

England in Australia 1882-83 Four Tests.

Series Drawn 2 - 2.

Balls per over: 4

Playing Hours: 5 hr days (timeless)

Captains: WL Murdoch (Aus), IFW Bligh (Eng)

The legend of the Ashes was born after Australia's sensational victory at the Oval in 1882, when a mock obituary notice lamenting the "Death of English Cricket" appeared in *The Sporting Times*. At this point, the "Hon." Ivo Bligh, a young, handsome, wealthy, and exceptionally eligible bachelor (the relevance of this will be explained below), was made England captain, and just before the team left on a difficult and eventful passage to Australia that would last almost two months, he was enjoined to bring back those "Ashes" of English cricket. Bligh did his best with a team that contained some talented amateur players, but lacked some of the top-class professionals who had toured a year earlier. He appeared to have done the trick when his team won the planned three-match series 2-1, only to lose a final challenge match at the end of the tour, a match that was later elevated to Test status.

Australia took the first match thanks to a combative 85 in 135 minutes from that 2-metre tall "unscientific" hitter George Bonnor, which included four strokes that today would be counted as sixes. Bonnor's knock also extended the Australian innings until rain had made the pitch very tricky, and Palmer took full advantage with 7 for 65 when England came to bat. The final margin was Australia by nine wickets. Bonnor was rather less effective two weeks later when he took part in slow bowler Billy Bates' hat-trick (a first for England) and 7 for 28, during a strange innings where Australia's opening stand of 56 in 40 minutes was followed by a second-wicket stand that included 14 consecutive maiden overs. Bonnor hammered three more "fives" off Bates in the second innings, but final honours went to the bowler, whose match figures of 14 for 102 have been bettered by a few England bowlers from time to time, but only rarely.

In Sydney, the effects of rain on the pitches – there were two, one for each team – and the predictable damage done by fielders, made batting a chancy proposition after the second day. Alec Bannerman's grafting 94 in 245 minutes kept Australia in the hunt, but deteriorating conditions and the heavily pockmarked pitches gave the bowlers all the help they needed. Spofforth's 7 for 44 was bettered by Barlow, who just put the ball on a length and let the pitch do the rest, to finish with 7 for 40 and dismiss Australia 69 runs short.

The tiny Ashes urn, which remains at Lord's to this day, enters Test history at this point, said to be presented to Bligh's team in the belief that they had won the series. Further investigation suggests that the urn had actually been fashioned for a picnic match the previous Christmas at Rupertswood, outside Melbourne, and presented in jest to Bligh by a group of Rupertswood maidens. If indeed it was just a stratagem to catch the roving eye of the England captain, it worked a treat: one of the ladies involved, Florence Morphy, married Bligh in 1884, and the couple later became Lord and Lady Darnley. In 1927 Lady Darnley presented the urn to the MCC at Lord's.

The Ashes urn has become the longest-running joke in world sports, the final twist being that Australia then levelled the series in a hard-fought Sydney match. (This time four different pitches were used, a practice, restricted to Sydney, that was abandoned a few years later.) The batting of AG Steel (135* in 238 minutes) and then Bonnor thrilled the crowd, although both gave "numerous" chances. It was a team bowling effort from the Australians which made the difference, supported by fine batting contributions from Bannerman and Blackham that eked out a victory at barely one run per 4-ball over.