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The Football Trust as a Mechanism of Industry Change

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Introduction

During the latter decades of the twentieth century hundreds of football clubs in the United Kingdom were the beneficiaries of substantial charitable investment that enabled them to drastically improve the quality of the infrastructure of stadiums and ensure greater levels of spectator safety and comfort. As a consequence, and notwithstanding obvious differences between top-flight and grass-roots spaces, or that many advancements may go unnoticed, football fans today now enjoy a standard of match-day experience considerably better than that available just a generation prior (Kelly, 1999; King, 1998; Turner, 2014). The impetus for developing club facilities and providing satisfactory spectatorship experiences was not, however, primarily or exclusively borne out of commercial imperatives or private interests. Though, admittedly, since the advent and success of the Premier League from 1992 over the last two decades or so these have come to envelope the game and commodification of spectator culture (Turner, 2014; Ward and Williams, 2009). Rather, calls to implement fundamental institutional changes across all levels of the football spectrum were precipitated earlier by a series of events (some of which were fatal) that heightened concern among the public, media, government and wider football fraternity about the state of the game, its patronage and its future. Foremost of which was the Ibrox stadium disaster in 1971 and subsequent Wheatley report detailed shortly (Wheatley, 1972). Although not the first tragedy in the game, the incident and report led to pointed criticism of the football industry and its stakeholders; namely, in failing to protect the interests, safety and needs of its consumers upon which its success ultimately depended. The report also raised broader questions about the image and reputation of spectator culture (and in particular its allegedly predominant hooligan undertones). The eventual by-product of this consternation was specific legislative change, and the formation of the Football Trust to oversee extensive rejuvenation of football’s infrastructure, but also, restoration of its public image and broader social and civic value.

This chapter, accordingly, considers the historic role the Football Trust played as a mechanism for industry change within the United Kingdom’s football culture (circa 1970s to the late 1990s). Initially established with the concomitant purposes of grant-aiding infrastructure improvements at football grounds and fostering behavioural and attitudinal change among the
game’s constituents and communities, the Football Trust soon developed a respectable political and public reputation for its transformative work. Not unlike other sport-related trusts (see Bingham and Walters, 2013), the organisation’s altruistic objectives to contribute to worthy causes, close financial management and accountability, strong leadership and political advocacy all helped consolidate the status of the Trust and affirm its strategic role as an agent of change. The existence and continuity of the Trust, however, were not untroubled. With its reliance on monies levied from the football pools, the Trust remained sensitive to the political whims of central government and its respective attitudes towards gambling and betting taxation. Moreover, while events during the 1980s (in particular, fatalities at Bradford, Heysel and Hillsborough) demonstrated the Trust’s necessity, they too placed an increasingly larger burden on the organisation and its resources. The ever-present threat of a national lottery, which eventually materialised in 1994 (Douglas, 1995), also compounded the Trust’s situation and complicated its ability to fulfil its philanthropic commitments. While subsequent political shifts during the latter part of the decade held promises for the future of the Trust, change also brought new concerns and challenges that ultimately would precipitate the organisation’s demise.

In what follows I consider the development of the Trust and its economic, physical and social contributions to the United Kingdom’s football cultures. I first examine the inception and financial foundations of the Trust, and the increased workload the organisation assumed during the 1980s in response to successive football catastrophes. In tandem, I also consider the prevailing political influence of the Conservative government which provided testing conditions in which the Trust (and its benefactors, the football pools companies) were forced to go about their work. In turn I then discuss how, during the early 1990s, a triumvirate force of extended commitments, political redirections and commercial factors conspired against the Trust’s effectiveness. Yet, although the Trust contributions may have been profound, I counter also that the organisation might now also be conceived of as a relic of football’s darker times, and/or as a necessary means to an end. I contend, furthermore, that revisiting the labours of the Trust also serves as a reminder of how we might counter football’s exorbitant commercial largesse by ensuring primary stakeholders (e.g. Premier and League clubs, sponsors, owners and affiliated businesses) affect more socially responsible, community-orientated, ethically and morally acceptable enterprises for the good of the game and its constituents.

**Kick-off**

During the late 1960s the state of the United Kingdom’s football spectatorship had become a concern. Rising incidents of antisocial behaviour among football crowds, in particular, had exacerbated public and political concerns about the game, its image and wider social consequences (Darby, Johnes and Mellor, 2001; Harrington and Dickens, 1968). In response, the government (working in conjunction with the Football Association, Football League, clubs, local authorities and commercial stakeholders) endorsed the establishment of several committees; the first chaired by Normal Chester in 1966, the second by John Harrington in 1968 and the third by John Lang in 1969 (Greenfield and Osborn, 2001; Lang, 1969). The groups produced several reports that critically examined the industry and its deficiencies (Harrington and Dickens, 1968; Lang, 1969). Although hooligan culture, safety standards and surveillance procedures were key focal points, the reports also explored football’s wider economic, political and social conditions. The findings, generally, lamented football’s declining health (in spectatorship and crowd behaviour, public image, player conduct, and administrative and management terms); and correspondingly called for a greater onus of responsibility to be placed on the Football
Association and its affiliated clubs to resolve the sport’s various ills; that centred to a significant degree on the (real and perceived) prevalence of hooliganism (Greenfield and Osborn, 2001; Ward and Williams, 2009). In totality, the reports presented a strong call for an industry shake-up and a range of solutions were offered with regard to redirecting football funding to stadium improvements, crowd controls, safety features and procedures, service collaboration and surveillance. Although the reports provided a useful blueprint, fostering enduring and sustainable cultural changes to the game and its spectatorship required time and, invariably, more direct and compelling measures (certainly in terms of specific legislation) and effective and feasible delivery mechanisms. In 1966 Chester had, for instance, suggested funds levied from the popular football pools could be used to affect such causes. However, the idea was quashed by the government who, at the time, were averse to providing football pools companies with tax relief (Greenfield and Osborn, 2001; Johnes, 2001).

The reports in their own right, and in time, may have brought about the necessary reformation of the game. Yet on 2 January 1971, with implementation strategies still under discussion, tragedy struck. During the last moments of a match between rivals Rangers and Celtic at the former’s home ground, Ibrox stadium in Glasgow, thousands of fans exited the grounds en masse through a narrow stairwell. The alleged fall of a patron hastened a crush incident that resulted in the deaths of 66 spectators and injuries to some 200 more (The Times, 1971; Wheatley, 1972). In addition to the expected shock of the catastrophe, the event reignited criticism of the government, football authorities and clubs. It also consolidated the necessity of more expedient and definitive action being taken to improve stadium conditions and spectator safety. In what followed, the government established a new commission chaired by Sir Norman Wheatley whose remit was to investigate the tragedy, but also examine issues of safety at sport grounds writ large and the necessity of legislative alterations (Wheatley, 1972).

In addition to the obvious inadequacies in stadium infrastructure and safety management procedures, the report found considerable shortcomings with regard to security and policing and club administration. In response, Wheatley proposed the implementation of a rigorous licensing system for all football clubs throughout the United Kingdom, with a particular emphasis placed on establishing a legal mandate for improvements to the stadium environment and provision of a safe spectator experience (Greenfield and Osborn, 2001; Ward and Williams, 2009; Wheatley, 1972).

To this end, in 1972 the government tabled the Safety of Sports Ground Act (SSGA). The Act established a clear localised licensing system for stadiums and demarcated a stringent set of safety conditions clubs were legally obligated to meet. Reflecting the desire to re-channel some of the commercial profits from the game for good (and admittedly necessary) causes, the idea was for the system to be financially supported by combined contributions from the Football Association, Football League and football pools companies, and corresponding government tax incentives. Importantly, the SSGA reflected many of the recommendations not only of the Wheatley report, but also its predecessors, and, as such, represented a significant turning point for the game’s culture, safety and spectator standards. Although well-intentioned, indecision and disagreement between the government and football stakeholders (in particular the Pools Promoters Association (PPA) who acted on behalf of pools companies) over an appropriate funding structure delayed the introduction of the Act until 1974 when the Labour government returned to office and its sports minister, Dennis Howell, could expedite negotiations (Howell, 1990). Integral to the implementation of the SSGA was the formation of an independent trust (comprising representatives from across the industry) who would assume responsibility for the receipt and delivery of grants, and assist clubs in their efforts to meet the stadium requirements.
and safety standards the Act now required. That organisation was the Football Grounds Improvement Trust (FGIT).

In both ensuring adherence to the SSGA and facilitating the broader scope of transformation football required, the arrangement between the PPA and the Trust was vital. Essentially, the FGIT received funds (largely from contributions made by the pools companies, e.g. Littlewoods, Vernons, Zetters and others, through the PPA) to fulfil several key purposes. Primary of which was the provision of financial and logistical aid to clubs to comply with the SSGA 1975. In addition, however, the FGIT also assumed the responsibility of promoting measures to prevent hooliganism and antisocial behaviour, advising on measures to improve the overall comfort of the spectator experience, and aiding any other (cultural, educational, social, research or environmental) initiatives for the betterment of the game and its constituents. In so doing, the Trust was able to extend upon its primary utility as a grant-aiding organisation and demonstrate a broader altruistic underlying remit that addressed the wider football realm.

Since their inception in the early twentieth century, football pools companies in the United Kingdom had drawn substantial income from patrons who regularly wagered stakes on the outcome of the weekly football draws (Huggins, 2013). As part of their philanthropic enterprise, and also to counter claims about their moral and social responsibilities, over the years the companies (aided by the PPA) had actively and successfully contributed to football and non-football causes. While commercial imperatives may have prevailed, working for ‘good causes’ (in and beyond football) was a clear part of the pools companies’ ventures and ethos. What the formation of the SSGA 1975 and FGIT essentially did was formally consolidate this arrangement via government policy, and compel the pools companies to provide a regular income stream to fund football development activities. Moreover, the arrival of the Trust signalled the government’s most concerted effort to address the needs of the game and its followers.

The initial set-up was for the Trust to receive 20 per cent of the turnover from pools companies’ highly popular, low-stakes ‘Spot-the-Ball’ (STB) competition (which essentially required players to guess the position of an absent football from a recent match photo). The success of the competition meant that the PPA was able to resource the FGIT with approximately £8 million per year. The money may have seemed significant, but, given that there were some 40,000 clubs over varying sizes and needs to be supported across the nation the Trust’s task was considerable. In order to ensure that grant monies were appropriated accordingly the Trust adopted a stringent system of management, accountability, evaluation, support and delivery measures that ensured that, while still tightly controlled, there was relative equity and parity in funding provision. Initially, for example, the Trust worked on a system of percentage grant aid in which development projects were awarded specific components of funding for particular items (such as lighting, seating, policing or surveillance). This funding was, in the first instance, directed towards the first and second tier league clubs whose larger size and fan base were deemed in greatest need. The Trust also employed the use of accountants and surveyors to assist clubs with the improvement procedures and paperwork, and ensure project feasibility and quality standards were duly met (Football Trust, 1986).

Throughout the late 1970s the Trust worked hard to effect measurable and meaningful change to football’s physical environments and public reputation. While it had achieved a small degree of success in helping improve the state of some of the country’s main club grounds, the sheer extent of clubs in needs still remained a pressing concern. So too did the larger issues regarding spectatorship culture and behaviour and clubs’ engagement and responsibilities towards their local communities (Darby, Johnes and Mellor, 2001; Greenfield and Osborn, 2001). Although the instigation of the government-backed ‘Football and the community scheme’ in 1978 helped the Trust in its efforts to affect change and improvements at the
grass-roots levels of the game (and by default, it was hoped, influence spectator attitudes), resources were still stretched. Notwithstanding the Trust’s assistance with grant aid, local clubs still shouldered much of the burden for meeting safety standards and licence compliance. The Trust had been able to provide around £380,000 to assist eight lower-level clubs with safety initiatives, but it was evident better resourcing and structural changes were needed to ensure the full intentions and ambitions of the Trust could be adequately supported. Foreseeing such difficulties, the PPA had persistently lobbied the government for more advantageous taxation allowances, though to no great avail (Pools Promoters Association, 1970–9).

The first moments

As the Trust worked on ways to improve its effectiveness, help arrived in 1979 in the form of the government’s Royal Commission on Gambling (Rothschild, 1979). For some time, there had been political and public discontent with the gambling industry and its regulation (or lack thereof) (Douglas, 1995). By the late 1970s, concerns regarding the disjuncture between its profitability, taxation and commitments to social responsibility led to a government inquiry and subsequent calls to hold the sector to account. The eventual report, chaired by Lord Rothschild, was complimentary of the Trust and, in particular, held up the arrangement between pools companies and the FGIT as a good example of how one form of gambling revenues could be operationalised for good causes (Rothschild, 1979). As part of the post-report negotiations with the government, and buoyed by the discernible impact the FGIT was having, the Trust’s scope, structure and funding arrangements were altered. A key element of which was the separation of the ground improvement and safety work from the Trust’s other development enterprises. The FGIT remained responsible for the SSGA compliance and related matters. However, a separate overarching entity, the Football Trust, now assumed new powers to extend grant aid throughout all levels of the game.

To assist the Trusts’ broadened remit of activities the PPA increased the pools contributions to 21 per cent of STB turnover. The pools contributions were also roughly split, with 54 to 60 per cent allocated to the FGIT and the remainder to the Football Trust’s additional social projects (Faulkner, 2000; Football Trust, 1986; Reed, 2003). The division of funding and responsibilities, in effect, made it easier for the respective Trusts to undertake their work, and also extend activities to cover the needs of more clubs in more areas throughout the country. Not only, for instance, could the Trusts address safety and infrastructural needs, but they could also make valuable contributions to elsewhere in the football community; for instance, the renovation of playing surfaces, provision of grants for deprived communities, relief for non-league clubs, educational and coaching projects, community engagement activities, scholarly research activity, and support of local initiatives in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The new arrangement provided some small relief for the Trusts, but pools companies were considerably constrained in the amount of assistance they could provide without damaging their profit margins. The PPA had, to their credit, tried to lobby the government for more favourable economic allowances, yet pools companies’ incomes were still subjected to heavy taxation through the pool betting duty (which in 1979 was levied at 42.5 per cent) (Pools Promoters Association, 1970–9). Without the possibility of tax reductions, the incentive to engage in philanthropic enterprise (in this case support football developments), while invariably admirable, remained precarious.

At this point the Trusts had developed a reputation and profile for their activities and efforts to improve football stadiums and the spectatorship experience. Trust initiatives were, for example, recorded in match-day programmes, and received frequent attention from mainstream
and local media outlets, football’s commercial sponsors and government ministers (Football Trust, 1986, 1988; Reed, 2003). Although the enterprise of grant-aid funding appeared to be warmly welcomed, the success was primarily contingent on the vitality of the pools industry and the ability of its protagonists (in this case the PPA) to ensure consistent revenue and counter any economic and political threats (such as rises in the pool betting duty, or, latterly, the establishment of the national lottery scheme). The Trusts were, in this regard, somewhat fortunate in that over the course of its history the PPA had become experienced at political lobbying and responding to commercial impositions and inconveniences. Moreover, during the formative years the PPA had demonstrated its ability to work with the Labour government to support the Trust causes. The Trusts may have been established as independent entities; however, with their reliance on the commercial viability of pools, and related regulation of the gambling sector, they needed to be cognisant of the political ether (Douglas, 1995; Reed, 2003). In 1979, for example, with the new trust composition yet to be tested, the organisation experienced a significant political shift that produced a fresh set of conditions and concerns to deal with.

That shift was the arrival of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the return of the Conservative government. The consequences of Thatcher’s agendas, and her relative disinterest in sport specifically, have been well documented (Jeffreys, 2012). For the Trusts and PPA proponents, the new political landscape offered little in the way of reductions to the pool betting duties. Irrespective of such reductions forthcoming, the Trusts still appeared committed to their developmental objectives and mission to change football safety and culture. To this end, and mindful of the constrained economic conditions writ large, the onset of the 1980s saw the Trust increase its activities across the football spectrum.

**Pressure points**

In keeping with the Trust’s imperatives to support infrastructure and cultural change across the sector, grant-aid activities extended to include initiatives for targeted populations (lower socio-economic demographics and small towns, for example), facility and ground improvements, better match-day transport networks, community engagement and research projects (Football Trust, 1986, 1988). Working with the Football Association, the Trusts also made significant contributions to upgrading the UK’s premier pitches in London, Glasgow and Belfast. In addition, £1.45 million was invested in all-weather pitches and £6.2 million provided for CCTV installation (Football Trust, 1992a). Further support was also afforded to the establishment of the centre for football research at the University of Leicester. Such activities invariably demonstrated the utility of the Trusts in serving the needs of the game and its patrons. Yet more so than this, the breadth of work undertaken and desire of the Trust to continually expand its remit helped consolidate its public profile, and thus in turn its legitimacy, as an important stakeholder in football’s future. Relatedly, the efforts to extend the ‘Trusts’ activities beyond the practical/infrastructural concomitantly reiterated to outside observers and critics that the organisation’s utility extended far beyond being a mere arbiter of funds and safety surveillance.

The Trusts’ ability to evidence a ten-year legacy of work for the good of the game, particularly by establishing an effective football development scheme, may have enhanced their credibility and afforded them a discernible public profile and a modicum of political leverage mechanism. However, acquiring status as an industry protagonist did not, it appears, make working conditions easier for its members. In fact, the popularity of the Trusts’ initiatives and schemes resulted in perpetual and increased demands for grant aid which strained existing resources and placed further pressure on the organisation. Concerns, in particular, focused on
more rigorous government lobbying (particularly around the need for more conducive economic conditions) and reconsidering the Trust structure, the funding model, representative membership and objectives. By the mid 1980s, these issues were compounded significantly when a series of events caused a distinct organisational rethink and entrenched the politicisation of the Trusts within a broader (inter)national problematic football narrative.

The triplicate of tragic events that precipitated changes to the Trusts over the latter part of the 1980s and early 1990s were, respectively: the Bradford stadium fire on 11 May 1985; the Heysel stadium crush incident in Brussels on 29 May that same year; and the Hillsborough crush incident on 15 April 1989. In short, the Bradford fire (which killed 56 people and injured 265) led to the commission of inquiry chaired by Lord Oliver Popplewell (Popplewell, 1985). Following the subsequent events at Heysel (in which 38 fans died), Popplewell’s commission took into account both disasters and extended its remit and recommendations which included fire provision, health and safety provisions, policing, spectator behaviour and controls, administrative concerns, certification and compliance, improved communication and antisocial behaviour prevention (Johnes, 2001; Popplewell, 1986). The work also specifically informed the eventual Safety of Places of Sport Act 1987 legislation that compelled sport sites to implement, monitor and adhere to new sets of safety standards and codes of practice.

Latterly, the Hillsborough disaster (in which 96 fans died and 776 were injured during a Nottingham Forest versus Liverpool League Cup semi-final at Sheffield Wednesday’s ground) also resulted in considerable condemnation and led the government to establish a further Royal Commission of Inquiry, this time chaired by Lord Justice Peter Taylor (Johnes, 2001; Taylor, 1989, 1990). The subsequent report not only attempted to address the causes and mechanics of the tragedy, but, in addition, locate the incident within a broader context of the sport (Taylor, 1990). As such, the commission entailed critique of football’s administrative and management structures, ticketing, fan culture and alcohol-related practices, police and surveillance mechanisms, leadership and adherence (or otherwise) to existing safety statutes (ibid.). Each of these events have been extensively investigated, and still today (certainly in the cases of Hillsborough and Bradford) are cause for continued public and political scrutiny (e.g. Darby, Johnes and Mellor, 2001; Greenfield and Osborn, 2001; Johnes, 2001; King, 1998). The interest here is not in the specifics of the events, but, rather, the ways in which they respectively and in conjunction highlighted the important work of the Trusts, reasserted their legitimacy and agency as organisations of change within the game, and emphasised their precariousness with respect to the broader political context.

In regard to events at Bradford, Popplewell was particularly complimentary about Trust work and their continued support of football. Although the Trusts had demonstrated an ability to affect change, irrespective of these efforts Popplewell noted the need for further improvements. Such improvements, however, were curtailed by financial constraints within club structures and the Trusts that impeded work being undertaken expediently (Popplewell, 1986: 42). Although the Trusts were cognisant of the constraints on their operations, Popplewell’s report essentially placed on formal record acknowledgement of the value of their work in changing the UK’s football culture, and, in doing so, entrenched the bodies as key players within the evolving and emotionally charged narrative about recrafting the culture and image of the nation’s beloved game. Such endorsement may have bolstered the Trusts and their members, yet paradoxically the esteem in which they were held placed an added burden of expectation and obligation (specifically in terms of delivering measurable changes and improvements within the sport), and exacerbated the scrutiny levelled at the organisation and its operations by the government and industry stakeholders. Added weight to Popplewell’s

Like his predecessor, Taylor’s assessment of Hillsborough raised a series of social, political, cultural and economic concerns about the game and its image (ibid.). Taylor was also complimentary of the Trusts and the pivotal role they played in orchestrating grant aid and facilitating a generous scale of activities to help improve the game throughout the UK (ibid.: 40). Irrespective of the Trusts’ admittedly ‘good work’, it was clear that the 76 final recommendations made in the Taylor report (many of which focused on implementing and managing compliance standards) would require considerable financing, and place further burden on the Trusts (who, to note, were still heavily occupied with addressing Popplewell’s earlier mandates). With their proven expertise in grant-aid delivery and management, the Trusts were, as far as Taylor was concerned, the preferred organisation to facilitate and deliver the needed changes to the game. While the Trusts assumed this presumption of responsibility in their stride, the financial implications of Taylor’s report were likely to significantly diminish the organisation’s resources. As such, a more viable economic solution that would ensure the Trusts’ future was desperately needed. Taylor’s proposition was for a further 2.5 per cent reduction in the pool betting duty (from 42.5 per cent) which, in conjunction with increased funds from the Football Association, would raise approximately £16 million per year for both Trust activities and Taylor-report work (which was, at the time, estimated to be implemented over a ten-year period at a cost of around £100 million) (Football Trust, 1991; Pools Promoters Association, 1989). Notwithstanding the large scale and cost of activities to be funded and implemented, what Trust members seemingly desired most were more favourable political conditions that might, in turn, bring about economic relief that would aid their rapidly expanding remits.

Restructures, promises and instabilities

In the first instance, the increased workload brought about by the Taylor report necessitated that the ‘Trusts’ members consider a more efficient operational model. Although the Football Ground Improvement Trust and the Football Trust had worked effectively as relatively separate entities, the overlap between some of their activities, coupled with the all-encompassing nature of report recommendations, made the current set-up seem inefficient. Thus, in the efforts of streamlining the administration and improving financial procedures, in 1990 the bodies merged into one unit: the Football Trust. The consolidation renewed the image of the organisation and gave it a stronger voice within government sport and funding discussions. The fortification of the Trust at the turn of the decade coincided with a shift in the prevailing political ether. The political shift was demarcated initially by Conservative Chancellor John Major’s support for the desired RPD reduction (which, it was hoped, would yield £20 million for Taylor-report work over the following five years) and then by Major replacing Thatcher as Prime Minister in late 1990 (Football Trust, 1991; Jeffrey, 2012). Unlike Thatcher, Major helped to facilitate a closer relationship between the government, Trust and PPA (although the burden and concerns regarding Taylor-related work still remained) (Johnes, 2001).

Major’s commencement provided a partial change in government attitude, yet it did not alleviate all of the Trust’s issues, foremost of which was the debate and eventual materialisation of a national lottery scheme (Douglas, 1995). The notion of a national lottery had been debated for some time, though the Trust had largely been able to parry its development with strategic lobbying, much of which had leveraged the invariably good work the Trusts had done for the betterment of the game. Yet, by the early 1990s pro-national lottery lobbyists had garnered significant strength and political influence, to the degree that the issue remained a priority with
the government’s forthcoming election agenda (Douglas, 1995; Jeffreys, 2012). In 1992, when the Conservatives returned for another term, the Trust and PPA’s fears were realised and establishment of the ‘National Lottery’ became a fait accompli. In what transpired, the Trust was savvy enough to change tack from its earlier criticism of the lottery to a more measured approach by positioning themselves as the most capable organisation (based on their organisational structure, practices and proven track record of grant-aid facilitation) to run the enterprise (Football Trust, 1992a, 1992b). Their efforts were to no avail and the government appointed Camelot (a non-sport-specific gambling and betting outfit) instead who commenced the lottery in 1994. In resignation the Trust now turned its focus on negotiating and mitigating the lottery’s consequences, which, as expected, were immediate and severe.

Over the next three years the Trust’s income was reduced by 66 per cent (from pre-lottery levels of approximately £22.6 million from the RPBD and a further £14 million from STB) (Football Trust, 1997). The drastic change in the gambling landscape specifically caused pools companies, such as Littlewoods, the primary contributor to the Trust at that time, to reassess the financial contributions (Douglas, 1995; Reed, 2003). Foreseeing long-term declines and shortfalls in the industry, Littlewoods, for example, reduced their donation rate from 20 to 21 per cent of their income to 15 per cent then to just 10 per cent. The cumulative effect of these reductions resulted in a projected shortfall of some £33 million to £55 million in Trust income over the remainder of the decade (Football Trust, 1996). Pools companies’ responses were understandable. They were, after all, commercial enterprises established to make a profit and as such needed to sustain themselves as viable businesses whatever the economic outlook. The contribution arrangement with the Trust may have worked in terms of reflecting positively on the pools companies’ image and corporate social responsibility; yet, such commitments could only be met by pools companies protecting their financial bottom line. The companies were not insensitive to the Trust’s legacy and in particular their vital role in the implementation of Taylor work, but merely recognised that the wind change precipitated by the National Lottery ultimately now necessitated a revision in their working relationship and reconsideration about how both might be able to more effectively achieve their objectives (Douglas, 1995; Football Trust, 1997).

The most significant advance in this respect eventuated in 1997 when the suspected political shift away from the Conservatives with the succession of Tony Blair as Prime Minister and his significantly enlarged New Labour government (Jeffreys, 2012; Newman, 2001). Although the Trust had operated in a variety of political climates, the onset of a Labour administration had held significant promise; no less in terms of effecting further RPBD reductions that might partially restore the Trust’s resources. Prior to the election, the Trust had, sensibly or otherwise, courted both major parties in the hope that its future would be improved whatever the outcome. However, the Trust had received favourable intimations from the then shadow sport minister, Tom Pendry, and confirmation in election manifestos, that the RPBD reductions were a key post-election Labour agenda item, and that the organisation would be more strongly supported in its work to not only complete Taylor work but extend its other sport development projects (Football Trust, 1997; Jeffreys, 2012; Labour Party, 1997).

Political promise, however, did not translate into practical reality. First, the government’s pledged RPBD concessions failed to materialise. Following the 1997 election, Blair also replaced Pendry with Tony Banks as sport minister. Banks was, at first, sympathetic to the Trust’s plight and mindful of the work needed to improve its situation and ensured that the organisation received a government-backed £55 million injection (Department of National Heritage, 1997; Faulkner, 2000). Though only partial recompense, the assistance enabled the Trust to remain viable, at least in the short term. Labour’s financial endorsement may have made the Trust’s
immediate future tenable, but it soon became clear that increased government investment was not without consequences and closer scrutiny. Following Lord Aberdare’s retirement as Trust Chairman, the government installed Pendry as his successor (to the discontent of long-standing deputy chairman, Lord Faulkner, whom Aberdare had himself specifically nominated as the most suitable). In addition, and in keeping with the changes in political priorities and the new sport-funding landscape (Jeffreys, 2012; Newman, 2001), the government also called for a significant restructure of the Trust and eventually the development of a new entity (the Football Task Force) to help realise Labour’s ambitions for the game, its culture and constituents (Faulkner, 2000).

Calling time

The political shifts that occurred in the United Kingdom during the 1990s, the establishment of the National Lottery and professionalisation of football writ large (demarcated by the onset of the Premier League in 1992 and associated rampant commercialisation) drastically changed the working environment for the Trust and PPA (Newman, 2001; Turner, 2014; Williams, 1999). The Trust was presented with a triumvirate of forces to negotiate, namely: (1) a step change in the central government that promised much but only partially delivered; (2) undefeatable challenges in the gambling industry; and (3) a new sporting landscape driven strongly by neo-liberal market forces. The latter, in particular, had produced new heights of financial largesse in football’s upper echelons but resulted in the government questioning the parity of commitment and corporate social responsibility among stakeholders to the long-term development of the game (Bingham and Walters, 2013; Brown, 1999; Faulkner, 2000; Turner, 2014; Ward and Williams, 2009; Williams, 1999).

The Trust may have tried to maintain its autonomy during this tumultuous time, however its survival and effectiveness was ultimately dependent upon adaptation to these external pressures. Not unlike it had done after the lottery’s commencement, the Trust continued its operations (albeit with reduced resources, capacity and momentum); yet, its eventual expiration appeared set. Although the pools companies remained, the Trust wound up in 2000 and its remit was subsumed within the newly formed Football Foundation (Faulkner, 2000; Reed, 2003). Not unlike its predecessors, the Foundation also extended support into coaching and education in addition to sport infrastructure projects. Littlewoods Leisure (which was now responsible for the STB competition) was at the same time bought by Rodime (latter becoming Sportech). Grant-aid development to football still continues via National Lottery contributions channelled through the Sport Council and Sport England, Professional League and organisations like Sportech and other community driven sport entities (Bingham and Walters, 2013).

The story of the Trust, its relationship with the government, and its utility as a mechanism for industry change is revealing for several reasons. The Trust may have been borne out of necessity, but over a short period demonstrated its effectiveness in not only aiding improvements to football infrastructure but supporting broader efforts to enhance spectatorship safety and fan experiences. Although the consequences and demands of specific tragedies necessitated immediate priorities at the top end of the game, the Trust remained unwavering in the commitment to ensure that longer term strategies were equitable and benefited all levels of the industry. In keeping with its social remit, and although the vast majority of their work focused on grant aid for safety provision, the Trust also remained dedicated to broader educational, civic, community and cultural projects. The cumulative scope of its work and the Trust’s history of success as a competent and effective organisation, not unsurprisingly, afforded it a
noticeable public profile and political recognition. Notwithstanding this narrative, the administrative nous and stature developed in the first 15 years of its existence essentially afforded the Trust little protection against the challenges that eventually confronted the organisation in the 1990s. Although its members may have endeavoured to salvage the organisation in the post-1997 era, the Trust’s degradation and then (r)evolution in the Football Foundation (in which many of its long-standing objectives, projects and purposes were continued) may have provided the most sensible and viable end solution.

Conclusion

It is easy to assess the demise of the Trust as a rather sad ending to an organisation that had provided so much as a key protagonist within football’s late twentieth-century development. This would be, I believe, a valid assessment. While improved government funding streams, the National Lottery’s success, business takeovers, and more pronounced commercial investments from Premier and League clubs may have since rendered the Trust lame, its value and contribution to the current state of the game (certainly in terms of an overall safety and spectatorship perspective) should not be understated. There were, too, important characteristics that consolidated the Trust as a valuable cultural institution. The Trust, first, had a small, manageable, committed body of members who were knowledgeable not only of the larger context of football but also politically adept at government negotiation and lobbying. The Trust was also particularly proactive in positioning itself at the forefront of industry discussion and continually demonstrated administrative nous, transparency, and expediency that helped its public image. Irrespective of members’ desires to continue the Trust unchanged (by restoring financial resources and protecting the PPA relationship), however, its longevity could never be guaranteed against a specific set of contextual conditions that lay beyond its control. Not unlike other charitable organisations and sporting bodies (Bingham and Walters, 2013; Douglas, 1995), its existence, sustainability and effectiveness was always predicated upon amiable political factors, a favourable economic environment, stakeholder negotiation and individual enterprise.

By supporting such a grand scale of works for such a long time it is possible to acknowledge that the Trust fulfilled its mission (if not completely, certainly to a substantive extent).

Aforementioned assessments notwithstanding, it is evident that the Trust effectively served a distinct set of purposes at a particular time when football was most in need. In so doing, it is also possible to exacerbate the potential grant-aid vacuum precipitated by its absence from the football development landscape. As such, and given the profound transformation of football culture in the United Kingdom by the Premier League spectacle and lucrative climate of the professional era (Greenfield and Osborn, 2001; Turner, 2014; Ward and Williams, 2009; Williams, 1999), it is difficult to compare or say that grant aid and development activities post-2000 (e.g. those undertaken via the Leagues, clubs, Football Foundation, Sport England and other similar organisations) have not continued to benefit the game in similar ways to Trust work. Likewise, evaluations as to whether the state of the game has duly or detrimentally suffered as a result of the cessation of the organisation and its replacement by other comparable entities need also be tempered (Bingham and Walters, 2013).

The analysis of the Trust provided here provides a useful example of how a mechanism of industry might be established elsewhere; for example, by developing constructive relationships with corporate stakeholders whose livelihood relies on sport patronage and thus warrants, morally and practically, social (sporting) responsibilities. It is also possible to appreciate the Trust, specifically its enduring and largely positive relationship with commercial pools companies, as a model appropriate for other countries and settings; particularly those in which
football infrastructure remains underdeveloped and/or cultural and social football projects remain disjointed from the game’s commercial business. Although the scale of football tragedies experienced during the 1970s and 1980s might never (we hope) be repeated, trust/charitable bodies (akin to the Football Trust) continue to have worth where support for infrastructure, spectatorship safety and community initiatives remains under-resourced.

References


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