

TALES FROM THE HILLS (Ashmansworth and Crux Easton)

After the war, a fine cricket pitch with a beautiful pavilion lay between Cross Lane and Zell House Lane at Ashmansworth. It was maintained by the happily-named Major Green. He lived in the village and took a week to cut and roll the pitch before a game. On the day, someone might point out that the tea wasn't so good. "John," he said sadly to John Gibbons, the Newbury cricketer, "John, the more you do for people, the less they appreciate you."

As well as Major Green's XI, the Finzis at Church Farm, Ashmansworth, occasionally fielded a team, inspired no doubt by the enthusiasm for cricket of one of their frequent guests, Edmund Blunden, the poet, who later became Professor of Poetry at Oxford.

After WW2, when he was playing for the Finzi XI, Blunden began to feel his age; but he soldiered on. He was reminiscing with John Gibbons at one of these matches and said, rather poignantly, "I used to keep wicket, John, but I can't see so well now." We know the feeling.

In his 1943 book *Cricket Country*, Blunden regretted the demise of cricket during the war: "In vain I produce bat and ball ..." he wrote. But he explained that after the Battle of Britain in 1940 the lads had no time for cricket: they were all too busy making model Spitfires!

At the time it inspired him to write this lament on the likely fate of the game (a prophetic epitaph, too, on the Ashmansworth ground):

Calm is the morn without a sound,
Except the local Plane Club's drone,
And one black crow that croaks alone
On what was once the cricket ground.

Calm in the moss'd pavilion all
Save where the rats are trying on
The umpires' coats, or gaunt grey don
Hopes to dig up a cricket ball.

Up in the Press Box nothing stirs
Except the amorous spider who
Devours her mate to prove him true
The only score today is hers ...

Agricola