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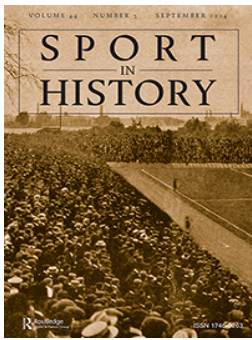
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From Popularity to Suppression: Cockfighting and English Society c.1730 to the 1835 Cruelty to Animals Act

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ABSTRACT

The reasons for cockfighting's relatively successful legal suppression by Act of Parliament in 1835 were complex, subtle and nuanced. This study begins by placing cockfighting's social and cultural functioning across the period from c. 1750 to 1835 in far clearer historical context, stressing the centrality of wagering. During this period, cocking had a key place in the cultural wars that increasingly focused on so called 'blood sports' and animal-human relationships. Opposition to cockfighting came from two directions: concerns about animal suffering and the behaviour of attenders. There was a decline in plebeian cockfight reportage after 1800 but cockfighting continued to enjoy support amongst some groups, most importantly within the elite, up to and beyond 1835. There was increased humanitarian concern about cocks' treatment, although such concerns were still not widely accepted. The success of reformers was less due to worries about cruelty to animals per se, than to their ability to link cockfighting to human behaviour and notions of moral degeneration such as gambling or drinking. Increased attacks on these aspects from the 1770s led by local magistrates, more pressure on Parliament from the 1820s, and wider social changes in the early 1830s, finally led to the Act.

Through the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, cock fighting, exploiting specially bred fighting-cocks, was amongst England's most widely practiced and socially acceptable associational sporting activities. Although with more rural dimensions, cockfighting, like horseracing or cricket, had been a key element of the emergence of a substantial, commercialised and largely urban English sporting culture.¹ But the 1835 Cruelty to Animals Act made it a misdemeanour, despite upper-class involvement and participation, while other upper-class-supported animal sports such as hunting were *not* considered at all problematical. Inter alia this paper shows why.

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Fighting cocks were variously sources of food, objects of spectacle and gambling, targets for those seeing cockfighting as a cause of 'uncivilised' behaviour, and the cockpit itself a site of sympathy for their treatment and death. At that time what constituted 'civilised' behaviour was increasingly a matter of debate. The behaviours and values of civility and politeness supported by the humanist movements of the eighteenth century were increasingly linked to a supposed civilising mission by some sections of society from the early nineteenth century onwards. These groups emphasised expected codes of conduct, especially but not solely in plebeian society, and attacked 'brutal' and 'savage' behaviours and attitudes.² As such the topic became increasingly politicised.

Cockfighting was a global phenomenon, with long historical and transnational antecedents across cultural settings from Asia and the Americas to Europe.³ Two matched game birds would fight each other, stabbing with beak and heel, until one died or gave up the fight. Complexities, ambivalences, and contradictions all surround English attitudes to the fighting cock during this period. It had class dimensions, whilst its controversies were in part between social classes, and between rural and urban lifestyles, as Brian Harrison pointed out.⁴

Yet despite detailed monograph studies of many other sports covering this period, cockfighting has yet to find its history.⁵ Many social and cultural historians who have shown interest in popular 'blood sports', from Robert Malcolmson onward, have argued that 'popular' sports came under heavy attack and declined in popularity during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, but have paid limited attention to cockfighting, often focusing more on sports such as bull baiting.⁶ The extent and the effectiveness of attacks on cockfighting have not yet been explored in any detail.

Bull baiting was in decline by 1800 and by 1830 was largely confined to parts of the West Midlands. Bull running and cock-throwing were even less widespread.⁷ By contrast, cockfighting was not merely a regional and 'popular' sport. It was nation-wide and cross-class in its support. It was also important because of the centrality of wagering, which has been argued to be a key factor in the spread of British sport.⁸ Its high-stakes wagering between wealthy individuals generated media coverage, a betting market, and growing number of events.

Historians of sport have largely interpreted the 1835 Act as evidence of the civilising process, arguing that, as Richard Holt long ago pointed out, it was 'the inherent cruelty of the spectacle that increasingly offended reformers ... the suffering of the animals was a source of shock and dismay'.⁹ John Tolson likewise saw the Act in terms of the growth of the humanitarian view of the suffering of the birds.¹⁰ Heffernan has recently pointed out that sports historians need to do more to explore animal-human relationships in the past,¹¹ a theme variously described as 'the final frontier',¹² or having 'the capacity to

reshape the project for cultural history'.¹³ Hitherto, mainstream scholars' focus on animal cruelty themes during this period has been largely on mammals.¹⁴

Thus far, much scholarship has offered relatively simplistic explanations for cockfighting's relatively successful legal suppression by the Act of Parliament in 1835. More detailed study suggests that the reasons for this were complex and nuanced, involving a range of interacting factors. This study begins by placing cockfighting's social and cultural history and functioning across the period from c. 1750 to 1835 in a far clearer historical context. It provides further evidence for the centrality of wagering. It analyses the arguments supporting cocking's place in the cultural wars that increasingly focused on so-called 'blood sports', and the animal--human relationships involved in the discourses associated with the range and variety of attacks on it by social reformers. There was increased humanitarian concern about cocks' treatment, although such attitudes were still not widely accepted. The (limited) evidence about the strength and effectiveness of opposition is assessed. More importantly, it argues that while there was a decline in reportage of more plebeian cockfighting over time, this was less so for elite cockfighting. The evidence suggests that by 1835 cockfighting was in decline, but its *extent* is difficult to quantify. Certainly, cockfighting continued to enjoy support amongst some groups, most importantly within the elite, up to and beyond 1835. Some enjoyed it and defended the traditional enjoyment of popular pastimes such as cockfighting. Some merely indulgently accepted cocking's existence.

What is also becoming clear is that the final success of reformers was less due to worries about cruelty to animals per se, than to their ability to link cockfighting to human behaviour, and to notions of moral degeneration such as gambling or drinking. It was attacks on these aspects, beginning in the 1770s, and resurfacing in the 1820s, that in part led to the Act. But, as we shall see, other factors too were involved around 1835.

The cockfight

The cockpit was a site of societal conflict and contested cultural space. Many of the urban elite, the evangelical priesthood, better-educated intelligentsia, and women never visited its events, and looked down on it as cruel, primitive, and barbarous. Cockfighting was opposed by some magistrates, church officials and congregations, and other respectable members of the public, especially with the increase in size and political influence of the urban bourgeoisie.

Despite this, it had a national following, with often-detailed advertising and reporting of cocking in contemporary newspapers. Earlier scholarly regional and local histories of cockfighting across Britain, covering

Yorkshire, Northumberland and Durham, South-West England, south Wales, and Ireland, have offered starting points and material for their study, but there has been no sustained attempt to explore the activity on a national basis.¹⁵

The sport had regularly scheduled competitions; a strongly commercial thrust, basic organisational features, and commonly accepted rules. It had powerful meanings to its largely male organisers and spectators. Its associativity was strong, despite its lack of clubs. Clubs were central to the 'modernisation' process, but cockfighting had no Jockey Club or Mary-le-Bone Cricket Club style leadership.¹⁶ This may have left it more vulnerable. Cockfighting did have a symbiotic relationship with horseracing, with leading results reported in racing calendars. Newmarket, a key horse-racing centre, had several cockpits. In London, 'Rules for matching and fighting cocks in London which have been in practice ever since the reign of King Charles II' were available, but the Cockpit Royal there had no wider significance.¹⁷

Cockfights covered a range of social contexts, from race meetings and urban public houses to small village and rural outdoor cockpits. In some villages meeting dates were still tied to traditional holidays and festivals from Christmas through to Shrovetide, Whitsun or Midsummer, but dates were more generally secularised. Importantly, cockfights were not visible in the more problematic urban streets and squares. Urban cockfighting took place indoors, or in inn yards, hidden away from those who might be influenced unduly by it. It allowed a cross-class pluralistic audience, from the upper-class titled elite to working groups such as colliers. Some in society were hardly aware of it or were indifferent. For others it was problematical, a source of concern.

Cockfighting was a ritualistic, highly regulated, stylised, and formal human performative activity. It relied on cocks' proclivity to fight other cocks to the death without provocation, and its defenders used this argument in its defence, claiming cocks chose to fight while in field sports and bull baiting the animals had no choice. One Parliamentary supporter argued that:

There is neither coercion nor excitement used to induce them to commence or continue the combat; nature prompts them to engage, and this indomitable courage and ceaseless hostility to each other is only terminated by the death of one. I admire indomitable gallantry wherever I see it displayed, in man, or bird; the quality to me is ever estimable: I exclude only the baiting of animals, coerced or confined, and without the option of surrender.¹⁸

The reality was that breeding and rearing ensured that only the most strong and aggressive birds were kept, and the steel or silver spurs that sometimes were fitted before combat ensured more death and injury. A strike to the brain or major loss of blood killed, though some cocks survived with

several injuries. Its rules had only minor variants and were available nationally in print from 1743.¹⁹

There were different types of cockfight.²⁰ For individual leading owners, the more high-status 'long main' of cocks, lasting several days, with an odd number of cocks on each side so that an overall winner emerged, was a key form of wagering. The 'main' was the overall series of individual contests leading to one side winning more matches. The principals owned or drew together a specific number of cocks, many theirs but sometimes privately augmented by friends, with separate individual battles between two cocks carefully matched by weight beforehand. There were also many other short or 'common mains' of a day, depending on the stakes.²¹

Many cock-owning participants were also breeders, whose involvement took effort and money. For the long mains, there were stakes of anything up to £500 or more on each side, organised through articles of agreement negotiated between the two principals.²² Cocks less matched might also appear in 'bye' battles, not part of the main contest but betted on. There would be much wagering during the main, on individual cocks' fights, the professional feeders, or one of the sides. At one 'Great Main' between gentlemen of Westminster and Leicestershire, in 1791, as much as £100,000 was estimated to have changed hands.²³ As probability understandings spread more widely, there was more printed guidance for cockfight aficionados about odds calculation, with some wagerers keeping odds-ready reckoners alongside their cash accounts.²⁴

Newmarket, home of the Jockey Club, with its elite membership often holding parliamentary positions, had several race meetings each year, often with cocking as a subsidiary diversion. One visitor in 1807 reported that 'cockfighting is a diversion here pursued to great extent and in the highest style'.²⁵ Upper-class 'sporting' gamblers, possessing money and power, were the mainstay of cocking during this period. As one anti-cocking Cheshire magistrate accepted, it was a 'fashionable amusement', 'supported by the example of people of the first distinction'.²⁶ A Manchester writer, in 1819, while attacking its brutality, still accepted it as a 'fashionable divertissement' with titled support.²⁷ Another opponent ironically bemoaned that 'horseracing, cockfighting and boxing are the laudable and humane amusements not only of the *profanum vulgus* but of the nobility and gentry of this country'.²⁸

High-status cockpits were standardised, roofed, round, or polygonal in shape, usually close to forty feet across, with a circular board-edged central turf or matted pit about twenty feet in diameter. Pens accommodated the large numbers of cocks sometimes needed. Detailed study of the visual representations of leading London cockpits found in the works of Hogarth, Ackermann, Rowlandson, and other artists suggests three or four levels of benches and an ambulatory, allowing different levels of priced

and social seating. Clothing and appearance indicated attendance from a variety of social backgrounds.²⁹ Spaces allowed members of the rising middling ranks to mingle with their superiors, but also imposed elements of physical demarcation, which aided the pursuit of status and cultural differentiation.

County or local rivalries could also be expressed, and these rivalries reflected a different form of cockfighting identity. A common form was the main between the 'gentlemen' of competing counties, towns, or local areas who associatively clubbed together to raise match money, usually for lesser amounts. Events were held at cockpits in or attached to urban inns and taverns. As cockfights evolved into commercial spectacles, innkeepers recognised that the new combinations of blood and money increased opportunities to sell food and drink. Some matches, organised by local innkeepers keen to maximise their income streams, were 'subscription' matches, open to any who wished to enter their gamecocks and contribute a fee. Various worded advertisements in newspapers, or the many surviving handbills, perhaps for 'the great subscription main', the 'gentlemen's subscription main', or 'a subscription cock match' at various locations across England, featured regularly. Subscribers to such cockfights are rarely identifiable. Of the six subscribers to a Darlington main two were titled, one was an 'honourable', and the other three men were styled 'esquire'.³⁰

The less common, lower-status 'welch' mains were strenuous and brutal knock-out forms in which pairs of less well-bred birds fought individual battles, with the winners moving through rounds until there was a final pair. There is no data on what proportion of losing cocks died. The metal spurs killed many certainly, but some cocks would refuse to fight, others were injured and survived, and cockfighting texts gave guidance about that. These mains attracted the most opprobrium in wider society. They too were innkeeper organised. Who paid to enter cocks is far less clear. Presumably, it was cost dependent. In 1744 the sixteen subscribers to a Welch Main at Alnwick subscribed ten shillings each and the prize was a silver tankard worth eight pounds, while the innkeeper gave a second prize of a £2 silver gill can, probably making money via attendance, drinks, and the 'ordinary', the social meal usually also advertised.³¹ Eight subscribers for a welch main at Oxford in 1759 paid two shillings and sixpence towards a purse of a guinea and a half. The subscribers to an Ancaster, Lincolnshire, main, paid five guineas towards a prize of 'a capital ox' in 1785.³² The even lower-status 'battle royal', where multiple birds were thrown together and fought till only one survived, was rarely advertised, probably because promoters were aware of potential criticism.

All cocking was founded and rooted in animal husbandry.³³ Compared to humans, birds were more easily manipulated, trained, and commanded. From Gervase Markham's *Second Booke of the English Husbandman*

(London: Browne, 1614) onwards, multiple British texts guided newcomers about the best methods of breeding, rearing, training, and managing cocks, the best methods of fighting with them, and treating injured cocks.³⁴ This was a costly enterprise in terms of money and time. The cock was always foregrounded, and good bird winners attracted high prices, but unlike horse racing females too were esteemed. The appearance, size, feather, shape, heel sharpness, and courage of cock birds to breed from were important as were the breed's success in battles.

Titled owners might take breeding with as much seriousness as with their thoroughbred horses. In 1823 the *Bee* lampooned the 'modern man of honour', rank, and fortune for such cock fighting attitudes, saying 'His breed is of a particular kind; and deluded by these vermin that prey on the vitals of his purse, he fancies that the pedigree of a cock can be traced through ages that are nearly coeval with what he knows of his own ancestors'.³⁵ Tracing the ancestry of a cock back over several generations paralleled horse racing. In breeding there was little concern for individual cocks, though they were well treated and lived long lives compared to modern factory birds, and sometimes men bonded with their favourite (and more successful) cocks.³⁶

Fighting cocks were bred to fight and kill. Some saw them as exemplifying English courage and patriotism, fighting to the death, and symbolising character and courage. Cock-chicks were carefully reared and only the strongest and most aggressive were identified, the rest perhaps eaten. Wealthier land-owning cockers then sent them out to cock walks, many of these provided by their tenants, others paid for. Unlike horseracing, with its single thoroughbred, there were different gamecock breeds, often linked to locations, such as Knowsley Black-breasted Reds, Shropshire Reds, Bedford Piles, or Cheshire Piles. Tenancy agreements and leases between wealthier landlords and small farmers or husbandmen across the country at this period often included the necessity to keep a fighting cock – and sometimes a hunting hound as well – for a landlord's use.³⁷

Many leading cockers kept records with a view to achieve victory in the mains they organised. One Yorkshire cocker family kept a series of notebooks from the 1730s to the 1760s, with, for example, detailed notes on the behaviours, weights, fighting, and death of observed birds in the pit, to build up data bases of potential sires and help improve future performance.³⁸ They recorded pedigree, physical description, and condition, and noted where they were walked. These cockers corresponded widely with other cockers and their feeder, arranging mains, discussing matches, buying, selling, and exchanging cocks, revealing a nation-wide cocking community, and the time-taking negotiation of detailed letters of agreement for future mains, defining numbers of cocks, the financial stakes, date, and venue.

Young cocks were trained to be even more combative and were involved in sparring and trials, with spurs protected by leather, to identify the best, and sweated to get excess weight down.³⁹ Training might be done by an owner, or an estate worker, but required a relationship between trainer and game cock. As the date of their cockfight grew nearer, birds would be taken up into pens and be given specially prepared diets. Then gamecocks would be trimmed: cutting off the mane, the feathers of the tail close to the rump, and head feathers to stop opponents grabbing them, and sharpening the wings, the beak, and spurs. As one opponent pointed out, 'Who raises a voice against it? Scarcely any. Greatness sanctifies the deed.'⁴⁰

This treatment was the responsibility of a highly esteemed professional, the 'feeder', who took over the cocks for up to a fortnight before an elite match. Surviving correspondence from the 1740s and 1750s between leading cock patron-owner Sir John Lister Kaye and his feeder Henry Bennett shows a close relationship, which could well have been part of the general ethos.⁴¹

A well-reputed, skilled, and experienced feeder could win with inferior cocks. Many advertisements for matches named the feeders, and leading ones would move from one higher-status match to another across a large region. The Newcastle feeder Small worked Northumberland, Durham, and Southern Scotland matches from the 1780s to 1816. In the 1820s, Gilliver and Potter covered a larger area including Derbyshire, Huntingdon, Lancashire, Leicestershire, Staffordshire, and Yorkshire, sometimes competing against each other, from May through to September. Obituaries likewise might mention 'an eminent feeder'. Though further study is needed, most seem to have been skilled workmen.

Just before a battle, the feeder would hand a bird over to another professional, the 'setter-to', who brought the spurred cock to the start line in a cockpit in a way giving it the best chance, and 'understood when a cock wants rest or when he must be made to fight'.⁴² The work of feeders and setters-to imply a mutual understanding between them and the birds, with compliance from the cocks, who might have experienced fear and stress, possessed marked intelligence, and had visual and vocal ways of communicating.⁴³

Cockfighting mains presented a spectacle, generating strong emotions, and for some attenders providing a visceral and often addictive experience absent from male everyday life. There was the excitement of watching deadly combat, the loud shouts of spectators echoing round the pit, and admiration for the level of courage, bravery, pluck, perseverance, and bloody desperation that cocks showed in their self-defence. There was the money staked and the wagering. And for some owners there was the thrill of status representation. The birds were human surrogates, symbolising their owners' and their backers' identity, sexual and otherwise. Winning was important. Birds might be subordinated and treated with brutality

since they were, like human slaves, their owner's property. They provided more than sadistic thrills, allowing Englishmen opportunities for vicarious self-validation, and to compete with others socially and occasionally politically in a more acceptable way.⁴⁴

Supporters claimed the essential Englishness of their activities, the spirit of John Bull. Watching cockfights was a corporeal, emotional, and cross-class experience. In a warlike age, the defenders of cockfighting argued it to encourage warlike qualities and martial manliness and fostered British military prowess. Watching fights inured spectators to violence, blood, and injury.

Opposition to cockfighting: animal suffering and human behaviour

Early in the eighteenth century few writers showed any concerns about cockfighting, but from the late eighteenth century onwards opposition came from two main directions, centred either on the birds' suffering or behaviour of the humans involved in cockfighting events. It came largely from the more educated sober, sensitive, pious, temperate, and hard-working sections of the middle classes, especially but not solely from church and chapel backgrounds. Some skilled workers and working-class church and chapel congregation members were influenced too. There was increased public concern about the ideological issues surrounding cruelty, and greater recognition of bird suffering. Secondly, concern centred on what was seen as the brutal, uncivilised behaviours and gambling of humans callously commodifying, exploiting, and encouraging it, especially amongst the lower classes.

From the later eighteenth century an increasingly vocal call for ethical consideration of animals emerged from a wide variety of published material.⁴⁵ There was more sympathy with and pity for animals' sufferings, equalising humans and non-human animals, based on shared sentience and a capacity for suffering.

However, cockfighting was only a minor element of a slowly increased prevalence of the notion of 'cruelty' to animals, helping generate compassion and pity. In terms of blood sports, complaints were far more targeted on more plebeian examples such as bull or bear baiting.⁴⁶ The more limited cockfighting opposition laid heavy stress on its cruelty, cocks inhumanly murdered, and the wanton infliction of pain for sport and pleasure. It was found most often in sermons, where it could variously be described as 'the sin of cruelty to brute animals', a 'cruel diversion', or 'abominable cruelty'.⁴⁷ Sometimes it was argued as against Christian teaching, but there was increased emphasis on the action of humans within the moral register. There were occasional letters to the press, raising issues about 'the lingering

and painful death of cocks'.⁴⁸ Even in the pages of the generally pro-cockfighting *Sporting Magazine*, a letter appeared arguing that sports should be 'free of cruelty and wanton infliction' as possible.⁴⁹

Even so, there was limited evidence of widespread concern about the birds' involvement. Mammal suffering was far more concerning. As one opponent pointed out in 1819, cockfights were 'esteemed less reprehensible', and were regularly advertised in the press, while bull baits appeared 'seldom'.⁵⁰ There is little evidence that concern about bird suffering had any immediate widescale impact.

People in towns were aware of poultry, but it seems likely that birds' happiness was never a priority. The crows of noisy roosters punctuated the early morning. Hens picked earth in courtyards and streets. In most towns and villages poultry keeping and the use of birds for eggs for food was not uncommon, on a range of scales right up to large lofts.⁵¹ Eggs were an everyday staple, for eating and commercial exploitation. Hens were eaten once they stopped laying.

More specific but still limited anti-cocking published attacks shifted focus to plebeian spectators. As Rob Boddice has argued, the viewpoint was always anthropocentric, based on belief in the mental superiority and unique spiritual destiny of human beings, with a concern for the corrupting effects on human morality, alongside new notions of masculinity.⁵²

Concern about human behaviours, not about birds, dominated. It was at least as much a social reform movement as one about animal cruelty issues. It emerged largely from the growingly powerful and literate 'respectable' middling sort. They argued that involvement in cockfighting (and other sports such as bull baiting) was an index of depravity and savagery, and a predictor of further moral degeneration. It damaged human hearts and minds. Their concern was as much to improve men's spiritual and moral outlook and behaviour as the cocks' welfare and treatment. Anxiety about the potential of such spectacles to reduce human viewers to beasts was widespread even in the seventeenth century.⁵³ Cockfighting was boisterous and uncontrollable, corrosive of collective social discipline, attracting large concourses of people, some drunk, even in the 1730s. William Hogarth's engravings similarly shed light on the human impact of cockfighting.

By circa 1800, the activity was being described as 'barbarous', 'an act of barbarity', 'inhuman', and 'brutal'. It was 'a relic of the barbarous customs of our ancestors ... that it should be suffered in this enlightened age is not less surprising than deplorable'.⁵⁴ Such sports were viewed as archaic ones, utterly 'repugnant to the present polished state of society'.⁵⁵ The significant unrefined plebeian attendance encouraged 'unseemly' and anti-social behaviour. Cocking took people away from work, encouraged idleness, and wasted family income. It supposedly led to broader criminality. Suppressing brutal practices was as much to protect potential human victims of these activities

as to mitigate the suffering of beasts.⁵⁶ Cockfighting was ‘a stain on the national manners’.⁵⁷ It was ‘a reproach and disgrace upon Englishmen’.⁵⁸ The welch mains and battle royals, attractive to lower-class attenders, were portrayed as ‘a striking disgrace to the manly character of Britons’.⁵⁹ The high-stakes wagering of the elite and lower-stakes gambling of plebeians on sports like cockfighting also attracted increased opprobrium.⁶⁰ The Society for the Suppression of Vice from 1802, the Evangelical revival from 1802 to the 1840s, or the High Church Oxford movement in the 1830s, were all concerned with sinful leisure behaviour.

The early Methodist movement, with its visible religiosity and active preaching, more attractive to working-class followers, strongly opposed the furious gaming, drinking, and brawling behaviour towards the birds.⁶¹ Improved working-class education, the building of new schools, and the growth of mechanics institutes from the early 1830s may also have been helpful. According to his memorialist John Wesley himself ‘never attended any place of public amusement’ but was opposed to cockfighting and saw it as a reproach to religion.⁶² In his diary in July 1756, Wesley noted his concerns over working men’s interest in cockfighting, describing the ‘pain given to every Christian heart by those savage diversions, bull baiting, cock fighting, horse racing and hunting’. He asked, ‘Can any of these irrational and unnatural sports appear anything other than cruel?’⁶³ Some religious writers were still unwilling to recognise birds as sentient beings, seeing them as animated yet without souls, but for many, cruelty to the fighting cocks involved was also unsettling. Articles, sermons, and material in published religious periodicals such as the *Methodist Magazine* or *Evangelical Intelligencer* focused on the sin of cruelty towards ‘brute animals’ or ‘brute creation’, an unjustifiable act which could forfeit God’s favour.⁶⁴ The arrival of the Primitive Methodists in the northern coalfields led to some decline in cockfighting there.⁶⁵

Religious anti-cockfighting attacks also exploited Christian beliefs in God’s punishment for sin. Sinfulness forfeited God’s favour. An obituary in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, for April 1789, recounted the fate of the wealthy cockfighter John Ardesoif, who when his prized cock lost his battle, in his anger tied the bird to a spit and roasted it on the fire. His friends remonstrated. He threatened them with a poker. Then he fell dead.⁶⁶ A subsequent correction explained that Ardesoif had died of a fever after heavy drinking, and that though he had once thrown his bird on the fire the bird had escaped. This correction was ignored. The original story, widely believed, was regularly retold in the press and in various books as a moral tale.⁶⁷ William Cowper (1731–1800) provided a poem, *The Cockfighter’s Garland*, in May 1789, after reading the article.

Stories where working men attending cockfights died were similarly exploited. When a man went to Digby, near Sleaford, from a neighbouring

village, in 1811, to attend the cockfight, and, while intent on the sport, fell speechless and expired immediately, it was reported under the headline 'Awful visitation'. Another man died attending the 'disgraceful scene' at a Lancaster cockfight in 1825.⁶⁸ In 1831 a fight between a quarryman and pitman at a Gateshead cocking led to a death.⁶⁹ Crimes linked to cockfighting were exploited too. In Maidstone, when three young footpads in Maidstone gaol blamed cockfighting for their crimes the Greenwich magistrates told constables to stop the activity.⁷⁰ One writer in 1801 claimed, in discussing bullbaiting and cockfights, 'abundant are the testimonies, which have been registered at the gallows of her devoted victims, trained up to these pursuits'.⁷¹

There is little firm evidence that sermons, novels, poems, or newspaper comments were directly effective in constraining those involved in cocking. Opponents were concerned about societal improvement, not the fate of cocks, so they attacked what they saw as its disagreeable features, such as gambling, drinking, and disorder. These failed to fit the more socially disciplined, orderly, and godly society they wished to see. But gambling and drinking were widespread and enjoyed across all levels of society right through the period in a wide range of sporting contexts, including cricket and golf. More sophisticated and better-regulated cockfights were still enjoyed by the sporting titled and squirarchy.

Assessing cockfighting's decline

Whilst the effectiveness of anti-cocking publicity is very difficult to assess directly, even measuring its extent is hard. Just how far cockfighting, especially its more plebeian manifestations, declined in support over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century has long been an area of historiographical debate. Robert Malcolmson in 1973 took the view that most plebeian sports were subjected to systematic and sustained attack, especially later in the period.⁷² More recently Emma Griffin has argued that scholars had exaggerated notions of an 'inevitable' decline in working-class leisure pastimes between 1660 and 1830.⁷³ She suggested that the impact of moral reform was exaggerated: academic emphasis on the power of notions of societal improvement has been over-deterministic.

Certainly, cockfighting was widely advertised in the early eighteenth century. In Yorkshire alone, a minimum of thirty-three specific locations, mostly inns, advertised between 1700 and 1749. By the late eighteenth-century advertisements in some newspapers were becoming fewer, though this may also have been a matter of editorial opposition to the activity, and a refusal to print advertisements. The *Kentish Weekly Post* between 1750 and 1759 featured twenty-seven different cockfight locations in its locality, but the *Kent Weekly Gazette* and *Kent Weekly Post* mentioned

only six locations between 1800 and 1810. Even so, through the 1790s some midland and southern papers such as *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* or *Reading Mercury* were still reporting mains in their leading towns.

But elsewhere from the 1790s onwards there is suggestive evidence of some decreased wider societal support, especially a drop in newspaper advertising for minor matches. But such newspaper advertisements only ever represented a minority of matches, as surviving handbills show. Newspaper advertising of mains had always showed local and regional variation, and terminology varied.⁷⁴ A *Sporting Magazine* writer believed in 1794 that 'cocking has been for a few years in a threatening state of declination'.⁷⁵ A 1793 writer claimed that the 'fashionable amusement of cockfighting' was 'now growing into disrepute'.⁷⁶ Joseph Strutt in 1801 claimed it was now 'nearly, if not entirely, discontinued in every part of the kingdom'.⁷⁷

Bullbaiting in the West Midlands proved remarkably resilient to attempts to undermine it. In the case of cocking, the historical record suggests decline or more limited toleration by the 1810s and 1820s in at least some country parishes. In much of the country, references to the sport simply began to disappear, although with little evidence of conflict; more behaviour change. Where it was mentioned, by travellers, local historians, and folklorists across England, from Penrith to Totness, it was largely in the context of 'improvement' in the diversions of local inhabitants, with many reports talking about 'decline', 'sinking into disuse', an 'exploded pastime', 'no vestige remaining' or 'tolerated with the greatest indifference'.⁷⁸ How well informed they were is less clear as it may have continued more clandestinely, publicised by word of mouth and handbills.

Certainly, by the early 1800s press coverage of lower-tier events organised by public houses was significantly diminished. That did *not* mean they disappeared. In Newcastle, there were still regular mains advertised during the season at a Gallowgate pit in 1830.⁷⁹ Miners brought their game cocks to fight, attending on Saturday paydays.⁸⁰ This suggests that industrialisation and urbanisation did not necessarily curtail popular sports. At Alnwick a local printer provided posters for local cockfights regularly between 1816 and 1835 that do not feature in the surviving newspapers.⁸¹ There were still press mentions where something more socially significant occurred, such as betting losses or fighting. For example, in 1827 a Chester-le-Street labourer sold his clock and some bedding to attend a Durham main, while a Darlington weaver lost his money and paid his debts with webs of cloth. At an affray at a Gateshead cockfight in 1831, pitmen, quarrymen and others were involved.⁸²

By contrast, elite cockfights continued to be advertised. In 1805 'young men of fortune' were described as presiding over cockfights within forty miles of London. They were 'the principal inciters and regulators of every battle'.⁸³ In Northumberland, there were sufficient supporters amongst

'sporting' gentry and titled families to ensure continued advertising for higher-status mains. Though magistrates were opposed, the higher-status cockfights at race meetings and elsewhere attracted 'fairly wide support' amongst the sporting and country titled and gentry, including the Second Duke of Northumberland.⁸⁴ Between 1790 and 1810 there were many examples of titled and gentry involved in major cockfight mains especially at urban centres such as Wakefield, Darlington, York, Ashbourne, Stockton, and Birmingham. Critics of cockfighting accepted this continued elite support. 'We see those who ought by their good example to reform the lower classes of mankind, giving a sanction to horse racing, bull baiting, cockfighting and prize fighting etc.', claimed the *London Chronicle*.⁸⁵ The *Carlisle Patriot* was concerned that 'many of our first-rate families are sedulously employed in pursuits, which disgrace their rank: such for instance horse-racing, cockfighting, and, worst of all, pugilism'.⁸⁶

From the 1810s, press coverage was focused far more on two, three, and four-day events, often with leading cockers and feeders named, sometimes linked to inns but often (but not always) associated with race weeks, spread across the country, from Yarmouth to Lancaster, Newcastle to Westminster. In 1815 sixteen race-meeting cockfights can currently be identified, none further south than Oxford, and Walsall races had a new pit, recently erected. The readership for reports of cockfighting was now more clearly associated with a more high-status 'sporting' subgroup, often Tory, gentlemen of leisure, gentry and upper-middle-class aspirants. Coverage of cocking focused on more socially significant commercialised fights held in purpose-built pits. These were patronised by those higher in social standing, the county gentry, and titled 'sportsmen' who often followed horse racing and hunting and possessed the political power to protect the activity. Novels sometimes featured this social group. In Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, a Tory hunting squire and his companions enjoyed bullbaiting, cockfighting, and other blood sports.⁸⁷

In London, opponents of cocking enjoyed a brief success when the well-attended Cockpit Royal in Birdcage Walk, St James Park, built in Charles II's reign, was closed and the building razed at the expiration of its lease by the governors and Trustees of Christ's Hospital, to whom the ground belonged. But a new Cockpit Royal in Tufton Street rapidly replaced it, an indication of continued support. It was attended in 1815 by 'several hundreds of persons of almost all ages ranks and conditions'.⁸⁸ In 1822 entrance cost five shillings, and it had a cross-class clientele.⁸⁹ In 1823 it was described as old fashioned, and mainly frequented by 'old gentlemen'.⁹⁰ When it closed in 1825 another Royal Cockpit was opened in Grosvenor Street, Milbank.

From 1822 two new expensive 'sporting' newspapers, *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle* (from 1822 onwards) and *Pierce Egan's Life in London and Sporting Guide* (1824–27), included cocking coverage, focused mainly on

London's several pits, the south, and race meetings. Stakes for winning mains amongst elite cockers could still be substantial. At Canterbury, in August 1825, they were £1,000 a side. The same year at fashionable Melton Mowbray, the hunting set attended an April cockfight in a large new cockpit, holding 700 to 800 people, with high stakes of £100 for each battle and £1,600 for the main. A new subscription cockpit was also planned for Chester.⁹¹ Some members of the aspirant upper middle classes also followed the sport, including in one 1825 report some members of the Stock Exchange.

There have been but few speculators on the market to-day, and rumour assigns as the cause of it that an important cockfight, in which many of the speculators are deeply interested, appointed to take place some short distance from town ... a number of the gentlemen of the Stock Exchange have resorted thither, instead of attending to their ordinary occupations.⁹²

Titled and gentry sportsmen still appeared as patrons and cock owners. A leading figure, the twelfth Earl of Derby (1752–1834), bred annually about three thousand Knowsley Red birds across many walks on his Cheshire estate, at significant expense. Cockfighting was his absorbing hobby. He held mains in his drawing room, regularly contesting at race week events right up to 1833, offering up to a thousand guineas a side.⁹³ He even had a cockpit built at Preston, only used for the race week cocking.⁹⁴ In 1827, at York, 'gentlemen of rank and distinction' were still arranging cocking during the spring races.⁹⁵

But coverage in *Bell's Life in London* was becoming less. By the late 1820s reports under the heading 'cocking' were fewer, and few titled were named. In 1827 it argued that cockfighting, 'which our Gentry once followed with so much ardour, is now on the verge of extinction', a once fashionable amusement which '[has] become, by the progress of refinement among the Nobility, vulgar and ... no longer patronized by the upper classes'.⁹⁶

Magistrate pressure on cockfighting's licenced venues

The reason why there were fewer newspaper advertisements for lower-tier popular events over time was almost certainly that less structured cockfights in lower-status taverns and inns organised by innkeepers were more vulnerable to attack and control. Many magistrates showed a growing wish to discipline personal morality, especially in terms of sobriety, and public order. Cockpits, like village horse races and urban bull baiting, were viewed as encouraging strong drink, drunkenness, idleness, profane language, gambling, and disorder, and leading to loss of work time, absenteeism, and hindrance of labour.⁹⁷ Inn and tavern cockpits had key cultural and commercial significance: popular recreational use for human supporters, and sites of potential death for fighting cocks. Newspaper cockfight advertisements

were dominated by inn sites, so accessibility to, or restrictions on, such spaces, were important to the survival or decline of the activity.

Cockfighting's opponents could put pressure on tavern landlords with cockpits. From 1729, when annual Brewster sessions were introduced, magistrates could refuse to renew licences of cockfight taverns or refuse new ones at the Quarter and Brewster sessions. By the 1750s, despite increased property qualifications which limited attendance to 'gentlemen', who were often more supportive of cocking, the balance in many counties was shifting. There were increasingly fewer 'sporting' county landowning gentry and more 'esquires', members of the more respectable rural and urban middling groups: merchants, businessmen, traders, clerks, clergy, ministers, sometimes more distant from their wider communities as a result.⁹⁸ Many disapproved of the pleasure-loving, sport-loving section of the elite attracted to blood sports, gambling, and strong drink. They were influenced by evangelical and dissenting attitudes to popular leisure.⁹⁹ They were increasingly concerned to maintain public order, defend property, and stress the importance of rationality, discipline, and obedience in social life.

An early straw in the wind was the Disorderly Houses Act of 1751, regulating places of entertainment in London and Westminster. From the 1750s onwards local magistrates slowly began to exploit the opportunity to withdraw the licences for those alehouses and taverns associated with disliked plebeian activities. Like pugilistic contests, cockfighting crowd behaviour was redefined as a potential offence against common law. From the 1780s magistrates, most especially in the counties of northern England, where cockfighting was widely popular, also increasingly used this. Lancashire's Easter Quarter Sessions in 1782 and 1783 gave notice to all licensees that any who encouraged or allowed cockfighting would be refused licenses, because 'ill-disposed persons' assembled there to fight cocks, 'to the great impoverishment of themselves and their families and to great encouragement of vice'.¹⁰⁰ This was only aimed at plebeian cocking. Elite cockfights at Preston and Lancaster races featured as normal.

Other counties rapidly pursued the same strategy, threatening to withdraw licenses or prosecute cockfighting under common law. In 1783 Durham's Quarter Session Grand Jury attacked the more plebeian aspects of 'petty horseracing' and cockfighting, their pernicious consequences, the 'useful hands' pursuing 'idle amusements' and depriving the community of their labour.¹⁰¹ There were similar approaches in Northumberland and Cheshire Quarter Sessions aimed at the behaviour of 'the lower classes'.¹⁰² In the northern counties more high-status cockfights at inns generally continued to be advertised.

Initially there were only occasional examples of Quarter Session indictments of inn-holders, such as a Surrey innkeeper who allowed gaming and

cockfighting at Lambeth in 1781, or the East Riding prosecution for keeping a disorderly house, including gaming, drinking, and cockfighting, in 1786.¹⁰³ But around 1790 magistrates in a range of towns including Manchester, Leicester, Sheffield, Peterborough, and Aylesford refused licences and banned it from inns and public houses.¹⁰⁴ Cumberland local magistrates likewise warned innkeepers they would refuse licenses to those promoting 'the cruel diversion of cockfighting'.¹⁰⁵ Nottingham magistrates banned cockfights in 1804. Such announcements had rhetorical power, but the gambling laws relied on informants laying information against wagerers and this was rare. There may have been an unwillingness to publicly inform against cockfights at taverns. And the 'sporting' elite supported high-status mains.

Parliamentary legislation

But it was parliamentary pressure that would threaten cockfighting even more strongly. Arguments about cockfighting slowly moved up the agenda as they became involved in broader political discourse, power and political processes, and were referred to in legislation. Through the first decades of the nineteenth century, concerns about animal cruelty began to bring together political, social, and moral reform. Initially most members of both Houses of Parliament were reluctant to introduce legislation to interfere with the people's sports, and the State remained neutral. Landownership, with its control over game and country sports, dominated both houses. Where animal cruelty bills were introduced, the initial bills were directed against human cruelty against domestic animals, various beasts of burden, and carriage, although there was a very unsuccessful attempt to ban bull baiting in 1801, only partly on the grounds of cruelty. In an 1809 bill to Prevent Malicious and Wanton Cruelty to Animals, bull baiting was briefly discussed but fighting cocks were excluded, viewed as wild animals.¹⁰⁶ The Bill was passed by the House of Lords but rejected in a sparsely attended Commons, revealing little interest in the topic. At the time of war with France there was some concern that any prohibition of such sports would foment dissent, and some pointed out its class discriminatory nature.

There was strong reluctance within Parliament debates to discuss cockfighting, given its support amongst some of the elite. The first anti-cruelty Act in 1822 banned the cruel and improper treatment of 'cattle', meaning animals with an economic value. Through the 1820s a series of draft bills included attempts to eliminate bull baiting, but not cockfighting. New bills and amendments were persistently launched by MP Richard Martin, the leading activist, in 1823, 1824, 1825, and 1826, with another following in 1829 to try to extend the 1822 Act. These failed in the face of stiff Parliamentary opposition and attempts to discredit them. Detailed analysis of debates show that cockfighting was still rarely mentioned. The debate in

February 1824, for example, largely focused on bull baiting as tending to corrupt the morals of 'the people'.

Objections to these bills attacked the proposals as petty, or inconsistent and partial, addressing only working-class sports and leisure, pointing out that 'unnecessary cruelty' should also apply to field sports. Where cockfighting was briefly mentioned, Sir Robert Peel simply pointed out that gentlemen 'of large fortune' enjoyed it.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, Peel's brother, MP Yates Peel, was well known as 'being the best cock-fighter in the Kingdom'.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, by being discussed at the governmental level, statements about the sentience of animals were gaining wider circulation. This further assisted in creating a discourse of compassion for animals, though by then bull baiting was restricted to the Black Country, really a local problem. A new pressure group, The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) was founded in 1824, rapidly becoming the multi-vocal lobbying fulcrum of the animal-protection movement.¹⁰⁹ At a formation meeting one of its main objectives was to 'prevent the unnecessary suffering of animals'.¹¹⁰ It was London-centred, with a limited membership. However, much of its actual focus targeted wider 'social' problems alongside the behaviours of the lower classes involved in blood sports. Being better organised, it was much more effective in moving from earlier disorganised efforts at sympathy with animals, and wanting to protect them, into turning cruelty into a social and political problem.¹¹¹

By 1825, during a second reading of a Cruelty to Animals bill, Peel and other Tories were beginning to accept that animal sports involved 'unnecessary suffering' though this was still not seen by most MPs as fit for general legislation. The animal blood sports getting increased attention were plebeian examples such as bear baiting, bull baiting, and dog fighting. Critics suggested that if these were criminalised then so should the fox hunting, stag hunting, coursing, shooting and fishing of the elite. Cockfighting only got limited attention, when one supporter of the Bill 'said a few words against the practice of cockfighting'. After a long debate the Bill was lost by eighteen votes.¹¹²

As Parliamentary lobbying increased, with petitions organised by the SPCA, there was increased alarm amongst cocking's defenders. In *Blackwood's Magazine*, in 1827, 'Gallinacious' begged the Lords and Commons of England to halt. He accepted that England was 'now more refined in its taste, so fastidious in its morals, and so tender hearted in its amusements', but attacks on cockfighting were 'insincere', based on 'canting philosophy', and a 'pretending and pretended humanity'.¹¹³

Any attack on cockfighting, to be successful, had to suit all parties in Parliament. Many of the Tory squirarchy were generally supportive of country sports, including hunting, horseracing, and cockfighting. But in the 1830s several other factors also had an impact. There were changing and less

deferential 'respectable' concerns about a more dissolute upper class whose extravagant spending and wagering on sport was associated with the performance of a lifestyle of extreme privilege. The 'sporting' upper classes were attracted to gambling, but cockfighting lacked the growing infrastructure of ante-post betting with published odds well before events, which bookmakers now organised. In sports like horse racing or pugilism individual 'form' was important in judging odds, but in cockfighting there was no knowledge of birds, only of owners and feeders. Ante-post betting details appeared rarely. So, it was understandable that other sports increasingly attracted the ante-post betting based on press information. The growing importance of the summer London season for watching or taking part in other sports, and the expansion in the popularity of seaside watering places was also taking country gentlemen's interest away from their estates and 'county' cockfighting events. It perhaps encouraged disengagement. And it is even possible that, like archery and bowls, which had both lost popularity, cockfighting was a generational movement, and just going out of fashion, right across the classes. If so, there is a parallel with bullbaiting, where Emma Griffin has argued that 'the disappearance of bullbaiting was almost entirely unrelated to reforming activity led by social elites'.¹¹⁴

The Tory party, which was generally more supportive of cocking, had dominated the House of Lords but the 1831 General Election led to an overwhelming Whig majority for parliamentary reform. The 1832 Reform Act resulted in a more liberal and progressive Parliament with a loose alliance of Whigs, Radicals, and liberal MPs. The Tories won less than 30 per cent of the vote, so the political climate was changing.

The same year, the debates about animal cruelty during committee discussions over a bill to ban dog fighting began to focus not on cruelty, but on those attending, all supposedly bad, immoral characters. Pressure from London magistrates, and from leading Quaker colliery owner and industrialist MP Joseph Pease, led to an 1833 Act 'For the More Effectual Administration of a Justice of the Peace in Several Police Offices Established in the Metropolis (3 & 4 William IV, c.19.)' applying only to London. This allowed magistrates to prosecute breaches of the peace, nuisances, social disorder, and public order offences, including cockfighting, as well as fairs, prize fighting, and other disruptions, more effectively. It focused on male behaviour and did not mention animal cruelty. But at the subsequent SPCA meeting there was a sense that 'the Legislature was daily becoming alive to the importance' of animal cruelty issues, and that this was a successful avenue of approach.¹¹⁵

It generated a response from some leading cockers. A new cockpit in West-Green, Tottenham, was quickly erected, outside the city boundaries, 'patronised and supported by noblemen and others', and built expressly for the purpose of defeating the Act prohibiting cockfights.¹¹⁶ But such

upper-class behaviour was under growing criticism from the respectable of all classes who saw gentlemen of rank idling their time away at 'gentlemanly sports' like cockfighting.¹¹⁷ Cockfighting's elite supporters were aging. Several descriptions of later cockpits suggest a rather older clientele. The Earl of Derby, a prominent supporter, died in his eighties the year before the 1835 legislation.

With a widening body of reforming opinion in Parliament and beyond, and backed by lobbying from the SPCA, Pease successfully introduced the 1835 Cruelty to Animals Act 'to Consolidate and Amend the Several Laws Relating to the Cruel and Improper Treatment of Animals (5 & 6 William IV, c. 59)'. The resulting debates were reported quite widely.¹¹⁸ It attempted to stamp out a raft of popular fighting sports alongside making provision for animal welfare.

The Act introduced a series of provisions focused on animals, to deal with those who 'wantonly and cruelly beat, ill-treat, abuse, or torture any Horse, Mare, Gelding, Bull, Ox, Cow, Heifer, Steer, Calf, Mule, Ass, Sheep, Lamb, Dog, or any other Cattle or domestic Animal'.¹¹⁹ To ensure support, the Act failed to list wild animals such as foxes, deer, otters, hares, fish, and game birds pursued in open country, which figured in elite country sports. It only banned blood sports such as bull and bear baiting. The Act addressed cockfighting more for its societal impact, and not on grounds on cruelty. It set out to control its public space. Because 'Cruelties are greatly promoted and encouraged by Persons keeping Houses, Rooms, Pits, Grounds, or other Places for ... fighting Cocks', it forbade the keeping of any house, pit, or other place for this purpose. Cockpits were 'great Nuisances and Annoyances to the Neighbourhood in which they are situated and tend to demoralize those who frequent such Places'. Those who managed or took admission money at 'any House, Room, Pit, Ground, or other Place for the Purpose ... of cockfighting' were liable to penalty. Cocking was only lawful if the place could be shown to be randomly chosen and if no money was charged for entry. Fines could be levied of ten shillings to £5 a day.

Conclusion

Post-1835 cockfighting was still lawful if the place could be shown to be randomly chosen and if no money was charged for entry. Fines were also relatively small in the context of commercial cocking activity. Commercial cockfighting still figured after 1835, with continued cross-class support, probably publicised through handbills rather than in the press. It still lingered in provincial towns and villages, though town councils were increasingly keen to curtail it. In Durham, for example, the Town Council issued hand bills in 1839, declaring their determination to put a stop to cockfighting there.¹²⁰

Initially, there were relatively few reported prosecutions. The SPCA constables were involved in the two most publicised and notorious. In 1837 at a Quarter Sessions at Uxbridge, three MPs, including the Earl of Berkeley and the MP for Gloucestershire, Grantley Berkeley, along with other Berkeley family members and staff were amongst those charged with cockfighting, after the SPCA constable attended a cockfight, with seven shillings charged for entrance, at which about a hundred persons attended. The long-drawn-out legal proceedings lasted till 1839 when final fines were paid. There were press grumbles that 'the business of prosecution should be attended with trouble and inconvenience'.¹²¹ In summing up the case, the editor of the *Leicester Mercury* wished that 'the independence of the magistrates who fined them was less rare amongst her Majesty's Justices of the Peace in many counties'.¹²² There were difficulties in bringing court proceedings in the face of challenges obtaining evidence, the reluctance of police to be involved, and the ambiguous approaches of magistrates.

As with the Stamford bull running, there was popular resistance to attempts to enforce the law. In 1838 at Hanworth, when three SPCA constables tried to stop a well-attended Easter Monday cockfight, rioting broke out and they were assaulted. In 1841 the SPCA was still pleading for subscriptions because 'At this period of the year the cruel practice of Cock-fighting is carried on to a great extent in distant parts of the country', and to suppress it 'great expense' must 'necessarily be incurred in sending the constables'.¹²³

Most newspapers supported the prosecutions though there were hints in some newspapers of a more ambiguous position. In 1839 the *Patriot* was still talking about the 'good old English sport of cockfighting'.¹²⁴ In Liverpool, the *Liverpool Albion* claimed that whilst crowds might listen to the Chartists, they got no sympathy, and that greater crowds would attend a cockfight, 'certainly, with more pleasure, and, we may add, with more advantage'.¹²⁵ Its rival, the *Liverpool Mercury*, attempted to get local Church of England priests to preach against cockfighting and failed.¹²⁶

This paper has stressed the national, cross-class, and wagering-centred nature of cockfighting during this period. It has suggested that though there was increased humanitarian concern about cocks' treatment, such attitudes were not of major concern to many in society. There was more concern amongst the most 'respectable' of any class about the gambling, drinking, and disorder found at more low-status working-class events. Surviving evidence suggests that while there was a decline in reportage of more plebeian cockfighting over time, this was less so for elite cockfighting. By 1835 cockfighting support was in decline, but its actual extent is difficult to quantify. In terms of the 1835 Act, its cock-fighting aspects focused on human behaviour in specific commercial contexts, rather than on its cruelty.

This has been a preliminary study. A future more substantial study of cockfighting will be able to bring together in more detail elements of cultural history, animal history, the history of gambling, and sports history. A future agenda could, for example, unpack what it might have meant to the birds themselves in more detail, take on a more bird-focused historical approach, question assumptions of human superiority, and address issues of experience, bird agency (not all cocks wished to fight), and visual forms of representation. More data needs to be gathered on the actual lived interactions between humans and the fighting cocks, and how they acted and reacted against each other. It could also offer potential new insights into the history of emotions, drawing on new understandings of theoretical approaches and analytical tools.¹²⁷ This could allow scholars to better understand what it meant to be at such events, rather than read them through the lens of critics, whose claims have been exaggerated and their understandings limited.

Notes

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