

Stoolball

CONFLICTING VALUES IN THE REVIVALS OF A 'TRADITIONAL SUSSEX GAME'

by John Lowerson

This article examines the history of stoolball both as a supposedly 'Sussex game' and as the focus for arguments over how traditional games are adapted by modern society. It deals with its origins and its rediscovery by antiquarian writers before it was taken up as a means of improving the lives of village women. This involved rule-making and organization; much depended on the patronage of the gentry. With the First World War it acquired a new role, as a therapy for injured soldiers. At that point, a Sussex lawyer and landowner, W. W. Grantham, became its leading proponent, tying it in with both charitable causes and an idealized 'Merrie England'. His insistence on male or mixed play eventually provoked a backlash by leading women and bitter disputes. It was then revived again, on a much smaller scale after the Second World War, with a particularly strong Sussex identity.

Stoolball is widely held to be a, if not *the* quintessential Sussex game, representing an idyllicized continuity with the rural past. Its history is by no means so simple as that view suggests and it encapsulates issues and conflicts both within the county and in a much wider context of social and cultural change over the last 100 years or so.

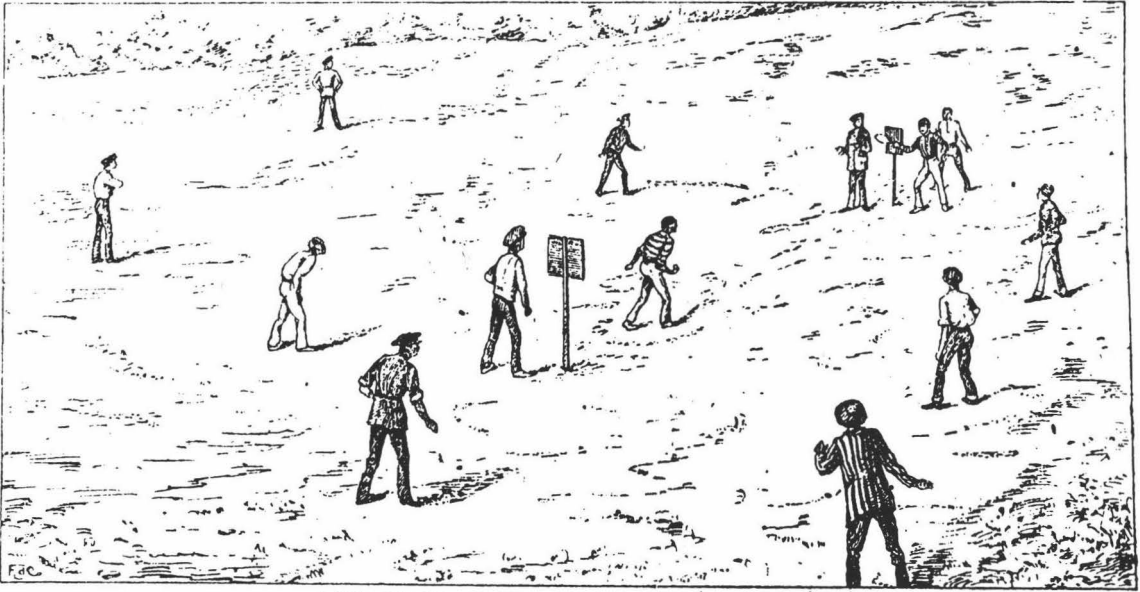
Much of the recent history of sport has been concerned with the 'modernization' of such traditional games, with codification and bureaucracy, to meet both the leisure and political requirements of urban, industrialized societies. In England, the centre of attention has almost inevitably been cricket, with its pastoral overtones, and football, transmogrified from pre-industrial near-riot into mass spectator symbol. Into the debate have come concerns of class, gender and social control, 'popular culture' and the annexation or invention of tradition for nationalist and imperial purposes. It is against this background that this paper examines stoolball.

As it is now played, at its most formalized, stoolball is a spring and summer game, widely followed in the south-east. Two teams of 11 a side play, if enough players can be recruited. It requires two wickets, boards one foot square mounted on poles four feet six inches tall, placed some 16 yards

apart and usually freestanding. To players holding willow bats seven and a half inches across, shaped rather like heavy table tennis bats, balls are bowled underarm. The balls are soft, derivatives of those used in real tennis. The fielders are placed as in cricket, a game with which it shares some rules and has a complex symbiosis.

Its history illustrates many of the issues I have mentioned above, but there are other elements, of symbols of rural-urban opposition and of questions of regional and national identity. In particular, it fits into the search for the 'real England' which has occupied so many people since the 1870s. It has a place in the hunt for that idealized peasantry, the 'Folk', which Georgina Boyes has examined in her recent study, *The Imagined Village*. As she put it, 'A marginalised, rural and anachronistic Folk were maintained as the source of culture' for an urban society feeling dispossessed.¹

Stoolball is one of a number of loosely-related ball games surviving from pre-industrial England, such as Knurr-and-Spell and Trap-Ball. Unlike those demonstrations of individual skill, however, it became enshrined in the values of late Victorian team game ethics and the bureaucratization of 'modern' sports with all their cultural apparatus and associated moral loadings.²



THE PLAN OF THE STOOLBALL FIELD.

Stoolball can be played almost anywhere. The village green is an ideal spot. Our sketch shows a plan of the field, and is explanatory in itself.

Fig. 1. The stoolball field — note the all male players.

ORIGINS AND ANTIQUARIANS

The first difficulty is the nature of the 'tradition' that it is supposed to represent. This is compounded by both the nature of the surviving documentation and the way in which that has been incorporated into historical writing. Its very identification is problematic because of its weaving in and out of so-called cultural mainstreams. At least one major spokesman for the history of sport, Allen Guttman, has claimed, quite wrongly, that it was a game which disappeared not long after the Reformation.³ Some very recent historians have placed it in a tradition of ritualized combat and even of protest which probably overstates the case and certainly would not fit the rosy pastoral picture which late Victorian revivalists tried to paint and recreate.⁴

Much of what material is available owes its accessibility to the growth of antiquarianism during and after the Industrial Revolution and most especially to its late Victorian and Edwardian refinements. It is a commonplace that those years produced an increasing search for national Folk roots, in which local history was mingled with an emerging anthropology and ethnography, not least in the Sussex Archaeological Society. Our

conventional explanation of the collection of dialects and rituals is that they were designed to preserve a dying rural/peasant culture from urban and industrial destruction. Georgina Boyce has shown how far the process went beyond this, into inventing and annexing the Folk for quite distinctive purposes. This is certainly true of stoolball. It fitted both the needs of heritage preservation and production but, unlike some similar games, it was *not* employed to serve a notion of steady imperial progress.

Originally 'Stoolball' was a generic description of a loosely-grouped variety of games, whose nature was complicated by the interpretation of the word 'stool'. Its symbiosis with cricket affects this further, particularly where it provided ammunition for the sort of explanation which set popular recreations in a simplistic, neo-Darwinian, 'fall and rise' model.

One populist explanation is that the stool was literally just that — a three-legged milking stool. Depending on the writer and his fancifulness the stool was either used as a primitive wicket or employed as a bat by milkmaids bowled to by village lads.⁵ More dialect-precise scholars, particularly in Sussex, claimed that 'stool' was a local term for a tree stump used as a wicket in Wealden clearings.⁶ From this grew the view that it originated as a

woodland-pasture pastime which subsequently bifurcated; in one direction it moved towards male cricket, in the other to a simpler women's game, stoolball. The amount of writing on this is quite surprising and is firmly located in regional patriotism. The idea that cricket had any ancestor, instead of emerging fully formed, is remarkably difficult territory to enter.⁷

These near-mythical origins were ascribed to an activity mentioned in late medieval and early modern writings as being pursued in Lancashire, Wiltshire, Gloucestershire and Somerset amongst others. The Earl of Leicester is said to have played it in Elizabeth's reign, as did the common people of London. It was usually portrayed as an informal game for both sexes, played for cakes and ale on Shrove Tuesday, or in post-Easter festivities where it secularized medieval models of ball-play representing the resurrected world. It was this which appeared in the pastorate of such 17th- and 18th-century writers as Robert Herrick and *Poor Robin's Almanack*. Both late medieval and post-Reformation clergymen such as archbishop Laud fulminated against its Sunday playing in churchyards by groups of both sexes including both the gentry and the 'rascality'. Paradoxically it continued with very little interruption during the Interregnum.⁸

In this loose reconstruction attempts at historical precision were mixed conveniently with a sense of an indistinct past. As one observer commented in 1893:

Stool Ball, is a game shrouded in some degree of mystery. Some descriptions of the game are indeed of so hazy a nature as to put it beyond the understanding of all but a select few.⁹

The greater the ascribed vagueness of its origins, the more it was valued by the antiquarians who portrayed it as reaching an Elizabethan and Jacobean heyday, very convenient for bolstering the myth of a 'Merrie England' in which it served as a 'harmless pastime'. Its ascribed purity proved valuable for some late Victorian commentators concerned at a modernized cricket seen increasingly as commercialized, dependent on admission charges and prostituted by professionals and amateurs. Their views were reiterated some decades later by another observer:

... all those British sports came within the limits of scientific calculation compared with the vast possibilities of stoolball, in which the novice can defeat the expert and the latest

recruit confound the most experienced veteran. . . . there is at least one game in English sport which is not subject to professionalism and in which every player may hope to excel irrespective of sex, age and experience.¹⁰

VILLAGE REVIVALS AND GENTRY PLAY

The apparent former wide diffusion of stoolball was reduced by the 18th century to a few geographically restricted survivals. It was played in Brighton to celebrate a royal birthday in the 1780s and by the early 19th century appeared to be limited to a few Kent and Sussex Wealden settlements where it was played as a distinctly localized, intermittent seasonal game by village women.¹¹ Rules were part of an oral tradition and varied in detail between villages. Its actual extent is difficult to reconstruct.

The growth of folkloric interest coincided with, rather than caused immediately, an almost systematic revival in some Sussex scarpland and Wealden parishes, largely those dominated by gentry and clergy. There it became an auxiliary to a genteel and Anglican concern with reviving village life, whilst controlling the exuberance of acceptable public recreations and trying to expand activities for women.

The Gages' closed village of Firle was frequently claimed to be the only place where it had survived with regular play, but this owed more to local patriotism than to actuality. A photograph dated to 1861 shows a very diversely clad team from Chailey, ten miles away.¹² The key centre for the late Victorian revival appears to have been another closed parish, Glynde, outside Lewes. Under the patronage of the family of Mr Speaker Brand a local girls' team, the Glynde Butterflies, played teams such as the Chailey Grasshoppers, 'in the most determined spirit of resistance'.¹³ These teams seem to have consisted mainly of younger girls from the gentry and clergy families together with superior farmers' daughters and a few strapping village girls to pad out the numbers to the ideal eleven. They prompted a spate of patronising reports in the local press: 'the butterflies again spread their light wings to enjoy another little day of sunny bliss'.¹⁴

The horizons for competition of these gentry-led teams were limited by the walking distances between villages or the slightly extended frontiers of daylight travel in farm carts. Brand's social neighbour, Christie of Glyndebourne, provided an



Fig. 2. The village game — Chailey, 1860s.

annual treat for schoolchildren on his son's birthday; as part of the entertainment, a team of local married women would play one of single girls and all would be given tea.¹⁵ Generally, though, the age and condition divide was ignored and teams were usually all-age.

These models prompted a modest growth, fostering village rivalries and producing the first known codification of the rules in 1867, designed to stop squabbles over local variations.¹⁶ It grew essentially as a game for women, but was almost invariably umpired by men. Its immediate purpose was made explicit by a Sussex clergyman in 1875 — the clubs, he wrote, 'not only provide good exercise for young ladies who might otherwise become lazy, but also promote kind social intercourse among all classes'.¹⁷

As such its fortunes and leadership depended on younger women from county families for whom it became a socially benevolent auxiliary to the essentially class-specific, space-private fashionable games of croquet and lawn tennis whose fluctuations

in popularity during the 1870s and 1880s reverberated into the game. It attracted national attention in the later 1870s when a match in Horsham Park was portrayed as a *fête champêtre*, with carriage-borne families watching the players in the interstices between picnics in a marquee.¹⁸ The engraving which accompanied the *Graphic* report treated it as a variation on more established, carefully controlled country house amusements such as archery parties with their bonding and mating rituals. It was another opportunity for gentle exhibition of the mobile female form in the marriage mart. When the Duchess of Norfolk fostered a club in Arundel in 1912, it became 'quite the rage this summer'.¹⁹

A similar match in the Lewes area was described as being played by, 'fair athletes . . . the sides were composed of the younger branches of the leading county families in the neighbourhood . . . supplemented by a few village girls', who acted as 'rustic auxiliaries'.²⁰ Thus portrayed, the latter were not too far from the rollicking peasantry drafted into paintings for genteel amusement in the 18th century.²¹



STOOLBALL — A MATCH AT HORSHAM PARK

Fig. 3. *Fête champêtre*: Horsham Park.

This growth was small-scale, dependent as it was on being fitted into a sometimes capricious country house social calendar. When a Glynde meeting revised the rules in 1891, 14 local clubs were represented by female members of gentry, clergy and upper farmers' families.²² A similar rule revision elsewhere was designed 'for Girls living in the country who want a change from the inevitable tennis'.²³ The drafters went on to claim that, 'It is also a good game to teach working girls, for the essentials cost very little'. Its moral virtues were also lauded by the bishop of Chester, Dr Jayne, who was prepared to encourage its being played on Sundays because of its lack of potential depravity.²⁴

There was a steady growth after the rules were clarified and competition became more organized. Fifteen clubs formed a Sussex Stoolball League in 1903, offering an elaborately woven banner as its annual tournament prize, to be kept by any club that won it three times in a row. That happened when Ringmer, near Lewes, won twice before the outbreak of war and immediately after its end;

unfortunately, the banner has disappeared without trace.²⁵ In all these meetings, the policies and groupings were determined exclusively by women, still largely from the gentry. In East Sussex, the annual season was dominated by matches gathered round a team organized by the family from Sheffield Park. Not far away a similar part was played by the Champions of Danny Park, whose daughter, Gertrude, set it firmly in the context of country house lawn pastimes in articles in the fashionable press.²⁶ It was at this point that it was described briefly in the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The village clubs which can be traced through infrequent newspaper reports depended heavily on management by clergy wives and daughters. They fielded such teams as the Barcombe Iolanthes.²⁷ There are no prizes for guessing the origins of that name but, Gilbert and Sullivan apart, they represented also a growing Edwardian obsession with the 'faerie' and nature mysticism.²⁸

Such teams offered inspiration for a wider social role. When it was introduced into Surrey, at

Bookham, reports in the national press made clear the influence of social maternalism in this new stage of its development:

It is just the game for village women. As a rule they play no game, because there is no game for them to play. . . . The very women who ought to play the game, the thousands of whom spend their lives in constant drudgery in their cottages, are the very women who have no chance of active recreation.

The reporter placed it even further in a context of Georgian root-seeking and social imperatives:

There is no doubt that the countryside would be merrier if there were a stool-ball club for women in every village. They cannot be very well left to organise it for themselves. . .²⁹

It had now moved some way from spontaneous celebration of the passing seasons.

In Bookham, as in the many Sussex villages where it was established outside the immediate purlieus of a great house, the symbiosis with men's cricket clubs was very strong. Women practised and played on those evenings when men did not. Gratitude and dependence were recognized by ritual annual games between women's teams and those drawn from cricket or working men's clubs. The men were almost invariably required to play left-handed to give the women 'a sporting chance'. Stoolball in these circumstances was practically as well as symbolically marginalized. Because it did not require specially prepared grounds it was often played on the edges of cricket fields, to preserve the sacred crease, or on rough pasture loaned by farmers. Other mixed matches were played, often as gentry novelties, 'Trousers' versus 'Petticoats' and so forth.³⁰ Sometimes the gentry fielded mixed teams and it was male participation in these that eventually prompted the greatest spurt of growth and a crisis in gender and regional identities which still reverberates in the game. At this point it became almost inseparably intertwined in the career of one individual whose energy and eccentricities had singular effects.

THERAPY, SOUTH SAXONS AND MERRIE ENGLAND

For once in the history of traditional games we have a hero (and occasional villain). This was William W. Grantham, a lawyer and landowner, with a manor house, Balneath, in Chailey, north of Lewes,

where he claimed to be, and certainly behaved as if he was, the lord of the manor, reviving tenants' dinners and so on. Born in 1866, the son of a High Court judge, he was educated at Harrow and Trinity, Cambridge, then called to the Bar in the Inner Temple. He took silk in 1923 and became Recorder of Deal. He was variously Master of the Grocers' Company, Chairman of the Governors of Hackney Downs School (to which he introduced the game for junior boys to help overcome a severe shortage of cricket pitches), Deputy Chairman of the London County Council, where he long sat as a Conservative, and a Lay Reader of the Church of England.³¹ The social contacts he made were exploited ruthlessly when he decided to develop stoolball as a mass game, part of a proposed revival of an England of the Folk.

He was an enthusiastic sportsman, riding in the Pegasus Club, the Bar point-to-point he founded with his father, and a keen cyclist and a member of the MCC.³² In Sussex he was a key figure in the Society of South Saxons, a gentry recreation club founded in the 1830s and revived in the 1880s, which played lawn tennis and croquet in the parks of its more influential members.³³ His almost legendary eccentricity accompanied considerable organizing skills and an insatiable appetite and ability for self-publicity. He made sure that most of his activities were reported in both the local and the national press, usually writing the reports himself. This did a great deal for stoolball's new revival and extension but eventually prompted a gender-focused backlash. Just occasionally it produced oddities, such as widespread press reports in the 1930s of Grantham's collection of 23,000 different used railway tickets.³⁴

Grantham had played stoolball in the occasional mixed lawn matches of the Edwardian years but the reason for his becoming the game's key popularizer was essentially masculine and military. He served in the Volunteers, with the rank of Major by which he always preferred to be addressed. He was the eternal adjutant, effectively non-combatant but a first-rate depot organizer. He served eventually in the 6th (Cyclists) Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment, staying at home during conflicts. As the battles of the First World War took their toll Sussex became a major hospital centre for the seriously injured. Grantham saw demoralized wounded officers needing recuperation either to return to the Front or to life as maimed civilians. Most of the

manly games associated with military character formation, rugby etc., were either too strenuous for men in the early stages of mobile recovery or totally unsuitable for those who had lost an arm or a leg.

In 1917 Grantham hit on the idea of using stoolball for this. The predominantly women's game was now harnessed for men, although occasional mixed matches were staged to allow officers and nurses to play together. Grantham provided a further level of competition by fielding teams of his legal and country friends with such titles as 'Ye Ancient Lawyers'. The first games took place in the grounds of the Royal Pavilion, Brighton, a temporary convalescent hospital.³⁵ The bored patients turned to it with enthusiasm and other hospitals joined in. Grantham was prompted to go further and began frenetically to raise money to buy stoolball sets and lists of rules for widespread circulation.

Using his MCC links he arranged a demonstration match at Lord's in August 1917.³⁶ After a wholesale lobbying of the influential he secured the patronage of minor royals, some key generals and various aristocrats. The Lord's match was repeated annually for a decade, eventually being linked with the Not Forgotten Association, a British Legion-type organization raising money for invalids. Other sites he exploited eventually included Ranelagh Gardens, the Temple gardens, the so-called 'Raft', now covered by the former London County Hall, and, for 20 years, the gardens of Buckingham Palace. These were loaned by George V and his sons for the games and a garden party whilst the family was away.³⁷

The cash raised from the accompanying collections enabled Grantham to post stoolball sets to various English hospitals and also to army hospitals for the less severely wounded in France, where it offered a useful means of prompting the more rapid return of convalescents to the trenches. Whilst Grantham was accredited in 1918 with 'a popular revival of Merrie England' the game was now being used for very un-merry purposes.³⁸ One commentator was more instrumental — the wounded, he claimed, 'will find in it plenty of harmless and innocent recreations plus a good deal of that fighting spirit which appeals to all of them so irresistibly at the moment. It is also a good game to teach our women and girls engaged in war work'.³⁹

This unlikely addition to the demands of total war found other customers. From the Front, a sergeant in the 1st Battalion of the Norfolks described it as ideal for play, 'on rough ground,

dotted with shell holes, quite close to the trenches', with entrenching tools as bats.⁴⁰ The chaplain of a Guards battalion, responsible for entertainments, wanted to teach it for play in rest periods.⁴¹ Perhaps the most surprising was an officer in the 7th Australian Infantry Brigade who praised this former women's game as a useful addition to the repertoire of masculinity, with qualifications; 'I am afraid, however, that at the moment everyone is much too engaged in Boche-strafting to have much time . . . later in the year when the fighting season is over we hope to have the opportunity for further games'.⁴² This was a new twist on seasonality.

The war's end saw a shift in Grantham's focus, although the game's place in the charitable calendar remained until the next war when its aged proponent tried unsuccessfully to revive it for casualty therapy. Royalty continued to support the fund-raising but a more active interwar part was played by Winnington-Ingram, the pan-athletic bishop of London. He played in gaiters, apron and shirt-sleeves or cricket whites and a flat cap but failed to enthuse his diocesan clergy to take the game up.⁴³ Grantham persuaded Mrs Lloyd George to play at Chailey in a Welsh team in which she was the only one not wearing national costume; he also cajoled the young Duke of Norfolk into trying his hand.⁴⁴

Grantham's abundant energy was now used in a new crusade to popularize the game. His objectives were held in uneasy tension. They involved a revival of stoolball as a mixed-gender or male activity on a scale designed to make it a mass pursuit which would spread throughout the Empire and beyond. In actuality it was a virtual re-invention rather than a revival and Grantham was never slow to parade his own role in this. He endowed it with the drive which the Victorian apostles of manly sports had employed, but he also became entangled increasingly in a Merrie England tableau which eventually proved counter-productive.

His organizing abilities resulted in a controversial national governing body, the Stoolball Association of Great Britain, which he founded in 1923 in league with a fellow-enthusiast, Canon Masters of Kent. It was distinctly evangelistic but with a fragile base; it was Grantham's enthusiasm which held it together and it reflected both his ebullience and the weaknesses of his character.⁴⁵

The game was promoted as easy to learn, cheap to take up, playable at any age from seven to 77, and by both sexes. As such it would contribute to



Fig. 4. Stoolball reviver — W. W. Grantham in smock and beaver.

physical and moral health and to 'the team spirit which may almost be said to have been discovered by the Anglo-Saxon people'.⁴⁶

This provoked a positive response. By the mid-1920s there were some 500 clubs, 250 of them in Sussex. A decade later there were claims of 1000; the game was played in Lancashire, Norfolk, Staffordshire and the Home Counties. Grantham tried to provide a recruitment base in schools, and East Sussex and London both developed school leagues, with county shields for annual tournaments; one was embroidered by Mrs Grantham. Nottingham took it up, using boys in its handicraft training centres to make the bats for girls to play. Huddersfield had 600 pupil players. It was played by both sexes in primary schools, but only by girls in elementary schools. By the 1930s it was commonly claimed that the grammar (or secondary) schools regarded it as socially inferior and there were frequent complaints that the scholarship system robbed competitions of

their best girl players as they matured.⁴⁷

Grantham continued to field teams of upper and upper-middle class males and I shall return to the tensions surrounding this. He talked on BBC radio about the game, took part in a sound movie and demonstrated it on the embryonic television service at Alexandra Palace in 1939. He travelled extensively for recreation and business — hence the 23,000 railway tickets — and invariably took sets and rules along with him. Between the wars he cajoled locals and expatriates into playing in Geneva, Iceland, Greenland, the United States, Chile, the Caribbean, South Africa, Japan and Vladivostok, as well as during long halts on the trans-Siberian railway. For transoceanic voyages he developed a deck version and there were few of his voyages where he did not end up on the ship's entertainments committee.⁴⁸ There was some minor take-up in the Dominions but there were elements in the game's Englishness which made transferability difficult and this was exacerbated by the way in which its apparent simplicity was increasingly shrouded in a patriotic pseudo-ruralism of which Grantham became a virtual caricature. Because of his actions stoolball came to typify a mildly dotty Englishness rooted in a near-mythical Sussex.

The immediate post-war growth fostered doggerel verse and some banal songs based on the Edwardian fantasy anthem, 'Sussex by the Sea':

We play in Leagues and Cup Ties,
Just like all other clubs do,
For handsome silver trophies,
And we play County Matches too.⁴⁹

Grantham's rôle as a South Saxon has already been noted but it took a new direction when he became a key figure of the new Society of Sussex Downsmen, founded in 1923 to encourage the county's preservation against the likes of Peacehaven. Grantham soon founded a stoolball section. As part of his romanticizing of a supposedly secret county, he took to wearing a black linen Sussex smock, the idealized garb of Victorian labourers and shepherds, which Mrs Grantham made and embroidered for him. He played and umpired in it, together with a beaver hat, wearing it increasingly to address public meetings and dinners and on his foreign travels.⁵⁰

He persuaded his fellow Downsmen to don similar ones and the Society's team played its matches so attired, travelling from railway station to ground in specially-hired and decorated farmers' drays.⁵¹ The press rarely pictured Grantham

thereafter without his smock. Thus dressed, the team was filmed by the Ideal Film Company, 'In the days of Merrie England', at his manor in 1929, a paradoxical juxtaposition with the media he exploited so systematically.⁵² As an antidote to modernism he offered, 'Old fashioned English games instead of jazz'. 'Young women in the drapery shops of Brighton are being invited' to give up the cinema for 'old-fashioned games on the greens, camping rambles and the revival of Sussex crafts'.⁵³ Almost incredibly, some of them joined in, at least those who joined the morally prophylactic stoolball clubs sponsored by churches and chapels.

There was one area where Grantham's energies attracted participants whose observations of Englishness were to have profound and far from desirable effects. Between the wars he was cultivated by Japanese diplomats in London and responded enthusiastically. They introduced him to professors of physical education anxious to introduce western games into their country as part of an accelerating modernization process. Japanese individuals and teams played in English fixtures and supported Grantham's charities. But there was an ambivalence. He responded to their polite interest in traditional cultures by pressing the antiquarian aspects of the game.⁵⁴ There is a remarkable photograph of Grantham in a smock demonstrating the use of a bat to a clearly apprehensive Japanese diplomat's wife dressed in the most recent Paris fashions; the cultural icons jar on the observer (Fig. 5). Grantham seems to have avoided the sort of public statements of fascism which scarred many of those in other parts of the Folk revival, but one can only speculate as to what extent the antiquarianism he proffered so assiduously was considered by Japanese Intelligence when it planned its attacks upon a clearly effete and decadent British Empire.

SUSSEX RULES

Grantham dominates any account of the game's interwar history, but he also masks developments closer to its older patterns and these revealed a never fully-resolved tension over gender-restricted play and the exercise of traditional local leadership. Grantham claimed occasionally that stoolball was a woman's invention, but all his efforts were aimed towards mixed play at a serious level and a standardized national organization which he dominated. This offended the social maternalists



Fig. 5. Cultural transmission of culture clash?: W. W. Grantham's Japanese diplomacy.

who saw it as primarily for women and also those whose identity with a regional culture was as much concerned with local autonomy as with male romanticism.

Grantham's activities were paralleled almost immediately after the Armistice by a revival of Sussex play by its Edwardian matriarchs who also promoted its 1920s extension as a bastion against the urbanisation of village life. The burgeoning Women's Institutes were often associated with clubs as were women's branches of ex-service organizations.⁵⁵ Local leagues, such as the Cuckmere Valley or Chelwood Gate, emerged in tandem with a revived Sussex Federation. Financed by whist drives, jumble sales and dances they extended the associative range of village women's lives. The simpler dress of the post-war period undoubtedly made the game easier to play — by the 1930s short tennis dresses were a feature of most team uniforms. In addition, a number of institutional teams

appeared, such as that for the nurses of Hellingly Mental Hospital.

The physical and moral values underpinning this were a scarcely muted revival of the case familiar to students of women's sport before 1914. In the words of one writer in 1934,

Cricket never has been and never can be a women's game, for they cannot endure the prolonged fatigue, nor with impunity bear the blows of the ball. . . during the summer they have had capital matches, pleasant tea parties and have enjoyed fresh places.⁵⁶

The idyllic marched with the useful for women who were told repeatedly, including by the vice-president of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association, that 'motherhood is her very function in life'.⁵⁷ It also offered therapy for those hard-pressed by being mothers.

Many of these participants from all social levels welcomed the revival but balked at the self-declaration of a male figurehead and systematic mixed play. For them the clubs, games and the social

apparatus were a limited space in which female control was essential. Men might umpire and be admitted to annual dances and prize awards but they should stay out otherwise. This division remained strong in local situations where stoolball occupied cricket's peripheral spaces.

The unease came into the open at the same time that Grantham founded his national association. The gentry ladies had extended their social leadership by organizing inter-county matches between Kent and Sussex. In 1922 one of these resulted in an acerbic dispute over the placing of umpires and catching out. The Sussex people insisted that, as the oldest organization, inter-county matches must follow their rules. Kent pleaded ignorance, but both Canon Masters and Grantham intervened to demand a standard national rule in which the Sussex 'clean catch' would be replaced by the varieties initially allowed for Grantham's male invalids.⁵⁸

A furious row erupted in which women's self-determination, interpretations of historical precedence and deep personal animosity played



Fig. 6. 1920s action: the athletic woman.

almost equal parts. Opposition to Grantham was coordinated by the leader of the Sussex Federation, Mrs John Blencowe, who as Miss G. Brand of Glynde, had been a leading prewar player. She was also one of Grantham's neighbours in the Chailey area. She engineered his removal without warning from the Sussex area council in 1923, accusing him of disloyalty to the county and the game.⁵⁹ He rejoindered unwisely that the game had wider national roots, remarkable in view of his customary Sussex emphases.⁶⁰ A sharp correspondence ensued between the two which Grantham made worse when he published it in the local and national press. He then claimed that the Sussex federation was singularly unrepresentative of its local game, attracting only a quarter of the county's clubs.⁶¹ The row dragged on, with Sussex refusing repeatedly to join the national body; delegates from the area continued to attend it but only as individual members. Grantham and his friends organized intercounty matches but they did not use the Sussex rules. At one point in 1927 Mrs Blencowe proposed a Women's Stoolball Association for the county with the hope that it would become the genuine national body, but there were few takers for any further level of organization and conflict.⁶²

The issue was never really resolved and the game operated at several separate organizational levels throughout the 1930s. Grantham's male-dominated mixed game existed uneasily alongside a Sussex/Surrey network which ran its own affairs. On the other hand, many village and institutional clubs were only interested in a world of friendlies and sub-regional leagues that ignored their would-be leaders, extending the older base without becoming involved in power disputes away from home.

The phoney war of 1939–40 prompted a brief public burst of fund-raising games played by aristocratic ladies in the Temple gardens.⁶³ Grantham and Masters both died in 1942, the national body died with them and war work diverted the energies of the social maternalists.

SURVIVALS

The post-war story has to be brief. Life flickered back in the villages of Kent, Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire, where *Country Life* claimed the 'memory of rural

England . . . is tenacious';⁶⁴ the emphasis was firmly on local leagues. In the late 1970s a new National Stoolball Association was formed, but the game is effectively limited to the south-eastern crescent where 13 affiliated districts playing in 18 leagues represent just over 200 clubs.⁶⁵ But there are others. In one issue of the *Sussex Express* in 1993, for instance, the Eastbourne–Hailsham area fixtures listed 34 clubs not in the Association's list. Many of them are institutional rather than community-based: Anglo-Dutch Meat and Apple Windows in Eastbourne for example.⁶⁶ Yet even these seem to fit what one 1980s' observer described as 'districts with a lively folk memory'.⁶⁷

A small schools league still exists in East Sussex and the game is sampled as part of the National Curriculum's physical education menu in some other schools. At adult level it is threatened by increasingly high ground costs and the public indemnity insurance now demanded where it uses local-authority controlled space. It also suffers from the changing education and mobility patterns of many girls in their late teens. Sussex still requires a 'clean catch' rule at odds with its neighbours; it is tolerated with resigned shrugs. And the gender issue still divides. Four of the affiliated leagues are officially mixed and it is accepted that this is often essential for the game's survival in smaller villages where enough women cannot be persuaded to form a single-sex team. A substantial number of the active players of all ages, however, refuses to play in any game with men. It is still gently contested territory.

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NOTES

Much of the material quoted was assembled as manuscripts, cuttings and ephemera by W. W. Grantham in two substantial scrapbooks and a box, now held in the library of the Sussex Archaeological Society, Barbican House, Lewes. The material in the scrapbooks is organized more or less chronologically, but the cuttings are not always ascribed. For convenience they are referred to in the references as 'G. S.'.

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