



▲ Even readers who know nothing of cricket may well recognise the beard, or at least be familiar with the initials of its doughty owner.

Created in 1999 by Australian sculptor **Louis Laumen** and taking pride of place in the Coronation Gardens at **Lord's**, this modern statue of **Dr William Gilbert Grace** (1848–1915) is yet one more reminder that, as the centenary of his death approaches, the cult of WG shows little sign of fading.

Here was a player so prodigiously talented – scoring some 54,896 first class runs and taking 2,876 wickets over a period of 44 years – that one reporter called him ‘a



Unsurprisingly the largest collection of artefacts relating to WG is held by the MCC Museum at **Lord's**. This was the cap he wore as captain of the England team that toured Australia in 1891–92. The S stands for **Lord Sheffield**, who financed the tour, including covering WG's fee of £3,000 and the cost of hiring a locum for his practice in Bristol. The bust (right) was sculpted by

freak of nature'. Famously signs went up outside grounds saying that if Grace were playing the entrance fee would be 6d, if not, 3d.

Grace has been credited with inventing modern batting, saving the MCC from its inward looking torpor and transforming cricket from a marginal plaything of gamblers to a national and international sport.

He has had six biographers and had his life and career picked over in countless books, articles and academic papers. He has also had more memorials and commemorations in London than any other sportsman; this for a player who, born in Gloucestershire,



lived in the capital only in the last 17 years of his life. But then he was already a national treasure as a teenager, having appeared at both the Oval and Lord's in 1864, and in 1866, at the age of 18 – this just one of dozens of feats that cricket fans can still reel off today – scoring 224 not out at the Oval before being given a few hours off to compete at the National Olympian Games at Crystal Palace where he won the 440 yards hurdles (see page 64).

Best known of his memorials are the **Grace Gates** (above), forming the main entrance to Lord's on St John's Wood Road. Unveiled in

WH Tyler in 1888. Neville Cardus wrote that it was only when he saw two workmen remove this bust from the Long Room at Lord's, in early September 1939, that he knew war really was on its way. Like several anecdotes told by Cardus, this may not have been true, as is also the case with numerous tales about WG himself. They continue to be circulated, and enjoyed, nevertheless.



1923, with Portland stone piers and ornate ironwork, the gates were designed by architect **Herbert Baker** and listed Grade II in 1996.

During his lifetime it was said that WG was the most famous Englishman in the world, apart only from **William Gladstone**. He was certainly the highest profile sports celebrity the nation had ever known, even if he was notoriously prickly, was acutely uncomfortable as a public speaker, and for a doctor was said to have had dubious standards of personal hygiene.

In his defence, one contemporary described Grace as just ‘a great big schoolboy’.



▲ **WG Grace** had just enrolled as a medical student in Bristol at the time the **Champion** pub in **Wells Street W1** opened in 1868. This stained glass window was, however, a much later addition, being one of eleven panels, each representing a different champion, created for the pub by **Ann Sotheran** in the 1990s.

Rather like **Henry VIII** the received image we have of Grace is that of him as an older, stockier man, rather than the tall, lean figure of his youth. By the time he retired from the England team at the age of 50 he weighed nearly 18 stone.

He nevertheless played on for the London County Club at Crystal



Palace for another nine years, and in the meantime carved for himself a second sporting career in **bowls**.

Indeed it could be said that he did as much to popularise the game of bowls as he had done for cricket, resulting in the game's first ever international taking place at **Crystal Palace** in July 1903, where the photograph, below left, was taken.

Without doubt WG never made much money from bowls, if any. But then he did not need to, having already grown rich from what the *Wisden* cricket almanac described as his ‘breath-takingly grasping’ attitude. This venality, widely recorded, as was his often blatant gamesmanship, may explain why WG was never knighted.

But it also serves to expose the hypocrisy of the cricketing establishment, not least that Grace always played for the Gentlemen (that is the amateurs), rather than for the Players (the professionals) in their annual encounter at Lord's.

As *Wisden* conceded ‘Nice customs curtesy to great kings’.

And they did not come any greater than Grace.

▶ Just as **Elizabeth I** appears to have slept in almost every Tudor bed in England, it is hard to find a cricket ground or bowling green where WG did not play. On the other hand, he truly was in great demand.

As a cricketer he was a regular visitor to London from the age of 16. As a part time medical student, after eleven years of study, he finally qualified at **St Bartholomew's Hospital** in 1879.

He was then in practice in Bristol and playing for Gloucestershire until 1898 when he and his family moved to **Lawrie Park Road** in **Sydenham**. The house was demolished in 1963 but a plaque on a block of flats (top) marks the spot, as do two neighbouring developments, **Doctors Close** and **Cricketers Walk**.

Grace had been invited to the capital to spearhead a new enterprise called the London County Cricket Club, an attempt by the **Crystal Palace Company** to attract more visitors. The cricket ground was in the same part of the park where Grace had won his hurdles medal in 1866.

The move to Sydenham was accompanied by sorrow, caused by the death of WG's daughter **Bessie**, and by an unseemly row of his own doing with his former friends at Gloucestershire.

After the **Crystal Palace** venture failed in 1908 the Grace family moved again, to **Mottingham Lane SE9**, where a blue LCC plaque on what is now a care home (above right) is displayed, and where WG finished his playing days with **Eltham CC**. His last appearance at the crease was in July 1914, when he scored 69 not out. He died the following year and was buried at **Beckenham Cemetery, Elmers End**, where a pub bearing his name stands in **Witham Road**.

Amongst other associated sites, **Gracefield Gardens** (above right) marks where **Streatham CC** played from 1882–1914. It was named as such purely because Grace had played on the ground occasionally.

Grace House meanwhile (above) is one of several council housing blocks overlooking the Oval. Ironically another is **Lohmann House**, named after a Surrey player who once refused to play for England in protest against amateurs such as Grace supposedly getting more in expenses than the £10 fee he was due as a professional.



Any photograph, programme, cheque or scrap of paper bearing the great man's signature is highly treasured. This one is from a signed copy of his autobiography, held in Surrey's library at the Oval.