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Original Citation

Stone, Duncan (2008) Cricket's Regional Identities: the Development of Cricket and Identity in Yorkshire and Surrey. In: Association of Cricket Statisticians and Historians Conference, 25 October 2008, University of Huddersfield.

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

Introduction

The link between a person's identity and their chosen sport or team is well documented. Yet beyond the sharing of common experience, sport also has the ability to nurture "a strong localism – loyalty to neighbourhood, town, region [and] country."¹ Furthermore, supporting a given team provides supporters with opportunities to display broadly 'agreed' local, regional or national character traits, language, customs and culture, which as a whole forms what may be regarded as a specific geographically based identity.

In the UK, sports academic work has chosen to concentrate upon the generation of national identities,² with the cricket literature following this broad trend.³ Although some of the more historical texts have addressed regional identities, they have concentrated 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.⁵

With this in mind, 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.

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 Yorkshire's geographical 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. Industries generated unprecedented population growth, and following legislation regarding the workers welfare and shorter working hours, the masses within these new communities had more leisure choices outside of the public houses.

By 1930, 25% of the teams playing in Halifax were works based.⁶ 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 of 1920 ensured that £635,000 went towards working men's sport in South and West Yorkshire alone.⁷ 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!⁸ The Church also enjoyed a similar influence, with church based teams making up a further 25% of those playing in Halifax in 1930⁹. Figures revealing the considerable influence that both industry and the church appear to have had in some Yorkshire communities and on cricket participation at this time.

Despite the 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”.¹⁰ League cricket matches were played at the workers convenience on half-day closing and weekends, in opposition to the County Championship’s timetable “designed around the mealtimes of the leisured”.¹¹ 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”.¹²

What is important to note regarding the alleged differences in cricket regional identities, is that the leagues were apparently highly appreciated for their competitiveness in the north, in spite of their amateur origins, and strictly controlled professionalism. Indeed, Roland Bowen has argued that this style of competitive cricket was adopted in the north as a deliberate move away from the false morality he believed was being woven into the cricketing ethos of the south.¹³ Northern league cricket in the south was presented as a vulgar, competitive, and professional form of the game, played at odds to the values of the MCC and Club Cricket Conference.

A typical example perhaps, of the establishment attitude towards the cricketers and cricket going public of the north, is reflected in the opinion of I Zingari and MCC stalwart Lt. Col. the Hon. Gerald French. According to French, the reason for this regional contrast in the preference for competitive league cricket in the north and friendly “club cricket” in the south, stemmed from the “pronounced difference in temperament between northerners and southerners”.¹⁴ The northerners “being more susceptible, perhaps, to the excitement aroused by the struggle for points [and] the

opportunity of betting”. This contrasted greatly to “their brethren of the south, who like[d] their club cricket for its own sake, unadulterated by commercial influences”.¹⁵

The ‘official’ version of Surrey

French’s opinion neatly encapsulates the ‘official’ version of cricket as played in Yorkshire and the North and Surrey and the South. Although clearly nonsense, Yorkshires working classes did have ample opportunities to watch or play cricket on their own terms, unlike their “brethren of the south”¹⁶ who had few such options. This latter scenario existed despite, or as will be discussed more likely, because of Surrey’s early role in cricket’s development.

The working classes of Surrey appear to have had no opportunities to develop their own brand of cricket, separate from ‘Country House’, ‘village green’ or ‘friendly’ club matches. These matches and cricket more generally, appear to have remained under the control or influence of an upper-class, largely unaffected by the societal aftershocks of the industrial revolution until incredibly the late twentieth century.

With industries in Surrey such as mining and steel production non-existent, populations remained relatively static, with the population of Guildford - scene of the earliest known reference to cricket - not passing 20,000 until after 1901. Without extensive industrial and apparently limited church patronage, and no equivalent to the Yorkshire leagues, cricket in Surrey appears to have remained centred upon ‘local magnates’ and ‘friendly’ village matches, despite Surrey having the highest number of clubs per capita in pre-Victorian times.¹⁷

As late as 1939, not one of the home-counties 1,100 clubs affiliated to the Club Cricket Conference played in a league.¹⁸ As J.H. Fingleton observed during a Sunday game at East Moseley in 1948: “The president of the club told me that there were over 1000 club teams in Surrey alone, but the county draws nothing from this colossal strength because in England to-day there seems to be no half-way mark between professionalism and amateurism”.¹⁹

A year after Fingleton’s visit to the UK, on Monday the 11th of April 1949 a meeting took place at the Oval cricket ground of the Surrey Association of Cricket Clubs. At the meeting the issue of introducing league cricket to Surrey is recorded. The entry itself reads:

“League Cricket: Most areas strongly approved. Decided to await replies from Clubs”.²⁰

What is so intriguing about this entry is its incongruous nature. The issue of league cricket - let alone the clubs’ replies - does not appear again until 1965, and even then it was dismissed without further consultation. The minutes record that; “as a general rule the committee members were not in favour of League Cricket”.²¹ Sadly it requires pointing out that five years of minutes covering the meetings between 1955 and 1960 are missing. This stated the 1949 entry pre-dates the eventual adoption of league cricket in Surrey by almost twenty years, and as the Surrey Clubs’ Championship - the very first southern equivalent to the Northern Leagues - was not formed until incredibly, 1968; the implication as to who controlled cricket in the south is clear.²²

Literary Representations

"Sports-place images are communicated by a variety of media, including the press, television, radio, novels and... poetry".²³ As with the historical work on cricket, Surrey also 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 for any extended period of time.

Clearly the cricket supporters in Yorkshire had more sources for reading about the representation of both league cricket and the Yorkshire County Cricket Club (YCCC), which famously included the reports of 'Old Ebor' in the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. Surrey supporters on the other hand, had to rely on the 'national' dailies for reports on their representative side's doings on the cricket field. Reports that according to Dave Russell had at one time an 'enhanced power'²⁴ when presenting the English County Championship and the counties players, due to the absence of substantial audiences, radio or television coverage.

'Old Ebor's' 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".²⁵ This quote is interesting as an example of 'spin' when presenting a

negative aspect of a player as a virtue, for Lord Hawke, then President of YCCC, lambasted Mitchell personally at the 1928 AGM for the 'dourness' of his batting.²⁶

Lord Hawke himself was not immune from this spin, for Hawke found himself assimilated into "the common culture of Yorkshire".²⁷ This 're-modelling' of Hawke was required for "the social background of most of the county's pre 1939 captains hardly rendered them typical products of the 'imagined' Yorkshire".²⁸

The regional press in Yorkshire not only engineered its own image, it also developed one for the south. 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".²⁹

Although Surrey was therefore "much maligned for its pretensions and character" in the north,³⁰ in the south, its cricketers were presented as stereotypical 'gentlemen' southerners. This image was often as bogus as the 'common culture' identity afforded to Lord Hawke. A particularly fine example of which is *Wisden* contributor Gordon Ross's description of the 'bloody minded,'³¹ professional Jim Laker. Ross describes the Yorkshire (Bradford) born spinner 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".³²

This is allegedly describing a man who casually achieved nearly 1,400 wickets in 309 matches and upon retirement was banned from both the Oval and Lords! Despite overtly competitive exceptions, such as Douglas Jardine, the London press, like their

counterparts in Yorkshire nurtured (and protected) these ‘characters’ for their own advantage and long-standing reputations and identities were born.³³

But why would the regionalized media choose to do this? Pierre Bourdieu³⁴ 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”,³⁵ like the “fictionalized descriptions”³⁶ of early cricket by Mitford and Nyren before them, it may be argued, were deliberately manipulated by authors, in order to distinguish ‘their game’ from the others. Certainly *Wisden’s* attitude towards the predominantly amateur leagues of the north was libellous snobbery of the highest order.³⁷

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.

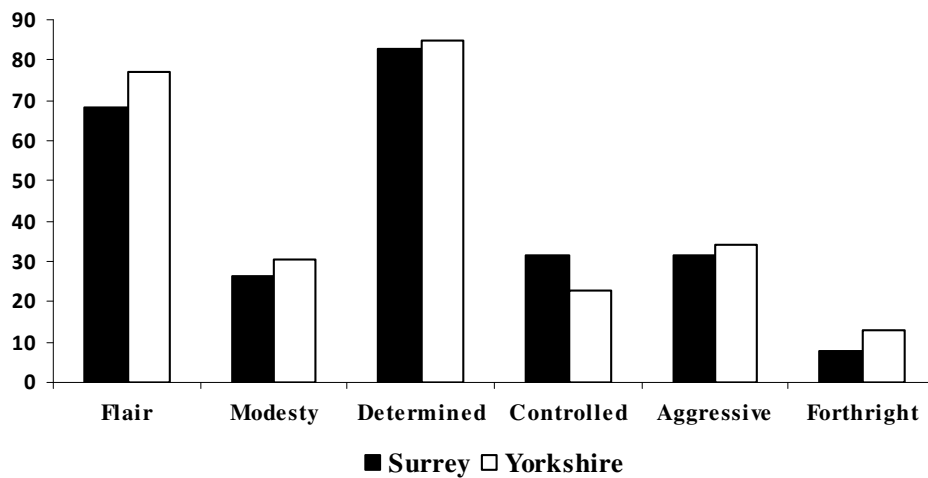
As hinted at previously and by authors such as Holt, the Yorkshire respondents should be likely to appreciate different aspects of the game to their Surrey counterparts. Similarly historical stereotypes would imply that Yorkshire and Surrey supporters attribute different class values to cricket. Specifically 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'.

I contend that popular memory and attitudes are essentially hegemonic, and that this data reflects the values of those who have controlled cricket provision and its presentation in each region for the majority of the last 150 years, as much as it does any genuine class values.³⁸ I'm sure a survey of Yorkshire and Surrey football supporters would have generated very different data.

Although the respondents' conferred different meanings to cricket, the data generated 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); questions the validity of Richard Holt's notion that 'the unforgiving duels of batsman and bowler, the strange mixture of guile and grit'³⁹ were aspects of cricket that appealed solely to audiences in the north. Phelps concluded that northern and southern spectators valued very similar characteristics in a player, and the survey data describing '*desired player characteristics*' (Graph 1) clearly supports this.

GRAPH 1: Desired player characteristics⁴⁰



One needs to question whether press reports or the popular literature, accurately reflect these sportsmen, or indeed the general public's opinion. At this stage of my research, I propose that the cricket played in the south, would have been played (and appreciated) just as keenly as in the north. Although primary evidence at this stage is scarce, and there was a clear difference in cricket 'styles' employed regionally, we may refer initially here to aristocratic gambling, cheating in varsity matches, the common use of professionals in Country House matches, Surrey's zealous adoption of professionals, the clubs numerous championships, and players such as Shuter, Jardine and Surridge.

It is *Wisden's* editorial presentation of an "institutional memory"⁴¹ or 'ideal', and the resulting perception of southern cricket as 'genteel' and northern cricket as 'gritty' over numerous decades that have followed the first orthodox historical accounts. An example being a display at the Bradman Museum at Bowral, NSW Australia, which states:

“From the 1880s onwards English cricket experienced a subtle change, with the blending of the professionals from the industrial north and the amateurs from the genteel south”.

While the Surrey respondents provided no coherent 'character' to their own supporting style, both the Surrey and Yorkshire respondents regarded Yorkshire supporters in highly stereotypical terms, meaning that both sets of respondents' shared extremely close views not only on *'desired player characteristics'* but also the Yorkshire supporter's regional identity. Regardless of the accuracy of early authors' work, and more recent demographic changes, it is apparent that aspects of the stereotypical image of Yorkshire has been highly internalised within Yorkshire and accepted as fact elsewhere.

Whether this is a result of some form of 'social engineering' mediated by the various media, or elements of truth inherent in the stereotype is hard to determine. The longevity of the Yorkshire identity is no doubt helped due to the generous and specific publicity given to Yorkshire and the uniformed projection of its 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. Social and legal reforms and the increasing levels of power and influence acquired by the working classes.
4. The patronage and provision of cricket, and who controlled or influenced the game at county and specifically more local levels.
5. 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 added 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'.

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. As Bale astutely stated as far back as 1982: "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”.⁴²

¹ Hargreaves, 1982, pg 71.

² Archer, well support you... Jarvie, Sport, Nationalism... Allison, Sport and Nationalism.

³ Maguire, Globalisation, Sport and National... Mellor, Eng Cricket, Amateurism... Williams, Cricket and England

⁴ Russell, Sport and Identity... Holt, Heroes of the north... Williams, Churches sport and identities...

⁵ Struna, Social history and Sport, pg 197.

⁶ Williams, J. *Churches Sport*, p. 123.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁸ Birley, D. (1999): *A Social History of English Cricket*, Aurum Press. p. 252.

⁹ Williams, J. *Churches Sport*, p. 115.

¹⁰ Birley, D. *A Social History*, p. 214.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹³ Bowen, R. *Cricket: A History*, p. 116.

¹⁴ French, G. *The Corner Stone of English Cricket*, p. 134.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 134.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 134.

¹⁷ Bale, J. *Sport and Place*, p. 70-1.

¹⁸ Williams, J. *Cricket and England*, p. 27.

¹⁹ Fingleton, J.H. *Brightly Fades the Don*, p. 222.

²⁰ Guildford Area Minutes: 11/4/1949.

²¹ Guildford Area Minutes: 3/5/1965

²² 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.

²³ Bale, J. *Sport and Place*, p. 177.

²⁴ Russell, ‘Amateurs, Professionals and the Construction of Social Identity’, 60.

²⁵ Cited in Holt, R. *Heroes of the North*, p. 146.

²⁶ Russell, ‘Amateurs, Professionals and the Construction of Social Identity’, 57.

²⁷ Russell, ‘Amateurs, Professionals and the Construction of Social Identity’, 57.

²⁸ Russell, D. (1996): “Amateurs, Professionals and the Construction of Social Identity”, *Sports Historian*, 16, 64-80, p. 73-74.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.66.

³⁰ Osbert Lancaster cited in Brandon, P. (1998): *A History of Surrey*, Phillimore and Co Ltd. p. 11.

³¹ *Ibid.* 295.

³² Ross, *A History of County Cricket: Surrey*, 161 (italics added). Fred Trueman was a Yorkshire fast bowler, notorious for his pace and hostility.

³³ Russell, ‘Amateurs, Professionals and the Construction of Social Identity’, 61.

³⁴ Bourdieu, p. (1978): *Distinction: A Social Critique in the Judgement of Taste*.

³⁵ Brabazon, T. (2006): *Playing on the Periphery: Sport, Identity and Memory*, Routledge, London.

³⁶ Guttman, A. (1986): *Sports Spectators*, Columbia University Press, New York. p. 79.

³⁷ Birley, D. *A Social History*, p. 214.

³⁸ Brabazon, T. *Playing on the Periphery*. p. 99.

³⁹ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 266.

⁴⁰ Aspects other than a player’s level of skill, which was assumed to be universal across both supporter groups, were deemed more relevant.

⁴¹ Brabazon, T. *Playing on the Periphery*.

⁴² Bale, *Sport and Place*, 4-5.

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