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Cricket's Regional Identities: the Development of Cricket and Identity in Yorkshire and Surrey

Introduction

This paper is designed to shed light upon the reasons why the counties of Yorkshire and Surrey appear to have diametrically opposed cricketing regional identities. By examining the differences in the development of each region in economic, social and cricketing contexts, the people who controlled cricket's regional democratization processes and each counties literary representation, I hope to demonstrate how stereotyped images of the two counties have been generated and perhaps internalised. I will then question the validity of the archival evidence regarding cricket in each region, if the historical stereotypes presented are accurate, have any contemporary relevance and propose reasons for this.

Due to the limitations of this paper however, I will be unable to discuss certain national developments with regional repercussions, some regional developments themselves, women's cricket and the full extent of the research findings. Similarly, the formation of each county club is not discussed, although Yorkshire County Cricket Club's famous selection process should be noted.

Bale has stated that "appraisals of the forms of regional and local identities, associated with sport in different parts of England are a prerequisite for any study of sport and English national identity – Understanding Englishness requires (an) appreciation of what divides, as well as unites, those who regard themselves as English".¹ Academic work in the UK however, has largely focused on the generation of national identities,² with the cricket literature following this broad trend³. While some of the more historical texts address regional identities, they centre on 'northernness', with comparatively little or no research on the south or southern cricket post industrial revolution.⁴ As such, despite sports highly

significant role in the generation and exhibition of identity being well established, regional identities remain under researched if not overlooked completely.

A brief focus on Yorkshire

While records indicate formalised cricket being played in Surrey from the early 1700s, cricket in Yorkshire is rarely mentioned until the mid to late 19th century. Be this due to location or a genuine absence of cricket is uncertain. What is certain however is that cricket in Yorkshire experienced a vast expansion in play and popularity, very quickly.

The reasons for this expansion were primarily due to the industrial revolution, with industries generating unprecedented population growth. Within these new communities, following legislation regarding workers welfare and shorter working hours, the masses had more leisure choices outside of the public houses.

By 1930, 25% of the teams playing in Halifax were works based.⁵ This is hardly surprising bearing in mind the money being pumped into working class sports, including cricket at this time. For example, in 1929, the Mining Industry Act (1920) ensured that \$635,000 went towards working men's sport in South and West Yorkshire alone.⁶ To put this figure into context the MCC's Findlay Commission was concerned about the first class counties running at a combined loss of \$29,000 in 1937!⁷ The Church also enjoyed a similar influence, with church based teams making up a further 25% of those playing in Halifax in 1930⁸. Figures revealing the considerable influence that both industry and the church appear to have had in communities and on cricket participation at this time.

Despite this high prevalence of working class cricket participation, when it came to spectator cricket, what set Yorkshire and the north apart from Surrey and the south, was what *Wisden* described as “the menace of the... Yorkshire Leagues”.⁹ League matches were played at workers convenience on half-day closing and weekends, in opposition to the County Championship’s timetable “designed around the mealtimes of the leisured”.¹⁰ An apparently very competitive form of cricket resulted from fierce local rivalries, despite leagues such as the Leeds and District, being what Birley calls “essentially amateur combinations”.¹¹ What is important to note regarding regional identity however, is that the Leagues, despite their amateur origins, and limited number of professionals were apparently appreciated for their competitiveness in the north, yet decried for being a vulgar, competitive, and heaven forbid professional form of cricket, played at odds to MCC values in the south.

The ‘official’ version of Surrey

Whereas Yorkshires working class had ample opportunities to watch or play cricket on their own terms, their counterparts in Surrey had few options, despite, or as will be discussed more likely, because of Surrey's early role in cricket’s development. Surrey's working classes appear to have had no opportunities to develop their own brand of cricket, separate from ‘village green’, 'Country House' or 'friendly' matches. These matches appearing to remain under the control or influence of an upper-class, largely unaffected by the societal aftershocks of the industrial revolution.

With industry in Surrey almost non-existent, populations remained relatively static. The population of Guildford (scene of the earliest known reference to cricket) not reaching 20,000 until after 1901. Without any known industrial or excessive church patronage, and no equivalent to the Yorkshire leagues, cricket appears to have remained centred upon 'local

magnates' and 'friendly' village matches, despite Surrey having the highest number of clubs per capita of population in pre-Victorian times.

As late as 1939, not one of the home-counties 1,100 clubs affiliated to the Club Cricket Conference played in a league.¹² Possible reasons for this are numerous, but as the first southern equivalent to the Northern Leagues, the Surrey Clubs' Championship was not formed until incredibly, 1968; the implication as to who controlled cricket in the south is clear.¹³

Literary Representations

Bale notes that "sports-place images are communicated by a variety of media, including the press, television, radio, novels and... poetry".¹⁴ As with the historical work on cricket, Surrey appears to have been largely overlooked in the literary stakes. Yorkshire has had its own independent sources of identity, culture and their reproduction for over 150 years, which includes ten Yorkshire daily papers to this day. Surrey on the other hand due to its proximity to London has had none of the above.

'Old Ebor' was famous for his coverage of Yorkshire Cricket in the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. Reports of the Yorkshire cricketer's dour, competitive, thrifty, hard, patient, conservative and unsentimental yet humorous natures would be produced. Quotes were written in the vernacular – an obvious regional signifier – reinforcing the subjects place and forcing the reader to 'impersonate' or imagine the subjects manner. Old Ebor's successor, J.M. Kilburn wrote, "To contemplate Arthur Mitchell in the acquisition of an unsmiling, purposeful century is to appreciate the hard, unyielding Yorkshire hills".¹⁵ Russell notes that even Lord Hawke was assimilated into "the common culture of Yorkshire", as was required, for "the

social background of most of the county's pre 1939 captains hardly rendered them typical products of the 'imagined' Yorkshire".¹⁶

Yorkshire's regional press not only nurtured its own image, it nurtured one for the south too. With "the most hostile images... reserved for London and the south, together often represented as the site of privilege, snobbery and unnecessary show, and a place that absorbed much of the north's skill, goods and talent, while giving little in return".¹⁷

Surrey has therefore been "much maligned for its pretensions and character" in the north,¹⁸ while its cricketers have been presented as stereotypical 'gentlemen' southerners in the south. Even if they happened to be a 'bloody-minded' professional from Yorkshire! *Wisden* contributor Gordon Ross describes Bradford born Jim Laker thus "...in the man himself, there lies the *casual* air of a southerner; no visible hatred of a batsman as bred, shall we say, in a Trueman" (italics added).¹⁹ This of a man who 'casually' achieved nearly 1,400 wickets in 309 matches, and was banned from both the Oval and Lords.

Bourdieu²⁰ has argued that working class values associated with sport, such as competitiveness, effort, strength of body and character, as allegedly witnessed in Yorkshire by its media, contrast with the upper classes' values of disinterest, form and grace, as advocated by *Wisden*, the southern elite and their biographers. These "specific subjectivities",²¹ like the "fictionalized descriptions"²² of Mitford and Nyren before them it may be argued were deliberately included by authors, in order to distinguish 'their game' from the others. Certainly *Wisden's* attitude towards the predominantly amateur leagues was libellous snobbery of the highest order.²³

Contemporary Research

In order to test the degree that the historical stereotypes have contemporary relevance, 400 questionnaires were distributed to supporters of Surrey and Yorkshire. This sample represents those who actually attend, and possibly display regional character traits at matches, rather than follow their team via the media.

As hinted at previously and by authors such as Holt, the Yorkshire respondents will be likely to appreciate different aspects of the game to their Surrey counterparts. Similarly historical stereotypes would imply that Yorkshire and Surrey supporters attribute different class values to cricket. Specifically here, bonds with place and the role of the game within the region. Regarding the later, both sets of respondents reverted to type. 45% of Yorkshire respondents regarded cricket as an opportunity to 'bond with others' and 'identify with where they came from', while 50% of Surrey respondents saw cricket as 'just a game' or '(a) way of life'.

Popular memory and attitudes being essentially hegemonic, I believe this data reflects the values of those who have controlled cricket provision and its presentation in each region for the last 150 years, as much as it does any genuine class values.²⁴ I'm sure a survey of Yorkshire and Surrey football supporters would generate very different data.

Although the respondents conferred different meanings to cricket, the data describing the supporters 'desired player characteristics' almost mirrored each other. This data and Phelps' work *The Southern Football Hero and the Shaping of Local and Regional Identity in the South of England* (2001); the only work I found on regional identity, sport and the south, questions the validity of Holt's notion that northern cricket supporters appreciated different aspects of play and their sporting heroes characteristics to their southern counterparts.²⁵

One needs to question whether press reports or the literature accurately reflect these sportsmen, or indeed the general public's opinion. I propose that the cricket played in the south, would have been played (and appreciated) just as keenly as in the north. Documented evidence is scarce, but we may refer initially here to aristocratic gambling, cheating in varsity matches, Surrey's zealous adoption of professionals, the clubs numerous championships, and players such as Douglas Jardine. It is *Wisden's* presentation of an "institutional memory"²⁶ or 'ideal' and the resulting perception of southern cricket as shall we say; 'genteel', over numerous decades that may have influenced historians to think otherwise.

Regardless of the accuracy of authors' work, and more recent demographic changes, it is apparent that the stereotypical image of Yorkshire has been highly internalised within Yorkshire and accepted as fact elsewhere.

While the Surrey respondents provided no coherent 'character' to their own supporting style, both the Surrey and Yorkshire respondents regard Yorkshire supporters in highly stereotypical terms. Indicating that both share extremely close views not only on 'desired player characteristics' but also the 'Yorkshire supporters regional identity'. The latter no doubt due to the generous publicity given to Yorkshire and its uniformed image within and outside of Yorkshire by the media to this day.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the causal affects in the generation and reproduction of regional identity are clearly numerous and overlapping. However, it is safe to say that the major influences upon the development of these cricket regional identities are:

1. Location: with regard to a regions geographical 'independence' from the national centre of power, influence and culture.
2. The industrial revolution and its inherent population growth in the north.
3. The patronage and provision of cricket, and who controlled or influenced the game at county and specifically more local levels.
4. The media: a region either having an early autonomous regional press - or a 'representative' journal, and how these media presented themselves, their players and other regions.

Much more may be said regarding differences in regional cricket supporters' introduction to cricket, supporting patterns and the games meaning. However, I would initially suggest that future work may need to focus upon specific locations and leagues, rather than the homogenous 'north' and 'south'. Similarly, a more 'orally historical' approach may help in the explanation of identities and their reproduction within regions or groups previously thought to represent 'commonality' or indeed 'difference'.

Finally, regarding the media and its legacy, sociologists and historians need to exercise caution in not regarding documents as an 'undisputed territory' when presenting the past. Clearly *Wisden*, and journalists from each region had value-laden axes to grind and reputations to protect, which has been left unchallenged by some. Questioning who has controlled cricket, its image and presentation in specific regions, can only help in explaining regional (and national) identities further and better than before.

¹ Bale, J. (1982): *Sport and Place: A Geography of Sport in England, Scotland and Wales*, London, C. Hurst.

² Archer, I. (ed.) (1976): *We'll Support You Evermore*, Hutchinson, London; Jarvie, G. (1993): 'Sport, Nationalism and Cultural Identity'. In Allison, L. (ed.), *The Changing Politics of Sport*. Manchester University

Press. 58-63; Allison, L. (2000): "Sport and Nationalism". In Coakly, J. and Dunning, E. (ed's.): *Handbook of Sports Studies*, Sage Publications.

³ Maguire, J. (1993): "Globalisation, Sport and National Identities: The Empire Strikes Back?" In *Society and Leisure*, Vol 16, No 2, 293-322; Mellor, G. (1996) 'English Cricket, Amateurism and National Identity: A Sociological and Historical Study', unpublished MA dissertation, University of Leicester; Williams, J. (1999): *Cricket and England: A Cultural and Social History of the Inter-war Years*, Frank Cass, London.

⁴ Russell, D. (1996): Sport and Identity: The Case of Yorkshire County Cricket Club, 1890-1939. In *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 7, No2, 206-230; Holt, J. (1996): "Heroes of the North: Sport and the Shaping of Regional Identity". In Hill, J. and Williams, J. (ed's.): *Sport and Identity in the North of England*, Keele University Press; Williams, J. (1996): "Churches Sport and Identities". In Hill, J. and Williams, J. (ed's.): *Sport and Identity in the North of England*, Keele University Press.

⁵ Williams, J. *Churches Sport*, p. 123.

⁶ Ibid., p. 124.

⁷ Birley, D. (1999): *A Social History of English Cricket*, Aurum Press. p. 252.

⁸ Williams, J. *Churches Sport*, p. 115.

⁹ Birley, D. *A Social History*, p. 214.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 242.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 152.

¹² Williams, J. *Cricket and England*, p. 27.

¹³ Wynne-Thomas, P. (1997): *The History of Cricket: From the Weald to the World*, The Stationary Office. p. 223; Birley, D. *A Social History*, p. 307.

¹⁴ Bale, J. *Sport and Place*, p. 177.

¹⁵ Cited in Holt, R. *Heroes of the North*, p. 146.

¹⁶ Russell, D. (1996): "Amateurs, Professionals and the Construction of Social Identity", *Sports Historian*, 16, 64-80, p. 73-74.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.66.

¹⁸ Osbert Lancaster cited in Brandon, P. (1998): *A History of Surrey*, Phillimore and Co Ltd. p. 11.

¹⁹ Ross, G. (1972): *A History of County Cricket: Surrey*, Arthur Barker Limited, London. p. 161.

²⁰ Bourdieu, p. (1978): *Distinction: A Social Critique in the Judgement of Taste*.

²¹ Brabazon, T. (2006): *Playing on the Periphery: Sport, Identity and Memory*, Routledge, London.

²² Guttman, A. (1986): *Sports Spectators*, Columbia University Press, New York. p. 79.

²³ Birley, D. *A Social History*, p. 214.

²⁴ Brabazon, T. *Playing on the Periphery*. p. 99.

²⁵ Holt, R. (1989): *Sport and the British: a Modern History*, Oxford University Press. p. 266.

²⁶ Brabazon, T. *Playing on the Periphery*.