



BISHOP  
GROSSETESTE  
UNIVERSITY

## [BG Research Online](#)

Jackson, A.J.H., Capancioni, C., Johnson, E. and Hope-Johnson, S. (2020) *Provincial newspapers, sports reporting and the origins, rise and fall of women's football: Lincolnshire, 1880s-1940s*. *Midland History*, 45 (2). pp. 244-257. ISSN 1756-381X

*This is an Accepted Manuscript published by Taylor and Francis on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2020 at <https://doi.org/10.1080/0047729X.2020.1767977>*

This version may differ slightly from the final published version.

Copyright is retained by the author/s and/or other copyright holders.

End users generally may reproduce, display or distribute single copies of content held within BG Research Online, in any format or medium, for personal research & study or for educational or other not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- The full bibliographic details and a hyperlink to (or the URL of) the item's record in BG Research Online are clearly displayed;
- No part of the content or metadata is further copied, reproduced, distributed, displayed or published, in any format or medium;
- The content and/or metadata is not used for commercial purposes;
- The content is not altered or adapted without written permission from the rights owner/s, unless expressly permitted by licence.

For enquiries about BG Research Online email [bgro@bishopg.ac.uk](mailto:bgro@bishopg.ac.uk).

Jackson, AJH, Capancioni, C, Johnson, E, and Hope-Johnson, S (2020) 'Provincial newspapers, sports reporting and the origins, rise and fall of women's football: Lincolnshire, 1880s-1940s, *Midland History*, accepted version, 23 March.

**Provincial newspapers, sports reporting and the origins, rise and fall of women's football: Lincolnshire, 1880s-1940s**

Andrew J. H. Jackson\*, Claudia Capancioni, Elaine Johnson and Sian Hope-Johnson

\*Centre for Research and Knowledge Exchange, Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, UK, LN1 3DY

[andrew.jackson@bishopg.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.jackson@bishopg.ac.uk)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2432-4977>

@mylocalpasts

Jackson, AJH, Capancioni, C, Johnson, E, and Hope-Johnson, S (2020) 'Provincial newspapers, sports reporting and the origins, rise and fall of women's football: Lincolnshire, 1880s-1940s, *Midland History*, accepted version, 23 March.

### **Abstract**

The history of the modern game of football is well established, but it has stimulated certain areas of fresh focus recently—the 'origins of [men's] football' debate being of prominence. Meanwhile, the success of the women's game over the last few years, nationally and internationally, has encouraged new and due attention to the study of its long-neglected history, and an appreciation of its significance, past and present. Research has made particular use of provincial newspapers as an essential primary source yielding empirical detail, contemporary discourse, and alternative insight through local and regional case studies. Through the late-nineteenth century and into the twentieth, major urban centres, working-class football and the local press were expanding hand in hand. This article reports on the emergence of women's football in Lincoln and the wider county, taking as a particular focus the instrumental cultural role of the provincial newspaper in recording, promoting and critiquing sporting activities. The work was undertaken to support the production of a play and exhibition in 2018, marking the contribution of Lincoln 'munitionette' workers during the First World War, and their forming of factory football teams. The exhibition was remounted in the summer of 2019, for the duration of the Women's World Cup. Research concentrated on sampling, analysing and representing the complex, contradictory and changeable language of the press in occasional late-nineteenth century reports, the fuller accounts appearing by 1917, and dwindling coverage up to and following the Football Association's controversial 1921 ban of the women's game.

Keywords: provincial newspapers, women's football, munitionettes, First World War, Lincoln, exhibition

In 2018, a local community theatre company, the Lincoln Mystery Plays (LMP), approved the proposal for a script, *The World at Her Feet*. The piece, written by Stephen Gillard, responded to the LMP's brief which called for productions that would mark in a fitting manner the drawing to a close of the four First World War centenary years, 2014–18. The play placed its central focus on following the fortunes of six female factory workers during the conflict and its aftermath, most especially, their decision to form a football team that would continue into the post-war years and defy the Football Association's ban in 1921. The play was performed on Armistice Day 2018 and through the subsequent week at Lincoln's Drill Hall theatre, a building that had seen service as a military training establishment during the conflict.

The play attracted the support of Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU) in Lincoln. The University had recently produced a local exhibition in partnership with Lincoln Central Library (LCL), *Vote100: A Lincolnshire View of Women's Suffrage*. The exhibition was produced to reflect the region's role in the campaign to secure the right to vote for women, and to mark the centenaries of the passage of the Representation of the People Act, the 1918 General Election, and the 90th anniversary of the Equal Franchise Act. A follow-on opportunity was seen to create a broader, three-way partnership that would respond commemoratively to the final First World War centenary year, and recognise the advancement of women in the domain of sporting life as well as in politics 100 years ago. A team of staff and students from BGU, together with staff of LCL and the LMP play's scriptwriter, produced a second exhibition through August 2018, to parallel and promote the production and performance of *The World at Her Feet*.<sup>1</sup> The creation of the exhibition also sought the support of other regional partners in order to acknowledge, celebrate and encourage the development of women's football in the present, including the Lady Imps Supporter's Association, Lincoln City Football Club and Lincolnshire Football Association. In the spirit of bottom-up collective and activist public history, the project encompassed local history, community collaboration, and confronted issues of topical importance in the present—equal opportunities for and representation of women in sporting life as well as in politics. The exhibition was remounted at LCL for the period of the Women's World Cup, from 7 June to the 7 July 2019, and for a one-off media event supporting and celebrating the relaunch of a city women's team as part of Lincoln City Football Club in July 2019.

This article acknowledges the work of the BGU-LCL-LMP partnership and other contributing organisations and individuals, and, more materially, incorporates their research findings as translated into the content of the exhibition's display panels. The research for the exhibition, *Celebrating Women's Football*, drew primarily on the provincial newspaper and other periodical holdings of the Library, supplemented by other regional and national press coverage accessed online, visual images kindly offered by the National Football Museum, and a selection of material held in private collections. The exhibition's chronology begins with citing early press references to late-nineteenth century origins, moves on to recognising the significance of women's football during the First World War, and then reflects the game's decline from 1921. The exhibition also charted, and indeed was much inspired by, the story of a more recent revival of a city team. Through 1995 to 2013 its players saw their rise to the Super League, but then their untimely and controversial demise. This second chapter of the exhibition is not discussed in this present article.

## **The expansion of provincial newspapers, the growth of football and the women's game**

- 
1. A. J. H. Jackson, 'Celebrating Women's Football: Past and Present', ed. by LMP, *The World At Her Feet by Stephen Gillard: Armistice Day Commemorative Special Match Edition Programme* (Lincoln: LMP, 2018), pp. 9-10.

Jackson, AJH, Capancioni, C, Johnson, E, and Hope-Johnson, S (2020) 'Provincial newspapers, sports reporting and the origins, rise and fall of women's football: Lincolnshire, 1880s-1940s, *Midland History*, accepted version, 23 March.

Provincial newspaper content has made, and continues to make, a significant contribution to underpinning various forms of local, regional, and community study, and also to specific theme-focussed enquiry in history more broadly. The value of this media form in enabling and revealing insightful historical research is well understood in terms of its capacity to reflect both the lives of local peoples and societies in the past, and, equally, the function of provincial newspapers themselves as active agents.<sup>2</sup> Provincial newspapers expanded and co-existed alongside the output of the metropolitan-centred 'British' press, but in effect served as a 'national' press for its local and regional readers, extracting and translating broader news, as well as incorporating the more localised. The growth is reflected across the Midlands and elsewhere nationally. In Lincolnshire, for example, the *Stamford and Rutland Mercury*, of late seventeenth-century origin, had been joined by other publications appearing during the 1900s and surviving through to the century's end. These included the Lincoln-based five: the *Chronicle*, *Echo*, *Free Press*, *Gazette* and *Leader*; and the market-town-based titles like the *Boston Guardian*, and Grimsby's *Gazette* and *News*.

The general causes, pace and nature of growth have been well charted.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, difference, distinctiveness and the particular have been revealed through numerous local and regional studies.<sup>4</sup> Combining amenable were: the removal of certain duties and taxes; technological advances in production, communication and transportation; climbing literacy rates and mounting reader demand; and the growth of democracy, and, with this, the accounting of and for the structures and functions of local government and civic improvement. The early nineteenth-century provincial media inherited the core reporting, communication and advertising roles of its local and regional press forebears, and found encouragement in the low start-up costs while businesses were, in the first instance at least, relatively small in scale, and in the attractions of, and motivations for, founding a press as a political project. However, the growth of production was at its most rapid through the later decades of the century. In the North and Midlands single-place publications proliferated,

- 
2. A. Hobbs, 'When the provincial press was the national press (c. 1836 – c. 1900)', *International Journal of Local and Regional Studies*, 5.1 (2009), 16-43; Hobbs, *A Fleet Street in Every Town: The Provincial Press in England, 1855-1900* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018); A. J. H. Jackson, 'The Local and Regional Press', ed. by D. Finkelstein, *The Edinburgh History of the Press in Britain: The Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2020), pp. 709-29; R. Matthews, *The History of the Provincial Press in England* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); M. Murphy, *Newspapers and Local History* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1991); A. Walker, 'The development of the provincial press in nineteenth century England c. 1780-1914', *Journalism Studies*, 7.3 (2006), 373-86; J. West, *Town Records* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1983), pp. 224-36 and 277-8.
  3. A. Hobbs, 'Provincial Periodicals', ed. by A. King, A. Easley and J. Morton (eds), *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers*, (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 221-33; V. E. M. Gardner, *The Business of News in England, 1760-1820* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016); ; W. G. Hoskins, *Local History in England* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 32-9; I. Jackson, *The Provincial Press and the Community* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), pp. 3-15; D. Read, *Press and the People, 1790-1850* (London: Arnold, 1961); S. R. Smith, 'Technologies of Production', ed. by King, Easley and Morton, *Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals*, pp. 29-41; K. Williams, *Read All About It: A History of the British Newspaper* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 116-8.
  4. For studies relating to the Midland counties: M. Bromley and N. Hayes, 'Campaigner, watchdog or municipal lackey: reflections on the inter-war provincial press, local identity and civic welfarism', *Media History*, 8.2 (2002), 197-212, D. Newton and M. Smith, *Stamford Mercury: Three Centuries of Newspaper Publishing* (Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 1999); A. J. H. Jackson, 'Civic identity, municipal governance and provincial newspapers: the Lincoln of Bernard Samuel Gilbert, poet, critic and "booster", 1914', *Urban History*, 42.1 (2015), 113-29; I. Packer, 'A curious exception: the *Lincolnshire Chronicle* and the Starmer Group', *Journalism Studies*, 7.3 (2006), 415-6; J. Taylor, "'Town" versus "Gown": the establishment of the *Cambridge Daily News* as a modern newspaper at the end of the 19th century', *Journalism Studies*, 7.3 (2006), 403-16; A. Toplis, 'Ready-made clothing advertisements in two provincial newspapers, 1800-1850', *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 5.1 (2009), 85-103.

typically associated with expanding industrial centres, and the achievement of municipal incorporation, while the larger cities were seeing a range of concurrent and competing publications. The numbers of daily and weekend editions added to the availability of existing weeklies, and those employed as reporters grew as the demand for reports of the day's events rose. Titles were a declaration of spatial affiliation and aspired reach, such as: the *Lincolnshire Express & Rutland, Stamford, Peterborough and Huntingdonshire reporter*; *The Dudley Weekly Times*; the *Staffordshire Potteries Telegraph*; and the *Shropshire and North Wales Standard*. This said, the typical life course of a publication was generally short, with frequent failures, transfers or amalgamations. Nonetheless, in what was a 'golden age' provincial newspapers actively marked out circulation catchment areas; represented political constituencies; promoted zones of economic activity; reported on the lives of the individuals and local societies; and fostered cultural expression and collective identity. The multi-dimensional role of the local and regional press was amplified further by the manner of its discourse. This ranged from the objective, factual and empirical to the more evocative, hortatory and partial. Press content and tone also embraced the positive, promotional and 'boosterist', and the critical, sensationalist and 'muck raking'.

A leading function of the press was to report on and promote local cultural institutions, groups and activities, and their contribution to developing provision, engagement, and pride. Newspapers commented on the vitality of popular entertainments, sporting life and the staging of the arts, and voiced support for their furthering. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century provincial newspapers reflected something of a shift in the focus of their content. There was an easing of the earlier political fervour and force of publications and a drift to the embrace of relatively more social and cultural content. This incorporated a greater targeting of readers, typically by age, class, gender, and occupation, as well as fuller discussion of sporting activity, crime incidents, and 'human interest' stories. Moreover, by seeking to be the primary point of reference and leading authority on local and regional cultural life, the provincial press could counter the competition posed by the national press and specialist periodicals. The shift of emphasis is especially noticeable in relation to sport and the game of football. Provincial newspapers promoted football and were themselves supported symbiotically by the fashions and demands for the game's full and swift reporting.<sup>5</sup> Teams abounded, as an outcome of the expansion of urban centres and working-class communities, the growth of mass and organised leisure activities, and a reflection of local and collective pride. By the end of the century, greater press coverage was devoted to football coverage, culminating in the production of special editions. The expansion of the game in the Midlands and the North, and the dominance by their teams of the league drove the press of these regions to stake a claim to coverage and authority over publications based in the capital. Birmingham's *Saturday Night* and the *Wolverhampton Express and Star* Saturday edition were among the earliest of the sporting specials. Regional press editors could enjoy the advantages of engaging close eyewitness reporting, rapid production and circulation, and the locus of much mass demand; they could thus justify claims to primacy over the media content that could be mustered up by national, London-based publications.

---

5. A. Jackson, 'Football coverage in the papers of the *Sheffield Telegraph*, c.1890-1915', *International Journal of Local and Regional Studies*, 5.1 (2009), 63-84; Jackson, *The Provincial Press and the Community*, pp. 5 and 15; J. F. Lee, *The Lady Footballers: Struggling to Play in Victorian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2008); R. Lewis, "'Our Lady Specialists at Pikes Lane": female spectators in early English professional football, 1880-1914', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25.15 (2009), 2161-2181; T. Mason, 'Sporting News', ed. by Harris and Lee, *The Press*, pp. 177-9; P. Swain, 'The origins of football debate: football and cultural continuity, 1857-1859', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 32.5 (2015), 631-49; A. Walker, 'Reporting play: the local newspaper and sports journalism, c. 1870-1914', *Journalism Studies*, 7.3 (2006), 377-9 and 384-5.

The extent and nature of the reporting of football by provincial newspapers has attracted the attention of sports historians exploring the development of the game. Indeed, the instrumental significance of deploying local and regional press content has been demonstrated relatively recently in relation to fuelling a topic of some critical debate, on the 'origins of football'. An 'orthodox' interpretation had established itself, arguing that the public-school system and former public-school boys came to the rescue of the sport. Football had become moribund by the mid-nineteenth century, and the public schools and their influence secured its revival and formal codification through the Football Association from 1863. There followed, the 'dominant paradigm' argues, the rapid uptake of the Association game, particularly in the North, the creation of the League and the spread of professionalisation.<sup>6</sup> However, the greater availability of digitised and electronically published provincial newspapers has allowed for more extensive and searching enquiry, and the construction of a revisionist case. The presence of the middle-class and proselytising mission of the public schools ought not be written out of the history, especially given their role in the formalisation of the game. The analysis of press content, though, does expose a parallel interpretation. Turning the focus away from formal match reports and games and towards all accounts in which football is referred to tangentially, such as within reports of social and public events and celebrations, court reports, and the development of facilities, reveals the presence of a far stronger, accepted and integrated form of sport. Accounts can be found across many newspapers, including Midlands titles like *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, *Birmingham Daily Post*, *Derby Mercury*, *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, *Leicester Chronicle*, and the *Nottinghamshire Guardian*. The very extent of this activity, which included small-side game arrangements, a 'modern' style of play, and some prize payment, formed the basis of a 'cultural continuity' that facilitated the rapidity of the acceptance and take-up of the Association game through the final quarter of the nineteenth century. The evidence found in provincial newspapers has substantiated a 'major realignment of the "orthodox" history of football'.<sup>7</sup> Contributions by historians scouring the local and regional press have sought to challenge or bolster this historiographical agenda. An examination of the *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, for example, found little evidence for the sub-culture that existed outside of the public schools, and one having any form of wider influence. It was the 'power' of the Victorian public and grammar schools that drove the establishment of club and codified football, and laid the foundations for subsequent growth and development, not what might be described as local 'kickabouts'. While greater evidence might be found for discerning a degree of continuity, that is not the same as forming a convincing case for revisionism.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, examination of the *Staffordshire Sentinel and Commercial and General Advertiser*, has contributed to a further interpretation, one seeking to reconcile the orthodox and revisionist extremes. The study of the Pottery towns stresses phases, that is, narratives that follow in sequence rather than forming opposing historical positions. A phase of informality led into one of public-school power and influence; to be followed in turn by one of middle-class-inspired consolidation, organisation and growth. Football's history is one prone to generalisation and myth building, but there is a more nuanced and complex 'national' story to be constructed through greater reference to the significance of local and regional cultures.<sup>9</sup>

- 
6. M. D. Cooke and G. James, 'Myths, truths and pioneers: the early development of the association football in The Potteries', *Soccer & Society*, 19.1 (2018), 5-23; G. Curry and E. Dunning, 'The "origins of football debate" and the early development of the game in Nottinghamshire', *Soccer & Society*, 18.7 (2017), 866-79; P. Swain, 'Cultural continuity and football in nineteenth-century Lancashire', *Sport in History*, 28.4 (2008), 566-82; Swain, 'The origins of football'.
  7. Swain, 'The origins of football', 633.
  8. Curry and Dunning, 'The "origins of football debate"', 877.
  9. Cooke and James, 'Myths, truths and pioneers', 18-9.

The women's game and its history, local and national, have been generally overlooked and unlooked for. The main gaze has been transfixed by a male-dominated sport and the popular narrative accompanying it. A historiography has been building gradually, and in more recent years has gathered pace, endeavouring to address the lack of historical investigation and drawing much inspiration and impetus from the success of women's football and its growing profile. Perspectives and motivations are many and diverse.<sup>10</sup> There is, first and foremost, a history of redress. This embraces the rewriting and putting right of the historical record; a countering of the customary neglect, stereotyping and misrepresentation of the women's game; and a furthering of a more diverse, widely appreciated and critical understanding of the game. There is the developing history of practice, one of fresh discovery and recovery. This incorporates the identification, interpretation and presentation of archive collections; the greater use of web resources and tools, digitised media and oral-history gathering opportunities; the creation and cultivation of academic, heritage-sector and public partnerships and engagement; and the documentation, writing up and dissemination of findings. There are also the many and insightful opportunities that narrative and comparative historical lines of enquiry open up such as the piecing together of the prominent phases of the development of the game across time and boundaries; the discernment of continuity and change; the identification of causes and effects; and the interrelating of the local, national, international and transnational. What can be traced through from the emergence of the modern game in the final quarter of the nineteenth century into the twentieth, for example the place of the first clubs, the establishment of national and international levels of play, and the on-going presence of 'folk' football and informal kickabouts? What were the roles of the middle classes and of schools, public or otherwise; and the significance of fashion and dress? What was the legacy of the years of widespread participation through the First World War up to the 1921, in terms of how it was perceived and organised, and how well it survived through the middle decades of the twentieth century? To what extent did the reestablishment of the game from the final quarter of the twentieth century perpetuate established models or adopt new ones; draw inspiration more from international developments than from the domestic context; intersect with feminist and women's movements; and contend with

---

10.

C. Adams, M. Ashton, H. Lupton and H. Pollack, 'Sport is king: an investigation into local media coverage of women's sport in the UK East Midlands', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 23.4 (2014), 422-39; H. Byrne, 'Where are we now? A review of research on the history of women's soccer in Ireland', *Sport in History*, 39.2 (2019), 166-186; C. Brewster and K. Brewster, 'A lesson in football wisdom? Coverage of the unofficial women's World Cup of 1971 in the Mexican press', *Sport in History*, 39.2 (2019), 147-65; R. Hess, 'Missing in action? New perspectives on the origins and diffusion of women's football in Australia during the Great War', *The International Journal of the History of the Sport*, 31.18 (2014), 2326-44; Lee, *Lady Footballers*; A. Jackson, 'Portsmouth Ladies FC: pioneers of women's football', *Soccer History*, 44 (2019), 21-3; L. McGowan, 'Women's association football (soccer) in Brisbane, Queensland 1921-33: new perspectives on early competition', *Sport in History*, 39.2 (2019), 187-206; I. Nannestad, 'Women's football in Chesterfield in World War One: the first ever women's competition in England?', *Soccer History*, 42 (2017), 38-9; T. Tate, *Girls with Balls: The Secret History of Women's Football* (London: John Blake, 2013); J. Williams, *A Beautiful Game: International Perspectives on Women's Football* (Oxford: Berg, 2007); Williams, *A Game for Rough Girls? A History of Women's Football in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2003); Williams, 'The fastest growing sport? Women's football in England', *Soccer & Society*, 4.2-3 (2003), 112-27; Williams, 'Upfront and onside: women, football, history and heritage special edition. Introduction: women's football and the #MeToo movement 2019', *Sport in History*, 39.2 (2019), 121-9; Williams, J. Compton and B. Scarlett, 'Sporting reunions, contemporary collections and collective biographies: a case study of Harry Batt's 1971 England team', *Sport in History*, 39.2 (2019), 229-50; Williams and Hess, 'Women, football and history: international perspectives', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 32./18 (2015), pp. 2115-22, D. J. Williamson, *Belles of the Ball* (Devon: R&D Associates, 1991).



enduring inequalities and inequities? How much was its revival guided by the involvement of women on, and in various supporting capacities, off the pitch? Of further and particular significance here is research that has been undertaken into the role of the media in relation to women's football through time, as well as employing it as an illuminating and essential source for supporting historical investigation. The relationship of the press to the women's game has been, and remains, ambivalent and ambiguous. It can be seen occupying and oscillating between extremes: on the one hand, negative, offensive and defensive, and supporting stereotypes, orthodoxies and established interests; or, on the other, positive, promotional and celebratory. Press coverage can be seen as passing through cycles, at different times showing disinterest, disapproval, acceptance, appreciation, praise, and respect. For the historian, the press record is of great appeal, given its informative content and evocative language and access has been facilitated considerably through programmes of digitisation. However, it is a problematic source. Its coverage was clearly prone to bias, often stressing spectacle and curiosity, rather than the playing of the game itself. The representativeness of the accounts compiled is questionable, and indeed exposure to the press could be viewed with caution and the attention of reporters avoided. On a practical level it was open to inaccuracy and inconsistency with regard to the likes of the naming of teams and players, and the details of fixtures and results.

### **The *Celebrating Women's Football* exhibition: the game in Lincolnshire and elsewhere**

The construction of the *Celebrating Women's Football* exhibition broadly followed the curatorial and interpretative approaches taken by its predecessor, *Vote100: A Lincolnshire View of Women's Suffrage*. Both productions, created to tight timeframes and through community endeavour, made provincial newspaper content their starting point, augmented by other evocative and potent source content, textual and visual. The panels sought to allow the primary material to speak for itself as much as possible, with guiding contextual and explanatory text left restrained and not too distracting. Chronological span and thematic emphasis were arrived at in response to the historical sources. This article sets out the content that was selected for the final panels, although the exhibition also made available for visitors bound copies of the *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, *The Sketch*, and *The Illustrated London News* opened up to reveal local and national articles on the women's game. Exhibition-panel design took as its essential content the factual detail and stylised tone of press discourse. The charting of the stages of the story, and the manner of its contemporary representation, were juxtaposed—facts and feelings in equal measure. Lincolnshire media coverage, where it could be found, was interwoven with the more general British narrative, drawing on provincial reports from elsewhere and in national newspapers and periodicals. The article covers the first and most substantive chapter of the exhibition's story, with the panels examining early accounts, the First World War years, and the period up to and following the 1921 FA ban.

A first 'early origins' phase in the development of the women's game can be traced through the final quarter of the nineteenth century. Reports began to appear on ladies' matches among the many media reports putting on record the rapid growth of the men's game during the 1880s and 1890s. These ranged from the accounts of the activities of local teams to the national and promotional touring endeavours of the British Ladies' Football Club, whose exploits attracted much attention in the final decade of the nineteenth century. The coverage of early games contains a wide spectrum of opinions and tones, reflected across provincial newspapers as well as in national press and periodical publications. Some

Jackson, AJH, Capancioni, C, Johnson, E, and Hope-Johnson, S (2020) 'Provincial newspapers, sports reporting and the origins, rise and fall of women's football: Lincolnshire, 1880s-1940s, *Midland History*, accepted version, 23 March.

commentary expressed shock and concern, while other reporting shared a combination of surprise and appreciation.<sup>11</sup>

One of the earliest mentions of a game involving a regional team was carried in the *Hull Daily Mail* in 1887. The language is highly charged. It describes the 'screaming mass of excited men and fainting women' who witnessed a game against a visiting Grimsby team. The account, in the form of letters to the paper, recalls a 'dangerous hullabaloo', observing that the match was a 'farce' and would bring the game of football into 'disrepute'. Provincial press reports from elsewhere mirror the tone of the Hull feature.<sup>12</sup> An earlier account of a match in the 1880s considered the game 'essentially unfeminine'. The coverage, in the *Aberdeen Evening Express* in 1881, viewed the fixture as 'derogatory to decency' and a 'spectacle for the vulgar by careering in a semi-nude condition in public parks'.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, another report in the same year was a little less detracting, demeaning and blunt. The *Leeds Times* in the same year made reference to an England vs Scotland match in Bradford, and the 'band of females' who were 'frequently and uproariously cheered by the spectators'.<sup>14</sup>

A decade later, a meeting of 'North' and 'South' teams (that is, of metropolitan London) of the British Ladies' Football Club (BLFC) in Lincoln prompted the verdict that the players 'couldn't hardly kick the ball for nuts'. The report, in the *Lincolnshire Chronicle* in 1896, viewed the game as 'simply side splitting and caused roars of laughter'. The account also notes the engagement of 'male goalkeepers', who 'had very little to do but look on and laugh'.<sup>15</sup> A few days earlier the paper had carried an advertisement for what was probably the same match:

LADY FOOTBALLERS ON SATURDAY NEXT, MARCH 28<sup>TH</sup>.  
THE GREAT SENSATIONAL EVENT OF THE SEASON.  
LADY FOOTBALL TEAMS ON THE SINCIL-BANK GROUND, MARCH, 28<sup>TH</sup>.  
PRETTY LADIES! CHARMING COSTUMES! A MARVELLOUS ATTRACTION!  
PURCHASE YOUR TICKETS AT ONCE, AND AVOID THE GREAT CRUSH AT  
THE GATES. *EVERYONE – SIXPENCE.*

Accompanying the advertisement was a feature on the upcoming game to be hosted as a fundraiser for Lincoln City FC at its ground at Sincil Bank. The article, citing or reflecting the views of Lady Florence Dixie, BLFC President, declared:

We live in an age of progress, and the New Woman is the latest evidence of our advancement ... [We] saw the danger of the game being burlesqued ... the feminine nature was not merely ornamental ... it could participate with advantage in the healthful and invigorating pastime of football ... One of the very pleasing aspects of their appearance upon the arena of our local football club on Saturday next will doubtless be a characteristic in their style of play which has always been very prominent. This is the enthusiastic manner in which they endeavour to defeat each other.<sup>16</sup>

*The Sketch*, a year earlier, had also concluded regarding a game between North and South ladies' teams that 'the whole affair was a huge farce'; the 'ladies wandered aimlessly

- 
11. Byrne, 'Where are we now?', 173; Lee, *Lady Footballers*; Tate, *Girls with Balls*, pp. 5-88; Williams, *A Beautiful Game*, pp. 111-9; Williams, *A Game for Rough Girls*, pp. 25-9; Williams, 'The fastest growing sport', 113-4; Williamson, *Belles*, pp. 1-6.
  12. *Hull Daily Mail*, 11 April 1887.
  13. *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 9 May 1881.
  14. *Leeds Times*, 18 June 1881.
  15. *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 3 April 1896.
  16. *Chronicle*, 24 March 1896.

over the field' at this London fixture, and it was settled that 'girls are totally unfitted for the rough work'.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the same periodical later in that year devoted an article to the content of an interview with Mrs Graham, BLFC Captain. The piece acknowledged what was a 'battle against prejudice and convention' faced by players, but, citing Mrs Graham, also conveyed the opinion that 'women can, if they are robust and strong enough physically, acquire a fair proficiency'.<sup>18</sup>

The onset of the First World War brought a second phase of development, one of renewal and transformation, featuring both expansion and greater acceptance. Life and work altered radically, and attitudes and customs shifted. More women found themselves in factory employment; the forming of football teams would be actively encouraged by employers to promote physical and mental well-being, and their games would gather considerable crowds. The later war years saw greater numbers of teams, and relatively more press reports were devoted to matches. Some accounts contain some of the negative opinions of old, but others offer more supportive and appreciative portrayals, giving special emphasis to the popular role of the game in fund-raising.<sup>19</sup>

In January 1917, the *Lincolnshire Echo* asked 'Who will help?' following a request from the Derby Munition Girls to play a Lincoln side: 'It should not be impossible to find a team', the feature added.<sup>20</sup> Some months later the publication could report on the victory of the Lincoln Munition Girls over the Derby team, 1-0.<sup>21</sup> Another local paper, the *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, also reported in March on the Lincoln against Derby 'Day' at Lincoln:

Well, readers, to be candid, this game was very funny in many ways and during the first portion provoked a lot of hilarity, but, to be equally charitable, was it to be wondered at? Here were 22 ladies playing at a game which, by its very attributes, was eminently unfitted for them, the beholden of some 3000 odd spectators, none of whom took either the players or the game very seriously. Rather disconcerting don't you think? When I think of all the circumstances of the case I was really full of pride to see these lassies of ours buckled to their tasks and toiled through a manly game so well.<sup>22</sup>

More positive still, was an assessment in the *Echo* in April 1917. A local game was an 'exhibition of athletics', and that teams were showing 'speed and trickery', 'a business-like air', as well as 'an understanding of the finer points of the game'. The account added:

Looking on at the first match played by robust teams of munition girls and reflecting that some folk say the girl worker has come to stay, one cannot help wondering how far that may be true of them in the football arena. For years the girls have disported themselves at hockey, showing both speed and trickery, and in spite of those who may be inclined to scoff [*sic*] at the possibilities of girls playing football, it begins to look as though this may be more than a passing fancy.<sup>23</sup>

---

17. *The Sketch*, 27 March 1895.

18. *The Sketch*, 9 October 1895.

19. E Grigg, 'Women's Football: The Munitionettes', <<https://www.thecollectionmuseum.com/blog/view/womens-football-the-munitionettes>> [accessed 16 July 2019]; Hess, 'Missing in action'; Jackson, 'Portsmouth Ladies'; Nannestad, 'Women's football'; Tate, *Girls with Balls*, pp. 89-198; Williams, *A Beautiful Game*, pp. 119-27; Williams, *A Game for Rough Girls*, pp. 27-30; Williams, 'The fastest growing sport', 114-5; Williamson, *Belles*, pp. 6-12;

20. *Lincolnshire Echo*, 27 January 1917.

21. *Echo*, 26 March 1917.

22. *Chronicle*, 31 March 1917.

23. *Echo*, 16 April 1917.

In April 1917, the *Lincolnshire Echo* praised the charitable contribution of matches: 'there would be no need to look far to find deserving war or other charities'; 'let it be a really big affair and make money', the paper declared.<sup>24</sup> A couple of days later the paper recalled: Football and charity have gone hand in hand very often since the outbreak of war, and the result has been the production of many thousands of pounds for war benevolent objects all over the country by the medium of the national game. Three weeks ago, when the Derby Munition Workers came to Lincoln to play the Lincoln Munition workers, there was a gate of just over £90 for distribution.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly 'on side' with the local women's game by this time, the *Echo* announced later in April an upcoming and 'much-anticipated match' between the Ruston's Aircraft Girls and the Robey's Aircraft Girls, expecting it to 'prove a big attraction'.<sup>26</sup> The next day the *Echo* reported on the 5-0 victory of the Ruston's team.<sup>27</sup> A few days earlier, the *Echo* had reported on the 'five cars' that had 'formed the procession' to take teams to play the Derby Munition Men and Girls. Both Lincoln sides won, as they had at the home meeting in March: 'another double success by the male and female players could be claimed; with 'the Lincolnners gradually wearing them down'.<sup>28</sup>

Press reports following the First World War continued to express a combination of appreciation and ambivalence. In 1919, the *Lincolnshire Echo* reflected on the importance that the women's game had achieved, but also expressed concerns:

Modern girlhood owes much of its vigour to the cult of outdoor games and physical exercise ... but the craze for games may, of course, by carried too far. Very often it causes girls to overtax their strength during the growing age and after that strenuous devotion to sports may involve some sacrifice of girlish charms ... It is therefore as well that the young woman should remember that there are drawbacks to an excessive zeal for athletics, unless she has any particular ambition to cultivate a mannish type of beauty.<sup>29</sup>

More positive, though, the publication reported in April 1921 on the 'exceedingly clever forward line' and 'reliable defence' that made up the then Lincolnshire Ladies' team, and promoted a forthcoming match against the Yorkshire Ladies in support of a local hospital fund.<sup>30</sup>

At the close of 1921, however, women's football entered another phase, one of a sharp reversal in fortunes. The Football Association suddenly removed essential supports, including the availability of registered grounds and referees. It was a controversial decision that would have major ramifications in the immediate term and indeed for the rest of the century, undermining the viability, status and appreciation of the game. The aftermath witnessed reaction, protest and defiance. A bold, but short-lived, attempt through a new English Ladies' Football Association, endeavoured to establish a future basis for the game. At the same time, ladies' football teams could enjoy a warmer reception on the continent, where the openness and support established during the war was sustained. The trajectory,

---

24. *Echo*, 14 April 1917.

25. *Echo*, 16 April 1917.

26. *Echo*, 27 April 1917.

27. *Echo*, 28 April 1917.

28. *Echo*, 23 April 1917.

29. *Echo*, 16 July 1919.

30. *Echo*, 22 April 1921.

though, was towards decline, with the game failing to recover the levels of demand, engagement and acceptance of the wartime and early post-war years.<sup>31</sup>

On 6 December 1921, the *Echo* carried the notice that women's teams were now 'warned off', following the Association's ban. The FA's charges against the women's game were set out in a column of the paper, that it was 'quite unsuitable for women', too much was being 'absorbed in expenses', and there was 'an inadequate percentage devoted to charitable objects'.<sup>32</sup> In Lincolnshire, as elsewhere, articles appeared in newspapers discussing the ruling, with strong arguments set out 'for' and 'against'. One week after the ban, the *Echo* observed that 'none has so far been known to come to any harm by indulging in the game'.<sup>33</sup> A further week later, the same paper reported on the meeting at Grimsby of fifty-seven clubs and the new English Ladies' Football Association. The gathering refused to make the game 'more suitable for women': 'if we alter the rules it will not be football', the meeting resolved.<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, and in contrast, the *Leeds Mercury* of early December 1921 cited a series of views, including that of the 'Harley-street physician', Dr Mary Scharleib: 'I consider it a most unsuitable game; too much for a woman's frame'. However, the paper also included the view of a Bradford company director, who observed that 'since the girls played football they had better health and had been generally happier'.<sup>35</sup> Also reacting to the ban, the *Lancashire Evening Post* added opinion and conviction to an account of a defeat of Fleetwood Ladies by the Dick, Kerr Ladies in a children's benevolent fund match. The publication cited a female doctor who had set up the fixture, who claimed that it would be no more 'injurious to women than a heavy day's washing', and that women would get 'no more wrenches than they would in tennis'.<sup>36</sup>

Teams and matches reduced considerably following the ban, as did coverage in the press. In 1923, the *Lincolnshire Echo* reported not on a local match, but on the controversial refusal of a town in Scotland to allow a charity match in a public park; it being potentially a 'disgraceful sight', and 'wrong physically and morally'.<sup>37</sup> Much later, though, in June 1939, the *Echo* referred to a charity-raising fixture between a 'married' and winning 'singles' teams at Horncastle.<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere in the county the *Lincolnshire Standard and Boston Guardian* in 1927 reported on a match, rather a 'kickabout' encounter, between Theddlethorpe and Withern:

The ladies' football match is now one of the most amusing features of the fete, and at this year's function, held in beautiful weather ... the crowd were convulsed with laughter during the progress of the match. The play was not strictly in accordance with Association rules, but if the players lacked some of the finer science of the game, they more than made up for it by their almost ruthless determination. What the ultimate result of the match was few people were able to determine but it was evident that both the crowd and the players got a great amount of enjoyment out of it.

The paper, though, did report with some continuity, the touring charity-raising function of the leading national teams, advertising an upcoming exhibition tie between the famous Preston

- 
31. McGowan, 'Women's association football', 196-200; Tate, *Girls with Balls*, pp. 199-263; Williams, *A Beautiful Game*, pp. 127-37; Williams, *A Game for Rough Girls*, pp. 33-52; Williams, 'The fastest growing sport', 115-7; Williams and Hess, 'Women, football and history', 2116-7; Williamson, *Belles*, pp. 17-100.
  32. *Echo*, 6 December 1921.
  33. *Echo*, 14 December 1921.
  34. *Echo*, 21 December 1921.
  35. *Leeds Mercury*, 7 December 1921.
  36. *Lancashire Evening Post*, 27 December 1921.
  37. *Echo*, 19 May 1923.
  38. *Echo*, 1 June 1939.

Ladies and the Blackpool Ladies.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere were also accounts of the continuation of the international fixtures that had been established in the First World War years, if in mixed terms. The *Western Times* in April 1922 reported on two games between the British and French Ladies. In the first game 'players of both sides failed to keep their tempers under control and resorted to fisticuffs'; while in the second 'spectators were amused rather than enthused', and saw an exchange with a touch judge 'in a rapid stream of the French language'.<sup>40</sup>

Up to and during the Second World War, provincial newspapers note a continuation of the women's game, but this later conflict would not bring about a reversal of the post-1921 decline. There was the general disruption to sporting activities, including that of women's matches. In Preston, for example, the war had affected the ability to raise a leading team that could tour and attend high-profile charity-raising matches. 'Travel difficulties and food rationing' had undermined the viability of the manager forming a new city women's team, the *Daily Mail* reported in 1943.<sup>41</sup> By contrast, there was some mirroring of the conditions and circumstances that had promoted football for women during the Great War. In Lincoln the factory teams attracted fresh attention. In 1941, the *Lincolnshire Echo* covered the match between Ruston Bucyrus and Ruston & Hornsby, and amid signs of 'play improving'. The positive account included reference to the performance of the Bucyrus Captain, who had escaped from the Channel Islands just before the invasion.<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere, a visitor to London commented in the *Nottingham Evening Post* in 1943 on barrage balloon teams playing in the city squares. The 'girls wore boiler suits', the correspondent observed, and, echoing earlier twentieth-century sentiment, added: 'what surprised me was the proficiency the girls showed for the game'; 'it makes them fit and strong', the girls had commented.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

Over the last few decades, and particularly since the turn of the millennium, a set of pioneering sports historians have established a momentum behind exploring the history of women's football. This article is in part a contribution to that endeavour, a local tale recovered and made prominent and public; and, more substantively and distinctively, it takes provincial newspapers to be its methodological and conceptual rationale and underpinning. The production of both the exhibition, *Celebrating Women's Football*, and this subsequent article, did not set out to achieve a whole history of the game in Lincoln and Lincolnshire, but to convey how women's football was perceived and portrayed over time, and in particular through the diverse, dynamic and divergent medium of local and regional media reporting. The quests for success that both the local and regional press, and the game of football, found themselves upon through the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, gave rise to a particular interdependency and mutuality. Both had in common the need for a secure and viable follower base; and their appeal demanded that each display accuracy, focus and style. The provincial press could be the harshest of critics or the most adulatory of supporters, and the women's game fell subject to the extremes of both positions. The case of women's football is especially illuminating in terms of the agency of the press. It was an industry that sought to maintain a high and fair-minded sensitivity to the views of its readership, and, accordingly, had a role to play in promoting a wide range of community cultural activity and expression, and cultivating all that engendered a sense of local pride and collective identity.

---

39. *Lincolnshire Standard and Boston Guardian*, 9 July 1927.

40. *Western Times*, 7 April 1922.

41. *Daily Mail*, 29 May 1943.

42. *Echo*, 23 June 1941.

43. *Nottingham Evening Post*, 10 July 1943.

Jackson, AJH, Capancioni, C, Johnson, E, and Hope-Johnson, S (2020) 'Provincial newspapers, sports reporting and the origins, rise and fall of women's football: Lincolnshire, 1880s-1940s, *Midland History*, accepted version, 23 March.

Equally, and paradoxically, its impulse was to rise opportunistically to all that could provoke attention-grabbing, critical, sensationalist and lurid remark, particularly anything status-quo unsettling or convention disturbing. Through the decades of development and demise, between the 1880s and 1940s, women's football found itself a beneficiary of the former and more earnest of editorial stances, and at other times much pilloried by the latter, both put down and back.

The research undertaken to date points as much to other lines of enquiry as to what might be concluded here. Further primary sources were identified, including additional *Lincolnshire Chronicle* and *Echo* articles, but were not selected for the exhibition itself or for discussion in this present summary. It might be asked how the stances of the different Lincolnshire papers contrasted and evolved through the period. There is contemporary media material to be found in other repositories and collections, no doubt, and within the work undertaken by other local and regional historians. Progress can be made in identifying the relationships and interests interconnecting the sport of football, influential individuals and commercial sponsors, as well as the local media; and how these networks and influences steered and flavoured the press coverage of the women's game in the past. Comparative analytical investigation could also extend to encompass the following: the second 'chapter' of the exhibition, and the experiences of the Lincoln team, 1995-2013; the content of the companion play, *The World at Her Feet*, which made use of a series of quotes from the media to give force and impact to messages surrounding the disadvantaging and disparaging of the women's game up to today; and the 'third' chapter that has recently opened with Lincoln City FC's relaunch of a women's team, a moment concurrent with the Women's World Cup 2019, and all that that generated by way of the representation of the game, historical and current.

The history and historiography of men's football is far from a fitting place to start from in determining how 'to do' the history of the women's game. However, if some lessons might be learnt from the approach to the 'origins of [men's] football' debate, it is in searchingly and systematically deploying the informative, analytical and paradigmatic potential of what is now far more accessible provincial press content - if with some guardedness and circumspectness with regard to its representation and representativeness; in appreciating what substantive and detailed surveying of the local and regional press can lead to in terms of countering generalising and myth-building tendencies in sport history; and in identifying and understanding local and regional cultures and agency in the development of the women's game, in the Midlands and elsewhere.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to express their thanks for the help offered by all of the members of the BGU-LCL-LMP partnership and others who contributed to the creation of the *Celebrating Women's Football* exhibition: the Lady Imps Supporter's Association, Lincoln City Football Club, Lincolnshire Football Association, Alexander Jackson of the National Football Museum, and other individuals (including team managers), in particular former BGU English Literature student, Jasmine Mills. The production of this article, more specifically, acknowledges the historical research work on press accounts of the early game in Lincoln and Lincolnshire that was undertaken by Ghislaine Chisnall of Lincoln Central Library and Stephen Gillard, the scriptwriter for *The World at Her Feet*, in addition to that carried out by the authors. Gratitude is also expressed for the access granted to essential provincial-newspaper and other primary sources relating to the period up to the mid-twentieth

Jackson, AJH, Capancioni, C, Johnson, E, and Hope-Johnson, S (2020) 'Provincial newspapers, sports reporting and the origins, rise and fall of women's football: Lincolnshire, 1880s-1940s, *Midland History*, accepted version, 23 March.

century, held by LCL principally, but also by the *Lincolnshire Echo* and the National Football Museum.

## Authors

Andrew Jackson is Head of Research at Bishop Grosseteste University. Dr Jackson is a historian and geographer by background, and has written extensively on local and regional history, and in particular on Devon and Lincolnshire. Andrew oversaw for BGU the various public partnership and external engagement activities that ran through the 2018 centenary year, including the women's suffrage and football projects. Research relating to this period has also included the development of the first council houses in Lincoln, the co-operative movement, and the home-front dialect poetry of the Lincolnshire author, Bernard Samuel Gilbert.

Claudia Capancioni is currently Programme Leader for English at Bishop Grosseteste University. Dr Capancioni teaches Victorian and contemporary literature, literary theory and research skills at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Claudia specialises in Victorian women writers, life and travel writing, intergenerational legacy, adaptation and gender studies. She directed the editing of the booklet produced to accompany the 'Vote100' exhibition and oversaw repurposing of the displays for exhibiting at venues outside of Lincoln: Sleaford, Spilsby and Caistor. Claudia has also published on the Gothic, detective fiction and Anglo-Italian literary and cultural connections, Joyce Salvadori Lussu, and Janet Ross.

Elaine Johnson is currently a Visiting Tutor at Bishop Grosseteste University, specialising in local history. Elaine's main research work at present relates to nineteenth-century teacher training in Lincoln. She undertook substantial research on behalf of the University for the two 2018 exhibitions 'Vote 100' and 'Celebrating Women's Football'. Elaine was a contributor to the guide booklet produced for 'Vote100', and is also the author the article: 'Perspectives from the provincial press: A Lincolnshire view of women's suffrage', *East Midlands History and Heritage*, 9 (2019). Her research interests developed out of her part-time studies for a MA degree in Social and Cultural History at BGU.

Sian Hope-Johnson is a Bishop Grosseteste University alumni and Master's graduate. Her research has focussed on Masculinity and Modernism with a focus on Eliot and Hemingway. Sian has undertaken research in support of British Association of Victorian Studies and Being Human Festival events at BGU, and has helped to run workshops and lectures for children from local schools. Sian's was a major contributor to the Vote 100 exhibition and accompanying booklet. Sian was also asked by BBC Radio Lincolnshire to present a piece, broadcast as part of the centenary celebrations, telling the story of Lincolnshire suffrage powerhouse Jessie Boucherette.