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'It's a far cry from small boys in the park, jumpers for goalposts. Isn't it?' the changing space of informal youth football in the UK

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ABSTRACT

It is often remarked that all that is required for children to play football are 'jumpers for goalposts'. Space is also required, however, and so is permission to play, and to see the game through. Some of the spaces associated with British youth football through history include private school playing fields, villages, back streets, leisure centres, artificial pitches, and concrete sports courts or 'cages'. This article explores some of these green and grey spaces, and shifts between them, in informal youth football in the UK. We also pay attention to the symbolic greyness – the ambiguous and often contradictory attitudes – surrounding informal youth football at various times, and interactions between forms of football and ideas around 'restricted' and 'polluted' leisure. We trace the origins of the modern game back to the 1800s, before discussing significant developments over the past fifty years. We then examine the factors which have influenced where football can be played and the history of its association with some of the green and grey spaces mentioned above. The paper concludes by highlighting the increasing importance of grey leisure spaces to young people, and the greyness and nuances associated with such spaces within contemporary Britain.

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Introduction

There are a number of iconic spaces associated with the game of association football – the 'beautiful game' and the 'people's game': from the sandy pitches of Rio de Janeiro's favelas (Karim et al., 2022) to the concrete ball courts of Paris banlieues (R. Smith & Peltier, 2018), the streets of Amsterdam (Cruyff, 2017) and other cities, and goal posts painted on brick walls in and around streets of terraced houses and back lanes in Britain (Kirkham, 2024). For many, these informal, often 'grey', spaces of football evoke imaginaries of childhoods spent playing the game with little care or concern for anything else.

References to young boys (it is always boys) playing football in 'green' spaces, such as local parks or on any scrap of grass, with 'jumpers (sweatshirts) for goalposts', can also be found throughout many different aspects of British life, including literature and theatre (Wells, 2013), non-fiction (Smyth & Turner, 2011), and academia (Parnell et al., 2021, p. 179). One of the most frequent and famous proponents of the term is the fictitious television pundit, Ron Manager, who would go off on tangents when asked questions on a BBC comedy sketch show programme called *The Fast Show* (*Brilliant* in the USA):

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Oh, those Brazilians, you know? Circa 1970? Broke the mould. Theory out the window. Free expression of football. Uncategorisable. Is that a word? It is now! You know? Far cry from small boys in the park, jumpers for goalposts. Rush goalie. Two at the back, three in the middle, four up front, one's gone home for his tea. Beans on toast? Possibly, don't quote me on that. Marvellous.

The 'streets' are also an important space for football in the UK, an association that stems from late Victorian industrialisation. Football historian James Walvin argues that football 'fitted the nature and needs of industrial life' in the later nineteenth century, and that with new rule changes, it became 'a street game played by the young' (Walvin, 1994: 70). Bobby Charlton, a member of England Men's World Cup winning team of 1966, is quoted as saying that 'the [1996] World Cup wasn't won on the playing fields of England. It was won on the streets', recognising the working-class composition of almost all of the team. In more recent times, elite footballers such as Steven Gerrard (Jolly, 2021), Wayne Rooney (Garside, 2015), and Phil Foden (Draper, 2024) have all been referred to 'the last of the street footballers', perhaps recognising the increased role of professional clubs in youth football development.

Another neighbourhood grey space that has become increasingly associated with football in the UK, as well as in other parts of the world, is the 'cage'. Small multi-sports pitches or Multi Use Games Areas (MUGAs) that are enclosed with netting or fencing to prevent the ball from escaping, cages are sometimes sited in parks, but are perhaps more frequently found within urban housing estates, and are often associated with young Black players. Current England internationals such as Jadon Sancho, Eberechi Eze and many of their contemporaries are known to have honed their skills in cages (see Crossley et al., 2023). Sancho has been referred to as a 'cage warrior' (King, 2021) and Eze has spoken of 'growing up in London, with all the cages, everyone thrives off of the nutmeg' (Howell, 2020).

This article explores some of these symbolic, cultural and socio-spatial spaces, and shifts between them, in informal youth football in the UK. We pay particular attention to the balance and shifts between green and grey spaces, those spaces which display elements of both, and the consequent interactions with ideas around 'restricted' and 'polluted' leisure. We use 'grey spaces' and greyness more generally to discuss not just the physical and material environments, but also to articulate some of the fuzziness, haziness, and 'political and environmental ambiguities, contradictions, liminality, nuances and the paradoxes' (O'Connor et al., 2023, p. 898) of informal youth football, and the stage of youth itself. O'Connor (2024, p. 958), in discussing skateboarding practices in the urban environment, highlights how skateboarders are:

... are at once subjects *of* and contributors *to* pollution. They are policed, excluded, and challenged in their use of urban space, seen as a social pollutant by bringing noise and disruption to the normative frame of the city as a place of commerce.

We suggest the same can be said of young people playing football at various times throughout history. Pollution here is not just environmental and/or material: pollution can also be read as 'an exclusionary discourse' (O'Connor et al., 2023, p. 900) and symbolically applied to groups of people, seen as 'social pollutants' (O'Connor, 2024, p. 958), who are viewed as being unwelcome and/or 'out of place'. Here we see echoes of the 'restricted leisure' (Sharp et al., 2024) that was available under 'lockdowns' during the COVID-19 pandemic, and which speaks to young people feeling unwelcome in and/or formally or informally excluded from many leisure spaces, many of which have been commodified and privatised.

After first tracing the origins of the modern game of football back to the early 1800s, we next discuss some developments over the past fifty years. We then examine the factors which have influenced where football can be played and the history of its association with some green and grey spaces, including private school playing fields, villages, back streets, leisure centres, artificial pitches, and concrete sports courts or 'cages'. There is a degree of ambiguity and *greyness* about the game of football itself – what it can do and/or what it symbolises, how it should be organised or facilitated, and what opportunities should exist to participate in it. In conclusion, we argue that, for too many

children and young people in the UK today and in the near future, informal youth football is effectively a form of both restricted and polluted leisure.

Through time, attitudes to informal youth football have been affected by an array of ambiguous, fuzzy, *grey*, perspectives on youth and young people more broadly – the ever-present friction and contradiction between seeing young people who, essentially, want to kick a ball around, as a nuisance to adults, and/or as children having fun and pursuing a national pastime. A desire for social control in relation to these spaces thus often comes to the fore as much as ideas about sport provision, play facilities and childhood opportunities, and traditional sociological concerns around issues such as ‘race’, gender and class are never far from the surface. Young people themselves operate in a liminal space between childhood and adulthood, and are often viewed as ‘at risk’ or as ‘risky’, in need of ‘care’ or ‘control’. Whilst they are exhorted to be physically healthy, educationally engaged, and active citizens-in-the-making, the opportunities for such endeavours and attitudes are significantly reduced by cuts in government spending, increasing inequalities and the collapse of structures of opportunities. Young people viewed as not being engaged in these pursuits, for whatever reason, are constructed as problematic and as a social threat, contributing to a sense of ‘ephebiphobia’ (the irrational fear of teenagers), especially when they make their presence known in public, arguably *grey*, spaces (see Kinsey, 2019; Valentine et al., 1998).

Improvisation and structure, chaos and order: a brief history of football in the UK from 1800 to 1960

The specific origins of the game of football are contested (see Kitching, 2011; Swain, 2014a, 2014b) and a full discussion is beyond the scope of this article. Walvin (1994) notes that there is mention of ball games similar to football in early Chinese history (between AD 50–130). References to football in the UK came a little later, with the defining feature between the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries appearing to be the violence and risk of injury associated with the game (Walvin, 1994).

At various stages during this period, many, if not all, forms of football were banned in the UK (Metcalf, 2005, p. 138). At some point around the early 1800s, this rule became slightly more relaxed and various forms of football began to be played openly. The game in the early to mid-1800s included large-scale, often annual, games, as well as smaller-scale more frequent games played between men and boys on ‘high days and holidays’ (Kitching, 2021, p. 15). These games were often contested by players from opposing villages, with games taking place in and sometimes across a mix of *green* and *grey* spaces like rural fields and lanes, and linked to village festivals and fetes, although it is not always clear who the teams were or what forms the games took (Metcalf, 2005; Swain, 2014a).

Around the same time that football was being played in fields and meadows in England, the game was also developing in the playing fields of public schools. Contrary to a previously ‘dominant paradigm’ (Swain, 2014b) which viewed football as largely the preserve of public schoolboys during the early 1800s, Harvey (2016, p. 272) suggests that in ‘the period between 1830 and 1859 there were far more football teams outside the public schools than those within it’. Like the ‘folk football’ that was played outside the walls of public schools, the game that was played within these schools varied in rules and conventions, and often ‘developed according to the capacity and limitations of the school’s playing fields or playgrounds’ (Walvin, 1994, p. 33). By way of example, the game at Charterhouse (in central London) was played within the *grey* spaces of old monastery cloisters, because space was limited. The physical environment there, like the cages of today, thus encouraged close control and ‘dribbling’, whereas the expansive *green* fields of Eton and Harrow, for example, encouraged long and high kicks during games (Walvin, 1994, pp. 33–34).

Whilst football was now promoted in public schools, and at least tolerated at certain times in fields and villages, the same could not be said of the informal ‘street football’ played in urban areas, an early example of the ambiguities and contradictions surrounding the game. Swain (2014a) and Kitching (2021) both highlight how the annual Shrovetide

football game at Alnwick shifted from a ‘street and field’ (thus *grey* and *green*) game to a more enclosed and restricted ‘field game’ in a specific pasture in 1828, at the request of the town burghers in order to restrict damage to buildings. Byelaws and other instruments were used from the 1830s onwards to prevent football from being played in the streets. Swain (2014a), p. 525) sets out how the Highways Act of 1835 that made playing football and obstructing the highway a criminal offence ‘was a particularly effective weapon’ in restricting these activities.

Walvin (1994), p. 54) also notes that many employers in the early parts of the nineteenth century sought to have football banned in an effort to ‘inculcate a new labour discipline among their workforce’. This all began to change when campaigns to reduce working hours began to bear fruit in the 1840s and 1850s. The change that allowed industrial workers a Saturday afternoon off – *la semaine anglaise* – was perhaps the most significant development in this area. A number of other factors coalesced to see football become the dominant use of free time among industrial workers. The Football Association was established in 1863 and began to encourage the expansion of footballing activities. The game thus underwent substantial formalisation.

By 1914, football was the most popular sport in the UK (Beaven, 2005, p. 72). It was watched by thousands of people, mainly men, each week, and played by many as well, both formally within organised leagues and informally for leisure. The expansion of ‘lad’s clubs’ a few years later in 1921 saw more young men provided with more opportunities to play football and other sports, partially, again, out of a concern about levels of juvenile delinquency (Snape, 2020, p. 112). With more and more interest in football and a more permissive attitude towards the game, more opportunities to play it arose and football began to be played in more and more streets and back lanes. Informal games were still not entirely tolerated, however, and, in 1931 for example, a public outcry erupted after seven boys were sentenced to 14 days in prison for playing football in the streets of Glasgow (Jones, 1987, p. 168), an exemplar of ‘restricted leisure’ and young people being viewed as ... ‘unsightly and unwanted pollution in urban centres’ (O’Connor et al., 2023, p. 901).

Evident by the early 20th century, then, was a substantial greyness and ambiguity surrounding the politics of football: it was seen as a potential means to enhance the civility and discipline of young men, but it was also seen – usually when played informally or without adult supervision by the ‘wrong’ people in the ‘wrong’ place – as a potential nuisance and pollutant that needed to be controlled. More formalised football could be seen through the lens of modern state formation and governmentality, alongside measures such as compulsory education, as a way to civilise the masses, integrate them, and render them useful (see e.g. Green, 1990) – part of an array of mechanisms deployed to ensure that children and young people became ‘responsible’ adults. Informal football during this time, however, could be treated as akin to the violent street game of old: an anarchic and dangerous past-time for disreputable youth.

With urban populations ever-expanding into the mid-20th century, football was increasingly played in whichever neighbourhood streets and corners were available. In a section of his book *This Sporting Life* called ‘Back Lane Football’, Colls (2020, p. 236) discusses how children of the 1940s and 1950s grew up playing football wherever they could, and according to local rules dictated by the environment and the number of players:

In all these tight urban corners the game was played according to rules determined by old heads and how many players. On your own? Play against the wall, or ‘keepie up’. Two of you? Head tennis, or ‘doors’ where each man defended his own back door and attacked the rest. Odd numbers? One in goal and two sides even. Or doors. Even numbers? Proper sides ... All you needed was a ball. Streets and back lanes, passageways and alleyways, low ground, high ground, housing squares, scraps of land, lamp posts in a line, passes across the street, headers over a rope ... NO BALL GAMES notices had to get used to the constant beat of the ball.

Prospects for street football changed forever when the prevalence of cars grew rapidly from the 1960s, bringing environmental pollution and reducing opportunities for spontaneous doorstep play, and necessitating the growth of municipal leisure provision. As our history reaches more

recent decades, both change and continuity is evident in the forces and ideas which have encouraged and constrained informal youth football.

Changing times and changing spaces: informal youth football in the UK since 1970

The 1960s and 70s saw an increasing role for public bodies in the provision of sporting and leisure opportunities and the state's role in meeting people's needs (Rapoport & Dower, 1979). One estimate suggested that leisure services within local government cost around £600 million or 3.5% of the total local government expenditure a year, and was supported by around 80,000 full-time staff (Veal & Travis, 1979). Much of this outlay went on the development of leisure centres which often included swimming pools, sports halls, gyms, cafes and meeting rooms – including spaces for recreational football. Whilst they continued a long line of public provision of sport and leisure facilities, 'their architects also imported into the public sector many features and ideas that had been developed in commercial entertainment' (O. S. Smith, 2019, p. 182). This 'boom' was, however, short-lived, and concerns about the extensive reach of the welfare state during the post-war years coalesced in the UK in the mid-1970s with a global economic crisis leading to prolonged economic recession and 'stagflation'. The election of a Conservative government in the UK in 1979 resulted in a very different approach to the role of government in the everyday lives of citizens and how local services were delivered and funded, and how it viewed football and other sports.

According to various political and sporting commentators and journalists, Margaret Thatcher (the UK Prime Minister from 1979–1990) 'never really understood' sport (Fordyce, 2013). There was, however, a slight improvement in the role of sports under John Major who followed Thatcher as Prime Minister, and who was a Chelsea FC fan, and a keen follower of cricket. The Conservative governments of 1979–1997 enabled local authorities to sell school land in order to raise funds. It is estimated that around 10,000 school playing fields were sold during the eighteen years of Conservative government, having a huge impact on children and young people's opportunities to play sports including football, rugby and cricket (Hope, 2012). Industrial action by striking teachers during the 1980s, who ultimately withdrew their unpaid labour at after-schools clubs and activities saw participation in sports fall even further (Fordyce, 2013). The former England manager Sam Allardyce accused Thatcher of 'killing' the game, highlighting that it was only in private schools that children had the same sporting opportunities that he had access to as a child (The Mirror, 2011).

Under the New Labour governments following 1997, community football provision and opportunities saw significant change, but aspects of ambiguity and greyness remained. Labour saw football and other sports as ways to promote citizenship, support neighbourhood renewal and tackle social exclusion. The Football Foundation was formed in 2000 and a research report published in 2006 highlighted the communitarian links between Labour's approach to governing and to football more specifically:

Great emphasis has been placed on the power of strong, inclusive communities and their abilities to contribute to the tackling of social problems. As football clubs are amongst the most recognised symbols of 'community identity' in contemporary Britain, some have suggested they have an important role in building and sustaining communities of various types. (Brown et al., 2006, p. 12)

Football clubs engaged with the Home Office's Positive Futures project, aimed at engaging marginalised young people in deprived areas through sport (Kelly, 2010), although Mellor (2008) argued that this largely took the form of superficial 'corporate social responsibility' activities. At the same time that positive, diversionary activities and programmes were being developed and rolled out across the country, an Anti-Social Behaviour Unit was also established by the government, with the aim of cracking down on neighbourhood nuisance and low-level criminality, often caused, or perceived to be caused by, young people in deprived neighbourhoods. The Anti-Social Behaviour Act (2003) included 'new powers of dispersal within designated zones, including powers to remove

under 16-year-olds to their home address' (Kelly, 2012, p. 272) and also introduced Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) for persistent or high-level problematic behaviour. Breach of an ASBO could lead to a custodial sentence, with the ASB agenda referred to as 'the criminalisation of nuisance' (Squires, 2008).

Children hanging around streets or playing football close to houses were still viewed as being 'risky' or 'threatening' and were therefore at risk of being moved on, or worse. In 2008, *The Telegraph* carried a report of children who were threatened with ASBOs for playing football in the street (Allen, 2008), again highlighting the restricted nature and symbolic pollution of informal youth football, and the contradictory perspectives on both young people and football. A desire to see young people in some – designated by adults – public spaces but not others led 'to a resurgence in the provision of MUGAs and the introduction of "teen shelters" in locations such as parks' (Woolley, 2009, p. 103). MUGAs were intended to provide spaces where young people could play a variety of sports, including football and basketball, and where they could socialise with friends. The demonisation of young people as being 'risky' through the ASB agenda, however, even meant that they were not always welcome or tolerated in the spaces designed and built for them.

Both the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government formed in 2010 and the subsequent Conservative government elected in 2015 enacted programmes of austerity that once again saw government spending shrink, with many programmes and services benefitting young people and/or community sports provision being affected. Two thirds of local authority run youth clubs closed between 2010 and 2024 (Wallis, 2024). Overall budgets for youth services – including substantial youth sports provision – were cut by 70% in England and Wales between 2010 and 2019 (Weale, 2020). In addition, dedicated local sports funding was cut by 47% between 2010 and 2021 (Connett, 2021). Funding restrictions meant that stated government aims of increasing participation in sport among 'hard to reach groups' were not reached (Widdop et al., 2017). Sports charities faced an 'increasingly precarious and vulnerable landscape' (Kenyon et al., 2018), whilst local authority sports development work became 'more territorial and fragmented' (Mori et al., 2021, p. 568). There is evidence of some sports organisations effectively innovating and collaborating in order to continue provision through austerity (see Kenyon et al., 2018; Walker & Hayton, 2018), but smaller sports charities were worst affected, despite very often being 'best positioned to deliver bespoke support that is specific to the needs of the communities that they serve' (Walker & Hayton, 2018, p. 58). Enforced reductions in provision meant that 'highly skilled and experienced staff [were] no longer able to undertake the work they do so well with the target groups that need them the most' (Kenyon et al., 2018, p. 39), ultimately impacting the young people wanting to play sport, and restricting their opportunities to do so.

At the same time, sports provision was increasingly instrumentalised and marketised. The 2015 'Sporting Future' Strategy (HM Government, 2015) – focused on initiatives to become a more 'active nation' – centres heavily on extrinsic, measurable outcomes. The strategy asserted that sport 'enhances individuals and communities, boosts the economy, and supports a range of other policy priorities, including health, tackling crime and education' (HM Government, 2015, p. 11). The Strategy 'actively encourage[d] private sector input and emphasise[d] neoliberal ideals of competition and market forces' (Mori et al., 2021, p. 566). Without mentioning government funding cuts, it encouraged organisations to diversify their income through 'philanthropy and fundraising, crowd-funding, social impact bonds or partnerships with the private sector' (HM Government, 2015, p. 53). Mori et al. (2021, p. 566) cite one council sports development worker who embraced this ethic: 'He discussed how sport had traditionally been a bit "jumpers for goalposts" and needed to "get with the times" if it was to survive'. 'Getting with the times' meant adopting more managerialist and business-like principles (ibid). Neighbourhood-embedded grassroots provision for the sake of it, or for the love of the game(s), was no longer desirable: the new focus was on sports as outcome-oriented 'interventions'.

If there was one particular 'outcome' that the Coalition and Conservative governments sought through sport provision between 2010 and 2024, it was a reduction in youth crime.

Though mention of Anti-Social Behaviour remained, after rioting broke out across multiple English cities during the summer of 2011, the government's focus switched notably to 'knife crime', 'gangs', and violence – a discourse in which, again, positioned some groups of young people as 'risky' and 'threatening'. Sports programmes had a prominent place in the responses to the violence, and, more recently, one research and evaluation repository concludes that 'Sports programmes could have a high impact on crime and violence' (YEF, 2021). At time of writing, the Youth Endowment Fund has just announced a new large-scale investment in multi-site efficacy trials to test 'the transformative power' of sports programmes to reduce violence, funding a small group of national charities to undertake complex evaluations of their provision (YEF, 2024).

Spaces for informal youth football today: increasingly restricted, polluted, and grey?

In this section, we examine the current situation in relation to the informal spaces of youth football in the UK. In doing so, we draw more explicitly on the concepts of 'restricted' (Sharp et al., 2024) and 'polluted' leisure (Evers, 2019). The phrase 'restricted leisure' was used in a special issue of the *Annals of Leisure Research* to explore the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions on leisure activity. It was not used by all of the authors in the special issue, and the phrase itself was not developed or explained further in any of them. Whilst it was used in the context of many leisure activities being temporarily stopped, or restrictions placed upon them during the pandemic, we believe it has value in describing the limited and restricted everyday leisure opportunities for many marginalised groups, in particular for children and young people, outside of the extreme measures imposed during the pandemic. The retreat of publicly provided leisure facilities and activities documented here, over the last forty years, has led to fewer accessible sport and leisure opportunities for many young people, especially organised ones, often resulting in a reliance on hyper-local, informal, and often neglected facilities in *grey* spaces (Billingham et al., 2024). These local spaces, however, are not without their own contradictions and tensions.

Evers (2019, p. 424) introduces the term 'polluted leisure' to describe 'the embodied, sensorial, emotional, intellectual, spatial, and technological emergence of pollution – material and social, harmful and nonharmful, actual and perceived – assembling with leisure'. In discussing polluted leisure, he encourages us to 'consider running and air pollution, gardening and brownfield sites, urban exploring and post-industrial landscapes, fishing and drainwaters, e-waste and computer gaming, and much more' (2019: 425). To us, much informal youth football in grey and grey/green spaces discussed here – in cages, on streets, and on artificial pitches – offers a good example of polluted leisure.

The number of playing fields and grassroots pitches in the UK has continued to fall in recent years, with an estimated 926 fewer local authority football pitches in 2024 than in 2010, mainly as a result of austerity and cuts to local government funding highlighted above (GMBU, 2024). The loss of so many pitches and reduced funding, combined with reduced maintenance schedules in many areas, has led to the FA complaining about the 'abhorrent state' of many grassroots pitches (Hemmings, 2014). The poor quality of grass pitches, the frustration at many games being cancelled and the costs of hiring artificial pitches have all been suggested as explanations for the falling participation rates in grassroots football, and/or children being turned away from clubs (Hemmings, 2014; Parnell & Widdop, 2016).

The increasingly wet winters, when football is played in the UK, have also had an impact on the quality of grassroots pitches and playing fields. A guide produced by the Met(eorological) Office (2022) notes that, amongst other statistics, 2020 was the UK's fifth wettest year in a series from 1862. More recently, the 18-month period from October 2022 was the wettest on record for England. There is, therefore, unsurprisingly, an increasing awareness of the impact of climate change on grassroots football (Bawden, 2023). An increasing number of games and football sessions now take place on 'evergreen' artificial pitches due to these weather conditions, but environmental concerns

have emerged about these artificial surfaces, and they have been linked with an increased risk of cancer, due to the crumb rubber infill that is used on them (BBC, 2024a). In September 2023 the European Commission banned the sale and use of microplastics infill used on many artificial pitches, from 2031, although this does not apply to Britain as a result of their exit from the EU.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–1 also impacted opportunities for youth football, again through the temporary halting of grassroots clubs activities and the closure of leisure centres, and cuts to funding. Lockdowns and restrictions on leisure activities brought dire warnings of ‘the end of grassroots football’ (Hunter et al., 2020) and a ‘lost generation’ of football participants who would not return to the game if they spent prolonged periods without playing (Macinnes, 2020). Leisure centres, which often provide facilities for five-a-side football and/or coaching sessions, were also forced to close, and lost valuable revenue from the cessation of all of their activities and sessions. Playgrounds and ball courts, similarly, were locked up. The recent cost-of-living crisis in the UK, which has seen increasing costs of housing, food, and fuel, amongst other things, and a lack of support from central and local government, has also affected leisure centres and other sports facilities, and the number of people using them (Harris, 2023; Olusoga, 2023).

A Green Space Index produced by Fields in Trust, a national charity tasked with the preservation of green spaces and playing fields, estimated that, in the UK, over 6 million people did not have access to a green space within a 10-minute walk (Fields in Trust, 2024). This will have particular implications for children who may not be allowed to play far from home. The lack of access is felt more keenly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods but the relative abundance of green space available to public schools and their pupils is perhaps where inequalities in this area can be seen most keenly. An investigation by *The Guardian* newspaper highlighted that, on average, public school pupils enjoyed more than 10 times as much outdoor space as those who go to state schools (Horton et al., 2024). Eton had over 140 times as much space as the average state school, including 40 rugby and football pitches and four floodlit artificial pitches (Horton, 2024). Pupils at Lord Wandsworth College were able to enjoy ‘five County-level cricket pitches, six rugby pitches, and multiple “pristine” football pitches’ (Horton, 2024). Green space thus abounds for football and other sports, if you can afford to attend an elite private school. For the vast majority of children and young people living in urban areas, however, with limited green spaces available or accessible, the spaces used for informal football are increasingly grey, and/or polluted. We briefly discuss three forms of grey space in this section: school playgrounds, streets, and neighbourhood cages.

Since the dawn of compulsory state education in the late 19th century, school playgrounds have always been important spaces for play and informal football, and the sale of school playing fields mentioned above only increases this value. In recent years, however, concerns have been raised about the pollution that school pupils are exposed to. A study in 2021 concluded that a quarter of UK pupils attended schools where air pollution is over the World Health Organization’s (WHO) recommended limit (Carrington, 2021), whilst a similar investigation undertaken this year found that every new school being built in England is in an unsafe air pollution area by WHO standards (Gregory, 2024; Mahfouz et al., 2024). Partly in response to this problem, alongside other potential hazards from traffic, temporary road closures around schools – known as ‘school streets’ – have become increasingly popular around the country. A study of London school streets found that nitrogen dioxide, one of the pollutants from traffic, was reduced by 23% (Gellatly & Marnier, 2021). Despite such results, there has been resistance to school streets, particularly from motorists’ groups, who appear to view them alongside Low Traffic Neighbourhoods as a threat to their rights to and in public space (Grant, 2022). These motorists’ concerns have attracted high-profile support, including from then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in 2023 (Slow, 2023). Contradictions are evident, then, between the value placed on children and young people’s education and health, the need for less pollution in and around school playgrounds, and motorists’ desire to drive unimpeded. These competing priorities in these public spaces, the ambiguities in how to address them, and the lack of activity in relation to them, speaks to the greyness and haziness of childhood and youth in the UK at the current time, and the policies supporting their health and wellbeing.

These tensions between motorists' interests and children and young people's desire for informal games also play out on neighbourhood streets. Play England research (Dodd, 2023) found that traffic was a major barrier to children and young people playing on their streets, due both to their own concerns, and those of their parents. The research concludes that children regularly playing out in their street has declined dramatically over the past 70+ years (Dodd, 2023, p. 4). The report found that, whereas in 2013, over 55% of the children reported that they had never been told to stop playing, in 2022, this had dropped to 33% (Dodd, 2023, p. 12). When asked which activities they were told to stop, the most commonly given answers in 2022 were making noise and playing ball games (Dodd, 2023, p. 13) – both, apparently, perceived as nuisance. As a consequence of this, organisations such as Play England, Playing Out and London Sport are campaigning for various measures to increase street play, including Play Street initiatives (during which roads are closed to traffic temporarily to facilitate play), play sufficiency legislation, and the banning of 'no ball games' signs (BBC, 2024b; Minogue, 2024; Playing Out, n.d.).

Cages, lastly, are significant sites for play and informal football, but children and young people using cages similarly face substantial restrictions and problems. Very simple facilities, often consisting of little more than a concrete surface, rudimentary equipment such as football goals, and metal fencing, cages can play an important role in children and young people's lives. Though sometimes based in parks – grey spaces within wider green spaces – they are more often found on estates, and many urban areas house many of them: the London borough of Hackney, for instance, has over 80. Particularly due to the severe restrictions on their use of other public spaces, many local children and young people feel a strong sense of ownership over 'their' cage. As social infrastructure, cages can facilitate social bonds and a sense of community and belonging, as well as being important sites for informal football, but they can also be sites of potential harm (Billingham et al., 2024). They have attracted media attention due to the role they have played in the careers of many top-flight footballers (Crossley et al., 2023), especially those hailing from the 'concrete Catalonia' of South London (Ronay, 2016). These grey spaces are, however, often located in highly polluted areas, in poor condition and not always inclusive: girls, in particular, and younger children can be effectively excluded from them (see Barker et al., 2022; Van den Bogert, 2023). In light of these challenges, grassroots sports organisations often develop innovative approaches and provisions to make best use of cages, and to maximise the inclusiveness and accessibility of their provision (Billingham et al., 2024).

Despite the significance of cages to many children and young people, and the work done by sports organisations to maximise their benefits for diverse local communities, they face multiple threats. Cages have been demolished as part of estate regeneration plans, particularly on those estates stigmatised as 'sink estates' (Davies, 2016), in which young people – often racially minoritised young people – hanging out is more likely to be deemed 'anti-social' and, therefore, 'risky' (Grant, 2021). In the face of immense pressure on London housing stock, many of the capital's cages have been replaced with new apartment blocks (ibid). New cages can also face opposition: in Middlesbrough in 2023, for instance, local police objected to a council-led proposal for a new cage within a park, on the basis that they felt it may encourage crime among teenagers, whose play, again, was portrayed as 'risky' and, therefore, a threat to order (BBC, 2023). As with many other forms of resistance to young people's informal football mentioned in this paper, such fears could indicate the sustained prevalence of a broader cultural 'ephebiphobia' in Britain (Kinsey, 2019).

Somewhat more subtly, cages can become exoticised and exploited – associated with 'edgy' urbanism, in highly classed and racialised ways, which can involve the commercial take-over of these community grey spaces, either temporarily for photoshoots and filming, or more permanently as rentable spaces (Crossley et al., 2023). The character and culture of cages can also be undermined by well-meaning attempts at enhancement. Young people have expressed concerns about how refurbishment can 'gentrify' cages, making nominally 'grey' spaces colourful, turning them into spectacles for people to visit, thereby eroding their highly localised sense of value for children and young people (Billingham et al., 2024). At worst, refurbishment projects can entirely alter the nature

of a cage, from an informal space for largely unsupervised, casual, doorstep play, into a more high-spec facility only available at set times during the day to those who can pay for its usage, turning these grey spaces into (more) restricted areas of leisure. Concerns of this nature have been raised about the Football Foundation's 'PlayZones' scheme, for instance (see Billingham et al., 2024; Football Foundation, n.d.). Recreational neighbourhood 'cage' football, then, can become restricted by increasing formalisation.

Conclusion

Through the history of informal youth football in the UK, then, a lot has changed, and yet much has stayed the same. Despite the cultural significance of the sport and its symbolic positioning as both the 'beautiful game' and 'the people's game', it has, ironically, always been a form of polluted and restricted leisure, taking place across both green and grey spaces throughout the history of the game. It is still (perhaps only just) played in the streets and back lanes of towns, villages, and cities, on playing fields, and in parks where it is tolerated. These streets and back lanes are still sources of pollution, as are the school playgrounds, cages, and artificial pitches where football increasingly takes place.

Its restriction has come from multiple sources: the Highways Act of 1835, increased car traffic from the 1960s, the contemporary trend for 'intensive parenting', and ever-growing demand for urban housing, for instance. Young people playing football have been, and sometimes continue to be, seen as a threat to the social order – based on the view that young people's behaviour in public spaces is unruly and, therefore, 'risky'. Since the late 19th century, the same game, but played under different conditions, has also been viewed as a potential tool for taming and civilising potential juvenile delinquents. Periods of encouragement and facilitation have occurred – through the provision of facilities such as leisure centres and cages, for instance – as well as times of suppression and neglect, such as austerity cuts to local authority sports and youth service budgets. These trends, and the contradictions and ambiguities surrounding them, highlight the utility of the concept of *greyness* in examining attitudes towards and opportunities for informal youth football.

Informal games are arguably now threatened by a series of interconnected trends, towards the formalisation, containment, and instrumentalisation of youth football: the delivery of structured football programmes within designated facilities, evaluated against pre-set outcomes, is – to say the least – 'a far cry from small boys in the park, playing rush goalie with jumpers for goalposts'. There is nothing inherently dangerous about football being used to support broad societal goals, such as improved health, increased employment, or reduced crime among young people. And neither, of course, is there anything intrinsically harmful about formalised football provision, such as well-organised leagues. There is certainly nothing necessarily wrong with improved football facilities. The danger arises when these developments come at the expense of informal, free-to-access youth football: 'crowding out' the intrinsic value of play for its own sake, devaluing its more intangible benefits like friendship and joy, and reducing the availability and opportunity of more basic spaces for improvised play. These trends can also embed and exacerbate inequalities: between those who can afford to hire high-spec pitches or access private facilities and those who cannot, for example, or between smaller grassroots organisations delivering highly localised provision on a shoestring, and national charities with substantial fundraising capacity.

Grey spaces have always been centrally significant for football – whether the streets of Victorian London or the capital's more contemporary 'cages', for example. Green spaces, too, have consistently retained importance as sites for football, including parks, municipal football pitches, and the gargantuan playing fields of elite private schools. We also note that 'hybrid' green and grey spaces – small patches of grass within cities, cages located within parks, and artificial pitches that contain carcinogenic material – are increasingly important. Following a significant and long-term erosion of accessible green spaces, however, for today's children and young people – and especially those

growing up within more marginalised urban communities – grey spaces appear to be more likely sites of play and provision than green spaces.

In light of this, we would argue that grey spaces for play and informal football should be deemed vitally important for children and young people in Britain – and beyond, and their value should be recognised. This does not diminish the importance of access to green space, and neither does it elide the challenges with grey spaces, such as the pollution often engulfing them, the problems affecting them as sites for play, and the need to make them more inclusive for all children and young people.

Children and young people should be afforded permission for play both in open public spaces, green and grey, such as streets and parks, and in dedicated facilities such as cages, and they should be able to enjoy their games without fear of their health being detrimentally affected by pollution or other environmental harms. If we value their right to play football, as well as other recreational games and activities, informally, as well as recognising the extrinsic benefits that it can bring, we should provide children and young people with abundant green and grey spaces on which to exercise that right.

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