



Nothing but sunshine and a sea breeze

A game of beach cricket with captains and kings leaves Steve King with hazy memories, but the all-encompassing glow of a perfect game (despite losing by three wickets)

THE Ship Inn Cricket Club at Elie, in the East Neuk of Fife, is, its captain says—and I believe he is right in saying so—the only cricket club in the world with a beach for its home ground. As someone who has played cricket, with great pleasure, but little distinction, ever since he could stand upright, I knew as soon as I heard about it that I had to see this place. Inquiries, introductions and arrangements were made. Not only would I see the place, I would play a game of cricket with the Ship Inn side into the bargain.

As it turned out, the fixture was versus I Zingari. I Zingari are an interesting lot. The name is slangy Italian for The Gypsies. They are a wandering side, with no home ground of their own, founded in 1845. They are as famous for their facetious rules and regulations ('That the Entrance be nothing, and the Annual Subscription does not exceed the Entrance') as they are for their illustrious membership (a smattering of royalty, innumerable aristocrats and several captains of the England team among them).

I Zingari arrived by boat. Of course they did. En route to Elie across the Firth of Forth, they

passed the Bass Rock, once an island prison where Jacobites were sent to rot, now home to a vast colony of gannets. The morning's rain had freshened everything up, the sun had come out, there were puffins galore and dolphins swam alongside the boat. I wondered what the puffins made of I Zingari, whose black, red and gold blazers bear an uncanny resemblance to that bird's beak.

The beach in front of the Ship Inn where cricket is played has a fine view of the Firth,

a sweeping bay and a seafront dotted with sturdy Victorian villas. I asked a couple of I Zingari how this ground compared with others they had played at lately. Favourably, they agreed, notwithstanding the fact that the last one had been Highclere Castle in Hampshire. 'Eddie's place?' said one to the other. 'Yuh-yuh-yuh. Ver' good shoot, too.'

The Ship Inn's proprietors are Rachel and Graham Bucknall. Rachel was classically trained as a singer; Graham describes himself as 'a failed investment banker'. Although Rachel's is the more musical voice, Graham's is the louder. 'We met at a wedding,' he booms. 'And I said: "That is the girl I am going to marry." And she was and I did.' Time spent in Australia turned them into foodies, Mrs Bucknall explains, and gave them the idea of switching careers: 'The way they were doing things in Sydney, the seafood, the fusion, the relaxed attitude. We just loved it.'

Returning to the UK, they bought the Bridge Inn, a pub in Ratho, near Edinburgh, in 2010. It was soon winning industry awards. A few years later, a taxi driver happened to



The headgear is Ship-shape at the Fife club



mention that the Ship Inn was for sale. Mrs Bucknall knew the place—her family used to spend summer holidays at Elie when she was young. ‘The owners of the Ship Inn weren’t so keen on children then. They had desks outside where parents were expected to leave their kids.’

The couple shook things up at the Ship Inn, adding six bedrooms, expanding the restaurant and introducing a more adventurous menu. Cricket had been played on the beach since 1990, a tradition that Mr Bucknall—both a Yorkshireman and an Old Harrovian and therefore, almost by definition, a cricket nut—was keen to carry on. ‘I bought a cricket club first and a pub second,’ he says. A more committed captain it would be difficult to imagine.

His wife, sportingly, learned how to keep a scorebook and became a fluent commentator as well, her mezzo-soprano tones ringing out over the tannoy on match days. ‘I genuinely love my scorebook now,’ she admits. ‘And, amazingly, I still love Graham, too.’

The game itself? Nothing but sunshine and a sea breeze. It was, for me, memorable—I am tempted to say unforgettable, yet I would →



Top: Elie bay is an idyllic backdrop for the Ship Inn's matches. Above: Preparing the wicket



Above: Wickets are pitched directly in front of the Ship Inn. Below: The club's Hall of Fame

struggle to give a match report. I know, because I wrote it down, that we, the Ship Inn, lost by three wickets. Part of me thinks that remembering or even caring for more than a few minutes about the results of sporting contests is a mild form of insanity. What will linger instead is the sensation of having occupied that extraordinary space: the sandy softness underfoot, the narcotic slowness of the specially designed beach-cricket ball, the way the boundary began to shrink as the tide came in.

Much is said these days about the spirit of the game. This match should have been broadcast to all cricket-loving nations. Footage should be replayed in schools in years to come. It was a case study in how to get it right. Both teams played well and conducted themselves impeccably. Nobody was a twit. The sharpest barbs I heard were those directed by I Zingari at each other. One of them, in particular, a cheerful prodigy in an Eton cap who liked to hold his pose after playing a good shot, received regular encouragement from his teammates looking on from the boundary: 'Lovely left elbow, George'; 'Oooh, yes, very cultured, George.'

‘The boundary began to shrink as the tide came in’

As I say, we lost. Nobody seemed to mind. Mr Bucknall plied I Zingari with beer and fish and chips. They left, at last, in a bus—not quite as James Bond as their arrival by boat had been, although events did take a curious turn when a pair of elderly ladies insisted on boarding the bus, apparently unconcerned about where it was going as long as they could squeeze in alongside these dashing puffin impersonators.

Feel the sand between your stumps

- The spiritual home of beach cricket in Britain is Goodwin Sands in Kent, which has hosted matches since 1824. Its reputation grew to the point where it attracted the interest of the BBC, but the film crew got stranded and had to be rescued by the RNLI
- Cricket is the fastest-growing sport in Scotland—and Wales is not far behind, if the astonishing attendances at the annual Vale of Glamorgan cricket festival on Barry Island, south of Cardiff, are anything to go by. Schools from outside the Vale are now clamouring to be admitted, too
- The Brambles is a sandbank in the Solent, which, in the springtime, when the low tide is at its lowest, is briefly exposed and becomes suitable for a quick—very quick—game of cricket. Two sailing clubs meet there every year for a fixture, taking it in turns to ‘win’, irrespective of the number of runs that are scored or wickets that fall

I dined with the Bucknalls, upstairs at the Ship Inn. We feasted on mackerel pâté, goat's cheese with candied walnuts, Shetland mussels and Pittenweem lobster. Mr Bucknall ordered wine for us all—rather a lot of wine. Later, there was brandy. You don't get a voice like his from early nights and orange juice.

Although I knew what was coming and had no reason to be surprised, the sight that greeted me in the morning when I opened the shutters in my room nevertheless gave me a start. The entire scene of yesterday's adventure had disappeared underwater. Vanished. Nothing but sunshine and a sea breeze. 🐉
The Ship Inn at Elie, Fife (01333 330246; www.shipinn.scot)

