

MCC Museum, Lord's

William Ward's cricket ball 1820

William Ward, director of the Bank of England and an MCC regular, was celebrating his 33rd birthday on the day he stepped up at Lord's to face the underarm bowlers of Norfolk – overarm was yet to come – on 24 July 1820. Three bruising days later he was finally dismissed, having swatted the ball around the ground for a record 278 runs.

Small wonder it looks so battered. And yet apart from the fading of its original red dye, Ward's ball looks remarkably similar to those of today.

At its core is the 'quilt', a hard-baked kernel of cork and worsted. Around this are successive layers of thin cork and thread that the ballmaker would have patiently hammered and pressed until the requisite size and weight was attained. Two outer 'cups' of tanned hide then enclosed each half of the quilt. Squeezed together in a vice, these were hand-sewn together by the 'closer' to create the all-important triple seams that have remained a vital tool in the bowler's trade ever since.

But who first arrived at this classic design?

Was it Duke & Son, still the best known name in the business today (albeit no longer in family hands), established in Penshurst, Kent, in 1760, 16 years after cricket's first laws were drafted? Or was it John Small of Petersfield, the cricketing son of a saddler, who made similar balls for both the Hambledon club and the MCC? (Ward's ball, it is thought, may well be one of Small's.)

Whatever, the design was soon adopted by dozens of other manufacturers, the majority in Kent. Eight were in Tonbridge alone (including Wisden and Surrudge) and seven in Southborough.

And so for nearly 200 years Kent's ball makers supplied the world, until now, Duke, based in Walthamstow, are the only company left manufacturing balls in Britain. As for Ward, he loved Lord's so dearly that five years after his epic innings he paid £5,000 to save it from developers. How apt then, that his 1820 ball should now rest in the ground's museum, where it is deemed by experts to be the oldest cricket ball in the world.



Diameter 7.16cm
Weight 158g

