Sport Cricket

How super school solved England's opener woes

Whitgift had little track record in cricket before it suddenly developed three Test batsmen, writes **John Westerby**

For far too many summers now the England selectors have been scouring the country for opening batsmen of Test quality. First in search of a reliable opening partner for Alastair Cook, more recently in the hope of finding worthy successors, from Nick Compton to Adam Lyth, Michael Carberry to Keaton Jennings, the search has gone on across the length and breadth of the land.

This makes it all the more unlikely that two have been uncovered from precisely the same place. Rory Burns, 29, and Dominic Sibley, 24, who will resume their opening partnership for England in the first Test against South Africa a week on Thursday, learnt much of their early cricket at Whitgift School in Croydon before taking separate paths towards Test cricket.

Burns, the Surrey captain, has established himself in the side, after an excellent Ashes series and a century in his most recent innings, against New Zealand in Hamilton at the start of this month. Sibley, who moved on to Warwickshire two years ago, played his first two Tests in New Zealand and aims to cement his position in South Africa at the top of the order alongside his former schoolmate.

In fact, three out of the past four England openers have come from the same school as Jason Roy, who opened in the Ashes series last summer, is another old Whitgiftian. More than just a coincidence, surely. And what makes this recent record even more remarkable is that these three are the first England players to have come from Whitgift for more than half a century, ever since Raman Subba Row played the last of his 13 Test matches in 1961.

This is not, traditionally, one of the game's powerhouses. Despite their attractive playing fields just off Brighton Road heading south out of Croydon, they did not produce a county cricketer from Subba Row's time in the 1950s and 1960s until Matthew Spriegel, an off spin-bowling all-rounder, made his way into the Surrey team in 2008. But for the young cricketers coming through the school now and dreaming of playing for England, there is no shortage of role models to follow.

"We've been really blessed to have some very talented sporty kids coming here," Neil Kendrick, the head of cricket performance, says.

"The wickets are really good, which probably explains why we produce a lot of batsmen. But the ethos has always been just about instilling a lifelong love of the game.

"We've got loads of old pupils playing Premier League club cricket and I'm just as proud of that as of the England players we've produced."

It is a Wednesday evening and the next generation are being put through their paces in the school hall by Kendrick, the former Surrey and Glamorgan spinner, in a Whitgift Cricket Academy session, where specialist coaching is given to the best players from years eight to 13. Spriegel, 32, a youth coach at Surrey, has come back to his old school to lend a hand. A week earlier Laurie Evans, the Sussex and former Surrey batsman, had dropped in to dispense a little wisdom.

Evans is another former pupil who made his way into the Surrey team around the same time as Spriegel and plenty more have followed them to the Oval in recent years, including Tom Lancefield, Freddie van den Bergh and Ryan Patel, as well as Burns, Roy and Sibley. From an independent boys' school that had no particular track record of producing county cricketers, this has become a prolific production line.

So what changed? "About 20 years ago, we were nowhere near the top of the ladder but a new head came in, Dr Christopher Barnett, who had his own vision for the school and that included improving the sport," Kendrick says. "Colin Pates [the former Chelsea and Arsenal defender] started the football off, we've had a load of great rugby and hockey players, and Wardy came in to do the cricket."

Wardy is David Ward, a talented batsman who played in the powerful Surrey team of the 1990s alongside Alec Stewart, Graham Thorpe and Mark Butcher, finishing with a first-class average a shade under 40. Once his county career came to an end, he began coaching at Whitgift and Kendrick joined shortly after, in 2001, at which point Spriegel and Evans were 14, and Burns was just starting at the school.

Around the same time, Surrey started playing occasional one-day and County Championship matches at the school. "Having those games definitely raised the profile," Kendrick says. "For a school who weren't in the top tier of cricketing schools at the time, it helped to put us on the map."

Over the previous few years, the school's fresh focus on sport led to a number of talented games players arriving, with scholarships and bursaries provided by the local Whitgift Foundation helping with fees that now start from £20,000 a year.

The foundation, established more than 400 years ago by a former Archbishop of Canterbury, owns property including the Whitgift Centre shopping complex in central Croydon. Rent from these properties goes towards funding education at Whitgift and Trinity schools, as well as local care for the elderly.

In the past ten years, the foundation has provided £51 million of assistance. The school's rugby team has included Danny Cipriani, Elliot Daly, Harry Williams and Marland Yarde. The football team has been graced by Nigeria defender Victor Moses and England's Callum Hudson-Odoi, evidence of the rich array of talent that the school has attracted in recent years.

"Close to 50 per cent of the kids get money off their fees now," Kendrick says. "People like Danny Cipriani's family, for example, could never have afforded it without a big bursary. We have a really good range of backgrounds here."

Daly and Cipriani were good cricketers, the former playing for South of England before opting to concentrate on his rugby. "Cips could bat and bowl but he never practised at all," Kendrick says. "I remember picking him up at the station one time after he'd been training with Wasps to play at Epsom College and he hit one of the biggest sixes I've ever seen a schoolboy hit. He was talented all right."

Roy, two school years below Cipriani, had stood out when Kendrick saw him batting at Surrey's under-12 nets and moved from his state school in Redhill to Whitgift in year nine.

"I had a chat to the head and admissions people and said it would be good to get this lad on board," Kendrick says.

"He was a bit of a hot-head but we kept him quite stable while he was here. He fitted in well, he was a good rugby player, solid under the high ball. When he went on to the academy at Surrey, he had a few problems with his behaviour, but he just needed time to mature."

Burns was a more straightforward character, captaining the under-13 team to success in the National Schools Cup finals at Headingley, mainly as an off spinner. He kept wicket too, but ended up leaving the school at 16 because he felt he was not being given sufficient opportunities with the bat.

"There was a difference of opinion about where I was batting," is how Burns looks back on it wryly.

Burns moved instead to City of London Freemen's School, where the coach was Neil Stewart, the brother of Alec. Their relationship has endured to the extent that he consulted Stewart during the Ashes series last summer.

"He was a decent batsman when he left us, but more of a manoeuvrer of the ball," Kendrick says. "I think Neil [Stewart] was very good at working with the quirks in Rory's game and next time we saw him the power had come as well. He looked a very good player."

Sibley was a few years younger but quickly became recognised for the sheer number of runs that he scored, capable of playing long innings from a young age. When he was still an under-15, he was scoring centuries for the school first team. "We play 50-over cricket and 20-over cricket and Dom was always someone who would look to occupy the crease," Kendrick says.

"He wasn't afraid of getting behind the rate early in the innings, he'd back himself to catch up."

By the time he was in the upper sixth, Sibley was not playing much for the school. Instead he was playing for Surrey, becoming the youngest batsman to score a double century in County Championship history against Yorkshire in only his third first-class match.

When Whitgift decided to build on its cricket success by launching the academy programme for its best young players three years ago, it invited a couple of former pupils back to oversee the launch. They had been a few years apart at school but Burns and Sibley came to share their memories of school cricket. They started in the same place and, in South Africa over the next few weeks, Burns and Sibley will be back together again as an England opening pairing with much in common.



Burns, who learnt the game at Whitgift, has cemented his place as an England opener. Fellow old boy Hudson-Odoi, the Chelsea and England winger, visited the school recently, inset

VISIONHAUS/GETTY IMAGES; IAN TUTTLE/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK





Sibley scored a double century while at school, left, and made his Test debut last month, below. Daly, right, also of Whitgift, has 39 caps in rugby union for England



Sport

Anderson back for tour game but Wood still out

John Westerby

James Anderson will return to competitive action today for the first time since August in the opening warm-up game of England's tour of South Africa. The previous time Anderson had taken the field was in a game for Lancashire's second team in Chester, when he aggravated the injury to his right calf that he had sustained during the first Test at Edgbaston against Australia and was ruled out of the rest of the Ashes series.

The 37-year-old missed the tour to New Zealand too, but England's leading Test wicket-taker will be back in action in a two-day game against a South Africa Invitation XI in Benoni this morning, aiming to regain selection for the opening Test of a four-match series, starting in Centurion a week on Thursday. Anderson has not taken a Test wicket since the final match against West Indies in St Lucia in February, but still has the desire to add to his tally of 575 wickets from 149 Tests.

The head coach Chris Silverwood believes that the swing bowler is ready to stake his claim for a place in the seam attack after spending two weeks acclimatising in Potchefstroom. "Jimmy is absolutely flying," Silverwood said yesterday. "He's in a great place."

Ben Stokes, having been crowned BBC Sports Personality of the Year on Sunday, will not take part in the opening match but is likely to play in the three-day first-class fixture against South Africa A at the same venue, starting on Friday. Mark Wood, still recovering from a side injury sustained in the World Cup final in July, is not expected to be fit until the third Test in Port Elizabeth in mid-January.

Silverwood acknowledged that England's attack need to show more penetration than they displayed in New Zealand, but feels that conditions in South Africa will be kinder to their seam attack. "There's a bit more bounce here," Silverwood said. "A bit more pace in the wickets will suit our bowlers. But the bowlers as a unit have worked so hard on finding ways to get 20 wickets. It's been a struggle at times but that's something to work on."

Jofra Archer is suffering from a cold but Silverwood feels the fast bowler will have learnt from a chastening series on unresponsive pitches in New Zealand. "He's still very young in his international career, especially his Test career," Silverwood said. "It's the first time he's come across those conditions. He'll learn and he's got some good people around him, and Joe [Root, the captain] is continually learning what's the best way of captaining him as well."

South Africa are emerging from a turmoil after installing Graeme Smith as acting director of cricket and Mark Boucher as head coach within the last week. After losing their most recent home Test series 2-0 to Sri Lanka in February and being crushed 3-0 in India in October, six uncapped players were named yesterday in a 17-man squad for the first two Tests.

Keshav Maharaj is the only specialist spinner in the squad, while Aidan Markram, the opening batsman, has been included despite not having played since fracturing his wrist punching a wall during the series in India.

Dominic Sibley and Zak Crawley, the opening batsmen in Root's squad, were named yesterday in the squad for the red-ball leg of England Lions squad to Australia after the Test series in South Africa. Tom Kohler-Cadmore was named in the white-ball squad, having been dropped from a Lions tour last winter and not considered for selection in the summer. Kohler-Cadmore and Joe Clarke, the Nottinghamshire batsman, were reprimanded and fined for bringing the game into disrepute as members of the WhatsApp group that came to light during the rape trial of Alex Hepburn, their former Worcestershire teammate.

England Lions 50-over squad T Abell; D Bess (both Somerset); J Bracey (Gloucs); H Brookes (Warks); B Carse (Durham); M Crane (Hants); L Evans (Sussex); R Gleeson (Lancs); L Gregory (Somerset); S Hain (Warks); W Jacks (Surrey); T Kohler-Cadmore (Yorks); D Lawrence (Essex); M Milnes (Kent); T Moores (Notts); C Overton (Somerset).
Four-day squad Bess, Bracey, Z Crawley (Kent), Gleeson, Gregory, Hain, K Jennings (Lancs), D Lawrence (Essex), S Mahmood (Lancs), S Northeast (Hants), C Overton, O Robinson (Kent), O Robinson (Sussex), D Sibley (Warks), A Virdi (Surrey).

Proteas' six uncapped players

Dane Paterson
Right-arm fast, **Age** 30
First-class record
Matches 100 **Wickets** 347
Bowl ave 24.03

Pieter Malan Opening batsman, 30
Matches 148 **Runs** 10,161 **Bat ave** 45.16

Rassie van der Dussen Batsman, 30
Matches 113 **Runs** 7,370
Bat ave 44.39

Beuran Hendricks Left-arm fast, 29
Matches 85 **Wickets** 291
Bowl ave 23.63

Dwaine Pretorius All-rounder, 30
Matches 55 **Runs** 2,656 **Bat ave** 39.05 **Wickets** 162 **Bowl ave** 23.87

Rudi Second Wicketkeeper, 30
Matches 110 **Runs** 7,205 **Bat ave** 44.75 **Catches** 365 **Stumpings** 14

Full squad F du Plessis (capt), T Bavuma, Q de Kock (wk), D Elgar, B Hendricks, K Maharaj, P Malan, A Markram, Z Hamza, A Nortje, D Paterson, A Phehlukwayo, V Philander, D Pretorius, K Rabada, R Second, R van der Dussen.

Pre-watershed swearing was breach of Ofcom regulations

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obscenities — the player shouted "f*** off…f***ing prick…f*** you" — were picked up by one of their camera's microphones. On September 4, during a live Blast match, a player was heard via the stump microphone shouting "f***".

The third incident happened when David Gower, commentating during the fifth Ashes Test at the Oval — his final Test for the company — believed that his microphone was not live and said "haven't got a f***ing clue". Sky was cleared of this complaint because the comment was made in error and an on-air apology was made immediately.

The first two incidents were deemed by Ofcom to have breached their rules that state: "The most offensive language must not be broadcast before the watershed" and "in applying generally accepted standards, broadcasters must ensure material which may cause offence is justified by the context…such material may include… offensive language".

Last year the International Cricket Council (ICC) changed its regulations, which mean that broadcasters have discretion over whether viewers are able to hear what players say. Before that the ICC had decreed that stump microphones had to be turned off between balls but it is now up to the broadcaster and the amended rules were part of the ICC's attempt to clamp down on bad behaviour.

Its reasoning was that if players realised what they were saying could be heard by the viewing public, they may tone down on-field abuse. Leaving the volume turned up gives the viewer insight into what is being discussed by the wicketkeeper and slip cordon and if anything is being directed at the batsman.

However, broadcasters cannot have any control over the language used by the players and have to be mindful of Ofcom regulations.

Having been found in breach of these rulings, Sky is likely to be cautious, using the audio only in replays so that any bad language can be cut out.

Audio from stump microphones led to a four-match suspension for Sarfaraz Ahmed, the Pakistan captain at the time, for a racist comment he made towards the South Africa all-rounder Andile Phehlukwayo in January.

The West Indies fast bowler Shannon Gabriel was suspended for four one-day internationals for a homophobic remark during an exchange with Joe Root in the third Test against England in St Lucia in February.

Stokes: Team supported me during absence

Matt Lawton

Ben Stokes has paid tribute to his England team-mates for the support he received during what he described as the hardest time of his life.

Stokes, 28, was voted the BBC's Sports Personality of the Year on Sunday, marking a remarkable turnaround for a cricketer who stood trial last year for an incident that occurred outside a Bristol nightclub in September 2017. He was acquitted and responded this year with match-winning innings in a dramatic World Cup final at Lord's and the third Ashes Test at Headingley.

However, he received a backdated ban and a fine from the ECB, having been dropped for the Ashes in Australia two winters ago. "It's when you're out of the team that you feel it," Stokes said. "When that gets taken away from you, and you're not around the people that you're generally spending time with, but they have taken time out of their days to keep in contact, ask 'How are you?', that's when you really know that you're part of something quite special.

"That wasn't just for the first eight to nine weeks — it was until I got back into the team. Even though I wasn't there, I was made to feel like I was."