

# The history of the Cricketers' Arms Hotel, Surry Hills

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John W. Ross

**Cover photographs (clockwise from top):**

- Cricketers' Arms Hotel (source: Wikimedia.org)
- First-floor bistro (Cricketers' Arms Facebook page)
- Ruff day at the Crix? (Cricketers' Arms Facebook page)
- Front bar (Cricketers' Arms Facebook page)

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## Foreword

Moore Park, originally called Sydney Common, was the site of a cricket ground used by the British regiments stationed at Victoria Barracks. When the British Army departed in the 1870s, the New South Wales Cricket Association took over the ground and cricket soon grew to Test match status. Colonial pubs had always been closely associated with sports, and in 1876 the Cricketers' Arms Hotel was opened to cater for thirsty players and spectators in Moore Park.

At about this time, a group of local rugby union players, dissatisfied with the rules of the game, established an association to play under the Victorian rules (now called Australian rules). Teams were formed, one of them using the Cricketers' Arms as its dressing room when playing in Moore Park. Australian Rules had a chequered career from then on, having to compete with two other football codes. However, boxing was always a popular sport in such a working-class area, and in 1941 the well-known boxing referee Joe Wallis became the licensee of the pub until his death in 1952.

The pub survived a purge of inner city hotels in the early 1920s when Tooth and Co carried out major renovations to save the pub's licence. In the modern era, the Cricketers Arms is notable as one of the first gay-friendly pubs in Sydney. It retains a relaxed atmosphere and traditional character, entertaining its patrons with weekly live music and quizzes. A good cheap bistro and range of local beers complete the picture of a popular local pub.

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known as The Hill and the Paddington Hill. The Members' Stand was rebuilt in 1886. After the ground was renamed to the Sydney Cricket Ground in 1894, the Hill Stand was built between the two hills. During the Depression years it became known as the Bob Stand because it cost a bob (one shilling) to enter. In 1983, the Bob Stand was replaced by the Bill O'Reilly Stand and moved to North Sydney Oval, where it remains today.



Figure 2 Sydney Cricket Ground

### **Australian rules football kicks off**

A Rugby union competition commenced in Sydney in 1874<sup>3</sup>. But after a few years, dissatisfaction with the rules of rugby had grown, mainly around injuries caused by unregulated scrummages and hard colonial grounds. In June 1880, representatives of most of the Sydney rugby clubs held a large and enthusiastic meeting to form a new competition based on the Victorian Australian Football rules, to be called the New South Wales Football Association. The main difference was that there was no off-side, resulting in fewer scrummages<sup>4</sup>.

The level of interest in breaking away from the established rules can be seen by the formation of an association when there were not yet any clubs. But two months later the Sydney Football Club<sup>5</sup> and East Sydney Football Club<sup>6</sup> were established, followed by the Balmain and Woollahra Clubs. While other clubs came and went, there were never more than about five clubs. The Football Association lasted until the end of 1895, when it folded during the severe economic Depression of the 1890s.

Some football enthusiasts reignited the organisation in 1903. With the help of the Victorian Football League, the New South Wales Australian Football League was formed with 11 senior clubs, nine with a reserve grade. The League flourished until the start of World War I. From then it had a chequered history in Sydney, having to compete not only with rugby union but also with the growing popularity of professional rugby league<sup>7</sup>.



Figure 3 East Sydney Football Club, 1903 (nswfootballhistory.com.au)

### **Pubs and sport**

The early colony was populated by British settlers who brought with them a tradition of playing sports and games, but who found no organised facilities for these activities here. Pubs stepped into the void, providing playing areas and equipment for both indoor and outdoor pursuits. In time, sporting groups developed into self-sufficient organisations with their own facilities, and the pubs responded by changing the type of entertainment they offered.

Entertainment and hotels have always gone hand in hand, and was often the drawcard for patrons. Games, sports and any number of live acts were included: nineteenth century pub games included climbing a greasy pole, catching greased pigs and bobbing for apples. More sedate games included cards, bagatelle (a game that evolved into pinball), darts and billiards. Few pubs were without a billiards room. Boxing matches were popular, either staged or impromptu fisticuffs. Skittles were popular, and many pubs had a bowling alley. These activities mainly involved men, who were the bulk of the customers<sup>8</sup>.

Pub entertainments diminished by the late nineteenth century, as mechanics' institutes, church halls, and concert and dance halls were built and operated as more respectable establishments than hotels. From this time, the distinction between high and popular culture was more pronounced. Also, the rise of organised sport, such as football, tennis and lawn bowls at purpose-built venues reduced the importance of pubs as places to watch and play sport. All the same, pub entertainment continued, and free music or theatre and a congenial atmosphere were still drawcards for the poor.



## The Cricketers' Arms Hotel

### The 1870s – the pub-building decade

The following is a sample of the construction dates of nearby pubs:

- Cockatoo Inn (later Hopetoun Hotel) – 1846
- Exchange (later Clock) Hotel – 1864
- (former) Pembroke Castle (later Athletic Club) Hotel - 1865
- Albion Inn (later Beresford Hotel) – 1870
- Rifle Butts (later Flinders) Hotel – 1870
- Cricketers' Arms Hotel – 1876
- Criterion (later Carrington) Hotel - 1877
- Palace (later Local Taphouse) Hotel - 1878

The discovery of gold near Bathurst in 1851 propelled Sydney into its first “golden age”. Thousands of hopeful diggers arrived at Sydney, the gold was sent to Sydney for export, and failed miners drifted back to Sydney, often permanently. All this movement of people and goods stimulated economic activity in the town. Sydney’s population exploded from just under 40,000 in 1851 to about 150,000 in 1871 and then to nearly 500,000 in 1901. Wool, meat and minerals joined gold as the major exports in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

But a drought from the mid-1880s, followed by a banking collapse in 1893 and the subsequent Great Depression caused a downturn in the manufacturing and construction industries by the late 1880s<sup>9</sup>. This rapid economic expansion followed by stagnation was reflected in the rise and fall of hotel construction during this period. The result is that most of the old pubs that survive to the present day were constructed in the 1870s, with very few pubs built from the 1880s onwards. The Cricketers' Arms Hotel is an example of a pub that was built to cater for the boom in demand at this time.

### A hotel for sportsmen and fans

Fitzroy Street in Surry Hills was a main thoroughfare linking the eastern suburbs to the city of Sydney. Buildings were constructed between Bourke and South Dowling Streets as early as the 1840s (The Pineapple Inn on the corner of Nichols Street in 1845, the Hopetoun Hotel in 1846 and the group of buildings at 96-104 in the 1840s). By the 1870s, there were still vacant lots in the street, and in 1876 a hotel named the Cricketers' Arms Hotel<sup>10</sup> appeared on the Hutchison Street corner with a grocer's shop next door<sup>11</sup>. It seems the hotel and shop were built by the grocer Michael Hagerty, as he was recorded as the ratepayer of both buildings in 1880<sup>12</sup>.

The pub and grocery were sold to John Waddell in about 1882<sup>13</sup>, and he (or his estate after his death) retained ownership until the 1950s<sup>14</sup>. In 1905 the grocer's shop was incorporated into the pub<sup>15</sup>, increasing its size from eleven<sup>16</sup> to fourteen rooms<sup>17</sup>.

The early publicans involved themselves in sports from the start, as a quoits championship was held in the pub in March 1877<sup>18</sup>. In May 1886, the City Football Club (Australian rules) played its first match of the season against the Sydney Football Club at Moore Park, using the Cricketers' Arms as its changing rooms<sup>19</sup>.

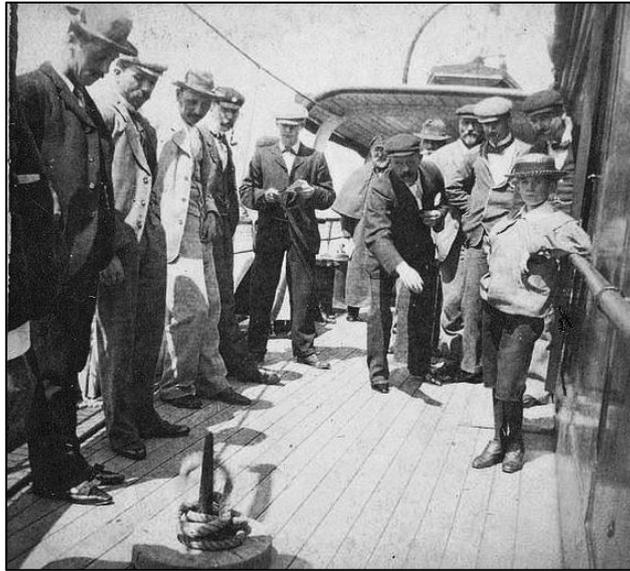


Figure 4 Quoits in the late 1800s (National Museum of Australia)

### Tooth and Co take over

The large brewing company Tooth and Company leased the Cricketers' Arms from about 1914<sup>20</sup>, one of hundreds of hotels around New South Wales that the company purchased or leased as outlets for its range of beers. Tooth's had deep pockets, and from the early twentieth century extensively renovated their hotels, usually transforming them from Georgian or Victorian to Federation-styled buildings. The date of the remodelling was often placed on the front of the pub in raised concrete, giving the impression (often accepted by historians) that the pub was originally constructed in the 1910s or 1920s, whereas they were invariably much older.

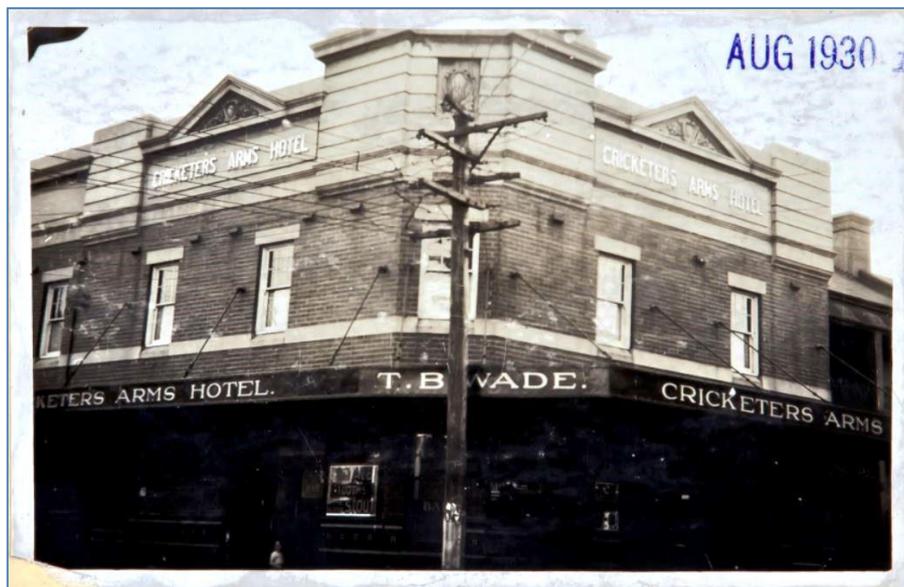


Figure 5 Earliest photo of the hotel, 1930 (Tooth's "yellow cards")

The Tooth and Company "yellow cards" from the 1920s to the 1970s reveal that the company leased the Cricketers' Arms from before the 1920s until finally purchasing it in August 1952. Then after some seventy years of occupation, in January 1984 the company sold the hotel to Brian and Kathryn Brenac for \$310,000<sup>21</sup>.

## **Threat of closure and other problems**

### **Dry Sundays**

During its long life the Cricketers' Arms, like all pubs in the rough-and-tumble working class inner city suburbs, experienced its share of problems with the law, difficult customers, and even the temperance movement. Pubs could not open on Sundays until 1979, and from 1916 to 1955 had to close at 6pm Monday to Saturday. Only people residing at the pubs or travellers could drink outside these hours. From reading much about the history of pubs in these days, it is clear that there was an ongoing cat and mouse game between the publicans (with thirsty drinkers to accommodate) and the local police (armed with regulations to enforce).

Until early closing was introduced in 1916 as a wartime productivity measure, Sunday trading was the main illegal activity, and like their neighbouring colleagues the publicans of the Cricketers' Arms made the trip down to the Water Police Court to pay a couple of pounds' fine on a fairly regular basis. As an example, licensee Matthew Cranitch was fined £3 for Sunday trading in August 1894<sup>22</sup>. The frequent reporting of these court appearances made it obvious that the income to be made from sly grogging (out of hours trading) was worth the occasional fine.

Out-of-hours drinking was not the only issue with the law, as there was also illegal gambling and prostitution for the police to deal with. Pubs would employ scouts to look out for the police, and the police Licensing Inspectors complained at various inquiries that it was almost impossible to get close to some dodgy pubs, due to the efficient system of lookouts. Basically, the police had the thankless task of enforcing unpopular regulations on an unsupportive public.

### **Watered-down beer**

Watering down the beer and spirits was another shady tactic used by pubs to maximise their income. In August 1905, publican James Moroney of the Cricketers' Arms was relieved of £3 for selling brandy with 5.5% of added water, according to a testing certificate from the Government Analyst<sup>23</sup>. Donald Gregor, licensee in the 1950s had his wallet lightened by £5 for three counts of selling adulterated beer in May 1958<sup>24</sup>.

But the Food and Liquor Adulteration Act wasn't just for publicans: in September 1894, Mr Baker, the Inspector of Dairies, fined Mrs. Jane Hall from the next door grocery £1 for adding 11% of water to milk<sup>25</sup>, and a further £3 the next month for continuing to add water to milk<sup>26</sup>.

### **Purple beer!**

In the early days it was not unusual for pubs to reuse beer from the drip tray under the taps in order to reduce wastage. It would have been flat, warm, a murky hybrid of lager and ale, and probably unhygienic. The New South Wales Government (and presumably many drinkers) thought this was bad practice and enacted legislation to stop it. From 1939, pubs were required to colour the beer in the drip tray with methyl violet, a purple dye obtainable from pharmacies<sup>27</sup>. A doctor was asked what the effects were of consuming methyl violet, and he said, not very reassuringly, that it would cause "violent reactions", but was otherwise harmless!<sup>28</sup>.

In 1955, the publican of the Cricketers' Arms was fined £5 for having no methyl violet in the waste beer tray<sup>29</sup>. This practice is not as ancient as it may now seem, as my wife told me that when

working in a London pub in the early 1980s, the bar manager told her not to throw out the beer in the drip trays as they would be reusing it!

### **Difficult customers and violent publicans**

In November 1891, the publican Henry Stibbs was confronted with a trio of violent troublemakers who set about destroying his front bar when he refused to serve them. One of them picked up some glasses from the bar and threw them around, damaging a window and smashing a bottle of brandy and two bottles of whiskey. Another one took handfuls of blue metal from his pockets and threw them around also. Stibbs was assaulted when he tried to protect his property. Witnesses said later that the bar looked like it had been wrecked by an earthquake<sup>30</sup>.

It was not only customers who caused problems for publicans. In 1880, Harriet Rice was the licensee of the Cricketers' Arms after her husband Thomas was ordered to live apart from her under a judge's restraining order. One day in July, Thomas Rice came to the hotel, argued with Harriet then pushed her so that she fell and struck her head on a sideboard. She attended the infirmary for treatment and obtained a warrant at the Water Police Court against her husband for assault and battery. Her injuries did not appear to be serious at first, but she died a week later, resulting in a manslaughter conviction for her husband<sup>31</sup>.

### **Culling the pubs**

The temperance movement was the biggest social movement of the nineteenth century, and one of their complaints was that there were far too many pubs, especially in crowded inner city suburbs like Surry Hills. During the three State elections after 1900, Local Option referendums to ask electors if they wanted fewer hotels always failed in the areas with the most pubs, because the drinkers invariably voted to keep them all! In order to force the dodgiest hotels to close, in 1920 the NSW Government established a Licences Reduction Board, whose intent was obvious from its name. Hotels with two or more licence violations in the previous three years would be called to a deprivation hearing and asked to show cause why their licences should not be cancelled.

The owners and licensees of six hotels in the vicinity of the Cricketers' Arms were summoned to the Board in October 1922. These were the Austral, Hopetoun, Rifleman's Arms, Cricketers' Arms, Carrington and Athletic Club Hotels. The hearings did not always go well. For example, the Rifleman's Arms Hotel was described by police as "old, obsolete, dilapidated, poorly conducted, and not fit for a hotel at all". The only permanent boarder was the licensee's son. The licensee had twice been fined for illegal trading. Women frequented the place, and the hotel had received extra police supervision<sup>32</sup>. After listening to evidence from all parties concerned, the Board closed down the Austral, Rifleman's Arms and Athletic Club Hotels.

Today the Austral Hotel has been demolished and replaced by a small park at the corner of Fitzroy, Foveaux and Bourke Streets. The Rifleman's Arms has had a variety of commercial uses, and the Athletic Club Hotel is now a block of apartments in Arthur Street. The Cricketer's Arms survived the cull, partly because Tooth and Company remodelled the building to the Licensing Court's satisfaction before the deprivation hearing. The renovations commenced in the second half of 1921 and were completed in March 1922<sup>33</sup>. Its case was also helped by its location on a main thoroughfare with a large volume of passing and sporting trade, and by the closure of two rival pubs within a stone's throw.

## Joe Wallis, boxing referee and publican

Joseph John Newton was born in 1888 into a working-class family in St Peters, Sydney. Like many working-class youths of the time, he boxed for money and local fame. One day he substituted in a bout for a friend named Wallis, and decided to use his surname for the rest of his boxing career. It wasn't clear why he adopted a stage name, as it were, but one pub history website suggested it was because his father didn't like boxing, and Joe thought he could hide his participation from the disapproving parent by using another boxer's name. He fought as a featherweight at the Gaiety Athletic Club, Castlereagh Street, but soon turned welterweight. By 1910, he was also working as a produce merchant.

From 1914, he refereed boxing matches at the Olympia Athletic Club (to 1916), the Hippodrome and from 1919 at the Stadium, Rushcutters Bay. In his day, referees controlled and scored fights alone, unaided by judges. His longevity as the "third man" in the ring was testament to his skill and toughness, given the hooting, abuse and sackings meted out to less competent or unpopular referees. The rigour of refereeing five bouts on each card, at several venues, most weeks of the year was alleviated when bouts were reduced from twenty rounds to fifteen in 1927.

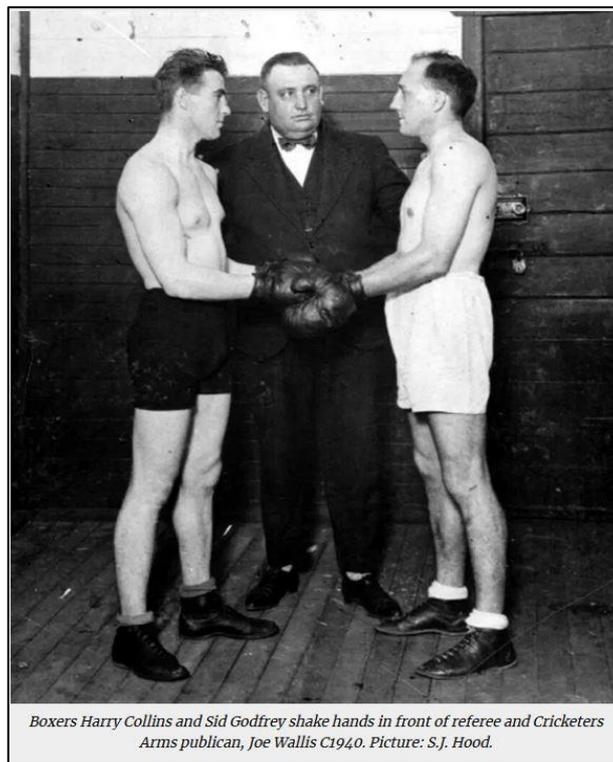


Figure 6 Joe Wallis as boxing referee, c1940 (Time Gents website)

Wallis was of middle height, and over the years he steadily put on weight until he was twenty stone (about 127kg) by 1951<sup>34</sup>. His contemporaries generally admired him. The boxer and sports writer Merv Williams asserted that nothing ruffled him, that his judgement was respected and that he seldom put his hands on the contestants<sup>35</sup>. In October 1941, at age 52, Wallis was granted a licence for the Cricketers' Arms Hotel under the name Joseph John Newton<sup>36</sup>. In August 1942, Wallis, along with four other hotelkeepers, ran afoul of the recent wartime restrictions on alcohol sale on public holidays by trading on Anzac Day. The five publicans were each fined £5<sup>37</sup>.

By the end of 1942, Wallis had refereed over 42,000 fights<sup>38</sup>. He also ran a gymnasium, and never forgot his working-class upbringing, giving away bottles of milk to poor children outside his pub<sup>39</sup>. He continued to referee boxing until 1949, including Australian title fights. In the end, ill health and some controversial decisions hastened his retirement. He died of cancer in October 1952 at Camperdown and was buried in Woronora cemetery. He was generally regarded as the world's best boxing referee<sup>40</sup>.

## **Modern times**

In the 1970s, the Cricketers' Arms became one of the first gay-friendly pubs in Sydney. The annual Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras passes close by, and the pub celebrates it enthusiastically each year. Bar staff can point to marks on the bar from the stiletto heels of dancing revelers.

Today the Cricketers' Arms has a laid-back atmosphere and plenty of character. The walls are decorated with decades of historic paraphernalia of the type that more trendy pubs are only just discovering. The toilets have taken graffiti to the level of abstract expressionism, or toilography as it is called there. The outside courtyard is brimming with plants and wooden tables, while in winter a fireplace is always lit.

Regular entertainment is returning to the pub after a year of reduced trading (2020). A jazz band plays on Wednesdays and rock and roll bingo keeps front bar patrons busy on Tuesday nights. The pub was also famous for its weekly Battle of the iPods, in which patrons were invited to bring along a twenty-minute selection of their favourite music to be played in the bar and voted on for prizes.



## Notes

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Sydney Cricket Ground history website.
  - <sup>2</sup> *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, 28 October 1876.
  - <sup>3</sup> History of the Australian Rugby Union website.
  - <sup>4</sup> *The Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1880.
  - <sup>5</sup> *The Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 7 August 1880.
  - <sup>6</sup> *The Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 12 August 1880.
  - <sup>7</sup> NSW Australia Football History Society website.
  - <sup>8</sup> Kirkby, *The Australian Pub*.
  - <sup>9</sup> Economy, Dictionary of Sydney.
  - <sup>10</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 July 1876.
  - <sup>11</sup> *Sands' Sydney Directory*, 1879.
  - <sup>12</sup> Rate Assessment Books, 1880.
  - <sup>13</sup> Rate Assessment Books, 1882.
  - <sup>14</sup> Rate Assessment Books, 1948.
  - <sup>15</sup> *Sands' Sydney Directory*, 1905.
  - <sup>16</sup> Rate Assessment Books, 1882.
  - <sup>17</sup> Rate Assessment Books, 1907.
  - <sup>18</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 March 1877.
  - <sup>19</sup> *Evening News*, 22 May 1886.
  - <sup>20</sup> Rate Assessment Books, 1914.
  - <sup>21</sup> Cricketers' Arms Hotel, Open research Library, Australian National University.
  - <sup>22</sup> *Evening News*, 21 August 1894.
  - <sup>23</sup> *The Australian Star*, 24 August 1905.
  - <sup>24</sup> Cricketers' Arms Hotel, Open research Library, Australian National University.
  - <sup>25</sup> *The Australian Star*, 15 September 1894.
  - <sup>26</sup> *Evening News*, 27 October 1894.
  - <sup>27</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 July 1939.
  - <sup>28</sup> *The Sun*, 8 July 1939.
  - <sup>29</sup> Cricketers' Arms Hotel, Open research Library, Australian National University.
  - <sup>30</sup> *Evening News*, 27 November 1891.
  - <sup>31</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 July 1880.
  - <sup>32</sup> Licences Reduction Board record, NSW State Archives.
  - <sup>33</sup> Cricketers' Arms Hotel including interior, NSW Heritage Register, Environment NSW.
  - <sup>34</sup> *The Sun*, 12 August 1951.
  - <sup>35</sup> Joseph John Wallis entry, Australian Dictionary of Biography.
  - <sup>36</sup> *The Sun*, 20 October 1941.
  - <sup>37</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 August 1942.
  - <sup>38</sup> *The Sun*, 9 November 1942.
  - <sup>39</sup> Joe Wallis, Cricketers' Arms, Time Gents website.
  - <sup>40</sup> *The Sun*, 30 October 1952.



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