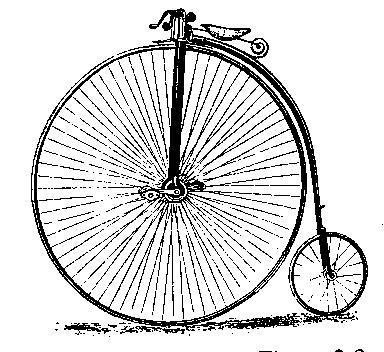
Chapter 8

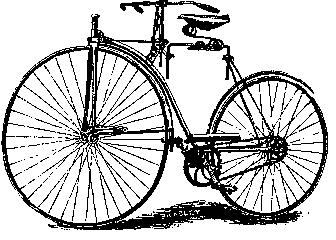
Branching Out - Continued

Though the examples provided in the last chapter would certainly indicate that those of Aston Manor had begun to adopt a new recreational identity it should not be thought that this was the whole movement. For, as this final chapter will indicate, this encompassed a great deal more. It not only expanded into many other areas but, perhaps for the first time brought the female onto the scene. It must be understood however that this development was not all-embracing, for it took until the years after our period of interest for the female to become an equal recreational partner.

There was however one area of recreational development that can be identified as establishing itself with particular vigour and, having within it a real sense of the individual and one that, perhaps for the first time truly involved the female, cycling. Though this recreation, as a competitive sporting activity had become an essential feature of commercial recreational presentations within Aston Manor it also became an increasingly popular private pastime for many of the general population. That cycling could become so popular was due, in part not only to it being a spectator inducing sport but more importantly in regards to its potential for private social usage, via its increasing availability and evolving design process.[[1]](#footnote-1) This, it has been logically argued was provoked by the insistence of the individual for an instrument that would allow them not only to enjoy greater comfort but also increased safety. Such innovations that emerged in response to these demands included, for example the pneumatic tyre, the introduction of a rear wheel drive and the development of a machine dedicated to the female. This process can be clearly identified when the three models illustrated are compared which clearly shows how the design and technology altered the basic premise of the machine:



Typical ‘Ordinary’ High Wheel Bicycle, often called Penny Farthing [[2]](#footnote-2)



The Rover ‘Safety’ Bicycle’ of 1884. [[3]](#footnote-3)

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Typical bicycle of the 1890’s. This type was designed not only for cheapness via mass production but

also to make cycling more practical, the female version offering a sloping crossbar. [[4]](#footnote-4)

The development of the machine however was not simply linear. For, as with so many other things in life innovation often provided alternatives. One such was the Tricycle. Deriving from the three wheel machine that was popular for those children lucky enough to have parents who could afford to purchase such an item it arrived, it would seem on the streets of Aston Manor around 1880. Though initially an item of derision it would seem that its presence upon the road and streets of the Manor had by 1886 not only become accepted but praised as a rival to the cycle. One journalist who stated that he had experience of the machine voiced its praises loudly when he stated:

I carried with me from Coventry two suits of clothes, a stick, umbrella, sketching stool and sketching books with painting materials innumerable, weighing in all twenty five pounds - a feat I could never have accomplished had I ridden a bicycle. Nor did this load interfere with my pleasure or my speed. Whithersoever my friend the bicycler went, there was I.” and “The machine is now so constructed as to meet the demands of the tourist. One tricycle has a basket attached in front, which the rider can open without moving from his seat. As much as one hundred and fifty pounds can be so carried.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Yet despite these virtues this innovation does not seem to have interested the local cyclist to any great degree. That it did attract find support, as will indicated later was in reality because of it being something of a novelty, one that was substantially higher in purchase price than the conventional cycle.

However, in regards to the ‘normal’ bicycle whatever reason that is put forward as an explanation to its ever increasing popularity there can be little doubt that primarily it was because it allowed the rider a degree of personal involvement. That it permitted the individual, by themselves or as a member of a club or group the opportunity to travel was undoubtedly another reason for its emergence in popularity that was perhaps second only to football in its rate of growth. Though initially it was a recreational tool of the middle class there is much to indicate that it soon became as familiar with the labouring classes. That such a situation could arise locally was in part due to the efforts of The Birmingham Local Centre of the National Cyclist Union. This organisation which was formed in 1892 to replace the Birmingham and District Cyclist Association was aimed at encouraging all aspects of cycling including matters of safety and constantly put forward proposals to promote the pastime. In 1892 for example it successfully campaigned for improved lighting on the roads, a cause from which Aston Manor certainly benefited. It was also extremely confident about the future. Indeed, a spokesman stated that he was inclined to believe that ’bicycling will soon become a popular a pastime as cricket itself’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Though this assertion might be thought to have been somewhat optimistic the consideration by a columnist of The Birmingham Daily Mail*,* that: “every suburb possesses one or more cycling club who have a ride out” certainly rang true of the Manor.[[7]](#footnote-7) The parent organisation additionally was responsible throughout the country for the arranging of competitive cycle meetings of quite a large nature. Events such the 50 mile individual championship, which took place in 1908 on the Aston Villa track had the effect of projecting the bicycle into the populations psyche and further established it as an essential factor in the recreational lives of the individual.[[8]](#footnote-8)

That cycling should have become so popular was not only due to factors as already indicated but also to the emergence of more mundane but nevertheless important additional factors, the hire purchase agreement, when machines could be purchased over a period of six or twelve months,[[9]](#footnote-9) the second hand market and the effective cheapening of the machine due to the development of mass production.[[10]](#footnote-10) Such was the effect of the latter for example that whilst for the first three months of 1879 the cheapest machine advertised in The Midland Athlete, a publication devoted to all athletic pursuits was £7 10s 0d, by 1905 the price, in real terms had fallen considerably making the purchasing of the instrument a more affordable possibility for many individuals. Certainly by this later date all the local newspapers were carrying advertisements by local manufacturers and dealers extolling the attractions of cycling, all at what were termed affordable prices. These were, often as not accompanied by inducements to purchase accessories, both for the machine and rider, such as bells, lights and tools to make repairs, particular punctures. Certainly, within the area of the Manor it was the company of E. V. Smith of Villa Cross who were the most celebrated.[[11]](#footnote-11)



Additionally the newspapers also featured ‘features’ on the pastime. Perhaps typical could be found in The Aston Times. Here, from the late 1880s were consistently provided articles of interest and, from around 1895 until the end of our period regular features such as ‘Cycling Gossip’ and ‘Local Cycling Runs.’ Within these were ‘chit chat’ on such topics as tyre widths, cycle safety as well as tips on the things to see whilst on particular journeys.[[12]](#footnote-12) Other publications were also supportive of the recreation. One, The Birmingham Weekly Post offered, during the summer months of 1900 a series of quite extensive articles on the joys of cycling entitled ‘On Tour With Tony To Scotland,’ within which the notion of bicycle touring was actively described and advocated.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, it stopped short of suggesting that the female participated, as an individual, implying that if she did wish to participate it was a more suitable for the husband accompanied married lady.[[14]](#footnote-14) Additionally the Sports Argus ran from 1900 until at least 1911 a regular column entitled ‘Cycle Chatter’. Here, were provided not only suggestions for rides but also information of interest to the keen cyclists such as new features for the machine, tips on maintenance and news of club activities.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Perhaps the most expressive publication that emerged during this time that the cyclist and indeed any other individual wishing to enjoy the recreation could draw upon was The Birmingham Half-Day Saturday Guide. Written as a source of information and of a size that could easily fit into a pocket or bag its function was to suggest ways of spending leisure time, containing as it did routes and places to visit for the cyclist, one of the places always mentioned being Aston Hall and its parkland as well as train timetables and general information about local points of interest. That it was published from 1871 to around 1900 is clear proof that it provided valuable service to the ever expanding recreational movement.[[16]](#footnote-16) The fact that cycling had gained such popularity allowed for dedicated publications to be produced, The Cyclos and The Bicycling News. Though published in Birmingham, they must have been of interest to those of Aston Manor, both having ‘as standard’ advice on places to visit, along with the best routes to take and tips on maintenance of the machine along with news of new models that were available. Yet despite these obvious important additions to the world of cycling perhaps the greatest expression of its popularity was the expansion of clubs dedicated to the recreation. These, initially however were, in common with the ownership of the bicycle middle class in nature, but as the period progressed there are clear indications that these and the recreation in general become ever increasingly more socially diverse.

The first club to emerge was The Aston Star Cycling Club*.* Formed, it is believed by a Mr. Whitehouse, before 1867 it often termed itself not only the oldest cycling club in the Midlands but also England. Meeting, as it did at their Club House in Park Lane it seems to have had a healthy existence up to the turn of the century, when it seems to have ceased to exist.[[17]](#footnote-17) This club was quickly followed by the St James and Aston Unity clubs, the latter it would appear being formed, if one is to believe their publicity, in 1867.[[18]](#footnote-18) This club which as appendix x indicates holds the honour of being the Manor’s second oldest club, enjoyed the holding of, what appears to have been a yearly celebration which towards the end of the period was enacted at the Victoria Hall[[19]](#footnote-19) whilst it would seem the former enjoyed only a very short existence.

Nevertheless as our period of interest progressed there appears to have been a surge, new clubs springing up rapidly. One of these, The Acorn Unity CC, certainly named after their headquarters, The Acorn public house not only presented the members with the opportunity to compete but also, seemingly very successfully developed a social facet to their club. Holding, from the very beginning an ‘Annual Dinner and Prize Presentation Night’ the club both promoted itself and the recreation to great effect. Meeting, as they did in their HQ they attracted not only local dignitaries but also the leading figures from cycle clubs and organisations from outside the area, thus establishing a broad relationship with others of the recreation.[[20]](#footnote-20)

It was at the same time that another of the early clubs was formed, the Vulcan CC. They too, like the vast majority quickly developed a social side, often enjoying what might be described as ‘runs’ to local places of interest. Yet this seemingly rather attractive activity reflected a factor that was, certainly in the early years of our period applicable to all cycling clubs, that the female was excluded from enjoying the pleasures of the pastime. However, unlike many others this club did not seemingly have a regular headquarters. Though the Rose and Crown appears to have been utilised on many occasions it also appears to have enjoyed a presence within other local hostelries such as the Bee Hive[[21]](#footnote-21) and The Holte Inn.[[22]](#footnote-22)

It should not be presumed however that all the cycling clubs within Aston Manor enjoyed a long period of activity. Several appear to have blossomed but failed to sustain a lengthy existence. Aston Victoria, for example seemingly survived between during 1903-05 whilst Burlington CC and Birchfield CC, amongst others equally had a short life. This latter club though was very active in that not only did it provide a recreational vehicle for its members but it also promoted several public events, for example arranging on the 4th April 1885, along with a Birmingham club Saltley CC a professional cycle and tricycle competition.[[23]](#footnote-23)

From this time onwards there was a steady increase in the number of clubs that can be identified as having connections with the world of cycling within Aston Manor. In regards to this increase it should be appreciated that it is quite likely that some of the new entrants were not actually formed within the area. However, what is certain is that all, to a greater or lesser extent did have a connection with the area, either utilising Aston Manor locations as headquarters or simply using the area for their activities, all seemingly enjoying a social side, holding what were often termed as ‘soirees’ at local hostelries.

One of the last to be formed, The Aston and District Club according to the local press had, if true what must be considered an extraordinary membership, numbering over three thousand, as opposed to what appears to have been an average club membership for many of perhaps around fifty, Aston Manor CC perhaps being typical,[[24]](#footnote-24) though the Lucas club, formed in 1897 had an initial seventy[[25]](#footnote-25) and the Birchfield club, at 1884 between 150-160.[[26]](#footnote-26) Whether this figure correct and whether this ‘club’ was in reality The Aston and District Cycling Association cannot be established but, if indeed it was the organisation it raises another factor in the development of the recreation. As in other activities which wished to develop it soon became apparent that there was a need for an overriding organisational local structure, though in regards to cycling this development did not emerge until the later years of our period of interest, when enough clubs had formed to justify such a construction. The organisation, be it club or association was actually formed in 1906 and quickly got into the habit of utilising many of the public houses of the Manor, meeting for a number of years at The Swan Pool Tavern.[[27]](#footnote-27)

However it was at a meeting in the Holte Hotel that it was proposed that, for the first time a competition be inaugurated to be contested by the member clubs. This event, being contested over a twenty-six mile time trial was for a trophy that had been donated by a Mr. S. A. Newman. It was here that one of the speakers drew attention to the importance of the press. In thanking both the Aston News and The Sports Argus he drew attention to the value of press coverage in advertising the activity. Perhaps only football received more coverage during the latter years of our period than cycling, and it may well be this that gave it the opportunity to rival it in genuine popularity.[[28]](#footnote-28) Indeed it was the interest that this ‘club’ fostered which provided the impertus for a further advance, for in the following year an association which was designed purely to represent those clubs and individuals of Aston Manor, TheAston Manor Cycling Association was also formed

Meeting on a regular basis up to 1911 and beyond this association was primarily concerned with overseeing the activities of the clubs which had definite associations with Aston Manor. In this capacity it was actively involved in the many competitions that were provided for within the area, as well as organising its very own event. As such, like many other similar organisations they held an annual meeting within which prizes were accorded to those who had emerged victorious at their competitions. Perhaps typical of these meetings was one held in 1909 in the Upper Grounds Hotel, a venue which appears to been a regular location for such events and which may have been the headquarters though no evidence can be found to substantiate this. On this occasion, which it was reported drew a ‘crowded attendance’ a multitude of prizes were handed out to many differing riders and clubs. That so many clubs were recorded as being involved gives strength to the belief that cycling both as a passive and proactive recreation was, by this time was clearly popular, both in the Manor and beyond. That many of the competitions were held, more often as not on the track that surrounded the playing pitch of Aston Villa FC, the Lower Grounds cycle track having been closed down in some years previous indicates that the area of Aston Manor was an extremely vital and important location within the Midlands world of club cycling.

The rewards for victory were, like the events that provided for their award varied. The One Mile Race, for example afforded the victor, a T. J. Gardner of Smethwick CC a clock set. However, certain clubs, particularly The Lion Wheelers did well, managing to gain prizes in both the Obstacle Race, E. W. Shelton, Salad bowl and servers; and first and second in the Slow Race, E. W. Shelton, pair of cycle knickers and A. Shelton, a Cruet. It was noted by the newspaper reporter covering this event that Mr. Shelton’s victory in the latter race was his third in a row! However, the most prestigious event, the 25 mile time trial, which was sponsored annually by the local cycle manufacturer, The Ivy Cycle Works, of Lichfield Road was won by The Vulcan CC, their prize being a Silver Cup. In receiving the trophy a Mr. J. H. Darlaston, on behalf of his club, after receiving ‘a magnificent reception’ assured them (the audience) that:

“they felt very proud to have the honour of winning the cup and that they would give whoever won it next year the same reception that they had received that they had received.”

Though it is not known where this particular club originated from there are many indications to suggest that their activities appear to have been centred on Aston Manor. Upon the final presentations being made, the Chairman, Mr, H. Twyford asked all to rise so as to salute the winners and to the continued prosperity of the Association, pointing out the advantages of combination, and hoping that the association “would carry on its useful work.” Allied to the fact that accompanying these proceedings was musical entertainment, this being provided by a Gilbert Starkey, a comedian whose ‘patter and songs created a great deal of amusement’ and a Master Alf Butterworth who sang with ‘conspicuous ability’ provided for a full evening.[[29]](#footnote-29)

That the Villa Park track was an essential factor in the promotion of cycling within, not only the Manor but wider afield can be verified when a meeting in 1908 is considered. On the 16th of May The Midland Cycle and Athletic Club held their fifth annual event, though the first to have been held in the Manor. Described as a ‘Cycling Carnival’ it featured not only club races but special invitation events. One of these matched teams representing Birmingham and London whilst another pitched the Manchester Wheelers against The Midland Counties Athletic Club in a five mile pursuit race, Manchester eventually proving victorious. That the event could retain the sort of attendance that had been attained by similar previously held meetings, some eight thousand suggests that despite the Lower Grounds being lost as a specific site the nature of these type of events was still attractive to many of the general public.[[30]](#footnote-30) Yet, despite the introduction of the club and competition ethos to cycling in the area there is little evidence to suggest that it involved the female. For, as far as can be established there was only one ‘Ladies Club’ in the area, that of Apollo. This club, which appendix x indicates seemingly existed from 1897 to 1904 enjoyed runs to places such as Tamworth and Wishaw[[31]](#footnote-31) but sadly, whether by design or fault the local press seemingly chose to generally ignore their activities. That the female would appear to have had limited representation within the world of club cycling should not be thought of as defining her role in the recreation as a whole. For, whilst her club participation was generally limited, certainly due more to paternalism than any lack of interest there can be little doubt that she enjoyed an ever increasing individual, private participation.

Not surprisingly its popularity, whether concerning club or individual of either gender did not meet with everyone’s approval. In one particular scathing letter, in the early years of our period to the Birmingham and Aston Chroniclean F. Wright (presumably a male) expressed the view that: “cycling was a nuisance, causing men and horses to be endangered.”[[32]](#footnote-32) This attitude however was not held by all, for, in the next weeks issue a letter, offering advice to the cyclist took the following stance:

“In your correspondence of last week I noticed an article referring to bicycling as a nuisance. Taking into consideration the fact that in the United Kingdom there are over one hundred bicycle clubs and close to three thousand cyclists I think you will find it a rather hard task to prevent these from indulging rationally in the sport after dusk. Please advise those who cycle to use a bell. Being a member of the oldest cycling club in England, The Aston Star for six years, proof of the attachment of the people of Aston Manor to cycling is witnessed when they applauded a two mile handicap race on the Aston Lower Grounds.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

Those who considered the activity dangerous nevertheless had much to support their cause. Throughout our period there were numerous incidents involving riders that gave succour to their adversaries. One such incident involved the brothers John and Clement Littlewood, cabinet makers of Albert Road. Riding, in what was described by a policeman as a ‘furious manner’ at fifteen miles per hour down the Lozells Road they crashed as they approached Witton Road. The Magistrates fined them 5/-.[[34]](#footnote-34) Again, in another incident a Violet Mason, who, when travelling downhill towards Lichfield Road lost control of her machine, crashing into a bakers shop window. Sustaining severe hand damage and cuts to her head she was taken to hospital.[[35]](#footnote-35) Others however who were injured did not always believe it was their fault, often blaming the condition of the roads. One such case involved a Mary Ann Johnson of Saltley, who sought damages of £50 before Judge Whitehorne and a jury at Birmingham Crown Court for injuries sustained whilst riding down Thimblemill Lane, blaming the condition of the road for her accident. Unfortunately she failed to convince the jury and her claim was dismissed.[[36]](#footnote-36) Such was the concern that so many people were being injured that in 1900 the press was driven to provide articles extolling warnings to all cyclists and young boy riders in particular of the dangers. Though many were of a similar nature, having concern for the rider travelling too fast, on one particular instance a more sombre stance was adopted. Writing in the Birmingham and Aston Chronicle a columnist took a medical perspective to the discussion. The writer, a Dr. Richardson assured the reader that:

“that it is always best to delay the commencement of cycling until the body is closely approaching its maturity.”

Given this, a clear warning in regards to the welfare of the young he continued:

“Cycling is an exercise so different from any other exercise, that it moulds the body framework, as it were to its own mode of motion. The fact is seen even in adult cyclists to are too much in the saddle and who find it a nuisance to undertake any journey on foot, which can be accomplished on the machine. These riders, in course of time, almost invariably acquire what may be called the cyclist’s figure, which is not graceful, and is not indicative of the full possession of perfectly balanced bodily powers. If this perversion of physical build can occure after the body has acquired its full development it stands to reason that the same will occur, with much more determinate results, if the exercise of cycling be carried on to any great extent at the time when the body is still growing, when all the organs of locomotion are plastic, and when irregularities of shape are not only easily induced but are easily moulded into permanent configuration. For the reasons here stated I should not recommend cycling as a pastime of the schools.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

However, what dangers the cyclist had to face were not always what they seemed. For, given the nature of children from time immemorial ‘practical jokes’ played by on them on unwitting victims have always been an attractive proposition. One particular prank played by youths in the Manor, was termed locally as ‘The Brick in a Paper Bag’. This particularly nasty habit involved the wrapping up a large stone or brick in paper and laying it on the road. The unfortunate cyclist, not realising the danger would then, presumably not being concerned at riding over a piece of paper attempt to do so. The result, as can be expected was a heavy fall for the unfortunate rider!![[38]](#footnote-38)

Others actions perhaps reflecting a more venomous attitude are recorded as being enacted as late as 1882 involved the drivers of horse-drawn vehicles flicking the whip at cyclists as they passed. These, when added to by the habit of throwing sticks into the wheels of cycles as they rode by and of pedestrians making pea-shooting attacks made the recreation, at times somewhat hazardous. One particular club, The Britannic perhaps believing that their members and cyclists in general were in need of some protection began a campaign to fight for expenses in relation to injuries sustained by riders. This campaign was perhaps inspired what happened in 1900 when an rider perhaps misjudging its speed was run over by a tram.[[39]](#footnote-39) Unfortunately it is not possible to ascertain if they were successful as this campaign did not begin in earnest until the end of our period of interest.[[40]](#footnote-40) However, it would seem that in regards to the dangers, the cyclist appear to have accepted them as part of the hobby. For, as the Aston News put it:

“accidents to cyclists give an element of tragedy to this popular pastime, but, as the cook said of the Eels in her pan, they seem to get used to it!”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Antagonism to the cycle and the rider belonged not only to the 1870s but was also present many years later, only here it was often aimed squarely at the females participation. The prominence given by The Aston and East Birmingham Newsto an article emitting from the New York Medical Board, United States in regards to the danger to her perhaps might be perceived as reflecting an attitude within Aston Manor and the area in general. Here, under the heading of ‘Is Cycling a Benefit to Women’ it expounded the view that, for women the pastime was one of risk:

“One danger is the saddle, which is physically and morally injurious to women. Everyone is familiar with the general form of the saddle and knows how entirely inadequate is the support given to the lady.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

That there were individuals who purported to have the best interests of the female in mind can be further evidenced when, in an article entitled ‘The Bicycle Hand’ another danger was pointed out. Here it was stated lady cyclists might be disposed, in consequence to look, for the first time with some askance at their new plaything. For in this instance ladies were warned that the bicycle hand is a ‘thing of ugliness and horror for ever.’ This affliction was graphically described as presenting its appearance as being:

“flattened, bulges out at the side, gets lumpy and out of shape and the fingers all become crooked, all of these dreadful results are held to be due to the habit of clutching the handlebars of the machine.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

For one writer however the concern for the safety of the female was sincere, simple and sensible and perhaps was aimed at calming the nerves of any female who might be considering purchasing a machine. It was fundamentally to follow a few rules. Writing under the heading of ‘Dont’s for Women Cyclists’ it clearly advised that any female who wished to purchase a bicycle should, as a matter of concern bear the following in mind:

Don’t buy a cheap machine,

Don’t have your handles high or your saddle low,

Don’t go on a long country ride alone,

Don’t alter your saddle unless you have enough strength to bolt it,

Don’t wear knickerbockers without a skirt to cover them,

Don’t ride more than forty miles per day,

Don’t step off the bicycle, jump off.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Whether many of the ladies of Aston Manor took notice of these warnings or advice cannot be judged. However, a statement published by the Aston Times, attributed to the ‘Medical Press’ clearly aimed at answering the purveyors of doom and was clear in its support of female participation:

“Let women cultivate health and the ways that bring health, and men will value them more for so doing, despite the fact that the result may be a little loss in the graceful outlines of the female figure owing merely to some healthy increase in the muscular tissue.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

That antagonistic views could be expressed publicly might have had, apart from a genuine concern for the welfare of the female, a more subtle agenda. For the fact that a female could cycle, perhaps alone and essentially away from a closeted world of ‘male control’ meant that she was essentially independent. It was this aspect of the recreation that inspired many, including even some ladies to express disquiet. In the magazine ‘Lady’s Realm,’ a publication squarely aimed at the middle class female market a Mrs. Linton, in 1890 described the female cyclist:

“as lacking the faintest remnant of that sweet spirit of allurement which conscious or unconscious is woman’s supreme attraction.”

Perhaps what was the real fear for such people was that the female was able to enjoy a social freedom, a point one indomitable lady put when she stated:

“Chief of all the dangers attending this new development of female freedom is the intoxication which comes from unfettered liberty.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

Certainly one of the major objections made about the female’s participation in cycling, and indeed many other forms of physical recreation was the matter of propriety. Victorian social respectability in demanding restrictive clothing for the female undoubtedly impaired the potential for activity. One of the major concerns was the exposure of the ankle. There can be little doubt that cycling, by its very nature had the potential to expose this particular part of the body, if ordinary street clothing was worn. Perhaps in order to circumvent this problem, as well as to acknowledge that the female and cycling were now intertwined a solution was proposed, the Tricycle Shield.



Perhaps proposed more in hope than expectation it was, it would seem an attempt by which decency and activity could be combined. Though advertised in all of the local newspapers there is little indication as to its ‘catching on’. Given that the Tricycle, as already stated was not particularly popular, the simple cycle being the mode most favoured it was an attempt which was perhaps doomed from its conception.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Thankfully, for the sake of female participation there were others who held very different views. In an article clearly designed to support female activity, one that perhaps came closer to reality appeared under the banner ‘Women on Wheels’:

“Four years ago a woman on wheels was a rare and conspicuous sight but today there are few parts of England where a recycling maid or matron exacts any wonder in the mind of the spectator,” [[48]](#footnote-48)

a view that was quite forcibly supported by the American emancipationist Susan B. Anthony writing in 1896. Though stating her views in connection with American womanhood she perhaps spoke for all females when she stated that:

“I think the bicycle has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. It gives a woman a feeling of freedom and self-reliance. The moment she takes her seat she knows she can't get into harm unless she gets off her bicycle, and away she goes, the picture of free, untrammelled womanhood.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

The female cyclist however did receive an unexpected boost when it was reported that Her Majesty Queen Victoria herself, at Osbourne House had actually rode a machine herself. Indeed, not only this she had actually ordered several machines for the Princesses, perhaps putting the Royal seal of approval on the recreation.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Yet, despite these upbeat proclamations, there is little evidence, apart from the already mentioned ladies club of females having an active club role in the physical side of the recreation in Aston Manor. It is noticeable that only one report in the press actually mentions dual gender participation, that in regards to the Lozells Wesleyan club. In a run to Kenilworth the Birmingham Weekly News mentions that ‘four ladies took part and lasted quite well.[[51]](#footnote-51) Perhaps as a confirmation of a general lack of involvement some five years previous it was recorded that on the occasion of their first run of the season members of Birchfield CC left their headquarters in Aston Manor to ride to Sutton Coldfield. The ladies however did not have the opportunity to ride with them, making the outward journey by rail. After enjoying an afternoon with the men they again utilised the rail service to return, leaving the members to ‘ride their steel horses home’.[[52]](#footnote-52) As proof that such a situation had prevailed and that this practice might be seen as typical can be gleaned from a report, of some eight years later concerning The Aston Conservative Cycling Club. On the occasion of a club picnic it was stated that, though the number attending was around fifty only half of these actually rode bicycles. It would seem that the ladies and friends went by coach to their destination, Whitacre, in Staffordshire whilst only the males pedalled there. After a lunch a number of games and an improvised concert in a local hostelry was provided after which, in gathering darkness the journey home began. However, to make the trip more exciting upon reaching nearby Coleshill both the riders and coaches were adorned with a large number of brilliant Chinese lanterns. Such was the effect of these adornments had on those who witnessed the club’s progress that it was reported that:

“Great was the astonishment of the yokels at the brilliancy of the spectacle and cheer after cheer went up as the party drove gaily away. long the dark country lanes which lie between Whitacre and home the gaily lighted bicycle and coaches presented a really beautiful appearance and fairly ‘astonished the natives’ for they came running out of their rustic homes with all the speed as the party drove by, to enjoy the somewhat unusual site.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

Of course, it must always borne in mind that the local newspapers in not reporting any activity might have taken the attitude that the female riding a bicycle was not particularly newsworthy, suggesting perhaps that it was not an unusual sight either in Aston Manor or the surrounding areas. Indeed, some eight years later The Aston Newsin an editorial piece would write of cycling and its devotees under the headline of ‘The Popular Pastime’:

“While the weather has not been of that ideal character which Easter holiday seekers would desire, there was a big exodus of residents from Aston during the week end. Those who remained at home availed themselves of the modern pastime of cycling into the country and enjoying the beautiful scenery of which the country of Warwickshire can boast, and which this time of the year gives one a foretaste of what may be expected a couple of months later. It has been said that cycling has added to the gaiety of nations, increased the enjoyment of both sexes and given holidays a new charm.” [[54]](#footnote-54)

That this newspaper was genuinely supportive of female participation can be perceived from the illustration that was used as a heading for a regular feature column concerning the enjoyment of cycling. Here, as can be seen clearly is the female, being greeted in time honoured fashion by the male, both participants in what the newspaper obviously implied was a socially acceptable recreation.



Heading illustration used in The Aston Times between the period 1900 and 1910.

All of the newspapers that covered the Manor, to a greater or lesser degree, as stated previously provided articles concerning the recreation but one, in particular, The Sports Argus, a Birmingham based newspaper devoted to sport and recreation developed a novel and useful way of imparting information to the would-be traveller. In a series of articles utilising a play on words with ‘Pleasant Sunday Afternoon’ entitled ‘Pleasant Saturday Afternoon’ guides would be printed extolling the virtues of particular locations. Routes were supplied along with details about points of interest which would be encountered en-route. All these were clearly marked for removal from the page so that the would-be traveller was able to build up a collection of guides to the various interesting locations in and around the Birmingham area.[[55]](#footnote-55) So popular were these that they featured from the 1890s until a time well after our period of interest. Perhaps typical was one of 13th May, 1903, which proposed that, after travelling from Birmingham to Coventry by rail a ride could be made to Princethorpe, Southam, Ufton, Leamington, Stoneleigh, Stivichall and eventually home via again a rail journey from Coventry. Giving clear instruction of what route to take it advised on things to watch out for, including, for example The Old Mill in the village of Marton and the ‘babbling brook’ of Princethorpe.[[56]](#footnote-56) Many other newspapers that covered the Aston Manor area also provided a similar service, The Aston News, for example from as early as 1895 presenting a column entitled ‘Local Cycling Runs’. These, like many others sought to impart information about locations that were considered worthwhile for the cyclist to visit. Again perhaps typical was one that concerned the town of Redditch. Not only were instructions given of how to get there but also details of particular points of interest in regards to the town.[[57]](#footnote-57) Yet, as was always the case in the later Victorian period innovation was always present, for around this time a new facet of cycling recreation arrived on the scene, that of Cycle Camping. Prompted by a publication by a Mr. T. H. Holding entitled ‘Cycle and Camp’ the notion of time under canvas was linked to the recreation, though if the views of ‘The Clubman’ writing in The Aston News is to be taken as a guide camping should be renamed ‘Scientific Savagery’. Now it was proposed through the Cycle Campers Association’ that nowhere was inaccessible. Significantly, in the article which espouses this opportunity there was, as indicated a clear inference of the acceptance of the male and female enjoying such a recreation together.

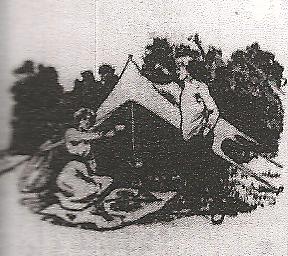


Illustration contained within ‘Cycling Gossip’,

Cycle Camping by The Clubman,[[58]](#footnote-58)

Although the illustration indicates she is conforming to her domestic role, she is after all seemingly handing the male refreshment her proximity to him in such a situation might indicate that the views stated previously in regards to the females ‘unfettered liberty’ had been, in principle rejected. It is significant that within the article no mention is made in regards to the question of marriage. Whether the idea of a single female holidaying alone with a male would have been socially acceptable could well be a matter for debate!!

Certainly one topic that appears to have constantly taxed the mind of those reporting on the pastime was that which concerned catering! ‘Cycling Gossip’ in particular seems to have used many column inches in debating the problem of whether the rider gets better refreshments as a club member of as an individual? It would seem that, in general terms the advice was plan ahead!! This advice was particularly relevant, it was thought when taking a cycling holiday. However, the expert advice here was to base the holiday around fixed points, which could be changed once all the sites surrounding the positions chosen had been exhausted.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Whatever the social implications of this development the writer was at great pains to point out some important facts to be considered when undertaking such a recreation. Not only must the rider be aware of the dangers of long distance riding, that a steady pace be maintained but also that regular, but small amounts of food must be taken to ensure that strength and stamina is preserved. Also, most importantly attention is drawn to the problem of leaky valves!!! However for those who felt confident and had the ambition to enjoy such a recreation a magazine was available, ‘The Bath Road News’. Here could be found not only items relating to the latest innovations in the world of cycling but also valuable tips on camping and long distance riding.[[60]](#footnote-60)

On a more humorous vein is the presumption made, some nine year previous to the time of Cycle Camping, which may have actually unearthed the real hidden attraction of cycling. Written, again in The Aston Newsit was proposedthat perhaps the real attraction for the female was that ‘the gentle art of courting’ could be made possible, perhaps allowing for a modicum of privacy despite being in a group, when the parties concerned were cycling. It goes on to describe an imaginary scene when:

“Arabella and John, having lagged behind the rest of the party, attempted to kiss when a turn in the quiet country lane hid them from the rude gaze of their fellow riders. John wobbles up so near as to menace the equilibrium of his companion, struggles with loose handlebars and erring front wheels ensue. Many, many difficulties are encountered, and overcome before the pair, the lady blushing delightfully rejoin their companions.”[[61]](#footnote-61)

Though this scene might be considered somewhat idealised, it has to be recognised that cycling must have had its attraction, if for nothing else the fact that it offered both the possibility of sexual equality and the likelihood of meeting members of the opposite sex, away from the constraints of home.

Nevertheless despite these ‘positive’ outlooks the fact was, as already indicated that the female was not essentially an integral feature of club activity. This was certainly inferred by the columnist writing under the heading of ‘Ladies Day’ in one particular local newspaper. This writer, quite obviously a male though clearly recognising the attraction of including the female, so as to allow, for example the opportunity to organise garden parties and impromptu dances also draws the readers attention to, what he considers an important factor, the financial aspect. Here it is pointed out that perhaps the female involvement was limited due to the fact that it was more financially expensive to provide the sort of attractions that would entice the ladies to become members. However, on a more positive tone, it was noted that their inclusion when encouraged ‘to a reasonable extent’ makes those clubs more popular and successful.[[62]](#footnote-62) In general terms however the attitude towards the recreation can perhaps be summed up by the editorial comment in The Saturday Night, when in 1883 it was stated:

“I fancy there were as many out on those days as during the best of last summer, and it did me good to watch boys and young men, and old ones too!”[[63]](#footnote-63)

It should be noted that no mention is made of the female!!!

Nevertheless from within the world of the private and individual it would certainly appear that by 1905 she had become, in Aston Manor a fully fledged participant. This can be clearly perceived from within the views expressed in a column by ‘The Clubman’ in The Aston News when it proposed that:

“whilst the pioneers of the cycling pastime were composed of hardy athletes who delighted in piling up mileage and battling with headwinds and gradients today vast numbers of quite ordinary people, *of both sexes* use the cycle as a means of pleasure travel without ever claiming or winning recognition as tourists.”[[64]](#footnote-64)

That the recreation of cycling was now firmly established as an accepted form of female recreation and one that was recognised as having the potential to be suitable for the whole family can also be verified. In a letter from a reader which appeared in one of the Manor’s newspapers, the writer recounted an interesting personal experience:

“The other day I noticed quite a crowd assembled near Six Ways, Aston and, on drawing nearer I found that the central object was a Tandem Tricycle upon which were seated a lady and a gentleman. In front of the machine - and this is what had excited the curiosity of the bystanders - was a little wider chair fixed close to the ground and in which was sitting a small child of some four summers. The arrangement for accommodating the child struck me as somewhat novel, but in the event of a collision it would be hard times on the youngster. Another novel but useful machine that passed the other day when out riding was a bicycle in front of which was an invalid machine.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

Nevertheless perhaps the final word as to the acceptance of the bicycle, both within the world of business as well as a recreational tool belongs to The Aston News of 1910. Here, under the heading of ‘The Wheel Age’ the writer clearly places the cycle and its use as a vital factor in the social and economic world. Beginning with the statement ‘We live in a wheel age’ he acknowledges the popularity of the bicycle to all classes of people and notes that it is impossible to go anywhere without noting how well used the machine is. In so doing the writer also comments that it has had a health benefit, providing exercise and allowing ‘far and away places to be visited’ for it was, generally speaking:

“beneficial to Englishmen to cultivate a more intimate acquaintance with their own country, for the reason that men who know little of their native land are lacking the essential part of their education.”

The writer also concludes that the machine had also had an effect upon the business world, particularly of the Post Office in regards to the delivery of its letters and parcels. Finally, in quoting a Mr. Legross in regards to usage he wrote that “one person in fifteen of the entire population is a cyclist but his estimate does not include motor cyclists who have lately grown in numbers appreciably.”[[66]](#footnote-66) The thrust of the article perhaps sums up the fact that at the end of our period of interest the bicycle, for men and women was a common an article of recreation as the car is today. The objections to its incorporation into the lives of so many, particularly the female had fundamentally fallen away.

For those, of either sex, of a less energetic nature however there were alternatives, ones that may have been attractive to those of advancing years. Whist, for example appears to have had a decent club scene which appears to have emerged after the turn of the century. Surprisingly, like many areas of recreation the participants appeared to have desired a competitive atmosphere, providing for a league to be formed, This, The Birmingham and District Whist League formed around 1900 which, a little while later appears to have been assimilated into the Birmingham and District Social Club Union which organised and ran a multitude of competitive competitions attuned to the social club scene, ie cribbage, dominoes etc. This league as appendix xiindicates comprised of several Aston Manor teams and would appear to have still been active right up to the end of our period, developing a system of promotion and relegation. It would appear, for example that in 1906 Upper Thomas Street occupied a place in Division One whilst Burlington Hall was in Division Two. In addition one of the political organisations of the Manor the Liberals organised Whist nights at their headquarters at Victoria Road. Often accompanying this game were other activities which featured in the Social Club Union activities, including Bagatelle. Here again there appears to have been a league, only now it appears that Burlington Hall were the only Manor representative, competing, it appears from 1898 to 1904.[[67]](#footnote-67) There is, unfortunately no indication within the rather sparse coverage afforded by the local press of whether the female was involved in these activities, though a guess might presume that she was not, and if she was then only in a guest role.

Another activity which was enjoyed within the confines of Aston Manor was Bowling or to give it its correct name Lawn Bowls.[[68]](#footnote-68) This game or at least a version of it has, of course been with us for a considerable period of time, immortalised as it is by the fabled exploits of Sir Francis Drake. The game made its first recorded appearance in the Manor around 1859 but was almost certainly played in the area well before this date. Nevertheless it might well be that the first club that was recorded as participating was The Holte Bowling Green Club which was formed in 1863, celebrating its Jubilee in 1888.[[69]](#footnote-69) Meeting and performing as it did at the Holte Hotel Green it was a consistent feature of local recreational life right up to 1911. There are references to its existence in all the local newspapers, including the fact that in 1892 it celebrated its 29th annual dinner at the Hotel, a presentation being made by a Mr. Hall who could boast of being a member of the Bowling club that occupied Aston Park some thirty three years previous.[[70]](#footnote-70) It was also reported that in 1905 it had a profit of £21 6s 1d with 53 members[[71]](#footnote-71) whilst a year later the club had a healthy fifty five members,[[72]](#footnote-72) which by 1910, when it held its 51st annual dinner still stood at forty five.[[73]](#footnote-73) The club, which appears to have normally restricted its appearances to ‘friendly’ fixtures against other local teams did however enter, in 1905 the Warwickshire and Worcestershire Bowling Cup, though it would appear without any real success, competing, it would seem for a number of years.[[74]](#footnote-74)This did not seem to dishearten the members, for as stated they continued to enjoy their social fixtures.

However others clubs, as indicated by appendix x emerged. These unfortunately seem to have faced a common problem, that of finding suitable playing surfaces. For this reason many of the clubs may have utilised the playing surfaces at The Holte Hotel and Aston Conservative Club and it must be presumed from 1911 onwards a new green that was laid in the grounds of Aston Unity Cricket Club.[[75]](#footnote-75) However, the Aston Manor team were luckier in that their headquarters, the Aston Tavern had, within its grounds a green of suitable proportions, as did, as previously stated the Aston Conservatives at their headquarters, both these clubs fulfilling fixtures against such sides as Erdington and Chad Valley (Harborne) respectfully, as well as other local teams.[[76]](#footnote-76) Another, The Aston Lower Grounds Club however appears to have come late on to the scene, appearing in 1897, though where they had their home ‘Green’ cannot be established though it would be reasonable to suppose that it may have been at the Holte Hotel. This club however fulfilled all the usual local fixtures but at times often chose to journey and engage with other clubs from outside the Manor. In 1911, for example it is recorded as having bowled against The Old House at Home Inn, Birmingham.[[77]](#footnote-77) It was these clubs that therefore formed the nucleus of the bowling fraternity, though in 1909 the last club, within our period of interest appeared. Named the Manor Bowling Club it announced its formation in The Holte Hotel and must presumably have arranged to use this locations green, though no confirmation of this is available. Announcing as it did that it had some 30 members it must suggest that perhaps bowlers had left other clubs to join. Whether this club flourished cannot be established because there appears to have been no further reports in the local press.

In regards to competition all relied on the friendly but The Aston Manor*,* The Aston Lower Grounds Club and, as already referred to The Holte appeared to have been sufficiently well organised so as to be able to attain a league status, taking part in competitions organised by The Warwickshire and Worcestershire Bowling League. In involving themselves with this organisation they became engaged with clubs from Birmingham such as ‘The Country Girl’, from Selly Oak,[[78]](#footnote-78) and Yardley BC as well as from Sutton Coldfield.[[79]](#footnote-79) For three clubs however the fascination of bowling expanded to take in an equally traditional form of the game. In the case of The Aston Labour, Liberal and Conservative Clubs it would seem that they expanded their interests to take in the game of Skittles (see Appendix x), though it is likely that the game was played, initially within their respective headquarters simply as a social pastime. It would seem that, in general terms it was these three political clubs which formed the basis for the game in the area. The local press frequently made reference to them playing each other, as in 1908 when the Labour Club lost narrowly to the Liberals.[[80]](#footnote-80) Again however, the movement towards a combative ethos within the realm of recreation can be substantiated when it is noted that The Labour Club chose to move into the world of competition. It would seem, that in 1902 or 1903 the club joined the Birmingham and District Skittles League, playing in this competition up to and beyond 1911, utilising their headquarters in Victoria Road as the home venue.[[81]](#footnote-81) Within a few years however both the Liberals and Conservatives joined them, so that by 1906 all were playing fixtures in this league as well as other fixtures against clubs such as Chad Valley, Harborne.[[82]](#footnote-82) That many of the fixtures were, in effect local ‘derbies’ must have added great spice to the competition and given that these matches were often accompanied by a night of general entertainment, often of music they must have been most enjoyable. Yet despite the fact that many of these fixtures were ‘friendlies’ it should not be thought that they were not seriously contested. Indeed at one match, when the Labour club played host to the Liberals, to ensure good order and a fair contest a Mr. J. Grierson, the Aston Villa FC trainer was engaged as referee! It would seem that despite the fact that the press seem to have only reported on these three particular clubs activities the game must surely have been played on a wider scale. For, given its nature it is difficult not to believe that within some of the inns and taverns of the area the activity was enjoyed.

On the other hand, for a small number of individuals within Aston Manor their interest lay in a more intellectual pursuit, this being the game of Chess. Though due to it being, one can safely assume a minority pastime, there appears to have been only one club devoted to its joys, The Aston Conservatives. Like their bowling club this club played their fixtures from around 1910 at their headquarters. Though little is known of their activities there were reports of a match against The Wesleyan and General Assurance Society in 1910. This fixture which Aston won was part of a more general evening of entertainment which combined not only the cut and thrust of the game but additionally what was described as a ‘convivial musical evening’ provided by such as Mr. J. E. Woods and a Mr. Fred Hill, the latter rendering a song ‘A London Lad at a Country Ball.’[[83]](#footnote-83) The Aston Manor press, it would seem devoted little attention to this particular club but when they did chose to report on their activities they appear generally to have been fixtures against other Conservative clubs around the region. However, for those who demanded a more demanding and competitive ethos there were opportunities to play the game at a higher level from within a thriving Chess community in Birmingham. This opportunity was comprehensively reflected in all of the local newspaper’s regular columns which posed ‘problems’ and ‘news’ of the game in the region. Given these inclusions it might well be supposed that those within the Manor that had an interest in the game would have had to seek involvement outside the borders of Aston Manor.

Yet there was one development, which if the local press is taken as a guide, seemed to have proved extremely popular, perhaps even rivalling, within Aston Manor that of football, cricket and cycling, that of swimming. Of course this activity has always been with us, particularly in relation to the young. There are countless indications within the industrial landscape, both in Aston Manor and indeed nationally of canals, reservoirs and lakes being utilised. Surprisingly however the Manor would be required to wait until as late as 1892 before it could boast of a Public Bath. Though neighbouring Birmingham established one many years previous the notion of a specific swimming and bathing location can be traced, at least in modern times to 1742. It was in this year that such an enterprise made an appearance. The facility, entitled a ‘Bagnio‘, was introduced, in Lemon Street, London, albeit for the male only, seemingly as a private gentleman’s club. Perhaps this latter point could be understood when it is perceived that ‘Bagnio’ was a synonym for brothel!![[84]](#footnote-84)

However, as has been the case in many other fields the provinces lagged somewhat behind the capital. So, in regards to Aston Manor’s introduction to the facility there was a substantial wait until the 5th October, 1892. Its introduction proved to be immediately popular, even though initially many of the rate paying element of the public saw fit to question its introduction, on the grounds of its effect on the rates![[85]](#footnote-85) One particular correspondent, ‘One who has to pay the Rates’, writing some ten year before the amenity was established wrote:

“I cannot see why we at Aston should be called upon to spend several thousands of pounds in building baths which I feel sure would not every repay the interest on the money for many years to come,”

whilst another, two years later bemoaned the fact that land which had been purchased for the baths, which in itself had effected the rate was being sold off. This, the writer infers will result in further expense at a later date when more land is purchased so as to be able to complete the project.[[86]](#footnote-86)

A desire for such an amenity was not however borne out of a late 19th century demand for a health providing recreational location. For, from as early as 1876 there had been plans considered, prepared and indeed submitted for the building of a amenity to provide the opportunity to swim and bathe within a community based, enclosed arena. Nevertheless the opinion of the governing authorities was that it was too expensive. However those who wished for such an amenity the ambition was not dulled by this setback and an alternative proposal was put forward and eventually accepted. This substitute proposed that the construction should contain not only a swimming pool but also a Free public library.

Sadly, for those who had ambitions to provide such an amenity the fear of cost again barred any progress. Though a library was constructed the inclusion of a swimming arena was dismissed. Nevertheless, despite this setback many influential individuals continued to campaign for the building of a swimming and bathing facility, one particularly influential campaigner being a Mr. Simons, who in 1892 when the ambition came to fruition was the elected Council representative for the Six Ways area on the Local Board. That the campaign was eventually successful could also be recognised as being due, in no small way to the active support of the local press. Writing on the subject, the editor of The Aston Chronicle stated his support in unequivocal terms:

“an urban district of 62,000 inhabitants, unprovided with a such an elementary convenience is an anomaly in this country, at this date, and when it is remembered as Mr. Simons pointed out there are scarcely more than a hundred homes in Aston provided with baths, the argument in favour of the improvement becomes irresistible.”[[87]](#footnote-87)

whilst The Aston News stated, some years later:

“It will be incredibly gratifying to know that after all we are to have a public baths at Aston and that the contract has been secured by a local man. Certainly the price to be paid is considerably in access of the original estimate but we shall agree with the Board it is better to spend a few more thousands pounds and have a perfect set of baths than to budget a cheese-paring policy such as when the Local Board buildings were suggested and have a set of baths more suitable for a little village than for such a populous district as Aston Manor. One that we have noted with some pleasure is the improved dignity of the Board when dealing with matters financial, we quite approve of economy but where false economy interferes with efficiency then we say it is ill for the district over which those who are responsible for the policy preside.”[[88]](#footnote-88)

Nevertheless the acceptance of the notion of such a building did not remove perhaps the greatest obstacle that the campaign faced, the obtaining of a suitable site. In order to alleviate this not unsubstantial problem two individuals whose names are synonymous with the area in relation to brewing, William and Edward Ansell, County Councillor and Alderman respectively came to the rescue. The agreed to bear the cost of purchasing the land required, wherever it might be, as long as it was within Aston Manor. This act thus alleviated the project of its greatest problem. A site was chosen, in Victoria Road, for a cost of some £1,200, purchased and tenders invited. Upon, a local builder, Mr. T. N. Stephens of Park Lane providing the successful quote, work began and the foundations were laid. Initially the project was handicapped by the fact that the site chosen had previously been the location for a pool which had once been part of the grounds of Aston Park. Indeed, it was said that when the initial excavations were made an ‘old boat’ that had once plied its trade on the lake was discovered!! Despite this and other difficulties the work continued and in 1892 the building was finally completed.

Built in a Renaissance style and faced in red terra cotta its magnificent entrance was emblazoned with the Coat of Arms of Aston Manor. Within its walls there were provided a diverse number of facilities that reflected the class consciousness of the age:

First Class Second Class

Swimming Bath - 58 wide x 90 long Swimming Bath - 33 wide x 60 long

3 Ladies Private Baths 4 Ladies Private Baths

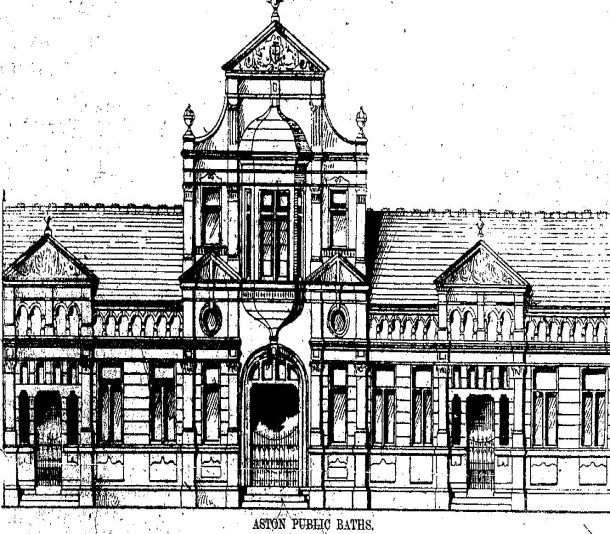
5 Gentleman’s Private Baths 6 Gentleman’s Private Baths

56 Dressing Rooms 43 Dressing Rooms

Hot Room Soap Bath

Lavatories Lavatories

Additionally, to keep the whole in pristine condition a house was provided next to the site for a caretaker.[[89]](#footnote-89)



When at last the facility was opened it was to Councillor Alfred Taylor that the honour fell after which he and the other gathered dignitaries were able to enjoy an evenings swimming entertainment. Amongst the items presented was a 50 yard race open only to Aston Manor residents; a 100 yard ‘open to all’ amateur handicap race; a 100 yard ‘open to all’ race and a 50 yard open to all amateur Ladies race. There was also a fancy dress water polo match which was followed by a Grand Water Polo fixture, this featuring one of the leading swimming clubs of the area, The Birmingham based Leander SC.[[90]](#footnote-90)

Almost immediately the facility seems to have drawn in large numbers of individuals who were keen to enjoy, for 1d a swim or bathe in clean water in a modern facility. Indeed within twelve months of the opening there is evidence to indicate that a most virile swimming community was beginning to be formed. As early as 1893 a charity event for ‘The Ansells Shield’ the prize obviously being donated by the large local brewer whose family members were such stalwarts of the swimming facility, was held[[91]](#footnote-91) along with the first annual sports meeting of Aston Baths, a function which is recorded as still being repeated at the turn of the century.[[92]](#footnote-92)

This was quickly followed by what appears to have been the first truly competitive Water Polo fixture to be held in the baths, between the teams from Birmingham YMCA and Birchfield Gymnasium. This latter club also appears to have been influential in popularising the baths through its gymnastic proficiency, for at the same event they also put on an ‘artistic demonstration’ of this discipline,[[93]](#footnote-93) a discipline that within Aston Manor, as will be indicated later owed much to the existence of the facility. This fixture certainly indicates another important factor in regards to the effect of the introduction of the amenity, it’s attraction as a venue, in bringing in ‘outside teams.’ It could be argued that the introduction of well established, organised ‘foreign’ clubs had the effect of inspiring those of Aston Manor to emulate them. It would seem that within a very few years the Manor developed a number of local clubs and associations*,* (see appendix xi)an early one being The Aston Old Edwardians SC, who could boast of a membership some four years after being founded of two hundred*,*[[94]](#footnote-94)The Lozells SC, and The Aston Manor SC*.* Indeed the first of these, in the year of its founding organised and presented its first Annual Swimming Gala, featuring an array of different aquatic events. In reporting of the function The Birmingham and Aston Chronicle not only applauded the event but also singled out for particular praise a Master J. Bates who: “swam and displayed exceptional ability.”[[95]](#footnote-95)

Though nothing seems to have been recorded as to the contribution of the Lozells club it was in 1894 when the latter appears to have contributed the most comprehensive experience yet staged in the Baths, the Aston Manor SC Annual Aquatic event. Though this club had held a similar, but much more restricted event in the previous year when the club had been founded it was now that they might be said to have announced their arrival on the swimming scene in Aston Manor. This, which featured competitors both adult and youth of both sexes, drew in several other clubs to take part. Unfortunately the press coverage, due it must be supposed to space restrictions did not choose to fully identify who they were, preferring simply to initialise them, ie B.L.S.C., S.S.C., K.S.C. and A.O.E.S.C., this latter probably relating to the Aston Old Edwardians SC. As an added attraction and, perhaps as a sign of the club’s ambition the event also featured a Mr. J. H. Tyers, of the Osborne SC, Manchester, who glowed in the title of being ‘Champion of The World at All Distances’ who took part in the 104 yards Open Handicap race. It was announced that in so doing he would attempt to break the 100 yards record. Additionally, perhaps as an incentive some £50 was donated by the club in prize money along with the usual array of medals and cups.

In regards to the actual events Tyers duly, as must have been expected easily won his event, despite having a thirty second handicap and collected the prize of three guineas. Other events included a Young Ladies Handicap; a 52 yards Youth Handicap; a ‘Plunging’ handicap and a Royal Mail race, the latter between the hosts and a team from Birchfield, the latter emerging victorious, though Aston Manor competitors did well overall. As a final attraction a Water Polo match was played between B.L.S.C. and S.S.C. which the former won 4-1. It would seem, if the press report is to be believed that the event drew a very good crowd and fully justified the official backing it received from amongst others Councillor W. Ansell, who presented the prizes.[[96]](#footnote-96) (see appendix xii for Water polo clubs).

The years which followed witnessed many other clubs emerging (see Appendix xii**),** one of which was the The Aston Police Swimming Club which boasted of forty members and included gymnastics as an additional activity.[[97]](#footnote-97) Yet, as important as these emerging clubs were in drawing in participants, albeit predominately male into recreational activity perhaps of even more significance was the introduction into the swimming fraternity of the female. For, perhaps the first time, outside of the world of cycling the female would appear to have had, at club level an opportunity to actively participate. Though girls, like their male counterpart had enjoyed the local canals and pools etc., the forming, in 1893 of The Aston Manor Swimming Club had allowed her a platform to be established from within which she could enjoy competitive recreation. Perhaps one of the hidden benefits of such a club was that it also offered an opportunity for her to expand her social horizons. There are several indications of the club organising excursions to local beauty sports, one example being in 1894 when they went to Bromsgrove by Wagonette,[[98]](#footnote-98) whilst in the following year a ‘Fancy Dress Ball’ was held, in the Victoria Hall.[[99]](#footnote-99) There is no reason not to believe that such social activities, in becoming a feature of the club were a factor that may have assisted it in continuing to exist, certainly up to the end of our period of interest. In 1904 the club is recorded as holding its fourth Open Swimming Sports, suggesting that progress had been steady in regards to the promotion of the club since its inception some ten years previous, though no reason can be found as to the reason why only four such events were held during this period? Perhaps one of the most significant influences that this club brought to the world of swimming was that from its early in its existence it pursued an open policy in regards to the gender question. Both male and females were actively involved in their presentations, though not of course against each other. The event which it put on in 1904 comprising of a multitude of individual and teams events also included the Men’s All-England Open Handicap and Invitation Men’s Team Race for invited clubs. In this event such luminaries as Leander Walsall and Wolverhampton & Dudley faced the Aston team, each having ten members, Walsall emerging victorious. During the evening, as somewhat of a diversion to the main business a Fancy Exhibition of Swimming took place, the display being given by the club’s Mrs. Pauline Brown. In showing off her skills she gave a rendition of, amongst other things the ‘Monte Cristo Sack’, presumably emulating Edmond Dantes escape from the Chateau D'If.[[100]](#footnote-100)

Some three years later once more the club sponsored an open swimming event, allowing all comers the opportunity to participate, whilst in 1909 it held, again what was reported as its ‘annual event’.[[101]](#footnote-101) Given this it can presumed that in promoting the recreation for the young people of the area it also contributed to a realisation by the local education authority of the value of the recreation and led to them becoming considerably more actively involved in its organisation and structure. Initially however the authority had a less than positive attitude. For, in response to a proposal by leading local dignitaries that a swimming pool be installed within the Aston Lane Boy’s School they, in rejecting the notion pronounced that: “School was for education.”[[102]](#footnote-102) However, such an argument was not sustained and, in response to the increasing demand from the school community for not only swimming but recreation in general an organisation was set up, which was in essence a local governing body for, not only this particular activity, but all school sports as a whole. Though no evidence can be found as to indicate when The Aston Schools Sports Associationwas formed it is apparent that it was extremely active, in all areas of child activity.

Certainly from around 1907 school participation increased considerably, for both sexes, this year witnessing the inauguration of The Aston Challenge Shield during The Annual Swimming Sports for Boys, being won by the Aston Lane School. The same school triumphed in the next two years. At the 1909 event however the extent of the events had been greatly expanded. Now a girls version of the Aston Challenge Shield was introduced which was won by Albert Road with Alma Street coming in second as well as a Life Saving competition. Here, the Gower Street school proved victorious, defeating an Erdington school. There were also competitions for learners, boys and girls; a long plunge competition for both boys and girls as well as high diving. This event also featured the final of the Fenwick Cup in Water Polo which saw the Aston team run out winners 4-0 against Lozells. A Mr. Norwood, presiding stated with some pride that:

“Aston had every reason with the excellent progress made in school swimming. Not only was the Junior Championship for the Midlands held by an Aston boy but a team of Aston school boys had recently defeated representative teams of Birmingham, Walsall, Wolverhampton and Handsworth and an Aston Girls team had similarly been successful in competition with neighbouring teams. Further he believed that proportionately the number scholars taught to swim in Aston would bear very favourable comparison with the numbers from the schools of surrounding authorities.”[[103]](#footnote-103)

The following year, on the occasion of the Aston Girls Swimming Competition and it seems for some years after a similar programme were repeated. It would appear that so successful were these presentations and the Aston Manor teams that competed in them that a Councillor A. H. James was driven to comment, with an eye on the political situation, in regards to annexation that:

“if that came about, he thought in the direction of swimming Aston could give Birmingham a few points.”[[104]](#footnote-104)

That such a statement could be considered accurate could be verified by the fact that shortly after he made the remark, the month of October witnessed two particularly important and successful meets. For on the 1st and 8th respectfully under the umbrella of The Aston School Sports Association the Boys and Girls of Aston Manor’s schools held their respective swimming meets. These events which began some five years previous, albeit on a vastly smaller scale appear to have been considerably expanded over the ensuing years and both drew in what the press termed ‘large audiences.’ Seemingly involving the majority of the schools of the Manor these two events were keenly contested and provided for a large number of individuals tasting success.

It was however Aston Lane who carried off the Boy’s main prize, The Aston Shield, whilst Albert Road lifted the girls version. Both events contained a multitude of individuals events, such as the Long Plunge, Swimming on The Back, Learners, High Diving, Boy’s Life Saving, which was won by Gower Street School and, of course, the now obligatory Fancy Dress and Comical Costume competitions. Unusually though the presentations of the accolades and prizes did not take place at the events but were presented to the victors, in his capacity as Head of The Education Committee by Councillor James in The Albert Road School on the 13th. Prior to presenting them he praised not only to the enthusiasm to the manner in which instruction had been given to the children but also to the large number of them who were enjoying the activity. He also paid tribute to the efforts of the teachers and to the Education Board who had done so much to encourage the pupils. Then perhaps, alluding to his previous comments in regards to Aston and Birmingham he stated that it was, with particular pleasure that he could refer to:

“another innovation - that of the instruction of boys in life saving. The Aston schools could he believed claim to be the pioneers in the neighbourhood of Birmingham in this instruction.” [[105]](#footnote-105)

Given that on the 15th of the same month The First Field Ambulance Swimming Club who were ending their inaugural season with presentations of proficiency were entertained by The Aston SC Life Saving Team perhaps adds credence to his remark.[[106]](#footnote-106)

It was also in this year that the St. Mary’s school are recorded as having triumphed in The Aston Schools Team Cup Race.[[107]](#footnote-107) However, in regards to this particular event no further mention is made, so it may be that this was simply a one-off event. It was also recorded, that in 1911 that pupils of The Aston Manor School managed to obtain more swimming certificates than any other school in the Manor, for which the school itself was presented with a certificate in addition to three Life Saving certificates.[[108]](#footnote-108) However, it was some years earlier, in 1894 that an event was staged which indicates that the recreation was, by now a well established and integral part of the recreational landscape of the Manor. Here, perhaps exemplifying the enthusiasm for the recreation a ‘School Swimming Sports’ meeting was arranged, which was open to children of both sexes, the event carrying, as prizes two shields which were presented by William and Edward Ansell. It is significant that this event finally cemented the female into the recreation as an equal partner, for when the event was inaugurated the previous year only the boys competed, Albert Road emerging the victors. This time however not only did the boys of the Albert Road School again emerge triumphant but they were accompanied by their female counterparts. Perhaps as a way of compensation, allowing for other schools to taste triumph the Teachers Race was won by a Mr. Cox of Gower Street, with a Mr. S. Rowley of the Vicarage Road establishment second, whilst the Handicap Race went to a Master Crighton, Upper Thomas Street. In regards to the girls the prizes for the Scratch Race also avoided the Albert Road’s domination. Here the laurels went to Theresa Hall of Vicarage Hall. In regards to the Fancy Dress and Comical Costume competitions it was a Mabel S. Botwood, Upper Grade School, dressed as a Black and White Cat and Annie Williams, Gower Street as Bo Peep who emerged the victors. The evening’s attractions then ended with the local celebrity, Master Bates and presumably his sister Miss Bates giving an exhibition of the art of swimming. Finally, in conclusion, the Chairman of the School Board, Mr. Richards presented the prizes, all of which was witnessed by what the newspaper termed a large attendance.[[109]](#footnote-109)

Again, in 1900 the Baths witnessed what might be termed a gala, The Aston Girls Swimming Sports,which featured significantly a clear and precise competitive team element rather than a simple straightforward individual competitive ethos. For, within this event the Aston Challenge Shield was competed for by not only local schools but also by others from the surrounding area. The competition which was won by Aston Lane saw Lozells Street coming in second.[[110]](#footnote-110) As an added attraction the event also featured a fancy dress competition which was won by a Elfie Coleman who adorned herself as a Sea Nymph! This type of competitive event certainly continued to at least 1905 when it is recorded that the Baths were witness to an Aston School Girls Swimming Sports.[[111]](#footnote-111) However from this date no further reports are forthcoming.

There can be little doubt that by 1906 the recreation of swimming had established itself as a core recreational activity within Aston Manor. That this had been recognised was clearly substantiated by the editor of the Aston News. He not only paid tribute to this fact and the health giving value that it provided to the young but also that, at this time the female had been integrated into the recreation:

“it is safe to say that in course of time there will be very few local school children who will be unable to save themselves from drowning if ever the emergency arises.” There is no doubt that at the head of all kings of physical recreation, both for practical and healful usefulness stands the art of swimming. There is no exercise which puts to use at one time so many muscles of the body and that without the necessity of unduly exerting any of them.” and “It is satisfactory to know that the gentler sex are going in for swimming much more than formerly and the Ladies Swimming Club has done a great deal towards this end.” [[112]](#footnote-112)

Indeed, as if to confirm this statement, in 1907 an Aston Schools Aquatic Sports meeting was held which apart from the usual events, 50 yards breast stroke etc., featured a Water Polo match between the local schools of Gower Street and Lozells which resulted in an 8-12 victory for the former, the victor gaining their school The Richard Fenwick Cup.[[113]](#footnote-113) It was this match which also indicates another diversion for the recreation. For within the ethos of competition Water Polo had become ever increasingly popular. Indeed from as early as 1897 it is recorded that a Birmingham Water Polo League had been formed, containing as it did two leagues based loosely on the football league format which featured several local sides. Aston SCare recorded as being able to field two teams, both being Division 1 and 2 Champions in 1911,[[114]](#footnote-114) whilst The Lozells SC also featured in Division one during the period 1905-1908.[[115]](#footnote-115) Additionally Aston Old Edwardians also competed in this league, being a member of Division 1 for a considerable number of years up to the end of our period of interest, as well as Lozells Street Mission who occupied a slot in the second division.[[116]](#footnote-116) Another club, Westminster SC whilst, it seems not having actually been formed from within Aston Manor nevertheless were very well established members of the local swimming fraternity, utilising, from 1897 The Victoria Road Baths with great success. Indeed a local newspaper reported on them competing, against not only local opposition, Aston SC in the National Water Polo championship in 1911[[117]](#footnote-117) but also as being the champion swimming club of Aston Manor in 1900.[[118]](#footnote-118)

The competitive ethic of these clubs was not however restrained to the immediate area. Aston SC performed, for example not only in the aforementioned league but also in more diverse competitions. The club is recorded as competing in 1899 in The Midland Counties Junior championships at Leamington Spa[[119]](#footnote-119) and in 1905 in the National Water Polo Championships, against, in this particular year the Weston Super Mare Club,[[120]](#footnote-120) having defeated the Derby SC in a previous round, whilst another club, The Aston Gymnastic SC met Suburban SC in The Walter Evans Water Polo Cup, unfortunately losing 4-1.[[121]](#footnote-121) However, as with all competitive matters the desire to win sometimes overcame the ‘sporting spirit’ so desired by the respectable classes. It is recorded that in 1910 in a Division 1 match of the Birmingham and District League between The Aston Swimming Club and Birmingham YMCA, at the Victoria Road Baths a C. Clarke was ordered from the water for ‘bad behaviour.’[[122]](#footnote-122) It should be noted however that despite the fact that the female had become involved in the recreation within this particular element of swimming she was firmly excluded. Indeed she was to remain so until some years after our period of interest ended.

However, in regards to the club scene one appears to have been particularly successful in presenting large functions, The Lozells Mission SC, often attracting what were often described as a ‘large attendances.’[[123]](#footnote-123) That it might be considered as one of the mainstays of swimming in the area can be gleaned from the fact that the later years of our period witnessed them staging an annual presentation which encompassed, as much as possible the whole of the local swimming fraternity. In 1908, for example The Aston Newswrote, in some detail about what the club described as their fourteenth annual sports meeting. This event which featured not only individual competition for their own club members but also involved many of the Aston Manor schools, though unfortunately the reports do not indicate whether the female sex was involved, though it is almost certain that they were. In regards to the school’s competition, the main feature was a team handicap race. This was won by Aston Lane with a gallant Gower Street second. Always mindful of the value of being popular this particular club provided, at times ‘less than serious’ attractions. To this end, at this particular event they arranged a ‘Members Comical Costume Race’. Here, the competitors had to swim two lengths of the bath, one on their back and the other using the breastroke. Though always a race, the addition of fancy dress obviously took some of the competitive edge away. Nevertheless the winner was a F. Robinson who was awarded a ‘Smokers Companion.’ As for the fancy dress element a costume depicting Harry Lauder, worn by a Mr. Harry Walker proved triumphant in the ‘most comical section’ whilst the ‘most original costume prize,’ went to a Mr. S. Smith who appeared as ‘The Daily Mirror.’ The event finally concluded, as it seemingly always did with an exhibition of ‘fancy swimming’ by a club member, on this occasion a Pauline Brown. Here she entertained the crowd with seal swimming, floating in various positions and diving without using her arms!![[124]](#footnote-124)

Their example was quickly emulated by the Aston SC, who are recorded as beginning in 1895 an Annual meet which was held regularly until the end of our period of interest, which in 1902 included The Grace Hutchinson Challenge Cup. The club was seemingly also mindful of its social obligations. For, in recognition of the value of drawing in the young to the recreation two years later, in 1904 it organised a Schools Team Championship, seemingly for boys only. This competition was, it was stated for the ‘Schoolboy Championship of England’ and, as such enticed five teams to compete: Abbot Street School, Manchester; Hornsey Road School, London; Alderman Newton’s School, Leicester; Roundhay Road School, Leeds and Central Council School, Weston Super Mare, though no explanation is available to explain the lack of Aston representative. The competition being decided over a series of two lengths races by each member of the four man team, the total time added together eventually ended with the Manchester School winning with the Leicester team in second place. However, for purely local interest an Invitation Aston Schools Team Handicap event was organised along with an Aston CC eight lengths (208 yards) race and the final of The Walter Evans Polo Cup competition between St. Silas and Aston SC. For the supporters of Aston however these competitions provided mixed results. For whilst they emerged triumphant in the Water Polo match 8-3 they had to give ground to Upper Thomas Street, finishing second in the handicap event. However in the club’s own event it was an A. Campbell who took the prize.[[125]](#footnote-125) This club, though obviously well established might well have been subject, as time passed, to increasing disinterest from the general public. For it is recorded that three years later, on the occasion of their twelfth annual event the attendance was ‘not large’.[[126]](#footnote-126)

However what might be seen as a movement towards public apathy did not seem to deter other clubs from organising similar meetings. Lozells SC. are recorded to have held an annual event since 1894,[[127]](#footnote-127) whilst Gower Street School appear to have been the first Aston Manor school to have actually organised an event themselves. Entitled ‘The Swimming Sports Meeting’, for boys and girls it was, as the press described as ‘The Championship of The Manor.’ After the competition had ended it was the hosts themselves in regards to the boys and the girls of the High Elementary who emerged victorious.[[128]](#footnote-128) However, it would appear that the first school to present their own swim meet was in fact the Ada Road School, from Bordesley in Birmingham. The fact that a ‘foreign’ school was prepared to make use of the facilities might be seen to indicate just how good they actually were. Yet, despite this school’s bold move the honours actually went to a Manor team, Aston Lane emerging as the winners of a shield that was presented by the hosts.[[129]](#footnote-129) It can thus be clearly perceived that there was an extremely vibrant swimming community in existence within Aston Manor, due in no small part to having at its disposal a facility that it might be believed stood favourable comparison against any other in the area. The value of the facility and the attitude of the education authorities were perhaps best summed up by the words of a writer in The Aston News who stated:

One of the most satisfactory features in regard to the Aston Schools is that the Education Committee with the voluntary efforts of the teachers, from the highest to the lowest have brought about an arrangement whereby every girl and every boy shall be fitted physically as well as mentally to take their place in the battle of life. The Sports Association, formed some years ago has provided every possible kind of athletics, but the chief object, perhaps, is that swimming take premier place in the school life.”[[130]](#footnote-130)

The fact that it was so generous in regards to space and facility enabled those of influence to perceive it as possibly being able to lend itself to other activities. It was this observation that allowed it to become the location that inspired and sustained a new recreational development, gymnastics. That this particular sporting endeavour could have expanded as a recreational activity might be seen as primarily due to the fact that the athletic community in the Manor recognised that in the Swimming Baths they had a facility that had the potential to enhance other forms of athletic prowess. Unfortunately it was also recognised that:

“knowing that the majority of Astonians have as yet developed no inclination to bathe throughout the year the idea on behalf of the members of the local club is of transforming the Baths into a gymnasium for winter use is not at all a bad one.”[[131]](#footnote-131)

It was thus decided that, during the winter months a part of the facility would be made over to gymnastics. As a result, the first class baths were ‘converted,’ at a cost of £500. By the simple act of boarding over the pool with a removable floor and installing all the necessary equipment Aston Manor gained a new recreational facility. Perhaps, as a recognition that this conversion might alleviate what was ever increasingly being recognised as the under-use of the facility as a place of bathing, The Aston News was prompted to comment:

“By the opening of the gymnasium on Monday evening, Aston has been provided with another of those institutions which it is considered desirable that all property constituted and well governed communities should possess” and “Thanks to the wisdom of our past legislators it now considered almost as necessary that the body should be educated as the mind. The physical instruction given in our Board Schools cannot fail to involve the youthful mind with a love of athletics. We do not mean to say that the whole of these young people in future years will turn out athletes but it is not at all improbable that many of them will so recognise the benefit accruing from the physical instruction they received during their schooldays that they will welcome the fact that if they have a gymnasium close to their own doors and do not like other places, have to fall upon Birmingham for what they avail themselves of,”

finally ending with a barbed passage aimed at those who sought annexation into Birmingham:

“the establishment of the gymnasium adds another to the various institutions which today Aston possesses - institutions, we venture to think which she would not have if those who advocated our annexation to Birmingham had been able to accomplish their ends.”[[132]](#footnote-132)

Upon the conversion being completed and the new arena fitted out for purpose with the most modern of equipment a public meeting was called and a direct appeal was put out for clubs, both in and outside of Aston Manor to utilise the amenity. It was at this meeting that a Mr. J. Adams, supporting this appeal made the comment that:

“Aston had not only the most unique gymnasium in the Kingdom but he could candidly say that that was the most beautiful and most complete gymnasium he had ever seen,”

a view that was not only supported by a Dr. Ratcliffe. In appealing for athletes of the area to come to Aston Manor and utilise the new facility he stated:

“It was most desirable that in every community that there should be facilities for physical education where men and women could be properly trained in athletics - not in the crude manner in which football players were trained and turned into more or less gladiators, but trained so that every muscle was properly and proportionally used.”[[133]](#footnote-133)

It would seem that the opening exhibition of gymnastic endeavour was made just prior to the Christmas holidays. In front of a celebrated but moderate audience Councillor Fisher, chairman of the Local Board welcomed the Birmingham Athletic Club to whom it had been granted the honour of providing the opening exhibition.

In drawing attention to the fact that education was not simply a matter of scholastic endeavour he stated that:

“something more than elementary education was necessary and that technical education was essential such as had been given on the continent for many years. Besides these they also required a physical education such as they were met together that evening to promote. They would all agree that a sound mind in a sound body was the right sort of thing.”

Upon a Councillor Taylor declaring the facility open, feats of skill on the various pieces of equipment followed and as well as several rounds of boxing. Certainly one of the highlights of the evening was the lifting of weights by a Mr. E. L. Levy, who commenced with a series of heavy dumb bell lifts. After completing these he added, firstly on each side a 80 lb and 56 lb weight which after lifting he increased to a total of 180 lbs, again lifting with ease. However, the most spectacular event was one that was entitled ‘Storming the Board’. This performance which required the efforts of fifteen male gymnasts required each jump from a spring board to clear a piece of string at various heights. Quickly the height attained moved from six foot to nine foot, 4 inches and then on to nine foot, eight inches. However, as more and more of the competitors failed, eventually, the height of some 10 foot was attained, too storming applause two of the entrants managed to clear the string. The event eventually ended with exhibitions of bayonet versus sword; sword versus lance fighting and various running exercises.[[134]](#footnote-134)

The honour of being the first genuine gymnastic club in Aston Manor however actually fell to The Victoria Athletic Club. Though others had put on periodic presentations prior to their formation it was this club’s regular displays at their headquarters, the Wesleyan Schoolroom, in Victoria Road which established them as the first. Formed in 1888 by 1896 it could boast of some fifty senior and fifty seven junior members, who, apart from their gym work participated in other sporting activities. The presentation that they enacted in 1896, in celebration of their founding, of leap-frogging, parallel bar work, and wand exercises, all accompanied by music might be considered to have been typical of the sort of display they put on.[[135]](#footnote-135) Another early club, The Lozells Gymnastic Club, which may have been formed from the swimming club of the same name was formed in 1893 and held, on a regular basis displays of such skills as vaulting and high jumping until 1901.[[136]](#footnote-136) Yet despite an optimistic report of some five years earlier which appeared to afford much confidence:

“Upwards of 100 men and 50 women joined last year and a large membership is expected this season. The opening of classes for Sunday school children for calisthenics and musical drill is a new departure, which bids fair to become very popular.”[[137]](#footnote-137)

the club seems not to have survived past this year.

Notwithstanding this apparent failure there are clear indications that the movement towards gymnastics continued. Certainly The St. Stephens Gymnastic Club was operating, giving a display in the church hall for the public as early as 1892 though it could be that this endeavour was simply a ‘one off’ given that no further activity is recorded.[[138]](#footnote-138) However the response to the appeal would appear to have been very successful, several aquatic clubs diversifying into the gymnastic area and utilising the new provision. Though the Birchfield SC were the first to feature in the new facility it was not long after that the Aston Manor Swimming and Gymnastic Club, began a series of exhibitions. These, beginning, in 1894 featuring both sexes, became an integral element in the development of the recreation in the Manor. Though the presentations were in the beginning limited in scope as the years progressed they became increasingly wide ranging. One event presented in 1910, for example, under the directorship of a Professor J. A. Panting, and attended by the Mayor, Alderman J. Taylor JP provided for a large, enthusiastic audience. Those who attended were treated, to amongst other items girls providing an exhibition of marching; Indian Club working and Flag Drill whilst the boys provided entertainment on the parallel bars, boxing and Wand Exercise. After an interval within which the Mayor, in a speech referred to the value of such exercises as the gymnasium provided and to the efforts of Professor Panting, prizes were distributed. These were gold and silver medals and, in recognition of their efforts Messrs Luckman and Jackson received a set of fancy waistcoat buttons. However, in the case of the Professor a gold mounted umbrella was given to him on behalf of the ladies class. After these ceremonies were over a performance was given on the horizontal bars by ‘The Bouncing Peps’ assisted by their dog Prince who performed ‘some clever tricks.’ On the conclusion of this attraction the second part of the event commenced with marching by the Ladies Team who were finalists in the Birmingham and District Shield Competition. There then followed exhibitions of jumping, parallel bar work, vaulting by both the men and women, as well as a Running Maze by the combined senior classes. All of the efforts were completed to the accompaniment of Miss A. Rose and Miss G. Carver on the piano.[[139]](#footnote-139)

It was also in the same year that another club, The Lichfield Road Gymnastic Clubare reported to have put on an exhibition, only this particular one was seemingly competitive being versus a Locton Street team. Competing as they were for a trophy, the Lancaster Challenge Shield the competitors were involved in horizontal bar work, dumbbells and jumping exercises, again to a piano accompaniment.[[140]](#footnote-140) Additionally it is also recorded that in 1907 an Aston Church Gym Club gave an exhibition though there is no indication as to whether this was associated with St. Peter and St. Paul, Aston’s parish church or simply a combined ‘church club.’[[141]](#footnote-141) What can be established however is that this club, along those from Lozells were active members of the Birmingham and District Gymnastic Society, a society which was still in existence in 1911.

What may have been one of their best moments came in 1904 when, on 14th May they competed in the final of the Midland Gymnastic Championships, the contest taking place in the Bingley Hall, Birmingham, against the Dolobran Athletic Club, themselves from Birmingham. On the way to the final the Manor side had disposed of St. Thomas’s Church GC and Hockley Hall GC. In this, the final which consisted of a programme utilising a series of apparatus which included rope climbing, dumbbells and several other athletic challenges including the high jump was a close and keenly fought affair. Unfortunately, after all the challenges had been accomplished the Birmingham side emerged victorious by 306 points to 300.[[142]](#footnote-142)

In regards to the schools it would seem that the Local Education Board were quick to identify the value of gymnastics as an activity. From as early as 1880 a number of schools had included it in their curriculum, instructing the pupils, of both sexes, in amongst other skills the use of the Stave and Dumb-Bell. For the girls this was often supplemented by instruction in musical drill, Upper Thomas Street being particularly noted as being proficient. The following year, the Chairman of The Board, in reporting on the introduction of the scheme stated:

“The Board employs an experienced Drill Master, not only for the boys but, where approved of by the parents (as is almost invariable the case) for the girls also. By this means better discipline, habits of prompt obedience and an improved carriage and physique has been secured.”[[143]](#footnote-143)

Yet despite the fact that this club and others were clearly proving popular, which indicates a healthy and thriving swimming and gymnastic fraternity there was another side. For, surprisingly, despite these successes there appears to have been a steady decline in the number of visits made to the Baths. It would seem that apart from those connected to the clubs the facility was of little interest to the general population. Though only the figures for 1901 and 1902 were presented by the press, which showed a decline resulting in a decrease of £141 9s 0d being taken at the entrance kiosk the fact that the Baths Committee chose to allow, at specific times free admission indicates that they were concerned enough to take action.[[144]](#footnote-144) Perhaps it was this recognition that led, in 1907 to the authorities announcing that every Wednesday there would be free concerts at the location.[[145]](#footnote-145) However the realisation that, for many the facility was of little importance did, it would seem not perturb the governing authority of the Manor. The facility had, by any standard been a great success, providing as it did not only a site within which individuals could partake of recreation but also one which from a health perspective was a great addition to the Manor.

As it has already been clearly indicated the Manor was, in recreational terms a very diverse location, the population having a varied recreational menu from which to choose. Perhaps this was fundamentally due to the fact that the late Victorians were innovative, always seemingly prepared to introduce new ideas. Within this idiom and perhaps the most surprising development that Aston Manor witnessed was the introduction of Air Rifle Shooting.

This recreation appears to have been introduced into the Birmingham area in the 1890s, as a competitive target shooting sport and was almost entirely centred around local inns and taverns. There is a fable that the recreation was introduced via a group of enthusiasts from one public house challenging a group from another inn or tavern to a shooting match for the prize of a leg of mutton supper for the winners, paid for by the losers.[[146]](#footnote-146) Whatever this is true or simply conjecture cannot be ascertained but, the pastime soon became extremely popular. In fact by the late 1890’s it had become so widespread that it inspired the introduction of national governing body, The National Air Rifle Association, which had its headquarters in the Old Arcade, Birmingham. It soon blossomed to the extent that it had over four thousand clubs, over sixteen hundred of them in the Birmingham area alone, with 20,000 shooters, clubs and associations blossoming in almost every town. The association, in recognition of a growing popularity then initiated a badge to mark its existence. It had, as can be seen an emblem within its centre, this being St. George and the Dragon of England.



The badge of the National Air Rifle Association.[[147]](#footnote-147)

In regards to Aston Manor, activity appears to have commenced around the turn of the century, when in 1900 The Aston Rifle Club was formed.[[148]](#footnote-148) Though this club does not appear to have survived past 1908 the popularity of its pastime seems to have inspired others to take up the sport and introduce, in 1902 a local league, The Aston and East Birmingham Air Rifle Shooting League. Having, as its headquarters The Victoria Inn, Lichfield Road it comprised of twelve teams, and involved, in 1903 the following Aston Manor clubs:

Aston Victoria (The Victoria)

Royal Exchange

The Crown

The Duke of York

Havelock Inn

Grand Turk Inn,[[149]](#footnote-149)

which increased two years later by the addition of the Alma Tavern and White Horse, [[150]](#footnote-150) and a further year later by The Prince of Wales,[[151]](#footnote-151) all the clubs existing under the auspices of the national body, (see appendix xiv). The Aston Manor Conservative Club also appear to have had a shooting team though no reference can be found as to whether they were actively connected to a league. It could be that if they were it was one linked to their own organisation. Whether they were related to a formal structure or relied on the friendly therefore cannot be established but there are several instances of the club enjoying matches against, in the main Birmingham teams, as in 1906 when they travelled to Perry Barr, Birmingham.[[152]](#footnote-152)

For those of Aston Manor, like the majority of other similar clubs elsewhere it was the inn and tavern that formed the bedrock of their existence, the clubs employing them as their headquarters. However there are no indications available as to which public houses actually had a shooting gallery within their walls. Nevertheless, it might be presumed that those teams mentioned most likely did ‘shoot’ within the confines of their headquarters. Yet, if a hostelry did accommodate the recreation this did not, in any sense require any sort of permanent alteration or addition to the facility. Rather it was, in reality simply a matter of reorganising a suitably sized room to accommodate the event.

The actual shooting, from a distance of some seven yards was done with small, low powered, lightweight air rifles, a popular type being the locally made BSA, firing lead pellets. The shooter, aiming at what was known as a Bell Target attempted to shoot though a small hole in the front which represented the ‘Bulls Eye.’ This allowed the pellet to pass through, hit a white paper disc which itself was in front of a small bell which, when the pellet passed through struck the bell causing it to ring, signifying a hit. However should the marksman miss ‘the bull’, the metal from which the target was constructed was strong enough to flatten the pellet and thus prevent any ricochets.[[153]](#footnote-153)

As to the actual competition the two teams, along with supporters and anyone else who wished to watch would crowd into the shooting room, glasses of ale in hand. Indeed it has been stated that at times so crowded were the rooms that it was not unknown for the shooters having to fire over the heads of spectators. Beer would be passed round to keep the crowd happy though gamesmanship, strategic coughing etc to put an opposing firer off was frowned upon and would receive instant retribution. That all this activity would have taken place within what was almost certainly a smoke filled atmosphere which, when added to by the heat of a fire, and the aroma of the ale must have provided for a warm but claustrophobic atmosphere.[[154]](#footnote-154) Though nothing is recorded as to be able to actually confirm which taverns of Aston Manor accommodated the shooting there are instances which indicate that one club, The Church Tavern did shoot in such a location. In a particularly important contest for the Aston Town and District Air Gun Association Trophy this particular club shot against the Roebuck Inn Club at this club’s headquarters in Erdington. The event must have proved enjoyable for it is recorded that they proved superior by four points.[[155]](#footnote-155)

This recreation was, as can be imagined essentially one that was enjoyed by the working class, and one that often drew condemnation from the ‘respectable’ elements of local society, perhaps because, like many other idioms favoured by the masses it had its soul within the local public house. Indeed such was the attitude of the Aston Manor magistrates, along with their neighbouring counterparts, that from the onset they took a clear opposing stance to its being enacted within licensed premises, though it would seem they were powerless to prevent it. However, rather surprisingly, in 1902 it is recorded that the Great Hall on The Lower Grounds was utilised for the pastime but no indication is available to suggest that this activity had any lasting connection with the local league or its teams.

Whatever the problems the league and its supporters faced from middle class opposition the pastime in general and the league in particular certainly seem to have prospered. Indeed it would seem that the recreation, allied to its league format had become so well established that, in 1903 year another league emerged, The Aston and District League, this comprising, as it did of several other local clubs. Though both these league competitions continued to flourish it is not surprising that the newspapers that served the Manor did not, it would seem publish many details, perhaps again a reflection of ‘respectable’ opinion. However, for those who wished to be kept abreast of the recreation, scores, results and, of course the important league tables there was a publication, The Sports Argus*,* a sporting newspaper which covered Birmingham and its surrounding areas that did. Indeed so popular and important was the air gun scene, that it is said that people waited on the street corners on the Saturday night when the publication was circulated, to see the results and compare league positions. There is no reason not to believe that this recreation did not continue to flourish well after our period of interest ended.

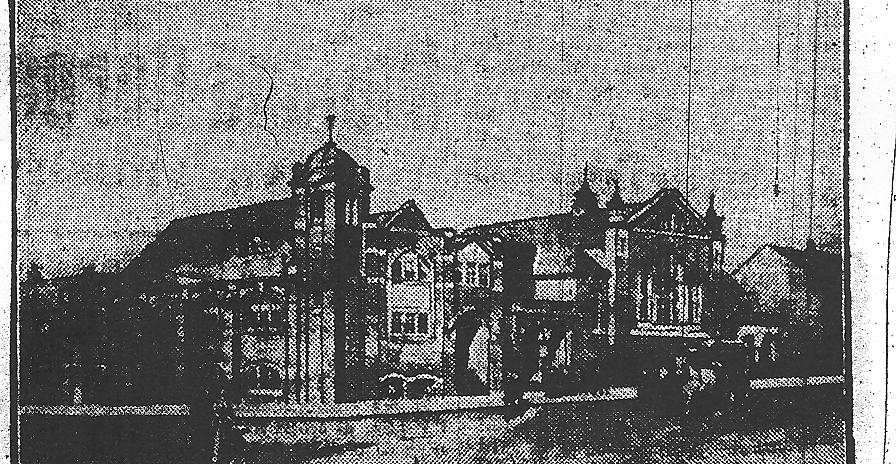
However, prior to the Rifle organisation emerging it would seem that shooting was already popular. Certainly within Aston Manor there was, at times scope for ‘gun sport’. It would seem that the local authorities had devised a way of ridding themselves of one of the ‘pests’ of the area, pigeons. There are several instances reported when local gun enthusiasts were encouraged to use their skill to rid the Manor of this particular, as it was perceived, nuisance. On one of these occasions however the opportunity for the shooters took on an even more attractive hue. For in 1884, in an effort to rid the Aston Cross area of the birds a £25 stake prize was put up for the person who achieved the most kills. Whether the pigeon was eradicated from the area is not known but the offer of sport and a possible monetary reward must have certainly appealed to a good many of the rifle fraternity.[[156]](#footnote-156) As strange and obscene as this may seem to us today, such events certainly, if not in our area then on a wider scale certainly continued. For, whilst no further instances within Aston Manor can be verified, elsewhere, as late as the turn of the century the shooting of this particular bird continued as a suitable pastime. Indeed, so acceptable was it that within the 1900 Paris Olympic Games one of the competitions was that of pigeon shooting, though not, as today involving clay targets but real, live birds.[[157]](#footnote-157)

These recreations that have been mentioned should not of course be considered as being ‘the whole picture’. There were certainly other activities which featured within Aston Manor, though some seemingly only briefly. Hockey, for example does not feature in the local press reports until almost at the end of our period. Here it was reported that an Aston Parish Church team, presumably St. Peter and St. Paul was reported as having played, with disastrous results Billesley, losing 5-1.[[158]](#footnote-158) Additionally the game of Rugby also appears not to have been played within the area. For despite the King Edwards School being particularly proficient at it there is no record of either them or any other team utilising the parkland or any other pitches for matches, either competitive or friendly.

Of course many people must have found other alternatives to those mentioned here. It is clearly impossible to establish all the hobbies and pastimes that the people enjoyed. It should also be remembered that, as already referred to, much recreational activity was often based in the home. Reading, handicrafts and modelling, dressmaking, writing and home beer brewing are but a few examples which, in some form are likely to have featured within the lives of those of the Manor. Unfortunately these ‘private’ activities did and indeed have rarely ever been the subject of detailed record, they are the hidden activities of life. There was, however, a development within Aston Manor and Victorian society in general which, recreationally speaking certainly came to reflect the working class and his attitudes, the Working Man’s club.

These, which came into being during the early 19th century were originally established and managed by the ‘respectable’ to cater for the education and recreation of the working man. They were essentially ‘Social Clubs’, established within the ever increasing industrial areas of the country to, it would seem counteract what many perceived as the inherent dangers to the morals of the ordinary individual from the ever expanding industrial environment. It was not however until 1852 when the first such club to provide purely recreational facilities, The Collonade Working Men’s Club in London was established. They were conceived as being respectable venues where the individual could enjoy recreation without the supposed evils of the public house. It was this ambition that eventually drew the Reverend Henry Solley to establish the Working Men's Club and Institute Union in 1862, a forerunner of the national organization to which many of today's clubs are affiliated, which provided all the necessary conditions of social intercourse, including alcohol, but where the 'temptations and evils of the bar’ would be absent. Within these clubs, there was a myriad of activity designed to, in effect humanise the working men, within an environment which was originally intended to also contain a educational element. Although this ambition was seldom satisfied they became an essential location for both politically and socially minded men (women were not allowed membership until very much later).[[159]](#footnote-159)

Though many clubs did appear within neighbouring Birmingham it was not until 1880 that Aston Manor first gained such a location. It should be noted though that Aston Manor within our period did have ‘clubs,’ though these were fundamentally aligned to the various political parties of the area, and were not in any way, in any sense working men’s establishments. It would seem that, in regards to the working man’s facility it was, in the previous year that a number of leading citizens from the area meet in a Lozells school to discuss the possibility of establishing one.



The Lozells Working Men’s Club, Gerrard/Lozells Street

Utilising a site on the corner of Guildford and Gower Streets, next to the Mission Hall, it was anticipated that subscriptions would be 3d per week and that the amenity would open between the hours of 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. each evening except Sundays.[[160]](#footnote-160) The aim, according to the proposers which included Mr. Ansell was to provide a location where ‘rational recreation and amusement’ could be obtained. The ambitions of those concerned were substantially enhanced, when, the following year premises were obtained in Lozells Road under the control of a Dr. H. P. Garvey and a Mr. H. Phelps, these individuals taking the positions of manager and secretary respectfully. In laying the Foundation Stone a Mr. Harry Lucas stated what many now believed:

“that times had changed, the old condition had passed, that the public house, which, in days gone by had its place had served its turn, but today it was no longer the place where the people and particularly young people could associate and get any good from.”

After thanking the speaker for his comments a Mr. Yoxall spoke and stated his belief that, the club would, in a very short space of time, for the working man be:

“their centre of intellectual life. What we wanted in this country and particularly among the working classes was to be more alive. He saw people of all classes droning, sleeping through life; they just did their work but never put any enthusiasm into it. The workman content to do the same work day after day and never to discover the theoretical basis of the work they did. Let them make their club a place where their lives would be lifted.”

Perhaps though the most telling comment was made by a Mr. Henderson, MP who spoke to the accompaniment of a chorus of ‘here here’s’:

“of the happier conditions under which the German workman lived than the Englishman, and wished something after the style of the German Café could be introduced into this country in the place of the glaring gin palaces to be seen at almost every street corner. The reason the Churches had to deplore the loss of the young men of today was that they had failed to meet the social and recreative aspirations of these young men.”[[161]](#footnote-161)

Having already, even before opening attracted some fifty members ‘the venture very quickly caught on.’ Within a short time it could boast of providing bagatelle, draughts, chess, an angling society, cycle club, billiards, whist club and an ambulance club. However, Mr. Ansell, though obviously a keen advocate of the club did find objection to one proposal that was put forward at one early committee meeting, which it must be presumed was made up of members. He and his fellow supporters objected to the idea that cards be included in the range of activities, presumably on the grounds of gambling. In reporting on the matter a local newspaper supported the committee stating that cards as a pastime was not the problem, it was the gambling that was often associated with them.[[162]](#footnote-162) It can only be presumed that cards were not introduced into the attractions of the club. Yet, despite this omission so successful was the club that, by the end of our period it had become a mainstay of the Birmingham and Suburban ClubLeagues, playing fixtures in such competitions as The Midlands Billiard Challenge Shield against teams from, for example Wolverhampton, Walsall and, from further afield Swadlingcote. This league structure also provided opportunities for the aficionados of bagatelle, whist, cribbage and air gun shooting to play their particular games in a competitive atmosphere. By 1895 however the amenity, because of its success had moved to new, larger premises, this being found in a house in Witton Lanewhich had previously been the property of the late Alderman Johnson. The attraction of this venue was undoubtedly the fact that it allowed for an extension to the facilities already established and, because it already had within it a large room the club would be placed in such a position so as to be able to provide for concert presentations capable of attracting an audience of up to six hundred people. The magnetism of the club was certainly recognised by the press, when in an editorial it was noted:

“As showing the enormous strides that the club has made during its first year, (at the new location) no less than 364 members have their names subscribed on the books. This, we image is something of a record for an Aston club. The cycling club has had a wonderful season and now numbers around fifty wheelmen in its ranks, and while the angling society is about the same strength in point of numbers. There are nearly forty members in the Ambulance class and this useful work will be continued during the winter by Dr. Garvey and Adamson. Altogether is in not too much to say that the Lozells Social Club is at the present time with its phenomenal success following the lines of the Birmingham Unity.”[[163]](#footnote-163)

The new location also it seems inspired, in 1907 the introduction of a Floral Society. Showing at the club they, like many other societies of the same ilk contributed any profits to charitable causes. They also, from 1908 enjoyed an annual society outing, a habit which certainly was being re-enacted in 1911. On one occasion, they travelled to Alrewas by coach, enjoying a dinner at The White Hart Inn. After enjoying their meal some of the members decided to organise a six a side football match between themselves and three members of the local team who were present. The return journey commenced at 6 p.m., and after finally arriving back at the clubhouse around 9 p.m. a smoking concert was put on by several members of the club. Rather surprisingly it has not been possible to establish any record of either an organised football or cricket team. This may, of course be simply through a lack of publicity but, perhaps it is more likely that the age group that was most attracted to the facility were slightly past the ‘soccer or cricketing age’.

It would be logical to believe that the establishment enjoying, as it was such great success must have had the potential to inspire others to follow. That initially none did can perhaps be put down to the fact that Birmingham had a particularly thriving club community, alleviating any need for any local additions. However in 1907 a new club did appear. Providing very much the same attractions as the Lozells facility The New Unity Club opened at the junction of Park Land and Park Road, with great optimism. Yet only fourteen months later it closed, due, it would seem to a lack of members!! Why this should have happened cannot be accurately determined but it must be thought that given the plethora of recreational clubs in Birmingham as well as the local facility already discussed reduced its attraction. Certainly many of the facilities and attractions that these establishments offered were also available in other locations both in Aston Manor and the surrounding area. The Aston Tavern for example had snooker tables which were extremely popular, so much so that at times the location was the scene of charity challenges. In 1905, for example a local star Freddie Lawrence, ‘The Boy Champion’ played a game of 700 up in aid of a local cause[[164]](#footnote-164) whilst at the Red Lion, on fairly regular basis challenge billiard matches were enacted, one such event being when an F. Bateman and J. J. Watts played an exhibition match.[[165]](#footnote-165) However it has to be recognised that essentially it was the local political clubs, Labour, Liberal and Conservative which sustained the more competitive side of the games of Billiards and Snooker within the Manor.

For the Conservative Club, for example as members of the Conservative Billiards League*,* playing in the competition from as early as 1905, fulfilling fixtures against such as Acocks Green[[166]](#footnote-166) and West Bromwich the game was particularly important.[[167]](#footnote-167) They, throughout the period from the mid-1890’s enjoyed a most successful existence, in 1895 for example fulfilling a match in The Gazette Challenge Cup against Dudley Conservatives.[[168]](#footnote-168) Yet there can be no doubt that this club’s greatest achievement, one that must have brought them a great sense of pride occurred in January of 1907. After battling through several tough matches the club reached the All England Billiard Tournament Final. Travelling to The Battersea Constitutional club, Battersea, London they faced The Mountain Ash Constitutional Club of London for the trophy, each team having three members and scored a fine win, providing for a clean sweep in all the ties.[[169]](#footnote-169) Surprisingly the amount of column space dedicated to this achievement might indicate that there was, from the wider population little interest in their endeavours.

The Liberals were also particularly active, playing in a Birmingham and District Liberal League from as early as 1905 against teams from around the area. They also like their Conservative counterparts at times arranged celebrity events, not only to raise funds but also for charity. One such occasion witnessed the licensee of The White Horse, Victoria Road take on a celebrity player Mr. J. J. Witts who was termed ‘the well known expert’, the expert winning easily.[[170]](#footnote-170) Surprisingly there are no indications of the Labour fraternity branching out into these games, though it is highly likely that they would have entertained the game within their establishment, playing their counterparts in friendly fixtures. If they did it would seem that the press were simply not interested!! Though the clubs mentioned certainly dominated Aston Manor’s representation within this sphere of activity there was another in existence which has an interest in the game, The Aston Cross Club. Though being recorded as holding an Annual Dinner in 1893 which was attended by some seventy to eighty persons no information can be found either as to their activities or even if they were actually based in Aston Manor. Given that the only record has them holding this function in The Victoria Hall, it could well be that this particular club may not have been based in the Manor and chose to restrict its activities to its own members, thus not venturing into the outside world of competition.[[171]](#footnote-171)

Not all recreations however found a ready home within Aston Manor. Tennis, for example seemed to be of little interest to the vast majority of the population, due no doubt to the schism of class. However, this did not prevent the local newspapers regularly reporting on the activity of the one Tennis club within the area, The Aston Lower Grounds Tennis Club whose courts were located on The Lower Grounds. Formed in 1882, it would appear to have been highly exclusive, membership being restricted to those of the correct social standing. It would seem that this club continued to exist certainly up to at least 1909 from which time onwards no record can be found.[[172]](#footnote-172)

The existence of these social divisions within their society did not however, in any way prevent many of the Manor enjoying one other particular recreation, which as our period progressed became ever more popular, travelling. Though many would have enjoyed the freedom of the bicycle, travelling to local places of interest the key to visiting locations further away, particularly the coast was the railway. Ever increasingly many took advantage of its existence for not only days out but for increasingly annual holidays. All of the newspapers that were available to the population carried ever more detailed descriptions of the attractions that were available at such places as Skegness, Weston Super Mare and particularly Blackpool. It would seem that a trip to the coast had for many have become a real possibility. The opportunity of going to The Royal Waxworks, Blackpool for example and seeing a likeness of the notorious Mrs. Maybrick, the Liverpool murderer certainly might be thought of as an attractive opportunity when compared to what was available at the beginning of our period.[[173]](#footnote-173) This is not to say, of course, that there were those who could not afford even the most bargain of fares, for it has to be borne in mind that, in general terms Aston Manor was not a financially enhanced area, being essentially composed of the poorer paid, working class individual.[[174]](#footnote-174)

In considering the activities that have been thought of within the guidelines of this and the previous chapter it can be clearly appreciated that those of Aston Manor did, in a multitude of ways take more control of their recreation. Though the rules, conventions and guidelines that fundamentally ordered them were middle class in origin and were, in the main dutifully observed nevertheless many of the working class, as can be appreciated seem to have chosen to construct their own world within which to participate. The result, it could be said was that recreation had by 1911 matured. It was essentially independent of any employee/employer relationship and, as such a matter of individual choice. Though a connection with the world of work continued it was no longer a dominant force, the option of free choice led many to discard the connection and opt for other relationships. However it must also be remembered that the acceptance of paternalism would have been the price that many had to pay so as to able to enjoy a modicum of recreational opportunity. Though it was said some years prior to our period, in 1861, the statement by a Hippolyte Taine might be considered just as accurate for ours in that recreation was an “outlet from repression”.[[175]](#footnote-175)

However, in regards to how much recreation had both altered and changed society in general and Aston Manor in particular one could no better than consider the comment made by a Mr. Collins, Lord Mayor of Birmingham. In a speech to the Birmingham and District FA, an audience that must certainly have contained more than a few Astonians he perhaps summed up the ethos of the Victoria attitude to sport and perhaps respectable recreation in general when he said:

“I speak from experience when I say that man will be better able to follow up the duties of after life demanding great mental work, if in his youth he has spent a good portion of his time in athletic sports of various kinds”.[[176]](#footnote-176)

Though such voices might have believed that it was they who were the governing force, in a very real way recreation has become influenced by those to whom it was originally directed. Aston Manor in reality was a broad church and had, by 1911 developed a identity which was both in content and attitudes not only vastly different from that of some forty years previous but of a nature not entirely intended by those of the respectable classes.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that if one was to read any reasonable volume of social history concerning the Victorian period you would be left with one definitive impression - change. The period was, without question an era that witnessed fundamental and definitive revisions to society and one within which the modern world as we know it was moulded. It was an era of Empire when the Union Jack flew resplendent over perhaps as much as one third of the world, when the Royal Navy ruled the waves and our manufactured goods found their way into all four corners of the globe. Additionally it was a time when innovation blossomed perhaps as never before, the railway system crossing the nation bringing a new industrial world to areas that formerly may have been idyllic rural locations. It was the industrial revolution that this railway was an essential part of that transformed the nation from an agricultural to an industrial entity. Now it was the factory and the workshop, organised to provide for an ever increasingly urban population that was the key to the future. Factories and workshops became the focus of labour, ever progressively more sophisticated to cope with the demand of both a national and international demand.

That such dramatic social change occured naturally forced immense adjustments upon those within the society upon which it was fostered. Work for example ceased to become dominated by the seasons but by ‘time.’ Now the factory whistle replaced the coming up of the sun and the flow of the seasons. Work had become ‘compartmentalized’, not only in regards to time but also nature. There had developed a clear social distinction between the artisan and the labourer and, in turn between the working class and the social strata which can be identified as the Middle Class. Though this latter element can be identified as owing its existence to a period previous[[177]](#footnote-177) it was, during the Victorian era that it could be said to have triumphed. It could be believed, and this work certainly supports the view that it was the Middle Class who were, in effect the engine by which the Victorian age progressed. It was their drive and ambition which provided the impetus for the development of much of what occurred. It could also be recognised that within this time certain ‘values,’ of work, self-reliance and respectability came to the fore, values that not only influenced and shaped the era, but even today resonate. Indeed, in the 1983 General Election Margaret Thatcher, when campaigning as leader of the Conservative Party often chose to emphasis them:

“We were taught to work jolly hard. We were taught to prove yourself; we were taught self-reliance; we were taught to live within our income. You were taught that cleanliness was next to godliness. You were taught self-respect. You were always taught to give a hand to your neighbour. You were taught tremendous pride in your country. All these things are Victorian values. They are also perennial values.”[[178]](#footnote-178)

Yet, as this work indicates, within the area of recreation ‘these values’ did not go unchallenged. For, as all pervading as they would appear to have been they were subject to a process of adaption.

The notion of conformity, which was certainly the underlying premise of the age was, as the period progressed subject to ever increasing challenges. Recreation, be it a game or pastime increasingly developed an identity that came to reflect, not simply the mores of the good and holy but of the ordinary person in the street. Certainly within Aston Manor the adoption of local and individualised identities can be seen as not only fundamental reflections of those ‘Victorian values’ but also a desire for individual expression and identity. Though the rules of participation were those espoused by the respectable middle classes by adopting the name of ‘Aston’ or street name in regards to a team or club or utilizing a public house as its headquarters the proletariat were expressing a desire to be identified as being individual, different within an age of conventionality. Similarly, by the adoption of the cycle and her refusal to bow to paternalistic pressure the female challenged the convention of gender relations, though not in such a manner that was totally outside many of the perceived values of the day. It is this movement, of the mass of the people attempting to provide for itself an element of independent identity which gave to the late Victorian period a unique social appearance and one that made the area of Aston Manor such an important arena within the world of recreation.

However, it is still difficult to understand why such a small area as Aston Manor provided a recreational landscape as varied and important as it did. Not only did it come to provide a world renowned football club in Aston Villa but also one from within the world of athletics that is equally well respected, Birchfield Harriers. Add to these a ground-breaking cricket club which gave to the world a new vision for the future and a swimming facility that, if compared to others both in the region and farther a-field certainly stands favourable comparison one is left with the impression of immense achievement. That such innovation could take place within the confines of a small, what in reality was a suburban area can perhaps be understood when one considers what was, as already stated ‘the jewel in Aston Manor’s crown’, the Lower Grounds. Though not unique, there were other such complexes in London and other major industrial areas it is difficult to believe that any had such a profound effect upon the areas within which they stood. It could be stated in fact that The Aston Lower Ground site, along with the park effectively inspired the recreational explosion that was enacted not only in Aston Manor but also within the large conurbation which lay adjacent. The site with its many facilities, allied to the attractions that it presented gave to Aston Manor an almost unique recreational identity. For throughout its life the area displayed and expressed an independence of thought and action that belied its size. It could be stated, with some conviction that when one talks of the recreational history of Birmingham, one should really talk of Aston Manor. There is little evidence to indicate that the larger location provided as much to the recreational world of the period under consideration as did her small neighbour.

Despite the fact that this work, is by necessity ‘general’ in nature it does indicate the truth of this statement. It is hoped that this contribution to the social history of Aston Manor has opened up areas that were perhaps not so well appreciated. Though now forgotten by all but the most dedicated social historian or true born Astonian it is hoped that this work has reawakened an interest in the area. The activity of the church, the public house, the clubs, the societies and indeed the individual, provide for a unique recreational identity, one that in complexity can undoubtedly stand tall alongside, I believe any other location. Of course this work should not be thought of as representing the whole story. The role of the female, for example has been, through necessity absorbed within a general homogenous approach. This is not to believe however that her contribution, though restricted, due in the main to the social conventions of the time were any less important. Her involvement, in all areas must be identified as being a contributing factor to that which happened after our period of consideration ended.

Yet, for as much as one would like to think that all elements of the development of recreational activity within the area have been considered it is more realistic to believe that much has been missed. Much of what happened ‘within the confines of the home’ is of course, due to its private nature unrecorded. The reality is that the local press, perhaps through a lack of column inches or as is more likely little interest chose not to report on it. How many football teams, for example played heroically against the odds against bitter local rivals on the local parkland or batsmen saved the day with match saving ‘knocks’, without ever receiving due notice of their endeavours. Again how many pints were consumed in celebration as a result of an individual hitting a bell at a local rifle contest and how many females gained their first taste of independence thanks to a cycle ride. Sadly much has been lost. However, despite this it is clear that Aston Manor was a true bastion of recreational endeavor. All the virtues that were so praised by those of the age can be identified as existing within the confines of this, a small enclave of Warwickshire.

Yet even though Aston Manor has ceased to exist, swallowed up by what many might consider the path of progress it has left a legacy that still resonates today. To walk around the area, to take a drink in its remaining public houses, to stand outside the Aston Manor transport building and gaze at the stone proclamation, to walk upon the parkland that still surrounds the magnificent Aston Hall, to view its church and to gaze upon the colossus that is now Villa Park is to step back in recreational time. All of these and more are visible signs of the vitality and vibrancy of what once was Aston Manor. Long may the memories last and long may Aston Manor be remembered.

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44. *Aston Times*, 28th December, 1895. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Aston News*, 8th August, 1896. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. R. Holt, *Sport and The British*, *A Modern History,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp121-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. D. D. Molyneux *The Development of Physical Recreation in the Birmingham District, 1871-1891,* Unpublished MA Thesis, Birmingham University, 1958. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 19th September, 1885, p195. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. ‘Champion of Her Sex’, in *New York Sunday World*, 2nd February 1896, p10. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *Midland Athletic*, 19th January, 1881. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Birmingham Weekly New*s, 16th June, 1900. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 4th April, 1885. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *Aston News*, 30th July, 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Aston News*, 15th April, 1908. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *Sports Argus*, 13th May, 1903. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *The Sorts Argus*, 13th May, 1903. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. *Aston News*, 10th June, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *Aston News*, 10th June, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Aston Times*, 24th June, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *Aston News*, 10th June, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. *Aston News*, 3rd October, 1896. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. *Aston News*, 8th July, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. *Saturday Night*, 6th October, 1883. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. *Aston News*, 1st July, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. *Aston News*, 8th August, 1896. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. *Aston News*, 3rd December, 1910. There is no evidence available as to the extent within

    Aston Manor as to the use of the motorcycle, though it must be presumed that there were

    individuals who used both owned and used the machines in a private capacity. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. *Aston Times*, 31st December, 1898 and *Sports Argus,* 23rd March, 1903. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. For a very brief discussion on the different variations of the game of Bowls see http://www.tradgames.org.uk/games/Bowls.htm#LawnBowls. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 5th May, 1888. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. *Aston News*, 29th October, 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. *Aston News*, 9th December, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. *Aston News*, 15th December, 1906. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. *Aston News*, 3rd December, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *Aston News*, 22nd August, 1906. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. *Aston News*, 20th May, 1911. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. *Aston News*, 27th May, 1911 and *Aston Times*, 21st December, 1895. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. *Aston News*, 20th May, 1911. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Aston Manor BC, *Aston News*, 2nd January, 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Aston Lower Grounds BC *Aston News*, 8th June, 1907. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. *Aston News*, 12th December, 1908. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. *Aston News*, 11th March, 1911. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. *Aston News*, 14th January, 1911. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. *Aston News*, 26th December, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. The Swimming Bath, [*www.information-britain.co.uk/famdates.php?id=268*](http://www.information-britain.co.uk/famdates.php?id=268). The Romans in the first century AD are believed to have had such facilities in Britain – they had already installed a heated pool in Rome in the first half of the century. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 9th September, 1882 and 12th January, 1884. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 12th January, 1884. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 7th August, 1886. It should be borne in mind that the bathing facilities at the time were and essentially remained so, for many at least up to as late as the 1930s a tin bath in front of a fire. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. *Aston News*, 11th July, 1891. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. For an appreciation of the type of rules that governed the facility see *Public Baths, Handbook*

    *of Rules and Regulations,* compiled by J. A. Panting, Birmingham: Birmingham Museum and

    Art Gallery, 1907. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. The Birmingham Leander Swimming Club, based at Northwood Street Baths, was formed in 1877 see J. Moth, *The City of Birmingham Baths Department 1851 - 1951*, Birmingham: Birmingham Council, 1951. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. *Aston Times*, 1st April, 1893. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. *Aston News*, 8th September, 1900. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. *Aston Times*, 26th August, 1893 [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. *Aston Times*, 16th July, 1898. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 28th July 1894. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. *Aston Times*, 12th May and 9th June, 1894. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. *Aston News*, 22nd March, 1902. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. *Birmingham and* *Aston Chronicle*, 21st June, 1894. light, four wheeled horse drawn with

    two lengthwise seats facing each other behind a cross-wise drivers seat. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 26th January, 1895. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. *Aston News*, 15th October, 1904. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. *Aston News*, 17th July, 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 12th October, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. *Aston Times*, 16th June, 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. *Aston News*, 1st October, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. *Aston News*, 16th October, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. *Aston News*, 18th October, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. *Aston News*, 1st October, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. *Aston News*, 28th January, 1911. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. *Aston Times*, 3rd November, 1894. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. *Aston News*, 20th October, 1900. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. *Aston Times*, 7th October, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. *Aston News*, 29th September, 1906. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. *Aston News*, 19th October, 1907. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. *Aston News*, 25th February, 1911. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. *Sports Argus*, 30th May, 1908. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. *Sports Argus*, 16th October, 1897. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. *Aston News*, 1st July 1911. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. *Aston News*, 8th September, 1900. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. *Aston Times,* 16th September, 1899. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. *Aston Times*, 8th July, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. *Aston Times*, 30th July, 1898. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. *Aston News*, 28th May, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. *Aston Times*, 7th September, 1895.

     This club may actually be The Lozells SC as previously mentioned. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. *Aston News*, 19th September, 1908. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. *Aston News*, 8th October, 1904. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. *Aston Times*, 9th September, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. *Aston Times*, 23rd June, 1898 and5th August, 1905. This club should not be mixed up with

     The Lozells Street Mission SC who as indicated were also heavily involved in swimming

     in the Manor. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. *Aston News*, 8th June, 1907. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. *Aston News*, 3rd November, 1900. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. *Aston News,* 3rd December, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. *Aston News,* 16th December, 1893. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. *Aston News*, 16th December, 1893. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. *Aston Times*, 30th December, 1893. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. *Aston Times*, 30th December, 1893. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. *Aston News*, 7th March, 1896. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. *Aston News*, 15th February, 1901. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. *Aston News*, 7th November, 1896. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. *Aston News*, 24th December, 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. *Aston News,* 26th March, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 3rd March, 1894. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. *Aston News*, 2nd March 1907. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. *Aston News*, 21st May, 1904. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. *The Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 23rd July, 1881. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. *Aston News*, 11th October, 1902. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. *Aston News*, 12th January, 1907. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. *Sports Argus*, 14th February, 1903. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. History and Early Origins, *http://www.localhistory.scit.wlv.ac.uk/articles/belltarget* [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. *Aston News*, 25th August, 1900. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. *Sports Argus*, 14th February, 1903. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. *Aston Times*, 1st July, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. *Aston News*, 17th November, 1906. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. *Aston News*, 17th November, 1906. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. *www.localhistory.scit.wlv.ac.uk/articles/belltarget/bt04.htm.* [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. For a somewhat idealistic description of a Rifle shooting match see ‘The Match,’ [*www.localhistory.scit.wlv.ac.uk/articles/belltarget/bt04.htm*](http://www.localhistory.scit.wlv.ac.uk/articles/belltarget/bt04.htm)*.*Given the nature of the

     atmosphere the target could be fitted to a convenient gas pipe to illuminate it. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. *Aston News*, 21st May, 1904. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 15th November, 1884. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Ross Malcolm,*The Final curtain: The Last live pigeon Shooting event at The Olympic Games* inThe Scotsman, 16th August, 2008,

     [*http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/olympics/Final*](http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/olympics/Final)*-curtain-The-last-live* and. M. A. Kellett,

     ‘The power of princely patronage: pigeon-shooting in Victorian Britain’ in *The* [*International Journal of the History of Sport*](file:///C:\Documents%20and%20Settings\Jen\Desktop\title~db=all~content=t713672545)*,* Volume [11](file:///C:\Documents%20and%20Settings\Jen\Desktop\title~db=all~content=t713672545~tab=issueslist~branches=11%20\%20v11), Issue [1,](file:///C:\Documents%20and%20Settings\Jen\Desktop\title~db=all~content=g772701939) April 1994, pp63-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. *Aston News*, 7th January, 1911 [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. B. Solly, ‘The Reverend Henry Solly and the Working Men's Clubs’ in *Soul Search*,

     The Journal of The Sole Society, November 1999. *http://www.sole.org.uk/* [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. *Aston Observer and Handsworth Times*, 13th December, 1879. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. *Aston News*, 4th January, 1880. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. *Aston Observer and Handsworth Times,* 5th June, 1880. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. *Aston News*, 3rd October, 1896. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. *Aston Times*, 29th July, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. *Aston Times*, 19th February, 1898. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. *Aston News*, 12th January, 1907. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. *Aston News*, 11th February, 1911. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. *Aston Times*, 7th December, 1895. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. *Aston News*, 19th January, 1907. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. *Aston Times*, 30th December, 1899. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. *Aston Times*, 26th August, 1893. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Molyneux D. D., *The Development of Physical Recreation in the Birmingham District, 1871-1891,* Unpublished MA Thesis, Birmingham University, 1958, p36. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. She was convicted in Liverpool in 1889 of the murder of her husband James Maybrick and

     sentenced to death, this being commuted to life after a public outcry. After an appeal some

     fourteen years later she was released and went to the United States where she died in 1941.

     See B. Ryan Jr. *The Poisoned Life of Mrs. Maybrick* London: **Penguin Books Ltd, 1989.** [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. According to statistics if 1850 is taken as the norm wages had risen by 33% at 1870 but by 1911 had actually fallen by 6% in relation to value against the cost of living, B. R. Mitchell with the collaboration of P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*,

     England: Cambridge University Press, 1962, pp344-345. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. R.. Hutchinson, *Empire Games*, Scotland: Mainstream Publishing, 1996, p74. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. *The Midland Athlete*, 30th April, 1881. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. J. Lawrence, *The Middle Class, A History*, England: Little, Brown, 2006, part 2, pp129-223. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. G. Himmelfarb, The Demoralisation of Society, USA: ?????, 1996, in J. Lawrence,

     *The Middle Class, A History*, England: Little, Brown, 2006, part 2, p231. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)