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Victorian Manchester's Female Sporting Entrepreneurs

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Throughout the nineteenth century, sporting pastimes were developed and endorsed by the entrepreneurial men who populated the new cities and towns of industrial Britain. Many sporting "stars" used their celebrity status to help transition from athlete to sport promoter, often acquiring facilities, such as a public house, as a base for their sporting activities to be housed. Within Manchester, the semi-rural districts surrounding the city centre became hubs for many sporting entertainments, with several purpose-built stadiums developed in the land attached to drinking establishments. The narratives of several these sporting entrepreneurs have been documented in sport history literature, presenting biographical accounts of the men who were instrumental in the survival of sport within the city. However, many of these texts fail to recognise the important role of the women who occupied various sporting and supporting positions within this environment, and who helped to stimulate and cultivate a culture for sport from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. This paper will provide examination of some of these individuals, uncovering the life stories of a group of females entrepreneurs who provided different forms of sport and leisure amusement during Manchester's 'golden era' of athletic development.

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Manchester Sporting Scene

Between 1780 and 1840, during the early industrial age, leisure entertainments grew in strength, supported by innovations in technology, transport and the development of popular culture.¹ The expansion of the railway contributed to the development of, and access to, sport by providing travel options and widening access for competitors and spectators alike, thus enabling national competition on a much larger scale.² The demand for sporting news accelerated, and businesses and entrepreneurial companies responded; newspapers increased sport coverage, racing programmes were printed and sport-specific equipment produced, all providing profitability at a time of economic expansion.³ An awareness of the marketable viability of such endeavours provided the catalyst for sport's presence within society. It was no longer a marginal activity but became a 'commercialised mass culture' in its own right.⁴

From 1800, sport was increasingly commercialised and private gardens and public house fields became ideal locations for leisure opportunities. The enclosure of sporting arenas was common practice by 1850 with each ground developing attractive racing programmes in order to attract local and national audiences. Within Manchester's surrounding parishes, pedestrianism had a significant following with multiple arenas constructed to fulfil the demand for sport. *Bell's Life* regularly published racing fixtures and sporting information, with the names of popular enclosures prominent, and their publican owners were familiar household names.⁵ Pomona Gardens was a prime example of how sport was both enjoyed and located in the suburban regions of the manufacturing towns of Britain. Situated in Cornbrook, Hulme, and bound by the river Irwell and the Bridgewater canal, the Gardens provided a rural escape from the city for many of the labouring classes, one that was later replicated by other Manchester entrepreneurs.⁶ Sport was widely promoted in its early years with rabbit-coursing, boating and pedestrianism favoured by the proprietors, and firework displays and musical acts also linked to these sporting events.⁷ By developing their own programme of events, which opposed the formalised amateur institutions that were beginning to appear throughout Britain, sporting entrepreneurs created a culture for professional athletic activities.

¹ Andy Croll, 'Popular Leisure and Sport', in *A Companion to 19th-Century Britain*, ed. Chris Williams (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 400.

² James Walvin, *Leisure and Society, 1830-1950* (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1978), 24-25.

³ Ibid, 77; Huggins and Tolson, 'The Railways and Sport in Victorian Britain: a Critical Reassessment': 100.

⁴ Stephen Tate, 'The Professionalisation of Sports Journalism, c1850 to 1939, with Particular Reference to the Career of James Catton' (PhD diss., University of Central Lancashire, 2007), 35.

⁵ Scambler, *Sport and Society: History, Power and Culture*, 34-35.

⁶ Walsh, *Manual of British Rural Sports 1861*, 216; Thomas A. Bullock, *Bradshaw's Illustrated Guide to Manchester* (Manchester: Bradshaw and Blacklock, 1857), 23-24.

⁷ Ibid; John H. Walsh, *Manual of British Rural Sports: Comprising Shooting, Hunting, Coursing, Fishing, Hawking, Racing, Boating, and Pedestrianism, and the Various Rural Games and Amusements of Great Britain* (London: London: Routledge, Warne and Routledge, 1861), xiii.

Manchester's running tracks were designed to accommodate the large crowds that followed the sport, with grandstands that guaranteed clear views of the events and space for upwards of 10,000 spectators.⁸ Entrepreneurial publicans not only organised sporting events but would also take bets, referee, time, and provide prizes whilst others became trainers and financiers of their own 'stable' of athletes, which left them with little time to serve their patrons, hiring managers and additional staff to ensure customers were entirely satisfied.⁹ As a result, while the role of the publican was traditionally a male domain it was not uncommon for women to take on this responsibility as the public house expanded. Usually the wife or daughter of the entrepreneur would continue in his position, which not only freed up time for their significant others to host lucrative races, but also encouraged businesses to stay within the family, a defining feature of many "sporting inns". However, narratives of sporting entrepreneurs tend to present biographical accounts of the men who were instrumental in the survival of sport within the city, failing to recognise the important role of the women who occupied various sporting and supporting positions within this environment, and who helped to stimulate and cultivate a culture for sport from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. This paper considers the narratives of some female entrepreneurs who occupied sporting roles during Manchester's 'golden era' of athletic development, drawing together some initial thoughts regarding their effect on Manchester's sport scene.

Female Entrepreneurs

British society characterised men and women differently, assigning them roles that meant that they sat across 'separate spheres'. Men tended to belong to the public sphere where reason, action, independence and self-interest were championed. Alternatively, women inhabited the private sphere, whereby femininity; emotion, submission, the need to be looked after, etc.; were valued and expected. However, I believe that this ideology was not as clear-cut as suggested, especially within the entrepreneurial classes. It became easier for women to work alongside their husbands, brothers and family members within business, and living over shops, and in public houses, enabled women to increase their profile, "helping out" by serving customers and keeping accounts whilst progressing

⁸ *Bell's Life*, September 27, 1857, 6; March 29, 1857, 7; April 16, 1864, 7; April 23, 1864, 2; August 23, 1865, 9; August 26, 1865, 8.

⁹ Peter Lovesey, *The Official Centenary History of the Amateur Athletic Association* (Enfield: Guinness, 1979), 15; William J. Baker, 'The State of British Sport History'. *Journal of Sport History* 10, no. 1 (1983): 59; Peter F. Radford and A.J. Ward-Smith, 'British Running Performances in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Sports Sciences* 21, no. 5 (2003): 429-430; Geoffrey T. Vincent, "'Stupid, Uninteresting and Inhuman" Pedestrianism in Canterbury 1860-1885', *Sporting Traditions* 18, no. 1 (2001): 47; Harvey, *The Beginnings of a Commercial Sporting Culture in Britain*, 133; Wray Vamplew, 'Playing with the Rules: Influences on the Development of Regulation in Sport', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 24, no. 7 (2007): 845; *Bell's Life*, January 28, 1844, 7; October 24, 1847, 7; February 1, 1852, 7; January 18, 1857, 6.

within hierarchy of society. Women provided patrons with allure, hospitality and excitement, whereas the male embodied control, governance and legacy within the establishment.¹⁰ The seduction of the barmaid was one of the attractions of the inn and, given the publican's concern over respectability, wives and daughters would be utilised to fulfil this role.¹¹ Expansion through marriage also provided legitimacy for the business and further opportunities for investment (and success). Marriage was a 'unifying feature' that solidified status and consolidated capital but the middle-class ideal of the 'saintly mother' and 'kept' wife was one in that the working classes could not conform. Females were expected to finance the home as well as provide families, and the drinks trade enabled women to work side-by-side with their partners in ensuring success.¹²

Salford Borough Gardens

The Gardener's Arms was appropriated by The Attenbury family in the 1820s, situated on Regent Road, Salford, an under-developed area on the outskirts of Manchester's city centre. Proprietor, John Attenbury, was a gardener who developed the land attached to the pub into a pleasure garden for the masses, providing a spectacular landscaped space with traditional flowers, exotic breeds of plant, fruits and vegetables on display. He promoted flower shows and competitions, with several members of his family also becoming gardeners and continuing the family trade. In order to further expand the business, the gardens evolved into a pleasure ground and racecourse in 1851, rebranding itself as the Salford Borough Gardens (and attached Borough Inn). This arena hosted numerous pedestrian and coursing events within the city under the management of Abraham Attenbury, son of the proprietor. However, in 1855, after the death of John Attenbury, wife Ann Attenbury took licence of the establishment, and continued to develop a diverse and profitable programme of entertainment to subsidise the drinking establishment, canvassing respectable local community patronage of the facilities.¹³ Mrs Attenbury featured within the pages of *Bell's Life*, being championed for her organisation of the facilities, her sporting knowledge, and for providing a hospitable environment for the many sporting men who congregated within the public house. Attenbury's forte was handicap matches – she regularly featured short distance sprinting handicaps as part of the programme, encouraging men to enter these contests through newspaper adverts, and being the contact for money deposits/entries. She scheduled many pedestrian races at the grounds, although, on race days, her son, Abraham, managed the competitions.

¹⁰ Peter Bailey, 'Parasexuality and Glamour: the Victorian Barmaid as Cultural Prototype', *Gender & History* 2, no. 2 (1990): 150-151.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 151.

¹² Jennifer Hargreaves, 'The Victorian Cult of the Family and the Early Years of Female Sport', in *Gender and Sport: A Reader*, eds. Sheila Scratton and Anne Flintoff (London: Routledge, 2002), 54.

¹³ *Manchester Guardian*, September 16, 1846, 4; *Bell's Life*, March 23, 1851, 6; *Era*, November 26, 1854, 4; *Bell's Life*, September 27, 1857, 3; September 7, 1872, 6; Barbara Gleiss, 'Women in Public Houses. A Historical Analysis of the Social and Economic Role of Women Patronising English Public Houses 1880s-1970s' (PhD diss., Universität Wien, 2009), 17.

The grounds attracted large numbers of spectators, and with it came gambling. Abraham received several criminal charges for betting within the grounds, and sister, Hannah, was also charged for betting, with reports stating that there was a 'room [within the Borough Inn] for the purpose of allowing people to go there and bet'. Both siblings were working under the control of their mother, with the "tricks of the trade" passed on between family members. This continued further with grandson, Alfred, who identified himself as a book-keeper and received fines for illegal betting practices within the Manchester area.

The ground's closure on October 23, 1863, was viewed negatively; the family could no longer sustain the grounds as the lease was due to expire and the land was 'required for other purposes'. Additionally, the emergence of more affluent and popular sporting venues also contributed to its decline.¹⁴ Ann retired from the sporting business, although her family continued to promote activities in and around the city, with the "Attenbury handicap" a regular feature at the Royal Oak running grounds, Newton Heath from 1865. After her death in 1869, the probate reflected back on her career as proprietress of the sporting arena, although, with only £100 to her name, suggested that the venture was not as lucrative as perceived.

Ann Attenbury's narrative provides evidence of a more co-operative relationship between husband and wife within the sporting environment. Even in her old age, she continued to be instrumental to the ground's sporting programme and crafted a family legacy within both sport and the beer trade. Similarly, the Holden family developed a network of sporting entrepreneurs (both male and female) through their carefully constructed identity, image, and brand, as the leading sporting family within Manchester.

Holden Family

James Holden was responsible for developing a sporting culture within both Manchester and Lancashire, and became highly regarded within the pedestrian community as a 'good-natured' and 'respectable stakeholder' who controlled many sporting activities within the city.¹⁵ Through his connections with local entrepreneurs and other sporting men, Holden constructed a legacy for pedestrianism, with his family and friends continuing to expand these sporting activities in and around the city centre. While his immediate family were instrumental in establishing the sporting community

¹⁴ *Census Returns*, Attenbury Family 1841 (HO 107/586/10); 1851 (HO 139/2224/416/46); 1861 (RG 9/2924); *Manchester Guardian*, September 16, 1846, 4; *Bell's Life*, April 11, 1852, 7; September 27, 1857, 3; October 10, 1863, 3; October 24, 1863, 3; September 7, 1872, 6.

¹⁵ *Bell's Life*, October 2, 1842, 7; *Era*, January 8, 1843, 10.

surrounding the family-run White Lion public house - Of the Holden children, three worked within the public house trade - daughters Alice and Sarah, and son James Jnr.¹⁶

Holden's network presented a Manchester based contingent that had power and influence in the sport and embedded themselves within the local racing circuit due, in part, to the connections surrounding his daughters. Sarah Holden married ex-professional rower George Piers in 1852,¹⁷ and resided at the family pub, where the newly-weds took on additional roles within the business; Sarah was already barmaid/manager of the establishment, but she also apprenticed her husband within the drinks trade and gave him access to the pub's sporting clientele.¹⁸ A printer by trade, Piers provided skills that could enhance the sporting business, drafting up contracts for races and producing publications and posters for match day betting and promotion.¹⁹

Most notably, eldest daughter, Alice Holden, was a regular feature at the White Lion, tending to the business in the absence of her father and accepting a more maternal role after her mother's death. Whilst working in the family trade she met and wed sporting personality and pedestrian George Martin in 1851.²⁰ The marriage benefitted both parties; Martin's celebrity status and national reputation provided a platform for further exposure, whilst Alice's familial connections enabled Martin to have a quick transition from athlete to successful sporting entrepreneur.

In May 1858, Martin announced his retirement from pedestrianism²¹ and licenced a beerhouse on 14 Walter Street, Salford, being within close proximity to the well-established Salford Borough Gardens. Alice helped with the day-to-day running of the facility, utilising her previous experience, whilst Martin focused on the training of athletes full-time, providing a "stable" of pedestrians who lodged at the pub.²² When he sailed to America in 1861, Alice continued to reside at the beerhouse and ensured the smooth running of the business. On Martin's return, he continued to live away from his family, instead financing a touring "circus" of athletes. Alice and her young children now had additional support from

¹⁶ Isaac Slater, *Slater's Directory of Manchester* (Manchester: Isaac Slater, 1855), 583; *Census Returns*, Elizabeth Gregory, 1871 (RG 10/4024).

¹⁷ *Bell's Life*, February 21, 1847, 5; *Marriage Certificate*, George Piers and Sarah Holden 1852 (MXF 084965); *Manchester Guardian*, October 9, 1852, 10.

¹⁸ *Census Returns*, 1861 (RG 9/2950), Cathedral Church, Manchester, 4 Long Millgate 'White Lion', James Holden, Head, 62, 'public house keeper'; Elizabeth Holden, Daughter, 20; George Pearse, Son-in-Law, 30, 'letter-press printer'; Sarah Pearse, Daughter, 27; Sarah A. Pearse, Grand-child, 7; Elizabeth Pearse, Grand-child, 4; Isaac Slater, *Slater's Directory of Manchester* (Manchester: Isaac Slater, 1855), 725; *Will and Probate*, James Holden, 16 August 1865 (G 3000 6/63).

¹⁹ Isaac Slater, *Slater's Directory of Manchester* (Manchester: Isaac Slater, 1855), 725; *Census Returns*, George Pearse (Piers) 1861 (RG 9/2950).

²⁰ *Marriage Certificate*, George Martin and Alice Holden 1851 (MXE 606479); *Era*, January 26, 1851, 5.

²¹ *Manchester Guardian*, May 27, 1858, 2; *Bell's Life*, October 17, 1858, 7.

²² *Bell's Life*, October 17, 1858, 7; *Census Returns*, 1861 (RG 9/2923), St Bartholomew, Salford, 14 Walter Street, George Martin, Married, 34, 'trainer of pedestrians', b. Surrey, York House; Alice Martin, Wife, 32, b. Lancashire, Manchester; John Nevin, Boarder, 23, 'pedestrian', b. Middlesbrough; Charles Mower, 22, 'bricklayer', b. Norfolk, Denham; Salford Borough Gardens, Borough Inn 1861 (RG 9/2924); Hadgraft, *Deerfoot: Athletics' Noble Savage*, 58.

her family; brother James, a professional athlete himself, based himself at the Walter Street beerhouse until Martin's return in late-1862 (after the collapse of the circus and a prison sentence!).

Undeterred, in 1864, Alice and George opened their new business venture, The Royal Oak Park; a sixteen-acre pleasure gardens, with attached public house, in Newton Heath, Manchester. Essentially George managed the running ground and Alice the hotel and pub. Alice was regularly seen on race days circulating around the crowds, she collected entrance fees, organised athletes, held race monies and provided refreshments to the spectators (anything from a couple of hundred to some reports of c.15,000 patrons!). The diverse programme of activities was influenced by both Alice and George; athletic sports, exhibitions, music, photography, dancing, flower shows and amateur dramatics were featured at the grounds.

The notion that, once married, the property of women became that of the husband means that the idea of finding women who had something to offer/of value, be it physically or symbolically, was attractive, and the Holden daughters proved valuable within the world of sport. The social standing of sporting entrepreneurs was constantly scrutinised within the press, and success in a densely populated market was obtained through trust. The integrity of the individual was influential in gaining patronage and developing business connections. The Holden family developed their reputation through carefully constructed relationships, tied to respectable figures within the sporting landscape. Piers' reputation as a coursing expert, Hayes' illustrious pedestrian career and management of a premier arena, and Holden Jnrs' sporting knowledge and refereeing abilities gave legitimacy to their sporting network. Although Martin's character was in many ways flawed, he continued to be successful, becoming a key player in the development of Manchester sport, at least partly due to his 'insider' status within the Holden network. By surrounding himself with reliable and valued individuals, his less savoury practices could be both hidden and reformed, with more ethical traditions being absorbed through community sharing.²³

In Holden's last will and testament he expressed his gratitude to his brother, John, and friend, Samuel Pearson, for 'apprenticing my children James and Sarah to suitable trades or businesses', and a legacy of both sport and the public house trade continued. Sarah Piers remained as a beer retailer in Salford after her husband's death, apprenticing youngest daughter, Elizabeth, in the trade,²⁴ and James married into the beer trade, wedding barmaid Mary Ann Moorhouse in 1866, who further supported Holden within the various sporting establishments he obtained.

²³ Wenger, 'Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems': 227-228.

²⁴ *Census Returns*, Piers Family 1881 (RG 11/3975/25), 193 Robert Hall Street, Salford, Sarah Piers, 47, widower, 'Retailer of Beer', Elizabeth Piers, unmarried, 24, 'Assists at Home', J.W. Piers, 5 months, grandson.

Issues and Initials Thoughts

Whilst today I have presented two instances of women's involvement within Manchester's sporting environment, it is important to note that there are far more examples that could be added to this narrative. For example, Peter Waddacor's City Grounds, developed in rural Bradford, Manchester. Attached to a working agricultural farmyard, "the Grange" expanded in 1862 being renamed and rebranded as a multi-purpose enclosed sporting venue affiliated to the Grange Hotel. Waddacor tended to the grounds until his death in 1870,²⁵ after which licenced was given to daughter Elizabeth, who took control of the day-to-day running of the public house. In 1852, Thomas Hayes married Elizabeth Taylor, daughter of publican and pedestrian referee John Taylor,²⁶ following a similar path to that of Alice Holden and George Martin; the couple ventured into the beer trade, owning smaller beerhouses and public houses before purchasing The Shears Hotel and constructing the Copenhagen Grounds, a well-renowned sporting arena, within the hostelry's land. And, more obviously, Betty Berry's Snipe Inn, Audenshaw, opened in 1838 with the landlady financing and promoting pedestrianism, wrestling, bowling and gymnastics.²⁷

The main difficulty faced here is the actual uncovering of detail. Generally, these Victorian sporting women are intrinsically linked with the male members of their family; their fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, etc.; and it is extremely difficult to construct robust narratives of them as individuals. Clearly, women had a much bigger part to play in the development of sport; public houses tended to be licenced to, and hotels runs by, wives and/or daughters of running ground promoters, ensuring a continued family legacy in sport; but there is often limited evidence attributed solely to them. Sport is a world rooted in masculine culture and tends to be absent of female athleticism, suggesting that women are not equal and that their sporting endeavours and success are not important.²⁸ Therefore, interpretation is required to provide these links and further illuminate the value of women within the sporting environment. Family connections existed between households as well as within them, creating a web that linked many individuals together in a more complex manner. These 'hidden connections' are usually uncovered through 'happy accident or idle curiosity' but it is these

²⁵ *Bell's Life*, December 18, 1859, 7; January 15, 1860, 6; April 21, 1861, 7; February 23, 1862, 7; June 29, 1862, 6; September 3, 1864, 7; February 3, 1866, 10; March 5, 1870, 3; December 24, 1870, 4; *Manchester Guardian*, December 5, 1866, 4; February 23, 1867, 5; July 27, 1867, 7; September 3, 1870, 7; January 27, 1871, 4; *Census Returns*, Peter Waddacor 1861 (RG 9/2968/62); 1871 (RG 10/4060/10); 1881 (RG 11/4016/84-85); *Manchester Times*, April 8, 1871, 6; August 23, 1879, 7; *Wills and Administration*, Peter Waddacor, April 27, 1870.

²⁶ *Marriage Certificate*, Thomas Hayes and Elizabeth Taylor April 22, 1852; *Bell's Life*, September 2, 1860, 7.

²⁷ Dave Russell, 'Sporting Manchester, from c1800 to the Present: an Introduction', *Manchester Region History Review* 20 (2009): 4.

²⁸ Dayna B. Daniels, 'You Throw Like a Girl: Sport and Misogyny on the Silver Screen', *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 35, no. 1 (2005): 29-38.

connections that require further examination so as to enable the larger community and their impact to be revealed.²⁹

Van Someren's collective biography of elite female tennis players provides an excellent example of how four individual life courses can be constructed, united and compared to the socio-historical context to create a more comprehensive and meaningful understanding of female amateur tennis provision during the mid-twentieth century.³⁰ Williams has also provided numerous samples of collective female narratives, addressing the contentious issues that surrounded gender and sport during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³¹ However, in this environment, whereby a complete narrative is difficult to construct, a prosopographical study would be beneficial in illuminating trends and presenting a clearer picture of the roles occupied by women, and their impact on sport. By adopting a more stringent and methodological approach, prosopographical studies enable researchers to investigate groups whereby data may be more limited by applying a set of uniform questions to gain specific data and expose shared qualities.³² Moving away from the construction of major narratives, prosopography is more focused, specific and determined in understanding the defining features and purpose of the group within a given context.³³

Concluding Remarks

Importantly, without the entrepreneurial vision and dedication of such families, athletic amusements and competitions in Britain's industrial cities would have been unable to survive, and the impact of sport within modern British society may not have been as valued. Whilst the sport historian has been able to discover key actors across a number of different sports, locations and classes, further work is required to ensure that women are credited for their actions and involvement within sport to ensure that they are not just a footnote in history.

²⁹ Gordon and Nair, *Public Lives: Women, Family and Society in Victorian Britain*, 47.

³⁰ Someren, 'Women's Sporting Lives: A Biographical Study of Elite Amateur Tennis Players at Wimbledon'.

³¹ Jean Williams, 'Send her Victorious: a Historiography of British Women Olympians 1896-2012' (working paper, De Montfort University, August 2010), 7-8; 'Speed: Towards a Collective Biography of Brooklands' Female Motor Racing Drivers', *BSSH Members' Bulletin* (March, 2011): 3-10; 'Speed: Towards a Collective Biography of Brooklands Women, 1907-1939' (paper presented at the Institute for Historical Research Sport and Leisure History Seminar Series, Institute for Historical Research, London, November 28, 2011); *A Contemporary History of Women's Sport, Part One: Sporting Women, 1850-1960* (London: Routledge, 2014); 'Frisky and Bitchy: Unlikely British Olympic Heroes?': 242-266; See also Carol Osbourne and Fiona Skillen, eds., *Sport in History* 30, no. 2 (2010), a special issue on Women and Sport.

³² Lawrence Stone, 'Prosopography', *Daedalus* 100 (1971): 46.

³³ Steven Shapin and Arnold Thackray, 'Prosopography as a Research Tool in History of Science: The British Scientific Community, 1700-1900', *History of Science* 12 (1974): 3; Koenraad Verboven, Myriam Carlier and Jan Dumolyn, 'A Short Manual to the Art of Prosopography', in *Prosopography Approaches and Applications: A Handbook*, ed. Katharine S.B. Keats-Rohan (Linacre College, Oxford: Unit for Prosopographical Research, 2007), 41.