Everyday Leisure and Northerness in Mass Observation’s Worktown 1937-1939

Abstract

Much leisure history deals with specific forms of activity or with the macro social and cultural patterns which mark leisure behaviours. However, as historians have turned to the micro-history of the everyday, individuals become producers and not only consumers of leisure. The ‘up-close’ nature of the everyday provides new insights to leisure practices which are rarely defined only by a specific activity but also involve conviviality, conversation and custom. Mass Observation’s Worktown archive offers unique insight to the leisure lives of Bolton’s working class population between 1937 and 1939. Bound to the culture of the cotton industry and the spatial confines of Bolton, leisure served to support overlapping identities formed around work and leisure. Everyday leisure accommodated mass cultural forms while also forming a local northern culture which grew from its industrial environment. It is argued that leisure was not so much a field of resistance as a sphere in which ordinary people were able to create their own leisure spaces through customary practice, language and an adaptation of employer-based facilities.

Northerness is, as Dave Russell (2004) has argued, a cultural construction, imagined externally by outsiders but an objective reality to the historian of the contribution of northerners and northern institutions to English cultural life. Over the past two decades several historians have turned to leisure as a sphere of cultural life expressive of a northern identity with works on, for example, rugby league (Collins, 2006), the Isle of Man Tourist Trophy motor cycle races (Vaukins, 2010), northern soul (Wilson, 2007) and rambling and cycling (Salveson, 2012). While not proposing a homogeneous model of Northerness, this field of historiography has argued that certain working-class leisure practices in the north of England exhibited aspects of cultural difference and otherness, particularly to those of the south. This raises questions related to the production of northern leisure practices and the ways in which they were formed within and contributed to a northern culture. Furthermore, if indeed Northerness is not a homogeneous construction, how might cultural practices be said to be Northern, and how might Northerness be qualified by local and sub-regional cultural variations? This paper explores these questions through an historical study of everyday
working-class leisure practice in inter-war Bolton, the location of Mass Observation’s ‘Worktown’.

The links between leisure and working-class identity were established by the eighteen-eighties when, as Eric Hobsbawm (1999) argues, the working classes became segregated by residential patterns, social expectations and leisure. Leisure is a complex indicator of identity and an important field of cultural production; as Joyce (1991, 148-9) notes, it has historically been a sphere of customary practices, the production of class-specific spaces and the use of dialect language in place of conventional speech. The informal friendships and relationships of everyday leisure have been argued to be crucial to a sense of community identity (Borsay, 2006; Hill, 2002, 132-7; Tebbutt, 2012). These informal cultural practices remain largely hidden from macro-historical approaches which cannot explain the ways in which everyday leisure is formed within the context of everyday life. Micro-historical approaches, on the other hand, have the capacity to reveal the agency of ordinary people in the production of their own leisure practices and spaces; in cultural terms, the everyday becomes central to the social construction of community through the active agency of individuals who produce a shared social reality (Day, 2006, 154-5). To follow de Certeau (1984), ordinary people become historical actors; in terms of leisure they have agency as both consumers and producers, subverting or distorting imposed cultural rules in leisure and re-appropriating leisure spaces organized by others for different purposes. Moreover, the micro, as Chris Rojek (1995, 106) has pointed out, cannot be separated from the macro in which it exists and must be evaluated in terms of social realities such as class and gender. The micro-spatial history of everyday leisure does not, therefore, exclude the consumption of mass cultural forms but explains how in leisure, tradition, custom and modernity co-exist (Moran, 2004; Iggers, 1997). Drawing from Mass Observation’s Worktown project, this article argues that while mass popular culture formed an important part of the leisure lives of northern working-class people, they were neither alienated nor passive consumers of leisure but highly active in the creation of their own everyday leisure activities and networks which contributed to the formation and continuity of a specifically northern and Bolton identity.

The Worktown project
After the First World War the north became prominent in the national consciousness as mass unemployment in its manufacturing and mining industries brought economic and social distress while new light industries developed in the southern half of England, and Britain
became, in Hobsbawm’s (1969, 219) phrase, two industrial nations. It was the north of England to which George Orwell (1937) went to investigate working-class life in the mining town of Wigan, ten miles distant from Bolton. Orwell was an outsider, born in India and educated at Eton. On coming into the north, he observed, the southerner was conscious of entering a strange country with a “curious cult of Northernness” and a sense of identity expressed through a “sort of Northern snobbishness” and a belief that only in the North was there “real” work and “real” people. This northern self-imagination was constructed around industrial work and an otherness to southern privilege (Joyce, 1991, 315), a view amplified by Orwell (1937, 97-101) who believed that to the Northerner, the South was populated by rentiers while the Southerner arrived in the North with the “vague inferiority-complex of a civilised man venturing among savages”.

It was this myth of the North as a savage ‘other’, together with the inter-war documentary movement’s fascination with the “Deep North” (Rawnsley, 2000), which led Mass Observation to establish its ‘Worktown’ project in Bolton in 1937 as an ethnographic study of everyday life in a town it believed to be ‘representative of the industrial life-pattern’ in Britain (MOA Box 1C). To the anthropologist Tom Harrisson, a founder of Mass Observation, Bolton’s appeal lay in its location in the “wilds of Lancashire”, a place which, unlike distant jungles, remained “strange” to him (Mass Observation, 1987, 6). Worktown was therefore specifically a study of the northern working-class culture of a Lancashire cotton manufacturing town. The conflation of Lancashire and the industrial north was a popular trope; in the nineteenth century, as Patrick Joyce (1991, 19-21) notes, “industrial England” was widely understood as Lancashire, the locus of a new urban industrial civilization, visited by Marx and Engels. If not typical of England, inter-war Bolton was indisputably a prime northern example of this civilization.

As Orwell was concluding his study of Wigan, Tom Harrisson returned from an anthropological study of the natives of Malekula and, like Orwell, travelled a “literal and metaphorical” road to the north (Cunningham, 1988, 211) to establish the South Lancashire Cultural Survey in Bolton. Like Orwell, Harrisson was an outsider, born in Argentina and educated at Harrow and Cambridge. Though critical of statistical social surveys (Caradog Jones, 1934; Llewellyn Smith, 1935), he found inspiration in the insight to cultural patterns and practices of the Lynds’ (1929) ‘Middletown’ survey. Shortly after arriving in Bolton he met Charles Madge, another outsider, born in South Africa, and founded Mass Observation.
through which the South Lancashire Cultural Survey was assimilated into the Worktown study. Unlike macro-histories, the Worktown archive gives access to the micro-spatial history of leisure; to adopt John Brewer’s (2010) phrase, it brings the historian into contact with leisure “close-up and on the small scale” and presents historical figures as actors with agency, motives, feeling and consciousness. As the record of an ethnographic study which adopted Geertz’s (1973) interpretive method of anthropology it now constitutes a unique historical record of everyday life in an inter-war cotton town. It gives insight to community relationships and reveals customs which, as Malinowski (1926, 53) argued, permeate all aspects of everyday life, including leisure and sport. Orwell (1957, 66) too believed that working class culture was essentially expressed through leisure. Mass Observation did not adhere to pre-established hierarchies of what was considered sociologically important; seemingly insignificant leisure activities were treated equally with other spheres of life (Highmore, 2002, 88). Leisure consequently forms a significant proportion of the Worktown archive, its associated customs and practices contributing to an everyday life in which cultural and class identity was produced and maintained.

Method

Initially called ‘Northtown’ by Mass Observation, Bolton later became ‘Worktown’ because, as Harrisson explained, it was a town that existed because of and for work. Its principal industry, cotton manufacture, was established in the early eighteenth century (Defoe, 1971, 147); by the nineteen-thirties Bolton was the largest cotton-spinning town in the world. Renting a terraced house as headquarters, Harrisson recruited a team of “professional” observers from outside Bolton which included the public school educated John Somerfield, Julian Trevelyan, born in Surrey and Cambridge educated, and Humphrey Spender, also public school educated and commissioned by Harrisson to produce a documentary photographic record of Worktown. Bolton was a foreign place to these observers; Humphrey Spender (1987, 15) for example, found the language to be “foreign” while to Julian Trevelyan (1975) Bolton exposed the gulfs of education, language and social behaviour that separated him from the working class. To counter-balance this class bias the Worktown study adopted Malinowski’s method of immersion in the culture under investigation (Madge and Harrisson, 1937, 36, 44) and recruited working-class observers such as Joe Wilcock, son of a Lancashire weaver and Christian activist, Bill Naughton, a
Bolton coal wagon driver and Walter Hood, an ex-Durham miner, (Hinton, 2013, 17-26). The Worktown public also contributed through questionnaires on, for example, the cinema and happiness. In the main, however, the Worktown archive is based upon observations of Boltonians and records of eavesdropped conversations collected by observers’ secretly penetrating sites of everyday working-class leisure such as public houses, sports grounds and the workplace.

The cotton factory and everyday leisure

Although mining and engineering were important, cotton spinning dominated work in Bolton (Tillotsons, 1932). The cotton mill was the focal point of overlapping communities of work, residence and leisure (Joyce, 1982). Hours of employment were 7.45 a.m. – 5.30 p.m. with an hour for dinner and on Saturday 7.45 a.m. – 12 noon, leaving workers free to attend Saturday afternoon football matches (Amalgamated Association for Cotton Spinners and Twiners, 1939). The factory was a cultural as well as an economic entity and as Stephen Jones (1987) observed, inter-war mill culture was permeated by leisure. The factory was itself a sponsor of leisure as nineteenth century employer paternalism was gradually superseded by scientific management and welfare capitalism, particularly in the large firms and new combines. Writing in the journal Welfare Work Edward Tootal Broadhurst (1920), a Bolton cotton employer, stated the aim of factory leisure provision was to develop healthier and happier employees who used their leisure in constructive physical and intellectual pursuits so as to reduce staff turnover and increase production. Like many mills, Tootal, Broadhurst and Lee’s provided extensive sports facilities in addition to an orchestra and choral, debating and dramatic societies (Griffiths, 2001, 156). Following the inception of the Bolton Mills Football Challenge Cup in 1921 a separate league was established for factory teams, making sport a sphere of identity with the workplace. Football teams representing the firms of Barlow and Jones and Sir John Holden and Sons competed in the Bolton and District Football Association, while cotton combines developed their own inter-factory sport competitions; teams within the Amalgamated Cotton Mills Trust, for example, played in its football and bowls leagues while physical culture and country dancing teams also performed across the Trust. Furthermore, mill social clubs organised events and excursions and the trend towards combination led to a wider regional association and identification with cotton; the Fine Cotton Spinners combine, for example, sponsored social clubs at each of its Lancashire
branches. Other Bolton industries also invested in employee welfare, the ironwork and boiler-making firm of Musgrave’s opening a 21 acre sports ground in 1925 (Griffiths, 2001, 163-3).

Within the factory, work was interwoven with leisure; their everyday relationship was not exclusive. As Patrick Joyce (1991, 132) has shown, the cotton factory was a place of friendships, rituals, jokes and conversations. Much leisure functioned at the level of what macro-history has regarded as the level of the mundane; the recovery of the ‘mundane’ through a micro-historical approach gives insight not just to the external manifestations of Northernness but also to the ways in which this was produced by individual actors in the workplace (Moran, 2004). A salient aspect of the Lancashire cotton industry was its high proportion of women employees, producing what Selina Todd (2005) described as a new generation of socially and financially independent young working-class women who “dressed like actresses” and were consumers of modern leisure forms such as the cinema and the dance hall. Mass Observation discovered that mill girls’ conversations centred on leisure, dealing predominantly with films at local cinemas, dress, keep-fit classes, rounders and young men. This differed little from the findings of a study of workplace conversations by the Industrial Health Research Board in which common topics also numbered men and boys, films, leisure activities outside the workplace and clothes (Rooff, 1935, 78). While critics (Durant, 1938; Leavis, 1932) argued that the radio and cinema led to passivity and apathy, mill girls in Bolton made these topics of judgement and opinion:

15 November 1937 “Main topic of conversation today was wireless variety. Edith said: ‘Will you be listening in tonight? There’s 3 hours variety with all the best people – George Formby, Gracie Fields, and all the others. I think its 7.30 to 10.30”.

16 November 1937 ‘First topic was last night’s wireless programme. George Formby a hot favourite’ (MOA Box 40B).

Although ephemeral and seemingly insignificant, conversations such as these illustrate the way in which mill operatives were able to construct an informal leisure life within work. Mass culture was not consumed passively and in isolation but actively as a shared social experience. Cecil Delisle Burns (1932, 165), social philosopher and Stevenson Lecturer in Citizenship at the University of Glasgow from 1927-1936, recognised the importance of such conversations in widening the mental world of adults engaged in repetitive processes, enabling play upon ideas provided by the radio and cinema and filling what might otherwise be empty space, and representing active engagement and mutual enjoyment. The
conversational references to George Formby and Gracie Fields were significant to a local and regional working-class identity. Both portrayed an imagined Lancashire identity and in Fields’ case, one grounded in the cotton industry in which she had worked as a spinner in Rochdale. Described by Jeffery Richards (DONB) as “the indomitable, eternal ‘Lancashire lass’”, Fields resonated among cotton operatives through songs formed in the culture of the cotton factory and corresponding with the working lives of mill girls. George Formby, born in Wigan, adopted an exaggerated Lancashire persona through humorous and sexually suggestive songs which played upon the everyday experiences of working class people. Mass Observation’s survey of Worktown cinema –goers testified to their popularity, one respondent noting that “As far as humour goes in the British films I think that George Formby, the Famous Lancashire Comedian, just about tops the bill” while another felt Gracie Fields boosted morale; reflecting the amorphous boundary between mass and popular culture a third looked forward to a “combination between Hollywood and ‘Our Gracie’” (MOA Box 35). Both Formby and Fields spoke in a south Lancashire accent through a performed Northernness that was not only culturally homogeneous with Worktown but also distinct from the “other” which prevailed beyond the boundary of the Lancashire and the north (Wales, 2006 209-11).

While the consumption of modern forms of leisure was part of the everyday lives of cotton operatives, older customary forms survived and flourished, contributing to shared enjoyments and a sense of identity as a Bolton mill-worker. Footings – unofficial feasts or parties - were held in the cotton factory, sometimes in work time, to mark occasions such as the marriage of a worker or a national event (Foley, 1973, 58), such as that undertaken in a weaving shed to fund a footing to celebrate the Coronation (MOA Box 40B). The wakes week holiday was a similarly established custom which took place in a changing and modernised Blackpool but remained a collective enjoyment with savings clubs organised in mills, churches and other social institutions through which workers laid aside a weekly amount so that by June a “fair sum” had been accumulated (Joyce, 1991, 165-7). The collective ethos of the holiday was further maintained away from Bolton as Worktowners sought the company of each other in Blackpool’s pubs and preferred those which sold beers brewed in Bolton (MOA Box 56A).

At a wider level the Lancashire cotton towns formed an overlapping geographical and industrial community and shared a regional identity. Important to the construction of this was
the *Cotton Factory Times*, published weekly from 1855 to 1937 (Cass, Fowler and Wyke, 1998). Supported by cotton trade unions, it appealed to a family readership and reported social and sports events (Fowler, 2003, 39). Although its circulation declined in the 1930s it continued to bind its readers to a clearly defined imagined northern cultural identity based upon cotton. This was aided through the Cotton Queen Quest, a competition founded in 1930 by the Manchester-based *Daily Dispatch*. Adopting the popular music-hall song ‘She’s a Lassie from Lancashire’, the Cotton Queen, like the *Cotton Factory Times*, nurtured an imagined cultural identity based upon the industry and the region. Crowning ceremonies were held in Blackpool and attracted 3,000 spectators (Conway, 2013). Competitors were selected by mill workers through local competitions which created intense interest with street crowds forming for the procession to a local crowning (Bolton Cotton Queen 2015). The Cotton Queen was not only a culturally symbolic role but a practical one as winners took an active role in the promotion of the industry through trade visits and public appearances. Through leisure it extended the sense of a town identity to one of a wider Northern identity based on the workplace.

### Sport

Sport, as Mike Huggins (2000) argues, is a ‘powerful shaper of cultural identity’. In terms of the everyday, sport is deeply integrated in popular cultural practice through active participation, spectatorship, gambling and social conversation. In Worktown sport was part of everyday consumption and productive in the construction of cultural identity; a particularly salient feature was the high level of participation in sport by women that contrasted with other northern regions; Madeline Rooff (1935), for example, found women working in the Lancashire cotton mills to enjoy more active leisure than girls in the north-east where the tendency was to stay at home and where no cultural tradition of women’s leisure had developed. Cotton mills provided substantial opportunities for women to play sport through work-based sports clubs, with mill teams prominent in rounders competitions (Huggins and Williams, 2006, 10). The game of rounders exemplified the integration of sport in everyday life in Worktown through its dilution of the divisions between work and leisure.

In Bolton rounders was played to local rules, adopting a soft ball and a flat-sided bat rather than the conventional hard ball and round bat. Liz Oliver (1995) has shown that its
popularity amongst working-class women in Bolton originated in its being played in non-fee paying elementary schools, thus separating it from tennis which was pursued in adulthood mainly by privately-educated girls. Over sixty percent of Bolton’s elementary school girls entering the workforce did so through the cotton mills, many continuing to play in rounders leagues and competitions organised by the Bolton and District Sunday School League (Cowell, 2000). As factories invested in corporate leisure-based welfare provision with modern and well-equipped sports grounds (Chance, 2012) rounders became part of the factory culture, not only in terms of women’s active participation but also of partisan spectatorship (Horsley, 2015; MOA Box 4B). In 1922 sixteen works teams entered the Bolton and District Sunday Schools Association rounders competition and by the late nineteen twenties over eighty teams competed in two leagues (Oliver, 1995). Though played by women as an amateur sport, rounders matches were reported in depth in the weekly local sports newspaper, the Bolton Evening News Buff, together with regular features on Worktown rounders players (Cowell, 2000).

Several rounders matches were documented by Mass Observation (MOA Box 4B), revealing a cohesive integration of sport and work in an everyday life spatially confined to Bolton and depending minimally on external intervention. Although materially supported by employers, rounders was organised, played and watched by cotton workers and their families, with competitions organised through local voluntary associations. Rounders became part of an everyday factory leisure culture; as one of Oliver’s respondents recalled that:

“Our manager were very good. He were very interested in our rounders team and he used to follow us up and down. .We’d work really hard all day, then go back and play rounders in the evening. There’d be no transport and we would walk there and back” (Oliver, 1995).

Rounders was also a spectator sport; an evening match on 28th August 1937 between the cotton spinners Greenhalgh and Shaw and Johnson’s Weaving Shed for the Barlow Cup, sponsored by one of Bolton’s major cotton industrialists, attracted 500 spectators while approximately 1,200 people watched a match between Tootal, Broadhurst and Lee and Eagley Mill on the evening of 11th August (MOA Box 4B).
Spectatorship is not inherently passive and the conviviality of the rounders crowd was expressed through conversation, opinion and banter. Language and dialect, as Katie Wales (2006, 142-3) argues, form sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic boundaries and as suggested above, are cardinal aspects of northern identity, often unintelligible to southern visitors (Jewell, 1994, 198). The Worktown accent and dialect were specific to Bolton and its locality (Shorrocks, 1998) and were so far removed from the received usage of the southern observers that they could neither understand it nor be understood and had to be guided around Bolton by Harry Gordon, a local unemployed fitter (Mass Observation, 1980). The conversations of spectators were thus important to the northern and more specifically the Lancashire and Bolton identity of Worktowners (Schubert, 2007), performing both inclusive and exclusive functions in the maintenance of a Bolton working-class identity. Take for example the following conversations documented at a match between St. Barnabas and Deane Methodists on 19th August 1937 at Musgraves’ Sports Grounds:

“Well Chris, what dun’ yo’ think abeaut t. big feight? What’s gooin’ t’appen?” “Ah durn’t know Sam … Ah” tell thi’ what, if yon mon ‘its Louis gradely its aw o’er wi’, bar sheautin.” “Cummon Gladys! Cummon agen.” “She’s a rum little bugger is that; but she’s a good batter”. “Well, by gum! Run love, run. Stop!” “Shi were catched eauwt”. “Why, there’s some tansy growin’ ‘ere Sam.!” “Aye, I gi ‘ies it mi ‘orse for ‘is liver. Theaa should see ‘im piss when ‘ee’s ‘ad a bit on it ‘i ‘is feed.” “She ston’s theer lerrin’ it beaunce afore ‘er moved!” “Oh! She’ll show ya what she’ll do in a minit (MOA Box 4B).

Conducted as a public discourse in which anyone from Bolton’s working class was equipped to participate but from which all others would be culturally excluded, such leisure-based conversations were elements of a construction of identity and a continuity of dialect and cultural custom. While work-based, such opportunities to play sport challenge contemporary views of mechanised work as dehumanising and inevitably leading to passivity (Burns, 1925, 103-4; Frankl, 1932). Although provided with paternalistic intentions, factory sports grounds were adapted by employees for use on their own terms and in pursuit of their own interests.

Sport was also integral to the life of the pub. The pub was a centre of communal working class life and a classic example of an everyday space, being the only building.
according to Mass Observation, used by large numbers of ordinary people where actions were not arranged for them; in the pub a man became a participator rather than a spectator (Mass Observation, 1987, 17). Standards of behaviour in the pub differed from those of other institutions; it remained a place in which ordinary people could swear, talk informally to strangers, place illegal bets on horse races and, in the male-only vault, spit on the floor (Mass Observation, 1987, 338). While a beer culture was central to the identity of the pub it also fulfilled wider community needs; in Worktown these included conviviality and conversation, the playing of games such as cards, dominoes and darts, and betting. The pub also served as a meeting place for local working-class organisations such as pigeon-flying clubs, fishing clubs, trades unions and friendly societies. Several Worktown pubs maintained a bowling green. Crown Green bowls was a popular summer sport throughout the north, differing from the flat green bowling of the south of England by a playing surface which sloped up from the sides to a central crown approximately one foot higher (Arlott, 1975, 101). The growth of bowls in the nineteenth century was aided, as Peter Swain (2013) records, by the provision of greens by factories and municipal parks. In the twentieth century bowls became an important regional sport, played through local and regional leagues, cup competitions and friendly matches which, like rounders, were reported in the local press. Bowls was closely associated with public houses, predominantly male, and facilitated legal betting on matches where the green was in an enclosed space with restricted public access, such as those attached to public houses or social clubs. There was also a professional sector of bowling with two annual tournaments, The Talbot and The Waterloo, held in Blackpool (Arlott, 1975, 104). During the inter-war period bowling teams were formed by factories, political clubs, pubs, parks and churches (Williams, 1996); bowls was also played on an informal and individual basis.

The Worktown archive enables us to probe more deeply and go beyond the external view of the pub presented in macro-history to the role of its users in the creation of their own leisure culture. The pub bowling green presents a prime example of de Certeau’s (1984, 117) space as a place activated by the movements conducted within it. Through the agency of its users, it had its own codes of behaviour and facilitated a multiplicity of leisure activities, several of which transgressed boundaries of respectability and normative codes of behaviour, which included drinking, betting and convivial conversation. All were in evidence at a match at the Gibraltar Rock pub on 13th July 1937:

On arrival at the Pub I asked the Landlord, who was stood at the front of the bar, if there was any bowling? “Aye, but it’s allus bad just
fortnit after t’olidays”. I went around the back and to the green.
“Admission 3d”. First pair bring out their bowls, toss for the Jack, and
begin. “‘im as sent that wood a’ll win the bloody game.” “T’other
man knows bloody little about bowling” “ee’s no bloody sluvvin,
isn’t yon mon, ‘ee’s played afore”. ‘Short’ shouts spectator. ‘Ones
enoof” said the bowler (crowd 50 at this time). This same bowler,
although informed he was ‘in’, sprinted across the Green to look for
himself. ‘Same Bowler’ ‘Ahm letting well alone, A Bookmaker’s
runner began paying out near me for the day’s racing. “Worr ‘ast
getten for me?” said a chap. “Thine’s on the bloody sheet, ya clown
was the reply (MOA Box 4C).

The above-reference to gambling emphasises the extent to which it permeated
working-class leisure and extended into the following discussion, which also
demonstrates the capacity of dialect to absorb and adapt modern American slang:

Go whoam, pair on ya, ya bloody “Robin Goodfellow’s double”; piss
off. This last remark was addressed to the landlord and another chap
together. Peter, who was drunk, asked “eauw much is it at Salvation
Army if ah get chucked eaut” “Theua art ‘avin a baby wit looks o’
thi.” “Nay by Christ, tha’ll a twins.” Back o’th’ army block. “Ah bet a
fella a dollar las neet and what dost think ‘appened? Bugger fawd of
tram an’geet took t Infirmary un ‘ee wer a bloody stake ‘owder un aw.
That wer another bloody dollar gone mae West.”

The anthropological approach of Mass Observation necessitated attention to the attachment
of magical qualities to places and actions and in this context bowls provided some of the most
interesting things to be seen in “anthropologically exciting Worktown”. Mass Observation
discerned how bowlers attributed magical properties to their bowls and made hand
movements as they followed them, perceiving these as forms of “sympathetic magic”,
Bowler with hat spits on coin (before the toss to start the game)

Bowler with cap waves right arm in order to deflect opponent’s bowl; this action failed; trilby man won his end.

A left-handed bowler runs behind his first bowl; his second bowl – or so he intended – was controlled or directed by the wafting from his right arm.

Bowler named Sam walks rapidly behind his bowl with his body inclined to the right almost overbalancing. He wanted the bowl to come over that way. His opponent wove circles with his arm to make the bowl run out of play.

M sometimes runs hard after his wood, saying to loud whisper ‘Go on, go on’ and making pushing motions with his hand.

There is a lot more magic going on in the game. At one point M over takes his wood and lies down on the ground, on one elbow beside it as it is finishing its run and he bends his head low over it and whispers. (MOA Box 4C)

Since the nineteen-sixties historians have become aware of the capacity of anthropology to reveal social relationships (Thomas (1963) and Joyce (1991, 150-161) has shown how belief in magic and the symbolic meaning of non-verbal language were formed by custom. In Bolton, twentieth century modernity had not displaced the customary behaviours of the bowlers which were a continuation of a cultural leisure practice recorded in Alice Foley’s (1973) account of her pre- First World War Bolton childhood:

… on a Sunday morning, when her father was recovering from a drinking bout, she accompanied him on a longish walk to some country pub on the outskirts of Bolton where he quenched his ‘feverish thirst’. There she sat on a bench watching lively men trundling heavy bowls across a smooth green. Scraps of their conversation caught my ear. ‘Nethen, mi hearty … Not over theer, a wee bit tu' left … that's a beauty, it 'ul get me whoam, owd chick.

Rounders and bowls in Bolton thus flourished as everyday working-class sports which operated primarily through the agency of ordinary people. Both were played and watched by
working-class people. Each provided opportunities for conviviality at a neighbourhood level and produced cultural spaces defined by the game itself and other everyday leisure practices which included socialisation and conversation and, in the case of bowls, drinking and gambling. In each case dialect and accent were active in the construction of a social life, marking both geographical and class boundaries (Tracy and Robles, 2013, 122-123).

Conclusion

At surface, the brief examples of everyday leisure in Worktown described above appear mundane and ahistorical; multiplied and aggregated over time they were crucial to the construction of everyday life. They reveal how the consumption and production of leisure enabled the formation of overlapping communities of work, family and neighbourhood. In their everyday leisure, Worktowners were not resisting new forms of mass culture and leisure did not transcend the social and economic constraints of working class life. Neither was popular leisure activity determined or even significantly reformed by mass culture; the evidence from Worktown suggests instead that mass cultural forms were absorbed and integrated into existing patterns of everyday life. It also remains the case that leisure was influenced by capitalist industrial production as factory work determined the time and money available for leisure, the pub and the cinema were essentially commercial interests, and factory-based sports provision was intended to increase production and profits.

The everyday history of working-class leisure lives as documented in the Worktown archive, demonstrates that they were not characterised by alienation and passivity; on the contrary, Worktowners pursued active and engaged leisure lives. As Harrisson noted, Lancashire men and women seemed always to be “on the go”, rushing from work to the football match at midday on Saturday and taking part in a wide range of social activities (MOA Box 39B, 73-75). These leisure-based activities formed social contexts in which shared places and activities helped form a collective consciousness and identity. Consequently, it is hard to see how everyday leisure was simply a compensation for work or in some way illusory, as argued by Henri Lefebvre (1991a, 133). Instead, the Worktown archive suggests an alternative leisure of active engagement through everyday cultural practices outside the control of employers and the state and one that was not alienated but within the control of ordinary people. In their everyday leisure lives Worktowners were “tactical” in de Certeau’s sense of manipulating events into opportunities – the factory could
be a place of leisure; the culture of the pub and its bowling green embraced gambling, which while not always illegal was nevertheless frequently condemned by figures of authority in Bolton. Rounders was played before factory welfare adopted it and was therefore not imposed on workers who, like those in Beaven’s (2005) study of Coventry, retained a high degree of agency in their interactions with employers’ provision of leisure. While it furthered the economic interests of employers, workers engaged with it on their own terms. Neither did mass culture replace an existing popular culture; while consumed as entertainment it could simultaneously be a sphere of opinion-forming and debate. Worktowners created leisure spaces with their own interior customs and practices; the pub, the bowling green and even the factory were not manifestations of a “victory of neocapitalism and an extension of bourgeois hegemony to the whole of space” (Lefebvre 1991b) but examples of de Certeau’s (1984, 117) oppositional concept of space as a practiced place, formed by the activities of the people inhabiting it. Through their tactical negotiation of everyday leisure, Worktowners created and maintained spatial, industrial and leisure identities. Everyday leisure in Worktown, as de Certeau’s arguments suggest, was not determined by the ‘strategies’ of the institutions of mass cultural production but negotiated a position alongside them, its practices largely hidden from politicians, employers and the establishment and until recently largely hidden from history.

With caution, the findings of the Worktown project speak to a Northernness that extended beyond Bolton. Harrisson reconsidered his initial assumption that Bolton represented British industrial life and realised that, as Patrick Joyce (1991, 219) has observed, neither the “north” nor the “industrial north” was all of one piece; Lancashire towns were not like Yorkshire towns. Lancashire’s popular culture was, as Hill (1995) has argued, fully formed by the end of the nineteenth century. Bolton too was found to have a “culture of its own” (Mass Observation, 1987, 18) with noticeable differences between adjacent Salford (Davies, 1992, 130). However, Bolton was not fundamentally dissimilar to the other cotton towns of south-east Lancashire where a new commercial and mechanised mass culture was making inroads to popular culture. The Worktown archive might thus be taken to represent a record of the inter-war working –class culture of the Lancashire cotton industry when older cultural patterns encountered new mass cultural forms and its global dominance in cotton production was declining. The specificity of this culture suggests that any claim of a representation of a homogeneous Northernness would be invalid, while one of a sub-regional variant of Northernness would arguably be justifiable.
References


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Mass Observation Worktown Papers:

Box 1C Draft Articles about the Worktown Project
‘Mass Observation in Bolton: a Social Experiment’

Box 4B Rounders and Baseball
*Tootals v. Eagley A*
‘Match between St Barnabas and Deane Methodists held at Musgraves Sports Ground, 19th August 1937, 7.30. p.m.

Box 4C Bowling

Box 35 Cinema-Going Survey

Box 39B Research for Book on the Cotton Industry

Box 40B Mill Work
Box 40E Textile Workers

Box 56A Observations


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