

# JONATHAN AGNEW



To tour Australia and win the Ashes is the ultimate ambition of every English cricketer. The very fabric of the sport is built around the history of these great contests, dating all the way back to the very first in 1882 when the captain Ivo Bligh was pre-

mented with a tiny terracotta urn in Victoria. That same fragile trophy now lives in a sealed glass case at Lord's and never leaves its home – not even when Australia wins. Their frustration at that, incidentally, is always a source of great amusement.

Those early, pioneering tours must have been a remarkable experience. Before modern air travel, England's cricketers meandered to Australia by cruise ship creating a tour that lasted for six months with little hope of the players' families making the long journey. Black and white photographs show the team doing some gentle exercise on board, but it was nothing more than a few physical jerks. The fact that they had to wear their dinner jackets every evening suggests this presented a great opportunity for some serious socialising.

How different it all is now. The non-stop schedule means that tours have become so compressed to the extent that five Tests are completed within seven weeks. The players' wives, girlfriends and children will be with them for nearly half the trip. Quick, efficient and family friendly, perhaps, but because the practice matches between the Tests have been

scrapped, these condensed tours have lost their unique appeal.

I received a friendly tweet out of the blue last week from Miles Obst. 'Not the Miles Obst', I responded, 'who bowled against England for Western Australia Country XI at Geraldton in 1991 while a massive plague of locusts destroyed your crops?' Indeed it was. Then there was the following PA announcement at Bundaberg where England faced a Queens-

land country team: "This is 'Stormy' Gale bowling from the Piggery End. C'mon 'Stormy', stick the wind up the poms!" And I will never forget Guitus the Wonder Whippet who faithfully, but rather monotonously jumped through his hoops and provided the lunchtime

entertainment during our three-day stay in Ballarat.

These days there is no opportunity for Miles or 'Stormy' to play against the poms – or for our cricketers to get a sense of the real Australia, which lies a million miles from the big cities. The Ashes will be fast and furious, but something very special has been lost.

***'I will never forget Guitus the Wonder Whippet'***