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Charles P. Korr

## West Ham United Football Club and the Beginnings of Professional Football in East London, 1895-1914

**No organized sport has assumed** a greater hold on the time and emotions of the working class throughout Europe than soccer. The transformation of football from an unstructured game into professional teams with vast spectator appeal was an important step in the definition of a workers' culture. The distinctions made between soccer and other forms of football in Victorian England reflected a series of social upheavals within both middle class and working-class society.

Unfortunately, only recently have football and sports in general received attention from social historians. Sources for the study of the early years of football are minimal by traditional historical standards. Most of the clubs have kept few records and they have been reluctant to allow outsiders to use the documents that are available. The major newspapers devoted little space to football and most of that to match reports. Local newspapers are a valuable source for individual clubs, but the scope of their reporting is limited and the quality very patchy.

The weekly sporting newspapers, *The Athletic News* for example, reported matches as well as covering the changes in the administrative structure of football and the complex business operations that became part of the sport in the last fifteen years of

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the nineteenth century.

The pioneering social commentaries and histories like C.F.G. Masterman's *The Condition of England* and George R. Sims' *Living London* and *How the Poor Live* gave some passing recognition to the importance of football in working-class life, but only latterly has their lead been followed by historians and sociologists.<sup>1</sup> Morris Marples, Eric Dunning, James Walvin and George Keeton have investigated aspects of the social role played by football and Tony Mason's work promises to place the first half-century of football firmly in its social context.<sup>2</sup>

Historians who are interested in working-class culture would do well to heed the admonition of the English playwright and football correspondent, Arthur Hopcraft:

No player, manager, director or fan who understands football either through his intellect or his nerve-ends, ever repeats that piece of nonsense trotted out mindlessly by the fearful every now and again which pleads: 'After all, it's only a game!' It has not been only a game for eighty years: not since the working classes saw in it an escape route out of drudgery and claimed it as their own. It has not been a sideshow of this century. What happens on the football field matters, not in the way that food matters, but as poetry does to some people and alcohol does to others: it engages the personality.<sup>3</sup>

It should not be necessary to repeat the conclusions of Marples, Dunning, and Pickford (among others) about the way in which football was transformed from an upper class and public school game into the working class sport. The vast majority of football clubs that developed into professional teams had their roots in industrial clubs, church or settlement house sponsored groups or neighbourhood clubs. It was the Victorian middle class 'amateurs' who wrote the rules for the game, established and ran the governing body, the Football Association. It was the governing elite who determined how clubs should be operated and it was amongst these men that the extended and acrimonious debate over professionalism in football took place, which fractured the fragile unity within the gentlemen's world of football. The impossibility of remaining both professional and purely amateur (as opposed to 'shamateur') drove many of the pure amateurs out of soccer and played an important part in the development of rugby as an upper class sport.

Ian Taylor's provocative article, 'Football Mad' sought to explain the rise of football hooliganism by contrasting the present relationship between supporters and players with a situation that he claims existed before the second world war when the football clubs

and their players were an integral part of the local working-class community.<sup>4</sup> The most startling assertion made by Taylor is that present day clubs grew out of 'the concern of working-class men to develop their primary-group relationships in what leisure time they had. Most of these clubs grew directly out of autonomous occupational groups.' One of his examples is the West Ham United Football Club, in East London 'which was started by a group of workers at the Thames Iron Works.'

The 'East End' of London is an amorphous term that has been used by generations of historians, sociologists and welfare workers to describe the vast area that lies east of the Aldgate Pump and stretches out into rural sections of Essex. The area has held a fascination for outsiders, who have used it as a virtual laboratory for their social theories and research. There has been a strange combination of revulsion at the poverty and degradation that was rife in the East End and attraction to the social structure that allowed people to develop a sense of community and shared enterprise that is almost unique in London. For decades an omnipresent feature of East London has been the attraction football has held for its residents. From George Sims' description in 1906 of thousands of 'urchins kicking paper balls in the back alleys' to the present day, football has been a staple part of local culture.<sup>5</sup> For more than seventy years the most important football club in East London has been West Ham United.

**The West Ham United Football Club Limited** was registered as a company on 5 July 1900. In its memorandum and articles of association the first objective of the company was 'to acquire and take over, or succeed to the concern and undertakings of the unregistered Association or Club known as the Thames Ironworks Football Club.'<sup>6</sup> The Thames Ironworks was located in Canning Town, West Ham. It was the last major ship building firm in London, but by 1900 it was fighting a losing battle with yards on the Clyde and in the north of England. In 1860 the Works employed 6,000 men and by 1900 that figure was down to 3,100.<sup>7</sup>

The importance of the Thames and the docks as a source of work set the tone for life in the part of Essex that was usually characterized as the 'East End'.<sup>8</sup> Dock work was casual labour and it was essential for the dockers to live close to their work. The Canning Town, Tidal Basin, and Custom House areas of West Ham saw the building of a great deal of cheap housing near the Victoria and

Albert Docks which were the biggest single source of employment for men in West Ham. More than 7,000 men worked there in 1904 but factory work provided employment to three times as many persons in West Ham as did the docks. Some of these factories, such as the Thames Iron Works, were associated with the docks, but it must be stressed that West Ham was not made up primarily of either casual labourers or men whose employment was the docks. The largest employers of skilled labour were the repair yards of the Great Eastern Railroad and the machine shops that grew up around it. By 1904 there were more than 11,000 men working in the metal and machine trades in West Ham as opposed to approximately 3,200 men employed at the Thames Iron Works.<sup>9</sup>

West Ham was, in governmental terms, not in London. It was an Essex suburb. It was not, however, a suburb in the modern sense of the word. It was even unique for turn of the century Essex. It was a manufacturing centre, containing factories that had moved from London. Most of these were offensive industries, i.e., those producing dirt, fumes and chemical residues.<sup>10</sup> It was also the only local government area in the region where a majority of the work force resided within the borough.

The rise in population of West Ham in the last two decades of the nineteenth century had led to a very marked housing shortage. There was an average of 6.46 persons per house in West Ham and the average for Wales and England was 5.21. Studies about social problems of the borough pointed out that this figure contained important anomalies within it. The borough was far from uniform in occupations, status or housing. Overcrowding was worst in Canning Town, Custom House and Silvertown, bordering the docks and containing the highest percentage of casual labourers. At the other end of the borough, in Upton Park and Forest Gate, housing was comfortable and was occupied by professional and business families. The northern part of West Ham was described as 'a bedroom dormitory for London' and this pattern increased as one went into the surrounding areas of East Ham, Barking and Ilford.<sup>11</sup>

Another distinctive feature of most of West Ham was the lack of open space and public recreation grounds. The majority of children or men who played football did so on vacant unenclosed spaces that separated factories and industrial areas. A detailed survey of the social problems in West Ham pointedly compared its lack of open space with principles set down in the 'planned towns' like Bournville where it was thought desirable to have open areas within

a five minute walk. It was virtually impossible to achieve this in an already developed area but the point was made that a lack of open space 'is conducive neither to health nor to morals.' The report concluded that it 'was not surprising to have bands of young hooligans whose energies are expended in petty larcenies in the streets.'<sup>12</sup> These sentiments about the value of sports as a builder of good character were a significant feature of the late Victorian ideal of hard play and hard work. It was the gospel of 'Muscular Christianity' that was developed at the public schools and universities and found a new expression in the settlement houses and parishes in poor areas of the cities. The vicars 'to the poor' brought the gospel of sport to their flock with the same fervour that their fellow missionaries brought the light of Christ to Africa and Asia.

It is difficult to imagine a more complete product of inherited money, position and the ideals of Victorian upper class education than Arnold F. Hills, owner of the Thames Ironworks and the force behind the creation of the Thames Ironworks Football Club, predecessor of West Ham United.

The football club represented a blend of Hills' two major non-business interests, sport and social welfare. He had inherited the business from his father and had joined the Board of Directors after his education at Harrow and Oxford. He had been the English mile champion and had represented Oxford and England in football. As a young man he had shown his interest in conditions around the Works in a rather dramatic fashion. At twenty-three he moved into a small home in Canning Town very near the Works. He lived there for five years and many years later he wrote that the lack of recreational facilities was one of the worst deprivations in the lives of the residents of West Ham.<sup>13</sup>

In 1895 Hills vigorously supported a plan to bring the borough of West Ham into the county of London. He pointed out that West Ham had most of the problems (overcrowding, filth) of the metropolis, but its tax base was so low that it could not enjoy the advantages such as good sanitation and open areas of play. In his words, 'the perpetual difficulty of West Ham is its poverty, it is rich only in its population'.<sup>14</sup>

Hills was a militant temperance advocate, a vegetarian and a believer in the utility of crusading for 'good causes'. The creation of a series of clubs at the Works (string band, football, temperance, drama amongst them) had varied motives, but primarily Hills' belief that it was both good business and socially responsible. He also started a company magazine (*The Thames Ironworks Gazette*)

in 1895 as a 'fresh link of interest and fellowship between all sorts and conditions of workers in our great industrial community'.<sup>15</sup> For the next twenty years, until Hills was paralysed by arthritis, the *Gazette* was a combination of technical journal, company newsletter, popular history magazine, and general local news publication. The lead article in almost every issue was Hills' discussion of an issue that attracted his interest. Another feature of the *Gazette* was a summary of the activities of the various clubs.

The football club was formed within the Works in the summer of 1895 and its origins showed little difference from other local amateur and industrial teams. The *Gazette* had a short notice about the formation of a football club and asked interested workers to contact the secretary, who was a senior clerk at the Works.<sup>16</sup> The team used a nearby football ground for their practices and matches. The financing of the club came from the members' subscriptions and a contribution from the Works. The activity was in line with the policy that Hills had enunciated in the *Gazette*: 'The importance of cooperation between workers and management'. He was anxious to wipe away the bitterness left by a recent strike. 'But thank God this midsummer madness is past and gone; inequities and anomalies have been done away with and now, under the Good Fellowship system and the Profit Sharing Scheme, every worker knows that his individual and social rights are absolutely secured'.<sup>17</sup>

Hills set up a Central Council to coordinate the efforts of the clubs, but insisted that the Council did not restrict the development of the clubs as separate entities. He wanted every club to 'rally loyally around the Central Council . . . and thus united . . . the social movement which has already done so much will go from success to success . . . It will set the seal upon the business prosperity of the firm and crown the labours of the Works with the laurels of the road, the river, the racing track, the field, and the public hall'.<sup>18</sup>

The first season of the football club was hectic and successful. Its committee (all of whom were members of the clerical staff, foremen or supervisors of the works) set up fixtures and entered the club in cup tournaments. More than fifty men had joined the club which necessitated finding enough matches for two teams. In the committee's own words, it had been 'somewhat presumptuous' and had entered the premier competition in England, the English Cup. They had no thought of winning the Cup, but there were two important reasons for entering: the competition would test the ability of the club at the same time as advertising the new club and, if they were 'lucky enough' to be drawn against a good professional club, it

would add considerably to the funds of the club.<sup>19</sup> During the season there was a move 'initiated by the players' to have the governing committee composed of non-players. As a result, 'a number of gentlemen were asked to fulfil this important function with the result that it has proved most beneficial to the club.'<sup>20</sup>

The schedule of the club resembled more closely that of a professional team than it did those of the local amateur or industrial clubs. It had matches against one first division League team and two clubs from the Southern League, the premier professional league in London. The results of the season showed that the team was something special. It performed well in the English Cup, won the West Ham Charity Cup, and did not lose a match to any local club. Before the season was over, the committee showed its ambition by having the club elected to the newly-formed London League, something which 'St. Luke's, a prominent and long-established amateur club in the East End, could not accomplish.

The Secretary of the club had good reason for painting an optimistic picture for the start of the second season. The club had increased its membership and would field three teams. There were thirty first team matches scheduled and six cup competitions. The team added some new players including four first team men from St. Luke's and the Castle Swifts. The former was a parish team, the latter a company club sponsored by the Castle Shipping Line. After only two years, the Thames Ironworks Football Club had become the ranking team in an area that was described as 'football mad'.<sup>21</sup>

The end of the second season saw another development which marked the club off from its local competitors. In March 1897 Hills made the announcement that he 'had finally found' a suitable piece of real estate in the neighbourhood and on the sixtieth anniversary of the Queen's accession he would open a stadium with 'a cycle track equal to any in London' and complete facilities for football, cricket, and tennis.<sup>22</sup>

When the club opened its third season it had a stadium which it claimed 'was good enough to hold the English Cup Final, . . . smart new outfits' and a complete schedule of matches. The committee also insured the players against loss of wages that might be the result of injuries sustained while playing football. There were also six new players for the first team, five of whom were from the Greater London area, but none of whom came to the club from within the Ironworks.<sup>23</sup> An article in the *Gazette* showed the new

focus of the club. The Secretary issued a reminder that any football player in the Works could join the club for 2s 6d. This 'entitles them to take part in practice matches and training on Tuesday and Thursday evenings'.<sup>24</sup> There was no pretence that the new members would be active participants in anything but the prime function of the club — to win matches against first class competition.

Even though the club was the most powerful in the East End and was on its way to winning the London League championship, the Secretary was disappointed: 'The support we have received has not been so large as we should wish for, the gates not totalling near the number we might expect and certainly not so many as the quality of the play of our men should warrant.'<sup>25</sup> The Secretary could not understand why so many people will go to matches at grounds that 'are much less pleasing and where the football is nowhere near as good . . . Things will have to improve when people realize how splendid the ground is and good is the club.'<sup>26</sup> This appeal was directed primarily at men at the Ironworks. The suppositions behind the Secretary's remarks show what the club had become. It had built on the popularity developed by leading local clubs, but it had no particular constituency to whom it could appeal — it was not representative of any particular area of West Ham and it had only nominal ties with the Works. It had no trouble defeating its local rivals on the field and 'was *undefeated by any amateur team.*' [their italics].<sup>27</sup> The governing committee had decided that the way to attract supporters was to give them high quality football, and by 1898 this meant professional football.

In 1898, the club joined the second division of the Southern League and was determined to reach the first as quickly as possible. The road to the top was made clear by the composition of the club that started the season. It had thirty players, only three of whom had been with the club the previous year. It no longer represented the Works in any real sense. Very few of the new players had any roots in the East End.<sup>28</sup> There are no records extant of the wages paid to the players in 1898, but it would require an enormous naïveté to think that they were lured to Canning Town from professional clubs as far away as Middlesborough, Aberystwyth and Inverness just to enjoy the sights of the East End.

This newly constructed club won the second division title but the Secretary still had a dismal report to make in the *Gazette* at the end of the season.

The only thing needed to make this a success is more support from the men inside the Works. Up to the present we have received very little indeed and can only regret that so many followers of the game prefer to patronize other clubs to the disadvantage of *their own* (my italics). I hope, however, that next season will see a different state of things.<sup>29</sup>

The Secretary's complaint might attract more sympathy if there was any strong reason why the men at the Works should have thought of the club as 'their own'.

By 1899 the club had reached the top of the football ladder, the first division of the Southern League, joining established clubs such as Tottenham, Millwall and Southampton. Again there was a big turnover in players and the new players were recruited from other professional clubs throughout Britain.

The club also engaged in a more aggressive ticket selling campaign, using both the *Gazette* and local newspapers. The price of season tickets had risen from 5s. to 10s. in two year, but the club offered a variety of admission plans. Also, for the first time 'ladies and boys are especially catered for' with a special reduced price of 5s. 6d. for ladies ('tickets issued to the grandstand only') and 5s. 6d. and 3s. 6d. for boys.<sup>30</sup>

If the efforts of the committee to put together a first class club did not have an immediate effect on attendance, it did draw a reaction from Hills. In June 1899 his article in the *Gazette* entitled 'Our Clubs' was a long description of his philosophy on sports. He talked of his former hope that successful teams might attract better workers and good publicity to the business, but he feared that priorities had been reversed.

But in the development of our Clubs I find another tendency at work which seems to be exceedingly dangerous. The Committees of several of our Clubs, eager for immediate success are inclined to reinforce their ranks with mercenaries. In our bands and in our football clubs, I find an increasing number of professionals who do not belong to our community, but are paid to represent us in their several capacities.<sup>31</sup>

The committee of the club could not have denied what Hills said, but they would not have regarded it as an accusation. They were trying to build a competitive football club in order to attract supporters. Two important words in Hills' comments had to be defined before the future of the club could be secured — 'community' and 'represent'. Hills' position appeared to be that the club represented the community of the Works and should get its players and supporters there. If that were the case, why had he provided a ground that could hold as many as 120,000 people and allowed the

club to recruit players and participate at a level that made professionalism inevitable?

By 1899 he finally saw that the combination of an attractive club with a broad enthusiastic following might not be compatible with amateurism. The 'Oxford Blue' won out over the civic spirited sports backer and he drew back from the logical consequences of the club he had started. Once Hills became worried about the drift of the club he pulled out all the emotional stops and described it in apocalyptic terms. He concluded:

Like the ancient Romans, in their period of decadence, we seem to be willing to be artists and sportsmen by proxy; we hire a team of gladiators, and bid them fight our football battles . . . Now this is a very simple and effective method of producing popular triumphs. It is only a matter of how much we are willing to pay and the weight of our purses can be made the measure of our glory. I have, however, not the smallest intention of entering upon a competition of this kind; I desire that our Clubs should be spontaneous and cultivated expressions of our own internal activity; we ought to produce artists and athletes as abundantly and certainly as carefully as a carefully tended fruit tree produces fruit.<sup>32</sup>

Hills' dilemma was a familiar one at the turn of the century — the middle class missionary who was repelled by the success (or 'perversion'), and the resultant takeover, of his good works. However, in 1905 Gibson and Pickford pointed out the additional problem that had faced Hills, 'that none but a good class team could fill the Memorial Ground'.<sup>33</sup> These writers, the most important men in football journalism, also concluded that West Ham United was amongst the dozen clubs in London which 'could be described as first class'.

The committee thought they were producing fine 'fruit' — the combined labours of the best footballers whose 'services' could be 'retained'.<sup>34</sup> In the view of the committee, what the community wanted was not local representatives on the field, but the chance to participate in a vicarious battle that would end in victory for their 'gladiator'. Clearly, the club could not prosper in the twilight zone of semi-professionalism. It had to choose between becoming a recreational facility for the Works or continuing to strengthen its appeal to the football fans in the local community.

Hills' solution for the problem was a backward-looking compromise.

The clubs of ours have to grow, but let them always represent our own people. It may be necessary, at the beginning, to introduce a little ferment of professional experience to leaven the heavy lump; but even then let these professional experts come into the yards to work as well as to play.<sup>35</sup>

It was precisely the 'heavy lump' that the committee could no longer afford.

Hills' proposal to bring players back into the Works was made up of equal parts of naïveté and what one contemporary football writer called, in another context, 'shamateurism'.<sup>36</sup> Hills was troubled by the same questions that had divided the north of England from the south and had sent public school products scurrying to rugby football as their defence against the virus that was contained in the working-class professional who ruled the playing fields of association football.

In 1900, the Thames Iron Works bought out another engineering company and, in order to raise the capital, the Works became a public company: for the first time, Hills was responsible to shareholders.<sup>37</sup> The Football Club was a money-losing operation and the only way Hills could justify it was by the role it played in the operation of the Works. His comments the previous year made it clear that he did not believe that its primary function was recreation or building company morale. The question became what to do with the club — to abolish it, to go back to a small company team, or to transform it. Hills' position must have been ambivalent. The club had not developed as he had planned, but it was still the product of his urging and generosity. If he allowed it to go under it would be an admission of failure. There was also the question of the Memorial Ground. Like the club, its most salient characteristic was that it was there. If the Memorial Ground was not utilized it would stand as mute testimony to the failure of Hill's dreams for the community.

**The solution to the problem** of the football club was to keep it in existence but to sever its formal connections with the Works. The creation of a limited company was the answer to Hills' dilemma. He did not use the opportunity to run and cut his personal losses, but instead he became a major shareholder, encouraged business associates and his workmen to invest in the club and gave it the Memorial Ground to use on very favourable terms. The Articles detailed the purposes for establishment of the company, the foremost of which was 'to conduct the business of a football and athletic club in all branches' and to promote a whole series of sports including cricket, tennis, bowls and lacrosse. The company was 'to carry on any business which the company thinks fits in with the above and is calculated to enhance the value of the company or to bring a profit to it.'

There follows a long series of specific provisions which show that the founders of West Ham United had given serious thought to the management of the club and the ways in which its primary product (a football team) could be used to generate other revenues. At the foot of the Articles is the provision that the company is 'to employ amateur football players, . . . and other athletes and to hire, employ and pay professional football players . . . and other athletes.'<sup>38</sup> One of the Directors' first actions, taken at an emergency meeting of the Board, was to advertise in *The Sporting Chronicle* for a 'top quality centre-forward.'<sup>39</sup> All seven subscribers to the Articles were elected to the first Board of Directors and they were joined by three other local men. One of them was an engineer at the Thames Ironworks and the other two were businessmen. Seven of the ten original Directors were residents of the inner parts of Essex, that is Canning Town, West Ham or the areas bordering directly on it. The other three were residents of the slightly more expensive outer areas of Essex and one of these three was a secretary at the Ironworks who had been an official of the committee of the Ironworks Football Club. The Board included two clerks, two engineers (both of whom were connected with the Thames Ironworks), a brassfounder, a timber contractor, a house agent and a resident of Poplar who was described as having private means. The ties with the Ironworks continued in two respects: members of its staff were Directors and some of the other Directors had business ties and served on civic committees with Hills.<sup>40</sup>

An article in the *Athletic News* in 1895 described the changes in football over the previous twenty years. It showed that the game was expanding and attracting large numbers of spectators. But success had brought problems. 'From humble origins, clubs . . . formed in the first instance for the recreation of their members' have grown and 'almost unconsciously the power passed into the hands of these regular providers of the sinews of war. So now we find the players, the servants of the clubs and the officials endeavouring to supply the exacting demands of the public'. The game could no longer afford to be dragged down by the 'systematic mismanagement' of some club officials and there was a need for 'strong patrons in the game'.<sup>41</sup> This analysis almost predicted the development of West Ham United; businessmen and managers would devote part of their time to running a financially viable organization whose product was football and whose workers played a 'game'.

The capital of West Ham United was £2,000 made up of 4,000

shares carrying a face value of ten shillings each. There was no rush to buy shares. The biggest financial boost to the club was a promise by Hills to buy one share for every one sold to the public. By 1902 only 1,777 shares had been sold and by 1910 less than 3,000 shares had been taken up.<sup>42</sup>

In 1902, the first year for which stock records are extant, there were twenty-one shareholders who owned more than ten shares, besides Hills. Ten of these men served on the Board of Directors — ownership of ten shares was a qualification for the Board. With one exception, all twenty-one of the large shareholders lived in the vicinity of the club and all were self-employed or semi-professional men. There were ninety-two persons holding shares. The pattern of share holding suggests that many of the first subscribers might have bought a share or two from a friend connected with the old club or that they purchased a share to maintain some connection with the former Ironworks Club.

The Directors had the power to determine the future of the Club. Each year, one third of the Board had to resign, but any resigning Director could stand for re-election. The Board was also empowered to make nominations and it was clearly assumed that this would be the normal course through which men were elected to the Board.

There was to be a yearly general meeting of stockholders, at which there was a report from the chairman and the election of the Board. Voting was by shares, which could have given Hills enormous power. However, he allowed his shares to be voted by the Board. There could be periodic Directors' meetings at which time they could exercise all the powers of the company including the purchase of property, the issue of stock, the appointment, suspension and removal of managers and secretaries, the investment of funds and the entering into of contracts.

Members of the Board were prohibited from receiving compensation for service on the Board. They were part of an organization that had responsibilities which were regarded as a form of public service. Public notice and self-satisfaction were the main rewards to be gained. Directors could enter into contracts with the Club as vendors and suppliers, but the club did not have the resources to make this a real temptation for a potentially unscrupulous director.

The Club's initial capital was limited, but the first couple of years were relatively successful. In 1901-02 it showed a small profit. The team did well on the field, finishing a strong fourth in the league.

The sale of season tickets doubled for the next year (to 110) and 500 additional shares of stock were sold. However, the next season saw a loss of £151. The Directors were shaken by their first losing season and saw the explanation in the 'bad state of trade in the area and the bad start of the team',<sup>43</sup> which had kept attendance below expectations. The big change had not been a fall in the size of the crowd (attendance was almost the same as the previous season), but in a wages bill that had gone up fifty percent. The following year saw an even bigger operating loss of £793 although expenses had remained constant. The big loss that year had been a drop in season ticket sales.

On the eve of the 1904 season the Directors had cause to worry about the future of the Club. It had lost £900 in the past two seasons, it had an overdraft of £770 and assets of less than £200.<sup>44</sup> The Club did not have resources or property to secure the overdraft. The local bank that extended the credit did so on the reputation and word of the Directors — an example of their willingness to pledge themselves to the future of the club and the easy relationship between the bank and local merchants. However, the Chairman gave a promising look towards the coming season and in this instance he was not playing the role of an executive Dr Pangloss. In the spring of 1904 the Directors took the most significant decision since (or possibly including) the incorporation of the Club — they left the Memorial Ground and found a new site, the Boleyn Ground on Green Street in East Ham.

**The move to the Boleyn Ground** had symbolic and practical implications and immediately recognizable effects. The Boleyn Ground was everything the Memorial Ground had not been. Spectators could walk to it from the industrial suburb of West Ham and the residential areas of East Ham and Barking. They could come there easily from Canning Town and the working-class areas surrounding the docks, the poorer areas of East London and from the suburbs of Ilford and Stratford because the ground was close to a railway station and the tram stopped less than five minutes walk away. It is significant to note that the front-page advertisement in the year-book was for the West Ham Tram Company. Many of the advertisements were for products and services which could hardly be considered directed to a poor working-class audience. Among the advertisers were a local hotel (for billiards, drinks and cigars), a bicycle and

motor cycle shop, house agents, caterers, printers and photographers.

There was more than convenience to recommend the Boleyn Ground. Its setting was radically different from the docklands proximity of the Memorial Ground. Boleyn Castle was the site of a Catholic school in a neighbourhood surrounded by small shops and pleasant residential streets. In most ways it was exactly the opposite of the squalid conditions that outsiders usually pictured as typical of the East End, but it was much closer to the economic and social reality upon which the future of the club would be based.

The new ground also symbolized a visible break with the Ironworks. Even though supporters would remember the 'Hammer' roots, the new club was making an appeal as a representative of a wider community. The central location of the ground was another way to play up the 'new' identity of the club.

The great irony involved in the growth of West Ham United is that its move to the Boleyn laid the foundation for its success as a professional club and the move was forced on it by Hills, a man who stood forthrightly against professional sport.

Between 1900 and 1904, there were a series of small episodes that showed the growing estrangement between Hills and West Ham United: among them the rejection of some of his nominees as prospective Directors and disputes over the rent for the Memorial Ground and the services provided with it. Hills stated that his refusal to rent the Memorial Ground to the Club after 30 April was because it was needed 'for the *amateur* [my italics] Thames Ironworks Team'.<sup>45</sup> He trusted that they could make arrangements for the next year and he also wanted them to vacate the office space they had been using in buildings owned by the Ironworks.

The Directors had looked at the Boleyn Ground about a month earlier but they had not been prepared for Hills' sudden action. The Board did, however, act immediately and resolved to vacate the Memorial Ground and give further inspection to the Boleyn. The Board also passed formal resolutions to start 'a million penny' collection scheme to aid the new ground and to 'communicate with advertisement contractors re boardings on our new ground and also ask the brewers for their personal assistance'. Thus the reaction to Hills' ultimatum aided West Ham United at the expense of two of Hills' most cherished ideals — amateur sport and temperance.<sup>46</sup>

Although Hills had done West Ham a great favour by forcing it to move, the way in which he handled it left bitter feelings. In late April

the Directors heard a rumour that the Clapton Orient football team (the leading amateur club in East London) might use the Memorial Ground. The West Ham Board voted to 'publish a copy of Mr Hills' letter to us in full in the press' if any team besides the Thames Iron Works used the Memorial Ground.<sup>47</sup>

The final move to the Boleyn was made in May 1904 and the rental provisions included the amalgamation of West Ham United with the Boleyn Castle Football Club. This meant 'taking their best players into our reserve team' and giving an opportunity to four Boleyn Castle Directors to purchase stock in West Ham, with the understanding that one or more of them would be recommended by the West Ham Directors to be elected to their Board.<sup>48</sup> The consolidation arrangements had all the appearances of the merger of a small business with a much larger and more successful firm, with the net result that the smaller group was subsumed into the larger. There was certainly nothing in the arrangements that gave any hint that football was a sport or different from any type of business activity where workers were interchangeable, and with Boards of Directors that made decisions for them.

During the first season at the Boleyn Ground West Ham turned the previous season's £800 loss into a £400 profit. There was a small decrease in wages, but this was more than overcome by the 100 percent (from £331 to £662) increase in expenses for the ground. The important difference was in the gate money which had risen from £2,900 to £4,300. This was accomplished despite the fact that the club had not improved its record on the field.<sup>49</sup>

Before the 1904 season the Chairman's report had been a combination of gloom (the past season's problems) and optimism, 'with a new ground and new surroundings and with an almost new team, the success that we have long hoped for will at last be ours'.<sup>50</sup>

The Directors were doing something besides hoping. They had raised more than £3,000 in loans and had obtained a new site. The only creditors named in the club's balance sheets were Hills (£107) and the Thames Ironworks Club (£85) and both of these debts were liquidated in 1905. The new loans came from the Chairmen, the three retiring Directors who stood for re-election and the new Directors.<sup>51</sup> The end of the lease at the Memorial Ground had given the Directors a chance that they did not lose. From 1905 the tone of West Ham United was set — a team competing at the highest level that depended on quality football to attract supporters, but also a team that physically established itself in the heart of an area where

playing football was the usual recreation. The inclusion, for the first time, of local politicians as vice-presidents was another sign of the attempt to solidify community ties.

The club was guided firmly by members of the local business and professional class who were willing to invest some money as well as a lot of time. The Directors' job had turned into a civic responsibility. The local newspapers also responded by devoting more coverage to West Ham than to all other local clubs. West Ham, with roots firmly set in the Boleyn Ground and with new investments in the club, was committed to appealing for support to the broadest possible audience in the area.

A new pattern also emerged on the Board — virtually every retiring Director stood for re-election. They were consistently returned to the Board, ensuring a continuity of policy but also effectively excluding outsiders from control of the Club. There is nothing sinister about this — there were (with the exception of one local publican who was nominated for six straight years and never elected) almost no nominations besides those made by the Board.

In 1906 Syd King, the Secretary of West Ham United, wrote a short history of the club in which he commented on its early problems: 'The charge that the club was out of sympathy with the local public was not repeated in 1903. A lot of prejudice had been lived down . . . and I don't suppose that any club has had to fight harder for its existence than West Ham United'.<sup>52</sup> King's comments are supported by those of Pickford and Gibson who described West Ham as a club that had dark days despite the local talent that was available; 'Indeed there is probably no club in the Metropolis which has experienced the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune more than they . . . It was a club that did well on the field, badly at the gate . . . and at the close of the 1903-04 season it was not at all certain that the club would continue'.<sup>53</sup>

The Club continued to show an operating profit in every season from 1905 to 1914 and by 1911 the assets exceeded the liabilities for the first time. The first major investment undertaken by the Directors was almost £1,000 to improve the ground and two years later the huge sum of £4,000 was authorized to build a new stand and improve the enclosures.<sup>54</sup> The Directors demonstrated their belief that the way to build support for the club was to have a winning team and to make the ground a more comfortable place for spectators, a far cry from the picture often painted of the football fan willing to put up with (and even to revel in) the hardships connected with

attending a match.

There is little doubt that supporters were interested in seeing a winning team on the field. Writing from a different perspective in 1892, Charles Edwardes summarized the importance of the result, 'The British public controls itself under trying circumstances when five favourites in succession lose at Epsom or Newmarket. This is not the case in football between league sides. One group must lose when the other wins'.<sup>55</sup> East London newspapers gave much space to changes in the West Ham team and the articles emphasized the higher quality of the new players. The signing of a local player might bring out some sense of pride in the report, but the acquisition of a player from another club (especially a League or Scottish club) drew much more attention. The latter type of signing was usually pointed to as a sign that the Directors were willing to pay the extra money that was necessary to improve the performance of the club.

By 1905 almost all of the players were professional, although one of the stars of the next few years was an amateur. The players had working-class backgrounds and had made a job out of a game.

In 1906 the average wage for the whole team (a pool of thirty players) was £2 10s per week over the whole year. At least twelve were paid between £4 and £4 10s during the season and a minimum of £2 10s in the summer.<sup>56</sup> New players who were signed on from other clubs received higher wages than older members of the team. Players who had been with the club since 1900 made up the reserve and third teams and their wages ranged from £2 during the season to as little as 15s per match. One provision the Directors insisted upon for all players earning more than £2 10s during the season was that they should not take another job; they were full time professional footballers and were being paid for that job.<sup>57</sup> A comparison of footballers' wages with other workers in West Ham is instructive. In 1906 casual dockers earned between 5s 6d and £1 2s 6d for a week's work. Plumbers' and joiners' average wage was £2 7s for a forty four hour week. Tram drivers made £2 3s for a sixty hour week and men employed in the building trades averaged £2 8s for a forty four hour week.<sup>58</sup>

The wages offered to players to join West Ham shows not only that footballers were paid well but that the Directors recognized the need to spend money to boost the level of the team. Between 1904 and 1907 the club purchased or signed on more than thirty new players, which meant transfer fees, signing on bonuses and higher wages. By 1907 all of the first team players earned between £3 and £4

per week during the season. The important wage distinction between players was what they were paid during the close season. In 1907 three players were paid £4 per week during the summer and three others were given £3 per week in the close season.<sup>59</sup>

The relationship between the club and the players was determined, in great part, by the unique contractual situation that existed in football. Once a player signed an agreement with a club he was registered on its books with the Football Association. The player could not sell his services to another club unless he was released by the club that held the rights to him. There were numerous transfers of players but these actions were hardly ever initiated by the player. He could only react to the actions taken concerning his status. He had one effective way in which to raise his salary: to negotiate a better wage when he was transferred. It was in the interests of both clubs that the player sign for his new club; his former team wanted the fee for him and the new team wanted his performance on the field. Between 1907 and 1914 the best paid players at West Ham United were men bought from better clubs. In some cases these men had international caps as well as experience with First Division League teams. The maximum wage (a term used by the Board) was £4 in season and £4 in the summer and by 1910 this was offered to every player West Ham transferred from a First Division team. A transferred player also received his signing on fee, which was normally £10 for top quality players.

At its first meeting in May each year, the Board made decisions on the salaries to be offered for the next season. There were provisions made to increase the offer if important players balked at the amount. The Board also offered to meet with individual players who were dissatisfied with their prospective salaries.<sup>60</sup> Few players chose to appear before the Board. The club had the ultimate sanction it could use against a player who thought he was not being paid enough; it could refuse to raise its offer and refuse to transfer him. The player had no way to protest about this situation and if he did (as did one West Ham player in 1910) the club responded by informing the Football Association that he was ineligible to play for any other club.<sup>61</sup>

The Board certainly saw itself as the employer of football players in the same way as the Directors employed workers in their business. Salary negotiations were handled by the Secretary, the paid administrator, and the Directors retained control over him and the finances of the club. There was also a strong strain of paternalism amongst the Directors. Players were fined for missing matches due to a

reaction from a smallpox vaccination because the vaccinations had been obtained '*without prior permission* from the Directors' [my italics].<sup>62</sup> 'Players, incapacitated from playing by injuries or sickness, must be indoors by 8 p.m. every evening. The penalty for the first offence was a 5s fine, any subsequent offence to be dealt with by the Directors'.<sup>63</sup> Curfews were enforced on players, wages were held in trust for players who had drinking problems and doctor's certificates were required for any failure to play or train.<sup>64</sup> In many ways, the term 'club' might appear to be a misnomer to describe the business of running a football team, an organization with places firmly established for the employer and the worker.

In the case of West Ham United, the 'working classes' did not 'claim the game as their own' if this means their exclusive domination of the club. In a 'football mad' working-class district the club struggled for survival because there was no reason to watch other men play unless their game was markedly different from local matches. West Ham United needed something more than players and love of football to succeed, it needed money and management. A combination of an 'amateur's' generosity and local businessmen's sense of community pride and a desire to gain recognition developed the foundation of a first-class professional club. A shared interest surrounded the club, its players and its supporters and also what might be called its 'role'. In this (the formation of the football club), as in so many other areas of English life, working-class participation was limited to work, either as players or supporters. But at least in this case, work had an emotional element that provided a sense of individual and communal pride lacking in most other occupations.

## Notes

1. C.F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London 1911), 83; George R. Sims, *How the Poor Live* (London 1889), 79 and chapter on the 'Docks'; Sims, *Living London* (London 1906) Vol. I, 292-6; Paul Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour* (London 1967), 13.

2. Morris Marples, *A History of Football* (London 1954); George W. Keeton, *The Football Revolution* (Newton Abbot 1972); James Walvin, *The People's Game* (London 1975). Tony Mason of the Centre for Social History, University of Warwick, is completing a book on the social history of football from 1870 to 1914.

3. Arthur Hopcraft, *The Football Man* (London 1971), 11-12.

4. Ian Taylor, 'Football Mad' in *Sports: Readings from a Sociological Perspective* (London 1971).

5. Sims, *Living London*, I, 292.

6. Memorandum and Articles of Association of the West Ham United Football Club Ltd., registered 5 July 1900.

7. *Victoria County History: Essex*, V, 19.
8. *Ibid*, V (London) 18-20.
9. E.G. Howarth and M. Wilson, *West Ham: A Study in Social and Industrial Problems* (London 1907).
10. *The Victoria County History: Essex*, V, 19.
11. Howarth and Wilson, *West Ham*, 7.
12. *Ibid*, 23.
13. *Thames Ironworks Gazette*, 1895, 7 (June 1896), 83, and 9 (December 1896), 2.
14. *Ibid.*, 3 (June 1895), 65.
15. *Ibid.*, 1 (January 1895), 1.
16. *Ibid.*, 3 (June 1895), 66.
17. *Ibid.*, 2 (March 1895), 34.
18. *Ibid.*, 7 (June 1896), 83. The lead article in this issue, written by Hills, was entitled, 'Our Clubs'.
19. *Ibid.*, 5 (January 1896), 34. The chance of recognition and a 'pay-day' is still the dream of many non-league clubs that enter the FA cup today.
20. *Ibid.*, 35.
21. Gibson and Pickford, *Association Football and the Men Who Made It*. (London 1905) III, 86.
22. *Thames Ironworks Gazette*, 10 (March 1897), 71.
23. Report of the Secretary of the Club in *Ibid.*, 12 (September 1897), 195.
24. *Ibid.*, 196.
25. *Ibid.*, 13 (December 1897), 46.
26. *Ibid.*, 46.
27. *Ibid.*, 47.
28. Roster of players in the report of the Secretary of the Club in *Ibid.*, 16 (September 1898), 211.
29. *Ibid.*, 18 (March 1899), 284.
30. *Ibid.*, 19 (June 1899), 338.
31. *Ibid.*, 295.
32. *Ibid.*, 295.
33. Gibson and Pickford, *Association Football and the Men who Made It*, III, 88.
34. *Thames Ironworks Gazette*, 19 (June 1899), 338.
35. *Ibid.*, 295. At the annual dinner of the Federated Clubs of the Thames Ironworks (5 February 1900) Hills proposed the toast. He wanted to 'throw out a few suggestions' to make about the future of the clubs: the foundation of the clubs must be young men coming out of the Works, even though some clubs should develop outside the structure of the Works. If a club was to be connected with the Works, it 'must always substantially as well as name, be composed of Thames Ironworkers (Hear, Hear)'. *Ibid.*, 22 (March 1900), 93.
36. *The Football Annual: 1896*, 13. The featured editorial was a defence of professionalism. The article pointed out the way in which 'amateurs' in cricket and other sports were 'paid more than any professional breathing.'
37. Hills addressed himself to this point in a lead article in the *Gazette*, entitled 'Reconstruction'. Hills discussed the business arrangements and profit sharing scheme and the eight hour day, two of the 'radical' moves he had instituted at the Works. *Thames Ironworks Gazette*, 20 (September 1899), 1.
38. Memorandum and Articles of Association of the West Ham United Football

Club Ltd., 5 July 1900.

39. Reported in Minutes of Board Meeting for 2 September 1901.
40. Memorandum and Articles of Association of the West Ham United Football Club Ltd., 5 July 1900.
41. *Athletic News Football Annual: 1895*, 13-14. (London 1895).
42. Annual Report of the West Ham United Football Club Ltd., 30 April 1902.
43. *Ibid.*, 30 April 1903. The figures are contained in the balance sheet for that year.
44. *Ibid.*, 20 June 1904.
45. Reported in minutes of Special Directors' Meeting, 14 April 1904. The first mention of a possible move to the Boleyn had been made at a meeting of the Board on 21 March 1904.
46. Reported in Minutes of Board Meeting, 18 April 1940.
47. Reported in Minutes of Board Meeting, 25 April 1904. The resolution passed unanimously.
48. *Ibid.*
49. Balance sheet, appended to Annual Report, 20 June 1904.
50. Report of the Chairman in Annual Report, 20 June 1904.
51. Balance sheet appended to Annual Report, June 1905. Minutes of Board Meeting in 1905 discuss the loans as well as loans obtained from the Tottenham Football Club.
52. E.S. King, 'The Football History of West Ham United' in *The Book of Football*, ed. C.W. Alcock (London 1906), 187-88.
53. Gibson and Pickford, *Association Football and the Men Who Made It*, III, 86.
54. Annual Report, June 1914.
55. Charles Edwardes, 'The New Football Mania' in *Nineteenth Century*, 32 (1892), 622.
56. Minutes of Board Meeting, 26 March 1906.
57. *Ibid.*, 3 May 1905.
58. Howarth and Wilson, *West Ham*, Minutes of the Board Meeting.
59. Minutes of the Board Meeting, 11 April 1907.
60. *Ibid.*, 5 April 1907.
61. *Ibid.*, 18 June 1910.
62. *Ibid.*, 6 January 1902, 3 March 1902.
63. *Ibid.*, 6 January 1902, 13 January 1902.
64. *Ibid.*, 30 December 1901, 23 March 1903, 6 May 1907.

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