Glory Days

Chignal Cricket Club 2000-2013
The First Match

You’ve been waiting all winter long
Shivering through many a snowstorm.
Recalling heroics with leather and willow,
In a September game you helped win
Two catches, a wicket and first man in.
The first match, a friendly against old foes
Hedgerow leaves barely on thicket sloes.
Clouds scud across a disturbed blue sky
Skirting the boundary, a Brimstone butterfly.
Fading Bluebells nod at the Oak’s gnarled feet
As the faithful supporter takes his seat.
Anticipation is in the chilled spring air
Too early for cricket some say, not here!
A drop of rain sends panic through players
Umpires’ eyes look to the sullen heavens.
Just a passing shower, a collective sigh of relief
Jumpers hurriedly donned, two t-shirts beneath.
Which side will win the coin’s crucial toss?
On a wet pitch, batting first means fifty all out
After furious winter practice, a certain loss.
But we’re bowling first and champing at the bit
Despite a smidgen of spin, you’re getting hit.
A barrage of long hops and half volleys
Oh well, at least the cricket tea looks edible.
Several pounds heavier
You don yellowing pads, first to bat.
Opening is fraught at the best of times
Today the pitch has some well-laid mines.
The walk to failure seems to take forever
This time the butterflies are in the stomach.
Opposition players give a ripple of applause
As an unworthy batsman marks his crease.
Then in steams the angry fast bowler
Kissing pitch with fire and smoulder.
You play and miss at four moving away
Blocking the other two, a maiden over.
Then a trundling, but accurate medium pacer
Traps you plumb in front with a devious yorker.
Avoiding the umpire’s cruel, but gleeful stare
Finger proudly rising, seemingly without a care.
You begin the long, familiar walk of shame,
Out for a duck, returning to the pavilion
From whence you optimistically came.
But there’s always next week’s fare
Dreaming of runs and wickets perhaps,
Hope springs eternal for the village cricketer.
Acknowledgements

Many people have supported the author in the production of this short booklet. Particular mention should be made of Ross Cant and Linda Bird’s help with providing information for the project. This is not the *magnum opus* (note to James Mawer, it’s not an ice cream!) on Chignal CC, that book was written by Nigel Bevitt-Smith and Paul Philo. Errors in the book are mine, hopefully there are few. I make no apology for the song lyric or film references in the text, they seemed appropriate. I hope you enjoy this irreverent take on Chignal’s recent cricketing exploits, I certainly enjoyed writing it. Happy days.

Tim Gardiner, April 2014
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Where the hell is Chignal Smealey?

A frequent question when you say you play cricket for a local team is “Where the hell is Chignal Smealey?” It’s a good one though, hardly anyone has heard of, let alone knows, where this mecca of village cricket is. The simple answer is on the north-west outskirts of Chelmsford, about three or four miles from the town (sorry city!) centre. Glossing over the difficulties in spelling the village name (one L or two?), the parish itself is one of the most idyllic settings for cricket you could imagine. It has a red brick church (St. Nicholas) and phone box (I wonder when it was last used?), but there is no shop or pub anymore. The most important thing is that Chignal Smealey has one of the finest cricket grounds in Essex. The wicket is not great and we could do with a new pavilion, but look at those Chestnut trees and the rolling farmland.

The history of cricket in Chignal Smealey dates back to 1900. This pre-World War II halcyon period of low scores on unrolled, wet wickets and whitened players on bicycles is described in the book ‘Chignal Cricket Club: The First Hundred Years’. The majority of the players in those days would have been agricultural labourers from the local area and many of them were not very good at cricket it’s fair to say. Several Chignal players of the pre-WWII era have reflected on a bygone age of cricket played in a meadow which during the week was used for grazing the local cows. In the 1930s and 1940s cricket outfields were cut annually (at best) with a scythe (can you imagine doing this every week?) or grazed by cows or horses. The resulting outfields were often covered in tall grass all over (some Chignal players mention grass as high as a foot) and the actual pitches (or wickets) were said to be treacherous. If you inspect the Chignal scores of the pre-WWII era it can be clearly seen that it was a bowler’s game, with 50 runs for an entire team often being a winning score. There are several instances of teams being bowled out for less than 10 runs with plenty of ducks accumulated in those days.

But that’s the thing with Chignal, it still feels like 1934 on a warm sunny day as the breeze whispers through the Ash tree (one of our most faithful supporters since 1900) and catches are being shelled every five minutes. And then the off-stump comes cart wheeling out of the ground as Tom Bird, our mild-mannered, but frighteningly fast bowler, removes another hopeless opposition batsman. You see in recent times,
Chignal has had two teams, both in the T-Rippon Mid Essex League (including Rainham so it’s a loose definition).

This is not a story about off spinning parsons (to quote the excellent cricket writer Marcus Berkmann) and 4 all out against Pleshey. This is a story about the cut and thrust of League cricket in the modern era (2000-2013), the dodgy LBWs, cheating (always by the opposition of course), stroppy fast bowlers and above all the precious batting average updated on the website!

Chignal Cricket Ground, paradise on earth with a clapped-out roller!

**A sticky wicket**

The first thing any cricketer wants to know when batting is how the wicket (cut pitch) will react. With Chignal it’s fair to say that up to the 1950s the pitch was a lively affair with batsmen uncertain how the ball would respond when it bounced. The pitch had problems with weeds such as Plantains so it must have been a real joy to bat on. These days, with the purchase of a motorised roller and more emphasis placed on the
preparation of the surface, batting is a little less fraught than in past times. However, I’d still rather be a bowler, particularly a fast one, than a batsman.

I think the history of the ground as grazed pasture with Rabbit holes and decimation by Moles on occasion has not leant itself to the production of good cricket wickets. Through the years much effort has been put into rectifying the situation and for a while Tom Bird was in charge of producing the pitches for league cricket and other games. This was a significant undertaking and a thankless task in all honesty as it’s easy to criticise the facilities when you’re not actually mucking in to help.

Currently the club pays for someone to take care of the pitch. However, in 2013 the ageing roller experienced regular breakdowns making it hard to get a pitch with reliable bounce. In a recent 20/20 game, the ball was frequently grubbing along the surface, before bouncing head high off a length the next ball. I remarked at the time that this must have been what it was like to bat on a hundred years ago, when hopefully the bowling was a little slower! One thing with the pitch is that it really tests the hand eye co-ordination of a batsman who has to be prepared to change shot at the very last minute. Having said all this, the reasonably short boundaries straight of the pitch give batsmen full value for their shots and the outfield is no more uneven than many other grounds. Plenty of sixes are scored and team totals of over 200 runs are a fairly frequent occurrence which is testament to the efforts of all those involved with pitch preparation. A recent club record of 418 runs was scored in a 2nd Team game with the highest ever individual score also recorded (213 runs). More on that later.

**It’s still standing!**

One thing that distinguishes the Chignal ground is its delightfully rustic pavilion, which has been standing since 1959 when it was opened by Peter Smith, the Essex and England cricketer. It has been altered through the years with running water and showers added which contributes to the general ambience of a game at Chignal. I have a feeling one day someone will slam a door and the whole shebang will collapse in flat-pack style. It’s a bit like the Tardis in reverse, it looks quite big from the outside, but the changing rooms are a one in, one out affair. The carpets, despite
frequent hoovering, seem to have an unusually adhesive quality for dirt, grass and fluff, making any foray into the shower a rather futile exercise.

Another problem is that it is now uninsured (or should that be uninsurable?), so if the unthinkable were to happen and it burnt down, we’d literally be up s**t creek! Well I guess Pleshevy survived all those years without a toilet, pity the poor souls who had to venture around the back of the pavilion though! Hopefully one day the cricket gods will smile on Chignal and the funds will be there to build a new pavilion taking the club forward in the 21st century. We could even have a bar, pool table and dart board.

The Chignal pavilion has seen better days but it’s still standing!

We don’t like cricket, we love it!
The main thing which adds to the success of a cricket team is the persistence of the players. Several faces have been a constant in the team since 2000, such as the three amigos, Matt Cant, Ross Cant and Tom Bird. The three brothers combined have played an unbelievable 854 games between them (from 1998-2012), nearly two and a half years of cricket! Ross holds the record with 312 games since 1998, nearly a
whole year of his life! Just don’t tell his wife Sarah! The statistics table at the end of the book gives the top 40 players selected on the number of games they have played instead of the number of runs scored or wickets taken as it’s those individuals who have consistently turned out that have made the club successful.

Even more incredible than the number of games played are the overs bowled by certain players. Tom tops the list with more than 2400 overs (over 14400 balls) under his belt since 1998, closely followed by Nigel Clarke (1387 overs) and Ross Cant (1295 overs) not far behind. If you take Tom’s standard run-up as 30 m, then he has run 432 km bowling for Chignal, the equivalent distance of over 10 marathons. Good way to stay fit!

Sarah Cant, the reluctant cricket supporter
They might be giants

Our story commences at the start of the new Millennium with Chignal CC playing a range of league and friendly fixtures. The league games were every Saturday throughout the season, with the option of a less intense experience on the Sunday. The 1st Team were in Division 3, with the 2nd team in Division 10 of the T-Rippon Mid Essex League. One thing that immediately strikes you is that such a small cricket club in the back of beyond has two teams on a Saturday playing league cricket at a reasonably good standard. This is an achievement in its own right, as anyone organising a team for a game of cricket these days knows how hard it is to get one set of 11 players let alone 22. Legend has it that one local team captain recently had to make over one hundred phone calls to raise a cricket team. At Chignal, cricket was still played regularly on a Sunday afternoon.

A club legend, David Philo, topped the run scoring list and Ted Bird was the finest wicketkeeper/batsman this side of Chelmsford. Nigel Clarke wove a web of deceit from one end while young pups, Ross Cant and Tom Bird, the top wicket takers that year (2000), pounded in quicker stuff. The future must have seemed bright. The team photos are still in the geriatric pavilion, proudly displayed between the cobwebs. It’s hard to recognise retired batting heavyweight Terry Day, but youthful looking club stalwart, Vin Chauhan, remains unchanged to this day.

With the loss of the older generation of superstars and success of the Chignal youth policy (which produced Matt and Ross Cant and Tom Bird), the team looked to the future with some cause for optimism. Linda Bird, the club’s long-suffering scorer, scribbled in her scorebook, never missing a ball (well occasionally she might’ve including a couple of my infrequent boundaries!). If you were lucky, a couple of supporters turned up, only to retire to the Pig and Whistle (more on this later) for a beer after tea with the home side struggling on a damp wicket.

A well-deserved promotion to Division 2 was achieved at the end of the 2002 season. This promotion was earned largely by the excellent batting of David Philo (556 runs, 1 hundred and 4 fifties) and Matt Cant (555 runs, 4 fifties). Superb spells of fast bowling by Tom Bird (37 wickets) and the deceptive spin of Nigel Clarke (43
wickets) sealed the deal. The 1\textsuperscript{st} Team was starting to prosper in the higher leagues as the cricket of the younger players matured. The next few years (2003-2006) were a period of consolidation for the 1\textsuperscript{st} Team in Division 2 until promotion beckoned as the players knocked on the door of Division 1 in 2007. Once more Matt scored a stack of runs (613 runs including 2 hundreds) and Tom regularly destroyed top orders with 33 wickets.

This cricketing tale now switches to the fortunes of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Team from 2006-2010, a period I shall call ‘The Wilderness Years’, which coincided with my introduction to the wonders of Chignal CC after years of hassle from Ross Cant, my brother-in-law (well he sort of is). Read what you like into the fortunes of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Team and my debut for the club in a 2006 friendly which still records my highest ever cricket score of 46, an unsurprisingly modest total. But it is a high score I share with Harold Veal, a Willingale cricketer, and my then mother-in-law’s father. One of the nicest men I have ever met and a true countryman proud of his local patch, which is undoubtedly one of the most pleasant rural backwaters in Essex. Of the batting high score coincidence I am extremely proud, as he coached me one evening before I was unleashed on the local cricket scene. May my run drought continue for a little longer!

**The wilderness years (2006-2010)**

On my debut for the Chignal CC friendly team on 14\textsuperscript{th} May 2006 against Great Waltham, I actually managed to open the batting with no fear at all (well almost none) to score the aforementioned well-constructed, but slow 46. No-one except me remembers this match for obvious reasons, but I also managed to take two catches to help Chignal win the Ian Cant Memorial Trophy. From there on, the only way was down and so it proved personally as I had impressed the management enough to secure a cherished opening spot in the league.

In those days, the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Team was at the dizzy heights of Division 7. So the on field problems began. I didn’t score a run for the rest of the 2006 season getting the team off to a bad start every week, except for an excruciating to watch 18 at Burnham as we fell well short of our batting target.
The storm clouds (both actual and metaphorical) gather over Chignal CC
In that game Dave Wells hit a quick-fire 46 before I had scored, and even then my first run off the bat was given as a leg bye. Ross also recalls been bowled off the keeper’s pads to compound the misery, a classic example of conning the umpire.

**The umpire strikes back**

The 2006 season ended in further embarrassment as I was given out LBW in the last game to an 11 year old boy, the umpire was his granddad and it was going miles down leg side. I was mocked by two youths as I walked back to the pavilion, with their taunts of “You got out to an 11 year old” ringing in my ears as I prised the pads from fresh legs. The problem was we only had 10 players for that game, up from 9 players the previous week. The shortage of players meant that we couldn’t compete in many games with a lot of pressure on the top order, which didn’t respond too well. Basically, lose quick wickets early on with only 9 players and you get bowled out for nothing. This simple equation proved accurate by the end of the 2006 season which saw the team relegated to Division 8 in a sorry state.

The winter of 2006/7 saw much needed net practice and the introduction of new blood into the Chignal fold, younger players at that. Sam Hodgson, a young fast bowler, joined the club, and the Lee brothers (Jake and Robbie), transported by their ever reliable dad (Trev), were a regular feature of the 2007 season. Young Asian players such as Denuwan Thennakoon (Denu) and Shamith Welapura (Shami) were welcome additions and prospered in a resurgent team which displayed excellent camaraderie to narrowly miss out on promotion back to Division 8 by the end of the season. I had got used to opening the batting in the lower divisions and actually managed to string a few scores together, growing in confidence with the bat.

Sadly the wheels began to fall off the wagon batting wise, as we were bowled out for 43 at Terling early in 2008, a game in which I was bowled for a duck by a bowler whose contorted action was a distraction as he looked at the ground at the point of delivery. I couldn’t score a run and was low in confidence which led to me being dropped from the 2nd Team. A brief reappearance later in the season for the 1st Team remains the only game in which I have played for them, a dubious success in which I batted for half an hour for 2 not out while Ross Cant scored an excellent fifty to
secure the batting point in a resounding loss. After the unnecessary but inevitable sledging by the players about my Boycott style run rate, I resigned myself to playing in the Warsop Sunday League in 2009.

The fortunes of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Team didn’t improve much in my absence with relegation to Division 9 by the end of 2008. A further relegation in 2009 saw the team drop to Division 10. After the initial optimism with the arrival of new players in 2007, the old ways returned with a shortage of players some weeks and morale low. For the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Team it appeared that the new dawn had well and truly faded.

\textbf{Every day is like Sunday}

I was now a confirmed Sunday player, seeking solace in the lower order and throwing down a few non-spinning grenades every weekend. Entry into the Warsop Sunday League in 2009 seemed like a new era for friendly cricket at Chignal. This was the year in which I took my record haul for a season of 5 wickets (personal best of 3-32) and scored a succession of not outs in the lower order. I was developing a reputation for finishing games off in the Sunday league, exemplified by a stodgy 7 not out to win against Rayne as the batting collapsed. My one memory of a rare appearance in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Team that year was accompanying James Marriage while he scored a rapid 70 not out to nearly take us to victory against Terling. They were almost worried as each slog swept four passed gracefully over the boundary.

Perhaps my champagne moment of the Sunday season in 2009 came in the last match against Broomfield. I was due to bat at number six and was walking around the boundary in my pads as the fourth wicket fell. I strode out to the pitch only to be greeted by a padded up Joy Shaha who had also made the journey to the middle. Joy’s English wasn’t great so my attempts to explain that I was in next fell on deaf ears and I left the pitch to allow him to bat. The opposition players thought it was hilarious and we’re still unsure to this day where Joy was supposed to bat.
Another hapless Chignal batsman prepares to be dismissed!
In the end it didn’t matter, we both made ducks! Another Joy related incident came when he was accidentally locked in the pavilion after a game, calling the captain James Marriage requesting to be let out. Legend has it that Joy is also Bangladeshi royalty although no one has been able to confirm this outlandish claim!

Having achieved mediocrity in the Sunday League in 2009, we continued in the same format in 2010. This was the season, the same as with my batting in 2008, where the wheels fell off very quickly. I had switched to bowling around the wicket in an attempt to achieve more control over the ball, but unfortunately this meant that two dismissals, LBW and hitting the stumps, were taken out of the equation. I was then reliant on fielders taking catches which is always risky at Chignal (I include myself here as I can’t catch a thing these days). The consequence was only 2 wickets the whole season at a cost of 178 runs. Ouch! However, I was bowling 8 over spells some weeks so couldn’t complain about not being given the chance to shine.

Two incidents live long in the memory. The first was in the game against Maldon CC, former team of a youthful Alastair Cook. Upon turning up we found them engaged in what seemed like a bonding session in the dressing room with the strains of Toploader’s ‘Dancing in the Moonlight’ belting out. When the game started we learned that the captain had a microphone through which the coach was relaying messages about field settings and bowling options we assumed. Naturally we ribbed him about it the whole game as clearly this league was being taken a bit too seriously in our estimation. They duly thrashed us, but I returned my most economical bowling figures for some time (6 overs, 1-20) as unnecessary respect was shown to my floaters!

The second incident came against Woodham Mortimer. An opposition player, who shall remain nameless, scored a dodgy hundred as we dropped him six times. This left us with plenty of runs to score to win. Now the said batsman was Mr Angry when he bowled, particularly as Chris Thorn planted him back over his head for six. This only wound him up further and he uttered “Bet you can’t f*****g do that again.” Of course you can get guess what happened next. Chris hit him for a further three sixes all back over his head as the humbled bowler sloped off, cursing his luck. So this proved the old adage, ‘let the bat do the talking!’
By 2011, Sunday cricket was in trouble at Chignal. We had exited the Warsop League and only managed one Sunday friendly all season. We had few players wanting to play both on a Saturday and Sunday. Opposition teams were also struggling to get players and the rest of the Sunday fixtures were cancelled. To this day, Chignal does not field a Sunday team ending decades of less competitive cricket. I think this is a shame, but the game moves on. The folding of the Sunday team effectively signalled the end of my weekend playing career at Chignal, before it had even really begun! There has been a long history of Sunday cricket since 1967 so it is sad that no games will be played anymore. I didn’t enjoy Saturday league cricket, thinking it was a bit too serious for the level it was being played at. I would have to re-invent myself as a mediocre midweek 20/20 cricketer to continue playing for the club....

Linda Bird’s view from the pavilion as she prepares to record her millionth ball!
Bats out of hell

As a well-timed intermission to this tale, I think it is only fair to reflect on the batting heroes of the last 15 years. The best place to start is with the highest ever overall score by a Chignal player, the 213 hit by Shahbaz Mohammad in Division 9 on 2nd May 2009. This mammoth tally included 164 runs in boundaries (an incredible 18 sixes) in an overall team score of 418-6 off 45 overs. This was a club record individual and team score. My contribution was a quick fire 1 not out off 2 balls. For reference one opposition bowler went for 74 runs off his 5 overs while another notched 111 off 12, absolute carnage. However, the abundance of runs at least allowed me to bowl and I was rewarded with a wicket. We duly completed the club’s biggest ever margin of victory (308 runs) as we bowled Southend-on-Sea and EMT 4th Team out for just 110.

The flip side is the lowest team scores made during the period. Unsurprisingly I was involved in both of them, 43 all out against Terling (a lovely place to get a duck) in 2008 and the humbling 31 all out versus South Fambridge in 2010 (another of my ducks) thanks largely to Binman’s 5-13. It was clear that South Fambridge wanted revenge for Ross Cant’s onslaught against them at home earlier in the season (11 sixes between them). This they achieved against a below strength side, hardly what Sunday cricket was invented for. The one amusing thing about this game was Biraveenan Pirathapan (Biv) requesting a move up the order based on his rapid duck. Misplaced confidence was something we didn’t lack.

So who are the individual batting maestros of the modern era? The most runs scored during the 1998-2012 period were by Matt Cant (6895), James Halls (4284), Nigel Clarke (4071), David Philo (3891) and Ross Cant (3525). The most hundreds were scored by Matt (7), David Philo (6), M Ray (4) and Fazal Rahman (4). Matt (135), Fazal (133), Tom (77) and Ross (65) have hit the most sixes. Rumour has it that the players of yesteryear have hit sixes into the churchyard, having never come close I would suggest this is one hit too far.

Two of the most improved batsman playing for the club are the Lee brothers (Jake and Robbie) who I have been coaching and can claim a smidgen of pride from their
improving batting in recent years as they matured from boys to men. Having said this, it doesn’t always sink in as Robbie showed during a recent game when he struck a six over mid on before late cutting a ball for two runs. At last I thought he had learned that you don’t have to hit every ball for six. Next ball, with a fielder posted to the long on boundary, he attempted to hit another six only to hole out to the man in the deep! He reassured me that if we were chasing a larger total he would have played more sensibly, I’m not so sure.

On the flip side of the batting coin are those batsmen who are at the slower end of the batting spectrum. My personal highlight was an innings of 4 not out in just under an hour when we failed to score 80 odd in nearly 70 overs. Being broadly sledged by my own team and the opposition that my obdurate batting was all in vain as several players had barbecues they wanted to get to, I pointed out that we needed 40 runs in as many overs when I reached the wicket. We could have got those in wides if only someone had stayed with me for more than an over! However, my efforts are nothing compared to others such as Dave Gibson who once scored 3 runs in 27 overs! Painful
to watch, one run roughly every 10 overs. Inevitably, we must switch to the Duck Cup which has been won most years by the same players. Tom Bird shares the record for the most ducks (24) with Duncan Rimmer! I have my fair share as do most players who have notched up a few games.

**Never mind the bollocks!**

No tale of the modern Chignal era would be complete without mentioning those fast bowlers who got under the skin (and bat) of the better quality batsman. The stand out fast bowler over the last few years is Tom Bird, who has taken 476 wickets, mostly for the 1st Team, playing a major part in the success they have enjoyed recently. He bowls full and straight with plenty of movement to upset the best batsman. Having been wicketkeeper while he bowled in a 20/20 game he certainly hit the gloves harder than any other Chignal bowler and he wasn’t even at full pace. In a recent game for the 1st Team he dismissed a batsman for a duck in his first over on the way to a match winning five wicket haul against Springfield. As the batsman trudged back to the pavilion it turned out he had scored 240 odd in the previous game. To say this was a crucial wicket is an understatement. One difference from the early Chignal days is that most batsmen in the 1st Team and a few in the 2nd Team wear helmets. The consequences of getting hit in the face can be horrific, as many batsmen will testify.

Other fast bowlers of note include Ross Cant (264 wickets), Nick Halls (253) and Vin Chauhan (212). Vin is not so quick these days but his accuracy for the 2nd Team is legendary. He thinks every ball is a wicket-taker, with a yelp and hands on head when the batsman somehow manages to lay leather on willow. He is also one of the nicest blokes in the team and historically a more than competent batsman with two hundreds behind him with the bat. Just don’t let him call you through for three! Young fast bowlers are starting to emerge with Sam Hodgson approaching one hundred wickets for the club and Nadeem Ahmed already over this mark (101 wickets). That combined with the quickest bowler (70 mph) ever to bowl for the club, Taimoor Riaz, makes the future of fast bowling for the club seem promising. I had the pleasure of fielding at second slip during Sam’s recent five wicket haul at Wickford. He bowled with pace, bounce and no little movement against batsmen unaccustomed to facing that kind of bowling in Division 9. The high point of the spell was when he got a ball
to jag back and hit the unlucky batsman in the box. In response, the batsman walked off the wicket cursing “He’s me hit in the f***ing bollocks, f***ing hell.” Possibly one of the funniest moments I’ve seen on a cricket pitch. This is as close as the 2nd Team will ever get to intimidating the opposition batsmen in true West Indies’ style!

What shouldn’t be overlooked are the batting talents of many of the fast bowlers, particularly the stack of runs scored by Ross and Tom, with many more to come no doubt. Ross is the best wicketkeeper in the club now so it seems that the cricketing talent is brimming over at Chignal.

The tall Ash tree on the northern boundary of the ground
Ooh nice googlies sir!

As a part-time off spinner I feel better able to talk from personal experience about the difficult to master art of spin. My number of wickets is relatively small (just 13), but I enjoy the contest that you can have with a good batsman who is trying to come after your bowling. To get a stumping with a quicker ball after being deposited over your head for six the previous ball is particularly satisfying.

I’ve never got much spin from the Chignal wicket, unlike Nigel Clarke (242 wickets) and Fazal Rahman (130 wickets) who have got opposition batsmen in all sorts of trouble with balls that can spin both ways. Spin bowling is like playing chess with the batsman and you have to be very philosophical sometimes. I have bowled some of my best spells of off spin (a rare thing) and got hit for six runs an over and not taken a wicket.

The Chignal wicket can spin quite alarmingly if you hit a rough patch, but perhaps the biggest weapon for any spinner is the slightly variable bounce, with many batsmen beaten by one that pops up off the pitch or a grubber which gets half an inch off the ground. Having said that, the delivery which most often gets the wickets for spinners is the non-spinning, straight ball. It’s a hard life being a spinner, as short or full balls are often deposited over square leg or onto the roof of the pavilion. But the rewards when an off-break spins back sharply outside off stump and hits middle with the bemused batsman looking on is worth the toil.

Can’t catch, won’t catch

Perhaps one of the most simple cricket skills (which in some ways is more important than batting or bowling) is the ability to catch the ball. They say the best fielders make the best wicketkeepers and so it proves with Ross Cant (136 catches for the club, noting that not all were as a keeper). Originally a fast bowler, he has morphed into the best wicketkeeper to grace the club since Ted Bird. A recent one-handed catch will live long in the memories of those at the ground. Many have donned the gloves, most notably Craig Swan (134 catches), Martin Clarke (42 catches) and John Grainger (26 catches). Craig (or Cartman as he’s known for his uncanny resemblance to the South Park character) was perhaps the most vocal keeper in recent memory.
His constant chatter must have dismissed many batsmen who quickly became irritated by it! Stumpings are relatively infrequent off the spinners however. It’s a rare thing when the keeper demolishes the stumps and the square leg umpire’s finger is raised in the air; unless of course it’s the opposition umpire who’s a cheating so and so and won’t give his team mates out.

Having praised reliable keepers, many have donned the ‘Teflon’ gloves regularly shelling catches behind the stumps. These individuals will remain nameless for legal reasons, but dropping easy catches is not limited to wicketkeepers. Again those with butter fingers (myself included these days) will remain unsung, but you know who you are (Duncan!). Switching now to those catches which remain long in the memory, Tom Bird has taken the most, having caught 107 over the years (some as a keeper) with James Hall (71) and Matt Cant (60) also high on the list. I have taken a couple of stunners in my time including a one-handed diving catch at gully to win a game against South Fambridge. It was poetic justice as the batsman was given not out when caught behind off my bowling earlier in the day when he clearly nicked it. In the ensuing celebration I was buried under a heap of several players including the big-boned captain James Mawer!

![Brown Argus butterfly found along the western boundary](image)
Last but not least in a fielding sense are the run-outs which can be pivotal moments in a game. A quick and accurate throw from the deep can see a batsman short of his ground. In this respect a strong arm is required and Tom and Matt head the list of the most run-outs (24 and 20 respectively) for the club, followed by Ross (14).

**Twenty-twenty vision**

Returning now to the story of the club, I shall focus on the midweek 20/20 exploits. Having previously said that I dropped out of Saturday league cricket and with the Sunday team folding, the only cricket available to me was the midweek evening 20 overs a side slog-a-thons. I’ve been a 20/20 cricketer since 2004 when I started playing for the Writtle College Old Boys cricket team and it was not long before a regular twice-yearly fixture against Chignal was organised. The result is never usually in doubt given the batting and bowling strength of Chignal, but the fixtures are always light-hearted affairs ending in the Pig and Whistle for a pint and some grub. The games are not ‘official’ from a statistical viewpoint so players can hit out without fear of their batting average suffering as a result. The games also give everyone a chance to turn their arm over and chuck down a couple of overs.

Two recent games will remain long in the mind, one for the right reasons and the other for its comedy value. The former was a game against Writtle College Old Boys at the Foxburrow Road ground near Writtle College where it was a close run thing as Chignal chased a modest total of around 110. The Writtle College bowling had been accurate and we stuttered in the run chase. This was until Peter Thorn anchored the successful pursuit of runs with an adhesive 24. Peter is such a modest chap that he wouldn’t claim too much credit for the win, but without his crucial innings at the top of the order we would have lost.

The other game was against the Ploughboys, a team containing two Chignal greats, James and Nick Halls. As we arrived at the ground it began to rain fairly hard. Having assembled two teams for the fixture we decided to start a 15 overs per side contest. Chignal were quickly in trouble losing five quick wickets in the pouring rain. The pitch was playing havoc with several balls grubbing along the ground to dismiss key batsmen, with the occasional one leaping alarmingly off a decent length past their
earholes. Tom Bird was heard to remark “This pitch is dangerous” after being hit in the chest. I managed to dig in and score a (rhymes with) gritty 28 not out to prevent Chignal recording their worst team score for a some time. The roller having broken down had led to a dodgy strip reminiscent of those pre-war wickets when team scores of less than 50 runs were a common occurrence. It all combined to produce a strangely close contest in which the Ploughboys managed to overhaul our total of 84 runs off 15 overs. Biv almost took a hat trick, but the umpire was so far away at square leg that he missed the stumping which would have been his third dismissal in a row.

Given the demise of the Sunday team and the enjoyment of the frivolous midweek 20/20 games, it may be sensible to organise a few more in the future to keep those peripheral players (including me) involved with the club and ready for action should weekend cricket call.

A 2013 Premier Division game at High Roding
We are the champions!

Returning to the 1st Team, after their promotion to Division 1 at the end of the 2007 season, a couple of summers were spent competing hard in the league until it all changed in 2010. The season saw Fazal Rahman score a heap of runs (599 runs, with 2 hundreds) while Matt Cant (473 runs, 2 fifties) as usual made key contributions in the 1st Team, consistently scoring runs every week. Other contributions in the batting department came from Nadeem Ahmed (443 runs, 4 fifties) and Tom Robson (397 runs, 3 fifties) to allow Chignal to score highly competitive totals on a regular basis.

The other factor in this successful season which saw Chignal crowned Division 1 champions and promoted to the Premier Division, was the high quality bowling, both of spin and pace. Tom Bird (43 wickets), Nick Halls (29 wickets) and Nadeem (23 wickets) all made significant contributions with their fast bowling winning many games. Fazal (33 wickets) was the perfect foil at the other end with his deceptive spin and ability to turn the ball both ways at a reasonable speed. The economy rates of the top four bowlers in the 1st Team were all well below four runs per over, never allowing the opposition batsmen to break the shackles. Their bowling averages were also all below 23 runs per wicket, in the case of Nick Halls and Tom Bird less than 14 runs per wicket, incredible statistics for most bowlers let alone two competing at such a high level.

To attain promotion to the Premier Division, Chignal won 13 games and lost only 5, and they were equally successful playing at home or away. This was some achievement for a small village club and it is fair to say that without the facilities and pool of players that the larger Chelmsford clubs such as Old Chelmsfordians and Springfield enjoy, they have punched well above their weight in the higher divisions. The cornerstone of the club’s success has been the ease with which new players, particularly the Asian superstars, have become embedded in both teams, enjoying the camaraderie that comes from cricket at Chignal. Many players made vital contributions, feeling able to perform for the team without the fear of failure. It is a credit to the team captains (particularly Tom Bird) that promotion was achieved to the top flight.
The next two years saw the 1st Team find their feet in the Premier Division, finishing mid table in 2011 and narrowly avoiding relegation in 2012. The usual suspects performed well in both seasons with bat and ball. What has been noticed is the significant step up in standard between Division 1 and the Premier. Almost all catches are held and teams tend to bat right down to number 11 with no easy wickets on offer. This is exemplified by the fact that Tom and Ross Cant, two all-rounders with a decent batting average of around 20 runs per innings, often found themselves batting at 9, 10 or 11.

There are also fewer loose balls on offer and predictably a small club such as Chignal has struggled a little in recent times. However, I had the pleasure of watching Chignal bowl out Springfield (top of the table) in 2013, with Tom taking a well-deserved 5 wicket haul after crucial late order runs earlier on by wicketkeeper Ross (27 not out) to give them a competitive total, and so it proved.

Sadly, the 1st Team were relegated from the Premier Division at the end of the 2013 season after a hard battle to stay up. However, the club can be proud to have reached the top flight playing some high quality cricket. Staying there for three seasons is definitely the highlight of the club’s history so far.

Two pints of Oranjeboom and a packet of crisps

After the euphoria of a league or friendly fixture has died away, the players invariably head off to the pub for a pint of Oranjeboom. The usual haunt is the Pig and Whistle these days but at times due to unfavourable landlords, the team has made the Three Elms the preferred watering hole. The one constant of the teams is the spirit both on the pitch and down the pub. As the sun sets over the rolling fields to the west of the pub, there is no better place to enjoy a cool pint on a warm evening. If we’re lucky, Terry Day may even grace us with his presence dispensing sage advice about how the batting and bowling was better in the good old days.
Twenty-four hour party people

A recent game in Wickford finished early as excellent bowling by Sam Hodgson (5 wickets) skittled Rayleigh Fairview for 60 odd with the run chase over very quickly due to superb hitting by Robbie Lee. This meant an early trip to the Pig and Whistle, arriving at around 5 pm. A wedding reception was well underway before we ‘crashed’ the event. This gave the Lee brothers (Jake and Robbie) enough time to down numerous pints of lager before Trev (their dad) turned up later. This may be the first occasion that Chignal players have been wedding crashers, but it meant we could help ourselves to the lavish buffet (with landlord consent of course!) while enjoying the rock band that pumped out hits such as ‘She Sells Sanctuary’ by the Cult. Interestingly, I talked to a bloke who claimed that he once worked with the Manchester band, Happy Mondays; if this is true then he is a legend of the music scene. This drunken behaviour seemed to be tolerated by the bride and groom up to the point when I walked in on the first dance and photos to general dismay, talk about outstaying our welcome! Robbie had to be up at 5 am for work the next day and
didn’t leave the pub until midnight. This was 22\textsuperscript{nd} June 2013, the day when Jake and Robbie became club legends.

**The twits’ teas and tuppence**

A recent foray into the world of social media by Chignal CC (well James Mawer really) has seen Ronnie Irani following the club on Twitter. I wonder if we can get him to play for the 1\textsuperscript{st} Team? Chignal CC is nearing 200 followers including many Essex clubs and some from outside of the county. It must be hoped that this helps to bring new players to Chignal.

Cricket teas are also an essential part of the games. There has been a long tradition of excellence in this field dating back over 70 years to Miss Hutton’s clean linen and wicker basket containing sandwiches and cakes from the Good Easter bakery. These days, the tradition continues with Linda and Rhiannon Bird (Tom Bird’s wife) providing more than their fair share of teas. However, not all teas are as good as theirs, for example, one player who shall remain nameless, turned up with pickle sandwiches for tea with nothing else on offer. Needless to say this individual was not asked again!

The tight finances of the club mean that winter fundraising events are necessary. An annual Race Night is organised with players, wives, girlfriends and supporters of the club able to bet on greyhound and horse racing footage. I have managed to break even at several recent Race Nights, which I guess is not really the point of it. Horses can be sponsored for a fiver, with the option of naming them. The horse auction for the last race regularly brings in large sums of money for the club, with some being sold for upwards of £50.

The dawning of 2014 saw the club’s finances at an all-time low, with only a few hundred pounds in the bank. Chignal CC was not far away from folding with the roller broken and little money to fix it. What a sad day it would be if the club went the same way as many other Essex village clubs in recent years.
Ants in the nets, ladybirds in the lavs

The wonderful setting of the Chignal ground, with arable fields to the north, woodland behind the pavilion to the west, and horse paddocks to the east, provides an idyllic backdrop to a game of cricket. There is the long-lived Ash tree nestled beside the stream which trickles along the northern boundary of the ground and a dried out pond behind the pavilion. Dense Nettle beds around the boundary edge have led to many lost cricket balls and itchy cricketers. Bluebells nod in the warm breeze. Orange-tip and Brimstone butterflies can be seen perambulating along the hedgerows in the spring, lighting up the first games of the season.

The disused cricket net (Cricket Corner), home to ants and grasshoppers

The pitch itself used to be an old pasture and hasn’t been ploughed for well over a hundred years and has never been sprayed with the chemical fertilisers and insecticides which have diminished the wildlife found in the surrounding countryside since the intensification of agriculture after World War II. Therefore it was not much of a surprise in June 2013 when several Yellow Meadow Ants were found in the disused cricket net in the north-east corner of the ground which had been left uncut
for a couple of summers. Yellow Meadow Ants are usually found in old, undisturbed grassland which has never been ploughed. The ants have sought solace in the long grass having probably trooped over from the chalky grassland adjoining the north-west corner of the ground. A beautiful Brown Argus butterfly was spotted on the western boundary of the ground near this grassland; it is by no means an abundant insect in the surrounding countryside.

During a recent game, the Chignal youth (Michael Bird, Samuel Cant and Joseph Gardiner) were introduced to the joys of cuckoo-spit, the frothy anal secretion produced by Froghoppers in the long grass of the cricket net! A Field Grasshopper was also seen hopping around the ant hills. Here a lack of practice has actively benefited wildlife, with the disused net possibly being the first insect nature reserve in the area! I have christened this area ‘Cricket Corner.’

Wildlife is not only found in the long grass and hedgerows of the cricket ground; the pavilion itself is a haven for an array of spiders and overwintering ladybirds. Indeed, Linda Bird discovered what is possibly the largest aggregation (hundreds possibly thousands) of melanic (black-coloured) Harlequin Ladybirds in the UK in the lavatories some years ago. This ladybird is an invasive species from the USA and could be linked to the decline of our native ladybirds. It is believed that the black colour of the Harlequins provides excellent camouflage from preying spiders over winter in the darkened corners of the lavatories. To control the spread of the Harlequin Ladybirds, Linda vacuums them up every spring!

For many years a hole in the pavilion where the scoreboard sits housed a Blue Tit nest. The chicks made quite a racket when the score was changed! In 2013, a Robin’s nest was found in the shed which houses the equipment. The club had a problem with Moles for many years and there used to be several Rabbit holes in the outfield, although I’m not sure a ball has ever been lost down one! Chignal has one of the loveliest grounds in the county, even more so now Pleshey CC has folded. Pleshey was a particularly pleasant place to play cricket in the shadow of the 12th century moated castle mound despite the awful pitch, uneven outfield and lack of any facilities (the absence of a toilet was particularly problematic). The demise of the club means that Chignal are now flying the flag for cricket in the area.
Cuckoo-spit, anal secretion of a Froghopper found in Cricket Corner

A Field Grasshopper found in the disused cricket net
Back to the future

As I sit on the bench by the pavilion on a warm spring day in 2013, I watch the 1st Team bowling well against another Premier Division side. Tom has completed his second successive five wicket haul the week before and is bowling with real pace, with Taimoor, an even faster bowler at the other end. For a small club we certainly have punched above our weight and the games no longer seem like a case of David against Goliath. Chignal retain the spirit of the archetypal village cricket team, still able to enjoy amateur cricket despite the seriousness of the league cricket.

Village cricket clubs are folding alarmingly fast these days (e.g. Pleshey and Margaretting in recent times) with some teams struggling to turn out 11 players on a Saturday. It must be hoped that one day Sunday cricket will return to Chignal, but for now the friendly specialists must be satisfied with midweek 20/20s and occasional league outings when the teams are short of players. Perhaps midweek cricket can become a more regular feature as there certainly seems to be the appetite for it.

Chignal CC is about more than just cricket, it is about a communal spirit, of gathering on Saturdays to compete (or watch in my case) before retiring to the pub for a pint. The rural location is one of the most pleasant places to spend a lazy summer afternoon, either playing or watching from the boundary edge. Horses often trot by on the road, the riders stopping to enjoy a few balls of the action. Butterflies float along the hedgerows, while ants enjoy the dereliction of the disused net. Linda busily scribbles the score into her book as another six rattles the Chestnuts before dropping onto the pavilion roof, while Rhiannon unfurls the delicious and abundant cricket tea inside. Three children happily play cricket on the mown grass under the Ash tree. They are Michael (Tom Bird’s son), Joseph (mine) and Samuel (Ross Cant’s), Chignal cricketers of the future.
Bluebells can be found in the hedgerows at Chignal
Postscript – April 2014

Sadly as a postscript to this book, the 1st Team was relegated from the Premier Division at the end of the 2013 season and lost several key players over the following winter. This led to the 1st Team being withdrawn from the Premier Division, leaving the club with one team in Division 9 in 2014. There was talk of a merger with Old Chelmsfordians as a possible future direction for the club, but this idea was scrapped after heated discussions at an Emergency General Meeting early in 2014. So it seems that after ascending through the Divisions to reach the top, Chignal must begin rebuilding the side for the future. Chignal’s situation is not uncommon with many village cricket clubs, who struggle retaining players and financially. Luckily, the club has survived the turmoil of the winter and can now look to the future with just one side playing at weekends.
The eastern boundary hedgerow with sight screen and mature Ash tree

This Ash tree may be displaying early signs of the Ash Dieback fungus. What a shame it would be if the three mature Ash trees on the ground were to die.
Lies, damned lies, the statistics

The statistics below are based on the 1998-2012 period and players are in order of declining number of appearances, as at the end of the day it’s those cricketers that regularly turn out which have made the biggest difference. This is Chignal’s top 40.

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<th>Wickets</th>
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<td>40 Tim Gardiner</td>
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Mashbury Lane

Trudging slowly along Mashbury Lane,
Thoughts of our team’s infrequent wins
And humbling defeats remain.
Fallen leaves spiral in a frenzied whirlwind
In the strengthening easterly breeze,
Shed from that stoical Chestnut tree
Which the best batsmen hit with ease.
The pitch robbed of its six erect stumps
Replaced unfortunately by mossy clumps.
A rebellious Mole has done its worst,
Tunnelling under sacred, unfaithful turf
Leaving nothing but mounds of moist earth.
What of the geriatric, peeling pavilion?
In which thousands of jet-black Harlequins
Lie patiently in dark corners till spring.
The shattered boards have yet to harbour
A Blue Tit’s noisy nest, full of hungry chicks
Over which the lying scoreboard rests.
The ghost of a scything tail-end slogger
Thumps an agricultural six over cow corner,
But there is no fielder to take the catch.
On the loneliest of winter outfields
An empty life is waiting to be filled.


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More information on the club, including contact details if you are interested in playing can be found on the website www.chignal.co.uk or on Twitter @chignalCC

Dedicated to Janet Halls