

Pigeon Racing and Working-Class Culture in Britain, c.1870-1950

Abstract

Pigeon racing was immensely popular amongst male industrial workers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This article offers an overview of the history of pigeon racing in this period before moving on to explore the sport's multiple meanings for those who took part. Pigeon racing offered both the thrills and excitement of racing but also the more sedate and intellectual rewards of breeding and rearing the birds. The pigeon loft was a masculine enclave and a retreat from the pressures of domestic life for some, although for others it was an opportunity to share time with one's family. As such, pigeon racing demonstrates the complexities of working-class masculinity. Pigeon keeping was also expensive, time consuming and required space. The article thus concludes by arguing that despite the agency workers were able to exercise over their leisure, they were still restricted by wider material constraints.

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Pigeons have sat alongside flatcaps and whippets as archetypal signifiers of the northern working-class male. In reality, both the pastime's social and geographic base were much wider but pigeon racing was nonetheless an important component of male working-class culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in the industrial districts of south Wales, central Scotland and the north of England. Here, the wooden pigeon lofts, often made from waste timber and painted brightly to attract the birds, formed a distinctive feature of the landscape. Yet despite pigeon racing's popularity, historians have, by and large, overlooked the activity.¹ This represents a missed opportunity: pigeon racing was intertwined with masculinity, voluntary association and material constraints, themes that are central to the history of working-class culture.

This article opens with an overview of the social and economic history of pigeon racing, centring on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Utilising sources from pigeon racers themselves, it then moves on to explore the sport's multiple meanings for those who took part. Pigeons offered both the thrills and excitement of racing but also the more sedate and intellectual rewards of breeding and rearing the birds. For racers, the bird was a product of his hobby, to be discarded ruthlessly if it failed to achieve. Yet pigeons also needed to be treated gently and lovingly if they were to be trained to want to return to their lofts as quickly as possible. For some working-class families, open displays of emotion towards pigeons contrasted uncomfortably with the more suppressed relations that working men presented to their spouses and children. For some racers, the pigeon loft was a masculine enclave and a retreat from the pressures of domestic life, but for others it was an opportunity to share time with one's family. The sport was thus part of the complex social environment in which masculinity was forged but there were neither monolithic meanings to pigeon racing nor working-class manhood.

The article concludes by considering the degree of agency workers were able to exercise over their leisure within the context of wider material constraints. Leisure was a compromise between structural constraints and cultural agency. The working man may not have been able to afford to do all he wanted but that did not stop him making sacrifices and decisions of his own and on his own. The result of this world of cultural materialism was a fractured working-class culture within which individuals' lived experience was shaped not only by class but by local and personal conditions too. Hobsbawm's picture of a mass leisure culture, that led to a common way of life and a political solidarity amongst the working class, is too simple.² McKibbin instead talks of a series of overlapping cultures.³ The leisure of working men was similar in structure but varied in style and taste. As McKibbin put it, working-class culture was 'highly cohesive yet poorly integrated'.⁴ Not every working man raced pigeons but all would recognise the struggle between personal choice and material constraint that it presented.

Yet, as Bailey points out, 'leisure does not break down tidily into class categories' and pigeon racing reinforces this analysis.⁵ It was divided into two forms: short-distance flying, an exclusively working-class pastime, and the more common

long-distance flying, a relatively expensive sport that included not insignificant numbers of middle-class followers. Thus for all the associations between pigeon racing and the working class, the sport actually excluded much of that class through its cost and included many from a higher social sphere. Both pigeon racing and what is traditionally seen as working-class culture actually consisted of a series of fractured but overlapping subcultures that were not enclosed by divisions between classes but did illustrate the divisions within those classes.

I

In the 1760s pigeon fancying - keeping birds for their aesthetic and intellectual appeal - became quite common amongst the leisured class. It developed out of a wider fashion for bird, butterfly and bee fancying, that itself developed out of an increasing appreciation of natural fauna.⁶ Ritvo attributes this growing enjoyment of animals and their associated keeping as pets, to technological and scientific developments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that made the natural world less inherently threatening. Once man was not in a constant struggle against nature, he could enjoy it.⁷ However, the racing rather than fancying of pigeons grew out of man's employment of birds for business rather than pleasure. Using pigeons to carry messages dates back to the Ancient Greeks but did not develop in Britain until the eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, pigeons were carrying, within Britain and across the English Channel, everything from military news to market prices to the results of horse races. In a period when gambling was common, even manic, it was unsurprising that the pigeons of rival commercial firms began to be matched against each other. A further impetus to the idea of actually racing pigeons came from Belgium, where pigeon keepers began using Britain as a starting point for races from at least 1819.⁸ The faster and hardier continental birds raised the expectations of British pigeon keepers and to improve domestic standards new breeds were imported from Belgium and France where the selective breeding of pigeons dated back into the eighteenth century. In the 1840s and 1850s, the rapid growth of the telegraph led to a fall in the use of pigeons for messages and some birds owned by merchant and press agencies came onto the open market, leading to the growth of pigeon racing amongst individuals.

A fragmented historical record means that charting the growth of pigeon racing is difficult. However, there is tentative evidence of a diffusion northwards over the course of the nineteenth century. Weavers in Spitalfields, London were flying and keeping pigeons in the first third of the nineteenth century, although the lower wages of the 1830s led to their pigeon-cotes, 'even if its timbers have not rotted away, ... [being] no longer stocked'.⁹ In a slum in mid-Victorian Liverpool, an observer noted that all the roofs were leaking, at least partly due to 'pigeon fanciers breaking through the roofs to make traps'.¹⁰ In Bolton, the inspector of nuisances was actively trying to exterminate the hobby in the 1850s.¹¹ Pigeon flying was popular amongst Derbyshire miners by the 1860s.¹² Alan Metcalfe's detailed work on sport in the Northumbrian mining communities has not unearthed any homing clubs dating before 1877.¹³

It was in the last third of the nineteenth century that pigeon racing became firmly established in working-class culture. Charles Booth's survey of late nineteenth-century London noted that 'pigeon flying, street gambling and music hall going' were the chief amusements in the Park Streets neighbourhood of Bethnal Green, where locals were mostly shop assistants on the Mile End Road.¹⁴ Pigeon racing before the 1890s was largely a localised, even introspective, sport of short-

distance competitions. Of seventeen challenge matches, most under ten miles, that Metcalfe unearthed in Northumbrian mining communities in 1890, only three involved competitors from more than one village. Birds were trained to fly back to their lofts at a low height, sometimes never higher than six feet, in order to maximise their speed over races that could be as short as a mile.¹⁵ Each pigeon was marked by ink for identification and, after reaching its loft, its owner had to take it to the race headquarters, usually an inn, with the first bird there being declared the winner. Inequalities in the location of lofts could be equalized by forcing owners to draw lots for where their birds were released from.¹⁶

With its growth in popularity, outsiders increasingly associated short-distance pigeon racing with the working class. An observer in Battersea at the turn of the twentieth century noted that pigeon racing was a 'weekly sport, especially among the tattooed men in the poorer quarters of the parish, costers with flat black caps and hoarse voices, chokers instead of collars and ties, and Sunday boots of a ginger yellow'. They would head off every Sunday morning with their pigeon baskets on carts or bicycles.¹⁷ The son of a clerk of works from Lancaster remembered of the late nineteenth century:

I'd kept pigeons when I was quite young and my mother used to help me with them. There was a woman next door used to say, "I wouldn't let your Tom keep pigeons". It was supposed to be a low game in those days. You were looked down upon. My mother said, "Since he's kept pigeons he's never had his Sunday clothes on, he's never out of the back yard, I know where he is". She was quite happy with what I was doing and there was nothing wrong with it.¹⁸

Even a union leader in Derbyshire and Staffordshire in the 1860s and 1870s looked down upon pigeon flyers, placing them alongside drunkards.¹⁹ Others in contrast, thought that the working class' taste for pigeons preferable to other modern and commercialised pastimes. In 1894 *The Fortnightly Review* complained that in the north of England the 'labourer [had] diverted his attention from quoits and rabbit coursing and pigeon flying, and turned it to football'.²⁰

Although this working-class world of short-distance racing continued up until the Second World War and beyond, it was in retreat and being replaced from the end nineteenth century by the more formalised and socially-diverse long-distance racing. Here, birds were sent to a liberation point by train and released at a set time. When a pigeon had returned to its loft, the owner would hurry to a local post office or a local pub to have its time recorded. Again, this gave racers who lived near the headquarters or a post office an advantage and meant that victory 'often depended not only on the bird's flying ability but also on the fitness of the owner'.²¹ To enable fairer races timing clocks were developed during the Edwardian period. These allowed the time a bird returned to its loft to be verified: the pigeon's metal or rubber leg ring was entered into the clock, which then pinpricked an internal paper dial with the time and the whole contraption was taken to the race headquarters. To equalize the different distances travelled, the winner was not the bird with the quickest time but the fastest average speed. Although expense meant that clocks were not universally used, they did allow variations in distance travelled to be taken into account and races to be held with competitors from much wider geographical areas. The first national race, open to all England, preceded clocks and took place from La Rochelle in 1894, with 384 competitors sending 610 birds.²² Such races required organisation and, in line with the

wider trend in sport, national and regional associations were formed. In 1896 the National Homing Union was founded at a meeting at the White Swan in Leeds.

With the growth of long-distance racing, the social base of pigeon racing began to diversify. This process had already begun with the siege of Paris, which had given the value of homing pigeons much publicity. During the siege, pigeons carried over a million messages to and from Paris.²³ The siege gave ‘a great impetus and new life to pigeon flying in this country [Britain], and many gentlemen of good social position’ took to ‘the homing pigeon as affording an innocent pastime and means of sport’. In 1878 the *Sportsman’s Journal and Fancier’s Guide* argued that the respectability of cultivating the homing pigeons had made ‘rapid strides’. Nonetheless, it maintained that the pigeon had ‘with few exceptions, not been in good hands, and consequently the game has not been regarded with much favour by the community at large’.²⁴ A further impetus to the sport’s social standing came towards the end of the Victorian period when King Leopold of Belgium gave pigeons to the royal family. Royal lofts were set up and the Duke of York and Prince of Wales appear to have shown some interest in racing the birds.²⁵ A letter to *The Times* in 1899 claimed,

Since the Prince of Wales won the race from Lerwick a national interest has been taken in racing pigeons, as is shown by the announcements in the daily papers, and there is every indication that the sport will become more and more popular as it becomes more understood: indeed, I go so far as to say that it is only through ignorance of the fascination of the sport of pigeon racing that there are not many more good men in our ranks at the present time.²⁶

Long-distance pigeon racing was thus developing a new, more ‘reputable’ clientele. The winner, for example, of the first ‘Up North Combine’ race in 1905 was a baker and confectioner with his own shop and bakery in Jarrow.²⁷ Indeed, the administrative and organisational skills of middle-class officials were important for running the complex logistics of long distance races. In 1929, the *LMS Railway Magazine* noted that

At the time of its inception, some 40 years ago, pigeon racing was considered to be essentially a working man’s hobby, but this is no longer the case, and many of the newspapers in their account of the Bournemouth [north-west combine] race, stated that the owners of the birds taking part in the flight comprised members of all ranks of society.²⁸

The Newcastle-Upon-Tyne Homing Society, formed in 1892, was not untypical in including local businessmen, doctors, innkeepers and colliery officials.²⁹

Yet the majority of the long-distance racers before the First World War were probably working-class, as the below table illustrates.

Table 1: Occupations of members of Lancaster and Lancaster and District Flying Clubs, 1906³⁰

Blacksmith x 3	Machine operator
Cabinet maker	Miller's son
Chemist	Moulder

Clerk	Publican
Coachman	Publican's wife
Cotton spinner x 6	Railway driver
Fish salesman	Retired clerk
French Polisher	Shop owner
Insurance clerk	Stonemason x 2
Joiner x 5	Tailor
Labourer x 6	Wagon builder
Living on own means (son of retired mill manager)	Not traced x 15

In 1906 the Nelson and District Homing Society had an even more pronounced profile of skilled workers. Fourteen of its twenty members can be traced: four were cotton loom overlookers, seven were cotton weavers, one was a publican, one a cotton warp dresser and one was a laundry vanman.³¹

During the late Victorian and Edwardian growth of pigeon racing there was some evidence of social tensions between the respectable long-distance racers and the poorer short-distance flyers. The secretary of a Blackpool long-distance club boasted in 1906 that every member of his club paid their subscription by cheque, 'evidence of the superior class of men who now compose the Fancy'. One writer in the 1906 *Homing Pigeon Annual* complained, 'We are classed with the men who go about from pillar to post with a significant dirty bag or basket on pigeon flying bent, and who spend most of the rest of their time in low pot-houses, gambling, practices which are most abhorrent to the real fancier.'³² However such tensions were not universal and one former public-schoolboy celebrated in 1907 what 'a really good sporting lot the great majority of fanciers are, and none more so than the working man. Some of my staunchest friends are composed of the latter'.³³

With a more respectable profile and greater organisation the sport of pigeon racing continued to grow. When the *Racing Pigeon* was launched in 1898, it felt that the sport's 'enormous growth' over the last decade was evidence that there was a need for such a journal.³⁴ Of the fourteen pigeon racing journals and papers listed on the British newspaper library's catalogue, three began publishing in the late Victorian era, six in the Edwardian period, and three in the inter-war years.³⁵ By 1905 the volume of pigeon traffic on the railways from the mining districts of Northumberland was heavy enough for the North-Eastern Railway Company to begin running pigeon specials.³⁶ There were 23,292 birds sent to the 1907 Up-North Combine race.³⁷ In 1929, the London, Midland and Scottish Railway Company alone claimed it was carrying seven million birds during the racing season and running as many as seventeen special pigeon trains on some days.³⁸ It was claimed in 1900 that probably half-a-million people were interested in the result of a race of Yorkshire clubs from Winchester.³⁹ The sport was becoming part of the fabric of many working-class communities, especially in mining districts. In the years after the Great War one Welsh miner thought that in his valleys village 'there were probably four or five pigeon lofts in every street, each loft housing about thirty birds. Some of them were more commodious than the rooms in the miners' cottages. ... On the day of a big race the whole village would be agog and the backyards crowded with people looking at the sky as though expecting the advent of a new comet or the eclipse of the sun.'⁴⁰

The service of many pigeons during the Great War gave the sport some added respectability.⁴¹ By the late 1930s it was even the subject of outside wireless

broadcasts on the BBC.⁴² With this added respectability, social tensions within the pastime lessened in the inter-war years, ironically at a time when cross-class sociability between the working and middle classes was actually becoming less common. The sport increasingly became a realm where the middle classes and skilled workers mixed and competed on an equal footing. Middle-class figures celebrated the way the sport brought different classes together.⁴³ McKibbin has noted that the northern middle class connected with manufacturing was self-consciously different to its equivalent in the south. It had ideas of work and sociability that 'hardly differed from that of a member of a skilled trade union. They preferred the social world of their workforce than that of their wives'.⁴⁴ Thus the socially mixed nature of some northern clubs is not a surprise but such organisations could also be found in the south. In 1906, the membership of the Ashford and District Flying Club included a coachman, a forgerman's engine assistant, a surgeon, a farmer, a golf club maker and a gentleman wealthy enough to employ twelve servants.⁴⁵

Yet both long and short distance pigeon racing remained dominated by the working class. In 1938, the International [long-distance] Pigeon Board suggested that: 'The great majority of the members of the Union affiliated to the Board (some 120,000 in number) are working men, who take a very great interest in their sport. They are thrifty, respectable men, and of a class anxious to improve their position'.⁴⁶ In the 1930s, the secretary of Bolton's Short Distance Union felt it was 'a great organization that caters for the humble working man'.⁴⁷ A Scottish racer said that he and fellow pigeon racers were often referred to in the 1950s as the 'cloth cap brigade'.⁴⁸ In short, despite the sport's middle-class adherents, the pigeon was, as one Cumbrian fancier remarked, 'the poor man's racehorse'.⁴⁹

II

But why did men keep and race pigeons? What did the hobby actually mean to those who took part? There are no singular answers to such questions but by examining what pigeon keepers said and thought about their hobby we can piece together some explanation. Pigeon racing was an exciting pastime but not in the more instantly gratifying way of other sports. As one racer put it in 1934,

We fanciers are deprived of the joy of following the course and cheering on our favourites. Anticipation is virtually the sole quality that holds us magnetically in bonds of faith and hope, for we only see the final outcome of the effort of our birds. Ay, and what emotions are aroused thereby!⁵⁰

When this racer received the telegram announcing that his birds had been released on their race, he felt 'a throb of exultation'. When he saw his bird approaching he became 'transfixed, electrified; there comes the faint rustle of wings: almost simultaneously, upon the small platform at the entrance of the loft there is the bird of his dreams'.⁵¹ Short distance flying was quicker and faster and thus more obviously exciting; in Bolton, one fancier was said to be 'so excited about 'is pigeon that [he] dropped dead' at a race.⁵² As in so many pastimes, a little flutter added to the excitement. Betting was an integral part of working-class culture and pigeon racing was no different.⁵³ Even the more socially diverse long-distance races were normally organised around sweepstakes with the highest-placed birds sharing the total money. There were also bets on individual birds or between individual owners. Nor was money the only stake. Mass Observation noted that food and drink were commonly staked on short-distances races in Bolton.⁵⁴

Pigeon keeping was thus, for most of its adherents, an integrally competitive activity. The point of breeding pigeons was to win races. This was no different from the wider world of sport or, indeed, animal or bird fancying which were inextricably linked with a circuit of competitive shows. McKibbin suggests that most working-class hobbies were intensely competitive; even an artistic hobby like music or a utilitarian hobby like gardening had their own worlds of competitions. He argues that such individualistic hobbies provided an 'acceptable competitiveness to lives otherwise circumscribed both by the requirements of increasingly mechanized work routines and (indeed less certainly) by the demands of group loyalties'.⁵⁵ Successful pigeon racers certainly won both self-esteem and the respect of their peers and were spoken of in revered tones years after their death. Pigeon racing was thus a route to a more positive self-identification that was too often denied in even skilled manual work.

Yet the appeal of pigeons extended beyond the excitement, status and competition of racing. Crouch and Ward have argued that the process of gardening was an important part of the attraction to allotment holders. This not only involved an escape from the environments of work and home but also the challenge of cultivating and harnessing the soil.⁵⁶ Similar arguments can be made for pigeon keeping. It was not just the end result or races that people enjoyed but the actual process of rearing and training the birds. Raising and breeding pigeons had a drama of its own. The breeder both controlled and empathised with the lives of his birds, from matching their parents, experiencing the emotions of their races, to telling stories about their feats. Breeding was a long and skilled process and there was a considerable investment of knowledge in a bird. Feeding and breeding techniques were carefully developed and often guarded secrets. Racing too required a knowledge of topography and even calculating the velocity of a bird was no mean feat. The *British Railways Magazine* noted, it 'may seem a bit involved and a fit job for an accountant, but to these artisan fanciers [it] is just a piece of cake'.⁵⁷

Pigeon racers were proud of the commitment and knowledge required. A Bolton fancier noted, 'A hobby or sport presents you with as much returns as you put into it, not from a Capitalist standpoint, but from an interesting, social, and perhaps some little rewards for the patience you endow to it'.⁵⁸ The leading fancier J. W. Logan (a former railway contractor and the Liberal MP for Harborough) argued that the intelligence required to breed and race pigeons made it 'a man's game'. He claimed that he cared for

Homing pigeons solely because they are not only deeply interesting from their extraordinary intelligence, which, in my opinion, ranks them very high in the scale of intellectual animals, but because they call forth a man's intelligence to a high degree in learning the secrets of their nature⁵⁹.

Pigeon keeping, like other hobbies, represented what McKibbin has termed 'a socially-acceptable level of intellectual activity'.⁶⁰ Pigeon racers did not simply read the pigeon press, they engaged with it, comparing the advice they found in print or conversation with their own experiences. They developed encyclopaedic knowledge about the birds and their habits; it was, after all, their 'dominant interest in life'.⁶¹ Such knowledge is all the more significant when placed alongside wider high levels of working-class ignorance on current affairs.⁶²

Springing from this knowledge, pigeons became symbols of their owner and his skills and abilities. As one racer put it, a favourite bird

is representative of all his knowledge, and breeding skill. He has trained it over a period of two or three years. From a baby he has fancied it and time has confirmed his judgement. The way the bird has performed in the minor events has engendered confidence. Patience and attention to detail is now actually being tried out to the limit.⁶³

Just as sporting heroes represented the values of the working-class communities that idolised them,⁶⁴ so too did pigeons. Owners respected their pigeons' 'wonderful courage and stamina' and one Welsh miner even produced a mourning card on the death of his prized bird.⁶⁵ There could be thus a genuine affection between a man and his pigeon. One lyrical pigeon racer wrote that when an owner retrieves his favourite bird from a race, 'He cannot speak, his heart is too full for words'. This fancier felt there was a close emotional bond between a man and his bird: 'The fancier loves his birds whilst the unmatched long distance pigeon is true unto death. May this spirit of eternal loyalty and matchless purpose bind us together in all good works.'⁶⁶ The historian Keith Thomas has argued of the period before 1800 that the 'more the animal was doted on by its owner, the more likely was it to bear a human name'.⁶⁷ The habit of naming pigeons appears to have been very mixed amongst pigeon racers. A 1913 guide to pigeon racing, for example, selected 40 birds that had helped 'make pigeon history during recent years'. Of these highly-prized birds only 27 had names, which varied from Royal Edward to Northern Queen to No Fool. The others were referred to by their ring or loft number.⁶⁸ Birds were regularly lost in races to the weather, falcons, hunters or simply the long and strenuous journey. This meant that it was perhaps emotionally unwise for owners to be too sentimental about their birds. There was also a pragmatic side to the tenderness that was displayed towards pigeons. As one racer put it, birds were 'animated by the love of home',⁶⁹ and thus the return of a pigeon depended on it being comfortable in its home. Thus successful racing pigeons required not only a comfortable loft and good food but also, perhaps, affection between the bird and its owner.

Thus, while the drama and sentiment of keeping pigeons added to its attraction, the birds were not viewed in the same light as pets. There was a degree of ruthlessness in attitudes to pigeons amongst all classes of owners. The MP Logan remarked that he subjected his pigeons 'rigidly to the doctrine of the "survival of the fittest"' and that he never tried to cure any ailments his birds might suffer from. Instead, he tried 'to stamp out weakness of constitution by killing every ailing bird' that showed a loss of stamina.⁷⁰ One miner noted that many of his peers 'became as knowledgeable about Charles Darwin and his principles of selectivity as he was about Humphrey Davy and the principles underlying the safety lamp. So in his understanding of the former maxim, it was his accepted theory that only the fittest pigeons should survive.'⁷¹ A bird that got temporarily lost could find itself returning to an angry owner who promptly killed it.⁷² Furthermore, sabotaging or killing a rival's birds was not unknown.⁷³ At least partly to save the expense of feeding them, poor birds found themselves given away or simply killed and either roasted or made into a pie. This was the 'pigeon breeder's accepted code of practice'.⁷⁴ Indeed, in times of hardship eating the birds or their eggs might be unavoidable. One lady recalled of her childhood in London's inter-war East End, 'They were bad old days. Hunger and hard work. We even ate starlings, and killed my own brother's racing pigeons to put in a pie'.⁷⁵

The admittedly conditional sentiment some men displayed towards their birds could contrast with their attitudes to their families. The wife of a Welsh miner complained:

he thinks a damn sight more of his birds than he does of me. Same thing applies to the kids. He'd see them eat nothing else but 'shinkin' [bread and tea], scrag end and pwidin bara [bread pudding] as long as his precious pigeons got their linseed oil, maple peas, tick-beans and Indian corn ... The bugger, to get his pidgins through the traps into the loft to have a good night's rest, coos to them, but he never gives a sing song to the kids to get them to settle down in the cradle.⁷⁶

That birds required 'constant and unremitting attention' could cause tensions within families, particularly when it came to the question of taking holidays.⁷⁷ Yet other wives took some solace that pigeon racing was preferable to certain other leisure pursuits. It was undoubtedly better to be married to a pigeon racer than a drunk. The National Pigeon Association, which represented fanciers rather than racers, felt that 'the devotee of pigeon breeding and exhibiting is of a quiet and home-loving type'.⁷⁸ Some men passed on their love of pigeons to their children and it became a shared hobby, a rare opportunity to spend leisure time with one's father. In 1926, a London docker introduced his son to the hobby of pigeons by placing one at the end of his bed.⁷⁹ The son of a member of a Yorkshire club, dominated by local millworkers, and the fourth generation of his family to race birds, recalled that in his inter-war youth he 'enjoyed "pigeons" for it was a family pastime which occupied our everyday thoughts, it brought many visitors to our door, friends and fellow fanciers'.⁸⁰ Wives and daughters too could share the chores and pleasures of pigeon keeping and racing. There were some women who actually owned and raced birds in their own right, although the historical record tells us virtually nothing of who they were and how they were treated.⁸¹ Yet such sustained hobbies were beyond the material and cultural reach of most working-class women.⁸² More typical was the experience of the woman who wrote, 'we fanciers' wives (even if not particularly fond of the pigeon fancy) generally come in for a share of the trouble; to say nothing of the dirt when you have just cleared up, and Mr So-and-So comes in to inspect the pedigree of certain birds'.⁸³

The place of pigeons in the dynamics of family life is clear in the autobiography of historian William Woodruff. He wrote of helping his father on his allotment in inter-war Blackburn. It was usually he and his brother's job to release the birds and 'Occasionally, as a special treat, we were allowed to hold one'. On the occasion of an annual race from France, 'the family lived on the edge of precipice until the race was over. Madness would reign'. Woodruff's father would talk constantly to his pigeons and flowers but was shy with his wife:

He marched off, with a bunch of flowers in his hand and several pigeon eggs in his overall pockets ... On arrival home, he put the eggs into a basin on the sink. Awkwardly, almost abruptly, he handed the flowers to mother. No words, no glances, just a muffled grunt that seemed to say all that needed saying.⁸⁴

Such reluctance to show too much open affection was not unusual amongst working-class men. In contrast, in the competitive world of pigeon racing, open displays of affection to birds were almost required parts of the search for a champion. Wives

were perhaps expected to know how their husbands felt about them, pigeons could not be.

Andrew Davies has argued that there were two, sometimes overlapping concepts of working-class manliness. The first was based upon being the breadwinner and head of household, while the other centred upon hardness or toughness, expressed in physical labour, public conduct and, often, heavy drinking.⁸⁵ The emphasis should be on the overlap. Physical toughness was integral for all working men, even if not all felt the need to express it in their leisure time. Work was physically rigorous and to be able to endure its demands was essential for a man to actually be a breadwinner. As Tosh argues, masculinity was forged by a mixture of home, work and male associations; they were intertwined rather than separate spheres.⁸⁶ Bourke notes that the garden or allotment, which were important parts of a man's contribution to domestic life, were still often masculine territories.⁸⁷ Thus men's contribution to his household responsibilities could still be somehow apart and reclusive. More direct confrontation was uncomfortable, as clearly visible above in Woodruff's awkwardness with his wife. Pigeon racing further demonstrates that, even for miners, physical hardness, domesticity and emotional tenderness were not incompatible. However, reconciling and mixing those contrasting roles was not always easy. The relationship between home and work in forging masculinity was personalised and inherently variable.⁸⁸ It was often easier to actually express affection for a bird rather than for a woman or child, certainly without losing face amongst other men. For some families the shared hobby of pigeons perhaps even symbolised the emotional bonds that could not be put into words.

For some men, perhaps those whose manliness was derived more from toughness than family, pigeons actually represented a welcome escape from the domestic sphere. The time and commitment required to keep pigeons successfully took men out of the domestic environment. Like the fishing bank or the allotment, where many kept their pigeons, pigeon lofts could be a quiet refuge from the noise and bustle of both home and work. For George Orwell, pigeon keeping was an example of the 'privateness of English life'.⁸⁹ Even in the backyard of a terraced house, a pigeon coup could still provide solitude from the house just feet away, although space there was always in demand as Roberts noted in the *Classic Slum*:

The yard itself had many uses: it acted as boudoir for mother and a haven for younger children fearful of rough street life. Father cobbled and mended there, kept a rabbit or two, pigeons (common indeed) or a few hens. Someone was always whitewashing walls, and folk strolled chatting in and out, all in the spirit of good neighbourliness. Some families, however, scoured and brown-stoned their flags, close-bolted the door and held their yard as a piece, almost, of holy ground.⁹⁰

Like the backyard, pigeon racing was a communal as well as solitary activity. Pigeon racers invariably organised themselves into clubs that met in public houses, thus combining the sociability that drink and voluntary association provided.⁹¹ Fanciers also congregated in their kitchens, allotments and yards to discuss their birds and anything else. One racer felt that friendship was the 'biggest reward' that the sport brought.⁹² To another, the sport had 'a lot of friendly competitiveness about, we all wanted to win but seldom fell out about it'.⁹³ Those who kept pigeons on allotments often shared the tenancy with a mate who would be responsible for growing vegetables, utilising the pigeon manure to enrich the soil.⁹⁴ When the National

Homing Union developed a code of practice to ease inter-war tensions between local authorities, neighbours and pigeon keepers, it had to forbid congregating in gardens to watch the birds.

Such sociability was another source of masculinity. Indeed, men's need to reaffirm their manhood by associating with one another probably had an added importance because of the uncertainty of home and work as bases of masculine identification. As Tosh points out, a 'proper job and a viable household were highly vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the economic cycle'. Furthermore, a man's authority within his household was not certain; his wife was responsible for both the material and emotional care of his home and children.⁹⁵ This meant that pigeon racing, whether as a form of male association or as a solitary pursuit, was an important social retreat, where men could be men, safe from the complications that the domestic sphere presented to their masculinity.

Others have seen a link between occupation, particularly mining, and the choice of pigeon racing as a hobby. Peter White's portrait of County Durham suggests that men who worked with hard unyielding matter such as coal or metal were likely to have livestock-based hobbies.⁹⁶ Yet producing hard evidence for a direct correlation between the attraction of pigeon racing and the unrewarding world of industrial labour is problematic. D. Gwenallt Jones (b. 1899), a poet from a metalworking area in west Wales, thought the hobby turned 'the worker into a living person'.⁹⁷ A Welsh miner in the 1930s noted:

Every miner has a hobby. Some are useful; some are not ... Why do we do so many things? It's difficult to say. It may be a reaction from physical strain. The miner works in a dark, strange world. He comes up into the light. It is a new world. It is stimulating. He wants to do something. It may be, in good times, pigeon racing, fretwork, whippet racing, carpentry, music, choral singing or reading.⁹⁸

For the miner, pigeon racing may have been a stimulating release from working underground but that does not mean there was something particular about pigeon racing that created a special link between the hobby and the occupation. Despite the popularity of pigeon racing in mining districts, it was also practised by a whole variety of working-class, and indeed middle-class, occupations. McKibbin has argued that recreation was a response by workers to the world they found themselves in. He maintains that hobbies had a complicated but ambiguous relationship with work.⁹⁹ Miners had the same emotional needs in their leisure as other manual occupations. The delights of raising and racing birds appealed to a whole variety of different occupations and professions that were physically or emotionally unrewarding in one form or another.

The overwhelming concentration of pigeon keeping in urban areas suggests that its appeal may have been particularly salient for men disconnected from nature. For some pigeon keepers listening to the birds was de-stressing and bound up with ideas of the outdoors and freedom.¹⁰⁰ The sociologist Adrian Franklin suggests that

The aesthetic experience of fish keepers, gardeners or pigeon fanciers is without doubt focussed on the fish, flowers and birds that are the object of their gaze ... Indeed, the extreme artificiality of the urban setting may hone and sharpen the contrast with natural objects, making the aesthetic appreciation more focussed and intense.¹⁰¹

The Reverend J. Lucas called pigeon fancying 'the art of propagating life'. His first pair of eggs transported him 'into the wonderland of mystery and delight'. He maintained that it was 'an exalting and ennobling trait in the poor man's character that he has the wit to appreciate a beautiful natural object'.¹⁰² Yet Lucas felt racing the birds was abhorrent. Pigeon racers did not regard their birds *per se* as beautiful and thus the aesthetics in question did not represent an unquestioning love of natural things. Although shows of racing pigeons continued through the twentieth century, there was some agreement that the most attractive looking birds were not the best racers. Furthermore, the dichotomy between rural and urban environments has been overstated. Animals were kept in towns and gardens and allotments tended. Mining districts overlooked or stood underneath hills and countryside. Even in central London, fields were a short bicycle ride away.¹⁰³ Despite their dirty and industrial environments, nature was all around for those urbanites who sought it. It was not an instinctive need for nature that underpinned pigeon racing but the more social desires for solitude, sociability, status and intellectual rewards.

III

Any study of a working-class pastime needs to not only address its multiple meanings for participants, but also its relationship with the wider political and economic forces that structured its form, experience and meaning.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the history of pigeon racing also needs to address those factors which were beyond the control of those taking part. Working-class culture was neither autonomous nor able to operate outside the wider material constraints imposed upon it by an unequal society. Andrew Davies has demonstrated vividly that the employed working class's access to a whole range of pastimes, including drinking, watching professional sport, seaside trips and home-based activities such as listening to the wireless, was curtailed and regulated by financial status.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, the lure of commercial leisure was strong and the working-class could still scrimp, save and even steal to access it.¹⁰⁶ Thus, as Richard Holt put it, 'Man, to borrow from Marx, makes his own sport but not in conditions of his own making'.¹⁰⁷ This was particularly true of pigeon racing. The rewards of pigeon racing, which were shaped by wider social and economic structures, could still only be experienced where these structures allowed.

For all its association with the working class, pigeon racing was not cheap, which kept serious long-distance racing beyond the means of the mass of that class. There were lofts to buy or build and then maintain. Baskets were needed to transport the birds. Clocks and rings were needed to time and identify birds. And, of course, the pigeons themselves had to be bought and fed. Pedigree mattered in a pigeon and determined its price. Thus fanciers traced and recorded a bird's family line. In the 1880s the best birds could cost £5 to £20, although it was not unknown for some to fetch £40.¹⁰⁸ In 1906 a Manchester loft advertised cheap birds at a 'working man's price' but they were still ten shillings per pair.¹⁰⁹ In the late 1920s decent birds were said to typically cost between 25s. and £10, although the best ones could sell for considerably more and the contemporary record was £225.¹¹⁰ Thus, as one fancier remembered of the 1930s, 'pigeons were not cheap, especially good ones'.¹¹¹ A junior clerk in Lancaster, born in 1904, kept pigeons but could not afford to race them.¹¹² This was not surprising given that races cost anything from a few pennies to a few shillings to enter, and club membership, required for long-distance races, was even more. Even in the late nineteenth century, short-distance races in Northumbria often required each racer to place 5s. into a sweepstake race.¹¹³ In 1925, a club in

Oughtibridge, a village near Sheffield, was charging 17s. for membership, 2½d. for rings and 6d. for races. Its membership of 25 was drawn from a cross-section of the village's workforce, including the landlord of the inn where the club was based, the local blacksmith and miners and steelworkers.¹¹⁴ A Lancaster girl, born in 1883, recalled that her family even moved specifically so that her mill-worker father could have a garden to keep his pigeons in. Her parents never had holidays because her father would not neglect his birds, while he even paid men half-a-day's wages to wait at his home for his birds to return when he himself was at work.¹¹⁵ Such actions would have been beyond the regular means of the unskilled workers that made up the urban poor and many skilled men with young children too, although, as Davies shows, there were always some men who forsook their financial responsibilities to their families in the pursuit of pleasure.¹¹⁶ Table 1 further illustrates that it was not impossible for labourers to race pigeons. Sharing the costs between friends was one possibility, while birds could be, and were, begged, borrowed or stolen. Yet ultimately material considerations limited the possibility of taking up pigeon racing.

That working men could afford to own pigeons at all owed something to the significant rewards that successful racers and breeders could win, thanks to the pooling of entry fees and prizes from pigeon publications. In 1900, top prizes were often a sovereign and even up to £4 or £5, but with entrance fees at 6d. to 1s. per bird, it was said to be impossible to make a big profit.¹¹⁷ In 1928, one Manchester club gave out £4,800 in prizes and a man from Sale won a record £552.¹¹⁸ Successful racers also found it easier to stud their prized pigeons and sell their surplus but well-bred birds. One racer remarked, 'Success breeds success and I sold the odd pair of young birds each year which helped pay the corn bill'.¹¹⁹ A clothes shop-owner in Aberdare would even swap clothes and sheets for pigeons.¹²⁰ A Bolton short-distance racer pointed out in the late 1930s, 'I think it's folly to enter in this sport with your outlook from a money making proposition, it simply isn't done, I venture to say not one per cent make this hobby pay, never mind showing a profit'.¹²¹ Long-distance racing was more profitable but only for those who were successful.

The cost of the sport made it unstable, with men drifting in and out according to their financial and domestic circumstances. Of 129 clubs identified by Metcalfe in late-Victorian and Edwardian Northumbrian mining communities, only fourteen lasted for more than four years.¹²² The cost of the sport caused a downturn in its popularity during the inter-war depression. In 1930, the Homing Pigeon Publishing Company recorded 'a heavy loss' of £828 14s 10d. Its annual report noted, 'owing to the bad state of trade and general unemployment, the races organised during the season did not receive sufficient support to pay the expense incurred and the very large sums of prize money given'. Nonetheless, it did record an increase in the sale of rings and its paper, *The Homing World*. The company went into liquidation in 1932 and in disposing of its assets the liquidator noted that there was a 'very restricted market in pigeon fancy stock'.¹²³ Similarly, Mass Observation's late 1930s survey of Bolton recorded the secretary of the local Short Distance Union saying that due to 'bad trade and depression' the activity had 'dwindled down considerably'. A local fancier told the survey 'There were sweeps every two-three week, mebbe ten bob a pigeon, un thee carn't do it'. The survey also accorded the decline to a part of a wider decline in communal forms of leisure in favour of newer, more passive leisure pastimes.¹²⁴ (Such arguments were not untypical in contemporary leisure, and have been repeated by historians, but they overlook both the active and communal nature of consuming commercialised leisure, be it professional sport, the wireless or the pictures.¹²⁵) It was not until the early 1950s that it was claimed that 'Modern

economic conditions have made it possible for any man, whatever his position, to participate in this justly popular hobby'.¹²⁶

It was not just money that one required to keep pigeons but space too. Working-class gardens were rare, allotments limited in supply and backyards limited in space. In Glasgow, where yards were less common than in industrial England, many fanciers used small window boxes attached to tenement walls as lofts.¹²⁷ The inter-war slum clearances and the associated movement of people to council housing estates caused significant problems for the sport. Many local authorities, rather unfairly, saw pigeons as dirty, unhygienic and a nuisance and thus banned their keeping on the new estates. In Wolverhampton, the local authority withdrew permission to keep pigeons and poultry in 1934 as a 'result of very considerable trouble experienced by the Committee in dealing with complaints from neighbouring tenants as to noise and smell and the difficulty in getting owners to repair or remove unsuitable and unsightly structures'.¹²⁸ As George Orwell put it, the restrictions on pigeon keeping added 'something ruthless and soulless' to the improved housing conditions.¹²⁹ According to the president of National Pigeon Association, 'There are cases where the breeding and exhibition of Pigeons have been the lifelong hobby of men now forced to leave their old homes and live on Housing Estates, and the enforced termination of their hobby had caused them acute stress.'¹³⁰ The various pigeon racing unions experienced 'a serious falling off' in membership as a result of the prohibitions.¹³¹ Concern was widespread enough for some interest from MPs, although officials at the Ministry of Health did not feel that the matter was of 'sufficient importance' to warrant the pigeon lobby meeting a minister personally.¹³² The MP for Dartford told the Minister of Health there was 'strong feeling' about local authorities preventing 'working men from keeping a few pigeons [sic] in their back gardens'.¹³³

The ban was not universal, particularly where a local official or councillor was a pigeon fancier himself.¹³⁴ Representatives of the pigeon lobby resorted to emphasising their respectability and contribution to the national good in efforts to win support amongst civil servants and politicians. The National Pigeon Association contrasted keeping pigeons at home with going to dog races, arguing it was not in the national interest that pigeon keeping be restricted. It maintained that 'Those who are permitted to indulge, during their leisure, in a home hobby such as the breeding of Fancy Pigeons, are surely more likely to be peaceful and contented citizens than would be the case if such privileges continue to be withheld.'¹³⁵ Similarly, the International Pigeon Board said that the banning of the keeping of homing pigeons was 'wholly unnecessary and in the nature of a penalty to what had been conclusively proved a National asset. I refer to the valuable and gallant service rendered to the country by Homing Pigeons during the Great War.'¹³⁶

Given the likelihood of war with Germany at the end of the 1930s, the lobbying of the pigeon fraternity was not unsuccessful. Smethwick council held 'strong views' on the matter and barred the keeping of pigeons on the grounds of the damage to property that the birds caused and the nuisance of their persistent cooing. However, in 1939, the war service of the birds forced the council to consider allowing pigeons on the detached hill top portions of estates where enthusiasts could gather together thus localising any nuisance.¹³⁷ The cause of pigeon keepers was aided by the National Homing Union developing a code of practice for its members. This required a maximum of seven pairs of birds, clean lofts limewashed twice a year, flying limited to one hour in the morning, one hour at midday and one-and-a-half hours in the evening and no congregating in gardens to watch the birds. Thanks to

this code, in 1938, the International Pigeon Board could point to 32 local authorities that had ended their ban on pigeon keeping.¹³⁸ However, the 'red tape' of the NHU's code and local regulations on loft construction caused their own problems. The Medical Officer of Health for Cardiff noted 'you get a number of people who are afraid of the restrictions or can not be bothered'. Of the 6750 municipal houses in his city, approximately one per cent kept pigeons or poultry.¹³⁹

IV

While pigeon keepers struggled to pursue their hobby in the face of the objections and regulations of local authorities, they did not always find more support amongst their own class. In 1888, a union meeting of miners in Staveley was told that 'Employers would have sooner have men who could drink, fly pigeons, and who took dogs out with a string' than ones who were knowledgeable about the state of their industry. Another unionist told Derbyshire miners in 1889 not to waste their money on pigeon flying or other gambling but to join the union instead.¹⁴⁰ Like these labour activists, historians too have seen leisure as providing the late Victorian and Edwardian working class with a fatalistic culture of consolation that detracted from political radicalism.¹⁴¹ The world of voluntary and commercial leisure certainly gave men the dignity, stimulation and pleasure that were often denied to them in the world of work or unemployment. Yet this does not mean it was an alternative to political radicalism or thought. This is surely illustrated by the inter-war growth of a more overt and political working-class consciousness at a time when the popularity of forms of commercial leisure such as the pictures was rapidly increasing. Both individual trade unionists and Labour activists followed pigeon racing in the first half of the twentieth century. A taste in pigeons (or other forms of pleasure) was not incompatible with a taste for current affairs, although it probably absorbed time and energy that could have gone into organised politics. As Mckibbin points out, 'Men could wish to be elected to either a trades council or secretary of a pigeon-breeding society: one had to be comparatively unusual to do both'.¹⁴² Assuming positions of responsibility in both the organised worlds of politics and working-class associational culture may have required too much time to be common but that did not mean that leisure pursuits prevented wider political sympathies and awareness.

An interest in pigeons also crossed the political divide and included the working-class members of the Conservative Party that illustrate the limitations of working-class radicalism.¹⁴³ As such party divisions indicate, working-class culture was fractured. The workers were divided by political and religious beliefs, regional tastes and conditions and internal economic strata. It is within these divides that many of the roots of working-class conservatism lie. These divides also represent the series of overlapping subcultures that made up working-class culture. Pigeon racing itself was an example of one of the subcultures that percolated across the working class. There were variations in the type of racing pursued, the connections between a man, his birds and his family relations, even in the names given to lofts, but pigeon racers were united by a common love of the challenge of breeding and the thrill of competition.

Within working-class culture, leisure played an important role in providing some sense of unity between the different groupings. It also perhaps helped people make sense of the world and their place within it. It certainly made life more tolerable and enjoyable but it also made stark the impact of material constraints upon them, even if that did not always lead to any resentment being articulated in political radicalism or the language of class consciousness. Pigeon racing gave men agency

over their lives but it was still limited by the wider economic and sometimes political and social structures. Those on the dole might find themselves unable to afford to keep and race birds, those with jobs might struggle against the demands of the local authorities that owned their new homes or the better birds belonging to a local businessman with the money to invest in quality pedigree, feed and lofts. Whether contemporaries would have recognised it or not, pigeon racing, like all leisure forms, was thus political. Leisure was itself rarely a form of direct working-class resistance but it might, perhaps, encourage resistance or fatalism in other spheres.¹⁴⁴ Defining the impact of this in any precise manner is impossible since it was a highly individualised process that was dependent on one's own experiences of the three spheres at the core of working-class experience: work, home and leisure. Leisure was never the only lens through which the working-class saw the world and thus any conciliatory or resisting role it played in the wider political and social hegemony was not hermetic but complex, ambiguous, even contradictory.¹⁴⁵ To understand pigeon racers they must also be viewed as individual workers and family men; but, likewise, many family men and workers should also be understood as pigeon racers.

- ¹ James Mott, 'Miners, weavers and pigeon racing', in Michael A. Smith, Stanley Parker and Cyril S. Smith (eds), *Leisure and Society in Britain* (Allen Lane, London, 1973), pp. 86-96, is a tentative but limited historical and sociological examination of pigeon racing. Surveys of the history of sport do acknowledge the popularity of the pastime. For example, see Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1989), pp. 187-8.
- ² Eric Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies on the History of Labour* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1984), chs. 10 and 11.
- ³ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures, England, 1918-1951* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000).
- ⁴ Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991).
- ⁵ Peter Bailey, 'The politics and poetics of modern British leisure', *Rethinking History*, 3, 2 (1999), 131-75, quoted at p. 151.
- ⁶ Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000), p. 126.
- ⁷ Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1987). Similarly, see Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984).
- ⁸ See, for example, the descriptions of a race from London to Antwerp in *The Times*, 12, 14 July 1830.
- ⁹ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (Frank Cass, London [1851] 1967), p. 64.
- ¹⁰ John K. Walton and Alastair Wilcox (eds), *Low Life and Moral Improvement in Mid-Victorian England: Liverpool through the Journalism in Hugh Shimmin* (Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1991), pp. 115-6.
- ¹¹ Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (Methuen, London, 1987 edn.), p. 33.
- ¹² J. E. Williams, *The Derbyshire Miners: A Study in Industrial and Social History* (George Allen, London, 1962), p. 61.
- ¹³ Alan Metcalfe, *Beyond the Pit: Sport and Leisure in the Mining Villages of East Northumberland, 1820-1914* (Routledge, London, forthcoming).
- ¹⁴ <http://booth.lse.ac.uk> Charles Booth and the survey into life and labour in London (1886-1903). Booth notebook, B349, pp. 236-7.
- ¹⁵ John Benson, *British Coalminers in the Nineteenth Century* (Longman, London, 1989 edn.), p. 162.
- ¹⁶ Joe Gormley, *Battered Cherub: The Autobiography of Joe Gormley* (Hamilton, London, 1982), pp. 2-3.
- ¹⁷ Richard Church, *Over the Bridge: An Essay in Autobiography* (Heinemann, London, 1955), p. 52.
- ¹⁸ Elizabeth Roberts Oral History Archive, Centre for North West Regional Studies, Lancaster University (hereafter EROHA): Mr G2L, b. 1879. One writer thought that it was simply ignorance of the sport that led the 'Superior Englishman' to look upon the pigeon flyer as 'rather an inferior person' and the pursuit as of 'low character'. *The Homing Pigeon Annual, A Complete Stud Book and Register* (Manchester, Homing Pigeon Publishing Company, 1906), p. 9.
- ¹⁹ Williams, *Derbyshire Miners*, pp. 120, 134. One writer thought the opposite and commended the rise of football for doing much to stop pigeon flying, dog racing, drinking and gambling. Frank Omerod, *Lancashire Life and Character* (Edwards and Bryning, Rochdale, 1915 2nd edition), pp 91-2.
- ²⁰ Creston, 'Football', *The Fortnightly Review*, 55 (1894), p. 30.
- ²¹ Walter Haydn Davies, *Blithe Ones* (Bridgend Printing, Bridgend, 1979), p. 111.
- ²² J. W. Logan, *Logan's Pigeon Racer's Handbook* (London, 1924), p. 59.
- ²³ Eric Simms, *The Public Life of the Street Pigeon* (Hutchinson, London, 1979), p. 45.
- ²⁴ *Sportsman's Journal and Fancier's Guide*, 28, 21 Dec 1878.
- ²⁵ *Harmsworth Magazine*, Sept 1900.
- ²⁶ *The Times*, 12 Aug 1899.
- ²⁷ Jack Curtis, 'William Sheldon of Jarrow', <http://www.boglinmarsh.fsnet.co.uk/curtissheldonofjarrow.htm> (accessed 13 January 2004).
- ²⁸ *LMS Railway Magazine*, Feb 1929.
- ²⁹ Metcalfe, *Beyond the Pit*.
- ³⁰ Membership names and addresses from 1906 *Homing Pigeon Annual*. Occupations from 1901 census and Directory of Lancaster, Morecambe and District (Preston, W. Watson, 1899).
- ³¹ Membership names and addresses from 1906 *Homing Pigeon Annual*. Occupations from 1901 census.
- ³² *Homing Pigeon Annual*, p. 9.

- ³³ *The Homing Pigeon Annual, A Complete Stud Book and Register* (Manchester, Homing Pigeon Publishing Company, 1907), p. 91.
- ³⁴ *Racing Pigeon*, 20 Apr 1898.
- ³⁵ The remaining two are modern publications. Of those launched before 1939, two are still in publication.
- ³⁶ *Daily Mail*, 29 July 1922.
- ³⁷ Metcalfe, *Beyond the Pit*.
- ³⁸ *LMS Railway Magazine*, Feb 1929.
- ³⁹ *Harmsworth Magazine*, Sept 1900.
- ⁴⁰ Davies, *Blithe Ones*, p. 109.
- ⁴¹ Garry McCafferty, *They Had No Choice: Racing Pigeons at War* (Tempus, Stroud, 2002).
- ⁴² Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol. II: The Golden Age of Wireless* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1965), p. 119.
- ⁴³ William Anderson, *The Sport of Pigeon Racing* (Racing Pigeon Publishing Co., London, 2nd edn., 1954), p. 172.
- ⁴⁴ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, pp. 101, 86.
- ⁴⁵ Membership names and addresses from 1906 *Homing Pigeon Annual*. Occupations from the 1901 census. 6 out of 13 members traced.
- ⁴⁶ International Pigeon Board to Minister of Health, Walter Elliott, 20 Oct 1938. NA: HLG 52/1298.
- ⁴⁷ Mass Observation, *The Pub and the People: A Worktown Study* (Welwyn Garden City: Seven Dials Press [1943] 1970), p. 290.
- ⁴⁸ Personal communication with Bob Kennedy (b. 1933), 16 May 2003.
- ⁴⁹ Pigeon racer in Melvyn Bragg, *Speak for England: An Essay On England 1900-1975 Based On Interviews With Inhabitants Of Wigton, Cumberland* (Secker & Warburg, London, 1976), p. 385.
- ⁵⁰ H. J. Sewell, 'The pigeon in flight', *LMS Railway Magazine*, July 1934.
- ⁵¹ Sewell, 'pigeon in flight', 1934.
- ⁵² Mass Observation, *Pub and the People*, p. 289.
- ⁵³ Mark Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter: Popular Gambling and English Society, c.1823-1961* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992) is an excellent study of working-class gambling and pp. 97-101 examines betting on pigeons.
- ⁵⁴ Mass Observation, *Pub and the People*, pp. 288-9.
- ⁵⁵ Ross McKibbin, 'Work and hobbies in Britain, 1880-1950', in Jay Winter (ed.), *The Working Class in Modern British History* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983), p. 144.
- ⁵⁶ David Crouch & Colin Ward, *The Allotment: Its Landscape and Culture* (Five Leaves, Nottingham, 1997 edn.), ch. 9. Similarly, the sociologist Franklin suggests that part of the attraction of gardening was 'Nature as a process rather than as an aesthetic product'. Adrian Franklin, *Nature and Social Theory* (Sage, London, 2002), p. 144.
- ⁵⁷ *British Railways Magazine* (Eastern Region), June 1951.
- ⁵⁸ Mass Observation, *Pub and the People*, p. 289.
- ⁵⁹ Logan, *Pigeon Racer's Handbook*, p. 18.
- ⁶⁰ McKibbin, 'Work and hobbies', p. 145.
- ⁶¹ See, for example, Davies, *Blithe Ones*, pp. 108-9.
- ⁶² Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2001), pp. 220-3. This work notes that while serious reading bypassed much of the working class, there was a significant minority of workers engaged in intellectual reading.
- ⁶³ Sewell, 'pigeon in flight'.
- ⁶⁴ Richard Holt, 'Heroes of the north: sport and the shaping of regional identity', in Jeff Hill and Jack Williams (eds), *Sport and Identity in the North of England* (Keele University Press, Keele, 1996), pp. 137-64.
- ⁶⁵ Sewell, 'pigeon in flight'; Davies, *Blithe Ones*, p. 105.
- ⁶⁶ Sewell, 'pigeon in flight'.
- ⁶⁷ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, p. 114.
- ⁶⁸ W. E. Barker, *Pigeon Racing. A Practical Guide to the Sport* (London: Racing Pigeon Publishing Co., first published 1913), pp. 177-9.
- ⁶⁹ Sewell, 'pigeon in flight'.
- ⁷⁰ Logan, *Logan's Pigeon Racer's Handbook*, p. 18.
- ⁷¹ Davies, *Blithe Ones*, p. 109.
- ⁷² Albert Jones (b.1918) interview, National Sound Archive (NSA), C900/05531/C1.

- ⁷³ Cheating was not unknown in both short and long distance flying. Mass Observation recorded feelings that bribing timers had become more common since unemployment grew amongst local miners. Mass Observation, *Pub and the People*, p. 287.
- ⁷⁴ Davies, *Blithe Ones*, p. 110.
- ⁷⁵ Nor were all the pigeons eaten lawfully acquired, as another east-ender remembered: 'Everyone had pigeon lofts round there and they might have been *lost* by their owner'. Gilda O'Neil, *My East End: Memories of Life in Cockney London* (Penguin, London, 2000), pp. 168, 145.
- ⁷⁶ Davies, *Blithe Ones*, p. 107.
- ⁷⁷ Anderson, *Sport of Pigeon Racing*, p. 13.
- ⁷⁸ National Pigeon Association to Ministry of Health, 6 Feb 1936. NA: HLG 52/1298.
- ⁷⁹ George Frederic Potten, 'My Dad', http://www.homingworld.co.uk/pigeon_articles/2002_06_20_george_potten.php (accessed 7 March 2003). Others discovered pigeons in their childhood, with no encouragement from their fathers, while some never took to their father's passion for pigeons. Anderson, *Sport of Pigeon Racing*, p. 13. Gormley, *Battered Cherub*, p. 3.
- ⁸⁰ Personal communication with Ken Ambler (b. c.1930), 1 May 2003.
- ⁸¹ For example, the Lancaster and District Flying Club included a Mrs Shaw, the 38-year-old wife of a publican amongst its members. Anecdotal oral evidence suggests some women entered their birds in the names of their husbands. In 1898, a London grocer gave his wife a prize tumbler as a present. *The Times*, 8 Dec 1898.
- ⁸² Gender disadvantages in leisure are starkly clear in Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992).
- ⁸³ *The Homing Pigeon Annual, A Complete Stud Book and Register* (Manchester, Homing Pigeon Publishing Company, 1911), pp. 176-7.
- ⁸⁴ William Woodruff, *The Road to Nab End: An Extraordinary Northern Childhood* (Abacus, London, 2002 edn.), pp. 266-8.
- ⁸⁵ Andrew Davies, 'Youth gangs, masculinity and violence in late Victorian Manchester and Salford', *Journal of Social History*, 32 (1998), 349-70, quote from p. 353.
- ⁸⁶ John Tosh, 'What should historians do with masculinity? Reflections on nineteenth-century Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), 179-202.
- ⁸⁷ Joanna Bourke, *Working-class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960* (Routledge, London, 1994), pp. 81-9. Similarly, a study of nineteenth-century autobiographies suggests that at least working-class men who wrote did consider their families. David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-century Working-class Autobiography* (Europa, London, 1981).
- ⁸⁸ Tosh, 'What should historians do with masculinity?'
- ⁸⁹ George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* [1941], 1961), p. 13.
- ⁹⁰ Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1971), p. 131.
- ⁹¹ Metcalfe has noted that all the pigeon clubs in mining communities in east Northumbria before 1914 had their headquarters at inns. Even the region's pigeon shows were normally held in pubs. Alan Metcalfe, 'The control of space and the development of sport: a case study of twenty-two sports in the mining communities of East Northumberland, 1800-1924', *Sports Historian*, 15 (May 1995), 23-33.
- ⁹² Anderson, *Sport of Pigeon Racing*, p. 173.
- ⁹³ Personal communication with Bob Kennedy (b. 1933), 16 May 2003.
- ⁹⁴ Crouch and Ward, *The Allotment*, p. 223. Cultivating the land was a condition of tenancy for many allotments.
- ⁹⁵ Tosh, 'What should historians do with masculinity?', pp. 192, 189.
- ⁹⁶ Peter White, *Portrait of County Durham* (London, Hale 1967), pp. 173-4.
- ⁹⁷ Donald Allchin, D. Densil Morgan and Patrick Thomas (eds), *Sensuous Glory: The Poetic Vision of D. Gwenallt Jones* (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2000), pp. 62, 134.
- ⁹⁸ H. V. Morton, *In Search of Wales* (Methuen, London, 1932), pp. 247-9. Quoted in Rose, *Intellectual Life*, p. 240.
- ⁹⁹ McKibbin, 'Work and hobbies', p. 145.
- ¹⁰⁰ *In Living Memory*, BBC Radio Wales, 25 May 1993.
- ¹⁰¹ Franklin, *Nature and Social Theory*, p. 86.
- ¹⁰² Reverend J. Lucas, *The Pleasures of a Pigeon-Fancier* (London, 1886), pp. 14, 44, 24.
- ¹⁰³ Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (Routledge, London, 1992), ch. 3.

- ¹⁰⁴ Emma Griffin, 'Popular culture in industrializing England', *The Historical Journal*, 45, 3 (2002), 626-7.
- ¹⁰⁵ Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, p. 31.
- ¹⁰⁶ For example, the unemployed could still retain a strong interest in professional soccer despite being unable to afford to attend matches; they would even make significant sacrifices to see the occasional game. Martin Johnes, *Soccer and Society: South Wales, 1900-39* (University of Wales Press, 2002), pp. 70-3.
- ¹⁰⁷ Richard Holt, 'Sport and history: the state of the subject in Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 7, 2 (1996), p. 244.
- ¹⁰⁸ Letter from London Flying Club to Metropolitan Police, 25 July 1888. NA: MEPOL 2/343. *Sportsman's Journal and Fancier's Guide*, 30 Nov 1878.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Homing Pigeon Annual*, p. 58.
- ¹¹⁰ *LMS Railway Magazine*, Feb 1929.
- ¹¹¹ The Big Fella's Chronicles, 'John W. Logan MP', www.pigeonracing.com/pigeon_articles/articles_2000-2001/jack-logan.htm (accessed 14 January 2004).
- ¹¹² EROHA: Mr H3L, b.1904.
- ¹¹³ Metcalfe, *Beyond the Pit*.
- ¹¹⁴ Roy Needham, 'Down memory lane: the history of Oughtibridge HS since it was formed in 1920', *Pigeon Racing Gazette* (April 2002), 18-21.
- ¹¹⁵ EROHA: Miss H4L, b.1883.
- ¹¹⁶ See Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, ch. 2. Comparisons of the 1901 census and 1906 pigeon club membership lists show that it was not uncommon for pigeon racers to have young children.
- ¹¹⁷ *Harmsworth Magazine*, Sept 1900.
- ¹¹⁸ *LMS Railway Magazine*, Feb 1929.
- ¹¹⁹ Personal communication with Bob Kennedy (b. 1933), 16 May 2003.
- ¹²⁰ *In Living Memory*, BBC Radio Wales, 25 May 1993.
- ¹²¹ Mass Observation, *Pub and the People*, p. 289.
- ¹²² Metcalfe, *Beyond the Pit*.
- ¹²³ NA: BT31/31923/85704.
- ¹²⁴ Mass Observation, *Pub and the People*, p. 290.
- ¹²⁵ Such arguments also overlook the extent to which commercial, supposedly passive, leisure activities were well established before the late nineteenth century. Hugh Cunningham, 'Leisure and culture', in F. M. L. Thompson, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, volume 2: People and their Environment* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990), pp. 279-339. For the communal and active nature of soccer fandom, for example, see Johnes, *Soccer & Society*, ch.4.
- ¹²⁶ Anderson, *Sport of Pigeon Racing*, p. 13.
- ¹²⁷ Anderson, *Sport of Pigeon Racing*, p. 14.
- ¹²⁸ Wolverhampton town clerk to Ministry of Health, 5 July 1939. NA: HLG 37/19.
- ¹²⁹ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, [1937] 1966), p. 63.
- ¹³⁰ National Pigeon Association (NPA) to Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 8 Jan 1936. NA: HLG 52/1298.
- ¹³¹ Note of meeting between representatives of International Pigeon Board and Ministry of Health officials, 2 Nov 1938. NA: HLG 52/1298.
- ¹³² Note from officials, 24 Oct 1938. NA: HLG 52/1298.
- ¹³³ F. E. Clarke MP to Sir Kingsley Wood, 10 Nov 1936. NA: HLG 52/1298.
- ¹³⁴ NPA to Ministry of Health, 6 Feb 1936. NA: HLG 52/1298.
- ¹³⁵ NPA to Ministry of Health, 2 Jan 1939, 6 Feb 1936. NA: HLG 52/1298.
- ¹³⁶ International Pigeon Board to Minister of Health, Walter Elliott, 20 Oct 1938. NA: HLG 52/1298.
- ¹³⁷ Town clerk of Smethwick to Ministry of Health, 29 June 1939. NA: HLG 37/19.
- ¹³⁸ International Pigeon Board to Minister of Health, Walter Elliott, 20 Oct 1938. NA: HLG 52/1298. Even when pigeons were kept in accordance with the NHU regulations, it could still lead to complaints and a nuisance. Letter from Sedgely Urban District Council to Ministry of Health, 15 March 1950. NA: HLG 52/1298.
- ¹³⁹ Dr Greenwood Wilson, Medical Officer of Health, Public Health Dept, Cardiff Council to Ministry of Health, 21 July 1939. NA: HLG 37/19. Cardiff Corporation had introduced its system of regulation because of 'bitter experience' of the problem in private dwellings.
- ¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Williams, *Derbyshire Miners*, pp. 288, 291.
- ¹⁴¹ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983).

¹⁴² McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class*, p. 15.

¹⁴³ For example see Frank Howard (b. 1895) and Ernest Edgar Perkins (b. 1887) interviews. NSA: C707/122/1-2; C707/113/1-2.

¹⁴⁴ For a nuanced argument that working-class culture did play some role in the rise of 'Labour' by encouraging struggles for survival, see Neville Kirk, 'Traditional' working-class culture and 'the rise of Labour': some preliminary observations', *Social History*, 16, 2 (1991), 203-16.

¹⁴⁵ Such arguments are developed in Jeff Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth Century Britain*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002, ch. 11.