

## PLACE, COMMUNITY AND FOOTBALL

Place matters. The town where we grew up, the city we chose to move to – indeed, all the places where we’ve ever lived – form reference points in our lives, bringing with them a potent mix of associations: first girlfriends or boyfriends, where our kids were born, moves to new jobs, our achievements and failures ... and (for many of us) the football teams we supported. Writing in *The Municipal Journal* in November 2017, local government expert Barry Quirk puts it like this:

*Localities are woven into our personal lives: of where we’re from, where we’ve been, where we are now, and where we imagine we’re going. Specific localities give colour to our origins, our journeys and our imagined destinations.*

I was born and brought up in Manchester, experienced my adolescence in Stockport and spent three years at the university in Birmingham, before moving back to Manchester for my first job. My next work move was to Chester, followed by Liverpool, back to Birmingham, and finally Leicester. Domestically, I’ve also been based in Silverdale in north Lancashire, Gateshead (where my first son, Callum, was born) and Kendal, on the edge of the Lake District (where Fergus was born, seven years later).

In all these places, as a long-term football enthusiast (spectator and amateur player), I have sought out and watched local football clubs, ranging from the Premier League to the National League North. From the age of eleven, I was a dedicated Manchester City supporter, but also attached myself to Stockport County, when we moved to Stockport in 1956. Since then, I have watched a good

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deal of football at Chester, Morecambe, Carlisle, Blackpool, Wigan and Barrow, with more sporadic visits to various other venues. In each of these towns, memories of football are inextricably intertwined with memories of key events in my personal life. To quote Barry Quirk again:

*The fabric of locality gives texture to our lives. We may remember with fondness and tenderness the conflicting rhythms of life we experienced in specific places during specific times in our lives. These memories tether us to places in our past.*

If the link between place and football has been important to me in my meanderings around north and middle England, how much more must this be true of those who remain rooted in the area in which they were born and raised? Martin Tarbuck, editor of the Wigan Athletic fanzine, *Mudhutter*, was born in Wigan and has never left the town of his birth. He started watching Wigan Athletic in 1988 and is an example of the true football fan – one town, one club, a lifetime’s experience focused on a single place. The pattern of my career and domestic life has made such consistency impossible, but the link between place and football over time has, in its own way, been just as significant for me.

Once we have developed an affection for a particular place – because we were brought up there, raised a family there, or have chosen to live there – it becomes important symbolically as well as functionally. We want the qualities of the place that attracted us to it, or motivated our continued attachment to it, to be recognised and celebrated. And what better opportunity for recognition and celebration than the exploits of the football team that bears the town or city’s name? When a football team reaches a Wembley final (even if it’s only the EFL Trophy!), it is invariably the case that large numbers of the town’s population

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make their way there, many of whom may not have attended more than the odd match during the season. This is the day when the achievements of Walsall or Forest Green Rovers or Brackley Town have brought the existence of these places to wider public attention, and their residents want to be there in profusion to celebrate this outcome.

But there are recent social trends that have weakened the strength of the link between local community and the support of a football (or rugby league) team. In *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, a powerful and passionate review of the decline in fortunes of the football, rugby league and cricket clubs of Yorkshire since the 1980s, Anthony Clavane argues that the legacy of the Thatcher years – the decimation of the Yorkshire mining industry, the disappearance of the fishing industry and the major decline of other manufacturing concerns such as steel – has had a major impact on the community cohesion of towns and cities such as Barnsley, Hull and Sheffield, and the strength of the link between place, community and football team:

*Old Yorkshire as an idea can be sentimentalised, romanticised even, its insular and bigoted tendencies ignored by nostalgia-ridden advocates. But the loss of a belligerent, solidaristic communal culture is more than a Yorkshire tragedy. It is a national one. Many of the county's clubs are no longer the heartbeat of their communities; their players, an ever-decreasing number of whom are recruited locally, exist in a completely different financial orbit. The communal to-and-fro of the old, standing terraces belong to a different world of well-paid skilled jobs, crowded pubs and terraced streets. The evisceration in the eighties of that world sounded the death-knell for a simpler, purer, harder, edgier version of sport.*

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This is a convincing argument, which undoubtedly has resonance beyond Yorkshire. The decline of the cotton industry in Lancashire from the 1950s onwards has had similar adverse consequences for community cohesiveness in towns such as Bolton, Bury, Accrington and Burnley. And in the big cities, the slum clearance schemes of the 1950s and 1960s dispersed close-knit inner-city communities to council estates on their fringes, where community identity has been slow to develop. The Northeast has experienced a similar industrial upheaval, with coalmining now a thing of the past and shipbuilding in terminal decline. So, if Clavane is right, the decline of community cohesion and identity would be equally apparent right across the North, from Lancashire to Sunderland, and even in big cities such as Manchester and Leeds, which have prospered recently as retail and commercial centres.

It is hard to disagree with Clavane's conclusion that traditional working-class communities, focused on locations where peoples' work patterns, domestic lives and leisure-time activities are closely interwoven, have become much less common over the past forty years. He talks about Featherstone in West Yorkshire as a potent example of how things used to be, and what has been lost. Featherstone is, or rather was, a small mining town where social life revolved around the pit, the Miners' Institute and other community organisations, and the rugby league club, Featherstone Rovers, many of whose players worked at the pit, where the first topic of conversation on the Monday shift was always 'how did the Rovers get on?' But in the 1980s the mine was closed, and the life force of the town ebbed away. Rovers are still punching above their weight, but their role as a binding social force in a town with a high unemployment rate has clearly declined.

There remain a few exceptions to the dominant pattern of industrial decline, and here, support for local teams remains strong. Barrow-in-Furness, where the building and re-fitting of

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nuclear submarines is still the dominant industry, is one town where a traditional working-class community has largely survived; the shipyard's seven thousand employees are drawn mainly from the town itself, and Barrow AFC, unsuccessful though they have been in recent years, remains a source of local pride. The large steelworks at Scunthorpe still dominates the town's economy, and Scunthorpe United fans still chant 'Come on the Iron'. But these are the exceptions. For every Barrow or Scunthorpe there are plenty of towns that have lost their basic industry – or it has become much reduced in scope – and the traditional bonds between home, workplace and leisure have been greatly weakened. Barnsley, Oldham, Accrington, Crewe, Wigan and Middlesbrough are among the Northern places which have experienced this kind of decline, along with many others in the Midlands – Walsall, Stoke-on-Trent and Mansfield, for example.

And yet, despite industrial decline, the loyalty to football clubs remains. It may, in most cases, be less of an expression of community identity than it was, and more a symbolic attachment to a town that has lost its economic identity; but it nevertheless remains. Indeed, attendance numbers at grounds have risen since the early 1980s, when the Thatcher-inspired hollowing-out of our industrial base was just beginning. Amongst many Premier League clubs, there has, I suspect, been a major shift in the social background of their clientele – if you're on the dole or in a part-time or zero-hours contract job, you're not going to be able to afford a season ticket at Manchester United, Manchester City, Chelsea, Arsenal or any of the other corporate big-time clubs. But moving down a level or two, things are different. When Barnsley came to Wigan on the last day of the 2015–16 season, they needed a win to make it to the play-offs. Five thousand Barnsley supporters, bedecked in red, made the journey across the Pennines to cheer their team on, filling the whole of the North Stand of the DW stadium. Their journey and

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the passion of their support was rewarded with a 4-1 victory that secured a play-off place and later promotion to the Championship. My conclusion was that, whilst traditional working-class communities may well have declined, the importance of 'supporting your local club' has continued. Indeed, it can be argued that it has helped supporters cope with the economic insecurity into which so many have been plunged, since the 1980s.

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The significance of football clubs as expressions of the strength of community identity with a town can, however, be much more than a symbolic feature. It can operate for many as a major influence on the quality of their lives. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in situations where the very existence of a club is threatened. In August 2019, three months after gaining promotion from League Two in some style, Bury were expelled from League One due to insurmountable financial problems. A BBC documentary powerfully illustrated the impact of this expulsion. 'When I heard the devastating news, I cried in my dad's arms for an hour,' admitted one woman. Her dad had bought her first season ticket when she was six, over twenty years ago. Every other Saturday, Kenny Hindle, seventy-eight years old, would leave his sheltered housing, take the bus into town, go for a pint and then watch the team he has supported for more than seventy years. 'What do you do without bloody football!' bemoaned Kenny. Joy Hart, a former director of the club, chained herself to a drainpipe outside the stadium. Zoe Hitchin, a former club photographer, has since put together an exhibition covering the 134 years of Bury's history because 'the true value of Bury FC – which is people and community – has been forgotten. I care, because that football club was my extended family.' Many supporters claimed that they have

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found it too painful to watch any football since the club went out of business. Such is the power of the link between football teams and local communities to stir deep emotions.

Such traumatic developments have a resonance that extends way beyond the town in which they occur. I, too, was greatly saddened by the news of Bury's demise (which hopefully doesn't preclude a resurrection). When I lived in south Manchester in the 1960s, I made regular visits to Gigg Lane, Bury's friendly stadium, surrounded on two sides by mature trees. They were in what was then the Second Division, punching above their weight; although, going further back in time, they twice won the FA Cup in the early 1900s and often graced the old First Division with their presence until as late as 1929. As recently as 2016, I was at Gigg Lane to watch Bury beat Blackpool 4-2. Many other occasional visitors and supporters of teams visiting Bury are likely to have experienced reactions of dismay similar to my own. There is a camaraderie amongst football fans, particularly down in the lower leagues. There but for fortune!

At the time when Bury's future was in the balance, I hoped that one of Manchester's elite Premiership clubs might come to their aid, financially or otherwise. After all, Manchester City, for example, owe a large debt of gratitude to Bury, from whom they signed Colin Bell, one of their iconic players of the 1960s and '70s. Sadly, no such help was forthcoming.

The strength of the relationship between local community and local football club is further illustrated by the way in which local political action has been stimulated by concerns about the future of a football team. The demonstrations outside Gigg Lane provide one notable example. Other triggers include inertia on the part of the local council, or opposition to the behaviour of the club's owners. Charlton Athletic's long exile from its traditional home, The Valley, in the 1980s led to an organised and ultimately

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successful campaign for a return. When the local council – the London Borough of Greenwich – was perceived to be dragging its feet, the pressure group involved nominated several of its members to stand in local elections on a specific ‘back to The Valley’ programme. They didn’t win any council seats, but it certainly spurred the council into taking action.

When Wimbledon’s owners moved the club to Milton Keynes in 2005 (where it became MK Dons), the club’s outraged supporters started a new Wimbledon-based club, which in 2012 was promoted to the Football League, having worked its way up the non-league pyramid. They have since joined their ‘parent’ club in League One.

A breakaway group of Manchester United fans, angry at the takeover of the club by American businessman Malcolm Glazer, founded a new club, FC United of Manchester, which currently plays in the National League North in Newton Heath (the original home of Manchester United) before crowds regularly topping two thousand.

In 2015–16, when I was writing *Tangerines and Pies*, a book about Blackpool and Wigan Athletic, there were regular demonstrations outside Blackpool’s Bloomfield Road on match days, protesting about the way Oyston family ran the club. At the last home game of the season, there was a march from the town centre to the football ground, in which I took part. It attracted over two thousand fans. At a similar event the following season, supporters from other clubs who were experiencing problems with owners were invited to attend. There was a large contingent from Leyton Orient, then in the hands of Italian businessman Francesco Becchetti and already doomed to relegation. Groups of supporters from Blackburn Rovers and Coventry City also took part. The camaraderie amongst the different groups, united in their opposition to the attitude of their owners and in their determination to

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do something about it, was both encouraging and moving. There have also been several instances of clubs being bought out by supporters' associations: Portsmouth, Exeter City and Wycombe Wanderers provide successful examples of such takeovers.

All these different examples of community action (to which more could be added) can be seen as expressions of the importance of their local town to those who have taken such action, and of the way the local football club symbolises this attachment. Despite the fragmentation of traditional working-class communities, a sense of place clearly does continue to matter, not least to the vast number of football fans who support their team week in, week out.

And, of course, there is the social dimension of 'following your team'. Because I tend to travel to a range of different venues, rather than attend regularly at one particular club, I often go to games on my own. In this, I know I am not typical. Although I am usually aware of a handful of other solitaries in the vicinity, it is clear that the majority of those present have come as groups: sometimes fathers and sons, sometimes whole families (mums and daughters included), but particularly groups of mates, some school-aged, some in their twenties or thirties, and some senior citizens, who've probably been coming since they were lads. Many will have enjoyed a few pints in a local pub, on the way to the match. The social ritual involved is a crucial element of being a supporter.

Martin Tarbuck described to me his experience of away-days in the following terms: 'I love the day out, the beers, the planning, the train or coach journey, meeting up with friends, the rivalry, the anger, the smell of the pitch, and yes, the pies; everything about the day is a great occasion.' He quotes a comment from a friend of his: 'Anyone who knows anything about football knows that football has got nothing to do with football.' That sounds nonsensical,

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but I know what he means! Attending football matches is for most of us a collective, social activity and as such should be treasured, as an antidote to the increasing domination of individual pursuits, typically IT-based.

Daniel Gray's evocative book, *Saturday, 3pm: 50 Eternal Delights of Modern Football*, includes a chapter entitled 'Knowing where you were', in which he explains the strength for him of the association between major events in one's life and football matches: 'I don't know why it matters,' he writes. 'Life events should be significant enough in isolation without football fixtures clamping onto them like limpets.' But there is a sense in which individual football matches do, for many of us, act as landmarks in our progression through life. For others, such life associations operate through popular songs. For football fans, though, it's 'the game we'd been to on the day we got engaged', or some such soccer-linked memory that survives over time. In this respect, time, place, life and football become inextricably intertwined.