

# Jonathan Agnew



**C**ricket's commemoration last week of the outbreak of the First World War proved to be a stark and moving reminder of the impact the deadly conflict had on every aspect of life. A round of county championship matches was in full flow when war was declared on

August 4th, 1914 and when a number of players chose to sign up immediately rather than complete the games, public opinion was quickly divided over the morality of staging cricket matches in wartime.

The most famous cricketer of the time, the legendary batsman Jack Hobbs, caused outcry in some quarters when he signed to play in the Bradford League in 1915. His war effort was a clerical job in a munitions factory, but it was successfully argued that were Hobbs sent to the front and killed, it would have a massively damaging impact on British morale.

Four England cricketers died in the War, alongside 289 first class cricketers including Hampshire's fast bowler, Arthur Jacks, who was killed with his brother on the same day. Arthur Collins was an early casualty at Ypres. His 628 not out in a house match at Clifton College in 1899 remains the highest score ever recorded in a genuine match.

Probably the best known fatality was Percy Jeeves, a talented first class cricketer for Warwickshire whose name caught the eye of a young writer, PG Wodehouse, at

Cheltenham in 1913. Thus Jeeves the unflappable valet was born that day while Jeeves, the soldier, died three years later in the Battle of the Somme.

Frank Chester scored a century for Worcestershire aged only 17 but lost an arm while fighting in Salonika. He found solace in umpiring and quickly became regarded as the finest in the world while Harry Lee lay in No Man's Land for three days at Neuve Chapelle. A miraculous recovery left

him with a pronounced limp despite which he returned to score double centuries for Middlesex – he was not allowed a runner – and he even won a Test cap.

The Australian wicketkeeper, Bert Oldfield, somehow survived an

explosion that killed his three fellow stretcher-bearers and their patient. A metal plate was inserted at the front of his head, so when he was struck there by Harold Larwood in the Bodyline series of 1932/33, the incident almost sparked a riot.

Such bravery and such selfless sacrifice. How all of us in modern sport could learn from their example.

**'In 1914, public opinion was divided over staging cricket matches in wartime'**

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