

“Predominantly Male Pleasures?”: Gender and Working-Class Leisure in late Victorian and Edwardian England

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The later part of the nineteenth century is usually presented in the scholarship on leisure as a period of general progress and gain for the English working classes. Historians argue that economic factors, notably shorter working hours and rising real wages, fuelled an increased demand for leisure on the part of the working classes, a demand which several agencies (commercial, voluntary, and state) were keen to satisfy. According to one scholar of the period, by the turn of the twentieth century, “even the poor [had come] to assume that they had a right to leisure and to enjoy the varied delights of the new leisure industries.”

While scholars have conceded that some groups (for example, the unemployed, the old, the very young) could not participate in the expanding working-class leisure culture, they have, nonetheless, emphasised the latter’s progressive aspects, and neglected its less happy features. In this vein, feminist sociologist Nicky Hart has argued that the extent of women and children’s oppression in what she terms “traditional working-class life” has been obscured by masculinist assumptions about both the theory and practice of social analysis. Hart insists that “in a substantial number of households, the material welfare of wives and children played second fiddle to the recreational spending of husbands and fathers.”

In this paper I examine Hart’s claims that gender was a major axis of social inequality in working-class families and that men’s leisure came at the expense of women’s well-being. My focus is on the late Victorian and Edwardian period and while I am generally supportive of Hart’s thesis, I offer one or two refinements. Firstly, I argue that while men were undoubtedly the primary participants in the working-class leisure culture, it is clear that women were not excluded. In addition to, and acting in concert with gender were age, marital and occupational status, and subtle gradations of intra-class status. To a greater or lesser extent, all of these things determined the extent and shaped the nature of working-class leisure. Secondly, I question Hart’s assumption that there was a unitary “traditional working-class culture” which was universally and unequivocally oppressive for women. Contemporary sources and the scholarship on this period indicate that this is an oversimplification. In fact, there were significant variations in working-class customs and practices throughout England, as well as among various sectors of the working classes. In some cases (textile workers in the north west, for example) material and cultural resources were allocated on a far more equitable basis than Hart suggests.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the consequences and implications of acknowledging gender as a central organising principle of historical research on leisure.