

Popular Recreation and the Significance of Space

ALL sports and recreations require some space for their exercise, but this simple observation has meant very different things for different people throughout history. Certainly for the poor in eighteenth-century England, space for recreation was not something that could simply be taken for granted. The problem was not that suitable land was in short supply, it was that the poor did not possess any parks or playing fields of their own, and they consequently needed to appropriate some kind of public space in order to enjoy their sports and recreations. Whether for games of football or cricket, for annual feasts or fairs, for bonfires at Guy Fawkes or for dancing at May, space of some kind needed to be found. And this straightforward requirement has had many significant, yet unpredictable, consequences for the recreations of the poor.

Eighteenth-century England did not lack the kind of open spaces suitable for recreation: the commons, the village green, the market place, or the public street – all might be used by all comers for the purpose of fun and games. But these spaces were as diverse as they were numerous, and one activity could assume many different forms depending on exactly where it was enjoyed.

We can see the chameleon-like nature of popular recreation by looking at the custom of throwing at cocks on Shrove Tuesday, one of the oldest and most widely celebrated

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dates in eighteenth-century England. Cock-fighting and football on Shrove Tuesday were recorded by William Fitzstephen in the late twelfth century, and repeated prohibition orders throughout following centuries suggest a continuous history of these customs throughout the medieval and early modern periods. In the early seventeenth century, an Oxford fellow, Thomas Crosfield, noted the customs of Shrovetide as: '1. Frittering. 2. throwing at cockes. 3. playing at stooleball in ye City by woemen & footeball by men'; in the following century, the same handful of customs – throwing at cocks, football, and pancakes – were universally enjoyed on this day.

Cock throwing was as ubiquitous as it was simple. It consisted in tethering a cock to the ground, and attempting to knock it down from a distance with wooden batons. There were no standard rules by which the game was played, but it was conventional to charge players a few pence to throw at the cock. For

any player skilled enough to knock the animal off its feet, there was the added incentive that the cock was theirs if they were able to run and pick it up before it righted itself. In Chichester in the late eighteenth century, the going rate was apparently 'two pence three throws'. Cock throwing was played alongside a number of other games involving chasing, or 'threshing', a cock or hen, and it is possible that these pastimes were of yet greater antiquity – certainly the form of these games was even less firmly fixed. Here is a description of cock threshing in an early eighteenth-century village from the diary of a wealthy Lancashire farmer, Nicholas Blundell: 'The Little Boys ... rann Blindfold after an other who had a Bell, for a Cock; when that Sport was over, they ran with their Hands ty'd on their backs after the Cock & took him in their Mouth; I think there were each time seaven; I, William Harrison, William Thelwall & several others were present'.

Despite the best efforts of eighteenth-century antiquaries, the origins of these singular Shrovetide pastimes remain unclear, but it is certain that they were both widespread and subject to endless local variations. Yet no matter how these games were played, all were emphatically plebeian in their appeal: they were the recreations not simply of the labouring poor, but often of the children of the poor as well.

The day has been described as one of 'licensed misrule', and since festivities on Shrove Tuesday did occasionally get out of hand, there are some grounds for this view. The day was commandeered by apprentices in early seventeenth-century London, for example, and was the occasion of rioting in Bristol and York later in the century. But instances of violence and disorder were almost exclusively confined to urban areas, and in rural districts it seems less appropriate to describe the day as one of licensed misrule. The 'Little Boys' that Blundell and his neighbours watched chasing the cock posed no threat to social order – nor did the girls he



Francis Barraud, *The Travelling Show*
(Bridgeman Art Library, London)



Isaac Robert Cruickshank, *Jumping in Sacks*, drawn by W.H. Payne, engraved by George Hunt (Bridgeman Art Library, London)

saw threshing for a hen in a neighbour's field another year. Elsewhere, a shopkeeper gave pennies to the girls that came 'a-singing' on Shrove Tuesday, and a clergyman gave money to 'football men'. Festive merry-making did not descend into disorder in these communities on Shrove Tuesday, but instead the day was one of good neighbourhood.

Furthermore, this contrast between urban and rural areas does not stem from any difference in the activities that were enjoyed, for communities in all areas were participating in a fundamentally similar set of practices. Instead, we must look to the local environment if we are to understand why Shrove Tuesday took these different forms.

In part the difference was simply a function of the numbers involved. The sheer number of urban apprentices and labourers that might take to the streets in a large town to throw at cocks posed problems for the maintenance of public order that did not exist at small rural gatherings. But the potential for disorder that existed in towns rested upon something more than the numbers of people involved. The location of the activities, as opposed to the extent of participation, was also significant. In towns, recreations were forced onto spaces that existed for other purposes. The market square was intended for trade, and the street designed for traffic, but on Shrove Tuesday the intended functions of both of these places was eclipsed by the crowds that took over

corners of the town for purposes of their own. The use of these public spaces added a further level of meaning to the activities. When the urban poor took to the streets for games and festivity, there was an implicit challenge to the normal order of things that did not exist when villagers enjoyed the same activities on their village green, or in tucked away fields, and this is why a history of recreation needs to attend to the significance of space. The cultural resonance of sports and recreations varied according to the spaces in which they were held. Different spaces had the power to invest popular recreations with new meanings, and for this reason an appreciation of space is fundamental to understanding both their appeal, and their fate.

The picture presented so far, that of a world in which the poor had free access to a wide and varied range of public spaces for recreation, perhaps evokes a degree of nostalgia for the simpler life of a pre-industrial age. But touching as this image may be, it does not quite grasp the reality of public space. Land, if not privately owned, was publicly governed. All these spaces – commons, greens, streets and squares – lay within the control of someone; common right holders, manorial courts and civic authorities were the arbiters of this land, deciding when it might be used, by whom and for what purposes. Though recreation was often low on their list of concerns, these authorities certainly had it in their power to

shape popular recreation owing to their role as custodians of the land on which it was by necessity located.

Returning once again, then, to the example of cock throwing, it is evident that within towns the survival of the sport through the centuries had rested upon the tacit consent of civic rulers. The apprentices' holiday observed by a Dutch visitor to England could only continue with the authorities turning a blind eye: 'In London one sees in every street, wherever one goes, many apprentice boys running with, under their arms, a cock with a string on its foot, on which is a spike, which they push firmly into the ground between the stones. They always look for an open space, and, for a penny, let people throw their cudgels from a good distance at the cock, and he, who kills the cock, gets it.' Another London tourist noted 'it is even dangerous to go near any of those places where this diversion is being held; so many clubs are thrown about that you run a risk of receiving one on your head.' Shrove Tuesday was a moment when the young and plebeian took possession of the streets. And it was to flourish only for so long as civic authorities consented to this appropriation.

The eighteenth century saw a remarkable and rapid disappearance of the civic authorities indulgence towards the custom. Norwich appears to have been the first town to attack the seasonal sport following the Restoration, beginning a campaign in 1719 that was to continue for a period of over thirty years. From the 1750s towns everywhere were beginning to take steps to end the custom. The authorities at Newbury, Sheffield, Wakefield, Doncaster, Reading, Northampton, Bristol and London all prohibited throwing at cocks during the 1750s. Nottingham and Colchester followed in the 1760s; and Guildford issued notices prohibiting the throwing at cocks 'either in High Streets, Backsides or Church Yards in this Town' in February 1766. There is also evidence from Worcester, Gravesend, Liverpool, Ely, Abingdon, Dover and Wisbech that civic rulers were endeavouring to prevent the practice in the late eighteenth century. Towns from all parts of England were

taking steps to prevent cock throwing, and with this decisive shift in their attitude towards the custom. the face of popular merriment on Shrove Tuesday was changed for ever.

By the end of the eighteenth century, cock throwing had been eliminated from most towns, and although civic authorities sometimes needed to repeat their orders against cock throwing through a number of years, the suppression had not been particularly protracted. Eighteenth-century towns were well governed, and cock throwing was the sport not simply of the poor, but of the young. It was not difficult for those in control to consign the pastime to history. But in rural areas, the sport lingered far longer. The activity was far less controversial when enjoyed outside busy civic centres. Moreover, even when rural leaders did start to move against cock throwing, they lacked the policing mechanisms that had made such short work of the custom in towns, ensuring its survival for many more decades.

Cock throwing, an occasional pastime of the poor and the young, belongs to the historical margins, but the example nevertheless serves to make a significant historical point. So long as popular recreations took place on open space, there was an ongoing negotiation between those who played and those who ruled. The repression of the children's sport of cock throwing was a quick victory for the rulers, but with each space and each activity new negotiations needed to be worked out. That balance of power differed in each context, and the outcomes of these negotiations were consequently varied and unpredictable.

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William Weekes, *Street Acrobats*, 1874 (Sotheby's Picture Library, London)



Thomas Webster, *The Football Game* (Bridgeman Art Library, London)