

Themes in the History of Sport up to the Twentieth Century

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'If the French noblesse had been capable of playing cricket with their tenants, their chateaux would never have been burnt'. [Trevelyan, p. 408.]

Passion for Play - Sport in the period to 1600

Sport and Early Historical Sources

It is human nature to play and to compete. Peoples of all races and denominations have disported themselves in a more or less organised manner for at least as long as there have been written or pictorial records to serve as evidence to the contemporary historian. In almost all European cultures, however, [with the exception of those of ancient Greece and Rome] such records are scarce. This is partly because of the supposedly trivial nature of the subject matter and partly because writing for posterity tended, in the past, to be the prerogative of established religions. Sports and games would find themselves chronicled only in connection with the activities of the church, and much that was written about the recreation of the people was critical in tone.

In the British context, informative and informed writing on popular recreational activity is almost non-existent until well into the sixteenth century, when English literature written in the vernacular, and thus comprehensible to the masses, finally superseded French and Latin and achieved widespread circulation. Organised games had been brought to Britain by the Romans, but had died out with the collapse of Roman rule. In time, the island entered the Dark Ages, and there is scant historical reference to sport, either combative or recreational, throughout this long, gloomy interlude in British history.

Yet although, unsurprisingly, we find no references to football in Bede's *History of The English Church and People*, we may assume that various forms of recreational activity did take place. Alfred, King of Wessex, had much to occupy both body and mind amidst the turmoil of the Danish invasions, but still found time to write of the pleasures of hunting and fishing, albeit in the form of religious allegory. Who is to say what he was really thinking about when he burned the cakes? There are also occasional accounts of King Cnut's fondness for the hunt, but it is not until after the Norman conquest of 1066 that we have regular, written records of sporting activity.

However, although we have ample evidence that William I and his successors all valued the time they were able to dedicate to hunting, hawking and the [lists](#), we know comparatively little of what the simple folk would do with whatever free time they could muster. If a man of less than noble birth wanted to test his skill as an archer on the kings' deer, then this did not constitute hunting, but poaching, and was punishable by death until the [Magna Carta](#). What constituted sport for one class [of Norman descent] meant life or death for another [of Anglo-Saxon descent].

Attempts to Restrict Popular Sports

Yet we know that the masses or at least the male half of the working population did disport themselves in other, ostensibly less dangerous ways, for an ordinance issued in 1337 forbade all games and sports apart from archery as Britain prepared for war with France. Most of these prohibited games would have involved gambling [dice, cockfights] or physical aggression [football, cudgel play] or, ideally, both. Similar legislation in Ireland [*The Statutes of Kilkenny*, 1367] went so far as to name the sports that were to be suppressed in favour of archery. These included hurling, still popular in Ireland today.

Despite, and perhaps also because of this authoritarian intervention, the populace found ways to play. Sometimes, such revelry was officially sanctioned, at least at the local level: there are parish records which show that football, particularly on feast days, was widespread in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and donations from the church were often made for the provision of the ball. The fact that play was expanding can be seen in the growing list of 'undesirable' recreations. Whereas early ordinances tended to prohibit dice, quoits, cock-fighting and the like, there were eventually bans in some areas on events resembling modern darts, bowls, football, dancing, and an obscure pastime known as 'checker in the rye'. Brailsford [1992: 17] provides evidence for a wide range of mediaeval leisure pursuits in existing place names such as 'Stake Street' (the site where the bull was tethered in bull-baiting) 'Playford', and 'Dancer's Meadow'. Come what may, the people would play.

Nevertheless, attempts at curbing the public's penchant for sporting frivolity continued. Birley [43] cites legislation in Scotland from 1457 aimed at suppressing the playing of football and golf which had become popular at the expense of archery. He also mentions Henry IV's punitive tax on French tennis balls [1453], one of the earliest examples of the influence of politics on sport. In 1526 a proclamation was made ordering the burning of tables, dice, cards, bowls, clothes, tennis balls, and other 'instruments of the devil' [Birley, 57], the reason being, once again, that these pastimes distracted Britain's potential armed forces from training with their weapons - the sword and bow.

Survival of Popular Sports

As the end of the sixteenth century approached, sports and games had become increasingly woven into the fabric of the simple person's day-to-day existence. The economy was growing, and a certain degree of political and religious tolerance meant more personal freedom. The vibrancy of the period was evident as much through the individual's participating and spectating in recreational activity as through the pageantry and ceremony that we commonly associate with these times. The popularity of the sporting spectacle can be gauged by one gruesome statistic: at the Paris Garden bear pits in London, in 1583, over a hundred people are believed to have died when one of the stands collapsed. At the same time, university authorities in Cambridge were trying unsuccessfully to prohibit their undergraduates from participating in fencing and bowling matches for profit. Everywhere, gambling was commonplace. Sunday play, too, was the norm, despite vociferous protest from religious leaders. Significantly, entrepreneurs had begun to realise that there was money to be made from the common person's leisure time, for the expanding economy had provided the two ingredients essential for profit: disposable income and the free time in which to dispose of it.

Feast Days and Frivolity - festive culture from the past to the present day

Up until the English civil war in 1665, and for some considerable time after the restoration of the monarchy, sports and pastimes throughout the area we now know as Britain were closely linked to what might be termed festive culture. Most recreational activity took place in an atmosphere of eating, drinking and gambling, and there was invariably a fair degree of sexual promiscuity, too. All of this, of course, was fuel to the ardour of those hard-line Protestants known as Puritans: they had become increasingly vociferous at a decline in moral standards which they saw as running parallel

to the expansion of the personal freedom discussed earlier. No doubt festive recreation had always been vice-laden in this way, but the philosophies of the age meant that this would no longer go unquestioned.

Saints Days and Holidays

What, then, were these feast days in seventeenth-century England? All in all, there were upwards of one hundred and fifty days in the year which were classified as Saints' Days, pagan feast days and Sundays. Many of these were of only regional, even parochial significance, however, and no individual would have been able to claim one hundred and fifty free days a year. What it did mean was that there was employment available for the festive 'professionals' (acrobats, [cardsharps](#), prostitutes, stall-holders and the like) throughout most of the calendar year, winter being the only season with long breaks between feast days. Brailsford [1991: 20] estimates that around 30 feast days a year plus was normal for the average town or village in England and Wales in the early seventeenth century, meaning that, outside the winter season, there was an average of almost one 'working' day a week when there was a legitimate excuse to down tools and pick up the wine flagon! Once again, this was not a peculiarly British phenomenon. Holt [1981] has identified similar trends in France, where the strength of Catholicism provided an excuse for even greater vigour in the celebration of the saints days! Despite claims of irreverence, it was, of course, normal for feasting and fair-going to take place on Holy Days, for these were free days. Where there was cause for concern, particularly among the Puritans, was in the fact that pagan festivals, such as May Day and the solstices, were celebrated with at least as much enthusiasm as those in the Christian calendar. The not unreasonable accusation was that it was the feasting itself rather than the occasion, which was the main reason for participation.

Modern Sport and Festive Days

The co-existence of recreational activity and religious celebration is neither exclusively British nor a peculiarity of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To this day, the festival of Rusching is celebrated in Germany, whilst everything stops for Carnival in Brazil and Mardi Gras in New Orleans. In Northern Portugal there are feast-day parades where maidens attempt to remove red apples from the ends of lances held by young beaux in what is an unsubtle but very ancient fertility rite. Pagan rituals abound and superstitions are strongly held throughout Scandinavia, and most people see no paradox in the conservation of the pagan alongside the Christian. Similarly, Hungarians, Romanians, Russians, Czechs, Poles and Bulgars have all long celebrated the height of spring on the traditional day of fertility, May 1st. However, the feast was disguised as a workers' holiday under the various socialist regimes from 1945- 1989 and has, for many, lost its significance. Nevertheless, the colour, pageantry, dancing and merry-making are all there, whether accompanied by parades of the armed forces or celebrated to the sound of pig-skin pipes and the clinking of wine-glasses in country villages.

In Britain, too, the feast-day tradition for recreation has survived. Indeed, the time of year noted for the highest concentration of sporting activity is the Easter holiday period.

The Christmas season is also choc-a-bloc with football fixtures, as is evident from the soccer coverage on BBC's Radio Five Live programme over the 1996/7 Christmas and [New Year period](#): there were live commentaries on matches on 21st, 22nd, 23rd, 26th, 27th, 28th, 29th, 30th December and on January 1st. There were also full sporting programmes, including international cricket involving the England team, on 24th and 31st December. The only day which escaped this frenetic sporting [and reporting] activity was Christmas Day itself; this was not, however, a matter of religious sentiment, rather it was a consequence of the fact that this is the only day of the year when all public transport closes down. [The last Christmas Day football matches were in 1957. After that, the transport unions ensured that spectators would no longer be able to attend games unless they

travelled in their own vehicles.]

There has also been a revival in Britain of the traditional country festival, although much of this has come about as a result of the popular heritage industry, and we must therefore regard this as a somewhat artificial form of celebration [the Eisteddfods of Wales may be considered as an exception, for the most part, in that they had survived even before the idea of 'heritage' became trendy]. Closer to the original pagan festive spirit would have been the rock music festivals of the nineteen-seventies at places such as Glastonbury and The Isle of Wight, when venues were chosen according to the site of [ley-lines](#). Drugs replaced, for the most part, the traditional element of alcohol, and there was little to gamble on, but there was promiscuity in abundance. Perhaps the most noticeable difference between the festivals of the seventeenth century and the nineteen-seventies would have been the diametric shift from the violence of the former to the high-profile 'peace' motif of the latter.

Bull's Blood and Betting - cruelty in recreation

Whilst eating and drinking and, to a lesser degree, sexual activity, might be considered natural components of a feast day, whatever the period of history under scrutiny it is perhaps less easy to explain the violence and cruelty which were part and parcel of much of the merrymaking. One of the feast days most noted for violent activity was Shrove Tuesday, and it seems reasonable to assume that the excesses of this day were seen to be justified by the enforced abstinence of the Lent period which followed.

Cockfighting

Sporting events on Shrove Tuesday took many forms. At country and village fairs, there was the usual assortment of food and drink stalls, there was dancing and wrestling, juggling and sleight of hand, and, most widespread and notorious of all, there was cockfighting, perhaps the most durable and popular of betting sports that Britain has ever had. The cockfight was eventually banned [but continued to thrive in underground circles] in Britain, but a measure of its universal appeal may be seen in the way it has surfaced in communities around the globe [invariably among the poor, although in its heyday in Britain its appeal cut across class and economic boundaries].

Most members of modern-day industrialised societies would find it hard to sympathise with what was, for many seventeenth-century spectators, the thrill of the bloody battle to the death [the cocks had sharpened spurs attached to their feet to inflict damage to the opponent]. But the appeal of cock-fighting as a betting sport went beyond cruelty and violent conflict: it was, in fact, just about the only gambling activity in which the outcome was almost invariably free of [fixing](#). There was no way to bribe a fighting cock, they were notoriously hard to [dope](#), and the outcomes was visible to all, involving neither sleight-of-hand nor the opinion of a jury. In a society where gambling provided one of the major spending outlets for the working man and woman, cock-fighting was pre-eminent among sports. It is one of the paradoxes of British society, and, one which is invariably seized upon by those from other cultural backgrounds, that a nation which prides itself on animal-loving, on conservation and on sympathy for the underdog [itself a culturally revealing locution], can once have led the world in inventing new and ever more cruel ways to maltreat animals at the same time disguising this under the name of sport.

Apart from cockfighting - which was even indulged in by schoolboys, Shrove Tuesday being the traditional day for the Eton cockfights - there was throwing at cocks. This was unusual in term of animal sports in that it allowed for a certain degree of 'audience participation', involving as it did the tethering of the cock to a stake where, for a small fee, fairgoers could throw stones at it. The winner was the one who managed to kill the cock, and he or she took it home as a reward, much in the same way as one wins a coconut at a modern coconut shy.

Bull and Bear-Baiting

The most common types of violent confrontation in Britain were sports which had been imported from the continent, some of Germanic and others of Latin origin, and which involved pitting one animal against another. The most popular were bull-baiting and bear-baiting, the baiting being done by dogs bred specially for the purpose. In the case of bear-baiting, the larger animal was tethered to a stake, and was thus limited in its range of defensive strategies; it was among the most popular spectator sports of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but was particularly despised by the Puritans; it gave pleasure for pleasures sake, it drew large crowds and crowds meant sin, it was cruel, and it often took place on the Sabbath.

Although bear-baiting was sufficiently barbaric not to survive Puritan outrage, bull-baiting was still a feature of some town fairs into the early nineteenth century. Bull mastiffs would set upon the bull and, once they had sunk their teeth into the dewlap, would not let go. There were many casualties among the dogs, which only increased its appeal as a spectator and betting sport, but the bull would always lose in the end. Indeed, many communities saw the baiting of the bull as the best way to kill the animal, for folklore had it that the rush of blood would tenderise the meat! There was a bull-running festival at Stamford similar in many ways to that which still takes place at Pamplona, in northern Spain. The Spanish version is notorious for the consumption of wine and the frequent injuries to human participants, not to mention the cruelty which ensues in the ring. Research suggests that there are very close parallels with the Stamford version, for among the motivations cited by prohibitionists of the time, drunkenness, personal injury and cruelty were the most common.

Bull and bear-baiting were once-a-year events, part of the festive traditions associated with a particular Saints Day or seasonal celebration. [This was not the case with cockfighting, which could take place whenever and wherever two trainers met up with their game cocks.] They were public affairs, and thus liable to legislative intervention, and it was as a result of this that other cruel sports, which could be staged more discreetly in ale-houses or even on private property, began to supersede baiting as an outlet for the punter's baser instincts. Dogfighting, in particular, suited the gambler. The opponents were usually fairly evenly matched; there was, as in cockfighting, a visible outcome; and fights could be staged far more regularly than the traditional bait, which was popular entertainment rather than the stuff of serious betting. This perhaps goes some way to explaining why it has, at a very underground level, survived to this day. Investigative journalists at the BBC uncovered a flourishing dogfighting subculture in the Surrey and Sussex area in the late nineteen-eighties, and one still reads occasional reports in the national press of prosecutions for staging fights. Undoubtedly, sports of this nature still have their appeal to a small minority, and their continued existence suggests that we should be wary of excessively moralistic criticism of the pastimes of our seventeenth and eighteenth century forebears.

Behaviour Unbecoming - Puritan reform from 1642- 1660

Puritan condemnation of the vicious nature of the British celebration of 'holy days' used sex and alcohol as the basis of their argument for the banning of parish feasts and seasonal festivals. There was, of course, the further outrage that many of the most popular gatherings were at pagan events, such as Mayday and the solstices, and thus had no place in the life of the good Christian.

There can be little argument that drinking and loving were essential ingredients of the festive culture of the time, however, and the very games which characterised the summer fairs, in particular, seemed designed to arouse passions far different from those incited by the violence of Shrove Tuesday gatherings. Summer festivals were gentler affairs, with running and chasing replacing fighting and baiting. Mayday had a symbolic position as the feast to celebrate fertility rites, but the nature of the festivities meant that symbolism merged with reality. Chasing became more than just a game. Midsummer's Day was just as lively, and, as another pagan celebration, was anathema to the Puritans. Whitsuntide, too, [originally a pagan festival which was later 'appropriated' by the church

as a celebration of baptism] was characterised by games where men had to chase and catch women, and some of the variations on the chasing theme showed great inventiveness, involving, for example, the retrieval of ribbons which could be hidden about the female person. Stone [393] refers to the 'pagan admiration for virility' which was a feature of this merrymaking: this admiration was not shared by the Puritan, and these festive occasions were doomed once the civil war swung in favour of Parliament.

The Puritans - Spoil-sports or Civilisers?

For many the Puritan interlude was the beginning of what has been termed 'a civilising process' in regard to lifestyles in Britain [Holt, 1989:29]. This process, which, it may be argued, is still taking place, was begun through Puritan attitudes to sport, drink and Sunday observance. But what did these attitudes mean in practice?

Firstly, the status of Sunday as God's day was reinforced to the extent that no-one could work, play or drink on what became known as 'the Sabbath'. Even the name 'Sunday' carried pagan overtones and was rejected. The cult of Sabbatarianism was to endure long after the Puritans had been ousted from power, and it is only in the last year or two in Britain that Sunday trading laws have been relaxed to allow us to shop where we want to when we want to. As recently as the nineteen-seventies, it was still illegal to charge entrance fees for Sunday sporting events. To circumvent this troublesome law, county cricket clubs announced that entrance to matches would be free upon presentation of a programme for the game; programmes, however, cost anything up to two pounds each to buy.

The second practical effect of Puritan government on the free time of the working population was a drastic reduction in the number of feast days. This was achieved through legislation banning both pagan rituals and celebrations and 'papist' feasts such as Saints Days. In 1644, a law was introduced banning maypoles, which were seen as phallic. Maypoles, usually huge trees cut down specially for the occasion, were the centrepiece of Mayday revelry. They were adorned with ribbons, and young men and women cavorted around them in what the Puritans claimed were ancient, pagan fertility rites. To most of the revellers, the dances would probably have represented a chance to let off a bit of steam and to have fun again after the rigours of Lent, but the symbolism was there, and this sufficed for the festivities to be banned.

Thirdly, assemblies which were deemed to serve no purpose other than plain pleasure-giving were banned. This meant the closure of play-houses, the shutting down of the notorious bear-pits, and the effective demise of dancing and drinking celebrations at those few fairs which escaped prohibition. Even Christmas Day was anathema to the Puritans, who saw the consumption of mince pies, puddings and ale as irreverent on a day which was meant to be of purely religious significance, and houses were systematically searched by some zealots for evidence of indulgence. Brailsford [1992: 34] records the fact that there was even a law passed to outlaw 'vainly or profanely walking' and 'idly sitting in doorways'! It is difficult to imagine groups of scoundrels walking in a profane manner, but one can only assume it was recognised as a vice at the time.

Some Consequences of the Puritan period

Even if, in the modern context, Puritan attitudes to sex and drinking might be considered amusing and dated, there are several positive and enduring legacies of the period. It was under the Puritans that the morality of what we may loosely term 'play' was first examined, and out of this, although it took another two centuries and the trappings of Victorian public schools to establish itself, grew that most British of traditions, the fair-play ethic. Alongside the belief in 'playing the game' - i.e. playing according to the rules,- grew the notion of the manliness of sport, the idea that suffering could be endured because of the cleansing effect on both mind and body. This was another of the Puritan ideals which was to lie dormant for a considerable time before gaining dramatic prominence through

the *mens sana in corpore sano* motif of Victorian public school and university life.

Yet, important though this aspect is to the understanding of, principally, the British middle classes, even more significant in the long term were Puritan attitudes to the suffering of animals. Macaulay's famous jibe that 'the Puritan hated bear-baiting not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators' has left many of us with the image of the Puritan as a simple spoilsport, but it is a matter of record that attempts to curb the exploitation of animals for human gratification began some hundred years before the civil war.

It was a belief of the Puritans that animals suffered in the same way as humans, and that their physical and emotional feelings were not to be ignored. What has been a centuries-long struggle for the acceptance that animals have rights was begun under the Puritans. It was almost two hundred years before the [SPCA](#) were able to see the enforcement of the Cruelty to Animals Act [1835], and the process is still not complete, as anti-blood sports campaigners fight in the courts and in Parliament for the abolition of fox-hunting and hare-coursing even to this day.

Restoration and a the Growth of the Sporting Spectacle

With the Restoration and the advent of Charles II to the throne in 1660, there was an inevitable return to former values. Indeed, Puritan attitudes to recreation actually hastened the end of the interregnum. There was what Brailsford [1992: 441] refers to as 'a spirit of release. In effect, revelry and feasting were more riotous than ever, a trend that increased as the seventeenth century became the eighteenth and the industrial revolution came ever nearer. The restoration of the monarchy was mirrored at local level by the restoration of the local parish feast days, some of which had been banned fifty or sixty years previously. This gap of half a century or more meant that there was hardly anyone alive who could remember the original celebrations. As a result, many of the rituals which characterised the earlier forms of feast day were forgotten. On the other hand, many of the more lively and memorable elements survived; bawdiness and drunkenness flourished throughout the eighteenth century for their own sake rather than as a result of any ritualistic significance.

Almost everything which had been banned by the Puritans, including bell-ringing, (which was to become a quintessentially English art over the next two centuries), seemed to flourish after the Restoration. The exceptions were that the bear-pits remained closed and Sunday revelry was still frowned upon by many, leading to the instigation in the eighteenth century of the unofficial institution of Saint Monday, when workers would enjoy the pleasures which had been denied to them on the Sunday. Drinking became a serious social problem, particularly with the availability of cheap gin, and the crowded living conditions of city life from the late eighteenth century onwards exacerbated this social issue. Historians concur in concluding that gin consumption was a major factor in the soaring death rate [although Defoe, waxing satirical, chose to point out that it was good for the agriculturalists, enabling them to dispose of as much grain as could be turned into alcohol]. With the increasing consumption of alcohol and the decreasing level of ritual significance, the fairground became an unwelcoming and unsavoury place to be, and events such as the May games became unsafe for respectable women. Hiring fairs, such as the one described by Hardy at the start of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, were still places where men and women would mix and partake in seasonal revelry; similarly, each parish had its own feast days and dances. But the trend of the second half of the eighteenth century was for the gradual replacement of the fair and feast day by a new phenomenon, the sporting spectacle.

Mixing Business and Leisure – the Sporting Spectacle

Unruliness and debauchery characterised leisure activity from the end of the seventeenth century. This trend, graphically depicted in Hogarth's series of etchings, *The Harlot's Progress* and *The Rake's Progress*, gave rise to a renewed appetite for violence, and the industrial revolution,

meaning money in the hand for anyone who was prepared to do a day's work, fed the revival of that other great vice of the age, gambling. The question which was to face the entrepreneur in late eighteenth-century England was how to exploit these two tastes and maximise his profit. The days of the travelling fair were numbered and audiences too small to make for rich pickings. The answer lay in producing the spectacle and waiting for the punters to come and spend their money in any of a multitude of time-honoured ways, from eating and drinking to sex and gambling. The idea of a ritual celebration was forgotten as the centrepiece of the spectacle became one of the two great crowd-pullers of the age, the horse-race and the prizefight.

Horse -racing from 1780

Britain is no longer the centre of the horse-racing world; France, Ireland, Australia and the United States might all claim a share of that honour, along with several Middle Eastern states. Certainly, the idea of racing on horseback dates back to the pre-Christian era, but there can be no doubt that the notion of 'a day at the races' may be traced back to the England of the late eighteenth century. It is probably fair to say that racing as a modern spectator sport began with the first of the races sponsored by Lord Derby on Epsom Downs, in 1780. The race that has become known worldwide simply as 'the Derby' [but for the toss of a coin it might have been called the Bunbury!] differed from many other races in that it openly embraced the participation of the public.

Organisers of events at Newmarket, home of racing's elite, tried to deter the public from attending and betting on races there. It was not uncommon for each race to start from a different point and for participants to ride from one starting point to another in order to leave the crowds behind. The Derby was different, and has rightly been referred to as one of the greatest events in the British sporting calendar. Even today, mention of the Derby evokes a special kind of passion among the British racegoing public. Corporate sponsorship may mean that the official name is now 'the Ever Ready Derby', and the demands of TV coverage may have caused a shift to Saturday racing, but the Derby is still what it was over two hundred years ago: a great day out in the country within easy reach of the population of London and most of south-east England.

Soon after its inception, the Derby was attracting tens of thousands. Most would never see the big race itself, coming for the sideshows and entertainments and, above all, the gambling that was part of the occasion. Pickpockets, prostitutes, shady bookmakers and con-artists no doubt abounded, and there were hideous freak shows, but, by all accounts, Derby Day was an occasion without equal in the sporting year. Combining the elements of the traditional country fair and the new notion of the sporting event, it was a bridge between ancient and modern. The demands of labour-intensive lifestyles in the city meant that new forms of public entertainment were needed, and large-scale events such as the Derby fitted the bill, providing, as they did, a variety of participation and spectator sports and the chance to spend one's money away from the confines of the city taverns and gin parlours.

Of course, wherever there was racing there was gambling, and wherever there was gambling, there was fixing. The Derby appears to have suffered more than any of the other [classics](#) from the [punters'](#) gullibility in accepting new ways of being conned. Despite this, horse-racing flourished as a spectator sport throughout the nineteenth century. It appealed to men and women of all classes but was [and still is] unusual in that many of its devotees had never actually practised the sport.

Bare-knuckle fighting and boxing from the 1750s

The fistfight, by contrast, would have been something which these same punters had grown up with. Life on the streets was surely tough, and the ability to defend oneself with one's fists was a necessity, as well as a matter of pride. It is little wonder then, that the second great gambling and spectator sport of the age was bare-knuckle fighting, more commonly known as pugilism.

The pugilistic contest for prize money, prizefighting, reigned gloriously as king of the crowd-pullers at the end of the eighteenth and the start of the nineteenth centuries, before falling foul of public distaste. High-profile fixing and the continued adverse publicity regarding the death, disability and brain damage incurred by a succession of fighters in the ring were the main reasons behind the sport's decline. The average individual's passion for a fight was not, however, diminished, and it is no surprise that boxing was eventually to take over from pugilism in the public's affections.

Boxing differed from pugilism in several ways: there were timed rounds, the boxers wore gloves, they boxed according to Queensberry rules and from 1880 there was a governing body, the Amateur Boxing Association, for those who wished to participate at grass roots level. Technical supremacy replaced brute force, and weight divisions, (there had formerly been a distinction only between 'light' and 'heavy'), meant that serious injury was less likely. Thus the relatively safe but nevertheless manly sport of boxing attracted participants of all classes and was destined to become the great proletarian sport of late Victorian and twentieth-century Britain, providing as it did dreams of glory and riches for the common man.

Yet pugilism in its day thrived in the atmosphere of roistering aggression which was a feature of eighteenth-century sporting occasions. Crowds of several thousand were not uncommon at big fights and huge sums of money were wagered on the outcome. In consequence, the fixing which blighted horse-racing also infected the ring. Fights could be thrown and referees bought, but it seemed that the chance of a successful bet and the attraction of the violent spectacle outweighed the risks of being conned, and the crowds kept on coming. In an attempt both to limit the size of crowds, enabling ladies and gentlemen to view the proceedings without discomfort, and to make money for the patrons, inflated entry fees were introduced for championship fights, even though they were held outdoors. Shipley [37] records that five hundred tickets of half a guinea were sold for a fight featuring the legendary Daniel Mendoza in the 1790s. However, it would appear that twice that number gatecrashed the event, highlighting a further problem of open-air pugilism, crowd control.

Heavyweight contests were rivalled only by horse-racing for their ability to draw a crowd. Indeed, for this reason, the two were regularly combined, and the prize ring was often to be seen at the racecourse, where the betting fraternity gathered in numbers. Yet the really big fights had no need of added attractions to ensure attendance. People would travel in their thousands on foot to find a secure venue for a fight [i.e. one where the local magistrates would turn a blind eye, for prizefighting was illegal, and zealous legislators were determined to stamp it out]. With the advent of the railway, rich and poor alike were mobilised and could now travel, if not exactly in comfort, at least more rapidly than ever before in their attempt to outwit the law enforcers. Fights between women also took place, but were less widespread and less well-attended. However, women liked to watch, even more so when other women were fighting. Brailsford [11991: 134] tells us of a fight in 1813 between Charlotte York and Mary Jones which was attended by at least four hundred other women.

When pugilism died out in the second half of the nineteenth century, it did so as a result of the birth of boxing, a more controlled but nonetheless dangerous pastime, which still provokes controversy whenever the morality of contact sports are debated. The principal argument of those who wish to see boxing banned is that it is brutal, involving a high risk of brain damage and even death. There are further, less convincing arguments regarding the psychological effect of violent sport on those who watch it, and there are accusations, which have a degree of validity, (how much is impossible to determine) that there is corruption and fixing in the sport. The anti-boxing lobby is strong, particularly in Britain, and has the support of many noted members of the medical profession.

Even more numerous and certainly just as vociferous, however, are those who claim that banning boxing would create more problems than it would solve. The most compelling reason for the continued legality of the sport is that banning it would surely drive it underground. That is to say, fighting would go on, but without the supervision that is afforded by the sport's governing bodies, the

betting boards of control and, most importantly, the medical advisory boards. At the moment, boxing in Britain has the most stringent medical code of any country in the world: in the past eighteen months, American fighters at three different weights have been refused permission to fight in the UK as a result of their medical histories, and research into boxing-related head injuries has been taking place for a number of years.

The boxers themselves, those with most to win and lose, are in no doubt about the balance of risk and opportunity. In the aftermath of a series of high-profile ring tragedies, (Gerald MacLellan [USA] and Michael Watson [GB] are permanently brain-damaged as a result of their fights with, respectively, Britain's Nigel Benn and Chris Eubank), fighters were unanimous in the public defence of their sport.

Victorian Values - The new morality after 1837

The evidence suggests that the changing moral climate of the second quarter of the nineteenth century was ultimately responsible for the demise of pugilism. Certainly, Victorian sensitivities [or at least those openly expressed] would have been injured by the crime and brutality with which the prizefight was associated. So it was that two hundred years of violent sport came to an end with the death of prizefighting in the 1860s. After two centuries which had witnessed a complete reversal of Puritan ideals in many aspects of human existence, not least in the world of sport and individual leisure, there was now a return to many of the old values of the Puritan government. The country fair was a pale shadow of its seventeenth-century self and the traditional countryside recreations sat ill with the increasingly bourgeois town magistrates: the last great mediaeval fair in London, Bartholomew Fair, was finally closed down in 1854 amidst allegations of drunkenness, wagering, violence and bawdiness, the very features which had been the mainstay of the feast-day and fair for hundreds of years. The traditional image of British leisure was undergoing a radical change unseen since the time of the Puritans. This change mirrored the social upheaval brought about by the increasingly urban lifestyle of nineteenth-century, industrialised Britain. Gambling would, of course, continue to flourish, but new venues would have to be found, along with new sports to bet on. The Beer Act of 1830, under which anyone who could afford a two-pound licence could brew and sell beer, had brought about an increase in beer quality and a consequent boom in the popularity of the public house. For the next half-century or more, working-class sport and gambling had found a new home.

Fair Play

At the same time, but at a different economic and social level, a new breed of British sportsman [and, to a lesser degree, a new breed of sportswoman] would make his appearance owing to the rise of the public school. The gentleman amateur was about to take his place at the forefront of British sport, and what is generally considered the golden age of British sporting activity would begin. The notion of fair-play and manly participation, embodied in what has been referred to as a spirit of 'muscular Christianity', became the watchword of the British athlete and sportsman. Hacking, [the deliberate kicking of an opponent's shins], was considered essential to the manliness of rugby football, prompting the comment, 'if you do away with it, you do away with all the courage and pluck of the game, and I will be bound to bring over a lot of Frenchmen who will beat you with a week's practice' [Birley: 259].

From the middle of the nineteenth century, the British middle-class male lived cocooned in an almost make-believe world, where the stiff upper lip and the spirit of 'play up and play the game' ruled the emotions. It was not until the post-Edwardian era that the horrific realities of the First World War finally brought home the fact that life was more than just a game. This global conflict was the setting for one of the most ill-advised but doubtless heroic acts in the history of modern warfare. The essence of the nation's sporting traditions may be seen in the suicidal bravery of a certain Captain E. R. Mobbs, who motivated his troops to go into battle against the Germans by kicking a rugby ball

high into the air and charging after it. Unable to enter into the spirit of the game, the unsporting Germans shot him as he ran across no-mans land. In the words of Brailsford [1992: 123]:

It was not just a brave man who died, but a sporting ideal. The delusion of athleticism was that sport and life are identical, and it was a delusion which could not survive the horrors of 20th-century war.

Sport and Alcohol in the Victorian city

Although there is a tendency to see sport in the nineteenth century as a middle-class tradition, much of the change in emphasis from barbarism towards healthy recreation which was a feature of the time came about as a result of the development of a labour aristocracy [Holt, 1989: 42] who instigated a 'culture of respectability'. Skilled labourers found themselves attracted to the park, where one might take part in or watch a game of cricket, rather than to the public house or the prize ring. Temperance movements and church associations had, for some time, been trying to make fairs and feast days alcohol free, encouraging marching bands, the growing of flowers and other such pursuits in an effort to promote sobriety amongst the working classes. Hargreaves [1986: 25] laments the interference of do-gooders who, he asserts, did not understand the issues which really mattered to working men and women, referring to an 'attack on the drink culture around which so much sporting activity took place'. He goes on to claim that this activity actually went so far as to cause a division within the working classes by setting the 'teetotal anti-sports worker' against the worker who followed sports, effectively turning the latter into a member of an underclass in social terms. He also suggests that the fight against drinking was part of the bourgeois oppression of the masses which was also manifested in the gaming laws. There is a certain amount of evidence to support this view: in an astonishingly narrow-minded and unsubstantiated attack on betting among the working classes, Lord Brougham is quoted as saying [1844]:

Gambling has far more fatal consequences and is much more injurious to morals among the inferior classes than among the superior classes

The Role of the Public House

No amount of moralising, however, could lessen the influence of the public house on gambling and the playing of games. Nor was it just the workers who liked to gamble on the outcome of sporting activities. A contemporary [1865] etching of a raid on a cock-fight [reproduced in Holt, 1989: 169] in London's Great Windmill Street shows most of the audience in top hats and morning coats, and there are even respectable women in attendance. Sporting Clubs, attracting members of all classes, were often affiliated to pubs. The Football Association itself was formed in a pub in 1863, and the public house was the centre for many indoor and outdoor sports, space permitting: these ranged from bar games such as shove ha'penny to impromptu duckhunts around the pub's pond! According to Brailsford [1992: 68], however, and in keeping with the true British sporting tradition, 'the most commonly-enjoyed pastime appears to have been beer drinking.'

Publicans also acted as go-betweens for pedestrians, professional runners who toured the country looking for opponents. The usual form was for the opponent [or his agent] to send a deposit to a named public house where arrangements for the race would be made. Although the prize money was relatively small, (ten or twenty pounds was the norm in the 1850s), a lot of money would ride on the outcome owing to the side bets placed by spectators and pubgoers. The scandals and the fixing associated with pugilism had found a new home in pedestrianism, but the runners themselves, known as peds, sometimes achieved hero status, at least locally, and crowds could be large.

Angling's popularity, for example, grew in a world of male bonding, of workplace and street-life relationships focused on small pubs. Weekday drinking, often moderate in tone and quantity, formed a central meeting point for building clublife. Few northern pubs were without an affiliated angling

club by 1900 and London's 620 clubs were almost all pub-based.

This world of ale and sporting club was far removed from the back-street sub-culture of the gambling fraternity, with their locked-doors public houses and rattling sessions. By contrast the sporting club had a certain measure of respectability. Whereas the gamblers and ratters were surrounded by crime and vice of all types, (violent, sexual and fraudulent), the anglers, footballers and cricketers, although consumers of alcohol on an almost daily basis, were not seen as drunks and hoodlums.

Restrictions of Time and Space

Sport for the Victorian city-dweller was manifestly different from sport for his eighteenth-century ancestor. The demands of the factory or mill under the new organisation of labour hours meant increased pressure for recreation within a limited time-scale. The effects on an individual's leisure time were dramatic. We have already seen how the fairs disappeared and the pub became the focus of much recreational activity, but there was another major shift in the organisation of pastimes, that of the time in which they took place. In the past, a game of football would last until its players collapsed through injury, exhaustion or the effects of drink. Amidst the urban swelter and crippling labour demands of mid-nineteenth century England, the working man could not permit himself the luxury of a day off for play. As a result, there came about an innovation in the world of sport, the timed encounter. A football match would start at a set time and finish at a set time.

Furthermore, spaces for play were undergoing enclosure for the first time. Legislation against street football was one of the reasons, yet another was lack of available space: most important, however, was the capacity to make money from admission to the closed sporting arena. The late nineteenth century witnessed the building of sports grounds throughout the length and breadth of Britain, and the man or woman who wanted to watch a game of cricket or football, or attend a running match, would have to pay for the privilege. In the same way that the feast day and fair had given way to the open sporting spectacle some hundred years before, the open spectacle had now given way to enclosed, timed, regulated, gate-money sport. The spectacle was still the focal point of the day out: it could be a horse race, a football match, an encounter between two boxers, or even a greyhound race, but the environment for the spectator had changed beyond recognition.

One further outcome of increased city-dwelling was the shift in sporting power from the South-East of England to the North. The huge conurbations of the industrialised North, such as Liverpool, Manchester, Bradford, Sheffield, Leeds, and Newcastle, had little competition from the South outside of London, and a new era in regional rivalry had begun, a rivalry which exists to this day in sports such as football.

Impact of the Railway

Although all of the above factors were influential in changing the shape, timing and venues of sport and leisure activities, one cannot conclude an investigation of progress and change in industrialised Britain without mentioning the railway. From the 1830s onwards, the railway revolutionised day-to-day life, and its effect on sporting practices cannot be exaggerated. The greatest immediate impact of the new mode of transport was on horse racing. For over fifty years, patrons of the sport of kings had had racing schedules severely limited by the difficulties of transport. The horses had had to walk from meeting to meeting, journeys hampered by weather and limited by distance and the physical condition of the animals. Almost overnight, the structure of the racing calendar changed. No longer were owners restricted to racing their horses only every couple of weeks, and no longer were English horses kept off the Scottish racing cards for months at a time. Many racecourses actually opened up their own stations on specially constructed branch lines, facilitating the arrival of both horses and racegoers. Of course, the fact that the racing season now depended on rail travel meant that the sport, like team sports in the city, had to be timetabled: race meetings needed to

start and finish on time, a novelty within the sport. Cricket teams, too, were able to tour the country, allowing the power base to shift away from the capital. Cricket and horse racing were both national sports before the advent of the railway, but improved transport meant better attendances, more opportunity to participate and, above all, a levelling out of standards across the country. Three or four decades later on, the football and rugby leagues and cups could never have taken place without rail transport, but by the time they were instigated rail transport was taken for granted.

End of an Era - Sport in 1900 compared to sport in earlier times

By the time the Victorian era made way for the Edwardian, sport in Britain had taken the shape it would keep, more or less, until the television and advertising boom of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Over the course of the previous two hundred and sixty years, leisure activity had changed in almost every way conceivable. A list of just a few of the ways in which sport in 1900 differed from sport in 1640 will serve to put into perspective the resilience of man's and woman's desire to play in the face of social, political and economic upheaval.

In 1900

- *fields of play were enclosed and delineated*
- *games were timetabled, and there were written codes of conduct: in some codes of football, you could not pick the ball up and run with it*
- *cruel sports had all but disappeared [apart from those such as hunting and shooting, which were reserved for the gentry]*
- *spectators had to pay to watch*
- *people fought each other with gloves on, and neither kicked nor bit each other in the ring*
- *some players of team sports had started to wear numbers on their backs to assist the spectator in identification*
- *there were a fixed number of players per side in most team sports*
- *teams and spectators were able to travel the country to attend sporting events*
- *sports events were held on Mondays or Saturdays rather than on feast days*
- *the pub was the centre of sporting activity for working-class men*
- *sex had all but disappeared from the leisure scene, apart from the prostitution associated with the lowest category of public house*
- *the participation of women had fallen drastically, particularly among the working classes*
- *there were professionals in team sports such as rugby, football and cricket*
- *there was a sports press: columns were written and results printed in the major*

newspapers and there were specialist magazines such as 'Bells Life' which catered for the sporting gentleman

However, there were some things which had not changed, and probably never will:

- *most sporting activity still took place in a drinking environment*
- *in horse racing and boxing, the rich put up the money, the poor took part*
- *gambling was an essential part of sports culture*
- *fixing was the bane of all sports where gambling was involved*
- *in team sports such as cricket, working and middle classes would compete side by side [albeit on unequal terms]*
- *the church was still adamant that sport should not compete with church on Sundays*
- *working men and women had less free time for sport than their social superiors*
- *the English still despised the French*

Glossary of Terms

1. CARDSHARPS

Cardsharps would cheat at cards in order to con gullible punters out of their money. One common game would have been 'chase the lady' in which the punter has to find the queen from among three given cards.

2. CLASSICS

The classic horse races on the English sporting calendar: the equivalent of the 'majors' in tennis or golf. They are *The Oaks*, *The St Leger*, *The Derby*, *The 1,000 Guineas* and *The 2,000 Guineas*.

3. DOPE

As a verb, to drug a person, horse or other animal in order to affect its performance. Humans, nowadays, tend to use dope to enhance performance. Doped horses usually perform below standard.

4. FIRST-FOOT

A New Year's tradition. The person who first crosses a threshold in the new year, who should bring fuel and food with him or her - often a symbolic piece of coal and a loaf of bread or a bottle of spirits. In

return, the hospitality of the house is offered to this, the first foot.

5. FIXING

Also 'rigging'. Arranging the outcome of a sporting event in advance, usually with the object of winning money through placing bets at favourable Magna Carta.

6. LEY-LINES

Traditionally, lines invisible to the naked eye which cover the earth and which possessed mystical significance for the druids of Ancient Britain. Their intersection points, at places such as Glastonbury and Stonehenge, are considered the most magical.

7. LISTS

The area in which combat took place between knights under the code of chivalry. There were usually tents for the knights, a seated gallery for noble spectators, a central combat area divided by a fence, and there would have been stalls and side-shows for the general populace.

8. MAGNA CARTA

Charter of English personal and political liberty signed, under constraint, by King John in 1215. Gave new rights to the commoner.

9. ODDS

In betting, the chances of winning. 'Short odds' means a good chance of winning [2/1 (read as *two to one*), 5/2, 100/30] whereas 'long odds' means there is little likelihood of victory [100/1, 500/1]. 'Odds-on' refers to a very short odds favourite whose chances are considered more than even [even = 1/1 and is read as *evens*]. Odds-on favourites may be quoted at 1/2, 2/5, 1/3 etc.: these are read as *2 to 1 on*, *5 to 2 on*, *3 to 1 on*, etc.

10. PUNTER

One who gambles on the result of a sporting event.

11. SPCA

The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which now has royal patronage and is thus known as the RSPCA.