**Stamfordham vs DCSCC,** *1st May 2024*

At last, after weeks and weeks of rain, comes a couple of days of fine weather and so the season can begin.

But where is Stamfordham? A question that was to be of significance to the conduct, and outcome, of this match.

One of the attractions of the summer game is that it affords the opportunity for its participants to visit a variety of picturesque cricket grounds in far-flung outposts of the realm. Such as Stamfordham: a delightful spot - rustic, pastoral, undisturbed, where not even the lowing of cattle could be discerned in this location, lost in the misty backwaters of Northumberland, beyond Hadrian’s Wall.

And lost it proved to be for at least one member of DCSCC.

Finding the place and getting to the cricket ground on time during the rush hour was going to be a challenge, as was well-publicised by team-members on What’s App earlier in the day. One Nigel Metcalfe texted that the AA advised it was 40 to 50 mins away; others warned of rush hour queues and of at least an hour’s journey time, with the recommendation of avoiding the A1. There were three difficulties in reaching the ground: 1. Where was it? 2. How to avoid traffic jams around Newcastle; and 3. How to navigate the last few miles along a narrow, local road with more twists and turns than a corkscrew. Well, we all managed it… with one notable exception.

The toss had been taken at 5.30pm and DCSCC were to field, Stamfordham graciously lending us one player to make up our numbers. Your Chairman correspondent opened the bowling, conceding seven in his first two overs on an unresponsive, sponge-like pitch. The batsmen were clearly getting the feel of the wicket. Theo, our welcome new recruit to DCSCC, opened the other end, seeing his first ball go for four before tightening his hold on the (damp) ball thereafter. Chris C came on first change, bowling with pace against batsmen now well set and it took him until his third over before claiming our first wicket. Clean bowled, top of off – hooray! Durham were on their way!

Ian B replaced Theo, bowling an excellent maiden over, then taking a wicket - thanks to a catch by Kris C - in the first ball of his second over. This, however, brought on a left-handed Stamfordham big-hitter who promptly smacked a four, a six and a two…DCSCC were plainly not going to find it easy. But things surprisingly improved, thanks to the sporting retirement of the lefty who left the field after a rapid-fire 29. Vinay replaced Chris, bowled a first-ball wide and then removed the next batsmen, clean bowled. A batsman-baffling performance!

Then, after ten overs into the game, the absent Metcalfe deigned to grace us with his company, having apparently sampled all the traffic jams over the length and breadth of Northumberland to get to us. Nigel straightway took to the field and bowled his customary bamboozlers which thankfully slowed the Stamfordham run-rate. His was a vastly entertaining appearance on the greensward since, quite clearly still delayed in mind-set, he was unaware of a run-out opportunity off his own bowling until a barrage of explosive calling from his teammates urged him to pass the ball to Eckart, behind the stumps, to promptly remove the bails. And so DCSCC proceeded in their stop-start pattern of progress. Your correspondent and Kris C bowled the last four overs of the innings as the opposition raced to score as many as they could, delayed only by Cris C holding on to a skier off yours truly, for Stamfordham to finish on a total of 114 for five in 20 overs. A commendable score on a slow wicket against some tigerish fielding by some of DCSCC’s more athletic members.

Guy and Vinay came to the crease to begin our reply to this challenging total. Carefully at first, scoring a couple of singles as they were getting the measure of this lifeless wicket. Then Vinay, as is his method, hoisted a glorious shot into the distance – only to see it drop dead in the outfield for only two runs. Trying to make amends for this, he then swung at a wide ball, which barely reached the toe-end of the bat, to see it sail into the outstretched hands of mid-off. Aaagh! Off he forlornly tramped, to be replaced by Rory.

Again, care on this wicket was the watchword, especially facing - at one end - a very fast opening bowler with a dark ball on not the brightest of evenings. The other opening bowler was a complete contrast, sending down wides and slow, twice-bouncing deliveries that threatened to bore our batsmen to death. Rory gained a couple of elegant, sweeping boundaries before a scorching missile removed his bails. Chris next came out to bat.

This partnership slowly got going: some classy shots from Guy, ones and twos from both ends until the boundaries were then tested by our noble swordsmiths. There were some excellent shots on both sides until Guy seemed to show some reluctance to continue. Was he injured? Or wanting to retire sportingly like the Stamfordham lefty? Or just bereft of his senses? Captain Pat decided on this last explanation so shouted from the boundary that his fellow captain had better wake up and put his team first and not his personal honour! As it happened shortly thereafter, Chris subsequently holed out at long-on, going for another boundary, by which time we were into the fifteenth over with only 74 on the board for three. We needed to accelerate.

Kris C was the man best able to deliver with his trade mark blasting of anything within bat range, but even he could not do much to breathe life out of the comatose wicket. He battered what he could, however, as Guy drove and swept and gave the opposition a master class in swordplay until he reached 50 and captain Pat then called him in to save his honour. (Or was it that Pat was just desperate to get out there and wield the willow before the twenty overs were up?)

The last overs were exciting as our two remaining Vikings cut and thrust and clubbed away in a frantic chase to reach the desired total, just falling short by three runs at the close of play. We finished on 111 for three: fewer wickets and fewer extras conceded than Stamfordham and so a respectable performance on a wicket that the opposition knew better than we.

Congratulations to all concerned for a fine first game of the season - nothing for it now, but to return home, not quite victorious but not downhearted either … except perhaps for Nigel who couldn’t find his way without running into trouble again!