

Sweet FA: Fans' Rights and Club Relocations¹

Wray Vamplew, John Coyle, Julie Heath & Brian Naysmith
International Centre for Sports History and Culture
DeMontfort University
Leicester, England

Abstract

Since the Taylor Report of 1990 many football clubs in Britain have opted to relocate rather than reconstruct their existing stadia. Utilising case studies undertaken by postgraduate students in the De Montfort International Centre for Sports History and Culture, this article examines how fans have been treated by the clubs when such moves were being discussed. The conclusion that generally their interests have not been considered fits the historical pattern of relationships between clubs and their supporters. It is predicted that the situation will worsen both as the revenue from the electronic turnstile becomes more important than gate-money and as city financiers increasingly gain power and influence on club boards. The article concludes with an analysis of ways that fans can fight back.

Few think that the US franchise system, where teams are bought and sold like any other commodity, will take hold in Britain. The fans won't stand for it, they say. But in America, with TV and merchandising bankrolling sports, owners don't have to listen to them (Connett & Thomas, 1996).

The mooted solution is a new 60,000 stadium on a greenfield site far away, beyond the city walls, not far from the M25 in Hertfordshire. Every Nick Hornby in the parish is against such a move from their spiritual home; but cold logic and hard brass are usually five goals ahead of soft old sentiment (Butler, 1997).

Just under a century ago Sheffield Wednesday Football Club moved from its Olive Grove ground to its present home at Owlerton² which at the time was miles beyond the city boundary and poorly served by public transport. Nevertheless in the first season at the new ground attendances averaged some 3,000 spectators more than in the previous one at the old site. One reason was that the club had done much to secure their fans' acceptance of the move by the democratic manner in which they went about their choice of ground.

Since 1887, Wednesday had occupied Olive Grove, conveniently close to the city centre, and the Ground had witnessed the club's entry into the Football League in 1892. Although it was not an imposing ground, nor especially picturesque, the regular patrons regarded it with affection and pride and, according to an early historian of the club, 'it appeared to encourage the feeling in the

spectators [that] the Wednesday are part of us' (R. Sparling quoted in Inglis, 1996, p. 327). In 1898 the club's landlords, the Midland Railway Company and the Corporation of Sheffield, gave Wednesday notice to quit and the club determined that it must avoid future evictions by purchasing a ground of its own. Before the match with Aston Villa on 28 November 1898 Wednesday balloted its supporters on the options available.³ A small majority favoured Carbrook, a heavily populated area around local steelworks, but this fell through when the club was outbid for the site. Second choice had been Owlerton and, although negotiations for the original site broke down, another in the immediate vicinity became available and was purchased. On 2 September 1899 over 12,000 people attended Wednesday's first match at the new ground, a three-fold increase on the final crowd at Olive Grove. Much of this success can be attributed to the goodwill of the fans whose support was secured by the promise of a permanent home and a say in the choice of its site. This was a lesson in democracy that went almost unheeded in ensuing years.

As this Sheffield Wednesday example illustrates, club relocation has a long history. Indeed John Bale's survey of the 179 moves by the 92 clubs that comprised the Football League in 1988/89 shows that 88 per cent of them took place before 1921 (Bale, 1993, pp. 136-7). In the following sixty years most clubs stayed where they were but the last two decades of this century have seen a burst of relocation activity, both planned and actual. Since the late 1980s fifty Premier and Football League clubs have actively considered relocating. Eight had done so by 1996 and a further six moved during 1997. Indeed more clubs will relocate their ground in the last decade of this century than at any time since the first ten years (Inglis, 1996, p. 15; Duke, 1994, p. 129).

Following the 1985 Bradford fire disaster and the 1989 Hillsborough tragedy, both associated with stadium design and maintenance, the report of Lord Justice Taylor demonstrated clearly the decaying fabric of many stadiums. Initially a source of civic pride, was now, as virtual slums, a source of shame. His recommendations regarding all-seater stadiums forced many clubs to consider relocation as the most cost-effective way to implement his proposals. Some clubs such as Walsall had already recognised the dilapidated state of their ground and were committed to move to improved premises (*Guardian*, 13 Dec. 1996). Others moved because of financial pressures: some receiving offers they could not refuse; what Vic Duke has termed 'the supermarket imperative' (Duke, 1994, p. 130). In 1986 Bristol Rovers were forced by mounting debts to sell their ground and move in with Bath City at Twerton Park (Inglis, 1996, p. 83). Charlton Athletic had to leave their Valley stadium and share with Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park. When they returned to The Valley it was to be replaced at Selhurst by Wimbledon who were hoping to sell their Plough Lane site for lucrative redevelopment. Finally there are a few clubs such as Newcastle and

Middlesbrough, but certainly not Wimbledon, who have seen a move as a way of coping with larger crowds, actual or potential. Even lower down the leagues, Scunthorpe United was faced with spending a 'six figure sum' to raise the capacity of the Old Show Ground and chose instead to relocate (Inglis, 1996, pp. 319-20).

Inevitably these relocations caused angst among supporters of the teams concerned. There is no doubt that many fans regard their club as 'one of the most important things in . . . life' (Williams, 1996, p. 62). Considering that membership of the team is transient and rarely local in origin, for some this loyalty extends to the more-enduring ground where the team plays: the concrete link between the club and its supporter base. Here we are moving into the area of 'topophilia' – or love of place – a concept Bale first used in a sporting context in 1999 (Bale, 1989).⁴

There are many reasons why topophilia develops. Indeed the perception of the stadium is very personal. In 1996, the first author attended a conference at Old Trafford, the stadium of Manchester United and was taken aback by the seemingly never-ending queue to enter the club museum and trophy room. On the way back to Piccadilly Station he remarked to his taxi-driver that it reminded him of old newsreel he had seen of the trail to pay homage at Lenin's tomb. His response was quick: 'of course he was a Red as well!' More seriously the stadium is a place where fans congregate to pay their respects, no more so than in the leaving of treasured scarves at the gates in a tribute to the dead of the Hillsborough disaster or, more recently, at Stamford Bridge to honour the Chelsea director, Matthew Harding, killed in a helicopter crash on the way back from cheering on his team. Here then is the stadium as a shrine.

There is a brighter side. The stadium can be a theatre with audience and players, though hopefully with the drama unscripted and the performance unpredictable. Certainly too there is an element of carnival in the noise, the songs and the animal analogy in the team mascots. Others see the ritual and ceremony of matches, the chanting of the crowds and the worship of the team as quasi-religious, rendering the stadium a cathedral which draws together those with a common devotion. Sports fans usually have a sense of tradition recalling championship sides, star players and memorable matches. Hence stadiums can be historical sites or museums – literally so at Wembley, Old Trafford and Highbury – where subjective belief can intermingle with objective artefact.⁵ The stadium can also be a metropolitan oasis, its patch of green brightening the surrounding urban environment. The imagery can go on. Are stadiums to be seen as factories or machines grinding out sporting products for the consumer? Are they men's cultural centres providing a refuge from domestic life? Or are they even proxy homes offering a sense of belonging to a family with all its tribulations as well as its comforts and caring?

Whatever concept is adopted, the underlying point is generally one of the fan's attachment to his, and to a lesser extent numerically but not necessarily emotionally, her, stadium. Any attempt to relocate that stadium is generally met initially by strong resistance from local patriots who have devoted their leisure time to attending matches at a particular site. Perhaps another reason for this, however, is the lack of consultation or even just communication that occurred between the club authorities and the fans.

Drawing on the work of staff in the International Centre for Sports History and Culture at De Montfort University and also of students taking the MA in Sport and Recreation: Historical and Cultural Appraisals, this paper examines how some fans have been treated by their clubs when relocation has been on the agenda. These cover Maidstone United, a lower division Football League side, Brighton & Hove Albion and Fulham, both Football League strugglers, a slightly more successful Charlton Athletic, and Newcastle United, frequent pretenders to the Premiership in the 1990s.

In January 1997 the Centre undertook an economic impact analysis for Newcastle United Football Club of its proposal to cope with the excess demand for tickets at St James' Park (Vamplew, 1997). Essentially this comprised a comparison of two options: the first a downsizing and roofing of the existing stadium to form an indoor arena and the building of a 55,000 capacity stadium alongside this in Leazes Park: the other a shift to an out-of-town site.

Our report favoured the redevelopment at Leazes Park and laid great stress on what football had meant to Newcastle and its inhabitants over the years. We were of the opinion that the supreme importance of Newcastle United to Tyneside could be understood without some idea of its past (Joannou, 1995). For this was and is no ordinary club. It has an unshakeable historic claim to greatness which must inform any discussion of its future. Set firmly in the heart of the city, this is the club to which Edwardians in their tens of thousands made their way on Saturday afternoons from great firms along the Tyne to watch the team that won the League three times and reached five FA Cup finals in seven years. United won the League and a further two Cup Finals before the marvellous post war years with Joe Harvey and Jackie Milburn when Newcastle became the first team to win consecutive Cup Finals for sixty years in 1951 and 1952. 'Wor Jackie' was back again in 1955 to score the fastest goal in Wembley history as United took another trophy. For a whole generation of older Tynesiders these were days never to be forgotten. An FA record average crowd of over 58,000 watched Newcastle in the immediate post-war years. Fifty years on as many and more still want to come as support for the team is passed down through the family and the generations. The city loved its football and football has been good the city. But as the city suffered, so too did the club. Times were not so good through the 1970s and 1980s until new leadership at last took the club back to the top, taking the

profile and spirits of the city back up with it. A bright new stadium and exciting foreign players have helped to drag the club out of the darkness of the hooligan-plagued decades. Newcastle United is now a club with an international name, known and watched via subscription television throughout the world – an enormous asset for the future of the city.

Although our report was about the shape of things to come, we emphasised that the past glories of the football club should not be forgotten for sports teams can provide a sense of continuity in a changing world. The true stature of the club has to be appreciated in decisions about its future. And here a sense of place is of the essence. If the old St. James' is now too small to house in safety the vast crowds who want to see the team what could be more appropriate than building a new ground beside the old? What could be finer than a show of respect for the grand traditions of Newcastle's sporting past by creating the future alongside it, merging the old and the new in a complex of civic facilities to rival the best in the world? For Newcastle the past is precious, and staying close to the scene of the club's greatness is supremely important. Past generations of Geordies came to St. James' and new generations will come too. Not to some soulless suburban bowl but into the heart of a 'walking' city where shoppers can still hear the distant roars of the crowd as their team takes on the best in the country.

The economic value of tradition cannot be easily estimated but undoubtedly cultural traditions that generate community loyalty and civic pride have positive economic repercussions. Football clubs such as Newcastle United are among Britain's most enduring social institutions and have had an important role in moulding cultural attitudes that can exert a powerful influence on community behaviour and morale. The City of Newcastle now has a huge cultural investment in Newcastle United Football Club and we argued that it was important to the city that the football club remain at its heart, both emotionally and physically. We stressed that the proposal was for the club to remain in the city. The plans are not to relocate the team but to develop and expand the facilities in the Park. It will still be Newcastle United playing at St James' Park.⁶

Traditions, however, are not immutable. Any club that dwells too much on the past is destined to have no future. This is not the case with Newcastle United which intends to preserve the best of the old and combine it with the best of the new. The Club wishes to continue to play at its traditional home of St James' Park but in a stadium befitting a major European city with a major football team. Such a combination will engender a civic pride comparable to that held by local citizens for several continental clubs and their stadia. If brought to fruition, the development of a new stadium coupled with the concept of a sporting club, promises to create a new sporting tradition for the city in the twenty-first century to rival that established by the football club in the twentieth.

All this sounds good; but what was the reality? The Club accepted our points about the importance of tradition to itself and the fans but its real concern was the economic one of how many fans they might lose if relocation occurred. At least, unlike many clubs, Newcastle asked the question. But, like most clubs, it did not involve the fans in any of its discussions.⁷

Nor did GM Vauxhall League side, Maidstone United, which early in 1986, as a precursor to securing a ground suitable for Football League fixtures, sold its London Road headquarters to the retailers MFI for £3 million.⁸ Unfortunately the Board – or rather its ambitious and dictatorial Chairman, Jim Thompson – had failed to secure planning permission for the proposed new ground, no details of which had been released to the fans. After the local council imposed certain conditions the predicted costs proved prohibitive. Eventually, but again without any communication with the supporters, a groundsharing arrangement was secured with Dartford, even though its Watling Street ground was some twenty-five miles from Maidstone. Thompson said he felt ‘very sad for our loyal hardcore of supporters but believed the genuine fans will get behind the club in this difficult time’ (Crumpton, 1988, p. 86). Immediately the Supporters’ Club began a campaign to ‘Bring the Stones Home’. At one stage Thompson appealed to the supporters to increase attendances at Watling Street so that the club’s losses would be reduced. This was from the man who had earlier used money raised by the fans for medical equipment to pay the club’s electricity bill, who had demolished the club shop, and who had handed over the Supporters Clubroom to the local rugby club!

Thompson became a major shareholder in Dartford and then sold the Watling Street site to a development company, allegedly to repay a bank loan. Tax irregularities, a reluctance by the fans to travel, and an ill-considered, politically inept attempt to gain council permission for a grandiose development at Woodcut Farm, Hollingbourne brought the club to the verge of bankruptcy. This time a survey had been conducted of the fans and naturally they were in favour: football was coming home to Maidstone or at least much nearer than Dartford. However, the fans had not been told that a retail trading centre was an essential part of the plans, something that the council refused to approve.

When the London Road ground had been sold Thompson had announced that ‘the ground has given us many great days of enjoyment and now its final gift to us will be the money that will ensure the future’ (*The Kent Messenger*, July 1993, p. 2). Four years later the club went into liquidation owing nearly a million pounds. This may yet be the fate of Brighton and Hove Albion. In October 1993 Bill Archer, owner of the Focus DIY chain, bought 56 per cent of the shares of the club (for only £56.25) and cemented his place as Chairman. Less than two years later, in July 1995, the Goldstone ground, the club’s home since 1902, was sold to the property group Chartwell Land Plc. for £7.3 million. The plans for a

30,000 all-seat stadium to which the club would move were dependent upon a leisure complex development which, unbeknown to fans, had already been rejected by Brighton Council.⁹ In the meantime the directors proposed to groundshare with Portsmouth 45 miles away, but this was rejected by the Football Association until firm plans for a new local ground were put forward. All this million pound dealing was taking place at a time when the supporters had to put their hands in their pockets to pay the insurance for the club's minibus. David Belotti, Chief Executive and Vice Chairman, requested fans to write to local councillors expressing their support for the new stadium and pressing for a favourable planning decision, but when financial details of the scheme (which he had kept from the fans) were revealed by the Council and distributed by the Supporters' Club, the Vice-Chairperson had her season ticket revoked.

As it became clear that the directors had sold the ground with their own interests in mind, protests began. Effigies of Belotti were burned; Archer's DIY stores were boycotted; peaceful pitch invasions and postmatch demonstrations became common; and a vigil was held outside the home of Archer, who lives in Lancashire over three hundred miles from Brighton and who had not attended a match for over a year. All this was to no avail. Belotti and Archer ignored the pleas, banned those supporters who irritated them too much, issued writs against council members; promoted disinformation, practised brinkmanship and suggested that for season 1997/98 the club would groundshare with Gillingham, a round road trip of some 150 miles or a five hour train journey via London for a home game.

The saga had not been completed at the time the dissertation was submitted. Further developments have included the deduction of two points for a crowd invasion protesting at the Board's obduracy, the creation of a web site by fans to put their case internationally, and supporters from other clubs, home and abroad, attending a Brighton match to offer overt support.¹⁰ Disgruntled stewards unexpectedly allowed many fans in free so that the largest gate of the season would not benefit the club financially. The millions obtained from the sale of the ground have disappeared in trading losses and debt repayments (some to board members). Under Archer and Belotti the club has been left without a home, without credibility and with little hope of survival. This is a case of managerial incompetence on a monumental scale (Hayward, 1996).

Football grounds on urban sites are prime targets for housing or business use. This allowed some property developers to do well out of Fulham Football Club's Craven Cottage ground, situated on the banks of the Thames, without actually undertaking any development.¹¹ Ernest Clay, the Chairman of the club, had once told the players that 'we shall all be rich when we have a BUPA hospital and hotel on the ground' (Stock, 1982, p. 64). As majority shareholder in Fulham he purchased the freehold in 1985 for £920,000 but sold it within two

years for a profit of over £3 million to Marlow Estates who already owned Chelsea's Stamford Bridge ground. Marlow's Chairman, David Bulstrode, wanted the two teams to play on one ground while the other was developed as a commercial property. In the midst of these drawn out negotiations, Bulstrode's company also bought the Loftus Road ground of Queen's Park Rangers with the intention of merging the club with Fullham and freeing up one ground for commercial development. To prevent this a consortium headed by ex-player and charismatic sports personality, Jimmy Hill, and local businessman, Bill Muddymann, purchased the club's name and football assets and negotiated a three year lease of the ground. In 1989 Marlow was bought out by Cabra Estates, producing a capital gain of £2.3 million without a single brick being laid.

Around this time the local council stepped in with a compulsory purchase order with a view to promoting partial redevelopment of the site whilst retaining a 15,000 capacity stadium so as to ensure the continuance of professional football at Craven Cottage. The council had the full backing of the club for this initiative. However, Cabra then offered the club a deal that could have brought in up to £13 million. It gave Fulham a lease till May 1993 but the club had to guarantee to leave the site at that time. To the surprise of the council and the anger of many fans the Hill consortium agreed to this, thus rendering the purchase order of little account. The Supporters Club had distributed thousands of leaflets and worked tirelessly to promote Fulham's cause, only to be left high and dry at the last moment. Even though, to its credit, the club later surveyed fans on the options open to it when the lease ran out, many fans retained a bitterness to a board which had been willing to abandon both Craven Cottage and, when an offer was on the table, also its fans.¹²

Supporters' reactions to Charlton's attempts to abandon The Valley are cited by Bale as a classic case of topophilia being transformed into activism (Bale, 1993, p. 139). The decision to leave The Valley was prompted by the projected costs of renovating the ground to meet safety standards and an offer from Crystal Palace to groundshare. The first that the supporters knew about the move was when they were handed leaflets on 7 September 1985 briefly giving reasons for the move, telling them that after the next home game they would be at Selhurst Park and supplying a map of how to get there (Beauchampe, 1986).¹³ The relocation was presented as a *fait accompli*. Despite protests at the final game, the club seemed to have successfully moved grounds, especially as in May 1986 it gained promotion to Division One. The then chairman reportedly declared that Charlton would 'never, never return' to The Valley (*Greenwich and Eltham Mercury*, 3 Dec. 1992). By October the following season, however, falling gates at Selhurst Park had prompted the local paper to start a petition headed 'Our Home is The Valley' to which 15,000 signatures were collected.

The supporters' activism, now aroused, demonstrated itself in many ways including the launching of a fanzine. *Voice of The Valley*. The club was concerned at the decline in attendances and, after plans to move to a new ground fell through, a new chairman declared that Charlton would return to its Valley home. Nevertheless for the return to be viable it was argued that the stadium would have to include a banqueting suite and office space for rent. The local council, lobbied by some local residents, disagreed and rejected the plans (*Greenwich and Eltham Mercury*, 3 Dec. 1992). The fans' response was unprecedented: they fielded candidates in the council elections of May 1990, securing 10.9 per cent of the vote and helping to unseat the Chairman of the Planning Committee.¹³ The collective political protest no doubt helped persuade the Greenwich Council to approve revised plans and in December 1992 Charlton returned 'home'. There had been a delay caused by a lack of finance but supporters helped launch the Valley Investment Plan to overcome this (*Greenwich and Eltham Mercury*, 3 Dec. 1992). The motivation for the activism and financial sacrifice of the fans was summed up by the editor of the Charlton fanzine: the issue was 'never really football at all, it was identity, a sense of belonging. For Charlton fans it wasn't just that Selhurst Park wasn't The Valley it was . . . alien to people brought up to shop in Woolwich market and go fishing in Danson Park Lake' (Everitt in *Greenwich and Eltham Mercury Sports Special*, 'Come on Home', August 1991). It was only seven miles away but it was not the Charlton community.

Only one club has followed the democratic line pursued by Sheffield Wednesday a hundred years ago. When it decided to sell its Old Show Ground to developers, Scunthorpe consulted its fans on three possible sites and actually went to the most favoured one at Glanford Park. The result was a trebling of season ticket sales and a rise in gates of 32 per cent in the first four seasons at the new ground (Inglis, 1996, p. 320). A few others, such as Northampton, have kept fans informed as to what was likely to happen. Basically, however, communication and consultation have been minimal. Fans may have strong emotional attachments to their stadium and they may have paid gatemoney for most of their adult lives, but this has given them no proprietorial rights.

That generally fans have had no say in any relocation discussion should not surprise us. Rogan Taylor, founder member and for four years the Chairman of the Football Supporters' Association, has shown quite clearly that historically clubs have been interested only in the revenue-raising propensity of their fans (Taylor, 1992). Fund-raising activities had been the *raison d'être* of most, if not all, supporters' clubs and substantial sums had been contributed to the coffers of the parent club. In the 1930s, for example, the fans of Luton Town raised the present-day equivalent of over £1.5 million to provide a stand and other spectator facilities. However, when the law relating to club lotteries was clarified in the

1960s almost overnight football clubs usurped this line of activity from the supporters and set up their own enterprises. Not only was their lottery function taken away as the first major wave of commercialism hit British football, but supporters' clubs found that their other main activity, the organisation of travel to away games, was also taken over as commercial managers established 'official' supporters' clubs to undertake such a task as a profit-raising venture.

Worse still, long-serving supporters' clubs discovered that they had been too trusting of directors. Without written agreements they had no claim – save a moral one in a football world increasingly devoid of morality – to any of the assets purchased with the funds which they had raised, including their own premises if they were located within the ground. As Taylor points out:

supporters often valued – even loved – their own particular clubs too highly for their own best interests. They saw it as their first duty *to support* and hoped thereby to gain their *parent's* esteem. They trusted and hoped that their clubs would treat them decently. In response – and especially when the commercial *crunch* came – most football clubs simply traded on their affections. The supporters were sold down the river which flowed from their overpowering loyalty (Taylor, 1992).

Things may get worse. Several developments have been identified as likely to feature in top-level English football by the turn of the century, most of which will serve to widen the gap between club and fan. Football club revenues will be based even less on gate receipts and increasingly on merchandising, conference and corporate hospitality, sponsorship and television. Even expanding stadium capacity is likely to be offset by the development of the 'electronic turnstile' of subscription and pay-as-you-view television, some of which will be owned by the football clubs themselves.¹⁴ There will be an expansion of product consumption based around Premier League Football in a worldwide market via licensing arrangements and commercial partnerships with high street retailers. The internationalisation of English football will continue apace and add to the attractiveness of the sport to spectators, sponsors and television audiences. As clubs turn to the City of London for the finance to underwrite these developments, more power and influence will be handed over to people who know little about football and have no love of a club, a fear expressed by the late Matthew Harding, a financier who did care (*Daily Telegraph*, 24 Oct. 1996).

So how can fans fight back? Individually they can do little but does collective action offer any salvation? There are an increasing number of supporters' action groups but what action can they take which would be effective? Crowd demonstrations have occasionally forced resignations. Reg Brearley,

Chairman of Sheffield United, was driven out by the Blades Independent Fans Association that coordinated a 'funeral march' to the ground as well as red card demonstrations on match days and a 10,000 signature petition (Kelso, 1996). Norwich City's Chairman, Robert Chase also resigned after a long campaign by the Independent Supporters' Association who objected to him attempting to balance the books at the expense of the playing strength of the team (Kelso, 1996). More often than not, however, they serve only to stiffen the resolve of the directors, as in the case of Belotti and Archer at Brighton. They can also antagonise the football authorities and, again as with Brighton, lead to the deduction of league points. Fans can assert their outrage in that modern vehicle of supporter expression, the fanzine. (Duke, 1994, p. 139)¹⁵ though generally Boards have remained resistant to either schoolboy humour or intellectual derision.

Possibly the better approach is to have others with more influence pressurise the clubs. It is clear from Heath's survey that councils can play a crucial role, either as an enabler or as an obstacle (Heath, 1996b, p.40ff).¹⁶ One has only to contrast the fourteen refusals for the planning applications of Wycombe Wanderers with the initiative taken by Huddersfield Town who invited Kirklees Metropolitan Council to nominate the facilities it would like in a new stadium and then worked in partnership to develop the award-winning Alfred McAlpine Stadium (Inglis, 1996, pp. 187, 417). It is possible to demonstrate to the local council the economic contribution which would be lost to the area if the club relocated. With large clubs this could be significant: we estimated that Newcastle United contributed almost £21.9 million to the economy of the Northern Region with at least £8.7 million of this being spent within Newcastle itself (Vamplew, 1997, p. 21). Obviously with smaller organisations the possible loss would be much less but the case can be strengthened on the social benefits side especially where clubs are participating in the 'Football in the Community' scheme. Some councils, however, still remember the hooligan days and would prefer to see football clubs banished to the outskirts of town or even to some other authority's backyard. There remains the possibility of supporters joining the council themselves and becoming part of the decision-making process: or merely threatening to. As shown above, Charlton supporters stood in local elections and in the process won useful promises from worried councillors that helped pave the way for a return of the club to The Valley. Bristol Rovers' fans challenged the ruling Labour group in ten seats in 1993 and gained nearly 4000 votes, but in this instance not enough to force any change of heart (Inglis, 1996, p. 85).

The football authorities could be asked to intervene but generally they see relocation decisions as a matter for the clubs themselves to sort out, providing that they are not thinking of crossing the Irish Sea or permanently relocating too many (undefined) miles away from their existing home. Brighton fans did

consider attempting to force the Football Association to step in by blocking its phone and fax lines with incessant calls but ultimately thought better of it (*Daily Telegraph*, 15 January 1997).

Rogan Taylor has argued that the key group to lobby is in fact the sponsors of the club (Taylor, 1996). Developments in the game have given the fans a new target, the companies that sponsor the clubs and the competitions they run. Taylor (1996) points out that Greenpeace and others have already shown the power that can be exerted by a well-organised campaign aimed at relevant commercial interests with large investments at stake. What he suggests is that, by means of clever campaigns designed to embarrass such market-sensitive organisations, supporters could certainly make their point. One obvious weapon lies in the nature of the sport. In our report to Newcastle United we argued that football could not do without its fans as they provide the atmosphere so important for club support and even moreso for television presentation. Football is unscripted with a role for the unexpected, chance and circumstance. It is a live event that requires live responses and this is provided by the fans. An empty stadium makes no noise and this would be anathema to Sky and other media companies who regard ratings as vital. Here then is an opportunity for fans to fight back perhaps with orchestrated chants or planned silences, either of which could be utilised to discomfit sponsors.

It is true that in the decade since the Football Supporters' Association was launched, the role that supporters' organisations play in the game has changed dramatically. Once limited to fundraising and the occasional polite chat with a director, they now have permanent recognition via 'fans councils' with paid convenors at many Premier League clubs. Yet has recognition brought any real power? Not, we believe, when significant sums of money are at stake. As in many organisations professing democracy, consultation is token. Even when fans have managed to gain places on boards the fan director has been easily neutralised (Taylor, 1996). In his report Lord Justice Taylor hoped that a new era in football would bring 'higher standards both in bricks and in human relationships' (Taylor, 1990, para 138). He was half right.

NOTES:

1. The authors thank the Professional Footballers' Association for financial assistance towards the research costs of this paper, though the views expressed here are not necessarily those of that organisation.
2. Renamed Hillsborough in 1913.
3. Voting was 4,767 for Carbrook, 4,115 for Owlerton, 16 for Sheaf House and 124 with no preference.

4. This has been developed further in Bale (1993) and in Bale & Moen (1996).
5. This may be culturally specific. Rocco Da Biasi, an Italian football researcher, has argued that British fans have a greater sense of history than his compatriots (Cited in Duke, 1994, p. 138).
6. For a brief history of the ground see Inglis, (1996), pp. 258-64.
7. Since our report, however, the club has attempted to get the fans onside by asking them to sign a petition to keep the club in the city. One role of those collecting the signatures is to make the public aware of what is being proposed (*Daily Telegraph*, 29 March 1997).
8. Synopsis of essay by Heath, (1996a).
9. Synopsis of dissertation by Heath (1996b).
10. One banner declared 'Real Madrid Say Archer Out' (Wilde, 1997).
11. Synopsis of dissertation by Naysmith (1996).
12. In 1992 Cabra went into receivership and one of its creditors, the Royal Bank of Scotland, became the landlord of the club. Eventually the bank offered Fulham a deal of a ten year lease with the option to purchase the freehold for £7.5 million during the first three years; but if this option was not taken then the rent would rise to £300,000 per annum, a sum beyond the means of the club.
13. Everitt, (1991), pp.270-71 gives details of voting for The Valley Party.
14. Whether this will result in even more fixtures being scheduled by television company timetables with no regard for the convenience of the live supporter is conjectural.
15. See also the review essay by Harte, (1995), pp.240-46.
16. It should be noted that, unlike in Australia, North America and many parts of Europe, generally British football grounds are privately not municipally owned.

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