



GRAY-NICHOLLS and the Batman of Robertsbridge

The sleepy East Sussex town of Robertsbridge in Sussex is home to Gray-Nicholls who, since 1855 have been manufacturing cricket bats for some of the world's greatest players like David Gower, Mike Atherton, Clive Lloyd and Brian Lara.

It all starts at the company's tatty HQ opposite a street named Willow Bank. Outside the disarray of sheds lies a muddy courtyard piled high with willow tree trunks which are individually measured, cut into chunks – three or four to a tree. Then they're split into bat-sized pieces before being roughly shaped and graded.

In the woodwork shop a small group of master craftsmen are planing and sanding bats; the rhythmic to and fro motion scatters twirly wood shavings to the concrete floor. Weak rays of winter sun catch hanging particles of sawdust.

Following the trunk being split into bat-sized pieces (which is the point at which they study the cleft to assess its potential grade – looking at the cleft for cleanliness of grain, blemishes and stains, calculating what effect they'll have on the finished product), there's not a lot of machinery involved in constructing a Gray-Nicholls bat. In fact, there's only one where they're not in charge of what's going



on. Even the compression roller is operated and adjusted as it is used by a bat-maker.

“We handwork all our bats,” says Alex Honenkerk. “We don’t have a mechanised process. Each piece of timber is remarkably different to the next and putting it in the hands of a master craftsman it, it makes all the difference to the resultant product.”

“Sometimes a professional player will supervise the fine-tuning of the handcrafting process,” says Alex. “Every player has their own unique set of requirements. For some it could simply be the weight and blade length, for others we could go down to the maximum diameter of the handle at various points, how far apart their stickers are, or preferred sticker colours.”

“Some players can change their bat requirements four or five times in one season, whilst the least fussy, those who fully understand their own technique, like Sir Alistair Cook, do so every five or six years. In fact, the last time we adjusted Cookie’s bat shape was in 2013 – that’s six years of no tweaks and no adjustments; and before that it was around 2008.”

Enquiring after the longevity of a bat Alex explains that a good quality bat could give you 1,500 to 2,000 runs. “The difference between me scoring that and Cookie scoring that is that he’ll middle every single shot, meaning his bat will take a far higher damage rate than mine.”

“Some professional players that have a favourite bat and will do anything possible to keep it going. Peter Trego in Somerset and Christ Nash at Notts both had bats that we’ve kept running for about five years. Each time they were used they’d come straight back into our workshop to be put back together again. It would tend to be their go-to bat if it was a short format, 20/20 or a 50 over game, and they called for a bat change. There’s a lot of superstition in it – batting is very much a game played in the head.”

Often a pro would request a certain bat-maker to work on their bats. This can happen through luck, through reputation, superstition even. Alex tells of when Alistair Cook requested a bat whilst in the West Indies. “One of his match bat’s broke, so we sent him one I’d made. It didn’t look like any of his regular bats, but it hit the ball well.”

Gray-Nicholls cricket bats are made exclusively from UK grown willow with plantations in low lying regions of the Somerset plains, East Anglia, Essex, all the way to the boggy lands of North Yorkshire. These are the only places where they’re grown to the correct size, density, and moisture content which, in the end, provides the required performance.

That said though, for what is essentially slabs of wood, cricket bats are expensive and range in price from around £100 for professional-quality bats to in excess of £1,000. Fundamentally, the reason for this is the cost of the tree. Even if Gray-Nicholls grew the willows themselves, they’re not free as they’re in partnership with the landowner – and every piece of timber is going to be priced differently down to the way that it performs, and the way it looks. But this can only be gauged following the workshop compression test, which means only after most of the work is done will they know what they have.

Gray-Nicholls tend to use the willow’s first 15 feet –





Woakes and of course, Alistair Cook, who we've backed since he was 14. He won a school cricketing award in Essex and the prize was a year's sponsorship from us. At age 16 we identified him as being a future England captain, that's how confident we were in his ability. But now, since Cook's retirement from the international scene in 2018, we're on the hunt for a new test-match batsman. In the past decade agents are far more involved in seeking sponsorship, but with little brand loyalty. To obtain our support it's near head-to-toe Gray-Nicholls."

We wander back to the courtyard where I'm parked. Alex watches a couple of logs being transported into a shed and shouts a few instructions. He poses with a Gray-Nicholls cricket bat I brought along for the drive, which I then decided needs restoration. "No worries," he says. "I'll do it myself and have it refurbished in no time." ^{AC}

www.gray-nicholls.co.uk

Written and photographed by Cindy-Lou Dale

from the ground up to the first major branch, where it's completely free of any knots or whirls. This works out to about 40 cricket bats per tree. On average, they manufacture around 60,000 bats a year. From their workshop in East Sussex – which is primarily focussed on our high-end bespoke clients, professionals and international players – they ship out chunks of willow to their factories in Australia and since 2014 their Gray-Nicholls factory in India.

In 1974 Gray-Nicholls kick-started a bat-making revolution when they introduced the scoop, which showed the diversity of a cricket bat, and that it didn't need to be a straight piece of wood. It's only in recent years that they've managed to prove their technology to be correct. There's a huge following for the scoop and they occasionally bring it back into the range and when they do, they always sell.

Similarly, the science and technology behind their Titanium and Carbon Fibre handles contributed greatly to the sport. If you watch a super slow-motion play of a defensive shot, especially if the batsman takes it high of the splice, you'll see a lot of flex in the bat – that's the handle



Gray-Nicholls Bat Restoration: You can have your bat worked at their Robertsbridge factory, benefiting from the same craftsmanship as top international players. They'll examine the bat and determine what needs repairing or replacing. They'll strip it of all its labels and fittings, open any cracks and seal them down with hot glue, binding them for 24 hours, and finish with a sand and polish. Go online to start the process. Prices start at around £40.

acting like a shock-absorber so that the bat doesn't break. Using carbon fibre or titanium creates a higher performing blade as this stiffens the handle, thereby losing less energy, providing more drive into the ball. Sadly, the FCC rejected the handles as they felt it gave the batsman an unfair advantage over the bowler. Hence the bat is solid willow with a handle of laminated cane with cork, sometimes rubber, springs inside it.

"Amongst the current crop of international players, we have a few of big-name endorsers – Alex Hales, Chris

