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Register

Obituaries

David English

Actor, record-company mogul, charity fundraiser, author of the Bunbury Tails children's books and 'godfather' of English cricket

David English was sitting at home on the night of the England cricket team's dramatic victory at Lord's in the 2019 World Cup final when the phone rang. It was Joe Root on the line. After a few words with England's star batsman, the wicketkeeper Jos Buttler spoke to English, followed by Ben Stokes then other team members. "They were in the hotel and they had had a few Coca-Colas," English recalled. "They all passed the telephone around and said, 'Dave, thanks for everything you did for us.'"

Ten of the starting XI in England's World Cup-winning side had cut their teeth as junior players in English's Bunbury Festival and they never forgot his role in their development.

English took over the annual week-long under-15 tournament when the game's authorities ran out of money in 1987. Over the next 35 years hundreds of young cricketers participated in the festival under his benign stewardship. Among them were 118 who progressed to England colours. Their number includes not only the 2019 World Cup winners but nine of the England team that won the Ashes in 2005, including Michael Vaughan and Andrew Flintoff.

After talking to Root and the players after their 2019 victory, English took a call from Trevor Bayliss, the team's Australian-born coach. Bayliss added his appreciation and told him that "the boys" often talked about how English had encouraged them and set them on their way. "That meant a lot. They are like an extended family for me," English said proudly. "There's a real satisfaction to having known them when they were

He was kissing Brigitte Bardot but had to hide from her boyfriend

15 and watching them go through the ranks to the England team."

English, who became known as the "godfather of English cricket", aimed not only to impart cricketing wisdom but also to offer lessons in life to his teenage charges. "At that age you are not a child but you are not an adult. You are faintly worldly-wise, but still peeping over the Coca-Cola cans," he said. "I taught them at the festival to relax and have fun along the way."

After games he treated the young players to meals at Nando's, organised karaoke sessions and generally encouraged them to let their hair down. The high jinks were all relatively innocent, and the most outrageous incident involved nothing more than a "gruff and in-your-face" teenage Stokes pouring piri-piri sauce into a soft drink belonging to the "angelic" Root.

In parallel with the schools' cricket festival, English also ran the Bunbury's celebrity charity cricket team. "It all started when we had a game in Eric Clapton's garden and I suggested getting an XI together," he recalled. "So I phoned up all the famous people I knew and at our first game we had Phil Collins as wicketkeeper and Eric and Bill Wyman as first and second slip."

The Bunbury matches, which over the years raised more than £14 million for charity, also featured professional cricketers including Viv Richards and



English, right, with Barry Gibb from the Bee Gees at Bunbury cricket festival in 2004; right, with Ian Botham on a charity ride, 1989; below, paying homage to his cricket-playing rabbits in 2001

Ian Botham alongside a host of other celebrity friends from Elton John and Roger Daltrey to Will Carling and Rory Bremner. Cricket-loving politicians and even a prime minister also turned out for English's side.

"No one ever gets grand in the dressing room. It's John Major, meet Donny Osmond" and "Eric Clapton, meet Ian Botham," English said. Rock groups and cricket teams had much in common. "Each member brings something, be it as a bowler or bass player, and the end result is a team performance."

His closest friend in cricket was Botham and English had the scars to prove it. Their friendship started during the 1981 Lord's Test against Australia, in which Botham made a duck in both innings and was then sacked as captain. In the team hotel afterwards, English "told him my best jokes for three hours to cheer him up". They stayed up all night drinking and the next morning Botham took a very hungover English with him to a promotional appearance at the Piccadilly showroom of his sponsor, Saab. When English was sick in the taxi, Botham taunted his "weak constitution", but he arranged a Saab car for his new friend and over the next few years they were constant companions.

"It was great fun but he did get boisterous," English remembered. On one occasion Botham took him out for a day's ocean fishing and English got horribly

seasick. "I had never felt so ill. I staggered back to the hotel only to find that Beffy had installed a water bed in my room," he recalled.

English joined Botham on his charity walks and hosted the cricketer's roadshows in Australia and around Britain. In a foreword to English's 2003 memoir, *Mad Dogs and the Englishman: Confessions of a Loon*, Botham called him "the funniest man I've ever met". He also served as best man at English's wedding to Robyn (née Duckley). The marriage was later dissolved and he is survived by their children — Amy, who works in financial technology; and David Jr, a musician — and by his partner, Lia Lanaja.

His schools' festival and charity team were both named after the *Bunbury Tails*, a series of children's books he wrote about cricket-playing rabbits called the Bunburys. They led to him recording the song *We're the Bunburys*, written with Barry Gibb of the Bee Gees and featuring Clapton on guitar and vocals.

David Stuart English was born in 1946 in Brentford, Middlesex and grew up in Hendon, north London. He learnt to play cricket at Bell Lane primary, where the school's most famous old boy, Denis Compton, became his idol, and later studied at Whitefield secondary modern. His childhood was difficult after his father walked out.

After leaving school with no idea what to do, he took a gap year around Europe, encour-

ing Brigitte Bardot in a St Tropez nightclub. "I went up to her and in my best O-level French asked her to dance, introducing myself as David Anglais," he said. "We started kissing. It was going very well until her boyfriend, Gunter Sachs, came out and I had to hide behind the dustbins."

Back in England he was briefly on the MCC ground staff at Lord's but soon realised he was never going to be quite good enough as a cricketer, even though he claimed to have once clean-bowled Viv Richards. He vigorously rejected suggestions that the great man had generously gifted his wicket so that English would have a good after-dinner story to tell.

His other passion was rock music and after a brief stint as a showbiz reporter for the Daily Mail in 1971 he landed a job as a press officer for Decca Records, handling publicity for artists including the Rolling Stones and Tom Jones. Two years later he was headhunted by Robert Stigwood (obituary, January 10, 2016). "I'm going to start my own record label and you're going to make it the greatest in the world," the impresario told him. Installed as president of RSO Records, English found himself in "a massive office with chandeliers, secretaries and marketing managers" but with no artists and no product.

He set about looking for acts to record and his first release was a novelty version of *How Much is That Doggie*

in *the Window*, recorded backwards by Tim Rice and released under the pseudonym Rover. English promoted the record by sending it to journalists and disc jockeys with a dog bowl. The record sold only eight copies.

Things could only get better and they did when RSO signed Clapton and the Bee Gees, whom English accompanied to Miami where they recorded *Jive Talkin'* and *Nights on Broadway* and reinvented themselves as a disco act.

He became particularly close to Barry Gibb, who sang at his wedding. One night, when staying with the group in a hotel in Paris, a drunken English decided to climb along the edge of his balcony to the next-door suite, followed by Barry and his brothers Maurice and Robin. "We looked in and saw a couple making love. The woman looked up and saw a madman followed by three Bee Gees," he recalled. The next day they encountered the woman in the hotel's dining room where one of the band told her how nice it was to see her with her clothes on.

As Clapton's closest confidant, English was there when the guitarist wrote the hit single *Wonderful Tonight* while his wife Pattie Boyd was upstairs taking rather too long to get ready for an evening out. "She was taking ages and he wrote the song while he was fuming at her," recalled English. While Pattie was upstairs she called down, "Keep him amused, Arthur!" using Clapton's nickname for his friend, which came from the music-hall star Arthur English. The result was one of the finest songs Clapton ever wrote.

In between running a record label and managing some of the biggest acts in popular music, English somehow squeezed in a parallel career as an actor. He played a corpse in *Z Cars* and there were further TV appearances in *Emmerdale*, *Secret Army* and *Bergerac*. There was also an appearance alongside Laurence Olivier, Sean Connery, Robert Redford and Michael Caine in Richard Attenborough's 1977 epic war film *A Bridge Too Far*. During a break in filming he pulled out a cricket bat and taught Redford how to play.

Yet of all his exploits, it was his schools' cricket festival of which he was most proud. "People haven't heard of David English and I'm quite happy about that," he said. "I can't play guitar like Eric. I can't sing like Barry and I can't play cricket like Ian. But I can help people achieve their dreams."

David English CBE, rock'n'roll mogul and cricket benefactor, was born on March 4, 1946. He died from a heart attack on November 12, 2022, aged 76

