

The Daily Telegraph

[We must stop the game's charm being sucked away.](#)

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Sport is a part of life that lends itself readily to nostalgia, and all that that entails. It is strangely easy to become romantic about pursuits that have become overtly commercial, ruthless and, in some respects, cynical. Cricket is possibly the worst offender, partly because of its enormous heritage and how we associate it with long, happy, days of sunshine and friendship. But there is also our implicit understanding that it began on our village fields, played by our rural ancestors, and is an embodiment of our past and our way of life.

It is precisely for those reasons that the Sussex Central Cricket League's decision last week to remove the obligation on home sides to provide tea during matches has caused such shockwaves in the cricketing world. What happened is better described as a possible decision, as there is doubt about how the vote was run.

The motion to de-tea the league's cricket was passed by 114 votes to 89; but it was assumed that those delegates who did not vote had 'voted' for it. That provides a rare parallel between English club cricket and the old Soviet Union; but let that pass. The idea of stripping this ancient tradition from our popular recreation caused outrage enough. That the process appears to have been faulty adds to the scandal; but it has at least provided the league with a face-saving excuse to re-run the vote.

Tea, however, is not (in the views of many clubs) something it should be legitimate to vote on: it is as if the Sussex Central Cricket League had been asked to choose whether the sun should rise tomorrow morning, or whether bats and balls should be used in the course of the game. Tea just is: and there can't be a match without it. Lest you think I exaggerate, the reaction of many clubs in the league makes the point. The existing 'vote' is interpreted as allowing clubs to opt out of providing tea (and just think how delightful that would look), but to allow those who wished to continue to carry on scoffing. A number of clubs have said they would ignore a vote that, after a re-run, confirmed the initial decision.

The initiator of this rebellion is Horsted Keynes Cricket Club, which has also rallied the support of a number of others. Horsted Keynes has played cricket since the 17th century: at first sight, this is all about the game's heritage and traditions. There shall be tea because there has always been tea, just as there have always been bats and balls, and as the sun has always risen in the morning.

Yet there is more to it than that. It is about cricket being a social game – any game that lasts all afternoon, from 2 pm until 7 pm, cannot help but be social. There is chat beforehand; chat in the pub afterwards; chat on the field; and chat between innings, at tea. No-one will starve, or keel over with hunger, because he doesn't eat between lunch and dinner. And glasses of water are as effective at rehydrating a player as a cup of builder's. Neither is the point. The point is that the tea interval is a moment of relaxation for players and spectators. It is a time to

meet people and make friends, and share things in common – and one of the most important things cricketers have in common is, oddly enough, cricket.

Above all, it is about one of the most ancient traditions of civilisation, namely hospitality: that, too, is something that binds the Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and people of no faith at all who play cricket around the world. When an away team turns up at a ground in Sussex, Karachi, Jaipur, Trincomalee, Ballarat or Wellington, the extension of hospitality not only welcomes the visitors. It also says that although the combat on the field of play may be intense, there is a brotherhood, or in women's cricket a sisterhood, off it.

In short, the tea interval is about charm; cricket always used to be a charming game, and one aspect of its charm was its rituals. Those rituals all had a purpose, but as in other rituals in other sports, particularly those played at an amateur level, cricket's were designed to create fellowship and bring people together. It may be a long way from that consideration to the snarling and bad sportsmanship seen all too often on the field in professional cricket in recent decades, but the link is there.

Cricket, like everything else, has had a pig of a year. Tempers have frayed, largely off the field, and at times it has been all too easy to surrender to despair. At such a time it becomes all the more important that the charm that remains in the game, the touches that make it such a compelling recreation and spectator sport, are not sucked out of it; and there have been few more obvious attempts to suck the charm from the game than this idea that it is good to scrap the tea interval.

Robert Willard Watts, the Horsted Keynes club's secretary, put his finger on the problem when he said that "this whole saga has highlighted the widening gap in recreational cricket between those who, whilst playing competitively, are keen to have a cordial and jovial experience, and others who are more focused on speeding up the game and making it more akin with football and other sports".

The question of why people who like "football and other sports" don't just stick to them, and leave cricket, with its gentleness and its foibles, to those of us who don't wish to transform it, brings us to another treat in store next season. The Hundred, whose postponement from last season was the only upside of the pandemic, is a monstrosity invented to make cricket more like football. It is not least because it, too, will suck charm out of the game rather like a reverse tsunami that we need to keep the tradition of tea, and all it stands for and enables. The game is about to need its traditions more than ever.

And the row in the Sussex league is not the only way in which grass-roots cricket is imitating its superiors. At Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), a club not so old as Horsted Keynes but supposedly far grander, factions are fighting each other as it tries to find a way of governing itself that is suitable both for the business it pretends it isn't and for a club that some of its members imagine is a democracy.

After a year such as this, it is perhaps little surprise that tensions are everywhere, and rash decisions are made. Everyone in cricket, from the chairmen of the England and Wales Cricket Board and the MCC down to the titans of the Sussex league, has a responsibility to ensure that calm is restored: and that what is distinctive about our game, and has always attracted people to it, is preserved and not thrown away.