

# Going to the Dogs: Some Further Evidence

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Norman Baker demonstrated in a recent stimulating contribution to this Journal that the production and the distribution problems of the British coal industry during the winter of 1946-47 sparked a more general economic crisis, which induced the government to introduce limitations on mid-week sporting activities in the interests of increasing production and reducing the consumption of energy for floodlights at sporting events. The restrictions on greyhound racing, moreover, were particularly draconian. It was actually banned, on ethical as much as on economic grounds, because the sport was associated with gambling without any redeeming features to enhance its value to society. The restrictions generated an unexpectedly high level of criticism and were considered by many to be counterproductive and not based on sound economic thinking and evidence. The restrictions were, moreover, an affront to justice because they were discriminatory against greyhound racing. The government responded to the public outcry and political pressure by pragmatically reassessing their policy and eventually reluctantly abandoning it.'

The interpretation of events is persuasive but as an historian of the coal-mining industry with an interest in the history of leisure, it seems to me that there is one character in the drama, the British coal miner, who needs to be center stage rather than lurking in the wings. Why is this the case?

The coal industry suffered a shortfall of several million tons below the nation's needs in the winter of 1946-47, and coal was imported from the United States and Poland to augment indigenous supplies starting in May 1947 in preparation for an anticipated similar occurrence during the following winter. The chief culprit was not hard to identify for as a popular study opined:

The biggest problem in the coal-mining industry is undoubtedly absenteeism. This is the real scourge of the whole industry. If the industry could get rid of it, output, efficiency and the economic return on the mines

would be considerably increased and the road towards progress and development would be opened up.<sup>2</sup>

The causes of voluntary absenteeism were much discussed<sup>3</sup>; the highest rates were allegedly to be found at collieries situated in or near places where “opportunities for amusement are at their highest, not only during the day, but also the night.” Moreover, many of these amusements were associated with gambling, “one of the major forces of their lives,”<sup>4</sup> and it was common knowledge that the miners did nothing to hide, that they were pre-eminent among British workers for keeping greyhounds and whippets for racing and gambling.<sup>5</sup> It was also the case that:

Of course, all the dog tracks are well attended, all over the country the map of dog tracks corresponds with the map of the mining industry, where there is a large mining community there will also be one or more greyhound tracks or at least a whippet track . . . many miners not only attend the meetings, but breed greyhounds . . . However, gambling on dogs is mostly confined to personal attendance at race meetings.<sup>6</sup>

Dog racing and associated gambling was associated, in at least the Ministry of Fuel and Power’s collective mind, with coal miners and their high voluntary absenteeism, and the regional boards of the newly created National Coal Board (hereafter NCB) were soon being asked “whether evening racing (say after 7 p.m.) would substantially interfere with production in their regions.” The three largest coal-fields—Scotland, South Wales, and Yorkshire—replied in the affirmative, although other regions were less certain on the issue.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, the NCB conducted a survey in Staffordshire of absenteeism and loss of output at different collieries “close to and remote from dog tracks.” The result was inconclusive, although this concern with the supposed adverse affects of dog racing on coal output adds weight to an interpretation that discrimination against dog racing was more economic than ethical in origin. The ban was, indeed, merely an extreme manifestation of Shinwell’s obsession with absenteeism as a cause of the industry’s (and hence the nation’s) economic weakness,<sup>8</sup> and the NCB was continually pressed to provide evidence of the link between mid-week sporting events and loss of output. Some evidence for 1946 can be tabulated as follows.<sup>9</sup>

**1. Football Cuptie in Sheffield 28.1.46**

Colliery	Normal Daily Tonnage	Tonnage Lost	% Absenteeism
Osgreave	2250	900	18.6
Thurcroft	1300	671	29.1
Treeton	3000	1220	41.0
Brookhouse	2050	500	28.0
Firbeck	1950	500	15.2
Dinnington	1647	702	46.2
Manton	2428	600	55.4
Waleswood	700	270	44.0

2. Lincoln Races 3.4.46		
Manton 2578	500	37.5
3. York Races 29.8.46		
Manton 2481	700	53.4
4. Newcastle Races, two days August 1946		
Local Collieries	2000	
5. West Midlands in 1946, Football and Races		
	Increases from 12-18 to 30-40	
6. Lancashire Rugby and Football matches		
Wigan (rugby)	Increases by 15	
Burnley (football)	Increases by 15	

Evidence like this was indicative rather than representative, but helps to explain why the government persisted so long with its position that it was an *accepted fact* that mid-week sporting events had an adverse effect on coal production and not merely that “consequences were assumed but only proven in individual cases,” in Norman Baker’s words.<sup>10</sup> At a time when rank-and-file coal miners could still be characterized as a “tribe of Englishmen as distinctive in their way of life that, had they been situated on a remote island in the south seas, would have been the subject of a dozen ethnographic monographs,”<sup>11</sup> it is little wonder that their behavior goaded exasperated politicians into such desperate and politically dangerous measures as the campaign against the mid-week sporting activities of dog fanciers.

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1. Norman Baker, “Going to the Dogs—Hostility to Greyhound Racing in Britain: Puritanism, Socialism and Pragmatism.” *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1996, 97-118.
  2. Ferdinand Zweig, *Men in the Pits* (London: Gollancz, 1948), 56.
  3. Mark Benny, “Spotlight on Coal.” *Current Affairs*, no. 38, 1947, p.15, expressed a popular view in arguing ‘a rise in wages tends to be converted into more leisure rather than an improved standard of living.’ For recent discussions see Barry Supple, *The History of the British Coal Industry, vol. 4, 1913-1946. The Political Economy of Decline*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 511-13 and 656-66; Dave Douglas, “The Durham Pitman,” *Miners, Quarrymen and Salt workers* ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1977), 252-54.
  4. Zweig, *Men*, 64 and 111.
  5. See, for example, Colin Griffin, *The Leicestershire Miners Vol. II, 1914-1945* (Coalville: NUM Leicestershire Area, 1988), 65-6.
  6. Zweig, *Men*, 113-14.
  7. PRO POW 20/133, May 1947.
  8. Emanuel Shinwell, the Minister of Fuel and Power, told the miners’ leaders to their face that “any man who absents himself from work without due cause... is rendering a disservice to the whole nation. Every single ton of coal that is lost in consequence of absenteeism... renders my problem more difficult, and makes the economic problems that face the Government more acute...the production of coal, is the most vital consideration that

faces the country . . . We cannot afford to stand any more nonsense. They will have to be dealt with." *National Union of Mineworkers, Annual Conference Report*, 7 July 1947.

9. PRO POWE 20/133 Jan. 1948 letter from NCB to Owen Francis.
10. Baker, *Going to the Dogs*, 117.
11. Mark Benney, "The Legacy of Mining," in *Mining and Social Change*, ed. Martin Bulmer (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 49.