

JONATHAN AGNEW



As the Ashes cricket returns to Old Trafford, Manchester, this week with England needing only to draw the match to retain the precious urn.

Like its famous namesake, which dominates the landscape only a mile down the road, cricket's Old Trafford is synonymous with the history and folklore that is all part and parcel of the Ashes. It was here, for instance, in

1956 that Jim Laker took all 10 Australian wickets in a single innings, and a total of 19 in the match – an astonishing feat which surely will never be matched.

And it was at Old Trafford 20 years ago that Shane Warne delivered perhaps the most famous ball ever bowled. A precocious, blonde, spiky-haired 23 year old from Melbourne, Warne was expelled from Australia's Academy for indiscipline but had now appeared in 11 Tests, albeit with mixed results. I was commentating on *Test Match Special* with Trevor Bailey, and both of us were genuinely excited about watching Warne bowl for the first

time. England's spinner, Peter Such, had taken six wickets and I remember saying to Trevor: 'There must be some pressure on young Warne because his team mates are expecting him to come on and turn the ball.' It sounds ridiculous now, doesn't it!

His very first delivery fizzed out of his hand, pitched outside leg stump and spun massively to clean bowl a bamboozled Mike Gatting. Even in the

commentary box we were stunned. I at least had the excuse of having my view obscured by Gatting's ample bottom, and when I returned to Old Trafford early next morning, there was Gatting – still looking perplexed – armed with a tape measure as he relived the moment of history.

Four years ago, that tradition was broken when, as a result of the bidding process, Old Trafford lost out to Cardiff. At the time there was a great deal of bitterness in Manchester, but the result is huge investment in the facilities at Old Trafford which includes the pitch now being at 90 degrees to the one that Laker and Warne exploited so dramatically.

It is the ground I first attended as an ambitious youngster, bowling to the Lancashire players in the nets, and although it will almost certainly rain sometime over the next five days, it's good to be back.

You can listen to the *Ball of the Century* at bbc.co.uk/cricket.

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