hachette LEARNING

Modern History review

www.hachettelearning.com/historyreview

Escaping the everyday?

Leisure and identity in interwar Britain (1918–39)

Simon Peplow

Explore how the experience of leisure time varied during the interwar years in the UK

The interwar years – between the end of the First World War in 1918 and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 – saw significant social and cultural change in Britain. Alongside political upheavals, economic struggles and evolving class relations, historians have argued that leisure became increasingly central to British life and national identity in this period. Rising real wages for many workers, the expansion of commercial entertainment industries, technological developments (especially radio and cinema), and changes in working hours transformed how many Britons experienced 'free time'.

However, leisure was never evenly distributed and experiences varied greatly by factors like class, region, gender and age. Although large numbers of people could now, in theory, watch the same film, listen to the same radio programme or read the same book, they did not actually access or experience this cultural consumption in the exact same way.

Context

In November 1918, Prime Minister David Lloyd George declared that Britain's task after the First World War was in creating 'a fit country for heroes to live in' to reward its returning soldiers. Although this pledge was largely unfulfilled, some developments, such as rising wages and shorter working weeks for many workers, did significantly increase their ability to participate in leisure activities.

Real wages – a measure of what workers could use their income to buy, rather than purely the amount of money they received – increased for many industrial workers during the 1920s, although this varied considerably by region. Depressed areas of South Wales, the North of England and Clydeside in Scotland suffered long periods of mass unemployment and severe labour unrest, hugely impacting people's lives and their ability to participate in leisure activities. On the other hand, many workers in newer, lighter industries – such as the motor industry in the Midlands – found themselves with more free time and money, which now could be spent on enjoyable pursuits outside of work.

Cinema

Perhaps the best example of leisure in interwar Britain was the cinema. Silent films and, from the late 1920s onwards, the 'talkies' – films with audible dialogue – drew huge audiences by offering affordable escapism for the masses. About 18–19 million cinema tickets were sold each year in Britain during the 1930s, with the country having one of the highest cinema attendance rates in the world. To entertain these audiences, the number of picture houses in Britain mushroomed: from around 3,000 in 1926 to almost 5,000 in 1938. They also got larger; in 1912, the average cinema had 600 seats, but by the 1930s, new cinemas were being built with about 2,000–3,000 seats.

Audiences enjoyed glamorous stories, comedies, musicals and adventure films, often produced in Hollywood, which provided some escapist relief from everyday hardships. Some commentators – such as playwright J.B. Priestley – feared the 'Americanisation' of Britain, which they believed would undermine its 'traditional values' and create a homogenised mass culture. Attempting to boost the British film industry, the government introduced the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act, which required cinemas to show a quota of British-made films – although historians have mixed opinions on its success.

Even when watching the exact same films, the ways in which different groups and classes of people experienced the cinema were not identical. The poorest sections of the working class were often limited to attending what were known as 'flea pits': picture houses known for poor maintenance and low prices. Even when different classes used the same cinema, they were often physically separated. Those only able to afford the cheapest tickets were relegated to the gallery, with wealthier attendees in the more expensive seats in the stalls. Similarly, for working-class mothers, the cinema was not just a treat for themselves, but also a way to entertain their kids. So, the conditions under which someone participated in leisure activities determined the way in which they responded to them, as well as the meanings that they attached to them.

Holidays

The interwar years also saw a rapid expansion of domestic tourism. The traditional working-class resort of Blackpool reached its height in the 1930s, drawing millions of visitors each year. New attractions, including the Pleasure Beach and the famous illuminations, made Blackpool a symbol of mass leisure. Similarly, cheaper railway fares and organised trips – by companies such as Great Western Railway – made travel more accessible to more people. The 1930s also saw the rise of holiday camps, most famously Butlin's, which was founded in 1936. These affordable, often all-inclusive camps offered structured leisure with activities, communal dining and evening entertainment. For many families, this was their first experience of an organised holiday.

Books

The interwar years also saw a boom in cheap paperback books, especially through publishers like Penguin (launched in 1935), and reading became a more accessible form of leisure. Similarly, new libraries were built and book borrowing increased, as libraries offered educational and recreational reading for those unable to afford to buy books, especially in more deprived areas.

Radio

The radio – or 'wireless', as it was known – became another cornerstone of interwar leisure. One of the few domestic luxury items that could be found in most households, the number of listeners almost tripled in the 1930s, from around 12 million at the end of the 1920s to about 34 million in 1939. A substantial proportion of the total population had at least one radio at home and, for the first time, millions of listeners across the country could tune in to hear the exact same music or news programme. A miner in Wales or metal worker in Sheffield could now come home from work and hear a symphony orchestra playing Beethoven from the Albert Hall in London. Ten years previously, this experience would have only been accessible to those who could afford to buy concert tickets to be there in person. Historians have therefore suggested that radio created shared experiences across

social classes and regions, something they often identify as contributing to greater cultural cohesion in Britain.

However, as we have seen, the way in which people access mass culture becomes part of their everyday life and is therefore shaped by their surroundings, their relationships and pre-existing politics, power relations and attitudes. For example, while middle-class families were more likely to sit and listen attentively to the radio at specific times, working-class married women combined listening to the radio with household tasks, like mending clothes – blurring the boundaries between work and leisure.

The BBC

Early radio broadcasting was legally monopolised by the British Broadcasting Company, which was formed in 1922 and became the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1927. This was because commercial radio stations were effectively banned from broadcasting until 1973. John Reith, the first Director General of the BBC, who continued until 1938, believed that the BBC should 'inform, educate and entertain' the nation. This meant programming that mixed light entertainment with cultural enrichment. Classical music concerts, news bulletins, children's programmes, plays and variety shows all became staples of daily listening.

The first major commercial competition, Radio Luxembourg, began broadcasting in English in 1933. Despite being based in Luxembourg to evade the BBC's legal monopoly on radio broadcasting, its powerful signal allowed it to reach Britain. Radio Luxembourg played popular music and contained advertising not permitted on BBC broadcasts. Particularly through such commercial radio stations, broadcasting of new popular music fed into large dance halls appearing in cities across Britain. Young people flocked to these major leisure venues to dance to the latest popular songs, which they knew from hearing them on the radio.

Dance halls provided a lively, socially mixed space that some older generations regarded with suspicion – especially raising anxieties about the behaviour of young women, with fears of a supposed 'moral decline'. Such debates reveal generational tensions and shifting social norms. For many historians, dance halls reflect the emergence of a more distinctive youth culture, defined by new fashions, music tastes and a desire for independence from older generations.

The democratisation of leisure?

While some writers have concluded that mass culture was democratised in the interwar years, becoming more accessible to a greater number of people, others have argued that we can see a continuation of what might be described as paternalistic 'Victorian values'. For instance, the BBC was controlled by a small number of upper-middle-class people who made decisions about the kind of culture that they thought should be consumed by the majority of the nation.

Early broadcasters were aware of the social and political implications of this new technology that enabled the same programme to be broadcast into the homes of millions of different listeners. Many of them hoped to forge a communal identity, which might unite people from different regions and classes, and to generate a collective investment in the new democratic society that had emerged after the First World War.

Critics have suggested that this vision was in fact far from democratic, but instead a kind of aristocratic, top-down understanding of national culture where educated upper-middle-class men would decide what kind of music, political coverage, and programmes were 'best' for educating their working-class listeners. This approach was based on the assumption that the form of culture consumed by men who were educated at Oxford or Cambridge, such as John Reith, was the only form of legitimate 'proper' culture, and that the working class had no culture of its own. It has therefore been argued that attempts within the early BBC towards promoting a 'common culture' should perhaps be viewed not so much as a form of democratisation of culture, but instead as a response to fears about mass democracy. In other words, it was a pre-emptive attempt to shape and control national taste and culture, now that it was accessible to more of the British population.

Varied experiences

Experiences of leisure activities varied across class, and some clubs – including golf, tennis and rambling clubs – explicitly excluded working-class people. Similarly, private car ownership was mostly confined to the middle class, enabling greater mobility and leisure travel only for those with the means to afford it.

Some historians have also argued that, even within the working class, interwar leisure activities were further separated along lines of both gender and age. For instance, older men tended to continue to participate in more 'traditional' forms of popular pastimes, such as drinking, betting and sports. On the other hand, although young working-class women formed a significant portion of the new pleasure-seeking consumer market, they nevertheless had less access to it than their male counterparts. Young women generally earned less than men and therefore had less disposable income to spend on leisure activities. Women were also more often expected to contribute to household labour – keeping them at home doing the housework on evenings when young men were more likely to be free to explore their different hobbies.

Conclusion

Interwar Britain saw dramatic shifts in leisure activities, shaped by technological innovation, social change and economic inequality. Mass entertainment industries flourished, providing escapism and shared cultural experiences through cinema, radio and sport. Historians have also argued that leisure contributed to shaping ideas of what it meant to be British in the interwar years. Sporting events fostered patriotism, radio created shared national moments, and cinema helped build cultural heroes and common stories. At the same time, leisure was deeply influenced by class, region, gender and income, meaning that not all Britons experienced these changes equally.

Questions for discussion

1 How did gender, class, region and age shape access to leisure activities in interwar Britain?

2 To what extent did interwar Britain see the emergence of a 'common culture'?

3 How significant were technological advancements for transforming leisure activities in interwar Britain?

Resources

Independent Cinema Office, 'Glamour and comfort: cinemagoing in the 1920s and 1930s': https://tinyurl.com/Glamour-and-comfort

Mallory Huard (2012), 'The BBC and the shaping of British identity from 1922 to 1945', *The Gettysburg Historical Journal* Vol. 11, No. 3: https://tinyurl.com/Gettysburg-BBC

History: From One Student to Another, 'How did the British people spend their leisure time in the interwar period?': https://tinyurl.com/British-people-leisure

History Extra, 'Summer holiday revolution: when were Britons first allowed to take paid holiday?': https://tinyurl.com/Summer-holiday-revolution

John Griffiths, 'Leisure and cultural conflict in twentieth century Britain', *Reviews in History*: https://tinyurl.com/Reviews-history

The Victorian Web, 'The development of leisure in Britain after 1850': https://tinyurl.com/Victorian-web

Simon Peplow is an associate professor in modern British history at the University of Warwick. He researches and teaches on social, political and cultural histories of modern Britain.