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Just as English cricket is gearing itself up for the busiest period in its history comes the dire warning that, in some parts of the country at least, staging international matches is financially unsustainable.

Last year Cardiff, one of the newest international venues, was forced to return a test match against the West Indies to the England and Wales Cricket Board and now Durham has done the same, declining to stage two of the most attractive fixtures that international cricket currently produces – one day games against Australia and India. In both cas-

es, Cardiff and Durham had over-stretched themselves in a bidding process that saw all the international venues in the country competing against each other in order to stage the supposedly money-making matches.

It is further evidence of there being too many matches, and too many venues. To make matters worse, the majority of international grounds have invested massively in new stands and facilities because this counts in their favour in the bidding process. These grounds now desperately need a return on their investments but have been forced to commit more than they can afford in order to outbid their rivals and host a match or two.

While Sky television maintains its apparently insatiable appetite for cricket, which fills one of its sports channels all day, the public will soon be sorely tested. Ticket prices for this summer's Ashes have already pushed

through the £100 mark (I remember the rumpus not so long ago when the first £50 tickets were printed) and the administrators will quickly point to a heavy demand and full grounds. But England play Australia once more this winter and again here in the summer of 2015 – that is three Ashes series in three years. Traditionally we meet three times in five.

Durham's decision to hand back a match that it was once so delighted to be granted can only be based on the fear that not enough cricket lovers in the north east, weary of another round of internation-

als gainst familiar opposition, will pay the ticket price that the county needs to make a profit.

Television pays the money and calls the shots in terms of scheduling, but there are real signs that the stirring and familiar sight of full English cricket grounds is seriously under threat.

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Ones to watch

FOOTBALL Aston Villa v Chelsea

11 May
Villa are desperate for a win as they fight relegation.

GOLF The Players Championship at Sawgrass, Florida

9-12 May
Players will gather on a course famous for its iconic 'Island Green' 17th – one of golf's most difficult holes.

CRICKET England Lions v New Zealand

9-12 May
The tourists play their final warm-up game before next week's First Test against England's fringe players.



BOWING OUT? Aston Villa need a win in Saturday's clash



ISLAND GREEN A tricky hole to get stuck in at Sawgrass