

Dr Frank Miller Bingham, Caton cricket star and World War One hero

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INTRODUCTION

On 7 August, 1914, the first units of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) landed in France to try to halt the German military action. The following day at Eltham in south-east London, Dr WG Grace, then aged 66, played the last game of cricket in an illustrious sporting career, whose highlights included being the first cricketer to score a hundred first-class centuries and still being opening batsman for England at the age of 50. With two sons already serving in the armed forces, Grace was deeply disturbed by the reports of large numbers of casualties amongst the BEF later that month. He wrote to *The Sportsman* on 27 August:

Sir, There are already many cricketers who are doing their duty but there are many others who do not seem to realise that in all probability they will have to serve either at home or abroad before the war is brought to a conclusion. The fighting on the continent is very severe and will probably be prolonged. I think the time has come for the county cricket season to be closed for it is not fitting at a time like the present for able-bodied men to play day after day and pleasure-seekers look on. There are so many who are young and able and who are hanging back. I should like to see all first class cricketers of suitable age etc. set a good example and come to the help of their country without delay in its hour of need.

In fact, many talented cricketers had already volunteered to serve in the armed forces, and only one further round of county matches took place before the season was ended prematurely. Lieutenant Arthur Collins of the Royal Engineers was one of the first to lose his life in the fighting at Polygon Wood, near Ypres, on 11 November 1914. At the age of just 13, Collins had scored what is still the highest score ever recorded in a game of cricket (628 not out) in a junior house match at Clifton College, Bristol.

Frank Miller Bingham, Lancaster GP and formerly Caton cricket team's star player, was another talented sportsman who needed no prompting from Dr Grace. There is a beautiful bronze plaque in the main corridor of Medical Unit One, Royal Lancaster Infirmary, to honour the memory of Frank Miller Bingham. This article highlights his life and career and we pay tribute to all the sportsmen who, like Dr Bingham, paid the ultimate price during World War One.

DR BINGHAM'S EARLY LIFE

Born in September 1874 in Alfreton, Derbyshire, Frank was the second of three sons born to Dr and Mrs Joseph Bingham. He attended St Peter's school in York, and it was here that he developed a passion for cricket and rugby. Between 1888 and 1890 he featured regularly in the St Peter's cricket team, which sometimes also included his brother Sydney. By 1890, he was both opening batsman and regular bowler. In 1892, tragedy

struck the Bingham family when Frank's younger brother Thomas died at the age of 15 trying to prevent a six-year-old girl from drowning.

In 1893, Frank followed his father into the medical profession, studying at St Thomas's Medical School, London. During this period, he continued to play cricket and rugby. In rugby he played for both the St Thomas's first team and the famous club at Blackheath. In cricket, his talents led to him becoming a regular feature in the St Thomas's cricket team, subsequently becoming their captain in 1897.

In late May 1896, he played his one and only first-class cricket match for Derbyshire, at Lords against the MCC. It isn't known how he came to play in this match, but it must surely have been an exciting moment for this third-year medical student. Sadly, he didn't get to test out his bowling skills against the formidable Dr Grace, who frequently played for MCC, but was scoring 243 not out for Gloucestershire instead that week. However, Derbyshire faced largely the same MCC team that humbled the touring Australians two weeks later, bowling them out for just 18 in their first innings, and featuring regular England test bowlers. Derbyshire vs MCC was a tight match; MCC won the toss and batted first, scoring 165. Batting at number nine, Bingham scored just six runs in Derbyshire's first innings total of 105. MCC followed with 165 in their second innings, leaving Derbyshire to score 218 in their second innings for an unlikely victory. As Frank Bingham strode out to bat, the match was still in the balance with Derbyshire having lost seven wickets. He scored a vital eleven runs as Derbyshire scraped to victory with no wickets remaining.

After qualifying MRCS, LRCP in 1897, Dr Bingham joined his father's practice in Alfreton, which included being the company doctor for Blackwell collieries. In his four years there, he frequently played for the Blackwell cricket team.

LANCASHIRE GP

In the early 1900s, and newly married, Bingham moved to Brookhouse, Caton and went into partnership with Dr Stott at Hornby. Bingham chose to play cricket for his local team in Caton, whilst Dr Stott was one of the main bowlers in the Hornby cricket team. This meant the GP partners would sometimes meet in opposition on the cricket pitch and a particularly tight match occurred in 1909 at Hornby. Hornby batted first and Dr Stott opened the innings, but was bowled for just one run. Hornby laboured to a total of 87, with Bingham bowling Nelson for seven. Needing 88 for victory, Dr Bingham opened the batting for Caton, but was bowled by Dr Stott for just eleven. Clearly fired up, Dr Stott bowled out four more of the Caton team, but it wasn't enough; Caton running out the victors.

However, 1907 was clearly the peak of Bingham's local sporting achievements. Captaining the team that year, they went unbeaten the whole season, featuring ten victories over teams

from Bailrigg, Heysham, Halton, Storey's, Morecambe and the King's Own Regiment. Probably, the most notable match was the one at Caton on 29 June, against Morecambe's second team. Dr Bingham opened the batting for Caton and was clearly in fine form, but was rapidly running out of partners. Bingham was run out on 94, tantalisingly close to his century. Caton's total was 142, and Morecambe could only manage 24 in reply. Dr Bingham was the only batsman to score more than eight runs on either side.

LANCASTER AND THE KING'S OWN

In 1910, he joined the Territorial Army as Lieutenant in the Lancaster-based King's Own Regiment. In 1911, after the death of Dr Hall, he entered into partnership with two prominent Lancaster GPs, Drs GR Parker and CW Dean in Queen's Square. With his wife and two young children, he moved house from Brookhouse to central Lancaster. We can find no record of him in local cricket records after 1909.

In May 1914, shortly before the Great War began, he was promoted to Captain and placed in joint command of 'A' company in the Fifth Battalion of the King's Own. At the outbreak of the war, there was a huge demand for experienced doctors in the Royal Army Medical Corps, but Dr Bingham did not choose this option. He chose to stay with his regiment and take his place on the battlefield.

MAY 1915

Captain Bingham's battalion had arrived in Flanders in February 1915, and was involved in the fierce fighting near Ypres during the first two weeks of May. He wrote to his wife on 9 May,

describing a 'fearful battle' with heavy losses for the Fifth Battalion. On 18 May, he returned to Lancaster for a three-day break with his family and friends, before returning to Flanders, arriving back on the morning of Friday 21 May. The same evening, he took a small party of men from 'A' company to assess some new trenches that his battalion were to enter the following day. As they were returning, a shell landed nearby and a man was buried under the earth. Dr Bingham insisted that they stay to dig him out. Having done so, they began to return again, but had been spotted by a sniper and Dr Bingham was shot in the chest. He died soon afterwards. He was buried near Sanctuary Wood, and his grave marked with a small wooden cross. Subsequent fighting meant that the site of the grave was lost and his death is now recorded on the Menin Gate Memorial at Ypres.

The medical profession in Lancaster wanted to recognise Dr Bingham, and funds were raised for a commemorative bronze plaque. On 2 December 1915, after a moving speech by



Photo showing Dr Bingham (seated with cigarette in left hand) with other officers of the 5th Battalion, King's Own royal Lancaster Regiment, Wagon works, Caton Road.

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