

Graduation 2013

Honorary Graduation: Oration for Alastair Cook

Orator: Professor Jules Pretty

Chancellor, The Senate of the University of Essex has resolved that the Degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Alastair Nathan Cook MBE.

Cricket has long been important to the county of Essex. The first recorded match in the county was in 1724 at Chingford, and the County Cricket club was founded in 1876. It is one of the 18 major county clubs that make up the highest level of English and Welsh club cricket.

The Essex club has become internationally-famed in many ways: they were the only team to bowl out Donald Bradman's 1948 *Invincibles* in a day, at Southend, though they did concede the small matter of 721 in the process; Bradman himself scoring 187. Essex has had many world class players, including England captains Graham Gooch, Nasser Hussain, and Keith Fletcher, also the current England coach, Andy Flower, and now of course England's current captain.

Alastair Cook was born in Gloucester in 1984, his mother Elizabeth a teacher from Swansea and his father Graham an engineer and village cricketer. Alastair's sporting ability was apparent from an early age as he had excellent hand-eye co-ordination. His parents, though, had no idea that he would end up a sportsman. His early calling was music. By the age of eight, he was learning the clarinet, and joined St Paul's Cathedral School in London as a chorister. Regular school plus music plus singing required much focus and concentration, skills central to the best batsmen.

His first taste of cricket was playing cricket in the back garden of his Essex family home in Wickham Bishops with his brothers. Alastair puts his skill at playing short-pitched deliveries down to some of those hours spent playing at home. With the garden wicket having a flowerbed on one side and a greenhouse on the other, he also perfected his defensive batting techniques. I too have fond memories of garden cricket when the sun always seemed to shine on childhood - many hours also spent pretending that the flowers had not suffered.

During his summer holidays, Alastair played for Maldon Cricket Club, and by the age of 11 was already playing alongside adults in the Third XI. He played on and off for them over seven years, finishing with an average of 168 in his final year. He is now an honorary life member at Maldon.

Alastair Cook's musical flair resulted in him being granted a scholarship to Bedford School when he was 13. He learned to play piano and saxophone, though music was about to meet its match. The Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) came to play the Bedford XI; the visitors were a man short and drafted the 14-year-old to play against his school; Cook scored a century.

When he took part in the Under-15 World Cup he was told – along with all the other players – that only a very small number of them would make it as a professional cricketer. Many people have similarly been told that grand dreams would not come to pass. The best response is hard work, harder than anyone else. At 15, Alastair had joined the Essex Academy, and made his first class debut in 2003 aged 18. He had been offered a place at university but decided to take a gap year and take part in the Under-19 World Cup. You could say he has been on a gap year ever since.

He captained England at that Under-19 World Cup and scored his maiden first-class hundred later in 2004. Following a string of impressive performances at domestic level, he was voted young player of the year by the Cricket Writers' Club in 2005, celebrating with 214 against the touring Australians 24 hours later.

After capturing the headlines with this double-century, he completed a remarkable rise to international status after only two full seasons of county cricket. He made his England Test debut in March 2006, having been called from a tour of the West Indies to India. At Nagpur, the winter capital of Maharashtra, he scored a half century in the 1st innings, and a century in the 2nd - only the 5th ever test debut player to achieve this.

Alastair Cook won the Professional Cricketers' Association young player of the year award in 2006 and was shortlisted for the International Cricket Council's emerging player of the year prize. He then recorded his first century against Australia, and fourth in Tests, at Perth, although his 116 was overshadowed as the hosts' convincingly reclaimed the Ashes.

Alastair Cook reached three figures in a one-day international for the first time in August 2007 and enjoyed Friends Provident Trophy success with Essex twelve months later. After taking the catch that sealed England's Ashes triumph in 2009, and skipping over his batting in that series, Alastair enjoyed a strong series in South Africa before taking over the captaincy from the rested Andrew Strauss for the tour of Bangladesh in 2010, guiding his side to victories.

Then came the remarkable 2010-11 Ashes series in Australia. Alastair compiled a staggering 766 runs in the series, including an unbeaten 235 in Brisbane and was named man-of-the-series. His average was 127.7, including 3 centuries and 2 fifties. These runs saw him pass 5,000 Test runs to become, at the age of 26, the second youngest batsman to reach this landmark after India's Sachin Tendulkar.

In May 2011, Alastair succeeded Andrew Strauss as England one-day captain before being appointed to lead the England's Test side in August 2012. Captaining has not affected his batting, and he continues to break England cricket records. He became England's leading Test century-maker in Kolkata - hitting No. 23 against India and No. 24 at Dunedin's fine ground in early March. He is now the youngest player to pass 7000 runs. His top score ever is 294, and he averages 49 in tests and 48 in all first class cricket.

New Zealand captain Brendon McCullum called Alastair Cook a "genius batsman, second only to Australian legend Don Bradman." Fine praise indeed, though maybe intended to cloud judgement when it came to choosing to bowl first at Auckland – though McCullum also would have done the same. It was another dramatic match, the kind of sporting tension that can perhaps only be delivered by cricket worldwide.

Alastair was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the 2011 Birthday Honours. We all look forward to many more successes. He was married to Alice Hunt at the end of 2011, and away from cricket spends as much time as he can on the family farm.

The University of Essex is proud of its close partnership with the County Cricket Club of Essex, and its fine players and world class reputation. We provide a scholarship, currently held by Academy fast bowler Tom Moore who is studying Sociology and Business. We sponsor the Fast Bowling Academy at the Club, managed by former England bowler, Chris Silverwood, and the Club in turn has provided support for our students, including training sessions delivered by Academy Director and former England spin bowler, John Childs. I did, though, read one account of Essex cricket which said their County batsmen valued games with Universities because they could improve their averages at the undergraduates' expense.

The University is proud of its internationalism, with 135 countries represented here, including students from all test playing nations and most associate members. What we and the Cricket Club share is a desire for excellence - here in research and education, at Chelmsford in all aspects of one of Britain's national games. What Alastair Cook has shown is true excellence at international level too.

We are delighted that Alastair Cook has accepted our offer of an honorary degree.

Chancellor, I present to you Mr Alastair Cook.