

'King Solomon's mines cannot compare with the money that has been raked in by greyhound racing': Greyhound racing, its critics and the working class, c. 1926 to 1951.

Keith Laybourn

Greyhound racing emerged in Britain in 1926 and, during its first quarter of a century, was subject to institutional middle-class opposition because of the legal gambling opportunities it offered to the working class. Much maligned as a dissipate and impoverishing activity it was in fact a significant leisure opportunity for the working class, which cost little for the minority of bettors involved in what was clearly no more than a 'bit of a flutter'.

The position as I see it, and the Government see it, has been materially changed since the development of greyhound racing in 1926. There are only seven horse racecourses within 15 miles of Charing Cross, with 187 days of racing, whereas in the same area there are 23 greyhound tracks with over 4,000 days' racing within a year. Greyhound racing has brought on-the course betting facilities, often as an almost nightly event, into most of the large urban centres of the country,

Sir John Gilmour, Home Secretary, *Hansard*, Commons, 27 June 1934. col.1137.

[

There has been considerable dispute over the extent to which the working class of Britain gambled, or had a 'bit of a flutter', in the early twentieth century. This had been fuelled by the hostility to gambling of the numerically limited, but socially and politically significant, bodies such as the National Anti-Gambling League (NAGL), the Church Committee on Gambling, and the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches. These organisations had been instrumental in making illegal the off-course ready-money betting of the working class, as opposed to the legal credit and on-course betting favoured by the middle class. They were thrown into fury when greyhound racing began at Belle Vue, Manchester, in 1926, largely because this was a major new on-course and legal gambling opportunity for the working class.¹ The mushrooming growth of greyhound tracks to more than two hundred

licensed tracks by the early 1930s, with millions attending, was too much for them to accept. In contrast, contemporary defenders of greyhound racing argued that it widened the leisure opportunities of the working class, offering real opportunities to escape the class confines of gambling. To them greyhound tracks also provided an important opportunity for leisure and pleasure which was sociable, relatively cheap, and accessible.

This article suggests that greyhound racing was essentially an important working-class pastime which did not engender the type of corruption, immorality, degradation and insouciant behaviour which its critics imagined. It also maintains that it was, indeed, a niche sport and was only attended by a significant minority of working-class gamblers. Along with the football pools, it was one of the two most important additions to inter-war gambling that allowed the working class to gamble legally. Indeed, there is evidence that greyhound racing released many of the working class from the reality of the day-to-day hardships of life, created new jobs and brought new investment that helped in the economic recovery of the late 1930s.² In the wider scheme of things, greyhound racing was a significant and relatively cheap leisure pursuit which endorses the view that gambling for the working class was essentially 'a bit of a flutter'. Nevertheless, its rise as a predominantly working-class activity was the subject to class prejudice which was partly responsible for it being controlled in a way in which the more middle-class dominated horse racing was not.

The historiography of working-class gambling and greyhound racing

Many contemporary writers claimed that working-class gambling had increased in the twentieth century at an immense economic and social cost to the working class.³ In contrast, more recent writers, such as Carl Chinn and Mark Clapson, have argued that working-class gambling was a pervasive, often illegal, part of working-class life but was

essentially just a harmless 'flutter'.⁴ It is certainly the case that the NAGL and religious groups were fearful of the cost of working-class gambling. Yet, there are no accurate figures about the exact scale of gambling. Indeed, during the inter-war years gambling estimates varied widely, and it was often inaccurately assumed that most stakes were lost. The *Spectator* of 16 April 1923 estimated gambling turnover at £450 million per year. W. J. Randall, of the *Turf Guardians*, suggested gambling at £100 million in the mid 1920s.⁵ Evidence presented to the Royal Commission on Betting, Lotteries and Gaming (1949-1951) [hereafter Willink Commission] suggest an annual turnover of £200 million to £400 million. However, since so much of gambling was illegal, there are no verifiable figures for gambling in Britain and particularly so for working-class gambling.⁶

Whatever the estimates, the institutional middle-class view was that gambling was not appropriate to the relatively impoverished and economically marginal position of the working class. Opponents of gambling put forward three main arguments for their opposition to working-class gambling; that the 'profligate', 'indigent' and 'feckless' working class could not afford to gamble, that it would corrupt women and children, and that it would create a something for nothing culture. The NAGL had initiated the Street Betting Act of 1906, which made street betting a criminal offence as an addition to the nineteenth-century legislation against gaming houses. Off-course ready-money gambling of the working classes was made illegal whilst the legal-on course and off-course credit betting of the middle class remained untouched.⁷

The radical weekly *Truth* made much of this class division in gambling and, in October 1938, wrote that 'The man of means can back his fancy with a starting price office if he is unable to go to the racecourse but Alf the Tried and Trusted, the bookie of the street,

is harried by the police.’⁸ Mr. J. Jones, Labour MP for West Ham Silverstone, expressed similar views when speaking at the second reading of the Betting and Lotteries Bill in 1934.

The evils of gambling are only discovered when working men start gambling, then it becomes a moral offence. I can go to Throgmorton Street to-morrow morning and see a more responsible kind of gambling; nobody thinks of calling it street betting. In some streets in my division I can see the detectives picking up an odd man here and there who is taking a betting slip. The other people can gamble with impunity. Those who put a shilling on a horse are heading for Dartmoor but those who put thousands down are not gambling at all: they are only acting in a business-like manner. [...] There ought not to be one law for the rich and another for the poor which is the case today.⁹

Greyhound racing has drawn little academic discussion, although there has been debate on the reasons for its rapid growth. The central issues have concerned the working-class dominance of greyhound racing and the extent of its impact on their lives. Ross McKibbin portrayed greyhound racing as ‘not a socially inclusive sport’ and that it was ‘genuinely proletarian’, with ‘only a few high-born people attending it out of a sense of slumming it and sporting bohemianism.’¹⁰ Jeff Hill also described it as ‘almost exclusively working-class in character’.¹¹ Yet it has been argued that it must not be assumed that greyhound racing was solely the preserve of the working-class gambler. John Stevenson, has recognised its cosmopolitan nature.¹² More emphatically, Mike Huggins has revealed that whilst those attending greyhound tracks were increasingly working class in the late 1930s, with new and smaller tracks opening, there was a fleeting interest from middle-class attenders in the late 1920s and early 1930s, particularly at the larger tracks. Indeed, the middle class became involved in running the sport, investing in tracks, and owning dog.

Huggins maintains that the middle classes were drawn to greyhound racing because it was 'emblematic of modernity', citing J. B. Priestley's well known description of its as being 'part of the new, modern, postwar England'.¹³ However, he notes that this middle-class interest declined from the mid 1930s as it moved towards more hedonistic and fashionable leisure pursuits. Apparently, the impression that greyhound racing was almost exclusively working class arose because the Greyhound Racing Protection Association's juxtaposed horseracing against greyhound racing giving the impression that horse racing was an upper-class pastime as compared to greyhound racing, the 'great new democratic sport' of the working class. Greyhound racing thus became 'the working man's turf' or 'poor-man's racing' by the mid 1930s.¹⁴

A second debate has concerned the impact of greyhound racing on its customers. Opponents of gambling argued that it was a ruinous activity which impoverished the working class. This view was certainly one held even by some Labour politicians and the Attlee Labour governments (1945-1951) linked greyhound racing with both violence and the undermining the post-war recovery,¹⁵ the 'Canine Casinos' gaining 'pariah-like status'.¹⁶ Contrastingly, Daryl Leeworthy has indicated that, in South Wales at least, greyhound racing created economic, social and leisure opportunities and that the Attlee governments were not as anti-greyhound racing as suggested.¹⁷ Indeed, in 1934 it was suggested that there were about 7,000 people employed at greyhound tracks and in 1949 the 73 NGRS tracks alone employed 4,140 permanent staff (3,258 men and 882 women) and 14,809 part-time employees.¹⁸

The locus of debate has thus been about the working-class nature of the sport and its social and economic impact. These issues hover around Sir John Gilmour's observation

about the way in which the balance of gambling had changed with the onset of greyhound racing. In response to all these issues, it is argued that greyhound racing was often the 'whipping boy' for gambling in general, and, indeed, wartime and post-war failures in particular. However, the fact that it was a minority leisure pursuit that created some economic opportunities and acted as an escape from ennui for a minority of the working class who attended alongside a small hard core of professional and semi-professional gamblers.

The evolution of Greyhound Racing in Britain

The overnight success of greyhound racing in Britain in the inter-war years was one of the most dramatic events in the development of sport and gambling for the working classes and challenged middle-class preconceptions. There was dog racing in Britain throughout the nineteenth century but it was not organised in stadiums or on a legal basis. It was, therefore, the opening of the Belle Vue stadium in Manchester on 24 July 1926, that marked the inauguration of a new legal on-course type of betting.¹⁹ A flicker of activity in 1876, at a meeting at Hendon, had provoked little interest but the working class became increasingly attracted to whippet racing and flapping tracks. The Great War saw an enormous increase in the working-class attendance at these tracks but it was not until the opening of Belle Vue that the first official greyhound race took place under the auspices of the Greyhound Racing Association (Manchester) Limited, formed in October 1925. Based upon an American development, it was soon recognised that a greyhound track could be 'the poor man's racecourse'.²⁰ Belle Vue offered an 'American-style' night out, with gambling, for an entry price of 1s 6d (7.5p), a modest sum equating then to less than four per cent of the average working-class weekly budget, although prices did fall and became much cheaper being 1s 2d

(6p) at the Arms Park, Cardiff and 1s (5p) in the smaller Welsh tracks. There were only 1,700 people at the first meeting at Belle Vue but a crowd of 25,000 was being attracted by the spring of 1927, with about 100 bookmakers and a totalisator to bet with.²¹

The Greyhound Racing Association Trust Ltd was formed and opened tracks such as White City and Harringay, in London, Hall Green in Birmingham, and Powderhill in Edinburgh. The National Greyhound Racing Society (NGRS) was formed in December 1927, to represent the commercial interests of the tracks, and, in early 1928, the National Greyhound Racing Club was established to set up the rules of greyhound racing. At the beginning of 1927 there were only three companies involved in greyhound racing but there were 119 companies by the end, including the British Greyhound Club, Leeds Greyhound Association Ltd, Wembley Stadium, West Ham Greyhound Racing Ltd, and Arms Park (Cardiff).²² Not surprisingly, 'Everybody's Going to the Dogs', was a popular song in 1927.²³

Greyhound racing became a very profitable venture for the owners of the tracks who ran Tote betting, a system whereby winning dividends were paid out of a betting pot rather than on the fixed odds system of most bookmakers. The Home Office estimated the average Tote pool at £180,000 per year in 1931, although 25 tracks took more than £200,000 and one Scottish track took £244,318.²⁴ Most tracks were taking 11.5 per cent of the Tote pool and the average return to track owners was about £21,000 per year. The Clapton Stadium earned a rake off of £52,250 in a turnover £440,000. The White City, Manchester, declared a dividend of £212,000 in 1931 provoking one MP to declare that 'King Solomon's mines cannot compare with the money that has been raked out of greyhound racing.'²⁵ Such returns seemed obscene to many critics who saw it at the cost of working-class incomes, but they did fall after the Tote crisis of 1933, when the Tote at greyhound tracks was declared

illegal resulting in the closure of many tracks, and when the Betting and Lotteries Act of 1934 legalised Tote betting on greyhound tracks but imposed a 6 per cent maximum Tote rake off – the other 94 per cent being returned to the bettor.

By April 1928 there were 175 registered greyhound companies, although only 40 were operating.²⁶ In 1932 there were 242 licensed greyhound tracks in Britain, though 55 were not open, and there were rarely ever more than 200 official tracks active at any one time. Official attendances exploded to 5.5 million in 1927, 13.5 million in 1928, and 18 million in 1931, although untold millions attended unofficial tracks.²⁷ The Tote issue of 1933, which saw the greyhound Tote made illegal, led to closure of some tracks until it was made legal again, under strict rules of control, by the Betting and Lotteries Act of 1934. Nevertheless, attendances at official tracks grew to about 38 million in 1936 and greyhound racing became the third biggest commercial leisure activity in inter-war Britain, only exceeded by the cinema and association football.²⁸ The *Economist* estimated gambling on greyhounds at 'over £50 millions' in 1931.²⁹

The Second World War saw wartime restrictions on the number of meetings that each greyhound track could hold and there were only 105 tracks with the Tote in 1945. Thereafter there was a recovery to 138 Tote tracks, and 150 in total, with attendances reaching between 31 and 36 million at official tracks in 1947 before attendances fell to 32.5 million in 1950. From then onwards greyhound racing declined as a result of the betting taxes, a 10 per cent of the Pool Betting tax on totalisators introduced in 1948, partly in response to the Attlee post-war Labour government's concern that it was damaging Britain's post-war recovery. In a powerful statement to the Willink Commission (1949-1951), the Greyhound Racing Association noted the falling attendances, falling Tote turnover, and the

movement to untaxed off-course betting on the dogs in the numerous credit bookmakers such as Guntrips and William Hill's, whose Hill House had 200 telephones manned in the evening for dog racing.³⁰ This movement from the track to the off-course bookie was later confirmed by the Social Survey on 'Betting in Britain' produced for the Willink Commission (1949-1951) by W.F.F. Kemsley and David Ginsburg, which indicated that in 1950 annual track turnover was £60 million and that off-course betting had risen from almost nothing to £3 million since 1948.³¹ The Association, along with other greyhound organisations, suggested that the decline of the Tote revenue would affect the amenities offered since 'the amenities of necessity have to be cut, with dire results for attendance'.³² The implication of much of their attack was the implicit concern that class perspective was an issue and that whilst greyhound racing was a much smaller gambling activity than horse racing it was subject to a 10 per cent Pool Betting Duty that had not been imposed upon horse racing. Indeed, 'It is inexplicable that the small investor of limited means who attends his favourite sport after working hours at greyhound racecourses and bets on Governmentally controlled Totalistors on a non-credit basis should be taxed in relation to the dividend paid...' when investors [the middle classes] on credit system, on the Totalisator or otherwise, on horse racing paid no tax.³³ Greyhound racing declined thereafter.³⁴

Greyhound racing and the working class

The inter-war success of greyhound racing was essentially a product of time, place and opportunity, and saw the birth of a working-class tradition. The rising prosperity of the working class allowed them to take advantage of the new urban sport. Attendances rose rapidly. Belle Vue attracted 333,375 customers in the last five months of 1926.³⁵ The White City (London) averaged 39,700 per meeting in 1928, although average attendances fell back

to 15,300. Harringay also experienced a decline from an average crowd of 18,300 in 1927 to 13,200 in 1928 largely to the opening of new tracks in London.³⁶ In Hull, with a population of 300,000, there were two tracks which attracted 300 to 500 customers per week night. Many tracks were in working-class districts. Stephen G. Jones also noted there were three dog tracks in the Manchester and 'they are all in working-class residential areas.'³⁷

From the start greyhound racing was subject to intense national and local scrutiny by those who felt that it was damaging working-class life. Within three months of the opening of Belle Vue the Home Office was concerned that, of those attending, '30 per cent were women and girls' and that 'the great majority were young men'.³⁸ Local authorities were equally concerned and on 27 October 1927 the Manchester Watch Committee called upon the Home Secretary to introduce legislation to abolish greyhound racing, complaining of the 'carelessness' and contempt for 'morality' amongst the young of Manchester.³⁹ The *Manchester Evening News* of 29 October 1927 complained of women attending the tracks and 'trembled at what might happen to these women in the future.' Peter Green, Canon of Manchester, argued the need to give local authorities powers to prevent the proliferation of tracks, complaining that they were full of corrupt practices designed to beat the bettor.⁴⁰ There were, indeed, attempts to give extra powers to local authorities to close greyhound tracks and these demands were supported by prominent national politicians. On the 13 December 1927 Winston Churchill, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, wrote a letter to the Home Secretary, warning of the spectacle of the 'animated roulette boards' brought about by the development of greyhound racing. In the House of Commons on 11 May 1928, John Buchan, the famous author, was disparaging of greyhound tracks describing them as 'illuminated ribbons of turf'.⁴¹ In 1928 the Home Secretary, informed the Cabinet that 'The

principal objection against dog racing is that it is a mushroom growth which threatens to add enormously to facilities for betting amongst the working class and, in particular, for betting by many whose means would not permit of their attending horse races.⁴²

Despite such comments there was little evidence that the public wanted the closure of greyhound tracks. Yet as early as September 1927, the Home Secretary, who felt that the 'greyhound bubble could not last', decided to monitor the conduct at tracks. Most of the evidence suggested that there was no problem; Superintendent Edwards of the Manchester City Police suggesting that the meetings at Belle Vue were conducted in a 'perfectly orderly manner'.⁴³ To control greyhound racing revived when, the case of *Shuttleworth v Leeds Greyhound Racing* (1932) made the totalisator at greyhound tracks illegal and briefly paralysed by forcing tracks close or develop schemes to raise money through entry fees; Belle Vue (Manchester) developed a 'Non-Profit Tote'⁴⁵ The 'Tote Crisis' was resolved, with tighter controls, imposed under new legislation in 1934, but provoked further fury from the anti-gambling lobby. Mr. Chamberlain, of the Young Men's Christian Association stated that 'My feeling is that I have no right whatsoever to try to stop two people making a bet but I think we have the right to limit the social inducement to gambling.'⁴⁶

The Marquis of Londonderry, speaking in the House of Lords whilst presenting a bill on gambling, stated that

Greyhound racing has brought on-the-course betting facilities, often on an almost nightly event, into the large urban districts in the country ...it was having an undesirable social effect. The Royal Commission called particular attention to the evidence which they received as to the deterioration of character among young

persons in poor neighbourhoods, resulting from nightly betting on a succession of greyhound races which drains from their minds every other interest.⁴⁷

Lord Sanderson felt that there was a dangerous feeling of ennui amongst the working class that drove them to greyhound racing and that it had to be controlled, although he admitted that it was impossible for the Government to impose strong restrictions on greyhound racing 'without placing the strongest restrictions on horse racing and without incurring the charge of class legislation.'⁴⁸ The Lord Bishop of London also noted that the Charity Organisation Society found an increase in applications for help in areas near to greyhound tracks and that a probation officer at the Marleybone Police Court disliked the participation of women of all ages at the racetrack and the presence of children and young persons.⁴⁹ In contrast, Lord Askwith, President of the NGRS noted that 7,000 employees would be thrown out of work if dog racing were to be stopped and that dog racing 'had the advantage of giving people an opportunity of meeting their friends'.⁵⁰ Lord Gainford, the Earl of Kinnoull, added that 'The Bill is clear class legislation, you cannot get away from that'. He added 'After all, why should the poor man be forbidden his little bit of sport in the evening while the rich men go racing every day of their lives.'⁵¹

The Betting and Lotteries Act of 1934 imposed a restriction of 104 days per year on which betting could take place at a greyhound track, and required 94 per cent of the Tote pool to be given back to the bettors. The attendant parliamentary debate related to the tendency of the male working-class bettors to take women and children to the tracks. The Cartyne track, near Glasgow, had provided facilities 'So that mothers can leave their children in the nursery while they gamble' and Harringay track, in North London, provided and equipped a playground where children could be left; 'Two see-Saws and a round sandpit

complete with spades and buckets are some of the amusements provided for kiddies.⁵² John McGovern, the Independent Labour Party MP for the working-class constituency of Glasgow Shettleston, in which the Cartyne track was located, felt that it was 'a most degrading sight to see women and children taking children to nurseries on the track before going on to describe his two visits to the gloomy atmosphere of the dog meetings, although there was no disorder.'⁵³ Humphrey Spender photographed the lined features the male working-class gamblers of greyhound racing for the social investigation organisation Mass Observation (MO) study of *Worktown* (1937) – on life in Bolton although the pictures were of Pitmen's parties of the coal town of Ashington. The assumption was that greyhound racing had become quickly ingrained into working-class life and that family groups were often present.

The Second World War saw the temporary closure of greyhound racing until it was allowed on for one day per track per week. Nevertheless, its continuance was frowned upon by the wartime government and Sir Stafford Cripps' House of Commons outburst against greyhound racing and boxing, reported in the *Daily Express* in March 1942, associated these activities with black marketeering, spivs and idleness. This was immediately investigated by Mass Observation whose file report suggested that Cripps had placed 'exaggerated emphasis' on the 'immorality and decadence in Britain'. The problem, it argued, was that the war was going badly for Britain and that politicians were looking for a scapegoat.⁵⁴ MO also pointed out that in a recent survey 46 per cent of people wanted horse racing banned, with figures of 34 per cent for greyhound racing, 24 per cent for boxing and 4 per cent for football, and that to single out the working-class pursuit of greyhound racing and boxing was discriminatory.⁵⁵ Indeed, police investigations of greyhound tracks invariably found

them free of any obvious crime and disorder, although the arrest of Frederick Sabini, leader of the Sabini gang, famed for racketeering at horse racing and greyhound tracks, on charges of being an enemy alien⁵⁶ Notwithstanding this chief constables were sometimes critical of the economic impact of greyhound racing and, indeed, the Lord Bishop of Manchester felt that the chief constables of Manchester and Salford, John Maxwell and Major Godfrey, were worried about its spread.⁵⁷

MO's research on greyhound racing did much to dispel the myth that it was corrupting the working class. 'Mass Gambling', a survey conducted for the National League of Education against Gambling and published in January 1948 from existing research, observed and interviewed members of the crowd at greyhound meetings reporting upon their sex, age and social class on the scale of A to E.⁵⁸ The majority were classified as C or D, skilled or semi-skilled working class, though some were classified as B, denoting that they were middle class or small business men. This was largely judged by the 'trained eye' of the investigator, whose additional comments were often subjective.

What this brief report revealed, based upon eight anonymised towns – such as 'Steeltown', 'Railtown' and 'Moorland Town' (a group of Exmoor villages) - was the way in which the working class, in a range of communities, operated to gamble at greyhound tracks.⁵⁹ As a result of the rise in wartime incomes and the post-war expansion of betting, the mean stake was about five shillings (25p) per race, although it varied between 4s 6d (22.5p) in 'Twinetown', and 10s 6d (52.5p) or 11s 6d (57.5p) at Harringay.⁶⁰ The report pertinently revealed that in all crowds serious gamblers operated alongside those largely there for the spectacle. An eighteen-year old male, M18C (Male, 18 years old, 'C' class), placed £1 bets and 'never mentions anything about the race', and another, M35C, who was

'only concerned with the money'.⁶¹ At the other extreme there were many who went for the dogs; M35C felt that 'they're lovely creatures', whilst M50C thought that 'they are pretty to watch'.⁶² Most bettors seemed to bet with the Tote rather than with bookmakers, various surveys indicating meeting ratios of 3.7 to 1 and 5.0 to 1 at Harringay, 4.1 at Middlesbrough and between 2.5 to 3.3 to 1 at other surveyed tracks.⁶³ It appears also, that most bettors would also bet on 6 out of 7 races, or 7 out of 8 races.⁶⁴ In addition, it is clear that whilst the professional gambler might have a system many of the occasional better selected their dogs by names associated with themselves. One woman, F60D, lived at Blenheim Place, Chelsea and 'backed Blenheim one year and I won about 10s I think', whilst another, M55D Seaman, stated that 'I go by the names – anything attached to the sea like Sea Trout, or Sea Salmon....'⁶⁵ About 42 per cent claimed to study form, whilst 21 per cent bet on a whim, 27 per cent employed guesswork, 5 per cent had a system and 4 per cent relied upon tips, the other 1 per cent used a variety of techniques.⁶⁶

What emerges, from this composite picture, is that the majority of the crowd were working class, that both men and women attended, that bettors preferred to gamble on the Tote, where 94 per cent of the money would be returned to them, rather than with the on-course bookies, and that there was a mixture of interest in both gambling and the occasion..

The report surmised that

The typical bettor is then a solitary better, though of course they link up with friends once they are on the track. Children, though occasionally present at the tracks, are statistically very small except in Steeltown, where on a Saturday every one group in thirty-five included a child. The family party is quite a common site here and children more noticeable than stated.(B14C, F45C, F19C).⁶⁷

This survey was followed in May 1948 by a short follow-up report from MO entitled 'Dog Fever'. It placed greyhound racing into sharp perspective by noting that 'about five times as many people go in weekly for the football pools as bet on dogs, and about four times as many put money on the horses.'⁶⁸ The difference, it argued, arose from the fact

...that betting dogs almost inevitably means attendance at a dog track. The pool coupon comes through the front door, horses can be played by telephone or through the street bookie in the corner pub, but comparatively few dogs bets are placed away from the track. Among other things widespread rumours and suspicion of underhand dealings at dog meetings have made people chary of outside betting, and as a result in areas where there are no tracks there is virtually no betting either.⁶⁹

Most betting took place on track and there was immense variation between rural and urban areas and from region to region, although the 10 per cent Pool Betting Tax on the Tote encouraged a move towards off-course credit and ready-money betting from 1948 onwards.⁷⁰

Further evidence emerged about the greyhound track in Ferdynand Zweig's book *Labour, Life and Poverty* in 1949.⁷¹ This seminal study contained a chapter on dog racing based upon 200 'cases' which suggested that one in five adult male workers went to dog-racing meetings on a regular basis, though betting on dogs through off-course bookies' runners was more common amongst women.⁷² Zweig argued also that the London working class were more likely to bet on dog racing than horses, and more likely to attend dog meetings; London having 17 tracks and 33 meetings per week in the late 1940s and may have attracted up to 600,000 attendees per week. Nevertheless, the main contribution was his identification of five types of race-goers. There was the professional gambler, or 'fiddler',

to whom gambling was a full-time, if precarious, occupation. There was the semi-professional gambler, often men in small businesses such as small shopkeepers and roundsmen, to whom gambling on the races is an additional occupation, His third type was the sporting type who attended about twice per week for the leisure who say: 'I have nowhere else to go , and this is my recreation; better than the pub, because I am in the fresh air, and I have at least something for my outlay, and make some money from time to time.'⁷³ His fourth type were 'unhappy type', who often attended in ragged clothes 'who hold wistful illusions' and are often of 'inferior physique and emotionally unbalanced', and they include 'the crippled, deformed and otherwise physically handicapped'.⁷⁴ These included fitters, crane drivers and telephonists. The fifth section of the crowd, considered to be a small section, who attended once per fortnight or per month, were the casual racegoers. Of these, Zweig considered that 'the unhappy type' were the financial losers and that five out of six would leave the stadium with losses on the meeting.⁷⁵ Three years later Zweig's major work *The British Worker* used the same structure for gambling generally, though he more specifically reflected that whilst many sports cut across class boundaries that 'sports like dog racing...are reserved mostly for the working class and lower middle classes.'⁷⁶

B. S. Rowntree and R. Lavers, members of the NAGL, were even more judgemental of gambling on dogs in their book *English Life and Leisure* (1951).⁷⁷ They followed Zweig's categorisation – the professional, and the semi-professional, gambler, the sporting type who gambled a few times per week, the poor unhappy working class, and the occasional family groups out for a flutter or a night out. Rowntree and Lavers were additionally intent upon revealing the dispiriting nature of greyhound racing through Charles Dimont's mournful

picture of a night out at the bright lights of dog racing written in 1946. The track was lit with arc lamps, there were large illuminated clocks with shillings marked on their dials in the place of minutes to reveal the state of betting for the coming race, tic tac men signalling the odds, six men in bowler hats leading the greyhounds to their stalls, the 100 or so raucous bookmakers shouting the odds, but probably not making money, and the atmosphere of the crowd watching eight races on the night. For the better-off bettor there was a glass restaurant from which the customer could eat in warmth whilst watching the race. Yet Dimont's description focused upon the 'tomb-like vault under the stands, many of the spectators queue morosely before the totalisators grab their tickets, hastily hide them in their pockets or handbags and slink away'. The atmosphere was glum despite the race. The couple Dimont interviewed were represented as being reasonably typical of the restless and uncommitted youth who attended on a regular basis for entertainment, the sporting type.

She went on a weakness, he sells gent's hosiery. Thursdays and Saturdays they go to the dogs; Mondays and Fridays to the cinema; Wednesday is a football evening; Sunday they dance. Every night they must have something to do. Greyhounds are their favourite evening because it gives them a thrill and a chance to make money. Sid, the boy, has a system but he is reticent whether he has made money so far. They both live with their parents, and between them they earn over £8 a week, but one of the great attractions is that any wins are tax free. They plan to get married and have a car.⁷⁸

This dour description of a night at the dogs, and the representation of the almost feckless sporting couple, does not do justice to the attractive drawing power of the greyhound track. In contrast, the MO file 'Mass Gambling' (1948) gave a relatively neutral generic description of an official track on Saturday night emphasising the experience and

atmosphere as well as the gambling. It noted the normal ritual of passing through the five shilling turnstiles, walking towards the Directors Club, viewing the white circular rails to the track, viewing the black tote machine lit up by bright lights, and the occupation one of the two stands that normally catered for the punters. Then 'Suddenly the stadium becomes strangely quiet and the sound of the electric hare as it whirrax around the track is clearly audible. The traps click open and shouts go up.'⁷⁹ The fact is that 'going to the dogs' was exciting and enthralling, an evening's entertainment in its own right. According to Leeworthy, it offered 'speed, excitement, release and above all, freedom from the rhythms of work or unemployment but still essentially fixed by the repetitive nature of manual labour: true commitment to greyhound racing, after all, entailed attendance at the track two or three times every week.'⁸⁰

At this time the Willink Commission (1949-1951) added to this more favourable impression, using 'Betting in Britain', the first UK-wide Social Survey on gambling produced by W.F.F. Kemsley and David Ginsburg. It revealed that 60 per cent of the adult population (71 per cent men and 51 per cent women) gambled on one of three major forms of betting each year (pools, horses and dogs), that contemporary gambling was not a strain on national resources and manpower, did not cause serious crime, and that the great majority of gamblers 'did not spend money recklessly' and 'without regard to the consequences on the standard of living of themselves and their families'. Nevertheless, it felt that gambling should play no larger role in the community than it presently did.

Above all, this, more objective, report firmly established that greyhound racing was a minority working-class sport with only 7 per cent of men and 1.5 per cent of women, about 4.1 per cent of the total population, betting on the dogs. Ten times that percentage were

likely to be betting on the horses and the pools.⁸¹ Indeed, despite some fluctuation in estimates, it concluded that about 150,000 professional gamblers and 200,000 semi-professional gamblers accounted for more than 83 per cent of the official attendances at greyhound tracks, and 850,000 occasional bettors made up the rest. Effectively, if there were only 32 million attendances per year, about 600,000 per week, this meant that the ‘professional’ and ‘semi-professional’ groups dominated and that the average working-class bettor was in a minority.

Table 1 Attendance at Greyhound Tracks 1950⁸²

Attendance	Number	Attendances per year	Total attendances
2 per week	150,000	110	16,500,000
1 per week	200,000	52	10,400,000
More than 1 per month.	220,000	20	4,400,000
More than 1 per year	280,000	4	1,120,000
1 per year or fewer	350,000	0.25	90,000

The Survey also reveals that greyhound racing was a modestly-priced night’s entertainment. In 1938, 1946 and 1950, respectively, the average individual stake on a race was, respectfully, four shillings (20p), 11s 1d (55.5p) and 5s 6d each and on the night it was estimated that in those years the average nightly stakes bet were £1 12s 0d (£1-60p), £4 8s 6d (£4-42.5p) and £2 4s 0d (£2-20p).⁸³ Normally about 75 to 80 per cent of this money went to the Tote and 94 per cent of that was paid back to the bettors. Even allowing for a smaller

return from the on-track bookmakers this suggests that about 85 to 90 per cent of the money bet was returned to the bettors.

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that greyhound racing saw enormous growth during the second quarter of the twentieth century but was largely restricted to a significant, but relatively small, proportion of the working classes who regularly placed medium-sized bets. There may have been up to about 1,200,000 regular bettors though only around 350,000 and semi-professional bettors accounted for five-sixths of attendance. Greyhound racing also provided employment of many thousands of workers, and exerted a local economic impact. Yet greyhound racing's popularity pales into insignificance when ranged against horse racing and the football pools, and declined rapidly from the 1950s. Nevertheless, in the quarter of a century between 1926 and 1951 it was a successful and significant addition to working-class leisure, even if it lacked ubiquity. It allowed a small proportion of the working class to chase a green light, the chimera of self-employment which they believed would allow them to escape the drudgery and poverty of life. MO, which came closest to examining working-class opinion on dog racing from a sociological perspective, confirms the driving forces of pleasure and release that accompanied the professional business of gambling on the dogs. Yet it was a much maligned and strictly controlled leisure activity. There was an inordinate amount of opposition from the anti-gambling forces in Britain, the Establishment and the middle class, whose approach, despite frequent claims of impartiality, was driven by an implicit class bias against greyhound racing couched in the cloak of economic concern and moral imperative. The authorities, who never came to terms with the shock of the mushrooming growth of greyhound racing after 1926, and the opportunities it gave for legal

working-class gambling, discriminated against it and restricted its growth even if they were unable to ban it.

Note on contributor

Keith Laybourn is Professor of History at the University of Huddersfield, England.

¹ Huggins, 'Everybody's Going to the Dogs?', 97-120.

² Leeworthy, 'A Diversion from the New Leisure', 53-73.

³ Glass, *Gambling and Religion*; Green, *The fight against the betting evil*; MacDonald, *Gambling and Citizenship*; Paton, *The Rights and Wrongs of Gambling*; Perkins, *The Problem of Gambling*.

³ Chinn, *Better Betting with a Decent Feller*; Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter*.

⁴ Chinn, *Better Betting with a Decent Feller*; Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter*.

⁵ Perkins, *Betting Facts*.

⁶ HO 335/29; HO 335/52.

⁷ Reith, *The Age of Chance: Gambling in Western Culture*; Laybourn, *Working-Class Gambling in Britain*, 34; Dixon, *From Prohibition to Regulation*, 56-9.

⁸ *The Truth*, 13 October 1938.

⁹ *Hansard*, Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 1934, vol. 291, June 18- July 6,, cols 1192-3.

¹⁰ McKibbin, *Classes and Culture*, 362, 384-385.

¹¹ Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture*, 38.

¹² Stevenson, *British Society 1914-1945*, 386.

¹³ Huggins, 'Everybody's Going to the Dogs?', 105-6.

¹⁴ Baker, 'Going to the Dogs', 99.

¹⁵ Baker, 'Going to the Dogs'.

¹⁶ Baker, 'Going to the Dogs', 98.

¹⁷ Leeworthy, 'A Diversion from the New Leisure'.

¹⁸ HO 335/77.

¹⁹ There had been considerable racing in open fields with whippets and greyhounds before this date though and in Cooper, *The Life and Times of Thomas Cooper*. 393 where he wrote that 'And you will see others, like idiots, leading small greyhound dogs covered with cloth, in a string.'

²⁰ Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter*, 144.

²¹ Laybourn, *Working-Class gambling in Britain*, 170.

²² HO 45/14222.

²³ Huggins, 'Everybody's Going to the Dogs?', p. 98.

²⁴ HO 45/16319.

²⁵ *Hansard*, Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 1934, 292, 27 June 1934, col.1212.

²⁶ HO 45/14222 , on the Dog Racing (Local Bill) debates in the House of Commons, in March and April 1928. HO 335/111.

²⁷ HO 45/14222 , file on the Dog Racing (Local Option) Bill 1932-3.

²⁸ Huggins. 'Everybody's Going to the Dogs?', 97.

²⁹ *The Economist*, 8 April 1939, 75, in an article on 'The Sport Industry'.

³⁰ HO 335/52.

³¹ HO 335/102, 'Betting in Britain', 6.

³² HO 335/52, letter from Greyhound Racing Association Ltd to the Secretary of the Royal Commission on Betting, Lotteries and Gaming, 6 January 1951.

³³ HO 335/52, Greyhound Racing Association Ltd, 6 January 1951, item 12.

³⁴ Royal Commission on Gambling, *Final Report*, 1978, Vol. 1, para 10.7 Table 10.1.

³⁵ Jones, 'Working-Class Sport in Manchester between the wars', 72.

³⁶ HO 45/14222; Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Classes*, 47.

-
- ³⁷ HO 45/14222; Jones, 'Working-Class Sport in Manchester', 71. The three tracks were Belle Vue, White City and Albion.
- ³⁸ HO 45/14222, file with last date of 7 October 1926.
- ³⁹ *Daily Mail*, 28 October 1927.
- ⁴⁰ *Manchester City News*, 14 January 1928.
- ⁴¹ HO 45/142222, Cabinet Papers, CP 143, April 1928.
- ⁴² HO 45/142222, Cabinet Papers CP 143, April 1928.
- ⁴³ HO 45/14222.
- ⁴⁴ HO 45/142222, papers and file-folder comments.
- ⁴⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 23 December 1932. The totalisator was a machine, though there were many different types, that calculated the payments from all bets placed in a pool. Before 1933 about 88 per cent of the pool was paid back to the bettors in winnings but after 1934 this was raised to 94 per cent.
- ⁴⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 11 January 1933.
- ⁴⁷ Royal Commission on Lotteries (1932-3); *Hansard*, House of Lords, 26 April 1934, 99. cc 768-770, Marquis of Londonderry, Secretary of State for Air.
- ⁴⁸ *Hansard*, House of Lords [hereafter HL], 26 April 1934, cc. 789 792.
- ⁴⁹ *Hansard*, HL 26 April 1934, cc. 799-800.
- ⁵⁰ *Hansard*, HL 26 April 1934, cc. 810-11.
- ⁵¹ *Hansard*, HL 26 April 1934, cc. 956, 962.
- ⁵² *Hansard*, 292, Commons, 27 June 1934, col. 1157, evidence of T. Williams, Labour MP for Don Valley.
- ⁵³ *Hansard*, 292, 27 June 1934, col. 1160.
- ⁵⁴ Mass Observation [hereafter MO] File Report 1149. 'Some thought on greyhound racing and national unity', March 1942.
- ⁵⁵ MO File Report 1149, 'Some thoughts on greyhound racing and national unity', 12; Taylor, 'Mass-Observation, Sport and the Second World War'; Taylor, 'Sport and Civilian Morale in the Second World War Britain'.
- ⁵⁶ MO, 'Some Thoughts on greyhound racing and national unity'; HO 45/14222; HO 45/23691, Sabini was arrested under the Defence Regulation 18B.,
- ⁵⁷ *Hansard*, HL, 26 April 1934, cc.810-22.
- ⁵⁸ Mass Observation [hereafter MO], 'Mass Gambling', file report 2560, January 1948 although often indicated as having appeared in 1947. Greyhound racing appears on pp. 111 to 138.
- ⁵⁹ MO, 'Mass Gambling', 113.
- ⁶⁰ MO, 'Mass Gambling', 117, 119.
- ⁶¹ MO, 'Mass Gambling', 119.
- ⁶² MO, 'Mass Gambling', 131-134.
- ⁶³ MO, 'Mass Gambling', 121.
- ⁶⁴ MO, 'Mass Gambling', 123.
- ⁶⁵ MO, 'Mass Gambling', 131.
- ⁶⁶ MO, 'Mass Gambling', 135
- ⁶⁷ MO, 'Mass gambling', 127.
- ⁶⁸ MO, 'Dog Fever, May 1948, 1.
- ⁶⁹ MO, 'Dog Fever', 1.
- ⁷⁰ HO 335/52, Greyhound Racing Association, 7 (ii).
- ⁷¹ Zweig, *Labour, Life and Poverty*.
- ⁷² Zweig, *Labour, Life and Poverty*, 31.
- ⁷³ Zweig, *Life, Labour and Poverty*, 35.
- ⁷⁴ Zweig, *Life, Labour and Poverty*, 35-6.
- ⁷⁵ Zweig, *Life, Labour and Poverty*, 37.
- ⁷⁶ Zweig, *The British Worker*, 125.
- ⁷⁷ Rowntree and Lavers, *English Life and Leisure*, 114.
- ⁷⁸ Charles Dimont, 'Going to the Dogs', *New Statesman*, 30 November 1946. It is also quoted in Rowntree and Lavers, *English Life and Leisure*, 465-9.
- ⁷⁹ MO, 'Saturday Night', 16-17.
- ⁸⁰ Leeworthy, 'A Diversion from the New Leisure', p.66.
- ⁸¹ Royal Commission (1949-1951). *Final Report*, paras 169, 177, 180, 188; HO 335/102.
- ⁸² Royal Commission (1949-1951), 152; HO 335/102.

⁸³ Royal Commission (1949-1951), *Final Report*, 154.

Reference

- Baker, Norman. 'Going to the Dogs – Hostility to Greyhound Racing in Britain: Puritanism, Socialism and Pragmatism'. *Journal of Sports History* 23 (1996).
- Chinn, Carl. *Better Betting with a Decent Feller: A Social History of Bookmaking*. London: Aurum Press, 2004.
- Clapson, Mark. *A Bit of a Flutter: Popular Gambling and English Society c. 1823-1961*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992.
- Cooper, Thomas, *The Life and Times of Thomas Cooper*. 1872.
- Dixon, David. *From Prohibition to Regulation. Bookmaking, Anti-Gambling and the Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Glass, Rev.J. *Gambling and Religion*. London: Green, 1924.
- Green, Peter. *The fight against the betting evil: A Trumpet Call by Rev. Peter Green, Canon on Manchester, Chaplain to H.M. the King*. n.d.
- Hansard*, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons and Lords.
- Hill, Jeff. *Sport and Culture in Twentieth Century Britain*. London: Palgrave, 2011.
- Home Office Papers (HO), National Archives, Kew, London.
- Huggins, Mike. '“ Everybody's Going to the Dogs”? The Middle Class and Greyhound Racing in Britain between the Wars'. *Journal of Sports History* 34.1 (2007): 97-120.
- Jones, Stephen G. . *Sport, Politics and the Working Classes: Organized Labour and Sport in Inter-War Britain*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988.
- Jones, Stephen G. . 'Working-Class Sport in Manchester between the wars'. In Holt, Richard (ed.). *Sport and the Working Class in Modern Britain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990.
- Laybourn, Keith. *Working-Class Gambling in Britain c. 1906-1960s*. Lampeter: Mellen, 2007.
- Leeworthy, Daryl. 'A Diversion from the New Leisure: Greyhound Racing, Working-Class Culture, and the Politics of Unemployment in inter-war South Wales'. *Sport in History* 32:1 (March, 2012): 53-73.
- MacDonald, J. Ramsay. *Gambling and Citizenship*. London: NAGL, 1905.
- Mass Observation. File 1149 'Some Thoughts on greyhound racing and national unity'. March 1942. University of Sussex.
- _____. File 2560, 'Mass Gambling'. January 1948, 111-138.
- _____. File 2995, May 1948.
- McKibbin, Ross. *Classes and Culture: England 1918-1951*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Paton, J. Lewis, *The Rights and Wrongs of Gambling*. London: NAGL, n.d.
- Perkins, Rev. Benson. *The Problem of Gambling*. London. Epworth Press, 1919.
- _____. *Betting Facts. Being An Account of the Facts on Betting Evidence Given in Evidence Before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on a Betting Duty*. London. Wesleyan Methodist Church, 1925.
- Reith, Gerda. *The Age of Chance: Gambling in Western Culture*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Royal Commission on Lotteries and Betting (1932-3). *Interim Report*, Cmnd 4234.
- _____. *Final Report*, Cmnd 4341.
- Royal Commission on Betting, Lotteries and Gaming (1949-1951), (known as the Willink Commission). London: HMSO, 1951, Cmnd 8190.
- Royal Commission on Gambling, *Final Report*, 1978, Vol. 1 (London, HMSO, Cmnd 7200).
- Stevenson, John. *British Society 1914-1945*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.
- Taylor, Matthew. 'Mass Observation, Sport and the Second World War'. In R. Snape and H. Pussard (eds), _____ *Recording Leisure Lives: Sports, Games and Pastimes in C20th Britain*. Eastbourne. LSA Publications, 2010.
- Taylor, Matthew. 'Sport and Civilian Morale in Second World War Britain'. Paper delivered at IHR 'Leisure and _____ Sport History seminar series, 3 October 2011.
- Zweig, Ferdynand. *Labour, Life and Poverty*. London: Gollancz, 1949.
- _____. *The British Worker*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1952.