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Researching the History of Grassroots Football in England: Sources and Opportunities

Abstract

Since 1980 there has been an abundance of research into the history of association football in England most of which has focused on the elite professional game and its followers. Recreational football has been relatively neglected, though participant numbers suggest that it constituted—as it still does—a highly significant social and cultural phenomenon. For many thousands in the mid-20th century it was "their most important social activity" (Nicholas Fishwick: English Football and Society 1910–1950, Manchester, 1989, p.1). Yet why did so many people play football for small clubs in local leagues, or simply come together for an informal 'kickabout' when an opportunity presented itself? The scant historiography on English football at the grassroots suggests that this is a question that sports historians have yet to address systematically. Constructing a satisfactory response involves exploring the archival and newspaper sources already available to historians imaginatively while giving due consideration to the possibilities of previously overlooked autobiographical and literary texts.

Keywords: *archives; amateurism; Association Football; autobiography; England; literary texts; Oral History; recreational sport; sources*

Introduction

Over the past forty years, scholarly interest in the history of sport has grown rapidly in the United Kingdom as elsewhere. Once regarded as an eccentric or even trivial pursuit by those who saw themselves as constituting the academic mainstream, the expansion of sports history has been largely due to the development of social and cultural history, asking new questions of the past. Having thus achieved the status of a sub-discipline, it no longer seems such an eccentric or even trivial pursuit.[1] As we

1 Dilwyn Porter: Sports History and Modern British History, in: Sport in History 31:2 (2011), pp. 180–196.

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have come to understand sport better, its utility as a key topic for opening up relatively inaccessible areas of past experience has become more obvious. "Because sport is liminal", Robert Edelman and Wayne Wilson have argued recently, "it constitutes and expresses its meanings not only through institutions and printed sources but in the spaces between them—in families, neighbourhoods, courtyards, street corners, the criminal world, parks, pubs, kitchens, cafes, schools, schoolyards, and places of worship".[2] Given its central importance in the nation's popular culture, it is not surprising that historical studies of English football should have proliferated. It has generated and continues to generate significant interest among historians, sociologists and scholars in other disciplines. Stephen Glynn, in his recent survey of British football films, explains this by suggesting that football is "a social barometer" serving to facilitate commentary "on issues of class, race and gender, with particular emphasis on British codes of masculinity, tribalism, regionalism and national identity".[3] Historians, especially since the publication in 1980 of Tony Mason's pioneering study, *Association Football and English Society 1863–1915*, have been attracted to 'the People's Game', as it is often called, for similar reasons.

There is, however, an imbalance in the historiography of English football as it currently stands. The focus to date has been mainly on its governing institutions, on the national team and on elite professional clubs and their followers. "It was obvious", Mason conceded, "that *relatively unorganised* games between groups of friends and acquaintances, or people casually coming together on a park or patch of waste ground with a ball and the inclination to play with it, will form the bulk of active football at any given time".[4] Yet his influential work concentrated almost exclusively on the *highly organised* minority, on the Football Association (FA), the Football League (EFL), the clubs affiliated to them and the archival evidence that their surviving records provided, supplemented by extensive reference to the sporting press. As a result, grassroots football was largely excluded, even though it had become more of an organised activity in the late 19th century as small clubs and local leagues proliferated. Some years elapsed before Nicholas Fishwick's *English Football and Society 1910–1950*, published in 1989, drew attention to the vibrant base of English football's pyramid and what the game meant to those who participated at this level. "Junior football", he asserted, using the official designation for adult soccer at the organised grassroots, was "the backbone of English football" and for many of those who played it or were otherwise involved, it was "their most important social activity".[5] Following this intervention,

2 Robert Edelman and Wayne Wilson: Introduction, in: Robert Edelman/Wayne Wilson (eds.): The Oxford Handbook of Sports History, Oxford 2017, p. 4.

3 Stephen Glynn: The British Football Film, Basingstoke, 2018, p. 12.

4 Tony Mason: Association Football and English Society 1863–1915, Brighton 1980, p. 21. My emphasis.

5 Nicholas Fishwick: English Football and Society, 1910–1950, Manchester 1989, pp. 1–25.

though the spotlight continued to shine predominantly on the professional elite, it became more difficult for historians to ignore the wider picture.

This was apparent in the chapter devoted to sport in Ross McKibbin's *Classes and Cultures*, published in 1998, which recognised Association Football as one of the most important of the various sub-cultures through which the English defined themselves in the first half of the 20th century. McKibbin recognised that there were some important regional variations but concluded that it "was played by more people more enthusiastically than any other game". Significantly, he drew attention to both "unorganised" street football—often far more organised than it might have appeared—and to more formally constituted clubs, each "properly kitted out" and with access to a pitch, many of which had links with local institutions or places of work. Young males, motivated primarily by enjoyment of the game and the desire to be sociable, moved easily from one to another, from the spontaneity of a "pick-up" game in the street to the relative formality of a small club playing on a hired pitch in a local park or at a convenient "rec" (recreation ground).[6] This helped to ensure that when Matthew Taylor's comprehensive history, *The Association Game: A History of British Football*, was published in 2008, there was more awareness of the social and cultural significance of grassroots recreational football.

Reliable figures were not always available but Taylor's best estimate, based on FA statistics and including school football, was that 1.6 million male participants of all ages, but mainly between 16 and 24, were playing regularly across the UK by the mid-1980s. Junior football, comprising FA-recognised clubs playing in local leagues, was thriving as never before with around 65,000 teams taking the field each week. Taylor's survey also gave serious consideration to Sunday football, officially recognised by the FA only in 1960 but increasingly the recreational footballer's day of choice, and to women's football which had grown rapidly following the establishment of the Women's Football Association (WFA) in 1969, encompassing 300 clubs, 21 regional leagues and around 6,000 affiliated players 10 years later. In addition, much football continued to be played on a relatively informal basis with five-a-side games indoors at council-run sports centres increasingly popular. Street football was still alive and kicking in the 1980s, though increasing traffic meant that working-class lads were now more likely to make unauthorised use of pitches marked out in public parks.[7] Evidence relating to grassroots recreational football as a social movement and a significant cultural phenomenon was by now impossible to ignore. "The story is obvious enough to any casual visitor to a public football pitch on a Sunday morning", historian James Walvin had pointed out a few years earlier. Facilities were often very basic

6 Ross McKibbin: Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951, Oxford 1998, pp. 339–341.

7 Matthew Taylor: The Association Game: A History of British Football, Harlow 2008, pp. 123–136; 253–264.

yet "footballers return to play, week after week, often adjourning to a local pub (which serves as footballing headquarters) to relax and plan".[8] It was an observation which testified simultaneously to the average Sunday footballer's passion for the game and the liminality of amateur or recreational sport. As a topic, this seemed to present social and cultural historians with significant opportunities.

Yet, when a history of amateur football in England at last appeared in 2015, it focused mainly on the elite, on the gentlemen amateurs and the much-maligned 'shamateurs' playing in the top 'amateur' leagues. Terry Morris's conclusion suggested a belated realisation that "the real amateurs" had always been playing somewhere else, for pub or works teams, or with their mates in the park on Sunday mornings, but they remained elusive.[9] Recreational football had been hiding in plain sight but historians still seemed reluctant to take the subject on, not least because the ongoing debate about amateurism in English sport often confused them. Superficially, there was a clear distinction between those who had played for money and those who had played for fun but, until the FA abandoned its commitment to amateurism in the early 1970s, the situation had been complicated. It was easy enough for historians to identify professionals but there was evidently more than one type of amateur. Reflecting on his playing career in the 1940s and 1950s, schoolmaster Ken Shearwood identified two: firstly, the middle-class, public-school and university educated player, who sought and received no payment, even when competing at senior level; secondly, the working-class 'shamateur', who was rewarded for his efforts on the field via covert payments thus maintaining amateur status. "You got paid unofficially, or boot money as it was called", according to a player of a slightly later era.[10]

There was, however a third type of amateur footballer, by far the most numerous, playing for junior clubs in local league and cup competitions. Shearwood, as his autobiography later revealed, had encountered them while playing recreationally in Cornwall alongside farmhands and fishermen for Mevagissey in the St Austell and District League in the 1940s. "The pitch lay high above the village", he recalled, "… situated on a sloping, uneven field overlooking the bay".[11] Matches against rivals from neighbouring villages were fiercely contested; it was serious fun, but essentially recreational, and also amateur, in the sense that players were not paid. Thus 'junior' football—the label the FA applied to organised football at the grassroots—was also 'amateur' football, though amateurism in this context had none of the connotations of social exclu-

8 James Walvin: The Only Game, Harlow 2001, p. 267.

9 Terry Morris: In a Class of their Own: A History of English Amateur Football, Sheffield 2015, pp. 339–340.

10 Ken Shearwood: Pegasus: The Famous Oxford and Cambridge Soccer Side of the Fifties, Oxford 1975, p. 39; Alan Hammond: The Sixties Boys, Bath 2009, p. 60.

11 Ken Shearwood: Hardly a Scholar, Ormskirk 1999, pp. 289–293.

sivity that defined the clubs formed by public-school alumni or university graduates; neither was it compromised by 'boot money' or other unauthorised payments.

It is practical, therefore, in defining the limits of this discussion, to avoid any confusion that might arise from placing undue emphasis on amateurism and to stress, instead, the idea of football pursued primarily as a form of recreation, while acknowledging that other factors may also be involved. This aligns usefully with the status assigned by the FA to clubs and players in English football's hierarchy in that it broadly corresponds with what is called 'junior football', which—to note a further complication—might also refer to youth football in some contexts. Anecdotal and autobiographical evidence—of which we will have more to say later—indicates that most of the clubs with which this discussion is concerned operated on a modest scale, sufficient to field only one or two teams. Some had a formative connection with or were supported by established institutions; evidence gathered in Birmingham in the late 1940s, for example, indicated that many clubs for boys were "sports clubs and little more", with football being especially popular. The same source indicated, however, that adolescent males often acted autonomously, instancing eleven boys who met in a shed on an allotment and formed themselves into a team. Later, a few adults became involved "and this original group has grown into a large and flourishing club, meeting in the local school".[12]

Simply knowing a few people with an identifiable common interest who had attended the same school or lived in the same neighbourhood was often enough. At school in Walthamstow, as Robert Barltrop records in his autobiography, a group of friends, keen footballers, simply got into the habit of playing together on games afternoons. In 1938, on leaving school, they simply "wanted to go on".[13] Within a few weeks, they had applied for membership of a local league, negotiating the transition from informal to formal organisation without difficulty. "We made a football team and ran it ourselves, and it survived", Barltrop later recalled with justifiable pride. Monarchs FC had a spectacularly unsuccessful first season, losing all its matches, but the memories that remained were "not of failure, but of good fellowship in an adventure".[14] Unsurprisingly, ephemerality was a noticeable characteristic of such clubs. A group of friends might look for a way of maintaining their interest in sport while continuing to enjoy each other's company. Recreational football offered a cheap and congenial option. After a few seasons, as work commitments increased and players moved away or found themselves with family responsibilities, the club would disband.

12 Eighty Thousand Adolescents: A Study of Young People in the City of Birmingham by the Staff and Students of Westhill Training College, London 1950, pp. 95, 114.

13 Robert Barltrop: A Funny Age: Growing Up in North East London between the Wars, Waltham Forest 1985, pp. 64–65.

14 Robert Barltrop: Bright Summer Dark Autumn: Growing Up in North East London between the Wars, Waltham Forest 1986, pp. 15–17.

For any small club, a significant amount of voluntary effort and goodwill was required to ensure survival over a longer period or to achieve and maintain a higher status, or simply to keep going from week to week. Funds had to be raised, subscriptions and match fees collected, pitches hired, referees paid, playing kit purchased, meetings attended and minutes kept; all this while selecting teams—or sometimes simply making sure that eleven players were available—arranging fixtures and providing post-match refreshments. Club anniversary brochures celebrating significant anniversaries routinely paid tribute to the stalwarts, often ex-players, on whose largely voluntary efforts they depended. Ernie Albon was associated with the Arlesey Town club in Bedfordshire as it progressed from the Biggleswade and District League in the 1920s to the dizzy heights of senior football in the South Midlands League. Having served the club as player, trainer and secretary, Ernie, who ran a pub in the village, became the caretaker at the club's ground, "a position he held into his mid eighties"; his wife, meanwhile, "was responsible for laundering the players' kit".[15] It should be noted that football clubs in England have relied heavily on this kind of support. A similar publication praised lottery and raffle organisers, along with others, who "week after week give their services without reward" and were "the backbone of Bromsgrove Rovers Football Club".[16] Through their voluntary efforts over the years, the Worcestershire town had a team—it had started in the Studley and District League and progressed over time to senior football—of which it could be proud.

In England, then, football at the grassroots might be represented as both a social movement and a cultural phenomenon. It is characterised principally by small football clubs, playing in organised competition at junior level against similar clubs from the same locality in district leagues. The voluntary principle is paramount in that such clubs are essentially recreational with members paying to play rather than receiving wages or some other form of remuneration. This extends to non-playing members who give their time and expertise—it helps if the honorary treasurer knows how to present a balance sheet—in aid of what they regard as a worthy cause. They may accumulate some social capital by volunteering in this way, though this is not a guaranteed outcome. Sometimes an external sponsor may be involved, as with a works team, but this does not mean that a club necessarily loses its autonomy or that it ceases to be run on a voluntary basis. "Of all the sectors in which British sports and leisure pursuits are to be found", Jeffrey Hill has observed, "it is the voluntary—the one created by people themselves as part of everyday life—that is the most extensive and deeply

15 Malcolm Skillings/Tony Smith: Arlesey Town Football Club: The First Hundred Years, Arlesey 1991, p. 10.

16 Bill Kings: Bromsgrove Rovers Centenary 1885–1985: A History of Bromsgrove Rovers Football Club, Bromsgrove 1985, p. 135.

embedded, reaching into the very fabric of social life".[17] Grassroots recreational football, therefore, is often relatively organised activity, the examination of which requires sports historians to engage with the broader project of social and cultural history. We might extend our inquiry usefully, however, by also considering more spontaneous manifestations of football culture. What happened on the streets and brick-strewn open spaces of English cities might not have been organised with the same formality but it was essentially recreational. Martin Johnes indicated in his pioneering study of soccer and society in South Wales that he intended to examine "the world of junior soccer from the district leagues at its heart, to the street football that caused so many broken windows and so much residential anger".[18] This effectively defines the scope of the discussion that follows which, to facilitate coherence, uses illustrative material dating mainly, though not exclusively, from the 1930s through to the 1970s.

Sources: Archived Club Records

For historians however, the People's Game at this level remains relatively unexplored territory. In mapping out this small segment of the past, we have a sense of its broad contours but our substantive knowledge of the everyday decision-making that determined the life history of any particular club, its ephemerality or longevity, its success or failure, remains patchy at best. Alan Metcalfe, in his study of North-East England in the 19th century noted that football, unlike the "traditional" sports that it superseded, "was different [in that] it was a team game which required […] an organizational infrastructure to bring some coherence to the game".[19] Uncovering this infrastructure and understanding how it worked is a task for which the forensic skills of the historian are well suited. Much relevant documentation in the form of club and league records and published histories is available, albeit subject to the usual caveats regarding the difficulties of constructing a view of the past from inevitably imperfect materials. "Stories abound of club records, being destroyed because they were deemed unimportant, or simply left to decay", as sports historian Simon Inglis observed, more in sorrow than in anger. [20] In tracing the history of grassroots clubs in England, therefore, sports historians also have to rely, possibly more than they would like, on evidence derived from the local press. Club officials could not anticipate our interest in their past: they

17 Jeffrey Hill: Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth-Century Britain, Basingstoke 2002, pp. 130–131.

18 Martin Johnes: Soccer and Society: South Wales 1900–1939, Cardiff 2002, p. 81.

19 Alan Metcalfe: Leisure and Recreation in a Victorian Mining Community: The Social Economy of Leisure in North-East England, 1820–1914, Abingdon 2008, p. 148.

20 Simon Inglis: Sporting Records: Winners and Losers in the Archiving of British Sport, in: Archives: The Journal of the British Records Association 50: 130–131 (2015), pp. 66–70.

had other concerns and often it is only when local newspapers report their activities that we can be certain that a club existed at all. It will be argued here that the press has to be read as closely as archival evidence but that it may be a more robust source for the history of grassroots football than has previously been acknowledged.

Although their sub-discipline is of relatively recent origin, sports historians in the UK have tended to be rather conservative in their methodological approach. Few, however, would now regard archives as unproblematic repositories of objective truths. Yet even the most sceptical acknowledge that archival research remains important, simply urging "a more cautious engagement with archived materials".[21] This requires acknowledging the provenance of an archived source—the very fact that it has been preserved may in itself be significant—and, in addition, showing some awareness of its limitations.

That the records relating to Battle Athletic, playing mainly in local competitions in and around Reading, an industrial town about 30 miles from London, should have been deposited at the Berkshire Record Office and preserved for posterity, is indicative of a series of judgements made about the significance of this particular club and of football itself in the local community. Close reading of the minutes of committee meetings and other miscellaneous papers that have survived, facilitates the construction of an outline narrative spanning the years from the club's formation in 1935 through to the early 1970s. They are useful sources of information in that they make it possible to identify the club's officials and active members and the infrastructure they created to run a football club and to ensure its survival. These surviving traces of its past seem similar in substance and scope to those of the Severn Sisters Rugby Football Club as described by Martin Johnes. "Although the club was relatively small and not one of Wales' rugby elite", he noted, "its accounts and minutes show the complexity of running a rugby club, and how committee business in this amateur sport was dominated by organising travel, insurance and raising money to cover all expenses".[22] For Battle Athletic, as for Seven Sisters, the surviving records suggest that what happened off the field was at least as important as what happened on it, with raffles, dances and other events organised to raise funds giving the club a presence in the wider community in which it was located.

A perusal of the archived minute books of Battle Athletic indicates a pre-occupation with practicalities. The club's ambitions to achieve playing success were constrained by an acknowledged requirement to live within its available resources. A minuted decision in July 1937 committed the club to continuing in the Reading Minor League "as the expense of going into another League would be too great for us this

21 Douglas Booth: The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History, Abingdon 2005, pp. 84–88.

22 Martin Johnes: Archives and Historians of Sport, in: International Journal of the History of Sport 32:15 (2015), pp. 1784–1798.

season". Much attention is devoted to the organisation of fund-raising activities, notably an annual dinner-dance, which became the social highlight of the club's year. Such events drew women into what was a male-dominated social space and a "Ladies Social Committee" was formed in September 1946; the president explaining "that they would be of good use to the Club, especially at Social Events".[23] Naturally, the life story of each club is unique and this is reflected in the particular content of their archived records. A second book of minutes, covering meetings held between 1953 and 1955, is primarily useful to sports historians because it supplies details of an arrangement linking Battle Athletic to Reading FC, the local professional club. In essence, Battle would recommend talented young players to Reading for coaching; in return, the professionals offered an annual subsidy of £100 and access to their training facilities on one night a week.[24] Once this arrangement broke down, Battle's financial position weakened and a third minute book records a protracted struggle to survive over a period of about 15 years through to the early 1970s, with the club abandoning its connection with senior amateur football and now fielding only two teams, one at junior and one at youth level. A statement by Charles Kearse, Battle's long-standing chairman, in February 1957 had made it clear that "the club could not carry on in its present form". Both money and the goodwill on which a voluntary organisation depended were in increasingly short supply; he "was no longer prepared to spend as much money or time as he had done in the past, nor did he think was the treasurer".[25] Thereafter, though it was still in existence in the early 1970s, the minute book entries become progressively less informative, leaving the impression that the club was by then but a pale shadow of its former self.

The archival deposit relating to Battle Athletic is relatively extensive and richly suggestive. It includes, alongside the formal record, some unpublished typescripts dating from the late 1940s, compiled by honorary assistant secretary and reserve team manager Guy Michener, which supply an insider's view of the club's early development and the infrastructure within which its volunteers operated. It offers a sense of the club as it saw itself, rooted firmly in its own brief history and representing the district of Reading in which it was located. Again, close reading is required but Michener's typescript adds depth and complexity to the formal record, inviting sports historians to ask more nuanced questions, for example, regarding the role of women in the club. At social events, Michener noted, "the Ladies took it on themselves to be responsible for all the catering side as well as other duties".[26] Was this a role assigned to them by

23 Berkshire Record Office, Reading [BRO]: D/EX1853/1/1, Minute book of Battle Athletic Football Club, 1935–1953.

24 BRO: D/EX1853/1/2. Minute book of Battle Athletic Football Club, 1953–1955.

25 BRO: D/EX1853/1/3, Minute book of Battle Athletic Football Club, 1956–1972.

26 BRO: D/EX1853/1/1, Guy Michener, Battle Athletic Football Club: A Short History of a Very Successful Amateur Club, typescript dated 1 December 1947.

the men who ran the club? Or, as the words "took it on themselves" might imply, was it one that the women assigned to themselves?

For historians of sport, the formal records kept by grassroots clubs generate important insights, not the least of which relate to the plethora of community-based activities which were routinely organised to ensure that a team could play on a regular basis. The minute book of St Sebastian's FC in Wokingham, a few miles from Reading, a much less ambitious club than Battle Athletic, records that it was formed in 1946 after a meeting at the parish hall decided "to create a football team for the local lads". Once formally constituted, one of its first decisions was to establish an "Entertainments Committee" to organise a fund-raising dance. What happened on the field was important. The club chairman opened a meeting in March 1947 by congratulating the team "on their Stamina and Pluck during the last few months [of] Snow, Ice, Rain and Mud". Generally, however, the minutes testify to the club's determined self-sufficiency and the extent to which it relied on the goodwill of members who donated their clothing coupons to enable the club to purchase kit and spent their Sunday mornings making necessary repairs to the pitch.[27] The voluntary effort required to sustain a team in the Reading and District Football League should not be underestimated and this was replicated at thousands of small clubs up and down the country.

Sources: Anniversary Brochures and Other Published Materials

Small grassroots clubs from time to time, often when they reach a significant anniversary, generate documentation of value to the historian in the form of brochures or other publications outlining their histories. These are of variable quality, often taking the form of diligent compilations by enthusiastic club officials. "Unfortunately," as Jeffrey Hill has observed, "… most are celebratory and uncritical, and do not raise the kind of questions that historians should be asking".[28] The brochure produced by Harwell Football Club in Berkshire to celebrate its centenary is especially disappointing in this respect, though it does include a letter from an official of the local referees' association observing that the success of a club operating at the grassroots—the editor of the brochure refers to it as the "Harwell Village Football Club"—is best measured not by trophies won but "by the amount of enjoyment, relaxation and pleasure given and received".[29] It thus focuses attention on the essentially recreational function of a

27 BRO: D/EX2442/1, Minute book of St Sebastian's FC, Wokingham, 1946–1965. Clothing, like many other items, was in short supply and subject to rationing regulations in 1947.

28 Jeffrey Hill: Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth-Century Britain, p. 144.

29 BRO: D/EX2185/5/3, Harwell Football Club Centenary Brochure, Harwell, 1986.

village club. One problem for the researcher is that club histories often record activities on a season-by-season basis so that important themes are fragmented and thus more difficult to identify. Arlesey Town's centenary publication, based largely on a diligent search of local newspaper sources, contains much to interest sports historians and social and cultural historians generally. There is a tantalising reference to the disaffection experienced by some supporters in the late 1950s, who felt that the club was leaving them behind in its quest for higher status. Critics argued that it "no longer catered for local lads who had to seek their football outside the village" and that the new green strip adopted for the 1958–59 season broke with tradition, Arlesey having played in blue for over 70 years.[30] This episode, touching on the relationship between sport, identity and a sense of place, demands further attention but the authors pass on quickly to the events of the following season. Yet publications of this kind are significant sources in that they usually represent an image that a club wishes to present of itself at a particular point in time. A contribution to the history of the Old Monovians club in North-East London, dating from 1977 but available on its website, indicates that the work of preparing pitches and maintaining facilities was undertaken by members on an entirely voluntary basis while outlining the various crises which the club had experienced over the previous 15 years. "We have survived more than one hundred burglaries", it explained, "and are coping with the present inflation by increasing our fund-raising activities".[31] An image of the club as a resourceful, plucky survivor with a loyal membership was thus constructed and projected.

Sources: Local Newspapers

Sports historians, it is widely acknowledged, depend more than most on newspapers, perhaps increasingly so in an era of digitisation. Much of our understanding of the sporting past is derived from daily newspapers circulating nationally or regionally, from weekly newspapers offering specialist coverage, and—of particular relevance here—from local newspapers where coverage of grassroots football was most likely to be found. These were mostly published weekly, though some towns were large enough to justify an evening newspaper, appearing from Monday to Friday; some of which might even have run a special 'football edition' on Saturdays. Tony Mason identifies *Saturday Night*, published in Birmingham in the early 1880s, as the first of many newspapers of this kind.[32] However, while press coverage of sport expanded generally,

30 Malcolm Skillings/Tony Smith: Arlesey Town Football Club, p. 30.

31 Derek Steward: Old Monovians Football: Three Crises—1963–77, at: http://www.old-monovians.com/old-monovians/o-m-football.html (accessed on 21 February 2019).

32 Tony Mason: Association Football and English Society 1863–1915, pp. 192–194.

there was a discernible trend in weekly local newspapers towards "in-depth coverage of sport in the locality", and this is of particular relevance here. It was one of the ways in which they distinguished themselves from newspapers circulating regionally and nationally, effectively staking out their territories. Press historian Andrew Walker, with reference to this trend, has argued that it also "reflected the emergence of considerably more organised amateur football at grassroots level with a myriad of local leagues and cup competitions".[33] The two developments appear to have been inter-related. A history of the Kidderminster and District League, which started in 1894, has noted that the expansion of the competition and of football in the town generally owed much to "far greater coverage in the local press".[34] For a journalist, the avalanche of football-related copy that descended on them each weekend could be daunting. "There were masses of it", John Macadam, newly arrived at the *Liverpool Courier* in the late 1920s, discovered, "… leagues I had never even heard of—Cheshire Leagues, Wirral Leagues, local Combinations".[35] If we are to grasp the nature of the local press as a source for grassroots football, however, it is important to understand that much of this copy was generated by the clubs themselves.

Staffing levels on local newspapers meant that it was unusual to assign a reporter to local league and cup fixtures and there was a tendency to rely heavily on voluntary contributions which could be sub-edited before publication. "The *Walthamstow Guardian* gave a large amount of space to minor football", Robert Barltrop recalled; the Monarchs FC, "like scores of other clubs", submitted match reports and other news items.[36] It was common practice for a staff journalist to be assigned responsibility for collating and editing this copy and a sympathetic relationship often resulted. The journalist fulfilling this function for the *Eastern Evening News* in Norwich, was regarded as "a great champion of the Norwich and District Thursday League", an unfashionable competition but a reliable source of copy on a day when other sports news was generally in short supply.[37] Local newspapers actively solicited news items from club secretaries, some supplying printed forms on which reports could be written. "As soon as you find that spare moment after Saturday's game", ran a typical announcement of the 1950s, "sit down and write a few notes for the *Gazette*. Let us have your

33 Andrew Walker: Reporting Play: The Local Newspaper and Sports Journalism, c.1870–1914, in: Journalism Studies 7:3 (2006), pp. 452–462.

34 Tony Dwyers: Kidderminster and District Football League: One Hundred Years of Football, Kidderminster 1994, p. 10.

35 John Macadam: The Macadam Road, London 1957, p. 57.

36 Robert Barltrop: Bright Summer Dark Autumn: Growing Up in North East London between the Wars, p. 17.

37 Paul Oxbury: The League of Forgotten Men: A History of the Norwich and District Thursday Football League, Norwich 2014, p. 99.

teams, goalscorers and any points of interest about the game".[38] It was a system that served both the press and grassroots football well, filling column inches while simultaneously anchoring recreational football in the life of local communities. Publicity helped to guarantee a small following for recreational sport. Tom Ireland, a former secretary of the Thursday League in Norwich, claimed that there would be complaints when local newspapers failed to advertise fixtures in advance. These were mostly from senior citizens, "anxious for their fix of midweek football, and not happy that they did not know where to go the following afternoon".[39] Moreover, local newspapers could be certain that the players themselves would be interested. One grassroots footballer loved playing for St Matthews in the late 1960s because its match reports appeared in the *Leicester Mercury*. "I used to go to the shop every week and buy a copy just because my name was in it", he later confessed.[40] Match reports and other items submitted by club officials were essentially a promotional activity and this has to be factored into any assessment of their value as historical evidence.

Opportunities: Oral History

The sources reviewed above would have been familiar to historians practicing their craft well before the emergence of Sports History as a self-conscious sub-discipline in the 1980s. We are now, perhaps, so aware of their limitations that we fail to exploit their full potential. Digitisation of archives and newspapers has led some historians to frame their research solely around what is available online; what is available offline is increasingly neglected. Yet there is much to be gained from sports historians asking new questions of archival deposits. Our knowledge of street football remains limited but Martin Johnes moved it forward by the simple expedient of interrogating police records in order to estimate the extent to which it was played in Cardiff and who played it. As unemployment levels rose in the 1930s, he concluded, adult males were more likely to be arrested than boys, indicating a degree of social panic in that men occupying their enforced leisure time in this way were increasingly regarded as a social problem.[41] This is a compelling example of football's liminality, of the way in which it facilitates access to areas where the public and private spheres intersect. Evidence derived from archival deposits might be usefully supplemented with reference to autobiographical writing of various kinds. Les Jolly, in an article published by a local history society, growing up in London, recalled playing in the street "with coats put down to

38 East Kent Gazette: 14 September 1951, p. 6.
39 Paul Oxbury: The League of Forgotten Men: A History of the Norwich and District Thursday Football League, p. 215.
40 Highfield Rangers: An Oral History, Leicester 1993, p. 34.
41 Martin Johnes: Soccer and Society: South Wales 1900–1939, pp. 82–85.

act as goalposts" and the heated arguments that were part of the experience.[42] Perhaps this was why 'Mr R', a 19-year-old clerk, interviewed for the purposes of a social survey in the early 1950s, confessed that he had never actually played the game; his parents had not wanted him "to mix with the boys who played football as they were very common".[43] This points the sports historian towards the tentative conclusion that football in the street, though a commonplace activity in mid-19th century England, was incompatible with notions of respectability.

It also directs us towards oral testimony as an important source of evidence for sports history and to the methodological implications of oral history in general. Arguably, oral history has a large role to play in expanding our understanding of grassroots sport in that it provides access to personal and collective experiences which are inadequately reflected in surviving traces of the past with which historians are more familiar. This is not to say that oral testimony should be privileged as we construct our account of what happened; it requires close reading in order to reach an assessment of its value. Like any other source, it is "in need of interpretation, and revealing of the limitations in representations of historical reality".[44] The truth it is not but it has its particular uses. As Fiona Skillen and Carol Osborne have suggested, one of the most obvious advantages of oral history is that it provides "a singularly efficient method of reaching wider populations"; it has proved especially useful "for those researchers seeking to instate those social groups thus far largely 'hidden' from sports history".[45] As far as the history of organised recreational football in England is concerned, there are a number of groups that fall into this category, most notably women and ethnic minorities. The archival sources on which historians have conventionally depended tend to reproduce the power structures which conditioned their creation.

It was no accident that women's football was hidden for so long; its status was determined by the FA's decision to discourage female participation by declaring in 1921 that it was an 'unsuitable' game for women and denying them access to the facilities of its affiliated clubs. This created a climate in which women's football was routinely ignored by the press or characterised as an aberration, a view which some of those who played in the era before the FA changed its strategy may have unconsciously internalised. Broadly, our understanding of the organisational development of the grassroots women's game in England is that it seems to share many of the characteristics of its male counterpart. Jean Williams, in a pioneering study published in

42 Les Jolly: Hackney Schoolboy Football in the Thirties, in: East London Record 17 (1994–95), pp. 19–24.

43 Seebohm Rowntree/G.R. Lavers: English Life and Leisure: A Social Study, London 1951, pp. 118–119.

44 Douglas Booth: The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History, pp. 94–98.

45 Fiona Skillen/Carol Osborne: It's Good to Talk: Oral History, Sports History and Heritage, in: International Journal of the History of Sport 32:15 (2015), pp. 1883–1898.

2003, depicted it as "a voluntaristic initiative populated by enthusiasts".[46] It remains an under-researched area, though sufficient evidence has already been gathered from women footballers to suggest that oral history supplies a necessary underpinning for further research.

"I think we've taken some of the limelight off the men's team and I don't think some of them like it", was the testimony offered by one woman relating to her experiences at Highfield Rangers in Leicester, originally a men's club, in the early 1990s. She continued, "The men just think [the club] belongs to them because they've been running it so long and they think we're taking over."[47] This would have struck a familiar chord with some of the men she was criticising whose own narratives of exclusion and marginalisation were also validated via oral history. "It's about the history", one explained. "If you've not experienced it you won't really understand what it's about".[48] The experience of playing for a club comprising young African-Caribbean men as it worked its way up through eight divisions of the Leicester and District Mutual League in the 1970s, might have remained 'hidden' were it not for an oral history project undertaken in partnership with the Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research in the early 1990s. "Many times we had fights in the league", one player recalled, "and at the time we just thought that it was part and parcel of the society that didn't want us here".[49] Archives, as Paul Ian Campbell observed later, reflecting on his own research on football and the construction of African-Caribbean identity in Leicester, usually reflected only one predominant perspective; as Douglas Booth has argued, they were "metaphors for power".[50] Media coverage, similarly, is routinely constructed around dominant tropes thus ensuring that the experiences of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities remains out of sight and out of reach. "Against these kinds of problems", Campbell explained, "… the inclusion of orally sourced data was considered the most pragmatic solution".[51] It allowed him to access accounts of a particular grassroots football experience which could be regarded as authentic, widening the base of the knowledge we require to write history from the 'bottom up'.

46 Jean Williams: A Game for Rough Girls? A History of Women's Football in England, London 2003, pp. 102–106.

47 Highfield Rangers: An Oral History, p. 7.

48 Ibid., p. 53.

49 Ibid., pp. 118–119; see also Andrew Ward/John Williams: Football Nation: Sixty Years of the Beautiful Game, London 2009, pp. 155–161.

50 Douglas Booth: Sites of Truth or Metaphors of Power: Refiguring the Archive, in: Sport in History 26:1 (2006), pp. 91–109.

51 Paul Ian Campbell: Cavaliers Made Us 'United': Local Football, Identity Politics and Second-Generation African-Caribbean Youth in the East Midlands, c. 1970–9, in: Sport in History 33:2 (2013), pp. 169–194.

Opportunities: Autobiographical Writing

The oral testimonies referred to above might be characterised as fragments of autobiography elicited for the purposes of historical research. Published autobiographies may also offer useful insights to the historian of recreational football, though they require critical reading. It has to be acknowledged that those attributed to stars of the professional game are methodologically challenging, not least because they are so often ghosted, inevitably raising questions regarding provenance and reliability. Most, however, as Joyce Woolridge has indicated, follow a pattern in which lessons learned at the grassroots feature at an early stage as autobiographical subjects trace the onwards and upwards trajectories of their exemplary lives.[52] Arguably more useful in assisting historians are the autobiographies of players whose modest careers began and ended at a relatively low level; footballers whose experience of the game was essentially recreational. For B. S. Johnson, best known as an experiment novelist, recalling his teenage years in working-class in 1940s West London, "[football] so dominated our lives that we could not play enough of it". There was, he claimed, a special piquancy to be found in Sunday League football at this time, knowing that if it came to the attention of the FA "you could be banned for life from ever taking part in organised soccer again".[53] David Simons, who wrote his autobiography after retiring from a career in dentistry, was similarly enthusiastic and almost certainly a better footballer than Johnson. Significantly, his memories of playing for teams fielded by Maccabi, the Jewish youth organisation, in 1950s Leicester testify to the lived experiences of another marginalised ethnic minority. Later, while at university in Birmingham, Simons turned out regularly for another Maccabi team in the South Birmingham League and his recollections are highly indicative of the liminality which attracts historians to the subject of sport. Sensitised since his schooldays to the social gulf which divided soccer in England from rugby union, he was not surprised to find that "the rugger crowd" who shared the soccer club's facilities "always seemed to turn up in Jaguars with dolly birds who were there to make sandwiches". Simons and his teammates, meanwhile, would "scuttle off home" after the match, six players crammed into a modest Ford Anglia.[54] No sandwiches, no dolly birds … but an experience at the fraught intersection of social class and sport.

52 Joyce Woolridge: These Sporting Lives: Football Autobiographies 1955–80, in: Sport in History 28:4 (2008), pp. 620–640.

53 B. S. Johnson, [On Football], previously unpublished typescript dated 8 February 1966, in: Jonathan Coe/Philp Tew/Julia Jordan (eds.): Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson, London 2013, pp. 407–411.

54 David Simons: A Family Memoir: Out of Alfreton, Bakewell 2013, pp. 149–151, 187.

Having been founded by two journalists, John Moynihan and Brian Glanville, the club history of Chelsea Casuals, founded in 1957, has been well documented. "It was in the Queens Elm in the Fulham Road", recalled Moynihan, "where I first heard that I would be included in a team which would be playing in Hyde Park the following Sunday". The Casuals appear to have been an exotic side, determinedly bohemian but with impeccably *bourgeois* credentials, progressing from scratch games to organised competition. Moynihan's encapsulation of the Sunday football experience is suggestive of its vitality as a social movement and cultural phenomenon of the 1960s. "The teams increase, competition swells", he observed in 1966, "there is even a Queens Elm League".[55] Brian Glanville's memoirs, published in 1999, which draw on Moynihan's earlier account, touch again on the relationship between sport and class. Some tensions were inevitable once the Casuals began to play on Hackney Marshes, a venue where East London's recreational footballers congregated every Sunday for a testosterone-fuelled celebration of working-class masculinity. Reg Drury, the team captain, another journalist but also an East Ender, realised that his credibility was at stake every time he appeared on the Marshes. The tradition of calling for 'Three Cheers' for the opposition at the final whistle—a ritual redolent of the gentlemanly behaviour that middle-class sportsmen so valued—made Drury uneasy. "I can't give three cheers", he confessed. "It sticks in my throat".[56] Chelsea Casuals were not a typical Sunday side, but these fragments of autobiography supply a more than useful suggestive glimpse of an era when recreational football in England was in transition and becoming less exclusively working-class in terms of participation.

Reflecting on the role of sport in his life and recalling a time when he played on the wing for his cub pack in Norwich, novelist and critic D. J. Taylor recalls the elation that he felt when playing football as a ten-year-old boy for the 14th Norwich Cubs on a misty Saturday afternoon in February 1971. Slipping clear of his marker he closes in on the goal and scores to the delight of his father: "The last things I see are my father's hands raised above his head in exaltation". This leads him to reflect that, "Soccer—sport generally—is essentially a romantic activity".[57] In the scholarly search for clues which might explain the relationship between soccer and society, this is easily overlooked. Autobiographical accounts of the experience of playing football and its attendant pleasures redirect our attention to the individual, who joins with a collection of other individuals to make a team, and then with yet another collection of individuals to make a match. The banal question, "How did you feel?" is one that we should be prepared to ask from time to time; it may have its uses. The autobiography

55 John Moynihan: The Soccer Syndrome: From the Primeval Forties, London 1987, pp. 193–203.

56 Brian Glanville: Football Memories, London 1999, p. 145.

57 D. J. Taylor: On the Corinthian Spirit: The Decline of Amateurism in Sport, London 2006, pp. 17–18.

of poet Dannie Abse, reflecting on his days as a medical student in London during the 1940s, suggests that he would have responded with unmistakeable passion. Playing for his college first eleven in 1943–44 stands out as one of the highlights of his life. 60 years later, he could "remember the details of some games with disturbing clarity". He confesses to having "enjoyed my soccer then, at least on some days, as much as I have sexual intercourse on some nights with the right person".[58] Sports historians were slow to reach the cultural turn in history; they have some distance to travel before they reach the emotional turn. However, when it comes to explaining why anyone should be prepared to get out of bed on a wet Sunday morning to experience the raw delights of grassroots football, Abse offers a visceral rationale which demands to be taken seriously and is not easily accessed via other sources.

Opportunities: Fiction and Other Forms of Creative Writing

This brings us to fiction and creative writing in general and whether it may be regarded as a legitimate source for the history of sport. Here, Brian Glanville provides a useful link, his Sunday mornings with Chelsea Casuals on Hackney Marshes having prompted both autobiographical reminiscence and an evocative short story, *The King of Hackney Marshes*, published in 1963, while he was still an active player. It takes the form of a narrative delivered by an enthusiastic Sunday footballer, good enough to play for Clapton at senior amateur level on Saturdays and to have been offered a trial for a local professional club. As his story unfolds, we learn how important the weekly Sunday ritual once was to him, how it shaped his sense of self, how this was undermined after he became diabetic, and, finally, how he came to know and accept his new self. Some details about the experience of playing on the Marshes are included. "The dressing rooms are rubbish"; the pitches, more than a hundred of them, are "very small and one on top of the other, no goal-nets".[59] Some historians would be inclined to discount this evidence altogether, disregarding it completely or, perhaps, drawing on it simply to add colour to a history of recreational football in the 1950s based on a reading of more conventional sources. Most would accept that it is useful in that it might prompt new or pertinent questions about football and masculinity or the significance of Hackney Marshes as a cultural space or, more prosaically, about the demand for and availability of pitches in mid-20th century London. Others would view it more positively. Jeffrey Hill, for example, would argue that Glanville has, in effect, created a primary source "simply by being part of society and the historical

58 Dannie Abse: Goodbye Twentieth Century: An Autobiography, London 2001, pp. 73–74.
59 Brian Glanville: The King of Hackney Marshes and Other Stories, London 1963, pp. 72–77.

process that is unfolding at the time in which they write".[60] In this sense, Glanville's short story is like any other primary source, a surviving trace of the particular segment of the past from which it is derived, though sports historians may have to show more awareness of literary criticism in order to interrogate it in depth.

The capacity of creative writing to prompt an emotional response is important here, over-riding questions about whether or not it represents some kind of historical reality. Daniel Gray's essay, *Shirts on a Line*, invokes grassroots football's romantic element: team strips hanging out to dry are recalled as "part of an enchanting landscape", albeit that they belong to "to a pub side or village B squads of seventh divisions". Washed, dried and packed into a holdall, they are transformed into "another example of the weekly renewal which underpins all football".[61] As all footballers know, hope springs eternal every weekend. This powerful and moving image draws attention to a miasma of ineffability surrounding the People's Game which using the sources identified above as 'opportunities' might help us disperse. Archives, even when they yield an abundance of information, as Nicholas Piercey discovered when researching the history of early 20th-century Dutch football, inevitably limit what it is possible for us to know. His reflections on the methodological dilemmas which confronted him on finding the membership registers of Rotterdam's football clubs in the archives of the *Koninklijke Nederlanse Voetbalbond* (KNVB) will resonate with all who have studied the history of recreational football in England. Hundreds of names represented individuals, historical actors who "were more than the sum of the data collected about them"; how best could they be represented?[62] The records of attendance that preface the minutes taken at any grassroots club's committee meetings in themselves tell us little about the men and women listed and generate comparable frustrations. Oral history may help to some extent but its practitioners only have access to the living and reclaim but a small segment of their memories. It is, of course, important that sports historians maximise the potential of the surviving traces of the past that are available to them and extend the range of sources wherever possible. Beyond that, they will have to look to methodological innovation if they are to represent the leagues of forgotten men and women and their lived experiences more fully. Piercey sought a solution to his problem by describing an imaginary journey through Rotterdam in August 1914 in which many of the club members who exist in the archives only as names are assigned fictional roles. It was boldly experimental, but we are in territory where some leaps of the historical imagination may well be justified.

60 Jeffrey Hill: Sport in History: An Introduction, Basingstoke 2011, pp. 102–105.

61 Daniel Gray: Saturday, 3PM: 50 Eternal Delights of Modern Football, London 2016, pp. 77–78.

62 Nicholas Piercey: Four Histories about Early Dutch Football 1910–1920, London 2016, pp. 72–106.

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