British Football and Urbanization between 1750 and 1850

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Once life seemed rather simple; British people living in the countryside enjoyed leisure and play in a setting without the restraining limitations a city would bring. Then came the Industrial Revolution and with it an entirely new concept of space. People from rural areas flocked to cities like London, Liverpool, and Manchester. In “The Making of a Working-Class Football Culture in Victorian England,” William Baker explains “Whereas in 1800 there was not a single city other than London with a population of 100,000 or more, by 1891 no less than 72 per cent of all English citizens lived in cities, and the number of urban centers surpassing the figure of 100,000 had leaped to 23.” As evident in the statistics, the time between featured much urbanization. Further research indicates that the Industrial Revolution primarily took place in British cities. Out of the top forty European cities from 1750, only two were British, as opposed to ten in 1850. It is in these cities that industrialism and urban growth uprooted traditional patterns of rural life. It is naïve for historians of the Industrial Revolution to solely focus on machines, factories, investments, demographic change, problems of food supply, and questions concerning conditions of work. A balanced history of the time period must not forget leisure, since it is central to understand of how people spent time outside of the factories. A mighty transformation occurred in the sports and pastimes of the common people.

Aristocrats enjoyed leisure like everyone else, yet the alterations to their pastimes as a result of the industrial revolution were relatively minimal. On the other hand, there were greater changes to the lower classes: "Far more dramatic was the process by which the Victorian masses - middle class as well as working class folk - had their attitudes and lifestyles turned upside

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Urbanization forced the middle class to undergo a major shift in their leisure as some of their old pleasures, such as cockfighting, became illegal and they worked longer hours.

Known as folk or traditional football, these regionally varied pastimes split off to become the modern sports of rugby union and associated football. Football in medieval and pre-modern Europe was much more a form of play and carnival than of seriousness and sport. No specialized sites existed for football; it was played, not only in places usually used for other activities, but also while other activities were happening. Following the growth in British cities, there was an increasing desire for football to become unified through common rules. Subsequently, the sport became widely played, spectated, and idolized as a part of the regional cultural identity. The rapid urbanization of England, between 1750 and 1850, led to the codification of football and allowed for the sport to become widely popular.

Some may argue that the period between 1750 and 1850 was harmful for the future of football: moral prohibitions on old pleasures were severe, open space was at a premium, and time free from work was virtually non-existent. Thus, recreational opportunities in industrial cities and towns were few and far between. Even children had a tough time frolicking as playgrounds were lost to enclosures: the legal processes which consolidated small landholdings into larger farms. With adults, there was no room for relaxation, as work and production became the ideals of the age. All of these points were demonstrated by fewer references to football from writers and journalists in the early eighteenth century. Conversely, John Bale explains that these obstacles did not in fact impair the future of football. In *Sport, Space, and the City*, he asserts that “An increasing division of labour was accompanied by an increasing division of space and

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of time. There was a time for work and a time for play there were also to be specific places
where various activities previously found in streets and on commons, could now be undertaken
in the emerging city.”

The opposing argument fails to acknowledge that, although laborers had
longer workdays in the factories, the work week itself was shortened. Furthermore, even though
there was less open space, people had the means to reach football fields and pitches because of
improved transportation. Instead of a decline in football, it was in reality more popular than ever.
Throughout the eighteenth century, the game became more organized. Football had become more
generally accepted, and the less frequent references to it were simply because it was more
established and less controversial.

Urban cities, in contrast with the slow moving rural British towns, directed society
towards codification in football. John Clare, a poet known for his love of the countryside, sets
the backstory of the landscape in *Pewit’s Nest*: “They strime their clock like shadows - when it
cloys to guess the hour that slowly runs away & shorten sultry turmoil with their play.”

Here, Clare emphasizes that time is measured slowly in the countryside. If one were to attempt to keep
track of the time it would actually be ‘cloy’ or almost distasteful. Clare enjoys that he has the
leisure of taking as much time as necessary to connect with the creatures around him. The ‘I’
language found elsewhere in the poem stresses that his experience of nature is a personal one.

In “Sign of the Times,” Thomas Carlyle disdainfully acknowledges the unrelenting nature
of the machines that have emerged with industrialization:

"There is no end to machinery. Even the horse is stripped of his harness and finds a fleet
fire-horse invoked in his stead. Nay, we have an artist that hatches chickens by steam; the
very brood-hen is to be superseded! For all earthly, and for some unearthly purposes, we

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have machines and mechanic furtherances; for mincing our cabbages; for casting us into magnetic sleep.”

Here, Carlyle is in awe of how much technology has changed his lifestyle. From chickens to cabbage, machinery heavily affects society in all areas. Even though he believes the outcomes are mostly negative, Carlyle concurs that technologies are overpowering old ideas. The countryside and urban settings widely vary in efficiency, as the industrial cities waste no time furthering the technology. Alongside the development of machinery, there was a desire for advancements in other areas of life such as football. Thus, there is no wonder that the developments aligned with a desire for a unification in the rules of football. There was a greater yearning and determination for the sport to become better organized.

Economics and demographics are the largest causes of change to traditional amusements. In a study done by Mike Huggins, he sets out to extend and challenge existing historiography on late eighteenth century British popular culture, customary sports, and class identity. He focuses on the margins of late eighteenth-century England with the rural villages of Cumberland. Huggins notes that there is a lack of knowledge as far as popular culture outside of London in the eighteenth century. At the time, the experiences of common people were not considered worthy of notice. The upper-class patronage supported horse racing, cockfighting, and wrestling, even if the actual participants were often more working class. As William Baker states, “Before the Industrial Revolution, time was measured in terms of seasons, not hours. Rural English and European communities traditionally enjoyed wakes and ales, sports and games, during slack seasons in the agrarian cycle. But even work itself featured competition, sociability, and delight,

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characteristics now associated primarily with leisure and sport." The quotation supports that sports were much more casual in the countryside than how they were developed in urban cities. Huggins would argue that regional sports, such as those in Cumberland, were already on the way out: “But in fact, many regional sports—including the local style of wrestling, leaping, football, and quoits—were simply suffering a decline in interest and were to repackage and reinvent themselves throughout and well beyond the nineteenth century.” Whether or not some regional and blood sports were on the way out, the Evangelical movement, promoting morality and propriety, certainly nailed the lid on the coffin of traditional rustic pleasures. These sports would give way to less physical and more competitive alternatives after industrialization.

Amongst the urbanization in England, football developed the framework of the modern-day rules. The codifying did not happen all at once but was a gradual process. There were several generations that encompass the transition from folk football to modern rugby and football. Regardless, the start of the eighteenth century was central to the transition as football “was becoming better organized, with matches representing different parishes, villages, towns and even counties. Challenges were issued, games were advertised in the press, and the game…in the size of the field, the number of players and the placement of the goals, is remarkably similar to the modern game.” Murray points out, once again, that the game did not die out following the move to urban cities. Instead, the traditional sports underwent a transformation: “Many of the new middle-classes played football, and for those who wanted to pursue their new professions and continue to play football at the same time it was necessary to create a more civilized game:

one that eliminated its worst excesses and allowed them a better chance to play it without having to appear before their clients with a black eye or a broken arm.”

The old pastimes that new urban residents may have once cherished did not survive the resettlement. Society in the wake of urbanization had no room for a lack of professionalism. Plus, with moral prohibitions falling in place, people had to adapt to the new codes of football. Moreover, football became more competitive as Bale maintains: “By the mid-nineteenth century pressure to play inter-regional rather than simply local, games of football led to pressures to impose a standardized set of rules on the game.”

With the aspiration for people to play between regions, it was necessary to develop codification. And since there is much regional variance between rural towns, urban cities move quickly in order to unify the rules.

The codification ahead of 1850 was a great advancement towards the well-known rules of today, although it is by no means faultless. “What's in a Name? Playing ‘Football’ in the Mid-Victorian North-Eastern England,” an academic journal article written by Gavin Kitching, states that there were still holes in the codification:

When rugby and soccer were first codified, both codes left large amounts of room for interpretation. Both specified the objectives of their game, and forbad certain kinds of actions, but they did not tell anyone how to play either game. They did not, that is to say, tell anyone how to play as a forward, or a back, or a three quarter, or a goalkeeper…And this is shown, I think, in the radically underdeveloped nature of lateral play, passing, and 'open field' play generally, in the first forms of soccer and rugby.

The fact that there was still variance in the interpretation of rules is not surprising because of the many contradictions in traditional football. In Eton on one hand, handling was not allowed, and the ball was kicked through a goal. On the other hand, in Rugby, running with the ball was

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11 Bale, Sport, Space, and the City, 15-16.
allowed as well as hacking and 'throttling,' and the ball had to be kicked over a crossbar to score a goal. Nevertheless, the matches were generally governed by the conditions under which the game was played, whether it was in cloisters or in fields, on grass or on hard surfaces.

At Winchester there were no goals at all, and points were awarded when the ball was kicked over the goal line. Finally, at Charterhouse no handling was allowed; teams were kept to twenty a side and the main feature of the game was dribbling the ball on stone surfaces. The codification was imperfect, but the important part is that it is unifying the rules in unprecedented ways.

The unification of the variances of football was imperative for the sport to become widely recognized and popular. Murray claims that much of the initial codification happened before 1850:

The first combined rules were drawn up by Old Salopians and Old Etonians in 1846, but Harrow seems to have been one of the main forces in shaping the rules of what became the association game. As early as 1814 they played a game with eleven a side, 'bases' that resembled goals, and a minimum of handling. Many Old Harrovians went to Cambridge, and it was there in 1848 that another set of rules was drawn up.

The fact that there were modern features in the codified rules was a key step in moving towards the current sport that is simple in that it is open, simple to organize, uninterrupted, and has easily interpreted rules. Shortly following the period, in 1857, Cray Wanderers FC, the first football club north of London, was founded, and not long after, The Football Association was formed. At the forefront of all of these establishments, there was much work done in order to unify the rules and communicate them to the football-playing community.

The Industrial Revolution brought about major changes to the sport of football as it led to codification and set up a basis for the sport to become the symbol of cultural identity that it is.

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today. The swapping of rural to urban setting in respect to free time and relaxation was not easygoing at first. Open space was tough to find and moral prohibitions on old pleasures were severe. The contrast between John Clare’s romantic poem and Thomas Carlyle’s essay on machinery demonstrates that there was no better place to quickly push forward rules than in the city. And thus, there was a leisure transformation in an effort to better organize football amidst the restrictions of urban life. Old Salopians and Old Etonians even combine rules to begin to unify the sport. The initial codification was by no means perfect, yet still a major step towards the rules of modern-day football. History of the time period between 1750 and 1850 is unbalanced without including leisure because understanding the sport and pastimes and how they were affected by urbanization, is crucial to figuring out society’s indulgences. Amongst the rising population and longer work hours, there were also people playing the beautiful game. Football, among other activities, gave people a temporary escape from backbreaking factories. Today, the sport puts a smile on people’s faces, gives people a sense of belonging, teaches kids the value of teamwork, and provides jobs to millions of people. Without the framework of rules set at the turn of Victorian England, football could have died out and would not be the mass spectator sport it is today.
Works Cited


