

Interview with Peter Finnis by Tony Cornell 2019

TC

My name is Tony Cornell and I am a volunteer working on Mildenhall Cricket Club's "That's Over" heritage project. Today is the 2nd July 2019 and I am here at the Mildenhall Cricket Club pavilion to interview Peter Finnis the club's Vice President and former club secretary. Peter and I will be discussing his early playing days at Mildenhall and talking about some of the people he played alongside and his stewardship of the secretary post. And the recording of this interview will be archived at the Cricket Club and will be made available to the public. It may also be available online and used to promote the heritage and history of Mildenhall Cricket Club and the town as a whole. Hello Peter

PF

Hello Tony

TC

Thank you for seeing me today. Can I begin by asking you your full name and your date of birth?

PF

Yes I suppose I can remember all this stuff. Thanks for calling me in now. I was born back in November 1951 and place of birth was Newmarket General Hospital but always lived in Mildenhall. So born and went back to Junction Road about a year old the family then moved into Trinity Avenue which was a great place to be because it was a dead end road with fields at the end nice open space to play outside and yes there were nine of us who grew up together in a three bedroom semi so.

TC

Big Family

PF

Big family and that was great because we had the space to play outside. The roadway outside the house linked to Scott Avenue which gave my brother Michael who was also a member of the club, he had a long enough run up to hurl the ball down at me and wickets were stripped up on the wall and chalked on the garden wall. Younger brother Alan who was also a member of the club was often the wicketkeeper and Michael would be hurling a tennis ball down at me, practising his bowling and that was just brilliant days we would do that for hours without a car interrupting us. It was great fun and there was curved football out there, lots of us got together to play those games but. They were times looking back I think how mum and dad manage. You never felt that or sensed that at the time you just had everything you wanted, and for me sport was what filled the day really when I wasn't at school or off down the football field or playing cricket outside so as I said a good upbringing and a sense of freedom to be able to go off and do what you wanted it was lovely. So swimming in the Wamil just down past the club here as well, you know all those sort of things. This place, this new ground I didn't know would be our new ground.

TC

In the Lark

PF

In the Lark that's where I learnt to swim. So all these territories are great for us as youngsters they were real playgrounds they were.

TTC

You could roam around

PF

Absolutely. In the freedom you would go off in the morning and you would come back at the end of the day and there was no worries about where you had been parents weren't panicking over not seeing you, knowing full well you would be back for a meal. They were great and of course if I had known at that time what a wonderful playground this was going to be for me as an adult later, amazing place now.

TC

So sport occupied much of your childhood time, what would be your earliest recollection of Mildenhall Cricket Club and the old ground particularly

PF

The old ground for me was the ground I grew up in with my mates playing football a lot of the time. I didn't know much about cricket. I had only played that outside the house. So yes we would use the hut which was up there it was like a large shepherd's shed, we just used it as a goal mouth and it was one day when I was using it as a goal mouth that Mike Clarke the clubs secretary spotted us and gave us right rapid run down, but in doing so also encouraged us to go and have a go in the nets. So that we did started to play. Brother Michael was then getting into the team at Mildenhall, so I would come along with my dad at the weekends to watch him and that then led to me taking up doing the scoring in the box which got me involved and that you know some things are better than standing around really

TC

It wasn't quite the state of art box was it?

PF

It was just lifting up the front of the shepherd's hut sticking, two poles under which you hoped would last the day and then there were these two little slits behind us which were called the changing rooms in that hut and of course the copper stove was going to boil up the teas, how the ladies coped with that I'll never know, but we always had really good teas and so on. The thing that I really remember from that though is going along to practise as 12, 13 year old doing the scoring and there was the occasions, which I loved was when the opposition turned up one short, perhaps even one of our own team was unwell and could not finally make it, and being the scorer they would say do you want a game and I loved that being out on the field, normally batted number 11 and they were normally very kind to me and pitched a few up for me to hit other my own brother Michael who was going to who when I was playing for the opposition at number 11 hurtled one down and smashed my stumps to bits, no sense of diploma or a half volley. Suggested to me after that I had read it as an in swinger as against an away swinger. I didn't even know the two existed at that time. Yes it was then, arriving out of that initial contact with the club that eventually a youth team started I'm not quite sure how that originated as such but I was in there. I think from 14 onwards I started to play in the youth team

TC

When would have been?

PF

1965 and there was a sort of youth league set up so there was lots of clubs in the area that were all getting youth teams together and there was just the one age group of under 21's. Probably the age group of your present first team

TC

I think it's hard for our youngsters to believe that you are a youngster now at 21. In those days it was much different.

PF

And as one of the few clubs in this area we were able to pull people. So we had Bub Grant from Tuddenham would play. I had a few from the school that I was at. Paul Haylock he was a local but he come. Peter Julian and several others, Malcolm Grubb who was a long time person in the club. So we had a group there of really quite useful cricketers and there is a photo somewhere in the club house of us winning the Under 21 competition over on the Victory ground at Bury.

TC

Do you remember the year of that?

PF

I would be guessing at that, about 70, 1970

TC

Sounds about right. From my recollection of looking at photographs and things

PF

I would have been just in the right age group and that would have been about it. Could have been late 60's, 1970. They were great memories, yes that was the time that which really I was playing cricket at that time whilst cricket was on and no football was on, when football was on I playing football start to finish because that was my bigger love of the two and that gradually changed with age

Tc

So in 65 when you were still at school by 1970?

PF

1970 was when I finished school and started work, training as a lawyer and I had much more time. I didn't go away to college or university, I was working in the office. I had my spare time to commit to playing sport. I was going to say the club but I was a little more selfish at the time. With club commitments came with it.

TC

So you had football and cricket at that time. I believe

PF

Yes I played for Mildenhall reserves when I was... I think, again they were short one day and came knocking on the door and I did quite well so I kept in the team. I was about 15 I think. I was playing in

the youth, reserves for football then cricket for Mildenhall. But of course they were both being played on the same ground, so that became a real place, a centre for me and as far as the cricket is concerned my first memories of seasons were. At the end of the football season getting on there with a hose and it being flooded and people being asked to help and then we would spend hours George Hensby in particular with the heavy roller and that really was heavy but manually pulling it up and down and literally just flattening out a square that would be capable of us playing on it quickly and although it was always perhaps a helpful wicket for bowlers I have to say it was amazing how good the wicket was considering that it was the centre circle for the football field

TC

And having had creosote going right through the square

PF

Yes exactly. There were one or two posh sides from Cambridge who might have turned their noses up just a little bit but they were generally fine.

TC

So because it was all friendly cricket.

PF

Yes

TC

Those days there was no league cricket

PF

No I would say it was still competitive cricket. If you got good captains on both sides you could still make a good game of it and it could be good game right to the end.

TC

So who were the first captains you played under?

PF

Yes, a job to remember. I remember playing for a long time under Steve Cooke and Steve was a very good captain I thought. He liked to win which was always a great thing but quite good for working behind the stumps good place to deal up front. John Lawes was a character, much more a Saturday captain. The great thing I remember about John is having to travel in the back of his car there would be five or six of us loaded up but his black Labrador travelled across our laps, Job to remember actually now, I'm sure there must have been others I played under

TC

Presumably Tony might even have been, would he have been captain before you, Tony Carter? Or did you hand over to him, which way round exactly do you know?

PF

It's a difficult one to remember, I suspect Tony might have taken over from me actually. But once we started to get some players down here, some decent ones, some proper ones doing the job properly. I can't remember when I started to be captain it might have been at relative young I would have

thought. I don't remember captaining at the later days so might have been in the earlier days and Tony might well have taken over as captain

And of course there was different captains on Sundays, we had captain Saturday, captain Sunday and then a club captain.

TC

I know I played occasionally under Mike Clarke in those days I don't know if you ever did?

PF

I, don't ring a bell. I played under Roger Pendleton when I had second eleven games.

TC

Can you remember second eleven cricketers of those days?

PF

That's a bit far. It starts to blur who was playing for which team I suppose really, there is just a mass of players I could pick, but I wouldn't place them directly into their respective teams. There were a hard core of players, particularly the first team who tended to play most games and who I would say were totally invaluable as far as skill levels and quality of the game was concerned. The thing I probably most regret most of all and most envious of now is and what I see down here is the coaching that the youngsters get and we never had that of course we just played and OK there is a freedom in that, but I actually think I could have been so much better if I had had some proper coaching, but there were people who were naturally gifted and were great cricketers any way. I am thinking of people like Gerry Widger he was you know our James Anderson, he could swing the ball both ways. There way Grenny Dale. Grenny I think was probably one of the most stylish batsmen we ever had and absolutely brilliant gully fielder I mean he was a real Paul Collingwood type and he took some catches like we see Stokes do, he was really brilliant in that area. And then there were people who came in then left because of jobs like Tom Whittingham come in as a school teacher, I thought he was our ace in the pack for a while, he'd got a real cricketing brain and a good batsman

TC

Self-confident

PF

Yes assured and that rubbed off on the team that was so good about that, he really did lead well and then you got Andy Borrett local farmer at the time wasn't he came in a left hander good wicketkeeper, a good batsman and you are right there were people with cricketing brains and who thought about the game, knew about it. There where people like John Charlesworth. Dear old John quiet as anything pootle along at forty miles an hour and afterwards he have just a half, I had the arranged, I'm sorry if I'm going on too long

TC

Carry on

PC

I had arranged to travel to cricket with John in his little bubbled car, that what it looked like, forty miles an hour and the first time I had ever done a hundred miles an hour in a car, you will know who that was with.

TC

I could guess

PF

Phil Drakard that was an experience

.

TC

You mentioned Gerry. Gerry was one of the bonuses when we got to the new ground. Did you ever come down and see the ground before it was developed?

PF

I was one of those unfortunate ones who raked the stones off, along with you and many others. Yes came down I was here helping to get the ground ready in any ways you could I remember breaking my garden rake on the ground , the handle snapped in half it was so hard work, I don't know if I was ever compensated for that actually. No to see the ground as it was then it literally was covered in stones after the initial ground work was done and then to see it today and think every bit of that work was worth it, more than re paid us hasn't it.

TC

Certainly has

PF

Then I think of the likes of the people who then nurtured that ground and worked on it. We were blessed to have Mike Clarke not only as a secretary, which he was absolutely brilliant at, but also the fact that he was quite skilled in the maintenance of grass, he went into that as a profession didn't after his architectural work and did grounds around the county and he knew exactly what was needed. You then got someone like Mike Kill who's spent his whole life down here then working on the work that Mike had put into it, so we were, that was just brilliant really, we were so fortunate that the right people in the right place at the right time.

TC

That seemed to be the case, and again as I said moving here helped to encourage better cricketers to play here I believe

PF

Exactly. I think with the facilities, you know we laugh about the hut and its good we could it was actually a bit ridiculous changing facilities, not even running water was there, no showers nothing like that, no toilets, there was a public concrete toilet block up the road, yes so to come here to this facility, it also attracted in at that time didn't it, young families were coming because of the river , you could have a picnic, got somewhere the children could play. We were just so fortunate to get this ground when we did

TC

We had that and then as the youngsters and you became older, you took on the captaincy

PF

Yes that was, and Club captain I think I was as well and that was fine because actually I found I enjoyed captaining, I loved playing cricket but I found the captaincy side so much more rewarding, you know trying to make right decisions and then they worked and being really disappointed when they didn't, it's just flashed into my mind the nightmare of Ipswich and East Suffolk away from home and they were miles behind the run rate and then John Search you probably remember the fast bowler he came in at number eleven and just started to hit us everywhere, and whatever I did whatever I tried as captain did not work, and they knocked them off and won the game. I just went away speechless, what do you do, it just went away from you, there were other good times as well.

TC

And again you would have been involved as the captain for the mid-week games, the cup competitions

PF

Yes that's right, the Orby Wood, and the Rowntree cup, the Gibson, the Cyril Smith cup. The Gibson cup over at Exning you know all of those. I think the one that really stands out to me, I'm pretty sure, correct me if I am wrong I think it was 1977 the Jubilee year when we won the Jubilee cup and I think what sticks, what sticks in my mind were two reasons, firstly it was a one off win it wasn't to be played for again. Secondly we beat the best team in the area which was Bury and thirdly was I was opening the batting for us that night and I knew full well I was totally out of my depth seriously because they had got two county bowler in their side, and I just thought right I am not going to hang about we got people like Grenny and others who could come in and bat properly, I am just going to have a swing. I always use to open with Tony Carter didn't I?

TC

Yes

PF

And it wasn't going to be a nudge and nurdle day which is what we use to do, take quick runs. I was almost like literally shut my eyes have a big swing and I can't remember the bowlers name you might be able to the Suffolk bowler but I swung at the Bury Rail ground remember the little ground, probably got flats all over it now, I swung with my eyes shut, felt the ball hit the bat and I had not got a clue where it had gone, it apparently went back over his head for six. You know Tony from playing with me I did not hit sixes, and this is not boasting this is the honest truth I was so out of my depth I actually just swung the bat and amazingly I got 45 runs and then Grenny came in and played a really elegant innings and we won the trophy, and that for me was a standout game because of that really. I had been up against people like Colin Rutterford and Micky Rutterford, Joe Bamford, Dickie Bond all at Lakenheath that was a really strong side that was, and I can remember playing against Colin and I think I faced no more than three balls, he got me every single one he just, you know that sense that you are out of your depth

TC

Oh yes

PF

You've been there have you?

TC

Yes I've been there

PF

You just think Oh dear I am not the best performer, my comfort zone, but we had all those games going on. I think it was probably during those mid-week games that I first noticed the changes that were happening I wasn't so keen about, and that was when we played Isleham because we don't normally because they were in Cambridgeshire aren't they but we played them in the final of the Gibson cup at Exning, and I remember there their fast bowler opened up and I opened the batting and I edged him through the slips and so as I took a run got the far end he was effing and blinding at me because I had been so lucky. I had never come across that before and do you know I was surprised, looking back now I still surprised how much that threw me, OK he would have probably got me out anyway, I was out a couple of balls later and my mind was still on that because I was so shaken by it, yet for them that was their every week cricket because they were playing league cricket then and we hadn't started playing league cricket and developing that sort of you know, it worked, he unsettled me didn't he

TC

He probably did

PF

Yes

TC

Perhaps sledging was invented in Isleham

PF

Be careful what we say this is recorded

TC

I am sure they would understand

PF

They were a strong side

TC

Particularly for a village side

PF

They got to a Lords national competition final didn't they? But that did shake me and of course that has gone on a long way since then hasn't it. It is something if I was playing today I would find it extremely difficult, but that of course is a generational thing and have to accept it I suppose

TC

Well yes it is a generational because thing I have problems with it myself and people know I have problems with it. It not something I like

PF

I don't mind the banter, that's great that can be fun you can have a go at somebody and it's all done in good humour, but it's actually keeping that spirit of the game is the all-important thing

TC

Absolutely

PF

And we had Phil Drakard who we spoke about earlier hundred mile an hour man, I won't use the words he said because we are being recorded. I remember Fred Younker who played for Bury Rail coloured black man and he was a lovely fellow, lovely little fellow an opening bat and I remember Drakard mentioning to him something about liking him up and down and slapping him on a jam jar which of course today you could almost be done for a hate crime, on that occasion and the way it was said to somebody he knew they were both laughing about it. That sought of banter is fine, but somehow it seems to have gone past that.

TC

It does boil over occasionally which is wrong. So going over to being Captain you probably remember selection in those days was like an ordeal wasn't it did go on didn't it?

PF

Well I think there were several of the selection committee thought it was a night out. They were down the club for the evening and the bar was open so selection would take its time. The teams didn't pick themselves by any means and captains were vying for different places, you can do without them and so on. It was probably not the most efficient way of selecting the teams but nobody could really blame us for not having studied or thought about it. So it was done seriously, and it was done I think fairly as best we could. You are never going to please everybody.

TC

And the same culture for being out for a night drinking also applied to the main committee I think when they had a meeting

PF

Exactly it was a night out. For those of you who was busy and you wanted to get that over and done no chance. Any other business could run on for hours if it needed to.

TC

I think the younger generation have definitely got us beaten on that.

PF

They are much more efficient.

TC

It was the way we did things. We didn't have mobile phones or social media to communicate or emails did we in those days

PF

Oh no we had fifteen people on the committee I remember from my being secretary and I use to ring around just before the next meeting to remind everybody, like fourteen phone calls every time. There was no quick press of a button in getting the message around, yes I think they have made good use of that, like they have different committees for different aspects of the club which I think is very sensible.

You've got your selection and you've got your cricket whatever committee as far as, social and so on, no that works well

TC

Can you remember your feelings when you actually took over as secretary?

PF

Not particularly I don't remember any trepidation or particular excitement. I think, I think Mike had groomed me nicely so he could pass it on and I think the only thing I was slightly fearful about was that he had done such good job hadn't he and he had been such a huge figure in the club, well carried on being a big figure, he had such an impact on getting us down onto our new ground I think I was just a little bit wary about maintaining the standard you know, keeping up the level, of the quality of things that had gone on. So in a way that's quite a good thing to be in slight trepidation because it keeps you on your toes actually and try to do a good job and I think probably during my time as secretary I think one of the big things that came up and one of the most important things we did at the time was when we approached the bank to borrow some money to try to do some ground improvements and the bank just came back and said well sorry you haven't got any security down there you are not worth anything. We've got eleven acres of land with a pavilion on but who wants to buy a cricket club you know. So I could see it from their point of view. So I remember people taking the decision at the time which I think has proved to be a very wise one to take one of those eleven acres the bit on the corner here where the four houses are next to the car park and seek to get planning permission on there for four dwellings and we got that planning permission, that gave us a bit of flexibility with the bank we were able then to free up do you know improvements to the ground, pavilion and so on and I think we never really looked back from that. It was really like being, it was sort of like a, a bit of a bottle neck weren't we, we were trapped in a way and I just it sort of released stuff with that so getting that planning permission and being able to sell that land off as we did was good.

TC

Can you remember the year

PF

No I can't remember

TC

Late 80,s

PF

Yes I be guessing I was going to say 80's, I wouldn't want to guess which it was.

TC

And I think that all came about from just having a leaky roof

PF

Oh was it

TC

We hadn't got money. We needed to get...

PF

To repair it exactly, but those days of course interest rates were running at like 15% things like that so we had a large sum of money we actually invested didn't we and we were getting good returns on it then that was the important factor and also we wanted to secure it, we tried not to whittle away the capital, just use the interest and that way we actually an ongoing indemnity to continue to improve. So that was actually that was really crucial I don't think the Parker family who sold us the land were particularly pleased at the time because and I can understand their view they were selling this for sport and so on. But on reflection later they saw the benefit and the club needed to do that. We hadn't bought the land off them to do a sort of property deal. We just needed to function this club.

TC

And if they were able to see it now they would see it's been looked after.

PF

It was just a rough piece of ground that the tug o war club use to use that was all it was wasn't it.

TC

You remember the tug of war

PF

Mike Wilding and all the Lyons family. They were actually a very good tug o war team, they had they did well in National competitions and things. Then took it seriously didn't they

TC

Going back just a few years before the house were built Indoor cricket suddenly came about. Can you remember them?

PF

I loved it. Indoor cricket was great fun because that was winter times wasn't it and tended to be a Sunday afternoon if I remember rightly down at the Dome at Mildenhall and it wasn't that that we had the, six a side wasn't it and we didn't have the six best players in the club.

TC

No I was in it

PF

(Laughter) I wasn't going to mention names. The fact that you got six people who were suitable for that environment you know, like Martin King only needed a yard and a half to whizz the ball down which surprised people, you were behind the stumps weren't you. You'd got Tony Carter who just loved to nudge and nurdle in that cricket it's perfect. I got a bit of left arm over a bit different bowling wise and I think Chris Cooke and others played. We had a little group there that actually gelled really well as a team and that why I think that's why I enjoyed it so much all playing that game together but also we were quite successful which was the other factor. I think one of the highlights when I look back over my cricketing days was when we went into that National competition and we kept winning and winning and eventually, I can't remember where the venue was, quite some way away

TC

It was Rugby

PF I was going to say Rugby and I was not sure if I was right, but we were one game away from having to play at Lords in the finals weren't we Oh wow. That was.., Everyone came away that day with a sort sense of pride about that we had reached that far.

TC

That was an achievement I really did enjoy it

PF

That was almost like a tight knit team group in that thing wasn't there you know very much together and in that short it was quite a more intense form of the game in the centre of a tighter space and a tighter group as well. Really rewarding I thought.

TC

And what are the recollections of the people who served on the committee at the time you was there I am thinking about Courtney and the like

PF

Oh yes again as I say we have had some brilliant people in the right place at the right time and without deferring I'd say you Tony your one of those, we have people who have come in and committed themselves so whole heartedly to the club you know such time and effort and energy into it and we still have people doing that today which is great. But yes there was a lot of people working on that committee who gave themselves selflessly. Courtney was Chairman wasn't he for a long time he was such a good figure head and leader and people had a respect for Courtney I think in the town and the area and that carried on You got people like Roger Pendleton, we had people who were known on the local councils and things like that, so we had good contacts not for anything we gained from it other than there was that feel good factor towards the club that there should have been as well which the club has given so much to Mildenhall over the years and is still doing that. It is one of the successes of Mildenhall town. You look at this club and you see this as one of the highlights of what this town has done over the years, really has achieved a tremendous amount.

TC

My predecessor was quite active as well. He would come to committee meetings Bill

PF

Bill Abbs he was one of those like Mike Clarke and yourself, Brian Vale and one or two others around at that time who actually got quite critical it was like that focal point wasn't there we could most easily have just stay where we were and we would have withered on the vine, but actually no it was that tip over point coming back and down to this ground that's actually led the club to move on to where it is now. I mean we wouldn't be playing EAPL cricket or anything else would we and there are so many other strong clubs around in this area I think it's quite unusual and all the villages. All our players would have been disappearing over the horizon, so I think no it's a huge credit to the people who were in where they were and the committee members, every single one you could say would be putting into it, there was nobody just coming to the meetings, everybody was doing something, everybody was quite committed way, and it was very much a social club wasn't it as well

.

TC

It was

PF

Me growing up, with Marion as well it was our social life I played cricket Saturdays and Sunday at weekends

TC

Except when I was buying a house, do remember rightly

PF

Yes I do (laughter) that was a nice bit of training for me, sorry I got it wrong. That was the days of stamp duty coming in and an increasing and the government was trying to get hand on more money

TC

I think gazumping was rife

PF

Exactly that era wasn't it no it was a social of it you went out for the day to play cricket you didn't think about rushing home you were out for the evening you know. It was almost the day of chicken and chips starting to come into the pub restaurant thing it was the birth of that actually, thankfully that's progressed a bit these days. No it was great evenings and with clubs that you built relations with over the years in those ways you know places like was it Stonham over near Stowmarket and grounds like that

TC

Yes Stowmarket played there yes one of the favourites

PF

I do remember leaving the pub thereafter the game one time we left through the window because all the doors were locked and I won't mention the name of the member of the team who had to find his trousers before he could go, something to do with the beer race they call that. I'll go no further what goes on tour stays on tour.

TC

So it's been wonderful talking to you Peter have you got a final word

PF

Thank you Tony I have really enjoyed that. Can I just say for somebody who is not down here often these days but I do maintain my link with the club because it is very important to me still, hopefully will always be until I am not here anymore. But what is so encouraging to me as a former player and so on of the club is to see what's going on here today, to see what you are doing here with the museum and the history of the club and all the work that is going into that. To see what Louis doing as Chairman and geeing everyone up and the amount of effort that has been put in by a lot of people to see the quality of the ground and the quality of the cricket we are playing and all the advances that have been made, the expansion of the club house, to me from the outside it warms my heart to see that happening to a club that's very special and very dear to me, so thank you for this opportunity and this will always be a special place to me

TC

Wonderful thank you Peter

PF

Thank you Tony