**Histories of Hooliganism**

More than thirty years since its publication in 1983, Geoffrey Pearson’s *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* remains both required reading for sociologists, criminologists and historians and a vital point of reference for those rare media commentators willing to acknowledge the historical roots of street crime, disorder and violence in Britain’s cities.[[1]](#footnote-1) Working back from the wave of riots that spread from London to Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham during the summer of 1981, Pearson showed how preceding generations of Britons had all seen themselves as uniquely troubled by lawlessness and disorder. Each generation had invoked mythical ‘golden ages’ in the past, with conservative social commentators across decades and even centuries issuing remarkably similar complaints about the corrosive influence of popular culture on the young, accompanied by recurring pleas for harsher punishments.

Pearson took his title from the ‘hooligan’ panic that gripped London during the hot summer of 1898. As he showed, ‘hooliganism’ was rapidly adopted as a new label for the exploits of unruly youths, whose disorderly conduct, drunkenness, assaults on the police, street robberies and gang fighting were characterised by a sensation-hungry press as both unprecedented and ‘un-English’ (1983: 74-7). Responses to these youthful miscreants betrayed a profound amnesia. As Pearson wryly observed, ‘if Hooliganism was an entirely novel outburst as was usually supposed, then a tropical growth of gang life must have sprouted overnight’ (1983: 82). Pearson took his readers on a ‘tour of the quiet streets’ of late Victorian London, revealing a street life that was tumultuous and frequently violent. Assaults on the police and collective resistance to arrest were commonplace, while those suspected of co-operating with the police and courts faced intimidation, if not reprisal (1983: 81-92). Youthful gang members played their part, Pearson acknowledged, but they did not act in isolation: ‘Suspicion and hostility towards the law in working-class London at the turn of the century drew on much deeper funds of popular feeling’ (1983: 88).

As Pearson revealed, London’s hooligans were by no means unique. Their provincial counterparts – the ‘scuttlers’ of Manchester and Salford, ‘peaky blinders’ and ‘sloggers’ of Birmingham, and ‘High Rip’ of Liverpool – had already earned widespread notoriety by the 1880s (1983: 98). Across England’s major cities, youthful gang members adopted a common uniform: peaked caps, worn tilted over their eyes, ‘flashy’ scarves, bell-bottomed trousers and heavy, brass-buckled belts marked them out from their adolescent peers, while their favoured hair-style – a close crop, with a long fringe plastered down on the forehead – startled middle-class observers (1983: 93-8). As Pearson noted, here was evidence of a well established, working-class ‘youth culture’ that pre-dated the better-known ‘Teddy Boys’ by seventy years (1983: 100-101, 256). In each city, youth gangs resorted to weapons, including knives, stones, and the buckle ends of their belts, although Pearson was wary of claims in the popular press that London’s hooligans routinely carried firearms (1983: 101-6).

Contemporary responses to hooliganism were far from uniform. At the height of the panic, in 1898, calls for hooligans to be flogged extended from the *Daily Mail* and *News of the World* to the medical journal, the *Lancet*. Commentators in the radical and socialist press took a different view: for *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, the panic showed the folly of prioritising missionary work overseas above attending to social problems at home (Pearson 1983: 77-9). In the decade that followed, the troublesome figure of the hooligan provided a ‘crystallising focus’ for Britain’s imperial, military, industrial and social anxieties. In Pearson’s words: ‘He loomed large in the apocalyptic discourse surrounding … fears of racial decline and physical inefficiency’ (1983: 107). Social reformers set out both to reform the hooligan and, in some cases, to channel his instincts and energies into schemes for imperial renewal. Attempts to wean boys and lads off the streets and out of gangs hinged on the provision of sports facilities – frequently promoted by the boys’ club movement, which sought to combine boxing clubs with Bible classes. Others, like Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scouts, celebrated the hooligan’s ‘character’. As Baden-Powell put it in a speech to the National Defence Association in 1910, the hooligan was ‘the best class of boy’ (Pearson 1983: 108-11).

As D.G. Wright (1983) noted in his review of *Hooligan* for the *London Review of Books*, Pearson’s findings ran counter to many of the orthodoxies then current among historians of crime and punishment in nineteenth-century England. These stressed the fall in the recorded level of indictable crime between the 1850s and the 1890s, which V.A.C. Gatrell attributed to the success of the ‘coercive state’ in combating traditional forms of law-breaking (Gatrell 1980: 336). Gatrell’s conclusions echoed those of David Philips, who emphasized working-class acceptance of the criminal law and participation in the prosecution process during the Victorian period (Philips 1977: 285-6), and David Jones, who argued that, in both London and Manchester, people and property were notably safer by 1900 than they had been in 1850 (Jones 1982: 143, 177). As Pearson showed, contemporary commentators – especially in the press – were less confident that the war on crime had been won.

Pearson’s revelation that hooliganism had a history stretching back to the late nineteenth century had been anticipated two years previously by social historian Stephen Humphries. In *Hooligans or Rebels*, Humphries noted that hooliganism was a ‘constant cause of concern’ between the 1880s and the 1930s, with recurring moral panics followed by prolonged campaigns to control and rehabilitate working-class youth. These law-and-order campaigns, Humphries observed, were prompted not so much by increases in delinquency *per se*, as by heightened public sensitivity to youthful law-breaking at moments of economic and military threats to national stability – notably during the ‘Boer War’ of 1899–1902 and the First World War (Humphries 1981: 174-5). However, Humphries’ own examination of street gangs and hooliganism largely covered the early decades of the twentieth century. He made only fleeting mention of the late Victorian youth gangs that Pearson subsequently investigated in *Hooligan*.

Humphries used a series of oral testimonies to offer an account of street gangs from within. For Humphries, the illegal and antisocial acts perpetrated by youthful gang members ‘grew out of resentment and hostility rooted in a shared experience of inequality and subordination.’ Gang violence, whether motivated by territorial rivalry or racism, was ‘self-destructive and futile in the long term’ but nonetheless ‘offer[ed] working-class youths momentary reprieve from their inferior social identity’ (Humphries 1981: 175). Anticipating Pearson’s findings in *Hooligan*, Humphries viewed attacks by street gangs on the police as an expression of a wider working-class resentment, motivated by police interference in popular leisure activities and their role in the containment of political protests and strikes (1981: 205). In contrast to Pearson, Humphries claimed that conflicts between rival street gangs were ‘to a large extent ritualized and involved customary constraints that prevented serious injury.’ Weapons were ‘rarely used and were carried largely as symbols of defiance and resistance’. ‘Serious’ violence was most likely to be directed at newly arrived immigrant groups during period of socio-economic decline (Humphries 1981: 189-96).

Historians of Modern Britain were slow to build on the pioneering studies of Humphries and Pearson. The first book-length study of hooliganism focused not on London, but on St Petersburg (Neuberger 1993). Since the late 1990s, however, there has been a proliferation of English case studies – of late Victorian Liverpool, Manchester and Salford, and Birmingham, as well as London – drawing inspiration from Pearson’s recognition that London’s hooligans were part of a ‘nationwide phenomenon’ (1983: 94).[[2]](#footnote-2) More recently, scholarly attention has turned to the hooligan’s Australian counterpart, the ‘larrikin’, whose exploits – as Pearson noted – can be traced back to 1870 (Pearson 1983: 98-100; Sleight 2009, Bellanta 2012; Bellanta and Sleight 2014). Focusing on the cities of late Victorian England, this chapter surveys these new histories of hooliganism, highlighting their debt to Pearson’s ‘history of respectable fears’ as well as to Humphries’ recognition of the persistent links between youth gangs and economic inequality.

**Liverpool: The ‘High Rip’ gang**

The first provincial case study, by Rob Sindall (1990), focused on Liverpool, where the exploits of the High Rip gang briefly made headline news during the mid-1880s. Sindall claimed that the gang first came to the attention of the judges on the Northern Circuit in 1884, when seventeen-year-old Michael McLean – subsequently said to be its leader – was hung for the murder of a Spanish sailor in the city’s North End. Reflecting on the case two years later, the *Liverpool Echo* insisted that there was ‘as much intimidation and terrorism in the portion of the city lying between Scotland Road and the river as there [was] in the most disturbed district in Ireland’ (Sindall 1990: 66; Archer 2011: 185).

The High Rip’s local notoriety was sealed in August 1886, when 150 of its members reportedly marched along Scotland Road to Walton Gaol, seeking retribution against a man who had given evidence against one of their associates. According to reports in the local press, their intended victim belonged to a rival gang known as ‘the Logwood’. Three months later, two nineteen-year-old ‘High Rippers’ were convicted of unlawful wounding and sentenced to exemplary terms of fifteen years’ penal servitude. Their victim was also said to belong to the Logwood gang (Sindall 1990: 67; Macilwee 2005: 175-8).[[3]](#footnote-3)

The *Liverpool Daily Post* employed a ‘special commissioner’ to tour the High Rip’s ‘hunting ground’. The commissioner duly provided the *Post*’s readers with a detailed portrait of the gang’s members and their *modus operandi*. Aged between seventeen and twenty-two, they hailed from the city’s impoverished North End docklands. According to the *Post*’s investigator, the High Rip operated as a ‘secret society’, with new recruits swearing allegiance to the gang and its members and pledging never to initiate an attack without drawing blood. (Their distinctive ‘bucko’ hats must have significantly undermined the secrecy of their operations.) According to the *Post*, they levied systematic blackmail on the local dock labourers, using knives and belts with sharpened buckles to terrorise their victims (Sindall 1990: 68-9). The *Post*’s commissioner claimed that the High Rips’ adversaries, the Logwood ‘gang’, were in fact not gang members but vigilantes – ‘being formed of working men who have banded themselves together to put an end to the High Rip Gang’ (Sindall 1990: 69).

The *Post*’s accounts of the High Rip generated widespread alarm in Liverpool during the autumn of 1886. Its coverage did not go unchallenged, however. By late September, the *Liverpool Review* began to question the gang’s existence. As Sindall observed, discrepancies in local press reports reflected the proximity of the municipal elections on 1 November. Sensational depictions of gang outrages in the *Post* and its sister paper, the *Echo*, were intended to embarrass the Watch Committee and undermine the Tory grip on the city council. The *Liverpool Review* lent its support to the Tories by playing down the allegations. In the event, the Tories increased their hold on the council (Sindall: 67-8). According to Sindall, the *Review* brought the episode to a close in March 1887, declaring that stories of ‘High Rip Outrages’ had been ‘worked up to a point of serious exaggeration for sensational poster purposes.’ For Sindall, the episode was a clear demonstration of the capacity of the press to manufacture a crime scare to boost sales and embarrass the establishment (1990: 70).

The notoriety of the High Rip extended beyond Liverpool. This was largely due to the actions of one of the judges on the Northern Circuit, Sir John Day. Confronted by several batches of alleged High Rippers at the Liverpool Assizes in November 1886, Mr Justice Day declared that he ‘did not think it possible that such gangs existed.’ He nonetheless arranged to tour the Scotland Road district to see for himself. His expedition was arranged by the city’s Head Constable, William Nott-Bower. He set out at pub closing time with his fellow judge, Mr Justice Grantham, escorted by Nott-Bower and two detectives, and they spent two to three hours making ‘a complete tour of the district’. The judges were shocked by the poverty and squalor they witnessed, but – unsurprisingly, given their escort – they saw no sign of the High Rip. At the close of the Assizes, Day declared: ‘I have never seen and cannot believe that there is anything in Liverpool of the nature of an organisation of ruffians banded together against the law. All I say is that there may be, but I have seen no evidence of it’ (Nott-Bower 1926: 149-50; Sindall 1990: 120-22). Day’s willingness to brave the ‘perils of the Liverpool slums’ was widely applauded in the national as well as local press.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Three months later, Liverpool witnessed renewed allegations of ‘High Rip Terrorism’ after four youths rampaged through the Scotland Road district, robbing shopkeepers and stabbing and kicking by-standers. The youths were tried before Mr Justice Day at the Liverpool Assizes in May 1887. All four were convicted of robbery with violence. Day caused a sensation when he sentenced them to relatively short terms of imprisonment on account of their ages (three were aged twenty and the other nineteen), only to pronounce that each of them was to be flogged three times with the ‘cat’, receiving twenty lashes on each occasion (Macilwee 166-9). Day’s resort to the cat was widely credited with ending the High Rip’s ‘Reign of Terror’ in Liverpool’s North End (Nott-Bower 1926: 151; Archer 2011: 109).

This belief was unfounded – it was subsequently shown that cases of robbery with violence in Liverpool had increased, rather than decreased, after Day’s resort to flogging (Radzinowicz and Hood 1986: 704) – but it was widely invoked during the hooligan panic of 1898. The *Pall Mall Gazette* was in no doubt that flogging would clear hooliganism from the streets of London in an instant, since ‘there is Mr. Justice DAY’s putting down of the Liverpool High Rip gang to prove to all time that the cat is effective.’[[5]](#footnote-5)

The controversy surrounding the High Rip was one of a series of episodes from different cities examined by Sindall in his account of street violence between the 1850s and the 1880s. In a more systematic study of violence in Victorian Liverpool, John Archer (2011: 109) concluded that the High Rip episode was ‘a heady brew of press exaggeration and sensationalism’, but acknowledged that the youths involved belonged on ‘the spectrum of male-on-male violence’ in the city (2011: 110). Youths in the city’s poorer districts routinely ‘hung around on street corners, swearing and cursing, shouting lewd remarks at passing women and being generally anti-social’ (2011: 183). These groups occasionally came into conflict, as in in 1883, when a thirteen-year-old spectator named Michael Burns was fatally kicked and beaten during a fracas that erupted following a fight between representatives of the Lemon Street gang and the Regent Road gang. A detective observed that ‘the lads in each street combined together in lots, or gangs, for the purpose of play; and should there be any fall-out between lads in different lots, they had a general scrimmage’ (Archer 2011: 183-5). However, historians have so far uncovered few traces of these conflicts. The extent of gang formation in late Victorian Liverpool is therefore still to be determined.

**Manchester and Salford: The Scuttlers**

The first in-depth studies of late Victorian youth gangs focused not on London or Liverpool, but on Manchester and the adjacent County Borough of Salford (Gooderson 1997; Davies 1998, 1999, 2008, 2011). As Pearson noted in *Hooligan*, Manchester’s gangs were fiercely territorial. Their fights, known locally as ‘scuttles’, sometimes involved several hundred combatants and were so ferocious that the civic authorities petitioned the Home Secretary for sterner measures to put them down (Pearson 1983: 94-6; Davies 2008: 201-3). Focusing on a single conurbation made it possible to trace the reported escalation (and decline) of gang formation and activity over time and to examine patterns of conflict, along with the responses of the police, judiciary and local press, in depth for the first time. Crucially, it also made it possible to compile profiles of individual gangs and their members, locating them in the context of family and community relationships as well as local labour markets.

Reports of ‘scuttling’ first surfaced in the Manchester press during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Rival gangs of Catholic and Protestant schoolboys staged their own ‘mimic warfare’ on the streets of Angel Meadow, a notorious ‘slum’ district to the north of Manchester city-centre (Davies 2008: 38-44). Police arrested more than 500 of the combatants over a period of twelve months, but failed to quell the violence. Quite the reverse: the conflicts spread across the factory districts that ringed the city-centre, drawing in large numbers of youths aged in their mid- to late teens. The sectarian basis of the initial conflicts was quickly eclipsed by territorial loyalties, and by the mid-1870s it was common for Catholics (most of whom were of Irish descent) to fight alongside Protestants in skirmishes between gangs from rival neighbourhoods (Davies 2008: 51, 74).

Scuttling in Manchester and Salford persisted for three decades. Utilizing a sample of 250 cases tried by the local magistrates and reported in the local press, it is possible to discern clear patterns in scuttlers’ backgrounds as well as in their territorial feuds and their frequent resort to violence. Almost all of the 717 young people prosecuted in these cases were convicted. They were generally aged between fourteen and nineteen, and most lived with their parents and siblings. Without exception, they belonged to working-class households: they were the children of manual workers, and they worked in manual occupations themselves – as labourers, factory operatives, dyers, colliers, carters or street traders. It is rare, however, to find apprentices among those convicted following scuttling affrays. This is perhaps unsurprising: once they had ‘served their time’, apprentices stood to enter the elite ranks of skilled craftsmen with the prospect of higher rates of pay and relatively secure employment. Few of them appear to have been willing to jeopardize their future prospects by scuttling (Davies 1998: 350-52).

The most notorious gangs were clustered in the ‘slums’ of Ancoats in Manchester and Greengate in Salford, or in the lodging-house districts of Angel Meadow and Deansgate – the reputed haunts of ‘Criminal Manchester’. However, scuttling was by no means confined to the slums. Conflicts extended to the relatively prosperous manufacturing districts to the North and East of the city-centre (Newton Heath, Gorton and Openshaw) and to the colliery districts of Bradford to the East and Pendleton in Salford. All of these localities were firmly identified as ‘working-class’, but they were considered ‘superior’ to Ancoats or Angel Meadow. Most scuttles took place in the streets to which the gangs laid claim, but on Friday and Saturday nights confrontations also took place in and around city-centre music-halls and nearby beer-houses (Davies 1998: 350, 351, 362; 2008: 126).

Of those charged in this sample of 250 scuttling cases, 93.7 per cent were male (Davies 1998: 350). Gang conflicts constituted arenas in which youths could demonstrate their toughness and prove themselves as men, both individually and collectively. Public displays of aggression and daring in confrontations between opposing gangs allowed those on the brink of adulthood to derive considerable kudos and to imagine themselves as ‘hard’ men (Davies 1998: 356-7). Young women were rarely prosecuted following ‘scuttles’ and contemporary commentators tended to depict them either as inciting conflicts between rival gangs or in auxiliary roles: as observers of male fighting prowess, as handmaidens (carrying weapons) or as witnesses, ever-ready to commit perjury on behalf of their ‘sweethearts’ (Davies 1999: 73). However, scrutiny of trial reports reveals that young women sometimes took an active part both in fights between rival and gangs and in the subsequent intimidation of witnesses (Davies 1999: 79-86). In Salford, the local press was much excited by the discovery of a ‘gang of female scuttlers’ in 1890, but on closer inspection they turned out to be members of a long-established, and predominantly male, gang from Pendleton (Davies 2008: 250-52).

The most bitter – and enduring – feuds tended to be between gangs from adjacent districts. In Salford, the Hope Street and Ordsall Lane gangs clashed on a weekly basis over eighteen months, culminating in the trial of seventeen youths at the Salford Borough Quarter Sessions in June 1890. The two gangs’ meeting places were less than five minutes’ walk apart and their members were well known to each other (Davies 2008: 213-21). Contrary to Humphries’ claim that weapons were carried ‘largely as symbols of defiance and resistance’ (1981: 193), scuttlers routinely fought with knives and belts. Stabbings were frequent enough to provoke the ire of hospital staff as well as magistrates and judges, but fatalities were rare: the local press attributed just five deaths to scuttling between 1870 and 1900. Surgeons’ evidence in trials at the higher courts testified to a fighting code whereby gang members sought to scar or maim their opponents. Knife wounds were generally to the face or upper body, and fatal stabbings were met with surprise – and some disapproval – among scuttlers themselves (Davies 1998: 352; 2011: 44-5).

Police memoirs testify to the dangers posed by scuttlers to beat constables, in particular. Many scuttles appear to have taken place without police intervention, and attempts to suppress the conflicts by posting additional officers in recognised trouble spots were generally futile. As Superintendent Charles Godby of the City of Manchester Police ruefully admitted in 1871, scuttles were ‘no sooner put down in one place than renewed in another.’ Magistrates and judges were similarly thwarted in their efforts to curb the gangs. Hundreds of scuttlers were jailed – more than 300 in 1871 alone – and exemplary sentences of fifteen and twenty years’ penal servitude for manslaughter imposed during the mid-1880s had no apparent deterrent effect (Davies 2011: 45-8).

As in London, during the hooligan panic of 1898, coverage of scuttling in the Manchester press was routinely sensationalized. News reports on clashes between rival gangs showed that injuries were generally restricted to the opposing bands of scuttlers, but editorial commentaries tended to misrepresent scuttling in terms of wholly random assaults on peaceable passers-by (Davies 2011: 49). Scuttlers enjoyed their notoriety. When John-Joseph Hillier (alias ‘Red Elliott’) was christened ‘King of the Scuttlers’ by the *Salford Reporter* in 1894 he revelled in the title. Hillier took to parading the streets of Salford and Deansgate wearing a jersey into which both his street name and the legend ‘KING OF SCUTTLERS’ had been sewn (Davies 1998: 362).

Reports of scuttling declined rapidly during the late 1890s. By 1898-9 – the very moment that London was gripped by reports of hooliganism – only a few isolated scuttles made the ‘Police Court News’ columns of the Manchester and Salford newspapers. Local commentators were adamant that if scuttling had not disappeared entirely, it had significantly diminished. Senior police officers were understandably eager to claim the credit, but others attributed the demise of gang conflicts to the establishment of working lads’ clubs (Davies 2011: 50-51). The first clubs in Manchester were founded in response to a reported escalation of gang violence during the late 1880s. They were built in the districts most associated with scuttling: four separate clubs opened in Ancoats alone between 1888 and 1890. The clubs quickly took root, not least by establishing football, rugby and cricket teams and promoting gymnastics, athletics and swimming. They found thousands of willing takers (Weinberger 1993: 46; Davies 2008: 291-7). Working lads’ clubs did not convert the existing ranks of scuttlers. However, as the clubs grew during the 1890s they appear to have helped to reduce the numbers of new recruits into the gangs (Davies 2011: 51).

**Birmingham: Sloggers and Peaky Blinders**

In Birmingham, as in Manchester, conflicts between rival youth gangs were first reported during the early 1870s. According to Barbara Weinberger, Birmingham’s gang conflicts originated in ‘territorial wars fought between Irish and English street gangs’ (1991: 408). Hostility towards Birmingham’s Irish-Catholic population had intensified during the previous decade. In June 1867, Park Street in the city’s ‘Irish’ quarter had been largely demolished during the ‘Murphy’ riots – provoked by an anti-Catholic tirade by the militant Protestant orator, William Murphy (Gooderson 2010: 29-33). Anti-Irish feeling was subsequently inflamed by reports of ‘Fenian’ activity (Weinberger 1991: 408).[[6]](#footnote-6) During the following decade, Weinberger argued, anti-Irish sentiment ‘offered a focus and a target for the frustrations of inner city youths which … became institutionalized in gang warfare’ (1991: 408-9).

Weinberger offered two further explanations for the reported upsurge in street disturbances and ‘gang warfare’ in Birmingham from around 1873-4. The severe recession that followed the economic boom of the early 1870s threw thousands of unemployed – and disenfranchised – youths onto the streets (1991: 410-11). At the same time, aggressive police campaigns against drunkenness and street gambling met with fierce resentment in the city’s working-class districts. Young men featured prominently in the communal disturbances that ensued (Weinberger 1991: 412-14; 1981: 227-8). Weinberger contrasted the vigour of municipal campaigns to reform ‘public manners’ with the indifference shown by the civic authorities to the ‘welfare or rights of a section of the community who had no power or votes … and for whose behaviour they had nothing but disdain’ (1991: 414). Echoing Humphries’ account in *Hooligans or Rebels*, Weinberger concluded: ‘However misconceived, gang warfare at least gave the participants a chance to acquire some local power and prestige which was denied them at any other level of public life’ (1991: 417).

Weinberger’s account of the emergence of Birmingham’s youth gangs drew upon her wider study (1981) of crime and policing in the city in the ten years that followed the 1867 Reform Act. In a more comprehensive analysis – based on 143 incidents reported in the local press between 1870 and 1900 – Philip Gooderson (2013) drew a series of parallels between the ‘slogging’ gangs of late Victorian Birmingham and the scuttlers of Manchester and Salford. ‘Slogging’, like ‘scuttling’, drew on local traditions of prize-fighting and workplace violence (Gooderson 2013: 65). Girls and young women were less active in Birmingham’s gang conflicts than in Manchester’s – Gooderson’s sample of 284 ‘sloggers’ included only four females (2013: 67). The majority of sloggers were aged in their late teens, and their occupations closely reflected the structure of the local economy: around half were iron or brass workers, with smaller numbers employed in the manufacture of guns, jewellery and pearl buttons (2013: 67-70). Only 15 per cent of those in Gooderson’s sample were unskilled labourers (2013: 69).

Gooderson cautiously accepted Weinberger’s claim that Birmingham’s gang conflicts originated in sectarian antagonism (2010: 83-4, 110-11; 2013: 69). However, he rejected the link posited by Weinberger between gangs, poverty and ‘marginalisation’ (2013: 78). According to Gooderson (2013: 65-6), ‘slogging’ appears to have increased during periods of prosperity (such as the early 1870s, the mid-1880s, and especially from 1888-91), diminishing during economic downturns (after 1874, and again from 1892-5). Moreover, Gooderson stressed that in Birmingham – as in Manchester – the ethnic basis of gang conflicts was quickly superseded by territorial rivalries, with most feuds occurring between gangs from adjacent districts (2013: 72-4). In Birmingham, as in Manchester, gang conflicts spread across the conurbation during the 1870s and 1880s, before reportedly diminishing in the late 1890s (Gooderson 2010: 88-96, 165-6, 192; 2013: 66, 73-4). Gooderson ascribed the decline of ‘slogging’ to a number of factors, invoking the growth of ‘adult-approved’ football as an alternative source of excitement among working-class youths along with a belated triumph by the local forces of law and order (2013: 79).

During the 1890s, Birmingham’s gang members – formerly known to each other as well as to the civic authorities as ‘sloggers’ – were rechristened ‘peaky blinders’. In local lore, the term is sometimes held to refer to the practice of stitching razor blades into the peak of their caps (Davies 2006: 108). In reality, it derived from the fashion of pulling the peak of a cap, or hat, low over one eye (Bramwell 1991: 47). As Arthur Matthison recalled (1937: 63), the peaky blinder wore:

Bell-bottomed trousers secured by a buckle belt, hob-nailed boots, a jacket of sorts, a gaudy scarf and a billy-cock hat with a long elongated brim. This hat was worn well over one eye, hence the name ‘peaky blinder.’ His hair was prison cropped all over his head, except for a quiff in front which was grown long and plastered down obliquely on his forehead.

This was instantly recognisable as a gang ‘uniform’, whether on the streets of Birmingham, Manchester or London, even if the peaky blinder’s boots distinguished him from the scuttler with his Lancashire-style clogs (Pearson 1983: 96-7; Gooderson 2010: 216).

Late-Victorian social commentators were as much concerned with male violence towards women as with the problems posed by warring youth gangs (Hammerton 1995; D’Cruze 1998). They rarely connected the two. Historians have tended to maintain this distinction, with studies of gangs and hooliganism making only fleeting references to violence within courtship or marriage. A rare case study (Davies 2006) examined the conviction of James Harper, an eighteen-year-old Birmingham metal polisher, and an alleged peaky blinder, for the manslaughter of his former ‘sweetheart’, Emily Pimm, in November 1898. Refusing to accept that Pimm had jilted him, Harper repeatedly assaulted her in the street over a period of ten weeks before knocking her down and stamping repeatedly, and fatally, on her head (Davies 2006: 113-14).

In commentaries on the case in the local press, both gang membership and male brutality towards women were denounced as problems of the city’s ‘slums’ (Davies 2006: 108, 115-16). Close inspection revealed that neither the perpetrator nor the victim in this case confirmed to the stereotypes of the ‘peaky’ and his ‘moll’ that were applied to them (Davies 2006: 116-18). Yet these stereotypes performed an important ideological function, distancing the problem of violence from the mainstream of civic life and thus preserving the veneer of English civility whilst masking the extent of male violence within courtship as well as marriage (Davies 2006: 118-19).

**London: The Original Hooligans**

Historians were surprisingly slow to build on Pearson’s pioneering account of London’s hooligan panic of 1898. When they did turn their attention back to the capital, their focus was not so much on the youthful perpetrators of violence and disorder themselves as on the symbolic importance of the figure of hooligan in debates on social welfare reform that followed the Boer War of 1899–1902. In an essay published in 1992, Seth Koven noted that the ‘very existence of the hooligan’ affirmed the need for wholesale state intervention to ameliorate the conditions of life among Britain’s urban poor (1992: 383-4).[[7]](#footnote-7) As Koven revealed, many of the self-styled ‘experts’ on hooliganism to emerge in the wake of the panic of 1898 were Oxford or Cambridge graduates who had lived in university settlements in the slums of London during the 1880s and 1890s (1992: 376). Their earnest attempt to ‘create nation and community through vertical bonds of comradeship across class lines’ had faltered, but their experience of working with ‘rough lads’ gave them a degree of authority as social reformers as well as social commentators (1992: 365-6). In several cases – notably Hubert Llewellyn-Smith, Robert Morant and C. F. G. Masterman – they used this authority to considerable effect as architects of the Liberal welfare reforms of 1906–11 (1992: 380).

Writing more directly in response to Geoffrey Pearson, Bill Schwarz (1996: 106-7) posed the question: why did the hooligan panic erupt at the close of the nineteenth century? If recurring anxieties about young men, street disturbances and criminality have such a long duration – as Pearson showed – why did the term hooligan resonate so powerfully at this particular historical moment? To Schwarz, the rapidity with which the term entered the English language owed something to the growth of state intervention in family life during the late-nineteenth century: the increasing regulation of childhood and the practices of motherhood created new arenas for intensified public concern. This was exacerbated by the rapid growth of the press. Mass circulation newspapers – notably the *Daily Mail*, first published in 1896 – were eager to denounce criminals and hooligans, while simultaneously revelling in ‘the grisly details of each new barbarity’ (1996: 107-9).

More than anything, however, Schwarz attributed the timing of the hooligan panic to the protracted, and contested, process through which Britain edged towards mass democracy. Following the 1867 Reform Act, working-class men came to be recognised ‘as real or potential members of the political nation’, pressing for – and in some cases securing – the vote on the one hand, and receiving compulsory schooling and the benefits of culture (including parks, museums and libraries) on the other. As the political nation slowly became more inclusive, new structures of exclusion were devised to screen out those who wilfully resisted these civilising processes. The ‘concept of the hooligan’, Schwarz concluded, ‘was produced by the concept of the citizen, hooliganism working as the discursive Other of citizenship’ (1996: 118).

In the first full-length study of the hooligan panic and its repercussions, Ian Livie closely echoed Pearson’s account, noting how the press cast hooliganism as a distinct threat both to British civility and racial purity and to the capacity of the state to maintain public order (2010: vi, 13-55). Livie showed how the 1898 panic prompted evangelical moral reform groups to take an increasing interest in delinquency among working-class juveniles. The Salvation Army, in particular, turned the hooligan crisis into a crisis of faith as well as ‘moral health’ by linking hooliganism to ‘vices’ common among city youths such as smoking, gambling and intemperance (2010: 98). Salvationists’ fears for the physical and spiritual health of the urban poor were widely shared in official circles, as demonstrated by the publication in 1904 of the Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (2010: 145).

Campaigns by the Howard Association provided further impetus for reform in the wake of the hooligan panic. The Howard Association lobbied for the introduction of separate juvenile courts along with the expansion of the Borstal system to house a new category of offender – the ‘juvenile-adult’ aged between sixteen and twenty-one (Livie 2010: 202-11). These reforms were implemented by the Liberal government in 1908 with the passage of the Children’s Act and the Prevention of Crime Act. In Livie’s account, the Children’s Act was the ‘culmination of a decade of social agitation’ following the hooligan panic of 1898. As such, it ‘was ultimately as much an expression of conservative fears of moral decay as it was a product of a progressive agenda to create a new safety net for children and young persons’ (2010: 245-7).

Geoffrey Pearson’s comment that hooligan was a new label for youths previously known more loosely as ‘street arabs’, ‘ruffians’ or ‘roughs’ (1983: 75), has recently been borne out by Drew Gray in a case study of ‘gang’ murder that took place ten years prior to the hooligan panic. On the evening of 24 May 1888,a group of ‘Tottenham Court Road Lads’ set out for Regent’s Park to avenge a ‘kicking’ suffered by one of their number the previous night. They were searching for ‘the Marylebone chaps’. When they found Joseph Rumbold, a twenty-two-year-old printer’s machinist, promenading with a young woman and another couple, they set upon him and Rumbold was fatally stabbed. (It is unclear whether Rumbold belonged to a gang: Gray suspects that ‘he was simply unfortunate in being in the wrong place at the wrong time.’) George Galletly, aged eighteen, was convicted of Rumbold’s murder. He was sentenced to death at the Old Bailey, although he was subsequently reprieved on account of his youth (Gray 2013: 562-5).

Gray argues that the killing – an exceptional event – was systematically misrepresented by the press. While newspapers routinely exaggerated the extent of youth-gang violence, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, in particular, used the ‘Regent’s Park murder’ as ammunition in its campaign to oust the Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Charles Warren (Gray 2013: 569-72). The editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, W. T. Stead, had targeted Warren since the brutal suppression of demonstrations by socialists and the unemployed in Trafalgar Square the previous year (Gray 2010: 141-3). Stead’s relentless exposure of the state of crime in the capital – including a feature on the ‘Bandit Gangs of London’ published in October 1888 – heaped pressure on Warren, whose reputation was severely damaged by his force’s continuing failure to apprehend ‘Jack the Ripper’. Warren resigned in November 1888, two days after the death of Mary Kelly, the ‘Ripper’s’ final victim (Gray 2013: 566, 572).

In the first systematic study of youth gangs in late nineteenth century London, Heather Shore (2015) has recently revealed that metropolitan gang conflicts first came to the attention of the higher courts (and the press) during 1882 following the death of Frederick Wilmore, a nineteen-year-old carman, during a clash between the ‘City Road Boys’ and the ‘Lambeth Chaps’ on the Thames Embankment (Shore 2015: 7-9, 11; Andersson 2013: 57-8). This was a decade later than the first reports of ‘scuttling’ in Manchester and ‘slogging’ in Birmingham. Wilmore’s death prompted a series of articles on ‘the fighting gangs of London’ in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which warned its readers that while such gangs were not a new presence on the capital’s streets ‘the new generation of the savages of the slums is more combative and more inclined to organization than its predecessor’ (Shore 2015: 7).

Shore traced forty-one ‘gang-related’ affrays reported in London between 1882 and 1912. Of the ninety-seven defendants in these cases, ninety-six were male (Shore 2015: 7). Like the scuttlers of Manchester and Salford, most were aged between sixteen and nineteen and employed in semi- or unskilled manual occupations. Many of London’s gang members worked as costermongers or labourers. Few held apprenticeships (Shore 2015: 7, 15-16). In London, however, as in Manchester and Birmingham, there was no simple correlation between gang membership and slum life. The districts most noted for their gangs – Clerkenwell, Hoxton, Islington, Somers Town and Lambeth – were predominantly working-class, but socially mixed: the circumstances of their inhabitants ranged from ‘lowest class’ to ‘poor’ to ‘fairly comfortable’ according to Charles Booth’s poverty map of 1898-9. As Shore concluded, London’s gang members were not the ‘savages of the slums’, or even members of a ‘criminal class’, but ‘working-class youths from poor to respectable working-class areas’ (2015: 10-11, 22).

As reports of scuttling rapidly declined in Manchester during the late 1890s, concern with youth gangs in London intensified. Indeed, the hooligan panic of 1898 was preceded by reports of a ‘Pistol Plague’, or ‘Revolver Mania’, in the capital the previous year. Whereas scuttlers seldom resorted to firearms, almost half of the cases in Shore’s sample involved the use of pistols or revolvers (2015: 17-19).[[8]](#footnote-8) Shore found that an outbreak of ‘something akin to gang warfare’ between factions from City Road, Somers Town, Clerkenwell and parts of East London during 1907-8 attracted much less press attention than similar episodes during the 1880s and 1890s. Even a fatal stabbing inflicted by one of the ‘Nile Boys’ in City Road in April 1907 generated remarkably little interest (Shore 2015: 6, 19, 26).

**Conclusion**

As Pearson (1983: 94-8) pointed out, the hooligan panic of 1898 was only one manifestation of a broader concern with gang formation, violence and disorder during the late nineteenth century. Case studies of Liverpool, Manchester and Salford, Birmingham and London have confirmed many of Pearson’s findings, while providing new insights into patterns of gang activity along with profiles of the participants and insights into the responses of the police, judiciary and local authorities. Some important common findings emerge from these local studies. Across England’s major cities, members of youth gangs tended to be male, working class and aged in their mid- to late teens. Only in Manchester and Salford, where female factory workers were a boisterous presence in the street life of working-class districts, do young women appear to have played an active part in gang conflicts. Contrary to assertions by some Victorian social commentators, gang members were not all slum-dwellers and nor were they ‘unemployable’. Few went on to have criminal ‘careers’. However, gang membership was not universal among working-class youths, and apprentices seldom appear to have joined the ranks of scuttlers, sloggers or hooligans. This is significant: those working-class youths with relatively secure economic prospects seem to have resisted the lure of the gangs.

There are further similarities in the patterns of violence. In Manchester and Salford, Birmingham and London, feuds between rival youth gangs were largely territorial. Fatalities were rare, but weapons were routinely used to inflict severe injuries – confirming another of Pearson’s findings in *Hooligan*. In each city, police and magistrates struggled to suppress outbreaks of gang violence to the fury of the local press, whose allegations of police ineptitude and judicial impotence were at times as fierce as their condemnations of the perpetrators. Sensational newspaper reports appear to have significantly bolstered the reputations of prominent gang members.

Reports of gang activity in Liverpool only partially fit these wider trends. Although Archer uncovered evidence of ‘scrimmages’ between groups of youths from neighbouring streets in the city’s North End, historians have so far found notably fewer traces of gang conflict in Liverpool than in the other major English cities. Moreover, the most notorious of Liverpool’s gangs – the High Rip – was associated with robbery with violence rather than territorial skirmishing. This raises questions about the structural factors that shaped patterns of gang activity (Gillis 1974: 66). It is possible that, in Liverpool, territorial affiliation was at least in part eclipsed by the city’s deeper sectarian animosities (Neal 1988), while the lack of industrial employment in this port city appears to have fostered a more widespread resort to petty theft, street robbery and ‘levying’ – demanding money with menaces – especially in the North End dockland districts (Macilwee 2005: 162-9; Archer 2011: 112-14).

Recent research into youth gangs and hooliganism in late Victorian England has been dominated by local case studies. One of the tasks awaiting future historians is the development of a more integrated, comparative analysis. This will need to address the startling contrast in periodization that has emerged from the plethora of recent case studies. In Manchester and Salford, as in Birmingham, gang conflicts reportedly escalated during the early 1870s, and persisted for three decades before declining during the late 1890s. In London, by contrast, concern with violent youth gangs surfaced later – in the early 1880s – but peaked in 1898-9, at the very moment that scuttling and slogging appeared to have declined. This raises some important questions. Did trends in youth violence over time vary from city to city, and if so, why? Alternatively, were the reported local escalations (and diminutions) of gang conflict more apparent than real? Did the local press in Manchester and Birmingham lose interest in youth gang violence after 1900 – as Shore suggests might have been the case in London by 1907-8? More comprehensive research is required for each of the major conurbations for the period from 1860 to 1914, not least to determine the extent to which youth violence persisted beyond the phases of public concern with gangs.

Future research needs to extend beyond the major cities and across the class divide. To what extent were territorial gangs formed across urban England during the late Victorian period? And were the problems posed by disorderly youths more easily dealt with in smaller towns, where perpetrators were more likely to be recognised by police and passers-by? Equally, historians of crime need to turn their attention to outbreaks of disorder among middle-class and aristocratic youths. During the late Victorian period, as today, the punishment of young people was often made to fit the person as much as the crime. While scuttlers, sloggers and hooligans received tough sentences from an unforgiving judiciary, the Lord-Justice General, Baron Robertson, signed a letter to *The Times* in 1894 in defence of members of the Bullingdon Club, who had been sent down from Oxford following a drunken disturbance in which every window was smashed in Peckwater Quad at Christ Church.[[9]](#footnote-9) In any other context, prosecutions for wilful damage would surely have followed.[[10]](#footnote-10) The line between youthful criminality and ‘high jinks’ is worth exploring, not least since – to paraphrase Geoffrey Pearson – the ‘problem’ of youth has always been the problem of the children of the poor (1983: 208).

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1. In 2007, *Hooligan* was voted one of seven ‘iconic studies’ in British criminology (Soothill and Peelo 2007: 481-3). For media recognition of the book’s enduring relevance, see Toynbee (2007, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a slightly later episode in Glasgow, peaking in 1906, see Davies (2013: 17-23). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sindall appears to have conflated two separate episodes in the reported feud between the two gangs: see Macilwee (2005: 175-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example, the *Morning Post*, 16 November 1886. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 September 1898. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Fenian movement grew out of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. As MacCraild (1999: 138-42) pointed out, during 1867 and 1868 the British press was ‘racked by reports, many of them bogus, of Fenian activities, including imminent insurrection.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Here Koven developed one of Pearson’s observations in *Hooligan* (1983: 107). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As Shore notes, Gooderson (2010: 265-7) found that reports of assaults involving firearms also increased in Birmingham during the late 1890s. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *The Times*, 3 July 1894. The Lord-Justice General was Scotland’s most senior judge. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For prosecutions for wilful damage at the Oxford Police Court during the 1890s, see Gillis (1975: 102). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)