

# Making modern sport

## The impact of the Industrial Revolution

Graham Curry charts how the Industrial Revolution influenced the development of sport

The Industrial Revolution took place roughly between the years 1750 and 1900 — the precise beginning and end is still debated by historians. Improvements in textile manufacturing, steam power and iron making were the first significant leaps forward. In a second phase, electricity began to be widely used and the manufacture of steel in large quantities was developed by Henry Bessemer in Sheffield.

These events created more wealth for a particular section of society, and groups of middle-class industrialists built large factories, employed vast workforces and lived lavishly from the profits of their businesses.

### Changing times

Popular recreation in Britain was significantly affected by the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. This was mainly due to changes in work patterns, which no longer took into account the variations in seasonal duties. In addition, a lack of open spaces resulted in cramped, industrialised urban areas.

Initially, the demands of the Industrial Revolution changed working-class leisure by reducing the amount of free time available and contributing to transformations in the character of many traditional sporting pastimes. Later, however, the productivity-raising innovations associated with industrialisation enabled the incomes of working people to be increased and their leisure time to be extended. These parallel developments stimulated a demand for commercialised spectator sport, which was enhanced by growing urbanisation, offering entrepreneurs concentrated markets.

Philanthropists campaigned for extra holidays, reduced hours and increased wages, while many employers realised the benefits for production of a revived and healthy workforce. Trade unions also fought for improvements. Generally, by around 1870, improvements in living standards were becoming evident for the majority of the working classes.

The process of industrialisation had a profound effect on all elements of society, including sport. Football benefited most. The 'people's game', as it came to be known, became the epitome of a modern urban leisure activity — played in a limited space on a regular basis.

It is possible to isolate a variety of societal factors that were significant in the development of sport in Victorian Britain:

- urbanisation
- the influence of the church
- transport
- the civilising process
- the public schools

### Urbanisation

One consequence of industrialisation was that large numbers of the population shifted from an environment that was based around rural cottage industries — where one person made a single item of clothing in a week — to huge factories where workers were capable of producing hundreds of pieces in just a few hours.

### Learning outcomes



After reading this article:

- all will be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the impact of societal factors on the development of sport in Britain
- most will be able to analyse how differing societal factors had an impact on sport's development
- some will apply this understanding to enable them to evaluate how sport has evolved to the present day

In 1820 there were only five British cities, besides London, with a population of more than 100,000, and a further ten with more than 40,000. Fifty years later, there were 17 cities with more than 100,000 people and 31 with more than 40,000. Employees initially lived close to their places of work, as people did not generally have access to efficient means of transport. Sporting facilities such as football grounds developed close at hand, together with public houses and places of worship.

Saturday half day — the practice of finishing early on a Saturday — was established through a series of parliamentary bills that generally sought to reduce working hours. However, this custom was not universally granted to all trades in all areas and may explain the slow growth of sport in certain parts of the country. This custom explains why Saturday afternoon is generally recognised as the day of sport in Britain, with Sunday being largely kept until recent times as a day of worship and rest.

The perfect urban sport?

The development of many aspects of football is often said to have run hand in hand with urbanisation. Certainly the foundation of the club game from the 1880s had strong connections with

### Key term



**Philanthropists** Well-meaning individuals who, through their generous actions, contribute to the advancement of others less fortunate than themselves.



larger conurbations. Of the 12 founder members of the Football League in 1888, all except Burnley and Accrington came from towns or cities with populations of over 80,000.

But why were the clubs so popular, and what attracted the thousands of spectators who came to watch the spectacle unfold? Undoubtedly it was a sense of local pride and, for those not quite skilled enough to play, a sense of shared identity and purpose in the struggles against representatives of rival communities. New arrivals from sedate rural areas required a social setting where they were able to feel accepted by their newfound friends and neighbours. The local football club was ideal.

However, it was not until the economic benefits of industrialisation filtered down to the mass of the population that a large and regular paying clientele could be relied upon for sports events. This slow rate of economic development restricted the scale of widespread commercialised sport until the late nineteenth century.

The phenomenon of spectator sport developed from this environment. The factors of large urban populations within walking distance of stadia, increased leisure time and more expendable income resulted in large crowds watching local football teams compete against the best that other communities could offer. With its move to full-blown professionalism in 1885, the 'People's Game' was able to cash in.

#### Deurbanisation?

Bringing the debate forward to the present day, the wheel of demography (the study of changes in population) continues to turn. In the twentieth century there was a move towards suburban dwelling, as people moved out of the crowded centres and, with better forms of transport, became commuters. Some sporting facilities turned their backs on their urban roots and built new stadia near easily accessible motorways and rail or tram lines. The London Olympic Stadium has nine tube and train links, is on

numerous bus routes and is less than 40 minutes from all of the capital's main railway stations.

However, this re-positioning has not been the case for many English football clubs. They and their supporters have clung tenaciously to their original, long-standing grounds, which provide a place of pilgrimage for fans, who in many cases have moved away from the immediate surrounding areas.

#### Influence of the church

The contrasting views of the church with regard to sport over the centuries make for interesting reading. Prior to 1700, religious figures generally frowned upon merrymaking of any kind, though festival days were usually supported. With the onset of urbanisation, working-class excess in the form of drunkenness, wagering and violence was condemned by secular and religious authorities alike. The vast spectacles of Shrove Tuesday such as large-scale mob football were generally held in disrepute, though some, such as the Ashbourne game in Derbyshire, managed to survive.

Public schools were concerned with producing Christian gentlemen and used sport to enhance their values. However, religion was never far away. When one walks through the gates of these institutions the two things that immediately strike you are the enormous chapels, which often resemble cathedrals, and the vast swathes of sports fields.

Ex-public schoolboys often became muscular Christians in their efforts to teach the working classes the values they had acquired through games at their educational institutions. The emerging middle classes were vociferously outspoken against the twin evils of drinking and gambling on dog

or horse racing, which were felt to feed off each other to create a subculture of misery that dragged otherwise respectable men into criminal acts. With improved communications in the form of the railway, the popular press and the telegraph, Victorian muscular Christians feared a whole new industry would appear that positively encouraged gambling almost as a way of life.

In an era of growing philanthropy and social awareness, churchmen would practise muscular Christianity by founding sporting clubs to distract working men from the evils of drink.

Several football clubs that still exist today were formed in this way. Everton began life as St Domingo while Bolton Wanderers was originally called Christ Church. The local vicar was president of the latter for a time and the club changed its name after he objected to the club holding meetings in church premises without him being present. In 1879, a typical fixture list in Sheffield included the likes of Dronfield United Methodists, Crookes Wesleyan and Chapel Unitarians. In Nottingham 20 teams with obvious religious connections played in the 1877/78 season, including Nottingham Templars, St Mary's Institute and St Stephen's United.

#### New religion?

The recent decades have seen a reduction in organised religion, to the point where attendance at church services has declined markedly. Increased and widespread literacy, rationalism (free thinking based on scientific principles), class conflict and monetary independence have all combined to give the vast majority of the population the ability to question long-standing traditions and values.

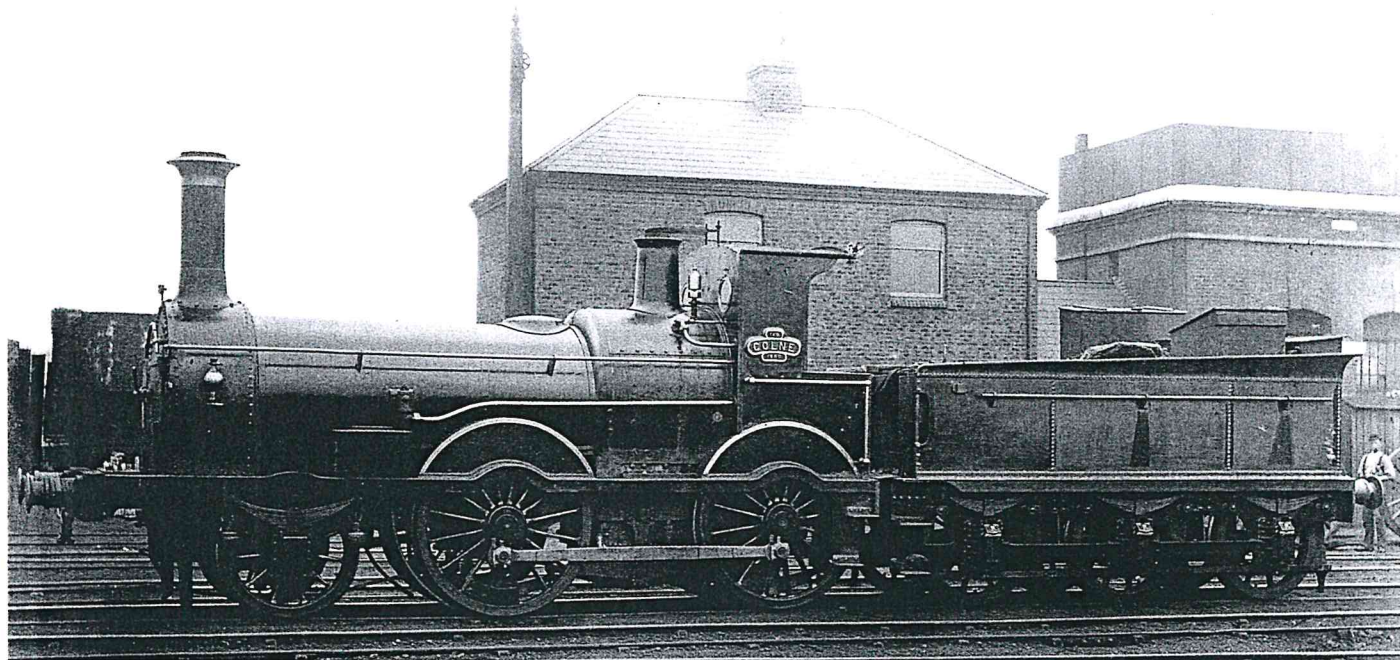
To talk of football in England, rugby in Wales or cricket in India as religions is perhaps overstating the phenomenon. However, the shared public ceremony that these sports represent, together with the stadium as a credible place of worship, seems to indicate that the two are more closely linked than some commentators would claim.

#### Key term



**Muscular Christianity** The actions of churchmen who engaged their communities proactively by attempting to eradicate the excesses of working class behaviour, such as gambling and drinking, in favour of more healthy and positive pursuits.





**The growth of the railways was probably the most significant development of the Industrial Revolution for sport**

## Transport

Probably the most important aspect of the Industrial Revolution, certainly in terms of sport, was the transport revolution. While improvements and innovation were present in roads and canals, the growth of the railway network was the real key to cutting journey times between towns and cities.

The 1840s was a decade of rapid expansion in the railway industry. Between 1844 and 1847, no fewer than 442 railway-related Acts were passed by parliament, with more than 2,000 miles of new track being laid. Private companies linked London with Dover, York, Brighton, Birmingham and Bristol, and railway mania began in earnest.

This sudden outburst of promotion and speculation enabled people of every class — with the possible exception of the very poorest — to travel at a much faster rate, sometimes as much as 50 miles an hour instead of the more sedentary 12mph achieved by the horse and carriage. Football teams might travel, for example, from Sheffield to

Glasgow overnight on a Friday, play the following day and return home on Sunday. The reduction of geographical boundaries hastened the development of nationally and internationally accepted rules, which enabled individuals and teams from distant communities to play each other in various sports.

As well as transforming inter-club fixtures, faster forms of transport hastened the postal services and newspapers, thus further dissolving any sense of isolation being suffered by certain parts of the country. Urban dwellers were encouraged to take the train and enjoy the vast swathes of countryside where their parents and grandparents lived. Parks within easy reach of cities became popular with working-class ramblers, though it must be stressed that this development, as with other similar new adventures for the lower classes, did not begin until the latter stages of the nineteenth century. Such was the transformation that some scholars suggest that the transport revolution should be seen as the most important event of the whole nineteenth century.

## The civilising process

Despite the importance of the Industrial Revolution, it would be incorrect to claim that it was the only influence on the development of sport at this time. Events were heavily affected by

an ongoing civilising process, which involved the majority of the population in a steady rejection of barbarous or cruel acts against other living things. There were two significant outcomes for sport:

- The middle decades of the nineteenth century saw a flurry of codification in various sports, with football and rugby in particular looking to make their games much safer for schoolboys and adults with occupations. Laws, innovations and playing practices began to take safety into account, as shown in the invention and widespread use of the shinpad.

- The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) was founded in 1824. In 1835, parliament passed the Cruelty to Animals Act, which was intended to protect cattle, bulls, dogs, bears and sheep from mistreatment. The act was largely used to prohibit cruel sports such as bear baiting and cockfighting.

## Public schools

The new middle classes began to imitate the aristocracy in a number of ways. Most significantly in terms of sport, they began using, or established, the public schools, where their sons could gain a meaningful education. Events in the major public schools, primarily Eton and Rugby, had a profound effect on the development of modern sport. The use of

## Key term



**Railway mania** The explosion of miles of track and passenger services in the middle years of the nineteenth century.



games by the disciples of Thomas Arnold at Rugby School was an important step towards popularising them as leisure activities for young adults.

Sport's inculcation of values such as teamwork and leadership was a vital part of the production of a Christian gentleman. Although the cult of athleticism might be said to have gone too far, as it became an obsession that preferred physical prowess over intellectual achievement, it was usually regarded as a positive development. The effectiveness of the employment of the same process of healthy exercise by former public schoolboys in the wider society as a tool to tame less civilised working-class tendencies, such as over-consumption of alcohol, is much debated. However, there is no doubt that the approach of proactive muscular Christians was widespread.

In short, industrialisation was important, but cannot be said to be the only influence on the development of modern sport in Victorian Britain.

## Sport as we know it

The Victorians were responsible for many things during the Industrial Revolution. They built the London sewers (many of which are still in use today), combated cholera, produced the first postage stamp and invented the telephone. They also formed most of sport's national governing bodies (NGBs). The Football Association (there was felt to be no need for the word 'English', as it was the first governing body for the sport in the world) was founded in 1863. Other examples of early NGBs include the Amateur Swimming Association (1869), the Rugby Football Union (1871) and the Amateur Athletic Association (1880).

The motives of the original organisers of swimming and athletics are shown in the names of their NGBs, signalling their rejection of professionalism. The amateur vs professional debate would rumble on in many sports for over a century. Several activities, such as rowing, would employ exclusion clauses that sought to prohibit the participation

of the working class by rejecting people on the grounds of their occupation.

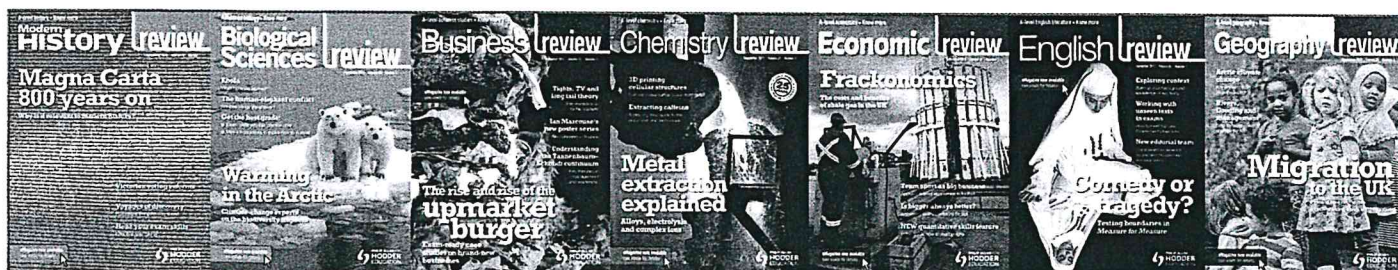
Most historians would agree that modern sport was first developed in Britain during the middle of the nineteenth century. Sport as an organised form of leisure had existed before Victorian times — the ancient Olympic Games in Greece are a good example. However, the structure of sport as we know it today was largely created by administrators and participants in Victorian Britain, who were able to take advantage of increased leisure time and greater disposable income in the wider society.

## Further reading



Holt, R. (1989) *Sport and the British: A Modern History*, Oxford University Press.

Graham Curry is semi-retired, having been head of PE at Tuxford School, Nottinghamshire. He has written several books and numerous articles on the history of football.



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