

PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES: FOOTBALL AND COMMUNITY SINGING

Community singing is perhaps these days remembered as an anachronism that survived as the form of entertainment provided for fans (and latterly television viewers) at the FA Cup final through to the early 1970s, culminating in a moving rendition of the hymn *Abide with me*. The programme of songs always seemed to be stuck in a distant era, in contrast to the main form of pre-match entertainment at grounds which at that time generally consisted of recorded music from the top ten ‘hit parade’. However, the association between football and community singing was much more than its presence at the game’s annual showpiece event and the relationship between the two dates back to the late 1920s. This article will offer an outline description of the community singing movement, a fashionable phenomenon that seemed to sweep the country in a brief period from 1926, and consider in more detail its presence at British football grounds during the 1926-27 season.

What exactly is community singing? Dave Russell has described it as “the performance of popular songs and hymns by large groups of (usually) untrained singers who had gathered together either specifically to sing or for another activity which was then partially appropriated for musical purposes.” There was a rich history of unstructured community singing in British social culture, which had manifested itself in areas such as the Victorian music hall and amongst the troops during the Great War. In the mid-1920s this was given a more formal structure with the establishment of a Community Singers’ Association in 1925 and towards the end of 1926 a more widespread ‘community singing movement’ emerged, promoted heavily by sections of the national press. The motives were linked to a number of factors but principally a desire to promote social cohesion at a time when Britain was a divided nation (1926 was both the year of the General Strike and a much longer lasting strike of coal miners) and competition within the newspaper industry for readers. It is worth noting that the ‘social cohesion’ promoted was one with a right of centre perspective – programmes for community singing invariably included popular songs from the Great War and nationalistic songs such as *Land of Hope and Glory* and the National Anthem. The Conservative Party even lent its backing to the movement, apparently to try and counter opponents who would disrupt party meetings by singing the *Red Flag*. Community singing was not the sole property of the political right, there was after all a *Labour Community Singing Book*, and the labour movement had its own rich history of singing that stretched well beyond the Clarion Singers.

The singing movement that began in the mid-1920s, however, did not encompass the left, and there is no trace of the *Red Flag* being sung as part of the various programmes of community singing that took place at football matches.

Football fans had certainly sung in a spontaneous fashion at matches back to the late nineteenth century. Southampton fans, for example, had developed their own ‘whisper’ – the *Yi! Yi! Yi!* chant. Bradford City fans are known to have sung at matches during the club’s 1911 FA Cup campaign, while Tottenham fans sang “an unkind dirge for the visiting team” during their FA Cup fifth round tie with Blackburn in February 1925. (*The Times*, 23 February 1925) There is also evidence of spontaneous singing by fans in Wales and Scotland. Swansea fans are known to have sung at matches during the early 1920s (see for example, John Northcott’s article in SH 11 on *I’m forever blowing bubbles*) and fans of the Old Firm were well known for the singing of their partisan songs at this time. It is perhaps of significance that all the examples presented relate to ‘big’ matches, such as Cup-ties and derby games, when interest and tension were much higher than usual. How often fans sang at matches is unclear, but fans were perhaps singing more than in the pre-war period, and one possibility is that the promotion of



'Cartoon' from Glasgow's *Evening Times*, 4 February 1927.



community singing at matches from the end of 1926 was an attempt by the newspaper industry to build on and exploit a practice that was already present at matches. However, it should be noted that 'community singing' was rather different to the spontaneous outbursts of song that had taken place before: it was planned, structured and controlled by the organising bodies.

The *Daily Express*, the newspaper that most heavily promoted community singing, began to organise events at football matches during the 1926-27 season. The first of these was held at Craven Cottage prior to the Second Division fixture between Fulham and Reading on Boxing Day 1926 (27 December, the 26 falling on a Sunday). "It is bound to appeal to the football crowd as a jolly form of seasonable harmony, a fine lung-expanding exercise, and a splendid way of passing the time before the teams take the field," announced the *Express* (23 December 1926) in its pre-match publicity. The singing was to be led by the band of the Welsh Guards with Thomas P Ratcliff as conductor, and would take place for half an hour in the period from 1.40, with the match due to start at 2.15. Supporters were to be handed a free song sheet as they passed through the turnstiles to ensure they could join in. The *Express* heralded the event as a huge triumph, indeed its enthusiasm seemed to know no bounds: "The effect was electric, stupendous. The wondering crowds gathered in the streets outside to listen to the new miracle of Boxing Day." (28 December 1926) The event contained several of the key features which were to be associated with community singing at football matches for the next 40 years or so, including a rendition of *Pack up your troubles* and a conductor dressed in white flannels directing events from a raised platform. Over the following weeks the *Express* sponsored community singing events at matches almost on a weekly basis. The second of these was held at St Andrew's on Saturday 1 January before the Birmingham versus Leicester City match when Birmingham's *Sports Argus*, unusually for a rival newspaper, also deemed it a success: "The crowd joined lustily in the singing of famous old songs, and they appeared to appreciate the innovation." (1 January 1927) Thereafter events were held at a range of London grounds (Arsenal, Chelsea, Clapton Orient, Tottenham) and at other venues in the southern half of the country, including Bristol Rovers, Reading, Southampton, Swansea, Swindon and West Bromwich. It is not clear why the *Express* did not venture into the northern industrial areas, which after all formed the heartland of the professional game. It may just be that the surviving editions of the newspaper are those for London and the South, it might be because Thomas Ratcliff (who conducted almost all the events sponsored by the *Express*) was unwilling to travel further afield, the geographical reach may have been linked to the newspaper's marketing campaigns or it might conceivably be that the *Express* lacked the confidence to venture into industrial areas where a strong labour movement could have been mobilised in opposition.

The organisation of community singing at matches was not solely in the hands of the *Express*, and within a matter of weeks it had spread throughout the country. In the North West the Manchester-based *Daily Dispatch* was particularly enthusiastic in its promotion of singing, beginning with the FA Cup third round tie between Southport and Blackburn. The *Dispatch* had the aim "of extending Northern interest in the mass singing movement." (10 January 1927) From the end of January the *Dispatch* was promoting up to 15 community singing events at football (association and rugby league) matches each week. Taking a typical Saturday, in this case 29 January, events were held at five senior grounds (Barnsley, Blackpool, Nelson, Oldham and Port Vale), five non-League grounds (Chorley, Manchester North End, Stalybridge Athletic, Winsford United and Workington) and three rugby league grounds (Leigh, St Helens and Warrington). By early March the *Dispatch* claimed to have organised singing at over 70 matches, including the international between Wales and England at Wrexham. While the *Express* promoted indoor concerts as well as singing at football matches, the *Dispatch* had more of a grass-roots approach and in addition to its forays into football, it organised workplace events in the mills and factories of the region; these usually took place in the canteen during the lunch break and were aimed at lifting morale amongst the workers. The *Dispatch* was also more shameless in its use of community singing as a promotional tool, and each Monday there would be photographs of groups of singers at events that had been sponsored the previous Saturday, with a few lucky individuals from a selection of venues qualifying for cash prizes. In the Midlands community singing took place at Walsall, West Bromwich and Wolves during January. The *Birmingham Gazette* was rather more select than the *Dispatch*, sponsoring singing at just three matches in the closing months of the season: Birmingham vs. Tottenham (26 February), Aston Villa vs. Birmingham (19 March) and Coventry vs. Exeter (23 April). The first two events were led by Joseph Lewis and Harold



Casey, respectively musical director and deputy station director of 5 IT, the Birmingham station of the BBC. Casey performed the role of Ratcliff, "He stood on a high platform and was clad in a point duty policeman's white mackintosh. His task was to translate the gentle beat of Mr. Lewis's hand into physical contortions violent enough for the massed crowd to see." (*Birmingham Gazette*, 28 February 1927)

In Scotland the lead was taken by Glasgow's *Evening Times*, which declared, "The Desire of the 'Evening Times' is to encourage the excellent practice of Community Singing to warm the Hearts of the Spectators with the Good Fellowship which participation in Mass Harmony engenders, and to do something to relieve the Tedium of Waiting before the Start of the Match and during the Interval." (21 January 1927) The first occasion that the *Evening Times* sponsored singing was at the Scottish Cup tie between Partick Thistle and Stenhousemuir at Firhill Park on 22 January, followed by the fixture at Ibrox between Rangers and Hearts the following Saturday. In the weeks that followed the *Evening Times* sponsored singing at up to three matches each Saturday and did not limit its activities to Glasgow, sponsoring events at Brechin, Kilmarnock, Falkirk, Dundee and St Johnstone. Community singing differed slightly at Scottish grounds as it was not limited to the pre-match period and would also take place during the half-time interval. Significantly, the *Evening Times* was both a rival of the *Evening Citizen* (of the Express Group of newspapers) and part of the Allied Newspapers group, which also included the *Daily Dispatch*.



The song sheet for the Scottish Cup tie between Brechin and Celtic, February 1927

The high point of community singing in 1926-27 came at the FA Cup final at Wembley. It was to the credit of the *Express* that they were able to come to an arrangement with the FA to hold community singing before the match, confirming their role as market leader in the field and their reporters excelled in hyperbole in their reporting of the events. The singing of *Abide with me* particularly excited James Douglas (*Sunday Express*, 24 April 1927): "Then comes the supreme splendour and glory of the day. The manscape stands up with its bare head and sings 'Abide With Me' as it has never been sung before. I confess that the majestic reverence and sincere solemnity of the hymn unmanned me. The soul of the people revealed itself spontaneously in waves of glorious harmony." Legend has it that *Abide with me* was included in the programme because it was a favourite of King George V and Queen Mary, although it had been gradually introduced to the programme of singing for events sponsored by the *Express* for several weeks previous to this. The first occasion it was sung at a match was before the FA Cup semi-final between Arsenal and Southampton at Stamford Bridge on 26 March, when it was a surprise success. "When Mr. Ratcliff, the conductor, gave the signal to the Grenadier Guards Band to strike up the opening bars, there was an atmosphere of curious expectancy. Would a football crowd, so far accustomed to rollicking Army choruses, rise to this more solemn occasion?" (*Sunday Express*, 27 March 1927)



The Community singing at the 1927 FA Cup final was recorded and later made available on two 78 rpm discs (Bryan Horsnell)

How popular was community singing? There is certainly evidence that, given the right conditions, fans would join in enthusiastically. It was both a novelty and an enjoyable addition to the entertainment offered by the football. It



was best experienced at matches where there was a big crowd, plenty of atmosphere and good weather. It should be borne in mind that the facilities for spectators at most grounds at this time were rather spartan, with the vast majority standing on uncovered terracing and open to whatever the elements delivered. A sudden downpour could dampen even the strongest enthusiasm and not every occasion of community singing was deemed a triumph. The *Sports Argus* report of the proceedings between Burnley and Aston Villa at Turf Moor noted that, "The community singing before the game was not a success," (22 January 1927), but there again the match was played in driving sleet and only around 7,000 fans turned out. On the other hand there were several instances of supporters breaking out into spontaneous community singing at matches. At Coventry on 19 February, "Plymouth were accompanied by a lusty following whose community singing before the opening of the match almost drowned the performance of the Coventry Silver Band." (*Sports Argus*, 19 February 1927) The following week, "There was a little spontaneous community singing among a section of the 15,000 spectators as the Albion players came on the field, and the song 'Pack up your troubles' seemed very appropriate to the present position of affairs at The Hawthorns." (*Sports Argus*, 26 February 1927) While at Molineux in April, "A contingent of Manchester [City] supporters amused themselves with a little spontaneous community singing before the game." (*Sports Argus*, 2 April 1927)

Community singing continued to take place at matches over the next few seasons, but gradually became restricted to big match occasions: the FA and FA Amateur Cup finals and international matches. The *Express* lost the contract for singing at the Cup Final to the *News Chronicle* in 1933, with TP Ratcliff transferred his allegiance with the contract, remaining as the figurehead conductor. However, soon after the war the *Express* won it back and retained it until 1971 when they announced their withdrawal. The programme of songs seemed to barely recognise the passing of years and standards such as *Pack up your troubles* and *It's a long way to Tipperary* continued to be sung into the 1960s. Regional songs also appeared on the programme depending on the clubs involved, thus if Newcastle were playing, *Blaydon Races* would be included, *She's a lassie from Lancashire* was a perennial whenever a Lancashire team appeared and *On Ilkley Moor baht* 'at accompanied Yorkshire clubs. Thomas Ratcliff was eventually succeeded in his role as conductor of the Wembley singing by Arthur Caiger and latterly Frank Rea.

It seems that community singing was more popular in the North than in other regions, for as one observer of the phenomenon noted, "... in the heart of the people, more especially in the North, still persists the love for concerted singing; the *Daily Express* happily gave the lead and all over England voices long mute broke into simultaneous song." (*Newspaper Press Directory*, London, 1928, p. 65) This article is essentially a starting point for research and the editor would welcome offers of articles on this subject covering a specific region (for example, the North West, the North East or Yorkshire) in detail.

Further Reading: Dave Russell, *Abiding memories: the community singing movement and English social life in the 1920s in Popular Music*, 27, 1 (2008).

Main sources: *Daily Dispatch*; *Daily Express*; *Sunday Express*; *Birmingham Gazette*; *Evening Times (Glasgow)*. Thanks are also due to the National Football Museum and Bryan Horsnell for providing illustrations.



The song sheet from the 1960 FA Cup final between Blackburn Rovers and Wolverhampton Wanderers (National Football Museum)



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