowling coach in 2019.

In between Simon, 47, served in key management roles with Hong Kong Cricket. On his return to Canterbury, he has also overseen the development of a specialist fast bowling programme for young cricketers and took on the role as interim head coach during Kent’s victorious One-Day Cup campaign in 2022.

He now takes on the top job at Canterbury overseeing men’s professional cricket, the women’s game and the performance pathways, working closely alongside long-serving men’s head coach Matt Walker.

PLAYING FOR THE COUNTY

Paying tribute to Paul, Simon says: ‘The success Paul had here over the six seasons he oversaw cricket is remarkable – the two trophies, a near miss, definitely a sense of building that went on through that period. Some really good players have been produced in his time here and gone on to play for England. If I can achieve half the things he achieved in his tenure, I’ll be quite happy.’

After growing up playing club cricket in Oxfordshire, Simon played as a professional for Middlesex for eight seasons before moving to Kent.

‘I was going to go to a club with ambitions to win more trophies, but also, I’d had enough of living in London,’ he explains.

‘That was a big driver as well, coming from Oxford. To be able to live 10 minutes from the ground in Canterbury and have a bit more >



PHOTO: KENT CRICKET

The Kent men's cricket team looks forward to a new era

'It was a really exciting opportunity to come back into cricket'

connection with everybody here was quite a big sell.' Winning the 2007 T20 trophy and topping Division Two to win promotion in 2009 were obvious highlights in a Kent career that has seen him take 347 wickets in all competitions.

He played in a strong Kent side with a keen sense of identity under Rob Key as captain and Graham Ford as director of cricket, an ethos which has inspired his approach to management since.

THE ROAD TO THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR

Simon's coaching journey started in Hong Kong where he initially put together training programmes and ran local teams.

From there he graduated into a role with the national Hong Kong side, first as bowling coach and then as head coach.

Latterly he took over as director of cricket, providing him with a global view of Hong Kong Cricket at international level and the domestic structures and strategies supporting it.

It was a fulfilling role, but a demanding one and after seven years he returned to Kent to look for a change of direction and to give his young family a chance to grow up in a more rural environment.

Paul Downton was keen to make use of Simon's skills and the next few years saw a natural progression in his new role at Canterbury. 'It was a really exciting opportunity to come back into cricket,' he says. 'Just to work with eight or nine bowlers as opposed to 40 people [in Hong Kong] was a really nice change.'

'Then fast forward through three years where I'd built up a bit more involvement

in lots of different areas in the club.

'I'd done head coach of the One-Day Cup team; we'd had some success in that. So, I was almost starting to ramp it up again, in the same way as when I went to Hong Kong.

'Doing that has fuelled the fire to get back on the horse, again, in terms of being a bit more strategic. I still love coaching. I'm still going to be involved. I'll be using myself in a kind of overflow while still achieving that strategic viewpoint.'

TALKING STRATEGY

Simon's strategy is about achieving greater consistency to turn around Kent's mercurial fortunes, which has seen the county win a trophy one year and fail to qualify the next. They also narrowly avoided relegation from Division One of the County Championship last season.

Simon is keen to define an identity and style of play which will succeed at Canterbury. It's an approach he wants to embed through the whole club from the age groups and academy right through to the first team.

'There's not been a sustained kind of level of success. I think it's just because we haven't really got a defined style or identity that runs through our whole club,' he says.

'What are the attributes that are needed as a Spitfire player? What does it take to win games of cricket here?'

That approach extends to working with analysts to see which bowlers are successful at Canterbury and liaising with ground staff on preparation of wickets.

KENT'S NEW CAPTAIN

With Sam Billings standing down as men's club captain after six years to focus on his



PHOTO: IAN SCAMMELL

own game following a poor run of form, Simon had to make an early decision.

While Sam will continue to skipper Kent in the T20 Vitality Blast, Simon has appointed Daniel Bell-Drummond to captain Kent in the County Championship, someone who he says is tactically very astute and will bring a more reflective approach. Daniel was born in Lewisham to a cricket-loving Jamaican family and progressed through the Kent youth system after being spotted playing for Catford Wanderers as a seven-year-old.

After attending Dulwich Prep, he won a scholarship to Millfield School, where he won the prestigious Young Wisden Schools Cricketer of the Year award.

International honours soon beckoned with many appearances for England age group sides including captaining England Under-17s in 2010.

'I've come up the ranks with Kent and still feel a young man,' says Daniel. 'Most of my life has been with Kent cricket of some



Daniel Bell-Drummond signing autographs for fans: 'Most of my life has been with Kent cricket of some sort. I'm very proud to captain the team,' he says

sort. I'm very proud to captain the team.' Daniel, who hit a remarkable unbeaten triple-century against Northamptonshire last season, wants to lead by example by continuing to put big runs on the board.

'It's about playing positive, smart cricket and giving everyone the belief that we're more than just the sum of our parts. And creating a good culture in the changing room, so guys can go and perform to the best of our ability. I always want to trust the players and give them the most backing and confidence they need to deliver their skills.'

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2024

Zak Crawley is likely to be available for a large part of early season until England's Test summer starts in July, while excitement is building about around the signing of England leg-spinner Matt Parkinson.

Kent's men begin their season with a three-day warm-up fixture against Loughborough UCCE, before starting their

County Championship campaign with a match against Somerset, also at The Spitfire Ground, St Lawrence from Friday 5 April.

Says Daniel: 'There's been a lot of very good planning from everyone, Simon Cook, especially, in regard to what we've been doing during pre-season – so I have full confidence we'll be ready come Somerset at home.'

Meanwhile, Kent Women continue to go from strength to strength with many local players representing England and regional professional side South East Stars. Tammy Beaumont enjoyed a spectacular 2023, scoring a history-making Ashes double-hundred, thereby becoming the first homegrown Kent cricketer to score a century across all three international formats. Since 2020, Kent's women and girls feed into South East Stars, alongside players from Surrey. They kick off their season against Southern Vipers on April 20 at the County Ground, Beckenham, where entry is free. ●



Simon Cook in action back in 2022, during the Kent CCC v Lancashire CCC friendly at the St Lawrence ground, Canterbury