

JEREMY LONSDALE

*An Unusual  
Celebrity*

THE MANY CRICKETING LIVES OF

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## Early Life (1908–27)

WILLIAM ERIC Bowes – ‘Bill’ as he became known – was born on 25 July 1908 in Elland, south of Halifax in Yorkshire, the eldest son of John Bowes and Clara Elizabeth Bowes. John originated from near York and married Clara in 1903, at which point he was recorded as a ‘railway traffic inspector’. In his autobiography, Bowes described his father as ‘of country stock’, who had ‘the level head and contented philosophy of the Yorkshire countryman. When he came home from work he liked his glass of beer.’

John Bowes’s employment required several moves but in 1914 the family – including a second son, Arthur – settled in Armley when John, now a goods superintendent for the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway (an ‘excellent-sounding post’ according to his son many years later), was transferred. Later, he was described as ‘goods foreman’ at the LNER yard in Wellington Street. The work involved him in the efficient movement of goods traffic in and out of Leeds. It was a serious role which came with a decent income that provided a stable home life for young Bowes.

Bowes grew up in Armley, from where in 1932 he would make a hurried departure for Australia as a member of the MCC side. It lies to the west of Leeds, being described as fragmented into 'a patchwork of small individual communities', independent in nature. For five years, Bowes attended Armley Park Council School, a two-storey institution established in 1900, with a local reputation for sports. Here he was given early cricket coaching. William Henry Wigglesworth, headmaster of the school for many years, had played cricket for Leeds and later was one of several who laid claim to having introduced Bowes to cricket.

In September 1920, Bowes entered West Leeds High School, having won a scholarship which exempted him from tuition fees. The school had opened in 1907 to provide secondary education for the growing population of the area, and Bowes would have benefited from the seven acres of playing fields and a gymnasium. Expanding during his time there, the school incorporated many educational innovations, but was also steeped in traditional considerations of 'fair play', 'generosity' and 'justice'.

The school magazine for 1924, Bowes's final year, suggests a lively institution of activity, aspiration and ambition, with a diverse range of clubs, visits and sporting opportunities, and a speech day addressed by the pro-vice-chancellor of Leeds University. A history of the school describes the 1920s as a 'splendid flowering-time for the school', noting boys went on to become artists, journalists, engineers, priests, teachers, lawyers, doctors, librarians and psychologists, and 'one became

a cricketer of world renown'. The first steps for Bowes towards this 'world renown' came via his father who, although not a cricketer himself, enjoyed the game. His son recalled later that his earliest memories were:

of warm summer evenings ... the sun sinking slowly into a red smoke haze beyond the trees, my father, glass in hand, sitting on a form behind me, enjoying the peace of it all, while I, watching the flannelled figures and lengthening shadows ... willed the Armley team to victory before the clock compelled the drawing of stumps.

Imitation of an early hero, local fast bowler Tommy Drake, took place in impromptu games near home and endless nightly practices using, according to Bowes, a variety of old tennis or hockey balls, a 'corky', and balls made of a string and hessian material bound hard. In 1932, Bowes's father told the *Yorkshire Post*:

He's been a cricketer since he was nine years of age. No sooner did the Easter holidays come round at Armley Park Council School, then out came the bat and ball, and, along with neighbouring youngsters he would play all hours that came on a bit of spare land opposite our house in Aviary Row, Armley. That's how he spent all his holidays. There was an old man named Kendall, who lived next door, who used to say: 'Mr Bowes, that lad of yours will end up in the county team, as sure as we are here.'

The (not always factually accurate) history of his school includes two stories about young Bowes's early destructiveness with the ball. The first recalled 'a gawky, spectacled fourth former', now well over 6ft tall, arriving at a net practice. Asked what he wanted, he told the master in charge he had been sent along because he could bowl. Given the chance, it was soon clear that he had 'uncommon accuracy, for the stumps were soon too loose to stand upright in their sockets'. The master had a knock himself and Bowes bowled him 'good and proper'. Later, told to pad up and bat, he declined, eventually admitting that he could not see the ball as he had just had drops put in his eyes to be measured for new glasses.

A second story took place on a warm afternoon against Batley Grammar School with Bowes, the newly discovered fast bowler, benefiting from a sloping field. The wicketkeeper remembered:

I never saw the first ball: I don't think the Batley batsman did, either, but it made a complete wreck of his wicket. The second ball ricocheted from the edge of the bat and I don't honestly know whether I caught the ball with my ribs or with my stumper's gloves, but it counted as a catch, perhaps looking less of a fluke than it really was. In came the third man. Excitement plus plus! Would young Bowes get a hat-trick? The batsman took his guard. 'Leg stump, please, sir!' Play! Bowes began his run-up. The batsman backed away towards the square leg umpire and was fully three yards away from his wicket as he stood

and watched Bowes send the slowest of slow deliveries straight at the unguarded target. Hat-trick!

In 1924, the school magazine reported that the first XI had lost the services of its previous opening bowler but Bowes had stepped up and in nine matches his figures were: 114 overs, 57 maidens, 91 runs, 39 wickets, average 2.33. In one dramatic match against Saltaire, West Leeds batted first on a 'very wet wicket' and managed just 33. However, in response Bowes and his partner took five wickets for no runs in the first two overs. Then came a bye and two lucky singles, before the innings closed on 3 all out. Bowes later remembered the headmaster, Clifford Darling ('a fervent lover of cricket') giving each player a week's detention of cricket lectures after the first innings, before cancelling it following their opponents' feeble reply and handing out three early leaves. Darling continued to send Bowes congratulatory telegrams throughout his career.

Bowes also took 5-6 against Batley Grammar School, setting up a third win in five days. He then scored 19 against Yeadon and Guiseley Secondary School and took 4-7, coupled 4-27 against Leeds Modern School with a 'good innings' of 15, and hit the winning runs against Batley Grammar School, making 17 not out to add to his 5-15. In July, he almost single-handedly dismissed Cockburn High School for 40, having figures of 15.3-8-9-8, and took 3-22 against the Staff XI. Despite these achievements, according to his mother, her son would say nothing until it was coaxed out of him over tea and



he would leave any team photographs on the kitchen table without comment.

Such performances made Bowes a figure of interest in the school which continued long after he had left. In 1928, the school magazine referred to his appearance for MCC and two years later congratulated him on his Yorkshire cap. A 'Bowes' Cup was presented by the Old Boys' Society to mark his achievements and he would return to his school to speak and, occasionally, to play cricket.

In July 1924, Bowes left school a week after his 16th birthday and went to work as a clerk for Messrs Hindle, Son and Lewis, auctioneers, valuers and estate agents of Park Lane, Leeds (to the 'huge disgust' of his mother, who wanted him to become a teacher). He remained until he took up cricket as a career, his work involving rent collection, writing letters, agreements and leases, and cataloguing the lots of the weekly sale. He also continued his education at Pitman's Commercial School in Leeds, where he learned shorthand and typewriting, useful skills for a safe but unexciting office life.

Alongside the local influences, Bowes was exposed to professional cricket. In July 1919, he was taken as a birthday treat to see Yorkshire play Gloucestershire at Leeds. Sutcliffe, Denton and Kilner all made centuries, but it was George Hirst (82 not out) who Bowes remembered sweeping the ball 'majestically to the leg boundary', a shot which in 1969 he reported was still vivid in his memory. Bowes also recalled watching Hirst from behind the nets when the great all-rounder visited his school as Yorkshire coach even though

he was too young to be chosen to participate. Later, he also remembered catching glimpses of play when he sat amongst a packed Headingley crowd at the Test match against Australia during the 1921 series.

Joining these stars was still some way in the future however, and it was into local nonconformist cricket that Bowes now made his way. He had attended Armley Wesleyan Church for Sunday School and so played cricket for Armley Park Wesleyans, where he was elected joint secretary. A piece in his 1947 benefit brochure explained:

It was a pleasure in those days to dash away from the desk and turn out for Armley Park Wesleyans in Saturday afternoon friendly matches. At that stage in his career people began to see that Bill would make a useful bowler, even if he did not presume to have any personal ambitions about being a professional. In order to bring in a little revenue, the club used to give a local farmer the use of the field for cattle-grazing. Bill will never forget the sigh of relief his mother breathed whenever he managed to get home with clean ‘whites’!

With rough wickets and sloping outfielders of long grass, this was cricket below the level of the senior leagues, with 2.30pm or 3pm starts as players rushed from work to catch a charabanc or bus, or walked, depending on the opponents. Starting in May 1924, Bowes had some early success but was more effective the following summer: among his best performances were

5-41 against Farnley Wesleyans, 5-15 against Kirkstall Zion, 5-13 against Horsforth Woodside Institute, and six wickets for under three each against Salem and Little London Wesleyans. Against West Leeds Industrial Co-operative Society, he finished with the remarkable figures of 7-7-0-6.

In 1926, Bowes took 81 wickets at 3.54 and scored 230 runs as his side won 18 out of 23 fixtures. He was clearly too good for this standard of cricket, although he was grateful for the grounding it gave him. Years later, he suggested he would probably never have played cricket professionally had it not been for the interest shown in sport by the Wesleyans of Armley. He recalled that the chapel was 'hard-pressed financially at the time, and the women managed to raise enough to pay for the loan of a ground, the men subscribed towards the cost of the tackle, and matches were held to raise funds for the chapel'. Bowes needed to play at a higher level and he progressed thanks to some good fortune. On Easter Monday 1927 he was cycling near Beckett Park in Leeds and stopped to watch a group of men engaged in net practice. Having fielded a few balls, he was invited to bowl and impressed by dismissing one of them, Harry Bulmer ('a noted hitter of the Leeds League'), leading to an invitation to play for Kirkstall Educational Cricket Club in a second XI match.

Established in 1853 by the Kirkstall Educational Society, by 1925 the club had joined the Yorkshire Council. Bowes's initial match was against Leeds City Gas Works, where he took 6-5, including a hat-trick, and gained his first ever 'talent money'. Reportedly this paid his club subscription and funded

supper for the team. He was promoted to the first XI the following week for a Council game with Hanging Heaton where he took five wickets, four bowled, in helping to dismiss the opposition for 20. A few weeks later, he took 6-29 against Hunslet, and four wickets against Hemsworth Colliery and Calverley. Later in the summer, he was joint winner of the Leeds Evening League bowling prize.

As well as gaining higher quality match experience, Bowes was also inspired that year by another Yorkshire great. In 1980, he told Richard Whiteley in a Yorkshire TV interview that he had visited Headingley in July 1927 to watch Yorkshire play Essex. He sat at one end and watched through opera glasses as first Stan Nichols and then Wilfred Rhodes took advantage of a sanded wicket. He could see the ball go down the pitch and turn, and he remembered that the skill, ability and thought involved so impressed him that he ‘went into cricket wholeheartedly’. The experience convinced him it was ‘quite a game’.

Bowes’s performances and enthusiasm prompted thoughts of a cricketing career and his benefit brochure later noted:

One of the Kirkstall Educational Committee members [Herbert Horsfall] knew the Warwickshire County CC secretary and arranged for Bill to go to the Midlands for a trial. About the same time the young cricketer read that the MCC were considering taking on ground staff professionals at Lord’s. During office hours this 18-year-old giant, who stood 6ft 3ins and weighed

14 stones, penned a hopeful application to cricket headquarters.

Bowes later explained that both he and Hedley Verity, who would become his great friend and bowling partner, had received invitations to attend a trial at Warwickshire. However, the county had no winter practice sheds and so it would have been April before they could have visited Birmingham, by which time it would have been impossible to secure other appointments that season should they be turned down. For Yorkshire, it proved a lucky escape.

The opportunity to join the MCC ground staff instead was noticed by the neighbour, Mr Kendall, who would sometimes join Bowes and his brother for 6am games of cricket on spare land near their homes, with Kendall retrieving the ball when it ended up in neighbours' cellars. Bowes recalled that Kendall ran into his parents' kitchen one day with a copy of the *Daily Mail* containing the advert. He applied in late 1927, attaching a newspaper cutting about his performances, and was invited for a trial in January 1928. A daily commuter on the train into Leeds from Armley at the time, Bowes was known as a quiet type by his fellow passengers until one morning he casually mentioned he had received a letter from MCC inviting him for a trial but was uncertain what to do. His travelling companions were unanimous in thinking that it was a chance of a lifetime which must be grabbed. In advance, he practised in the office in his lunch break and in Armley Park at night, bowling snowballs or stones at lamp posts, trees and telegraph poles.

Later, Bowes's father recalled that being one of about 300 applicants for the MCC posts, his son had not expected to be successful. When he was, Bowes senior passed on paternal advice, telling him he should not be 'laiking about' when away but instead must concentrate upon his job if he wanted to make good. Bowes's response was firm. 'Look here, dad,' he said, 'I'm going up there with the idea of trying to make myself the best bowler, not in Yorkshire, but the whole of England, if such a thing is possible.' In an interview after retirement, Bowes recalled deciding to give himself a year to see if he was good enough, showing what one reporter called his 'sturdy spirit'.

Bill Bowes aspired to a career as a professional cricketer. Although known to Yorkshire by now, he took an alternative route to a professional career, seeking long-term security – a constant theme in his life – after just one season of league cricket. He had reached this point thanks to his supportive family, teachers and chapel. He had also been inspired by local cricketers and by the sight of George Hirst and Wilfred Rhodes, who had demonstrated what was possible. It was now time to show what he could do himself.