



COUNTY MEMORIES – KENT

SILVER SURFERS OF THE SEVENTIES

Kent put a period in the doldrums behind them by lifting 10 trophies in nine years. **Paul Downton, Asif Iqbal** and **Charles Rowe** tell *Jeremy Blackmore* about a glorious decade

They were harvesting trophies as well as hops in the garden of England in the 1970s. Kent, who had not won silverware since taking the Championship title in 1913, saw their fortunes transformed.

Winning the Gillette Cup in 1967 was an early sign of a turnaround, the same year they finished second in the Championship. There was much more to come. In 1970 Kent came from behind to win the Championship, the first of a remarkable 10 trophies in nine seasons.

Blessed with an array of England Test greats, homegrown youngsters and some canny overseas signings, Kent dominated the county scene. Even when impacted by the fallout from the Packer 'circus' – perhaps more than any other county – they kept on winning.

Kent were no strangers to the bottom half of the Championship table though when Kent and England great Les Ames became secretary/manager in 1960 and joined forces with captain Colin Cowdrey. Together they charted a path to one of the great eras in county cricket, building a welcome environment with an underlying sense of purpose.

Asif Iqbal, an integral part of Kent's success, first played against the county at Dartford in 1963 while touring England with Pakistan Eaglets. He felt instantly comfortable with the people he met. When he returned to

England in 1967, Asif scored 146 at No.9 for Pakistan in the third Test at the Oval. Cowdrey approached him after the game and said if Asif would be interested in playing county cricket, Kent would be interested in having him.

With new rules making it easier to sign overseas players in 1968, Ames acted quickly to secure Asif's services.

They had met the previous year when Ames brought an England Under-25 tour to Pakistan, featuring Alan Knott and Derek Underwood. Asif skippered the hosts. "I got along so well with Les as well as these boys, Derek and Knotty. So, that also was in the back of my mind when I got this offer from Kent. I certainly agreed without any terms or conditions being offered. I just said, yes, I would love to."

The welcome Asif received at Canterbury in spring 1968 proved his initial impressions were justified. "Les walked out of the office and the warmth I felt in his greeting and welcoming me, that will remain with me forever. He made me feel I'm not just joining a professional outfit, but a very loving, caring club. From then, when I met the players and others, I was right in my assumption. Everybody helped me to settle down."

A conversation with Ames in 1969 proved a defining moment in Asif's career. After a decent first year, he found himself dropped midway through 1969 and sent to play



in the seconds. Asif explains he did not understand what it meant to play cricket for a livelihood as the concept did not exist in Pakistan. Sport was there for enjoyment and to entertain. Ames took him to one side and explained what being a professional cricketer meant and how every player was expected to give their best.

"That one line of Leslie changed all my thinking. It made me change my total attitude towards cricket. I really wanted to do well, not just for myself, but also for the club that has invested time and money in me. More than that, they believed in me. That was my main thinking: they believed in my talent and that's why they invited me to play. I have to do something for them. From that day onwards, my attitude changed, my performances changed."

Kent entered their centenary year in 1970 keen to mark the occasion in style. Instead, by the beginning of July they sat bottom of the Championship with only one victory in nine matches. Ames took the team to task, prompting a dramatic reversal in fortunes with a run of six wins and shrewd use of the still-new bonus points system.

The bowling honours were shared by West Indian allrounder John Shepherd (84) and Underwood (78), while Norman Graham was a threat.

Opening pair Mike Denness and Brian Luckhurst scored more than 36,000 first-class runs between them for Kent and provided the foundation for much of the '70s success. Both topped 1,000 runs in 1970, as did Cowdrey and Asif, who recalls two key moments which showed the fight and belief in the second half of that season.

At Blackheath, Pat Pocock frustrated Kent with Surrey nine wickets down and time running out to force a win. A narrow 12-run victory ultimately came through an extraordinary running catch by Asif.

"I was fielding at midwicket and there was this big shot to long-on," says Asif. "I don't know how far I ran, but I took that catch. I ended up running next to where Colin was fielding. He said, 'Wow, I think that's going to win us the Championship!' I remember telling Colin, 'don't worry skipper, we're going to win.' You just had that faith."

Another remarkable win came at Cheltenham where Asif scored a hard-fought 109 on a poor surface, setting up a narrow one-wicket win in a game missing Cowdrey, Knott and Luckhurst on England duty. He felt he had

helped repay the faith shown in him the previous season and received a congratulatory phone call from Cowdrey that evening.

At season's end, the team were invited to a reception at 10 Downing Street by Kent supporter and newly elected Prime Minister Ted Heath who had also defied the odds to win power that year. It was a defining moment for Cowdrey and consolation after not regaining the England captaincy following his return from injury. Says Asif: "Colin was a gentle, decent human being. He would not force anyone to do something he wouldn't do to start with. Also, he was very encouraging. He never pushed me."

After 15 seasons in charge, Cowdrey was succeeded by Denness in 1972. Under his leadership Kent dominated in one-day cricket with six trophies in five years. They recorded their first Sunday League title in 1972 and repeated the feat the following summer, the same year they beat Worcestershire by 39 runs in the Benson & Hedges Cup final at Lord's. Asif took 4 for 43 and scored 59.

Knott saw Kent over the line in a low-scoring 1974 Gillette Cup final victory over Lancashire by four wickets, setup by James Graham-Brown's miserly spell of 12-5-15-2. They claimed a double again in 1976 with a third Sunday League title and B&H Cup final victory over Worcestershire by 43 runs.

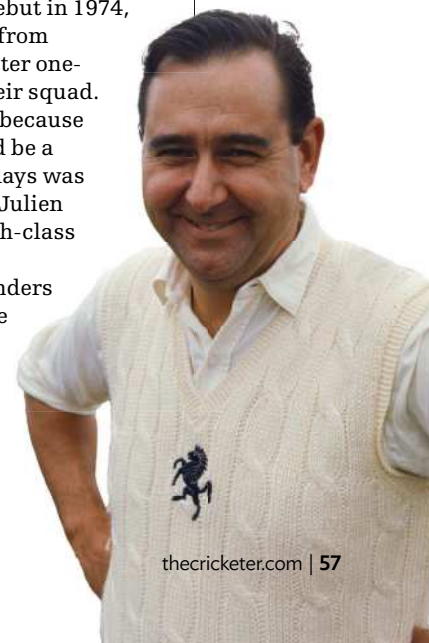
Charles Rowe, who made his first-team debut in 1974, recalls "an incredibly strong side" buzzing from success. He notes Kent were probably a better one-day outfit by then due to the make-up of their squad.

"We were geared to do well in one-dayers because we had allrounders. We had Asif, who could be a very useful bowler, Bob Woolmer in those days was the same, as were John Shepherd, Bernard Julien and Graham Johnson, but they all were high-class batsman as well.

"So in one-day cricket if you've got allrounders like that it makes it real easy, plus of course Knotty was a very good one-day batsman. We batted all the way down. We had good, accurate tight bowling as well. We had Deadly [Underwood], who was a nightmare to get away in one-day cricket. So, we had a complete side."

ABOVE
(l-r): Derek Underwood and Asif Iqbal celebrate winning the John Player League in 1972; Mike Denness with the Gillette Cup in 1974; Iqbal batting in 1980; John Shepherd in 1975; Brian Luckhurst in 1974

BELOW
Colin Cowdrey in 1970





ABOVE
Chris Tavaré batting against Middlesex in June 1979; Derek Underwood bowling in the 1977 B&H Cup final

OPPOSITE
Wicketkeepers Alan Knott and Paul Downton

Asif agrees allrounders played a key role in one-day success but believes there was another reason with the advent of the Sunday League and B&H Cup alongside the established Gillette Cup.

"No county had a domination of one-day cricket, because it was something new," he says. "There were two different competitions, and we were successful in both.

"There were allrounders, but at the same time, it was the entire team which performed. With limited-overs games, there's a challenge, either to do something special with the bat or ball, or even in the field. I loved that challenge."

The 1975 season was Cowdrey's last. He was responsible for Kent's first victory against the touring Australians in more than 75 years. Ian Chappell asked the team coach to pick the tourists up at tea, but Cowdrey accepted the challenge of scoring 354 runs in the final innings at more than a run a minute. He finished on 151 not out, an innings described in Kent's 1976 annual as "an impeccable and chanceless display of batting which will long be remembered".

Rowe, who batted with Cowdrey for the only time in his career, recalls his awareness, planning who would face each ball and identifying scoring options. "It was one of the best innings I've

seen. Colin just played magnificently. No one had ever spoken to me about batting like that before. Just to have a little insight into how his mind worked when he batted was amazing.

"We were never in the game until the last day. A good wicket and all that, but they had a really good bowling attack and yet we won because Cowdrey and Woolmer batted really well."

In 1977 Asif became captain. He recalls the pride after turning his game around in 1970. "I was rewarded by Kent. I can't see anything else they could have done; they make me the captain. That's my journey. I loved playing with the boys, they always played for each other. Then the thing I loved most is we all had a laugh playing together. We cherished seeing other players performing in the team. We used to back each other. That's why we had so many successes."

Rowe says Asif was the best captain he played under at Kent, with a good cricket brain and a charisma that made players want to do well for him.

Paul Downton, who debuted that summer while Knott was on England duty, agrees: "Asif was terrific. He's a really effervescent character. He would always take the attacking option. He was very encouraging. He opened the bowling and asked me to stand up to the wicket after a couple of overs. I ended up taking this stumping which was great for me."

Downton recalls a real buzz around Canterbury that year. While Luckhurst had retired and Denness joined Essex, there was a new group of young players coming through like Rowe, Chris Cowdrey, Chris Tavaré, Grahame Clinton and Kevin Jarvis, who all started to stake their claims.

Says Downton: "Particularly when the Tests were on, there was quite a clan of us, who'd grown up together, played quite a lot of 2nd XI cricket together and we'd got the opportunity. It was just fun to be involved. It was an exciting experience. We did our best and ended up winning more than we lost."

It was the tightest possible year in the Championship. Kent shared the title with Middlesex after both counties tied on 227 points, while Gloucestershire finished just five points behind.

Asif relished the responsibility of captaincy, finishing as leading run-scorer. Alan Ealham also passed 1,000 runs along with sizeable contributions from Clinton and Woolmer.

Rowe recalls: "Apart from being a great outfielder, Alan had a really good temperament. He basically played his game, which was to attack. He could easily have played for England, because he was such a good fielder and useful batsman. He saved us time and again. Clint took a while to establish himself but played really well that year as a gritty left-hand opening bat."

Shepherd and Julien again played key roles. The former was the second leading wicket-taker (87) in the country. He was a strong man who could bowl all day uphill into the wind, hit a quick half-century and was a great fielder. Says Downton: "Shep loved playing cricket. A joy to play with and to keep to. His away-swing always had you in the game if a right-hander was batting. Just a real gentleman, a great competitor, but a really loveable guy. He was extremely popular in our dressing room, but also around the county circuit. Magnificent cricketer for Kent, in a different era could have played an awful lot of Test cricket, but Kent were very much the beneficiaries of that."

Kent again reached a Lord's final in 1977, finishing runners-up and continued to challenge on all fronts. Everything seemed rosy.

Then came Kerry Packer's World Series Cricket with seismic ramifications for county as well as international cricket. Kent had five Packer players – Woolmer, Knott, Underwood, Julien and Asif (who was removed as captain).

After an impressive first year in charge, Asif says he felt let down after assurances by the club about his future. "To do that well, only be told at the end of the season, sorry, you're no longer going to be the captain. That really took away that joy and pleasure and everything, all those years I put into the county."

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There was an immediate impact on the club's wicketkeepers too. Downton, after just seven first-class games, found himself on an England tour as understudy to Bob Taylor and first-choice Kent keeper in 1978 while Knott took a sabbatical. Downton remembers a highly-charged time with the future of the Kent's Packer players in doubt: "It was a very strange time. There were all sorts of concerns: would this be the end of Test cricket; would it therefore be the end of county cricket? There was a real feeling of 'high treason' in the shires among the committee generation and Kent had five Kerry Packer players, so, in some ways, we were right at the heart of it. Of course, my situation was very strange. I was back at university, but somehow, I was being named in the High Court as an example of, 'the mercenary Alan Knott keeping out a young English talent', which of course was all rubbish, but it was the way it was portrayed. Knotty, he's quite a sensitive guy, a great man and a hero of mine. From what I gather he simply said, 'Well, I'll stand down'."

With Woolmer and Underwood not part of the England set-up in 1978, Kent were able to call on their services all summer alongside Asif. With the now blossoming crop of youngsters, Kent boasted a formidable side and won the Championship outright. Asif believes Kent's form that summer was a carry-forward of the previous year and the momentum he had built as captain.

Ealham was handed the leadership reins. Downton believes he handled the promotion well: "I think he was probably as surprised as anybody to be given the captaincy. He led from the front, didn't complicate things with the attack we had – we were a pretty potent side. 'Ealy' always had an attacking instinct and that held us in very good stead."

Underwood showed England what they were missing with a haul of 110 Championship wickets. Downton had a ringside seat to watch a master at work. Keeping to him was "a real treat", he says.

"He was an exceptional bowler. Hated giving away a run, was metronomic in his control, but had quite a great deal of variety and rhythm to his bowling so he never got taken down.

"The nickname Deadly was absolutely right. He was unplayable. He bowled at a good pace, metronomically accurate, spun the ball hard, it kicked and reared. He was exceptional. He also had this sort of Exocet arm ball which inevitably was dead straight, yorker-type level. I remember young batters coming in, he'd tee them up and then the Exocet lbw would come. He was a master of his craft."

Rowe believes Underwood, having been "lethal" on uncovered surfaces, had also become a better bowler on pitches other than wet wickets.

Off-spinner Johnson took 54 wickets, described by Downton as "outstanding, probably the unluckiest player not to have got an England call-up". Meanwhile seamer Jarvis had a breakthrough year with 79 wickets and there was a debut for a

young Graham Dilley.

Those who only saw Tavaré bat for England would have not recognised the attacking young batsman who smashed the ball around Canterbury that summer and finished as leading scorer.

Downton who was at school with him recalls: "He was the most brilliant attacking batsman of his schoolboy era. People like David Gower and Cowdrey were there and thereabouts, but Tav was absolutely the standout.

"He absolutely smashed it. He was a very natural hard hitter of a ball, classic player who

was just really talented. It's a great shame that he never really got to show [that] at England level where he batted to order and took it very seriously. His record in one-day cricket was exceptional too and he absolutely established himself as the Kent number three that year."

Rowe too had an excellent season, just missing out on 1,000 runs due to injury and formed an opening partnership with Woolmer, who had a vintage summer. Rowe saw their job as seeing off the new ball to make it easier for natural stroke players like Asif and Ealham to play their shots.

"Bob loved cricket, he just loved every moment of it," recalls Downton fondly. "Great theorist, you could see then how he would become a really good coach. He just had an almost childlike enthusiasm about him. I remember watching him as I was growing up, as a swing bowler really, batting at No.8, a one-day contributor, and then – [with] Colin Cowdrey his absolute mentor and hero – he became a better and better batsman. He was a standout player."

Woolmer was the star too when Kent visited Lord's for their third final in three years, scoring 79 as they beat Derbyshire by six wickets.

It was to be the last silverware for 17 years. In 1979, Kent could only come fifth in the Championship although they came close to winning the Sunday League, finishing runners-up after failing to beat Middlesex at Canterbury in the final game.

Downton's fate was still bound up with Knott's. In 1979 Knott kept wicket until Downton returned from university on July 1.

"An extraordinary situation," he says. "Knotty was, in my eyes, the best keeper/batsman there's ever been. He was still at the height of his powers. A most bizarre situation, but it highlighted the uncomfortable nature of that whole series."

Both players were offered four-year contracts.

Downton ultimately moved to Middlesex where he knew he would be guaranteed first team cricket.

Asif resumed captaincy duties in 1981 and 1982 but found it hard to replicate the enthusiasm he felt 1977.

"At one stage I thought I won't accept it, but then I was convinced by whoever was offering me the captaincy, to take the job again, but my heart was not in it, to be honest. I tried my best. I just couldn't bring myself to play the way I used to play or to get the best out of the players the way I did in my first year."

It was the end of an era. Asif though retains overwhelmingly happy memories of friends he made for life. "Lovely times spent with not just the players in the dressing room, but the relationships I've developed with the players and the crowd. They were lovely, the way they used to respond and yes, I've got nothing other than very fond memories for Kent, loving memories. The love and respect I got from people, that's more important." 