British Football and Urbanization between 1750 and 1850

Jonas Jacobson

Davidson in Cambridge

Matt Neal and Claire Wilkinson

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."[1] 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

---

[1]William Baker, "The Making of a Working-Class Football Culture in Victorian England," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Winter, 1979), 242.

down."2 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.3 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

2 Baker, "The Making of a Working-Class Football Culture in Victorian England, 79.
3 Bill Murray, *Football: A History of the World Game,* Routledge, 1994.

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."[4] 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."[5] 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

---

[4] John Bale, *Sport, Space, and the City*, The Blackburn Press, 2001.
[5] John Clare, *Pewits Nest*, (15-17).

have machines and mechanic furtherances; for mincing our cabbages; for casting us into

magnetic sleep."[6]

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,

[6] Thomas Carlyle, "Sign of the Times," Critical and Miscellaneous Essays: Collected and Republicized. vol. II (London, 1829), 101.

characteristics now associated primarily with leisure and sport."[7] 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."[8] 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."[9] 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:

---

[7] Baker, "The Making of a Working-Class Football Culture in Victorian England, 79.
[8] Mike Huggins, "Popular Culture and Sporting Life in the Rural Margins of Late Eighteenth-Century England: The World of Robert Anderson, 'The Cumberland Bard,'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 45 no. 2 (2012), 191.
[9] Murray, *Football: A History of the World Game*, 11.

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."10 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."11 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.12

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

---

10 Murray, *Football: A History of the World Game,* 12.
11 Bale, *Sport, Space, and the City*, 15-16.
12 Gavin Kitching, "What's in a Name? Playing 'Football' in the Mid-Victorian North-Eastern
England," *Ethnologie Française*, vol. 41, no. 4 (2011), 605.

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.[13] 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.[14]

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

---

[13] Murray, *Football: A History of the World Game.*
[14] Murray, *Football: A History of the World Game,* 13.

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

Baker, William J. "The Leisure Revolution in Victorian England: A Review of Recent

   Literature." *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1979, pp. 76–87. *JSTOR*,

   www.jstor.org/stable/43609011.

Baker, William J. "The Making of a Working-Class Football Culture in Victorian

   England." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1979, pp. 241–251. *JSTOR*,

   www.jstor.org/stable/3787342.

Bale, John. *Sport, Space, and the City*. The Blackburn Press, 2001.

Cannadine, David. "Victorian Cities: How Different?" *Social History*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1977, pp.

   457–482. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4284671.

Carlyle, Thomas. "Sign of the Times." Critical and Miscellaneous Essays: Collected and

   Republicized. vol. II, London, 1829.

Clare, John. *Pewits Nest*. 1-41.

Eisenberg, Christiane. "International Bibliography of Football History." *Historical Social

   Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 31, no. 1 (115), 2006, pp. 170–208. *JSTOR*,

   www.jstor.org/stable/20762108.

Huggins, Mike. "Popular Culture and Sporting Life in the Rural Margins of Late Eighteenth-

   Century England: The World of Robert Anderson, "The Cumberland Bard"." *Eighteenth-

   Century Studies*, vol. 45 no. 2, 2012, pp. 189-205. *Project

   MUSE*, doi:10.1353/ecs.2012.0006

Kitching, Gavin. "What's in a Name? Playing 'Football' in the Mid-Victorian North-Eastern

   England." *Ethnologie Française*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2011, pp. 601–614. *JSTOR*,

   www.jstor.org/stable/41318941.

Murray, Bill. *Football: A History of the World Game.* Routledge, 1994.

de Vries, Jan. *European Urbanization, 1500-1850.* Routledge, 1984.