The railways and sport in Victorian Britain

A critical reassessment

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Even though the Victorian period has often been characterised as 'the railway age'[1] and it can be argued that railways were the most important of nineteenth-century innovations, the links between railways and sport have been relatively little explored. Most historical research has concentrated on the impact of the railways on the economy and society, and up to the 1980s many writers concentrated on economic at the expense of social links.[2] It is the contention of this article that the assessment of the impact of Victorian railways on developments in sport by those few writers who have tentatively and briefly developed our understanding needs reconsideration.[3]

The problem is in part a result of specialisation among historians. Few sports historians have sufficient understanding of railway history and its sources. Few railway historians understand the history of sport. Where historians have written about the impact of the railway on sport, there has been over-reliance on metropolitan data and neglect of regional variation.[4] London distorts the overall picture. Its population often preferred days out to holidays away, and used railways as a quicker means of getting to sporting events. Equally London had a greater concentration of wealthy individuals able to afford to play golf, go hunting in the shires or attend race meetings. The visibility of such people in London railway termini or at suburban stations made them very noticeable to contemporaries. This was particularly true of metropolitan writers in the 1880s and 1890s, when new forms of sport like football, golf or tennis were booming, and ever larger numbers were attending major national events like the Derby or the university boat race. London-based writers tended to overgeneralise from their experience. L. H. Curzon, for example, claimed in 1892 that 'today the railways convey the masses in large numbers to the different seats of sport' and wrongly suggested that 'thousands' attended a race meeting where once 'hundreds' attended.[5] This was incorrect. In racing the reverse was the case over most of England. As we shall demonstrate, beyond major sporting events like cup finals the vast majority of sports up to 1900 had relatively limited reliance on the railways in terms of spectatorship, whilst the effects of the railways on participation were somewhat mixed.

As a result of such over-reliance upon London data, the role of the railways in giving shape and growth to the Victorian transformation of sport has

been overemphasised. James Walvin, for example, in a highly influential textbook, claimed that the railways 'transformed leisure and influenced sport' in a number of ways.[6] He argued that as a direct result of the spread of railways many more people attended sporting events, and that the crowds were drawn from much farther afield. Railways widened sporting horizons, transformed the structure and organisation of sports, and provided the upper classes with a greater variety of sport.

In reality the railways should not be seen as the driving force of a sporting revolution. Other factors were of far greater importance. Changes in sport were driven much more by increases in leisure time and real wages among some groups from mid-century, by the sporting information which was first passed on by electric telegraph in the late 1840s and became a major feature of the popular press from the 1860s, by growing commercialism, and by the development of a more positive attitude to 'manly' exercise, than they were by the railways. Such factors were linked with the railways only in marginal ways. Some writers have argued, for example, that betting on horses and on football results, and interest in the results of sports, were made possible by the railways' ability to distribute newspapers nationwide overnight.[7] But although sporting papers like the *Sportsman* had a national readership, the real boom in sports readership from the 1860s was at first largely in weekly, then in daily regional morning and evening newspapers. These papers gained their sporting information from another technological innovation, the electric telegraph, which was contemporary with and initially used the trunk railway system. To an large extent these newspapers could have been distributed by road within their region even without railways.

A more balanced view is that the railways were largely the facilitators of trends which were already evident, especially in terms of spectatorship. Certainly Vamplew's claim that 'railways revolutionised sport by widening the catchment area for spectators' is greatly exaggerated.[8] Simmons's argument that the railways 'contributed largely to the growth of spectator sports' is unconvincing.[9] As we shall see, for most pre-railway sports catchment areas were already quite wide. If the railways broadened the catchment area further, new spectators still needed to be caught, and any major impact should have led to clear increases in the numbers attending sporting events once the railway system was established. Yet comparison of estimated numbers at a range of sporting events before and after the railway boom of the 1840s often shows little change. It may be argued that estimated numbers in local newspapers were likely to be inexact to an unknown degree. This is true but no more so than of modern estimates where turnstile figures are lacking, and there is no evidence that newspaper estimates of crowds became more accurate in the 1850s and 1860s. So the use of such estimates is comparing like with like.

The lack of growth in attendance figures would appear to indicate that the early railways simply served an existing demand, and shifted some traffic off the road on to rail once the first year's novelty value wore off. They took market share from existing modes of transport. This shift was in fact more problematic than helpful to spectator sports. Chaos caused by overcrowded

stations or too many spectators all arriving together was often initially the result, as at Reading in 1857.[10]

Racing provides a key example. Doncaster, for example, was not changed by the railways from 'a rather select affair into a big popular festival' as Simmons suggested.[11] Like many other meetings, it was already a big popular festival at the opening of Victoria's reign. Overall estimates of crowd size at Doncaster in the first decades of the nineteenth century vary but were regularly around 100,000 for the St Leger. Brailsford's dismissal as 'flights of imagination' of a *Sporting Magazine* reference to Manchester races having a daily attendance of over 100,000 in 1822 may or may not be strictly correct, but such references, whether accurate or not, were typical of the period for major race meetings.[12] On a single day York had some estimated crowds of well over 100,000 in the first decade, Manchester had estimated crowds of up to 150,000 by the second decade, and Epsom claimed up to 200,000 spectators in the 1820s and 1830s.[13] Courses of medium importance such as Newcastle, Liverpool, Brighton or Chester regularly attracted well over 40,000 in these early decades. Even smaller courses could attract 10,000 or more, and crowds nearly always well outstripped the total local population, indicating that a majority must have travelled some distance.

Attendances varied from meeting to meeting and year to year, depending on factors such as the weather, the quality of entries, the support of the local aristocracy and gentry, shifts in the popularity of different venues or fluctuations in the local trade cycle. There was also a temporary drop in attendances at a number of provincial meetings in the mid-1830s, partly due to temporary withdrawal of some upper-class patronage when, following the Reform Act of 1832, the urban elite in some racing towns failed to vote the way they wanted. Even so, many annual sporting events prior to the railway attracted large crowds if there were top horses or sportsmen involved.

By contrast the arrival of the railways did not affect overall attendances at race meetings. Vamplew claims that 'all racecourses in the proximity of a station found their spectator catchment area widened and deepened'.[14] Crowd estimates do not support this view. Estimates of the numbers attending most meetings in the 1840s and 1850s are comparable overall to those of the earlier period. The notion that the railways drove a growth in attendance can be termed 'the attendance fallacy', owing to historians' failure to look at the pre-railway period in sufficient detail. Certainly there were large crowds on the railways in the 1840s but they had simply shifted from other means of transport.

There were some conspicuous exceptions. The nationally famous race meetings at Doncaster, Epsom and Ascot all experienced significant growth in attendance. By 1887 there were trains at Doncaster from London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Barrow, Carlisle, Newcastle, Chester, Bristol and Kings Lynn, and stations *en route*. These meetings were exceptional in being of national rather than regional interest. High-status attenders from throughout Britain made these meetings an increasing magnet to a wide area.

There are some examples of growth in crowd size in middle-ranked courses between the 1850s and the 1870s but it seems reasonable to link them with specific increases in the the local population, or local efforts to improve the quality of racing, rather than better transport facilities. At Leicester, for example, where the race week was the main annual holiday, there were 20,000 more attenders in 1870 than there had been in 1854, but the population had grown by almost 35,000, whilst the clerk of the course had made strenuous efforts to bring in more entries.[15] Better entries meant that racing men came in from a much wider catchment area, some staying for the full week. Excursion trains were organised to meet their needs, but at least some of this more wealthy group would have travelled by alternative means had there been no railway. Certainly, in racing, it is likely that the limited number of 'sporting men' involved in betting, bookmaking, ownership, touting and so on were the main beneficiaries of railway excursions.

In the 1870s and 1880s attendance at many traditional race meetings actually dropped. This too was linked not with the railways but with a general change in the commercial approach of race companies, involving a move from sponsorship to course enclosure and the charging of entrance fees. Women and children, or country people attending an annual holiday event, more rarely attended provincial courses when they had to pay to get in. At Leicester, after enclosure, there was an estimated drop in attendance of some 20,000.[16]

So to allocate either growth or decline in spectator numbers at race meetings to the railway is simplistic. Following the expansion of the railway system in the 1860s attendance at many meetings dropped, although for reasons largely unconnected with railway expansion. Similar examples of decline in attendance at other sports following railway expansion can also be found, again for broader reasons. In Cumbria, for example, many thousands could be found at wrestling contests in the early nineteenth century,[17] yet attendances were dropping by the 1840s and the most famous match of the mid-Victorian period, at the Flan, Ulverston, for the championship of England and £300, only attracted a crowd of some nine or ten thousand despite the availability of good rail links.[18]

Crowds at pugilistic encounters followed the same pattern. There were, for example, around 30,000 spectators at the Langan–Spring fight in early January 1824 near Worcester, and such figures can be paralleled elsewhere.[19] The attraction of fights at this time was such that entrepreneurs such as town racecourse grandstand managers or hoteliers would bid to stage them. For the Langan–Spring fight Warwick had offered 150 guineas and Worcester topped this considerably in the successful hope of bringing in wealthy visitors from across the country. But although the railways brought spectators from Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, Leicester and Nottingham to see the match between Caunt and Bendigo in 1845, and the railways continued to take spectators to bareknuckle matches until at least 1861, crowds were in decline from the later 1840s. In both these cases, as with Devonshire wrestling, cockfighting or bull baiting, the sports had become less popular and/or illegal over the Victorian period.

The crowds at 'traditional' pre-railway events like race meetings or wrestling were large in part because they were rare, often annual, occurrences and in part because they were held on unenclosed land where attendance was free to most of the people there and men, women and children attended. Thus a 'pedestrian' match between professional runners on Scarborough sands in 1813 easily attracted some 10,000.[20] By the 1860s foot races were often on enclosed running grounds and crowds were smaller, but almost all male.

By contrast, some newer sports, from golf and tennis to hockey and rugby, expanded in the later nineteenth century. Here too, as Lowerson shows, it was due not to the railway but to other factors: disposable time, space and income, a new breadth and depth of social involvement, the cult of athleticism, the extension of the middle classes, the growth of rational recreation and the habit of voluntarism.[21] By this time the railway was the main and cheapest form of transport, so it was used simply because it was available.

So the railway was a fairly minor factor driving change in most sports. In racing, for example, its unimportance in comparison with intra-racing factors can be seen when we examine the places where race meetings were held during the first period of 'railway mania' in the 1840s. The number of reported courses actually dropped during the decade. According to the *Racing Calendar* there were meetings at 151 different places in 1841, but by 1844 there were 120, and by 1850 only ninety-nine. During the second period of railway mania in the 1860s the number of reported courses briefly rose to 138, although this was still less than the late 1830s. The railway has been seen by Beresford as 'a main factor in determining the success or failure of individual meetings'.[22] But of seventy-nine racecourses which held more than ten meetings announced in the *Racing Calendar* between 1830 and 1879 the disappearance of none so far studied was directly due to the railway. Closure was usually linked with refusal to renew a lease, the withdrawal of upper-class support, building development, poor entries or the death of a major organiser and supporter rather than with poor attendance, and was very rarely indeed due to any problems with the railways. The key period was the 1870s, when more stringent demands by the Jockey Club stopped the 'natural' pattern of opening, closing, reopening or replacement of courses.

Equally, had the railways been of major importance one would have expected many places to hold more than one meeting a year. Few did, because in most places working people could only afford to attend one race meeting a year. Even in the 1860s only a few London courses, together with Newmarket (the home of the Jockey Club), York, Manchester and Liverpool, managed three or more annual meetings, and by as late as 1880 there were still only twelve British courses with three or more meetings. Total *numbers* of meetings reported at the end of the Victorian age were almost exactly the same as those at its start, although they were now held at far fewer courses.

It is clear that the sporting horizons of many spectators were already wide prior to the advent of railways. Early nineteenth-century upper-class and middle-class racing supporters in the provinces often attended a number of sporting events outside their own county. The notorious gentry eccentric

Table 1 Reasons for the closure of racecourses, 1840–79

Reason	*1840–69*	*1870–79*
Decline in support, mainly poor entries	10	6
Loss of major patronage	1	3
Change of owner/lease	1	0
Used for other purposes	4	1
Competition from other courses	3	1
Problems of organisation	3	1
Financial failure	0	2
Religious opposition	1	0
Change in Jockey Club rules	0	9
Continued as lesser meeting	6	3
Continued as National Hunt meeting	4	20
Not known	12	9
Total	45	55

John Mytton (1796–1834) attended race meetings in Warwickshire, Cheshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire from his Shropshire home.[23] In the pre-railway period innkeepers at market towns hired out their saddle horses to enable spectators to travel to race meetings in nearby areas, causing problems for other travellers. Joshua Crompton in 1829 was concerned that it might take him some time to get to York because all the horses 'must be greatly engaged on the road for Doncaster races'.[24] Newspaper descriptions of the Doncaster meeting in the *York Herald*, the *Doncaster Gazette* and the *Yorkshire Gazette* in the first decades of the century give lists of attenders, and refer to 'numerous spectators' from the manufacturing towns – Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool or Newcastle – as well as from London or elsewhere. So it was not the railway which opened up many courses farther afield to Londoners. The roads had already done so. London contained the largest number of owners and sporting men, and they already travelled to meetings. Although the upper classes travelled farthest, throughout Britain ordinary people would walk miles to see a major event: not just race meetings but pedestrianism, boxing, regattas or cockfights. It was relatively common in Cumbria, for example, where rail services were lacking, for working men to walk twenty miles to see a major wrestling meeting.[25] Major meetings were rare, often annual events, saved up for. They were interesting, exciting and enjoyable.

The arrival of the railway simply provided a quicker means of attendance for the wealthier than the use of their own coach. This can be seen clearly at Epsom, where by 1849 *Punch* was reporting that 'the jam of carriages caused by the stoppage at the turnpike' was 'less tedious than formerly by reason of the railway'.[26] Equally pickpockets, prostitutes, card sellers, bookmakers, jockeys, trainers, three-card tricksters and other course habituees who had previously followed the regional circuits from meeting to meeting on foot, horseback or coach sometimes now used the train. Generally the market for rail excursions was limited to the middle and upper classes, those with good earnings and irregular hours, self-employed men and regular racegoers such as the 'swell mob', bookmakers and others bent on business. Certainly there

were sometimes complaints that rail excursions took urban 'roughs' to country meetings where they caused trouble. But such violence too can be found in the pre-railway age. There are many examples of racecourse disturbances even in the 1820s and 1830s between locals and the travelling groups of pickpockets, sleight-of-hand tricksters like the thimbleriggers, with their apparently single pea and three thimbles, or gaming table runners.[27]

Simmons makes the point that Victorian London was 'ringed round with racecourses' all served by railways. This is actually unsurprising, given the population, and he omits to mention that pre-railway London was already ringed by courses. Of racecourses opening and closing in the period from 1800 to the early 1830s for example, Ascot, Barnet, Epsom, Enfield, Hampton, The Hoo, Egham, Guildford, Gormanbury, Oatlands Park and St Albans were all accessible and sometimes well attended. The new more enclosed courses dating from the 1860s with their railway connections were often replacements with better facilities of earlier courses.

Certainly as the rail network expanded people increasingly used train services to get to sporting events, at the expense of other means. The real question is the extent to which rail was opening up travel to new groups rather than a change of transport mode by existing groups. This is almost impossible to settle, given existing data. But had railways been a vital mechanism in racing's expansion one would have expected a great increase in meetings held at the weekend to attract working men with Saturday afternoons free. Yet during the Victorian period race meetings were rarely held on Saturdays and never on Sundays. Up to 1864 there were only four or five Saturday meetings each year, although the number grew somewhat to sixteen by 1869 and had reached forty-two by 1899, twenty-five of which were in the London area. Most meetings outside London, Newmarket and Manchester were single weekday annual events up to and beyond the 1870s, past the development of the five-and-a-half-day week. Few working men could afford, or were likely to be allowed, time off work during the week to travel to distant meetings.

At the same time the race companies themselves showed little interest in rail facilities up to the 1870s. While funding was raised other than through gate money it mattered little how spectators arrived. Indeed, the arrival of railway passengers who had previously travelled by carriage could actually be financially counterproductive to the race companies, since carriages were usually charged for entrance, and the occupants might pay for a grandstand or paddock ticket as well. Equally the total number of days occupied by race meetings throughout the United Kingdom showed little change, suggesting that transport improvements gave no real boost.

The cost of most excursions was not cheap, especially when an event was held in a small market town some way from large centres of population. Excursions were a relative luxury, even though they were often priced at return journey for single fare. To get to Carlisle races from Newcastle, the nearest large town, cost 5*s* in the 1840s, even at third-class return fares, alongside loss of mid-week earnings, before spending was taken into account.[28] This

Table 2 Total number of days used by recognised race meetings annually in the UK, 1816–66

Year	*Days*
1816	274
1826	323
1836	304
1846	313
1856	264
1866	306

Source *Racing Calendar*.

was an excursion hardly open to large numbers of working men. Not all sporting excursions were well patronised and so it is unsurprising that some railway companies such as the North Eastern showed little interest in running cheap excursions to race or other meetings. Bad weather could be a major deterrent for most outdoor sports. At a rainy Keswick Regatta in 1877 'there were excursion trains from all directions, but some were almost empty'.[29] It was only in London that a sizeable enough market existed for the railway companies 'to provide lists of cheap trains to any country place where races are to be held'.[30] These were for the use of the inner metropolitan betting group. In most parts of the country 'cheap' was a relative term. Excursion trains to sporting events were certainly laid on in the provinces, but only as an attempt to attract those who would have gone anyway. That is why it was common for excursions to have return validity extending over the period of race meetings. Vamplew has implied that the railway companies helped to raise prize money 'by sponsoring races' in order to create demand.[31] In reality their contribution was negligible. Money from railways was only around 0·05 per cent of total prize money in 1843 and although it rose very slightly thereafter it was still only 0·11 per cent by 1874, after which it declined once again.[32]

Even after the spread of railways the major catchment area for most sports continued to be the surrounding district. There was clearly some shift from road to rail, but its extent should not be overestimated. If it is undeniable that railways could make travel quicker and cheaper, it was not invariably so. Excursion trains were often slower, especially in the 1840s and 1850s, when the crush at stations to get tickets, the fight for often limited seating and the poor arrangements made by many railways were all off-putting. Even at Epsom the railways never carried more than a fraction of the crowds. Rail use was initially low and even by 1901 only between 60,000 and 70,000 used the four stations serving Epsom. Many still travelled by other means, and motor car and motor bus services were soon to play their part. Doncaster provides a rare example of very significant railway passenger growth impacting on attendance. In 1848, when Doncaster station opened, only 8,000 used rail on St Leger day, of an estimated 140,000 attendance.[33] But 190,000 were using rail sixty years later.[34]

Once we look to the broad generality of sports in the provinces in the period from the 1840s to the 1870s it is clear that most spectators were local.

In the north-east, for example, the vast majority of the huge crowds of around 100,000 who watched great rowers like Clasper, Chambers and Renforth on Tyneside, or who watched Bob Boyd on the Tyne and Tees in the 1880s, were local people, often drawn from the works surrounding the rivers.[35] They were not brought in by rail. Equally the crowds of spectators and pot-share bowlers on Newcastle's town moor on Saturdays came from the surrounding mining villages and the town itself, and they came on foot.[36]

Simmons has argued that the profits derived from the racing business by the railways, taken all together, were substantial.[37] Having studied racing in some detail, the evidence seems to suggest a Scottish verdict of 'not proven'. In reality some aspects were profitable, others almost certainly lost money. Some profits seem to have been made from the transport of horses, from the 'specials' commissioned by elite racegoers, and from spectators travelling by ordinary trains at full fare. But many excursions probably ran at an overall loss. There were few Saturday meetings, so coal locomotives, normally idle on Saturdays, could not be used. Low excursion fares called for significant numbers of passengers if the concession was to be justified, and this was rarely the case. The cheap excursion facilities to Newmarket from London the GER provided at the request of the Jockey Club were certainly losing money in the Edwardian period.[38] A. and E. Jordan have argued that sporting excursions were often operated at low or very low margins of profitability, and some at a loss, and were simply a device to increase total revenue, with profits based on marginal cost.[39] The Victorian writer W. M. Acworth believed that the extra cost to the companies of building, lavishly equipping and staffing the Singleton station for Goodwood in 1881 swallowed up any profits.[40] It was open to the public but little used. Many preferred to get off at Chichester. The Epsom Downs branch was built by the LBSCR because the opening of the LSWR line to Epsom in 1859 had severely hit revenue. The station had nine platforms for six days' racing a year, yet had only four to seven trains a day when opened and could have made only a low operating profit.

Where the number of spectators did grow during the Victorian period it was due mainly to the rises in population, expansion of free time and increases in real wages. For the argument that railways 'widened and deepened' the catchment area to be demonstrated we would need figures showing greater numbers of spectators coming from a distance, far more followers of racing or pugilism to attend more events in a year than they had done previously. Some middle-income groups certainly had sufficient excess income to attend more than their local event if travelling by rail. However, the data available do not allow a judgment to be made either way.

It is highly likely that there would be changes over time in the nature of the crowd. Pressures associated with industrialisation, urbanisation or the depression in farming may well have had an adverse effect on some groups who had previously attended. There is insufficient evidence to be sure. Local attendance was certainly central, and certainly there is much evidence to indicate that in the case of major events attractive to the working classes, such as rowing, racing or pedestrianism, local firms were unable, despite strenuous

efforts, to prevent employees attending, while even some schools closed owing to truancy.[41]

The impact of railways on attendance has also been exaggerated in the late Victorian period, when rail transport played only a limited role in the spectatorship of both Association football and rugby. In the 1870s and early 1880s the vast bulk of the crowd everywhere were home supporters who walked to the matches. Locality was important to football, especially in the larger urban areas, which often sustained several top clubs. In the 1880s London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and the Potteries were already divided as much as united by soccer, with rival teams in different but well populated parts of the town serving different types of community. In the larger towns it was crowds arriving on foot, or by the electrified tramways of the late 1890s, rather than by railway, which these late Victorian sports grounds relied upon: they could have managed financially without visiting spectators.

Most football spectators saw their team mainly at home matches, as economic considerations limited away visits largely to attendance at local derbies or very important cup ties.[42] Entrance prices ensured that most supporters in the early 1880s were skilled working and lower middle-class. More working-class support for football emerged first in Sheffield and Lancashire, and it was in Lancashire, where family incomes were larger, that local railway companies first began to advertise cheap trips to away matches in the mid-1880s. Distances between Darwen, Padiham, Blackburn, Church, Bolton, Burnley and Accrington, the early top Lancastrian teams, were relatively short, and the fares were within the reach of working men. By the 1890s excursions were travelling somewhat further. By then the Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway was running excursions from Blackburn as far as Blackpool and from Burnley to Liverpool for League matches. In the north-east the NER began running football excursion trains to other towns in the region in the mid-1880s. However, the fact that an excursion was put on is no indication of numbers. Actual use was closely linked with distance and the perceived importance of the match. Cleveland Association visited East of Scotland in 1889, with only twenty-seven in the saloon provided by the railway company.[43] Middlesbrough were given a saloon carriage to Lincoln for their early round FA Cup tie of 1886, but including the team and officials only 200 excursionists travelled.[44]

Rail travel by spectators to more important distant away games was more certainly growing by the later 1880s, and even the nature of the excursionists was changing. The comment that it was ‘the dangerous class of rough turbulent boys’ that ‘fought their way into the carriages’ of the relief excursion train from Middlesbrough to an FA Cup match with Sunderland in 1887 may well be illuminating.[45] There were already complaints about the ‘yells and general noise’ of supporters on the platform by this time.[46] In 1892 it was mainly ‘youths and young men’ whom Edwards, in an article significantly entitled ‘The new football mania’, saw as patronising the excursion trains to ‘fields of combat fifty or a hundred miles from home’.[47] Few working men, however, would have been able to afford both time off work on Saturday morning and the fare for a round trip of 100 or 200 miles on a regular basis.

The use of rail transport was restricted to those who had *regular* excess income to spend on leisure. Others had to walk, and 'many out of work pitmen tramped as far as ten, twenty and in some cases thirty miles' to support Morpeth Harriers in the semi-final of the Northumberland Challenge Cup.[48] In Lancashire fans walked miles to see a good match, and trams and cabs as well as trains were used.[49] In Scotland 'brake clubs' were organised to follow the Glasgow teams, using shooting brakes draped with portraits of players.[50]

Nearly all examples of heavy rail use come from regional and national cup finals and semi-finals where clubs met on neutral ground in an urban area, forcing supporters of both teams to travel. Special trains were 'laden with passengers' supporting two Darlington clubs for the final of the Cleveland Cup in April 1887 at Middlesbrough.[51] The appeal of national football cup finals was immense, especially after the location was moved to Crystal Palace in 1895, with mutualist efforts to save for the journey to London, while railway companies always advertised heavily in the local press.[52] But even national cup finals were no guarantee of large crowds. Most supporters stayed at home and waited for telegraphic news displayed in pubs and newspaper offices. They didn't go – it was too far, too expensive and tickets were scarce, since all associations throughout the country got tickets. 'Thousands of employees from the various works' turned out to see Wolves set off for the 1893 final, and thousands welcomed them back.[53] Few supporters could afford to travel, especially in times of slump, and where teams were unfashionable wider national interest was lacking. The Amateur Cup Final between Middlesbrough and Uxbridge at Crystal Palace in 1898 attracted only 1,500 people.[54]

So railways affected most mass *spectatorship* of sport only to a limited extent in the Victorian era. It was in *participation* that the effect was more marked, both in terms of middle and upper-class sporting involvement and in the opportunities cheap transport provided for the spread of professionalism. The railways gave rise to more opportunities for competition and higher earnings on a national and even international canvas to top professional sportsmen – initially top rowers, jockeys or pugilists and later top football or cricket teams. It also allowed wealthier amateur sportsmen to compete more widely. Again these changes can be overdrawn, since the trend was already clear even before the railway network spread across the country, even among provincial sportsmen. The Devonshire wrestler Abraham Cann, who claimed to be champion of all England, was travelling as far afield as London and Leeds in the 1820s in pursuit of competition.[55] The champion jockey of the 1830s Tommy Lye, based at Middleham in the North Riding, travelled some 6,000 miles, mainly by horse and coach, as early as 1839 in pursuit of his 173 races.[56] But as the railways expanded the top jockeys of the 1840s and 1850s were getting 250–350 races, and by 1854 Wells had to travel nearly 10,000 miles for his eighty-two winners. Champion jockeys were soon riding on the Continent and in Ireland as well. By the end of the century champion jockeys were getting between 600 and 800 races a year, if Continental rides are included. In 1899 Sammy Loates travelled almost 11,000 miles between meetings in Britain.[57] Increased travel by pugilists, pedestrians,

rowers or even wrestlers from the 1840s had a direct link with the railways. Donaldson of Patterdale, a top Cumbrian wrestler, travelled mainly by rail from Penrith to London to compete in 1843.[58] Newcastle rowers began competing in London, Kings Lynn and other regattas in the same decade, whilst London rowers came north. By the 1850s Cumbrian wrestlers were travelling to London, Lancashire, Scotland and north-east England. By 1871 British rowers were even competing in Canada, travelling by rail and boat. The railways allowed such top athletes to move between events more quickly and cheaply, reducing the costs of competition. Even so, the real driving force behind such travel was not the railway but increased prize money or stakes which still came largely from the subscriptions of rich patrons.

The claim that the railways helped the development of team games, especially football, has more substance.[59] Certainly the cheapness and speed of the railway was much more important for team games than for individuals. The cost of travelling by alternative means such as coach or brake was prohibitive over a season, so the railways were vital. Indeed, they aided the development of touring cricket sides as early as the mid-nineteenth century when William Clarke's All England eleven and then two other professional sides began touring all over England. The railways were even more important for football and rugby. Tony Mason makes the point that railways made sporting fixtures possible between teams from towns far apart, so teams could learn new methods and techniques. They also quickened and cheapened short journeys, allowing clubs to play more out-of-town fixtures.[60] Saturday afternoon sports and games were useful to the railways in that business traffic was less at weekends: by developing excursion traffic they were able to exploit underused carrying capacity. By the early 1880s top football teams earned significant sums by touring other areas at Christmas and Easter. In the north-east in 1886/87 Scottish clubs, including Dumbarton, Hibernians, Glasgow Rangers Swifts and Third Lanark, together with the Corinthians, all toured around the new year, while Sheffield, Blackburn Olympic and Derby came at Easter.

The importance of the rail network to the development and efficient working of football associations and leagues can be seen in their records. Lancashire Football Association minutes of 1886 reveal that some Association clubs objected to visiting grounds too far from a station, as they were forced to provide a pair of horses and a wagonette and convey players at railway rates.[61] The Football League recruited its initial members partly on the basis of travel costs. Sunderland was not elected to the League at first largely because Midland clubs found the cost of travel too high. Blackpool, often in financial trouble, could not afford the journey to play Arsenal in 1899. Even so, rail travel was not a panacea for team sports. Football and rugby teams alike suffered late starts, broken engagements and shortened matches in the 1880s and 1890s owing to the shortcomings of the railway network.

As the pubic increasingly travelled by train good rail access to race meetings became more important. Yet good railway facilities did not necessarily generate demand, and several late nineteenth-century courses, including Hedon Park (Hull), Portsmouth Park, Keele Park (Stoke) and Four Oaks

Park, failed despite being near large centres of population and situated on a railway line with convenient stations. Four Oaks Park, near Birmingham, opened in 1881, got a public station in December 1884 when the Sutton Coldfield–Lichfield line was opened but held its last meeting in August 1889 and was wound up in 1890. The railways had much more significant effect on the transport of horses for racing, breeding and hunting. Racing horses had previously to walk between meetings, with all the risk of injury, accident, loss of form or nobbling that that entailed. Even prior to the railways a minority of horses raced fifteen times or more a season, but between 1829 and 1869 the figure rose from less than 1 per cent of all horses to 6·5 per cent. Closer analysis indicates a more complex picture. Some major owners such as the Earl of Eglinton, Lord George Bentinck or Tom Parr made their horses travel long distances before the railways, and ran them regularly. Eglinton actually ran his horses less often in 1849 than in 1839. Bentinck ran his horses more, but the greatest increases were at two courses, Goodwood and Newmarket, where he had horses in training. Parr was both owner and trainer, and ran his horses more to increase profits. Most owners continued to limit the running of their horses. Indeed, there was later a backlash against overrunning horses and by 1899 the proportion was back almost to the 1829 level. At breeding time mares were rarely walked more than fifty miles to stallions prior to the railway, but the railways gave breeders a much wider choice of more distant stallions. The railways also contributed significantly to a boom in weekday hunting, as Simmons points out.[62] Businessmen were soon using train services to get their horse and themselves to the hunt, although hunters could be difficult to load on and off trains. Hunting offered elite company and moderate exercise and became fashionable.[63] The number of fox-hunting packs grew rapidly during Victoria's reign. There were an estimated twenty-eight in the 1830s; by the 1890s there were 164. Businessmen and rentiers who were socially ambitious formed a large part of their support, and financially many packs survived on fees from visitors. Visitors to the Quorn were charged £2 for a day's hunting, and Lowerson has estimated that riding to hounds even one day a week with one horse probably cost close on £150 per annum.[64]

It was largely the wealthier minority who could afford first or second-class travel who most benefited in participatory sporting terms from railway services: not just Simmon's 'prosperous Londoner' but his provincial counterparts too. Such activity should not be overestimated. Much of it was only at weekends or during annual holidays. The numbers involved were not large. Fast train travel made the weekend country house party popular for shooting and hunting among the upper classes. New sporting estates in the Highlands emerged through the 1840s, culminating in the Queen's purchase of the Balmoral estate in 1848. The royal family attended the Braemar gathering and games from 1849. Scotland became a sporting playground for the rich, with Highland gatherings expanding alongside the penetration of the railway into the Highlands. Yachting, another upper-class sport, was also given a major boost. Burnham on Crouch was transformed in the mid-1890s

into a major yacht mooring centre, thanks to its late Victorian railway. It drew heavily on rich London residents, and such developments can be mirrored elsewhere – around the Solent, especially at Cowes, in Cornwall or at Scarborough.

Middle-class sports like tennis and golf were also given a boost. Beyond the gold courses of the London suburbs, which were attracting rail travellers by the 1890s, were those of other large urban areas, and those of the seaside resorts, well used during the summer. Some inland golf links were provided with special stations by the end of the century. The seaside resorts had organised spectator sports, such as regattas, horse racing and cricket, for the entertainment of visitors even before the arrival of the railway, but by the later Victorian period some select resorts were well aware that their popularity could be boosted further by the provision of sports facilities. In the case of golf, for example, Lytham, St Annes, Hoylake and Southport all demonstrate that the provision of golf links and competitions increased visitor numbers as well as attracting both residents, who commuted by rail to Liverpool or Manchester, and weekend golfers. Some railway companies even built hotels to boost custom. Golfers were offered cheap fares from the cities to Scottish resorts, while the railway company's offer of cheap fares to the Eastbourne tournament in the 1890s increased both spectator numbers and entries. By the end of the century railway companies were increasingly using sports facilities such as golf, tennis, bowls and cricket in their resort advertisements to lure visitors.[65]

Another sport, wildfowling, which became more popular among a tiny minority of urban sportsmen with a taste for solitude, the natural world and some risk, was given easier access by the railways, while fishing, too, was becoming a popular means of escaping urban congestion. The Norfolk Broads developed rapidly as a sailing centre between 1850 and 1870 after local railway development, and then built up a tourist clientele through wealthier fishermen hunting large pike. Predominantly middle-class game fishing for salmon or trout in more distant clear streams away from polluted urban waters also relied on train travel, although the numbers involved are unclear. Certainly most of the middle-class fishing clubs were relatively small, but much of game fishing's appeal was to stressed individuals seeking peace, tranquillity and relaxation, with some mental challenge.[66] Even so, there were only 46,757 licensed trout fishermen as late as 1900. Working-class coarse angling was also becoming more accessible thanks to the railways. Large numbers took part. In Sheffield, which had around 20,000 registered anglers by the end of the century, fishing clubs, often based in pubs, ran club competitions and hired excursion trains to facilitate them. Another working-class sport which benefited from the facilities offered by the railways was pigeon racing. It experienced a major boost in the late nineteenth century, especially in mining areas, and birds were raced over long distances by individuals and clubs. Finally the sporting associations and clubs that were associated with the big railway companies should not be overlooked. Most companies built up a series of works football teams, works angling teams and works athletic

groups in the 1880s and 1890s, through their bureaucratic organisation, tournaments and match structures helping to create a regional consciousness. In football, railway clerks were particularly influential in building up teams that entered the League, but much other railway sporting influence as yet remains unexplored.

The railways came at a unique stage in British industrialisation and it is unsurprising that earlier assessments of their contribution somewhat exaggerated their influence. Recent research, by Simmons and others, has begun to question some aspects of their importance, while lending more weight to others. For example, it is now recognised that while railways were important in the Victorian economy, and the quality of service increased at the end of the century, railway development alone was not a sufficient explanation of the growth of suburbs and coastal resorts, while in the 1890s electric trams were becoming more important to the working classes than cheap train tickets.[67] Nevertheless railways made a larger and more varied contribution to the use of Victorian leisure than any other agency, especially in terms of excursions, day trips and seaside holidays. But the evidence regarding sport is much less convincing. It is clear that in terms of attendance at the majority of popular sporting events the railway simply facilitated existing trends. Just as today the majority of supporters to provincial events travel largely by car or bus, and rail has been superseded, rail itself simply superseded earlier forms of transport for at least some spectators. Rail had a greater impact on particular sports such as hunting, shooting, angling or golf. It enabled top professionals in sports such as racing, cricket or football to maximise their opportunities to compete, and facilitated the transport of horses, pigeons and other creatures involved in sport.

Notes

1 E.g. M. Robbins, *The Railway Age* (rpr. Manchester, 1998).
2 T. R. Gourvish, *Railways and the British Economy, 1830–1914* (1983); G. Hawke, *Railways and Economic Growth in England and Wales, 1840–70* (Oxford, 1970); J. R. Kellett, *Railways and Victorian Cities* (1979).
3 E.g. W. Vamplew, *Pay up and Play the Game* (Cambridge 1988); J. Simmons, *The Victorian Railway* (1991), *The Railway in Town and Country, 1830–1914* (1986); D. Brailsford, *British Sport: a social history* (1992). These writers often concentrate on exceptional events without examining how they fit into the relative chronology of the railway and the sport, or whether they have any significant effect on the underlying trend.
4 Simmons, *The Railway in Town and Country*, pp. 88–90.
5 L. H. Curzon, *A Mirror of the Turf* (1892), p. 32.
6 J. Walvin, *Leisure and Society, 1830–1950* (1978), pp. 24–5.
7 C. Chinn, *Better Betting with a Decent Feller: betting and the British working class, 1750–1990* (Hemel Hempstead, 1991); M. Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter: popular gambling in England,* c. *1820–1961* (Manchester, 1992).
8 Vamplew, *Pay up and Play the Game*, p. 47.
9 Simmons, *The Victorian Railway*, p. 301.
10 *Reading Mercury*, 11 August 1857.
11 Simmons, *The Victorian Railway*, p. 302.
12 D. Brailsford, *Sport, Time and Society: the British at play* (1991), p. 69.
13 *York Herald*, 25 August 1804; *Manchester Mercury*, 8 June 1819; *Westmorland Gazette*, 23 March 1839. All these are clearly references to attendance on a single day. More usually estimates were of the overall trend, or a comparison with previous years. The *Manchester Mercury* claimed 'certainly not less than

150,000 people attended our races on Friday last' in 1819, but the *Manchester Exchange Herald* of 3 March 1824 claimed 'hundreds of thousands' at the races and later the same month referred to 'countless multitudes', a 'greater number of persons than ever before'; *ibid.*, 23 June 1824.

14 W. Vamplew, 'Horse racing', in T. Mason (ed.), *Sport in Britain: a social history* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 216.

15 J. Crump, 'The great carnival of the year: the Leicester races in the nineteenth century', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Historical and Archaeological Society* LVIII (1982–83), pp. 58–74.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

17 *Cumberland Pacquet*, 2 October 1811, estimated 'nearly 12,000' at the wrestling on the Swifts, at Carlisle, while in 1814 it was calculated, on the basis of receipts at the gate, that 15,000 people entered the enclosure. At Whitehaven sports in 1825 'there was not less than from five to six thousand persons present' at the wrestling: *Westmorland Advertiser*, 13 August 1825.

18 *Carlisle Journal*, 11 October 1851. I. T. Gate, *Great Book of Wrestling References* (Carlisle, 1874), pp. 34–5, gives an even lower estimate.

19 The *Worcester Herald*, 10 January 1824, claimed, 'we do not exaggerate when we claim the number at 40,000,' but the *Worcester Journal*, 8 January 1824, claimed only 30,000. Brailsford, *Sport, Time and Society*, pp. 76–7, gives other examples.

20 Brailsford, *Sport, Time and Society*, p. 77.

21 J. Lowerson, *Sport and the English Middle Classes, 1870–1914* (Manchester, 1993).

22 Brailsford, *Sport, Time and Society*, p. 92.

23 'Nimrod', *The Life of John Mytton* (1851).

24 M. Y. Ashcroft (ed.), *Letters and Papers of Henrietta Matilda Crompton and her Family* (Northallerton, 1994), p. 59.

25 D. Scott, *Bygone Cumberland and Westmorland* (1899), p. 188.

26 *Punch*, 2 June 1849, p. 218.

27 E.g. *Sporting Magazine,* August 1822, p. 261; *Westmorland Gazette*, 27 May 1829; *York Chronicle*, 17 September 1829; *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 8 August 1828.

28 Newcastle & Carlisle Railway poster advertising a special train in 1846, in A. and E. Jordan, *Away for the Day: the railway excursion in Britain* (1991), p. 80.

29 *Westmorland Gazette*, 25 August 1877.

30 Quoted in Walvin, *Leisure and Society*, p. 25.

31 W. Vamplew, *The Turf* (1976), p. 32.

32 J. Tolson and W. Vamplew, 'Derailed: railways and horse racing revisited', *Sports Historian* 18, 2 (1998), p. 38

33 *Doncaster Gazette*, 17 September 1848.

34 P. L. Scowcroft, 'Railways and the St Leger', *Journal of the Railway and Canal Historical Society* 27, 9 (1983), pp. 266–76.

35 J. Dillon, *The Tyne Rowers* (Jesmond, 1993); M. J. Huggins, 'Leisure and sport in Middlesbrough, 1840–1914', in A. J. Pollard (ed.), *Middlesbrough: Town and Community, 1830–1950* (Middlesbrough, 1996), p. 149.

36 Potshare bowling was a traditional mining challenge game involving the bowling of pot bowls for a distance over long courses. See A. Metcalfe, 'Resistance to change: potshare bowling in the mining communities of east Northumberland, 1800–1914', in R. Holt (ed.), *Sport and the Working Class in Modern Britain* (Manchester, 1990), pp. 29–44.

37 Simmons, *The Railway in Town and Country*, p. 89.

38 *Railway Magazine* (1908), p. 373.

39 A. and E. Jordan, *Away for the Day*, pp. 227–30.

40 W. M. Acworth, *The Railways of England* (1889), p. 351.

41 For racing examples see M. J. Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society, 1790–1914* (1999), chapter 5.

42 D. Russell, *Football and the British* (Preston, 1977), pp. 55 ff.

43 *Northern Review*, 28 September 1889.

44 *Northern Echo*, 29 November 1886.

45 *Northern Review*, 10 December 1887.

46 *Ibid.*, 3 December 1887.

47 C. Edwardes, 'The new football mania', *Nineteenth Century* 32 (1892), p. 627.

48 *Northern Review*, 12 March 1887.

49 S. Tischler, *Footballers and Businessmen* (1981), p. 42.

50 See H. F. Moorhouse, 'Footballers and working-class culture in Scotland', in R. Holt (ed.), *Sport and the Working Class in Modern Britain* (1990), p. 188.

51 *Northern Review*, 9 April 1887.

52 See J. Hill, 'Rites of spring: Cup Finals and community in the north of England', in J. Hill and J. Williams (eds), *Sport and Identity in the North of England* (Keele, 1996), pp. 85–111.

53 *Athletic News*, 27 March 1893.

54 *Times*, 25 April 1898.

55 J. H. Porter, 'Devonshire wrestling in

the nineteenth century', *British Society of Sports History Bulletin* 9 (1989), p. 23.
56 *New Sporting Magazine* January 1840, p. 72.
57 Jockey travel is discussed further in Tolson and Vamplew, 'Derailed', pp. 42–3.
58 I. Ward, 'Lakeland Sport in the Nineteenth Century', Ph.D. thesis, University of Liverpool (1985), pp. 200–3.
59 Simmons, *The Railway in Town and Country*, p. 88.
60 T. Mason, *Association Football and English Society, 1863–1915* (1980), pp. 146–7.
61 C. E. Sutcliffe and F. Hargreaves, *History of the Lancashire Football Association, 1878–1928* (1928), p. 101.
62 Simmons, *The Railway in Town and Country*, p. 90.
63 D. C. Itzkowitz, *Peculiar Privilege: a social history of English foxhunting, 1753–1885* (Hassocks, 1977), chapter 2 *passim*.
64 For further details of hunting see Lowerson, *Sport and the English Middle Classes*, pp. 32 ff.
65 See A. J. Durie and M. J. Huggins, 'Sport, social tone and the seaside resorts of Great Britain, *c*. 1850–1900', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 15, 1 (1998), pp. 173–87.
66 Lowerson, *Sport and the English Middle Classes*, p. 43.
67 M. J. Freeman and D. H. Aldcroft (eds), *Transport in Victorian Britain* (Manchester, 1988), p. 13.

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