

# A SPORTING CHANCE

## Extra time for England's historic sports venues

*Sport is an integral part of English culture and an important aspect of modern life. English Heritage began work in January 2002 on a study of England's sporting heritage, starting with a pilot study in Manchester – a dynamic city with a remarkable and diverse sporting tradition*

Sport has been an exciting, colourful and distinctive feature of British life for many centuries. It has proved to be one of the most successful British exports and one of this country's unique and lasting contributions to world culture. This is the nation that honed and codified many of the world's most popular sports and 'taught the world to play'. Consequently, Britain, and England in particular, has a rich, diverse, in fact unparalleled sporting heritage.

### Sport and the historic environment

England is still a great sporting nation. A large majority of the population continues to be involved with sport in some way, predominantly as players and spectators but also in the design, construction and maintenance of sports facilities through to the manufacture and sale of sports equipment. Yet for an activity with such a fundamental role in our lives, the historic environments in which sports take place remain largely unnoticed. In particular, the growth and development of sports grounds and facilities have largely escaped the attention of the heritage sector. This neglect is all the more unfortunate because of the high rate of loss and change currently eroding our sporting heritage.

Today, there is a growing interest in information on the history of sport and a recognition that sports heritage is a legitimate subject of study. Specialist societies, such as the British Society of Sports History, producing journals, directories and reference books, are no longer on the fringes of academic respectability. Brigades of amateur statisticians have been joined by university research centres. The proliferation of information – courses, academic and non-academic publications, internet sites, television documentaries, specialist museums and bookshops – is evidence of the advance of sports history into the historical mainstream.

Decades of under-appreciation have, however, taken their toll on the built heritage of sport. Sports grounds and facilities have come under a variety of pressures. Victorian and Edwardian swimming pools have closed because of lack of demand or lack of funds, and may stand empty or have been demolished. Football clubs and

others have had to respond to growing commercial demands, media coverage and health and safety legislation. Bowling greens, race tracks and other open spaces for recreation are often subject to pressure for new housing or other developments. In short, entire categories of building have disappeared so fast that they were gone before anyone recognised the need to quantify their rate of loss and to make the case for more considered choices.

Although some sports facilities are protected through statutory designation, such protection accounts for barely 1% of the total number of listed buildings in England and Wales. Indeed, there is only one Grade I listed sports building in the whole country – a deer-coursing grandstand at Lodge Park, Gloucestershire, recently restored by the National Trust. Yet our sporting heritage, especially of the 19th and early-20th centuries, is surely as relevant to the study of early modern society and culture as are hotels, theatres, cinemas and railway stations, which would seem better served by statutory protection.

In the past decade, calls for the listing of sports buildings, and responses to threats, have increased the amount of planning casework and attendant media interest. Indeed, the parliamentary Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport produced a report in early 2002 on the sport of swimming. Interestingly, 'official' pronouncements such as this are on the increase. As recently as June 2002, in a move normally used to prevent great works of art leaving the country, an export ban was imposed on Wembley's royal box to stop it being sold abroad when the stadium is demolished. A senior official at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is reported to have said 'In the past we have used these orders for paintings and great works of art, but we believe that Britain's sporting heritage should also be protected.'

### Foundations for the English Heritage project

English Heritage recognises that sports grounds and buildings are usually modest in terms of scale and design but that this does not mean they are of insignificant value. Our sporting heritage is part of the wider physical and cultural

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environment, it has associations that mean a great deal to people of all ages, and it contributes strongly to the overall quality of life. Any project should set out to understand the significance of what survives but also to understand what these survivals mean to people, and the social and economic drivers for sport as an industry.

The project should also provide a framework for answering the question: how do we place a value on our sports heritage? It would seem that sports buildings pose issues that place them outside the usual norms of conservation principle and practice. To 'work with the grain' of historic sports places, therefore, we needed to develop a framework for understanding why particular grounds or facilities are important, which elements are more important than others, what matters to people and why?

Understanding importance is only part of the picture. We need to explore with the relevant sporting bodies how we can best use this information in the decision-making process, balancing the needs of a particular sport or facility against the wider historic importance of the ground or building, and sharing ideas about policy, design and planning implications.

At the outset we recognised that this would be a challenging project because of its sheer scale. We therefore decided to undertake a pilot study and use its results to encourage wider debate. We chose Manchester and its immediate environs for the study, as the city has made a significant contribution to the nation's sporting history – a contribution that has continued with the 2002 Commonwealth Games.

In addition, English Heritage Education worked closely with Plymouth Grove Primary School in Manchester to develop a range of activities relating to sporting heritage directly relevant to the National Curriculum (see Spicer, 30–1).

The pilot study culminated in a national conference in June 2002 where the results were shared with an invited audience.

## The Manchester pilot study

The pilot study comprised five inter-linked elements:

- desk-based research to identify the diverse range of historic places associated with different sports in the Manchester area

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*Sportcity - the centrepiece for this summer's Commonwealth Games and the heart of a major regeneration programme in east Manchester*

- fieldwork to verify the degree of survival of the places identified and to assess the condition and context of the various sites
- a survey of public views and attitudes to discover what people think about the heritage of sport and to encourage people to connect more fully with the historic environment as a whole
- a consultation exercise to gain a better understanding of the awareness and perceptions of the heritage of sport – especially planning issues relating to sports facilities – among key policy shapers, decision makers and opinion formers
- the development of a framework and method for assessing the significance of the sporting heritage, both nationally and within the pilot study area. □

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The pilot study was very much a team effort. Led by Jason Wood, the principal members of the consultant team were Simon Inglis, Clare Hartwell, Gill Chitty and Julie Graham.

If you would like to know more about this project or tell us about relevant issues or concerns that you have, please contact Gemma Abercrombie: English Heritage, 23 Savile Row, London W1S 2ET or [gemma.abercrombie@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:gemma.abercrombie@english-heritage.org.uk)

A leaflet on the Sports Project (Product Code 50701) is also available free of charge from English Heritage Customer Services: 0870 333 1181 or [customers@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:customers@english-heritage.org.uk)