Mass Observing Sport

In 1937 a small group of young men made camp in Davenport Street, Bolton. It was the first incarnation of Tom Harrisson’s band of investigators working on the Worktown Project, one of the earliest projects undertaken by the newly established social research organisation, Mass Observation. Founded in early 1937, Mass Observation’s objective was to create an ‘anthropology of ourselves’ in which the British people would contribute to a study of their own lives through participation in surveys, through life writing, and by undertaking observations and investigations in various situations. Mass Observation used two approaches to collecting its data: it employed a team of investigators to use ethnographic survey techniques to report on various themes relating to everyday life in Britain meanwhile, a national panel of volunteer writers was recruited from around the country to create a mass record of their daily lives by sending in diaries and responding to qualitative questionnaires called Directives. These Directives have proved the most enduring method of Mass Observation’s survey techniques providing the basis of the current Mass Observation Project which has now been running for over 30 years.

The Mass Observation Archive has long been acknowledged as a resource rich in evidence for daily life in mid 20th century Britain. The themes covered by both the original organisation and the subsequent post 1981 project have been wide ranging, providing researchers with a mine of information on the ins and outs of ordinary daily life. Mass Observation’s methodologies encourage the recording of the minutiae of life, believing that ordinary people could become the ‘the cameras with which we are trying to photograph contemporary life (Harrisson & Madge, 1938, p.66). This focus on the individual alongside the mass population results in the potential to interweave individual activity, opinion and experience into the greater cultural context of the period in question. By encouraging individuals to observe and record every facet of their lives, areas of life that may not normally have been commented on suddenly become visible or as Highmore states “ethnography practised at home meant that the most ‘banal’ of everyday activities could have potential for revealing cultural meanings” (Highmore 2002, p.88). As a result, themes such as leisure which focus on the individual can benefit greatly from studies such as Mass Observation which “encourage people to look more closely at their social environment than ever before… It will counteract the tendency so universal in modern life to perform all our actions through sheer habit” (Harrisson & Madge, 1937, p.29).

The evidence for leisure activities is often rooted in the concept of what Langhamer describes as institutional or organised forms of activity with less evidence being available for unstructured or ‘home-based’ activities such as reading or knitting meaning that the leisure time of many could lie unrecorded (Langhamer,2000, p.1-7). By asking people to record the small details of their lives, Mass Observation ensured that these types of activity could be recorded giving a voice to the leisure activities of sections of society, particularly women, whose leisure time was spent primarily in the home or in unorganised activity.

Some of these unorganised leisure activities found their way into Mass Observation’s thematic studies, for example reading, cinema going and drinking. Taking reading as an example, throughout its early phase Mass Observation revisited the theme of reading at least 7 times, including surveys and observations in public lending libraries, waiting rooms, and family homes as well as asking the volunteer panel of writers no less than 10 directives on Reading; the post 1981 project has revisited the topic eight times in various formats ensuring that as a leisure activity it is truly represented. Mass Observation also undertook surveys of the more visible organised leisure activities including both the participation in and watching of sport by people around Britain.

This paper will examine the potential for using material held within the Mass Observation at the University of Sussex as a research resource for leisure generally with a specific focus on sport and the role that it has played in British lives since the late 1930s. It will look at examples of both the ethnographic work undertaken by the Mass Observation team and at the material submitted by the National Panel of volunteer writers over the last 75 years.

**The Observational studies**

The Worktown Project was part of Tom Harrisson’s vision of utilising ethnographic survey techniques that he had honed on field work in the Far East within the UK. Harrisson recruited a team of young men, including Henry Novy, Humphrey Spender and Len England, and brought them to Bolton to gather data on everyday life in the town through observation, interview and street surveys.

From their Davenport Street base the team made forays into the Bolton world of sport, in particular looking at rounders, bowling, Association Football and cricket. The files are filed with observational accounts undertaken under the direction of Tom Harrisson’s methodical anthropological approach. Rich descriptions of the grounds and audience are entwined with overheard conversations and vigniettes such as Harrisson’s own observations of train drivers passing the Bolton Wanderers football ground on match days and how they would go “dead slow” when going passed the ground so that they could watch the game (Worktown 4/A).

Although Harrisson encouraged the ‘scientific’ and objective recording of these scenes, one can’t help noticing a subjective voice creeping into these accounts, revealing the observers as ‘outsiders’ looking in rather than full participants.

The following description relates to an All-In wrestling match in Bolton in the 1930s:

The hall was nearly filled and more and more people were coming in, I think there were about 1500 people and B told me that every Monday night the hall is so full that one has to hurry to get a seat. There were not more than 40 women in the hall. Looking at the faces of the audience I could not discover anything special cruel or rough. […] … the girls who come here are usually not accompanied by a man but are in pairs by themselves and there are many boys without supervision. [… ] Sample questioning of the observers makes it clear that every class of trade was represented; even a policeman, a coroners officer and a Catholic priest.

“Imagine a scene. The last round of an even contest, one of the wrestlers has his opponent doubled up, legs twisted round his necks, arms up his back, the crowd quiet, when a voice from the tanners shouts, “do you want a skewer?”. The atmosphere broke.”

There are clear exceptions to this rule of ‘outsider watching’ as opposed to participting, mainly in the form of Walter Hood and Bill Naughton. Both men were already based in the North West and in many ways were somewhat set apart from the rest of the team. Their reports sound far more at ease with their surroundings, they are participating in the watching of sport, not merely observing it, and accordingly their reports are filled with enthusiasm for their subject.

Some of the best accounts come from Bill Naughton, a regular attendee at the All in Wrestling competitions. As well as being a talented writer, Naughton’s enthusiasm for the sport comes through, perhaps bringing his accounts to life in a far more evocative way:

Round 2: Pye opens this round in a most unexpected manner. Without waiting for the gong he rushed to Brookes corner, grabbed him by the hair and kneed him fiercely three times in quick succession in the lower part of the groin. Brookes screams in agony, doubles up holding his pelvis (TESTICLES). Pye grabs him and lifts Brooks overhead. Jock the ref – springs on Pye’s back pulling his head backwards tearing at his hair, but to no avail. A scuffle ensues, over the ropes and into the ringside seats goes Brookes. There is another quick scuffle by the ringside spectators for Jock is thrown over too – Pye runs round ring beating his chest – meanwhile the din is terrific – crowd shouting Dirty Rat – swine, bastard, lousy pig, then missiles hurtle through the air – lighted cigarettes, a key, a piece of billiard chalk, and I had to dodge a small iron bolt thrown a Pye from the other side of ring. Pye won’t let either Brookes of Ref back into ring, spectators shaking their fists at him. The Hall is in uproar, even I was getting a little excited.

By round 3, “Brookes can barely rise, the referee in a ‘fit of temper’ attacks Pye with stool, Pye chases ref around ring.”

By round 5: roles reversed and Brookes ultimately wins. (Worktown 4/E)

Mass Observation seemed to undertake little analysis of these observational studies on sports although there is a chapter included in the 1939 publication, *Britain*, which describes the phenomenon of All-In-Wrestling. Mass Observation assessed that free style wrestling was successful because it fulfilled the ‘needs’ of people; it gave excitement and allowed people to identify with the wrestler in the ring making it possible for the audience to “think one is strong and vigorous and not afraid of an opponent; daydreams about big prizes can make one believe that one is rich and secure.” (Mass Observation, 2009 p.137). Perhaps the most insightful analysis comes with the following observation about the development of sport as part of the ‘social common bond’ that Mass Observation observed was fading out of others spheres of life: “the churches losing influence, the political parties with no ideology; what wonder, as human beings are herd animals that this common bond is taken up wherever it is found in tune with contemporary need and industrial presentation.” (Mass Observation, 2009, p.138)

Mass Observation shifted its ethnographic gaze to the rest of the country in 1938 with a handful of studies relating to sport talking place between 1939 and 1941 and again in 1947.

The effect of the early stages of WW2 was an obvious area for study in terms of sport. Amongst the interviews with sports clubs and news editors, presscuttings and surveys of people on the street are further observations on the effects of war:

Reporting on 13 December 1939 Henry Novy, a trainee journalist and enthusiastic investigator noted that:

The blackout, as we have recorded, for many people killed or reduced going-out activities. And along with the new habits formed round the blackout, a general disinclination to go far from home, --accentuated by the possibility of air-raids when you are away from it, and by the difficulties both of train and bus transport all over the country – made sport even in the day-time liable to a reduced appeal. (TC 82/1/A)

Sports effected by blackout comprise those that traditionally took place after dark which would normally necessitate brilliant floodlighting: greyhound racing, speedway, roller speedway, ice hockey, snooker, table tennis all-in wrestling and boxing. (TC 82/1/A)

Having said this, some found benefits to the blackout as described in a report from Bill Naughton on 17 November 1939 in Bolton:

A patron (lady). “Dances are much better attended. Lots of the older generation go – because the dances are over at 10.00pm. Dancing is a better tonic on black-out nights than the pictures” (TC 82/1/A)

The general findings for these early months of war, was that no sport, in particular the large scale gatherings had gone unaffected. The government had taken over Arsenal football ground whilst many of those stopped in the street in 1940 and asked of how the war was effecting their interest in sport complained that the lack of competition had changed the atmosphere with too many friendly matches being played. The same questions were asked of people in the street in April 1941 and the general impression was that although people’s enthusiasm for their favoured sports had not changed, the amount of time that people were able to give to sport (both participating and watching) had dramatically decreased. (TC 82/1/D)

These extracts are but a few of the fascinating snapshots of sporting activity captured by Mass Observation’s ethnographic surveys, but attitudes and activities were also reflected in some of the Directive questionnaires directed to the National Panel of volunteer writers both in 1937-50s and 1981 to the present day.

**The National Panel**

Between 1937 and the 1960s, nearly 3000 people wrote diaries and Directive responses for Mass Observation whilst over 4000 people have contributed Directive replies to the Mass Observation Project, which was launched at the University of Sussex in 1981. The nature of Mass Observation Directives results in a rich set of in depth, subjective and qualitative responses. Whilst some panel members have only contributed of one or two questionnaires, many have participated for years, if not decades, providing a rare opportunity for longitudinal research comprising many correspondents from all over the UK. For researchers in leisure and sport, this provides the potential to examine changing attitudes to leisure activity and the role that it plays in our changing society.

Despite the depth of opportunity that this provides it should be acknowledged that members of the National Panel from both eras are self-selecting volunteer writers. The Panel should not therefore be regarded as representative of British society with dominant biographical characteristics featuring in both phases of Mass Observation. For the original Mass Observation project this was young male writers, while the contemporary Project attracts a greater number of submissions from middle age women. For both projects, lower middle class professions such as teachers, librarians, students and housewives have dominated, however alternative voices to the natural inclination of the panel can be found in both sequences providing a broad range of correspondents.

Various authors have argued that this lack of representation should not be seen as a barrier to using the data collected by Mass Observation in either of its phases but rather as a voice for parts of society. Savage suggests that the participants of the early Mass Observation Panel should be read not as a representative sample but as a cultural movement of the educated middle class (Savage, 2008 p. 459), whilst Summerfield discusses whether Mass Observation might be better described as a social movement rather than social research indicating participants represented an identifiable section of society (Summerfield, 1985). These descriptions could equally fit the post 1981 panel of respondents, and the need to place the material collected in a wider context therefore. Professor Dorothy Sheridan, co-instogator of the post 1981 project and former Director of the Mass Observation Archive recognised the role that Mass Observation material submitted by the National Panels could play in creating a bigger picture when used alongside other data ‘…such material is a delight and a challenge because it may be all we have left of a particular life and time: a crucial part of the scholarly task is to establish the relationship between what has survived and its historical moment, that is, how “representative” can we take it to be and of what.’ (Sheridan, 1996, p.2).

Taking these considerations into account, what examples of material are available to researchers looking into sport and the British people? In a number of Directives Mass Observation asked their Panel to write about how leisure time was spent during the War. However, there are only two Directives specifically about sport. These were in March 1942 and May 1949.

The 1942 question appears together with an enquiry about the Panel’s general feeling towards politicians, such as Churchill and Bevin. The Mass Observers are asked to share their opinions about sport during Wartime and comment on how the War has affected their experience, both as a spectator and as a participant. Mass Observation received 425 responses to this question, with 62% of the responses being from men.

Many of the writers comment that they do not particularly enjoy sport. For these, the War has not affected their engagement in sport, simply because they weren’t very engaged before the War. As a housewife from County Durham writes:

I am against it! It makes me mad! But then in this house our recreation is Reading & Thinking --- Govt. should stop it at once. (DR 1016)

While a male woodwork machinist from Enfield replies:

I neither have the time, aptitude nor desire to participate in such things, which can usually be analysed down to one thing…escapism (DR 2578)

For others, the War has limited the amount of time they have available and the type of activities that they participate in. A Private in the Royal Engineers responds:

In peace time I used to row every afternoon, and sometimes play rugger. Since I enlisted I have had less time and opportunity for sport. I play soccer occasionally – probably about once a month, and keep fit by skipping or cross-country running (DR 1264)

While for others the rise in amateur sports in their local area has amplified their enjoyment. A young female teacher from Yorkshire writes:

I enjoy watching football more now because the….game is now being played for its own sake. The standard of play is lower but it is more sincere. (DR 297)

In April 1942 MO employee, Bob Willcock, published his analysis of the responses in a MO report. Willcock noted that 50% of the writing Panel were in favour of abandoning all sporting events during wartime while a further 25% felt that some events should be abandoned while other amateur events be allowed to continue (FR 1229, p. 1).

Willcock suggests that the primary motivation behind these responses was the popular view, among the Panel, that sporting events led to wastage of rationed petrol. As one Panel member writes:

Horse racing and dog track racing are the two sporting events I object to the most. These should be stopped….It is disgusting the amount of petrol that is used by these people. Only last night my bus was held up at least 3 minutes while a stream of cars went by from the local dog track. They ought to have their driving licence taken away from them. (DR 3033)

Whilst many Observers raised this concern, there is also a strong feeling that it should be up to individuals to decide how to use their rations- rather then it being dictated by the state. A clerk from Macclesfield:

I read the other day a complaint in the Daily Express about the number of taxicabs employed to take the greyhound fans to White City and then to return to the West End. But surely if the cabs are allowed to run at all it does not matter for what purpose they are used (FR 1229 p.3)

Horseracing, Willcock notes, is “condemned as a minority interest, with expensive upkeep costs and overmuch concentration on betting rather than sport” (FR1229. P.9). A 47 year old man from Leicester responds:

Having no interest in big sporting events I, selfishly perhaps, consider that those who patronise them should have to forego such pleasures. Especially so, in the case of horse-racing, owing to the food shortage, or the need for economy of shipping space. The quantity of food which racehorses consume should be diverted to the feeding of cattle, poultry etc. (FR 1229 p.9)

Sports that do not require such expensive resources are favored by the Panel. Many of the respondents share the opinion that sport and sporting events are good for morale during wartime. As one 18 year old male student from Croydon writes:

All work and no play makes John a dull boy”. Thus says a familiar proverb. It is obvious that in Wartime, workers have to have a certain times of relaxation, and these big sporting events are a popular form of amusement (DR 1684)

Whilst a 42 year old man from Surrey remarks:

I think that the big sporting event in War-time should be banned, except… in the case of football, they furnish a definite hobby and relaxation to men serving in the forces and in factories. (DR 3093)

Sport, then, for the wartime Mass Observers provided a necessary break from the trials of the War. There is an interesting distinction between the type of sports that Observers consider worthy of attention during wartime. However, I am aware that time is limited and I would like to move on to explore the contemporary Mass Observation Project, which we now run at the University of Sussex.

**Mass Observation today**

The Mass Observation Project was launched in 1981 with the aim of recording everyday life using the same Directive approach set up the original Mass Observation movement.

Over 280 Directives have been issued on a wide range of themes, a few of which have *touched* on sport. For example, Directives have considered regular pastimes, gambling, the 2006 Football World Cup and the 2008 Olympics in China. In 1994 a Directive specifically about sport was issued to the Panel and the responses, like those from 1942, were similarly eclectic in their views on Sport.

A 20 year old student from Brighton:

I support Everton in theory (when I was young I fancied the name) but couldn’t even tell you which division they were in, though I assume premier… (P2765 Autumn/Winter 1994 Directive)

And 30 year old computer programmer from Edinburgh reflects:

It’s a cliché from stand up comedy routines, but I was always among the last to be picked when the teams were chosen. There was the fat one, the short one and me: gangling, clumsy and speccy. After twelve years of this, twice weekly, you develop a certain attitude. (C2722 Autumn/Winter 1994 Directive)

The responses to this Directive differ from the 1942 Directive, most obviously, because the respondents are not dealing with a war in their own back garden. Instead the focus is on personal stories and anecdotes about involvement in sport.

As a housewife and artist writes:

I did have the opportunity to go to Wimbledon once in 1993 and I have to say I thoroughly enjoyed watching the tennis though...most of the enjoyment came from the atmosphere rather than the tennis itself….The best part for me was seeing Cliff Richard who brushed past me. (E2659 Autumn/Winter 1994 Directive)

Often the replies can provide insight into an Observers home situation as this response from a 30 year old housewife from Cleethorpes demonstrates:

It is only in the past few years that my husband and I have really enjoyed enthusiastically watching sport on television. He was made redundant in March 1993 and before that wasn’t in a terribly well paid job so ardent television watching has really replaced any social life that we used to have. We mainly watch the ‘big’ events upon which suddenly develop a patriotic fever that otherwise remains very latent. (E2538 Autumn/Winter 1994 Directive)

The Mass Observers can also act as reporters or “citizen journalists”. This is particularly true of the current Project which encourages Observers to send in reports on special events. Sporting events, such as the 1984 Olympic Games and the 1985 fire at Bradford football Stadium have also been documented by Observers in this way. The 1985 European Championship disaster at Heysel stadium in Belgium, where a number of Juventus fans died, was one of these instances with 16 reports arriving at the Archive unprompted. A female florist from Essex writes:

Is a man waving a red or white scarf a Liverpool supporter? Or just a man waving a red and white scarf? If I wore a red and white scarf would that automatically make me a Liverpool supporter? The point I’m trying to make is that anyone can dress like the rest of the crowd do what he likes and the crowd takes the blame….

When 38 people were killed at the start of the Liverpool v Juventus match…, Liverpool fans took the blame. Video film of the match shows Liverpool fans chasing Juventus fans and the wall fell killing 38. What we see and what is true isn’t always the same thing. Some say the National Front was involved and were sent there to cause trouble. I can believe it. Some say Juventus fans goaded British fans making them charge. One video even shows an Italian fan shooting a gun. Yet it’s us that take the blame as usual. People expect trouble and they get trouble. (D159, Special Report 798)

Whilst there are pockets of enthusiasm for sport amongst the Mass Observation panel, researchers using the Mass Observation Directive replies will be confronted with a sense of apathy towards sport, both as a participant and as a spectator activity. Instead, the National Panel of volunteer writers offer researchers candid and personal narratives, which do not merely offer a glance into an individual’s own feelings about sport. The responses provide a researcher with a *mass* of intricate narratives, which provide a window onto British society’s relationship with sport, set within historical and cultural complexities. They also provide researchers with the opportunity to identify recurring themes that can influence further research; the potential for allowing the testimonies of ‘ordinary’ person to influence research areas could not only enhance authenticity but also increase impact and relevance to non academic audiences.

**Accessing the Mass Observation Archive**

The Mass Observation Archive has been housed at the University of Sussex since the 1970s and its material available to all academic and non-academic researchers interested in aspects of British Society over the past eight decades[[1]](#footnote-1).

During its time at Sussex the material within the Mass Observation Archive has been catalogued to file and item level and in 1996 funding became available through the JISC New Opportunities Fund to create online access for these catalogues. This online facility has been refined over the past few years resulting in a cross searchable catalogue that allows researchers to interrogate the records thereby revealing materials relevant to their research fields. Accessibility has been further increased over recent years through the digitisation of selected parts of the Archive by publishers Adam Matthew Digital[[2]](#footnote-2). This electronic resource is available for institutions to purchase and also accessible within the Special Collections reading room at the University of Sussex. Although digital facsimiles may not be a complete replacement for looking at original materials, the digitisation procedure and the creation of an electronic resource in which to house it has provided researchers with additional functionalities that can aid the research process. Researchers can now track and read an entire volunteer writer’s set of responses in one go rather than needing to dip into many chronologically ordered boxes; keyword searching within many documents has been enabled allowing for more targeted search results, a system which may improve further over the next few releases with the introduction of OCR (Optical Character Recognition) generated indexes; and of course for those institutions who have purchased access to Mass Observation Online, there is the easy availability of access to material from the Archive without needing to travel to Sussex.

**Conclusion**

The Mass Observation Archive provides researchers with the opportunity to explore sporting themes in many different ways from the practicalities of sporting events as reported in observational work to the personal and emotional role that sport can play in an individual’s life as portrayed by the responses from the National Panel. The material can provide inspiration for research themes or can be used by researchers as ways of presenting representative, telling or reported cases[[3]](#footnote-3) to support findings in other studies. The materials collected by Mass Observation in both methodologies and phases provide a vivid reconstruction of contemporary opinions and views on sporting activities. The mixture of observation and personal opinion from the early phase of the project captures evocative vignettes that would otherwise be lost whilst the mass of material available on specific themes and made available in one place aid the potential for in depth comparative research with the observers as the main protagonists.

**Fiona Courage (Special Collections Manager & Curator of the Mass Observation Archive)**

Fiona is responsible for the care and accessibility of the University of Sussex’s archives, manuscripts art and rare book collections situated in [Special Collections](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/specialcollections) in the Library. These collections include the [Mass Observation Archive](http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm), the papers of Leonard & Virginia Woolf and Rudyard Kipling. Her role includes ensuring the provision of research and learning support, and outreach activities relating to the collections. As Curator of the Mass Observation Archive she is also responsible for overseeing the continued acquisition of data through the Mass Observation Project and other related projects.

**Jessica Scantlebury (Mass Observation Supervisor)**

**Archival sources**

Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex)

Worktown Project Box 4: Sport

Topic Collection 82: Sport

File Report 1229 ‘Attitudes to the continuance of organized sport in wartime’ April 1942

 Directive March 1942

Directive Respondents:

DR 297, female, b.1909, Yorkshire, Teacher

DR 1016, female, b.1886, County Durham, housewife

DR 1264, male, b. 1916, Bedfordshire, Private in the Royal Engineers

DR 1684, male, b.1924, Croydon, Student

DR 2578, male, b. 1918, Enfield, woodworking machinist

DR 2708, male, b.1895, Leicester, Jewellers

DR 3033, female, Derbyshire. Occupation and DOB unknown

DR 3093, male, b.1900, Surrey, no occupation given

Mass Observation Project (University of Sussex)

Autumn/Winter 1994 Directive part 1: Sport

Special Report: 798

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Highmore, B. (2002) *Everyday life and cultural theory: an introduction*. London: Routledge,

Langhamer, C. 2000 *Women’s leisure in England 1920-60* Manchester: Manchester University Press

Savage, M. (2008) Affluence and social change in the making of technocratic middle-class identities: Britain 1939-55 in *Contemporary British History* 22:4, p. 457-476

Sheridan, D. (1996) *‘Damned anecdotes and dangerous confabulations’: Mass Observation as Life History* Mass Observation Occasional Paper Series no. 7

Summerfield, P. (1985) Mass-Observation: social research or social movement? In *Journal of Contemporary History* vol.20 p.439-452

1. The Mass Observation Archive is housed within the Special Collections department of the University of Sussex. To search the catalogues, or make an appointment to consult the Archive, visit: **www.sussex.ac.uk/library/specialcollections**. Records with the reference number SxMOA1 refer to items collected by the original Mass Observation organisation, while SxMOA2 refers to material collected since 1981 as part of the Mass Observation Project. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The digital archive currently includes the entire File Report sequence, early Mass Observation Publications and selected Topic Collections along with the diaries and directive responses from 1939 to 1945. The resource also includes interactive maps, bibliographic resources and essays on various aspects of Mass Observation. Updates to the resource are expected. For more details visit: **www.amdigital.co.uk**. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For further discussion of using Mass Observation in this way see Bloome, Sheridan, Street (1993) *Reading Mass Observation writing: theoretical and methodological issues in researching the Mass Observation Archive* Mass Observation Archive Occassional Paper Series no. 1, p.16-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)