

Changing Birmingham - its people and places: Keep on Running

By Jim Wells, Friends Trustee

Continuing our exploration of BMT's Digital Asset Resource, a sporting theme seemed the obvious choice given the imminent arrival of the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham from 28 July 2022. In the eighteenth-century sport had quite different connotations. It was very much associated with prize fighting and animal sports, which became considered cruel, and was focussed around gambling, pubs and aristocratic patronage. This tradition is still reflected in the names of pubs, with 'The Fighting Cocks' in Moseley being a prime example.



'A Birmingham Prize Fight' by W Allen, 1789, 1945P50;
Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0
This painting depicts a fight between Tom Johnson, Champion of England and Isaac Perrins of Birmingham. According to the Gentleman's Magazine of October 1789, Johnson won after 62 rounds.

Sport, in the form that we now recognise, largely originated in the period of codification and regulation in the mid to late nineteenth century, with Birmingham being the location for a number of firsts. Lawn tennis is generally recognised to have originated and first been played in Edgbaston at 8 Ampton Road, an event commemorated by a blue plaque indicating a date of 1865. The tradition lives on today in the Edgbaston Archery and Lawn Tennis Society, which retains its original name from the nineteenth century. Significantly tennis was a sport in which women from the middle classes were allowed to participate, at a time when they were largely excluded from sporting activities.

A different first occurred on the other side of the city in Aston, with the initiation of the professional men's Football League by William McGregor, a Director of Aston Villa football club. In 1888 the Football League involved 12 clubs, forming the basis of what is now the global professional game. Combined with this was the appointment of the first paid football manager, George Ramsay, who, amongst other achievements, went on to ensure great success for Aston Villa, winning the League and FA Cup double in 1897, and winning the League in 1909-10, as illustrated in the postcard 'Aston Villa FC – Champions' (1995V632.855) from Birmingham's collection.



'After a Game of Tennis' by Fairlie Harmer (d.1945), 1924, 1924P22; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

The area now known as Villa Park was originally called Aston Lower Grounds from the 1860s, after the breakup of the Holte estate (see 'Artefacts' Winter 2021, Issue 67), and was a Victorian sporting and amusements venue. It had an aquarium, a concert hall, ornamental gardens and pools. In fact, Villa Park's current pitch is based on a filled in fishing pool called Dove House Pool. Some of the buildings from this era survived into the 1980s as various club offices. The facility was central to the development of sports in the region, hosting early matches of Warwickshire Cricket Club before their move to Edgbaston, and, most significantly for athletics, the first meeting of the Birchfield Harriers in 1879.



'Postcard: Aston Villa FC – Champions', 1909-10, Topographical Views - Kesterton Collection, 1995V632.855; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0. George Ramsay, the Manager, is first left second row down standing.

Birchfield Harriers was founded in 1877. In the season 1878-79 W.W. Alexander, commonly known as Alex, joined Birchfield Harriers. Alexander would go on to shape the direction of Birmingham athletics. He was a decent runner, but his legacy is as the leading force behind the growth of the Birchfield Harriers and the original Alexander Stadium at Perry Barr. His philosophy is captured in his programme notes for the opening event in 1929: 'To the working men and women of England my thanks are especially given. By their sixpences, the freehold of the ground was purchased.'

Remaining an amateur activity and not attracting the crowds of football, finances were often a problem for the Birchfield Harriers. In order to help the club in the mid-1880s, Alexander recruited the AAA* national record holder for 100 yards, Arthur Wharton. Better known later as one of Britain's first black professional football players, he was born in what is now Ghana. Wharton's 'pulling power' was so great that the gate receipts from the events that he participated in resolved the club's debts. As a result, it could be said that he saved the club at this critical moment.

Birchfield Harriers acquired its own ground in 1929 and, in 1930, this allowed the athletics club to stage the first women's international athletics event in Britain between the home country and Germany. Registered in 1922, the ladies' section of Birchfield Harriers quickly produced some exceptional athletes. Two really stand out - Phyllis Hall and Gladys Lunn. Phyllis attended the first international women's athletics meeting in Paris in 1922 and won a bronze medal in the 1,000 metres. Gladys' achievements are too many to list: she was an all-round competitor, became captain for both the International Cross Country and the England Athletics teams, and in 1947 she was President of the Midland Counties Women's Amateur Athletic Association.

However you personally choose to engage with the Commonwealth Games, it is worth remembering the men and women who set a high bar for sporting achievement and developed the associations and clubs in the City, making Birmingham the ideal host for contemporary sporting events.

*Amateur Athletics Association

For sources and background reading please visit our website: <https://fbmt.org.uk/publications>

Reading and Resources:

'Villa Park 100 Years', Simon Inglis, Sports Projects Ltd., 1997

An excellent source of information, a well-illustrated and an accessible history covering the period from the nineteenth century up to the 1990s. As the title indicates, the focus is very much on the ground and its development over the years, but the playing aspect and famous teams are recorded as well.

'Midland History', Volume 46, Issue 2, July 2021. Special issue: 'History of Sport in the Midlands'. Guest Editor: Luke J. Harris, Routledge

A fine collection of well-researched academic articles on local sports history covering topics such as pedestrianism, swimming, tennis, athletics and participation during the second world war.

'Played in Birmingham: Charting the heritage of a city at play', Simon Beauchampé and Simon Inglis, English Heritage, 2006

A detailed history of sport's physical infrastructure in Birmingham and its geography with a range of interesting illustrations. It covers specific areas such as Edgbaston, the Tame Valley and a number of sports such as swimming and bowls. There is also a good section on the manufacturing of sports equipment, which was a major industry in Birmingham covering everything from bicycles to whistles.

'Sport and the British: A Modern History', Richard Holt, Clarendon Press, 1989

A good broad social history of sport in Britain which allows for an understanding of how the developments in Birmingham fitted into the wider national picture.

'The History of Birchfield Harriers 1877-88', Edited by Prof W O Alexander and Wilfred Morgan, Birchfield Harriers, 1988

A real insight into the club's history, with some good profiles on the famous names associated with the club since its foundation in the nineteenth century and its long and illustrious history.

'Fleet and Free: A history of Birchfield Harriers Athletics Club', Gareth Rogers, Tempus, 2005

Similar to the previous publication but obviously with more of the recent history and profiles of contemporary members along with the broader context of the early history. It contains a very impressive range of statistics on performances and achievements to back up some detailed research.

'Tripping daintily into the arena: A social history of English women's athletics 1921-1960', Unpublished PhD thesis, Lynne Robinson, Warwick University

This is a particularly interesting piece of research as Phyllis Hall was still alive when it was being carried out and was interviewed by the author, and in the appendix is copy of the original letter she had received inviting her to the Paris athletics event.

Online Newspaper Archive

This is a subscription service but well worth the cost. It has huge coverage of newspapers including all the main Birmingham publications stretching back to the eighteenth century. With its search mechanism it is a lot easier to use than the old microfiche rolls.

Illustrations from Birmingham Museum Trust's digital online resource:

[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 1924P22 After A Game Of Tennis](#)

'After a Game of Tennis' by Fairlie Harmar (d.1945), 1924, 1924P22; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0



[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 1995V632.855 Aston Villa FC-Champions 1909-10](#)

'Postcard: Aston Villa FC – Champions', 1909-10, Topographical Views - Kesterton Collection, 1995V632.855; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0
George Ramsay, the Manager, is first left second row down standing.



[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 1945P50 A Birmingham Prize Fight](#)

'A Birmingham Prize Fight' by W Allen, 1789, 1945P50; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

This painting depicts a fight between Tom Johnson, Champion of England and Isaac Perrins of Birmingham. According to the Gentleman's Magazine of October 1789, Johnson won after 62 rounds.



On the right-hand side of this painting is Isaac Perrins (1750-1800), Birmingham's most well-known prize fighter. At 6' 3" and 17 stone he was a formidable opponent, and he was reputed to possess prodigious strength but a mild manner. As well as being an English bareknuckle prizefighter, his day job was as a factory foreman for Boulton and Watt, based at their Soho Foundry in Birmingham. At 39, Perrins was unbeaten when he fought Tom Johnson in Banbury on the 22 October 1789 for a purse of 250 guineas plus side bets. The fight was billed as a battle between Birmingham and London as well as for the English Championship. After a long bout it sadly ended in defeat for Perrins and it proved to be his last fight and he left Birmingham.

[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 1971F2800 Ceramic Jug](#)

Ceramic jug, 1817, 1971F2800; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

[This jug commemorates a boxing match that took place on 12th July, 1817. The fight was between Sam Scott, a fly boatman from the Black Country and Granby, a prize fighter from Birmingham. Although bare knuckle boxing fights were illegal at this time, a large crowd came to see this 'local derby' at Billesley Common, Moseley, Birmingham.]

Bareknuckle fighting was particularly popular in Birmingham during the late eighteenth century. As we can see from this jug, its popularity continued into the nineteenth century and only finally disappeared in the 1890s, when gloved boxing became the dominant form of pugilism. On the national circuit Birmingham produced the largest number of fighters outside of London in the early nineteenth century and, as time progressed, a degree of respectability came into the sport with the Queensbury rules in 1867 and the formation of the National Club in 1891 whose President was the Earl of Lonsdale.



[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 1995V632.856 Postcard - Aston Villa Football Grounds](#)

'Postcard - Aston Villa Football Grounds', 1904, Kesterton Collection, 1995V632.856; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

[Now known as Villa Park, Aston, Birmingham. Aston Hall visible in the distance, top right.]



This picture captures Villa Park at a transition period between being a multi sports venue and a pure football ground, a change that caused much controversy in the early 1900s. The concrete cycle and running track were built by the club in 1896/97 when it took over the lease after moving from a site in Perry Barr near the railway station. By the 1900s football had become the main spectator sport with crowds averaging 25,000. Consequently, pressure to remove the running track increased. It was disliked for many reasons: the players disliked it as, in their view, it was a hazard; the fans felt it put them at a distance from the game; and most significantly for the club, even with temporary seating it reduced the match day income from ticket sales. In June 1914 the Chair of Aston Villa Football Club announced the end of the track and the move to an oblong shaped ground with seating close to the pitch. In the cycling and athletics fraternity this was obviously greeted with dismay.

[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 1946P41 View of Aston Hall from the Staffordshire Pool](#)

'View of Aston Hall from the Staffordshire Pool', 1808-1838, By Joseph Vincent Barber* (d. 1838), 1946P41; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

*Barber was one of the founders of the first Society of Birmingham Artists in 1809, which developed into the Birmingham Academy of Arts, of which he was honorary secretary. In 1821 this became the Birmingham Society of Arts, of which he was also a member.



This watercolour portrays Aston Park when it was in private hands and from a position that, in the later Victorian period, became housing and was developed as a large leisure facility called Aston Lower Grounds and latterly Villa Park. The Staffordshire Pool was on the other side of what is now the Witton Road to Villa Park.

[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 1995V632.860 Postcard - League Football At Villa Park Aston](#)

'Postcard - League Football At Villa Park Aston', 1912, Topographical Views - Kesterton Collection, 1995V632.860; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

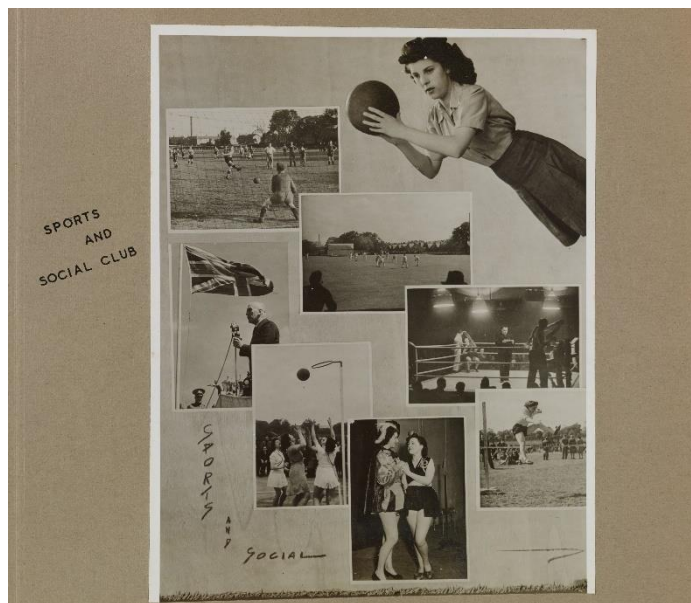
[View of Aston Villa Football Grounds (Villa Park), Birmingham, with match in progress]



[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 2015.14.2 Photograph Album: Castle Bromwich Aeroplane Factory](#)

'Photograph Album: WWII Castle Bromwich Aeroplane Factory, Birmingham', 1940-46, Manufacturers: Vickers Armstrong, 2015.14.2; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

[From album containing approximately 50 black and white photographs. Including Castle Bromwich Aeroplane Factory, and other factories across the country, during the Second World War.]



This handmade poster dates from the second world war. It promoted social and sporting facilities at the Castle Bromwich plant, which produced the Spitfire. It demonstrates the importance of work-based sporting activities in raising morale. In the nineteenth century George Cadbury had set the example at Bournville by investing heavily in sports facilities for all men and women at the factory, being himself a keen cricketer. By the time of the inter-war period most large enterprises had developed sporting facilities combined with social clubs. In 1955 there were 94 works grounds with a large range of leagues, including a Birmingham Women's Industrial Netball league, as illustrated by the photo in the top right. The largest league was men's football with 278 teams in 1939, part of the world's largest industry-based association, the Birmingham and District Works Amateur Football Association (BDWAFA). Sadly, most of the grounds have succumbed to developers plans and the BDWAFA folded in 2000.