



A 'Spieler' at work in Flat Iron Market, 1933.

SATURDAY NIGHT MARKETS IN MANCHESTER AND SALFORD 1840 — 1939¹

Andrew Davies

In *Love on the Dole*, Walter Greenwood characterised Saturday as a day of leisure in Hanky Park. After a morning's work: "There'd be a flutter on the two-thirty, football match this afternoon, the public house tonight and a long morning in bed tomorrow with the missis".² Gambling, football and drink are thus portrayed as the preoccupations of the typical working man, whilst the question of women's leisure is ignored. Unfortunately, historians' attempts to capture the 'classic' proletarian leisure activities can similarly obscure the variety of working-class experience.³ Saturday nights in the pub may have been shared by a good proportion of working men; yet the pastime was by no means universal, and if we look beyond the stereotypes, there is evidence of alternative Saturday night customs which formed no less vigorous a part of working-class culture.

In an essay written in 1904, Frank Jordan pointed out that: "There are a great many people who live in and around Manchester, whose week is not, to them, complete without the Saturday night is spent in the very heart of the city".⁴ The main attraction was the Saturday night market at Shudehill, and there is a wealth of evidence in the local press, and in retrospective accounts, to show that the market was a great institution in the social life of Manchester and Salford between 1840 and 1939. Both types of evidence suggest that the market had a dual appeal, as a source of cheap food and free entertainment, which ensured that Shudehill was a central fixture in the lifestyles of the working classes.⁵

This essay examines the Saturday night custom of the trip to market as a form of entertainment which persisted in the two cities throughout the century prior to 1940. The

development of markets has not been neglected by economic and municipal historians,⁶ but it is perhaps surprising that this pastime has received no attention in the existing social history of leisure, which has focused upon broad themes, including the development of commercial recreations like the music hall and the cinema, and attempts to remould popular leisure through social reform and policing, whilst failing to uncover the full range of popular amusements.⁷ In contrast, this study uses oral evidence to develop an analysis in relation to everyday working-class life. Saturday night markets were a feature of working-class entertainment, but were equally important to the household budgeting strategies of women locked in the struggle to make ends meet. An examination of the markets as an arena for leisure must therefore be located within the wider context of the study of urban poverty. Many working people received their wages on Saturdays during this period, if they were paid by the week, and the restrictions on Sunday trading forced stall holders to auction their remaining foodstuffs on Saturday evening.⁸

A vivid portrayal of market life was given by John Page in a book first published in 1858.⁹ His description provides an early illustration of the dual appeal which Shudehill held for the working people of the two cities. Page argued that the "lower orders" actively preferred to make their purchases outdoors, and would look to market traders or hawkers for a variety of their provisions rather than shopkeepers.¹⁰ Certainly, they patronised Shudehill on a Saturday night in sufficient numbers to sustain a lively market atmosphere. The stall holders were performers in their own right, and Page gave a description of the patter

of one cheap jack, selling hardware by Dutch auction:

Here is a concern in Shudehill, Manchester. The front of the van is hung round with guns, bridles, trays, rules, measuring tapes, braces, belts, handsaws... The platform is occupied by a middle-aged man in a red plush waistcoat with sleeves, corduroy breeches, white stockings, and high-low shoes... it is eight o'clock at night — a Saturday night in February. In front of the van, with the bright glare of the lamp reflected on their upturned faces, stand, at least, two hundred persons, mostly men — there are some women amongst them — and a good sprinkling of lads. I am a few seconds late to hear what 'John' has said to cause such a general roar of laughter... (selling a pocket-knife) "Remember, this is a well-bred knife, its father was a razor, and its mother was a butcher's cleaver..."¹¹

The price of the knives dropped from five shillings to sixpence before a few were sold, but it is clear that the majority of his audience watched the whole process without buying anything. Of course, the aim of the patter was to draw and hold a crowd, some of whom might eventually fall for the goods on offer. A good humoured crowd parted with its spare cash more readily, and for this reason "... flash slang, low wit, droll sayings, double-entendre, and sometimes a really rich pun, may always be heard wherever 'Cheap John' has his pitch".¹² The traders themselves recognised the value of the skill of the patter, and an expert cheap jack could quickly assess the professionalism of a rival.¹³ Similar performances by quack doctors drew crowds around their stalls. Page claimed that the working classes turned to them because they couldn't afford physician's fees, and consequently, the quacks were assured of good takings from their Saturday night pitches.¹⁴ Gambling schools were rife in the market areas, and although dice and makeshift roulette wheels were used warily by the 1850s, with look-out systems operated against the police, gambling remained a feature of the market scene.¹⁵ Beggars also headed for the central and market districts on Saturday night, largely in anticipation of working-class charity.¹⁶

Page described a marketplace culture which was well established in the 1850s. Written sources show that this culture flourished throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. A contributor to the Manchester weekly *Free Lance* was struck by the liveliness of Shudehill on a Saturday night in 1867, remarking that the price of foodstuffs had dropped considerably since the morning, as the vendors became more animated, lowering their prices to try and shift their stock before the market closed. 'High change', or the peak of trading, lasted until ten o'clock, and the market had only quietened down by midnight. Working-class housewives were to be seen bargain hunting, and made the evening the busiest time in the market all week.¹⁷ However, this commentator was also struck by the entertainments on offer around Shudehill. In addition to the free spectacle provided by the traders, small-scale leisure entrepreneurs saw the Saturday night crowds as a good target, and novel forms of amusement therefore found their way into the variety of attractions which the market area could offer. Shudehill was:

... alive with animation, and amid a blaze of gas all is life and bustle. In the outskirts of the market place you may have yourself accurately weighed and measured for one halfpenny. For the same sum you may receive a shock from a galvanic battery. You may then enjoy a few moments sporting, by shooting

at a target over a rifle range extending about two yards ... you have thrown in free of charge, an oral lecture ... explanatory of a great portion of your own interior, accompanied, at a short distance, by the strains of an energetic Scotch fiddler requesting you to 'come through the heather, around him gather, for wha'll be King but Charlie,' and other patriotic and national sentiments.¹⁸

The *Shadow* in 1870 was still more insistent upon the centrality of Shudehill market in local life among those who lived by economy rather than high fashion. Shudehill was no less than a town within a town; Covent Garden had its reputation, but Shudehill had grit and northern realism:

But our big market is a 'great institution', though it has not a history; and as we look upon the sea of faces, the owners of which swarm in thousands, crushing, pushing, elbowing, and swaying to and fro, whilst the general din proclaims that something is going on which is engrossing the minds of fifteen to twenty thousand men and women, we cannot help thinking how great is the subject of study before us. Life is here as it really is.¹⁹

The authors estimated that three quarters of the crowd would be looking to take their Sunday dinner home from the market with them, making Saturday night the time for the most crucial food shopping of the week, not a period of unbridled leisure. Some bought delicacies to eat at the market. Mussels were a favourite, and the *Shadow's* observer described a "spruce-looking female of the operative class", trying to tear her husband away from a stall. Luxuries or necessities could be bought, or both, according to individual circumstances.²⁰ Throughout this period, many visitors to Shudehill went to look rather than to buy, treating a stroll around the market area as a form of amusement. A writer for the *City Lantern* was struck by this point in 1878. Out of the crowds to be found on a Saturday night, some were there: "... for the purpose of buying, but the greater part seemed to be there out of sheer curiosity".²¹ This observation confirms that walking around the market was an entertainment in itself, even those who had spare cash in their pockets could take advantage of the free amusement.

The *City Lantern's* correspondent also noticed the different purposes of visits to the market between people of different age groups, and how this custom was adapted according to the precise circumstances of individual families. Four groups of visitors were identified. Firstly, there were married couples of advanced years, sometimes accompanied by their children. They were the most careful shoppers, and could be seen examining their purchases in minute detail, calculating how best to feed their family: "Experience has taught them frugality; and the lesson once thoroughly learned is not easily forgotten". Younger married couples, with fewer mouths to feed were likely to: "... look at far more, but buy considerably less than the above-mentioned". Courting couples took fewer responsibilities with them when they set out on a Saturday night, and their most likely purchases were the delicacies eaten during the evening. The final category consisted of individual visitors of either sex. The author claimed that these solitary figures were less likely to give the impression of enjoying themselves, which confirms that strolling around the market was essentially a social activity, and also serves to remind us that the custom was one which brought couples or families together on a Saturday night.²² Gender roles were certainly in evidence on these expeditions, with women

likely to supervise the shopping even with their husbands in attendance, but nevertheless, this custom was much more of a mixed activity than drinking, for example.²³ Both men and women went to Shudehill for a night out, and the contemporary sources show that the market was a substantial feature in the range of opportunities for leisure available to the urban working classes. The different uses to which the custom could be put are discussed in more detail below.

Salford's Flat Iron market drew a good deal of comment in the local press after a revival of the market's fortunes in the 1870s, which followed the decline of Knott Mill as an outdoor market.²⁴ Between 1890 and 1939, the Flat Iron was more controversial than Shudehill. The poverty of the Salford market was more acute, and more visible. There was no wholesale trade at the Flat Iron, and the second-hand clothes dealers, operating on the open ground around Sacred Trinity Church, lacked any claim to respectability. Nonetheless, the Flat Iron captured the imagination of a number of writers who were impressed by its atmosphere, and the performances of the traders in hardware, crockery, cheap furniture and clothing. The market was a famous Salford landmark, and contemporary observers were struck by the volume of business conducted there, with one journalist describing the Flat Iron on a Saturday night as a "carnival of copper".²⁵ Robert Roberts saw things differently:

*Those in greatest need found even the old brokers' shops too expensive: they bought everything from the local Flatiron market. Some writers since have found a certain romance about the place; it is hard to see why. The 'Flatiron' differed little from any other street mart in our industrial cities, except perhaps that, established close by a ganglion of railway lines, it lay constantly under the thickest smoke pall in Britain. It's frequenters then, could have looked sleazier, and the pathetic wares on sale even more grimy than most. In such places poverty busied itself.*²⁶

The poverty of the Flat Iron was an embarrassment to Salford's civic pride. The location of the market, at the gateway to Manchester, meant that the corporation was unwilling to turn a blind eye to the activities of the outdoor traders, although the market was also conveniently situated close to some of the poorest districts in Salford, like Greengate and the Adelphi. The market had its detractors and its defenders in the local press. In 1890, W.H. Wood deplored every aspect of the Flat Iron:

*The noisiest and busiest spot of its size in Salford ... the outer fringes of this pandemonium being occupied by the vendors of everything consumable, useable, and detestable ... this parody of a market, a disgrace alike to the Corporation and a reflection upon our civilization ... the dirty, ragged, lost looking creatures who make this spot the rendezvous for fraternization on Saturdays and Mondays.*²⁷

Like Shudehill, the Flat Iron was much more than a venue for shopping. Itinerant entertainers brought contemporary novelties to Salford, like the stilt walkers who made an appearance in the 1880s.²⁸ Before 1914, the Flat Iron featured a pleasure ground as well as the trading area, which included not only fruit and ice-cream stalls, but roundabouts, shooting galleries, boxing booths, penalty kick competitions for footballers, and a cheap theatre.²⁹ As at Shudehill, the traders were worth watching:



Prospective customers inspecting boots at Flat Iron Market, 1896.

*... the auctioneer striding up and down the platform of his stall, by turns wheedling the people with a honeyed tongue, or with winks and sideways glances setting the women giggling and the men roaring, or browbeating them with his fiercer banter until he has them at his mercy. 'Some of ye don't come to buy, s'elp me... ye come to pinch.'*³⁰

The Flat Iron market survived a series of municipal attempts at closure during the 1900s and the 1920s. Those who opposed the closure claimed that the market was a boon to the poor people of the vicinity, a crucial source of cheap food and clothing. The market was eventually closed in 1939 and the traders were offered new accommodation on Cross Lane market in Salford.³¹

Markets also figure prominently in autobiographical accounts of life in Manchester and Salford in the early twentieth century, and in oral reminiscences. This retrospective evidence is extremely useful, for it provides more precise information about the ways in which this custom fitted into individual family lifestyles than can be obtained from the contemporary written sources. Oral evidence continually illustrates the diversity of working-class experience, and this is extremely useful to the historian of leisure. Interviews provide more detailed insights into the role of individual preference than any other source. The second section of this paper will examine some of the retrospective evidence on this theme, and will relate this evidence to a wider picture of working-class life.

Mrs. Fallows' father worked as a timber carrier on the Salford docks, and though the dock labourers were renowned locally as heavy drinkers, her father was a highly religious man, and did not spend his Saturday nights in the pub:

*On Saturday night he used to take my mum to the market, Shudehill market. Well Thornton's were going then, the toffee people, and he used to bring a one pound of Thornton's toffee which them days was one and six for one pound which was a heck of a price, but that was his treat.*³²

An evening spent around the markets and main streets could be an occasion for married couples to spend time together; it also afforded parents of young children the chance to go out as a family. In her autobiography *A Bolton Childhood*, Alice Foley recalled:

The trip we loved best was to be taken to town on an occasional Saturday evening. Here was life at its gayest and rowdiest; the open shop fronts lit by paraffin flares, competing traders bawling their wares, and narrow streets crowded with buyers or gaping sight-seers. The poorest groups hung on until closing time, near midnight, when one shilling parcels containing a rabbit, assorted vegetables and fruit, could be had, making sure a good Sunday dinner. The covered market was a mecca for the town-folks.³³

In homes where the struggle against poverty shaped leisure activities as all others, this Saturday night custom had two important functions. Firstly, there were bargains to be had, particularly foodstuffs which traders had no means of storing over the weekend. This could be crucial to the household economy of the poor. Their poverty dictated that even Saturday night, the peak in the weekly leisure cycle, could not be free from domestic responsibilities. And yet, at the same time, the liveliness of markets and main streets was a source of entertainment in itself. Much of this was to be had for free. As Alice Foley pointed out, both shoppers and "gaping sight-seers" were catered for.

Mrs. Holden went to Bolton market as a girl, around the eve of the First World War, to buy food for her mother to cook for her family's Sunday dinner:

... me mam would give me a brown paper carrier bag with a string handle and sixpence ... and about five minutes to ten I used to make me way to the fish market, and there would be crowds all around ... the feller would have a great big table ... and him and his assistants would be stood in the middle of it. And they would have all these rabbits, and poultry, small chickens, and big hens, and all that ... all round on this stall, that they hadn't sold. And all the other stalls that hadn't sold all their poultry would bring it all, and it would all be put on this big round table, then the crowd used to come ... And as soon as they started, he'd shout, 'Who'll give me one and six for this big, lovely fat hen? Any bidders?' 'Course it was soon snapped up. And then when he'd sold all his hens, he'd come down to his chickens and them would go the same. I was waiting for rabbits .. And as soon as ever he put the first big pair of rabbits up .. he'd say, 'Now then, look what I've got for you', and he'd walk around and show all these rabbits, still in their skins, held, held up by their back legs, y'know, he said, 'Now look what I've got, all of you. Now I've got a pile of rabbits here, and I'm, get rid of 'em all. So, first bidders gets 'em. Put your hands up and shout, and y'get 'em, right.' And as soon as he says, 'Now who'll give me a tanner for this pair?' 'I will, mister! I will!' ... and I'd hand up me, the brown paper carrier, and he'd dump the two great big rabbits in. And I'd give him me sixpence and I was happy, I used to think, oh, me mam will be pleased, won't she be pleased at them ... And do you know, she'd skin them rabbits, take them in the kitchen. She'd skin 'em, wash them, chop 'em all up into pieces. And we had an enamel bowl ... she'd put these two rabbits in and two or three big ... onions, carrots, and then she'd stock the coal oven up, and she'd cover this dish up, with a cloth, and she'd put it in the oven and let that cook slowly all night. And then, next morning, she'd make a whole dish of dumplings, and put them in this stewed rabbit, and that did all our Sunday's dinner and all our Sunday's tea, for sixpence.³⁴

Her mother depended on cheap meat from the market to feed a family of nine living on one wage. Her trip to market was a means of stretching limited household resources, and provided for the week's main meal. This account shows how the markets could play a vital role in the domestic economy of the poor. Salford's Flat Iron market was described in similar terms by Elsie Osman. Her parents took her there on a Saturday night in the late 1920s, "... and by going late Father used to pick up some real bargains ... (he) bought lots of fish for practically nothing. The stallholders had to get rid of the fish before they closed at midnight — they had no refrigerators or ice to keep it fresh".³⁵ Mrs. Daly's mother took one of her daughters at a time to the Flat Iron from Greengate, when they needed new clogs, or clothing:

... me mother'd buy a pair of clogs for about sixpence ... and then the following week she'd go and get me sister something, then the week after me other sister, she, we all had to wear clogs because they couldn't afford shoes and the clogs used to last us ... They used to sell all sorts, clothes, clogs ... old radios ... plates, cups, mind some of them were cracked but you were grateful, other, otherwise it had to be jam jars.³⁶

The Flat Iron was noted as a boon to poor mothers in the 1900s, but clearly it had not outlived this role even by the 1930s. Mrs. Daly was born as late as 1925, and her evidence emphasizes the continuity of endemic poverty prior to 1939.

Robert Roberts made no mention of Saturday night trips to the market in his account of the social life of the 'classic slum'.³⁷ His parents, with their corner shop open on Saturday evenings, could not have shared in this custom favoured by families from the 'undermass'. Yet, as Roberts showed, markets were by no means the only resort of the poor, in the struggle to feed families on limited incomes. Roberts emphasized the importance of 'tick', the operation of credit facilities by corner shopkeepers like his mother, who were willing to postpone payment by regular customers when wages were slack. Roberts asserted that this gave his own mother the power to decide which of her customers would be able to feed their families adequately at such times.³⁸ This was confirmed in interviews conducted for the Manchester Studies unit:

Would you use the markets or tend to the corner shop?

Oh there was Cross Lane market, but, you hadn't the ready money to go to Cross Lane, to go, you just had to nip in the corner shop. There was no money to go and buy in.³⁹

Roberts commented that the Saturday night visit to their corner shop constituted a "high social occasion" among those women present who had a week's housekeeping at their disposal, which suggests that a day's temporary affluence was the high point of their week, just as the receipt of a wage packet was the key to the celebration of Saturday as a day of leisure among working-class men.⁴⁰

Others could not afford to use the corner shops or the markets. The insecurity of working-class life was such that, at least up to 1920, some simply had to scavenge for their food. Mary Bertenshaw told how she was taken by a lodger in Angel Meadow to Smithfield market on a Saturday morning, while the market operated as a wholesale more than a retail outlet, to join the weekly scramble for bruised fruit discarded by the traders. This was a different marketplace ritual, but it was a regular event, and she noted that her companion received greetings from others present.⁴¹



Shudehill Hen Market, c. 1900.

Hawkers were another source of cheap provisions, selling meat, fish, bread, and fruit and vegetables, around the streets in the first half of the nineteenth century. Engels noted that their produce was often of poor quality, sometimes consisting of the market traders' discarded stock, but hawkers offered economy and convenience, and continued to play an important role in working-class life in the 1930s.⁴² Salford and Hulme families could turn to Markendales for cheap meat during the week in the 1900s, buying lips, skins and ears supplied by the nearby Water Street abattoir. This practice would be enough to earn the derision of those better-off, but respectability sometimes took second place to necessity.⁴³

Butchers faced the same problems with storage as market traders, and consequently were forced to hold pavement auctions on Saturday nights, offering an alternative to the markets throughout the period from the 1840s to the 1930s.⁴⁴ Many women therefore stayed in their own neighbourhoods, but others took advantage of both locations. Mrs. Roberts grew up in Ordsall between the wars, and she recalled joining her grandmother's shopping expeditions. They went to Shudehill for meat, cake and vegetables, and "... always come back loaded with stuff".⁴⁵ In fact, this food was shared with her own mother, and represented their main shopping trip for the week. But her grandmother also took her to Tatton Street in Ordsall:

But I'll tell you what, on Tatton Street, there used to be the butchers ... shouting and bawling, er, they'd have a shoulder, neck end, sausage, liver, for so much ... and the other one'd be shouting what he'd got in his parcels. So, me and me grandma, we used to walk down ... And she'd say, 'We'll chance him this week' ... so the week after we'd go, we'd chance another one to see which was the best, the, the meat parcels ... Tatton Street was a, it was a gold mine down there.⁴⁶

But as her husband pointed out, the traders were not

alone in having trouble storing fresh food, especially in the summer, which gave him good cause to remember times when hot weather caused problems:

... some of the summers were very good, and er, I've seen bones move in a bag, with maggots, that's the God's honest truth, when they've been left. Y'see there was no fridges, what they had, they had ice boxes, and the sun, the heat would turn those blocks of ice into water in no time.⁴⁷

But little food was wasted. If a family bought home more food than was needed, neighbours would be likely to benefit within the networks of mutual aid between housewives upon which working-class women frequently depended. Mrs. Bennett's mother went from Greengate to the Shambles to do her Saturday night shopping:

... by the time they were finished, we'd got kippers, a piece o' cod, a bit o' plaice, a rabbit ... So he'd say, 'Well there y'are Hetty, sixpence'. And me mother'd come home. Well she'd be able to give some of the poor people (in the street) a bit o' that because we couldn't eat it all.⁴⁸

Her mother was in a privileged position, as she dealt with a trader for whom her husband had done some decorating work, earning her this favoured treatment. But her account of her mother's relationship with other women in the street shows that this custom was not confined to the poorest sections of the working class. Contemporary journalists sometimes thought they saw the least wealthy people from the two cities doing their shopping in the town centre on a Saturday night, but this oral evidence points to the people left behind in Greengate, who were hidden from the journalist's view.

The search for cheap food from the Saturday night markets was therefore one of the range of budgeting strategies adopted by women as household managers. Both oral and documentary sources stress that the markets were busier on Saturday nights than any other time, and suggest that they were a popular resort.

However, it is impossible to gauge the precise size of the crowds who attended, and I have indicated several other devices for stretching family budgets in order to emphasize the variety of women's experience.⁴⁹ This variety in household management was reflected in differences in women's experiences of leisure, as many women stayed in their own neighbourhoods on a Saturday night, foregoing the bargains and the entertainment on offer at Shudehill or the Flat Iron. However, retrospective accounts confirm that the trip to market was a mixed activity, attracting women and men, and this forms an important contrast with the uneven access between the sexes which marked other areas of popular leisure. Women enjoyed fewer opportunities for leisure than men, bearing most of the burden of running the home. Moreover, married women were likely to spend a much smaller proportion of the family budget on recreation than their husbands.⁵⁰

The sales patter and the performances of the stall holders, known locally as *spielers*, were designed to appeal to both women and men and therefore reflected the balance of their audiences. Richard Heaton was born in the same Salford 'village' as Robert Roberts in 1901, into what Roberts called the 'undermass'. He found work as a carter, and was married in the early 1920s.⁵¹ Shortly after his marriage, he went on a three-day week, but "Conditions gradually became a little better. I was back working full time again and we were able to go out occasionally. One of our favourite spots was Smithfield market on Saturdays". Black puddings, barmcakes and whelks could be bought on the market as a treat, but "... there was plenty of fun to be had for free", especially in the antics of characters amongst the traders like "Mad Jack" who sold confectionery, and "a pot man from Oldham who had you in tucks". During the early days of his marriage, this was a valued form of free leisure for a young couple with little money to spare for amusement.⁵² Mr. Peters was born in Lower Broughton in 1910, and he gave a description of Salford's Cross Lane market:

But the real entertainers were the market stall holders themselves.

Were they?

Oh they were, they were comedians in their own right, oh you could go round Salford market, Cross Lane market .. and y'could get a week's entertainment in half an hour from these traders ... oh there were some real characters, we had one feller ... he could juggle with plates, like nobody's business. That's what he sold, he sold crockery .. he'd be throwing them all over the place .. he'd open 'em out in a fan, throw 'em up in the air and catch 'em all as they come back ... and he was a spieler. In other words he could tell, really tell the tale y'know ... he'd always have a crowd round his stall because he was a good entertainer, oh yes.

So there'd be people watching as well as people who were interested in buying?

Oh yes, oh yes, well more watching than buying 'cause they hadn't got a lot of money in those days...⁵³

The traders who sold by Dutch auction had a routine which thrived on audience participation. Elsie Osman described Flat Iron market in the 1920s:

Were there any characters amongst them?

Oh yes .. especially the men that sold the pots .. and the men that sold like shoddy goods, that were no good really, but they made you believe that you were buying fantastic things y'know. And er, the spielers,

they call them the spielers, and they had a way with them y'know, they'd sell ice to eskimoes them fellers ... the way they used to talk. And all the women used to fall for it ... (the greengrocers on the market) they'd say, 'Right, so-many pounds of tomatoes there, am I asking sixpence?' And the women'd shout, 'No!' 'Am I asking fivepence even?' 'No!' ... he'd get as low as he could, but y'know, with making a profit. And then you'd see, hear one woman say, 'I'll have that' ... he used to chuck 'em, perhaps she'd get a pound of tomatoes for twopence or threepence ... it was a way of life, all the women used to love to shout 'No!' and all ...⁵⁴

The market was a place where married women behaved fairly boisterously, there is nothing subdued in the routine described in this oral evidence.⁵⁵ The stall holders were entertainers, and recognised as such. In interviews, many people stress that it was the fact that this amusement in itself cost nothing which accounted for the popularity of the markets as a Saturday night rendezvous. As Mrs. Bennett put it: "Oh, you could spend a night and not spend a penny".⁵⁶

Like the *spielers*, the quack doctors, or 'crocuses' were expert entertainers, who knew the economic value of holding a crowd. Mrs. Bennett described a quack at Shudehill between the wars.

... there used to be a woman there, make your hair grow lovely. And they used to have bottles of this stuff ... you'd see all men stood there .. and she'd have her hair right down her back, oh it was beautiful .. a man'd be stood next to her and he'd have a great big long mop of hair like they have it now, oh all stood out miles ... and then you'd see men with bald heads going up. 'Anybody out of the audience now, 'd like me to massage their scalp?' And they'd go up, and they'd have their scalp massaged. And then he'd say, 'A shilling a bottle. In six months you'll have the most beautiful head of hair that you ever did see.' 'Course men half canned 'd buy a bottle ...⁵⁷

Some men combined a trip to the market with a drinking session on a Saturday night, which confirms that this custom appealed to people who did have spare cash for recreation, as well as those without.



Women gather around a crockery stall in Flat Iron Market, c 1900.

Buskers were another source of entertainment around the marketplaces, and their performances were free to watch, unless you had some spare cash and felt obliged, or inclined, to pay something. The buskers around the markets varied in style as much as the itinerant entertainers who worked in the streets of the two cities through into the 1930s. In Bolton market on the eve of the First World War, the poorest buskers, in appearance, looked like tramps, and stood in rags playing tin whistles or mouth organs, or singing. Others were more sophisticated entertainers, and their performances could be distinctly Lancastrian in style:

And then they had the clog dancers of course ... they used to come on the market as well, and they'd get a little crowd round them and perhaps three or four men ... they'd start this clog dance then for a few coppers ... to see a real clog dancer, is an art, y'know, in itself ... the way that you could clap your clogs together ... and do all these fancy steps ... oh and the spoons, the spoon player that would, he'd come with two spoons between his fingers, and er, he'd be rattling these spoons ... and they had a way of rattling them together with their fingers like that to get the tune out of them ... and there was the, the diablo man an' all, he'd stand there with his .. they were like bobbins (on a string) ... he could open his arms wide and get his strings whirling like this ... he would lift his arms up in the air and he could make it slide down this string, from one hand to the other ... and then he'd get two, two bobbins, and he could have one up in the air, while one was spinning on the string below.⁵⁸

Working-class youths had their own uses for this custom. In the contemporary literature, the pastime is discussed as an activity favoured by young males, who were allowed a greater freedom of movement by parents than their sisters. In 1905, Charles Russell claimed that "nearly all Manchester lads" made the Saturday night trip to Smithfield,⁵⁹ and comparisons may be drawn with the Sunday evening 'monkey runs' which took place in various thoroughfares in Manchester and Salford.⁶⁰ Although lacking the 'picking-up' dimension of the 'monkey-runs', the Saturday night wander around Shudehill provided another communal leisure form, in which participation cost nothing. As with adults, the custom could be an alternative to other forms of entertainment, or could also be used to fill out an evening which also included a visit to a commercial venue. This suited youths well, appealing to their gregarious nature which struck many middle-class commentators, without making additional demands on the pocket. Noting the popularity of the custom for many years past, Russell claimed that:

Sometimes the chance of picking up a small bargain at one of the stalls is the attraction but on the whole it seems to be a desire to see their fellows and to talk over with other lads, whom they may not see again for another week, their various doings in the football field, or the successes and disasters of 'City' or 'United'. Working lads generally change into their Sunday clothes, or, in their own expressive language, 'tuff themselves up', for Saturday night, and even if they have been to a concert, a theatre, or a music hall, will take a tour round 'the market' before finally going home ... Crowded as it is with young folk, mainly youths, surprisingly little disorder of any kind prevails; the lads are quite content to promenade up and down the long central avenue, meeting and talking with their friends. Strange as the custom is, it

is a harmless one, and it would be well if the boys were acquainted with no more injurious way of spending their Saturday evenings than this.⁶¹

As Russell observed, most lads were attracted by the prospect of amusement rather than bargains. However, they recognised the value of this form of free entertainment. In Joe Toole's words: "The open market was a free attraction, and extremely welcome when you were broke."⁶² Fred Roberts walked to Shudehill with a gang of friends from Miles Platting as a teenager in the late 1890s: "We always went to Shudehill market every Saturday night. All the young people did; there were no pictures or anything like that".⁶³ Yet as Russell acknowledged, there were music-halls and theatres as counter attractions in the early 1900s, so the popularity of Shudehill cannot be explained solely in terms of an absence of commercialised facilities for leisure. Frank Doran was born in 1901, and toured Shudehill on Saturday nights after attending Hugh Oldham Lads' Club, listening to the spielers, then heading for 'Suckers Alley', the main row of ice-cream stalls.⁶⁴ Like Fred Roberts, he went with his mates. His mother did her Saturday night shopping on Oldham Street, at a butcher's which sold cheap meat around 11.30.⁶⁵ Freedom from domestic responsibility allowed him a freedom of movement which was denied to his mother. She was one of those married women who shopped alone on Saturday night, staying nearer to home.

Moreover, oral evidence illustrates the survival of this youth pastime in the interwar period, among young and old teenagers of either sex:

... did you ever go to the Flat Iron market in Salford? Yes. Only as a youngster .. they'd throw something to get us out o' the road, because we weren't buying anything, we was only stood in front o' the spiler .. they used to cart us because we was only stood in front with no intention of buying anything because we had no money.

How old were you when you did that?

Oh, twelve, thirteen ...⁶⁶

Mr. Peters went to Cross Lane market in his late teens, around 1930:

... we used to go round the market .. and watch all the other mugs spending the money, when we couldn't because we hadn't got any to spend, so you'd get a night's entertainment like that.

How old would you be when you were doing that?

... as late as twenty, before I went to Birmingham ...⁶⁷

The growth of the cinema and the dance hall in the interwar period must have affected the numbers of youths who went to the markets on a Saturday night. Manchester was at the forefront of innovation in the leisure industry, with 111 cinemas by 1914, and an additional 17 in Salford,⁶⁸ but oral evidence suggests that the expansion of commercial recreation, even in the interwar period, did not destroy this older, nineteenth-century urban youth custom. The monkey run also survived through the 1930s.⁶⁹ Communal forms of free leisure clearly continued to play a central role in popular youth culture.

The Saturday night trip to market was a working-class custom. Mr. Aston's father, who worked on the grain elevator on the Salford docks, went with his wife and two of their children to Shudehill, "that was a beehive". As he put it, the market on a Saturday morning was for individual shoppers with a pony and trap, and fur coats, to go and buy their pheasants. "Our turn" came during the



Flat Iron Market, 1933.

evening when fish, meat and poultry were sold off cheaply.

So then in that day there was two markets, one for the fur coat and one for the feller with the clogs, and that was how it went ... oh it was shouting out galore, oh shouting out, it was alive, you could hardly move, everybody was buying but everything had to be sold.⁷⁰

This class dimension left working people with last choice of the day's produce. In the 1840s Engels claimed that this often consisted of rotten meat, which demonstrated the paucity of the poorest working-class diets.⁷¹ Interviews covering the early twentieth century stress the value of the food bought in this way towards maintaining a family's regular diet, and by contrast are much more positive in tone, reflecting the improved municipal supervision of the quality of food sold in the markets during the late nineteenth century.⁷²

All this activity in the city centre was simply too much for some observers, from outside the working class, to comprehend. Frank Jordan braved the Manchester crowds in 1904 in order to discover what caused people to cram into the principal streets and markets on a Saturday night. In Wither Grove he found:

... a scene of the wildest imaginable confusion. Hawkers, ice-cream vendors, auctioneers and rogues are littered up and down the street in a way calculated to turn the brain of any police officer or indeed any lover of order.⁷³

In between the author's gasps of dismay, it is easy to detect the hustle and bustle which appealed to city

dwellers of a hardier type. Jordan, who feared being "swallowed-up" by all this "human turmoil",⁷⁴ sought in vain to establish a rationale for these streets scenes:

I tried to find out how these people spent their evening, what they got for it, and what good it did them. As far as I could make out they wasted their time in wandering up and down in an aimless sort of way. The only thing they acquire from this wandering, I think, is a cold and the good it does them is nil.⁷⁵

Though he noticed a few women buying their Sunday dinner in the hen market, in the main part of Smithfield, he found: "In this market a great many people roam about, gazing at anything and everything, doing nothing in particular except wasting time".⁷⁶ Oral and autobiographical sources offer glimpses of how this custom in fact played an important part in the lifestyle of working people, affording the opportunity for cheap shopping, and cheap — or free — leisure, even where this appeared to an outsider to consist of doing nothing. Jordan failed to understand this Saturday night ritual because he did not appreciate the impact of poverty upon working-class culture, which dictated that 'doing nothing' was an essential leisure pursuit.⁷⁷

Shudehill Market and Salford's Flat Iron featured in the diversity of local working-class leisure pastimes and budgeting strategies. Oral evidence indicates that it was not just the very poorest who shopped there on a Saturday night; cheap food and clothing from the markets helped to balance the weekly budget in a range of working-class households, including families with regular incomes in addition to those who depended on unemployment



Shudehill Market, 1939. It is unclear what keeps the attention of the crowd on the right.

assistance or casual earnings. However, the markets were not universal haunts, and the trip to Shudehill was one of a series of strategies adopted by individual housewives. This variety in approaches to household management was mirrored by the diversity of popular entertainment. A walk around the marketplace was an alternative to more notorious pastimes like drinking. Shudehill or the Flat Iron also offered the prospect of a good night out. For the inhabitants of working-class districts like Ordsall, the trip to Shudehill was a trip to 'town', providing a welcome break from neighbourhood life.⁷⁸ Moreover, the market area was clearly a place where working people of both sexes felt at ease, and enjoyed themselves, taking full advantage of the spectacle and audience participation provided by some of the traders.

Shoppers made the markets commercially viable, but many visitors went as "gaping sight-seers", whilst others combined business with pleasure. Clearly, the distinction between leisure and domestic responsibility was often blurred in working-class homes, although this point has received little attention from historians who have generally been more concerned with the relation between work and leisure in industrial society, reflecting the tendency to concentrate on men's experience.⁷⁹ Descriptions of the Manchester and Salford markets provide striking evidence of husbands and wives spending their Saturday nights together. Moreover, this custom formed a family excursion, challenging the assumption that leisure was thoroughly segregated by gender and age during the nineteenth century.⁸⁰

The Saturday night market was an important fixture in the weekly rhythm of working-class life in the two cities throughout the period from 1840 to 1939. This evidence of continuity in working-class leisure patterns contrasts sharply with the emphasis upon the transformation of entertainment in the late nineteenth century, and the interwar period, which has been the focus of much of the best historical writing on leisure. It is clear that the neglect of informal recreations by historians has hidden the durability of some of the popular pastimes of the first half of the nineteenth century. The wander around the market was a form of free entertainment which may be contrasted with alternative, commercial amusements, like the music hall and the cinema. Crucially, there was no admission fee at Shudehill. In the early decades of the twentieth century, this custom still attracted many whose weekly spending on leisure was limited. The trip to the market appealed to people who spent only part of their Saturday night in the pub, but also to those like Richard Heaton, who found at various points of their lives that they had virtually no spare cash for leisure. Poverty still shaped the use of working-class leisure during the 1930s, and despite the advances in commercial entertainment the impressive vigour and diversity of the working-class culture which had developed in Manchester and Salford by the interwar period owed much to the lasting appeal of communal, and informal, amusements like a visit to the market.

NOTES

1. This article is based upon research for a Cambridge University Ph.D. thesis on 'Working Class Leisure in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1940'. I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Alistair Reid, for a series of discussions of themes raised here. I am grateful to Dermot Healy for his useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Unless otherwise stated, oral history interviews were conducted as part of my research. I am indebted to all the people who took part in the interviews for their assistance and hospitality. Pseudonyms have been used to preserve the anonymity of the respondents.
2. Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole* (Harmondsworth, 1983) p.54.
3. For example, E.J. Hobsbawm 'The Formation of British Working Class Culture' in his *Worlds of Labour* (1984).
4. F. Jordan, 'A Night in the City', *Odds and Ends*, L (1904) p.323-4.
5. Most of the evidence used in this study refers to Smithfield Market in Manchester, known locally as Shudehill, the name of the district around the market; and the Flat Iron Market situated on the ground around Trinity Church in Salford. Supplementary evidence refers to Salford's Cross Lane Market and Bolton Market. For detailed information on the extent and macro-economic role of markets in Manchester and surrounding towns in the 1920s, see H. Clay and K. Russell Brady, *Manchester at Work: A Survey* (1929) ch.VI.
6. For Manchester and Salford markets, see R. Scola, 'Food Markets and Shops in Manchester 1770-1870', *Journal of Historical Geography*, volume 1, no.2, 1975, p.153-168. On the administration of the Manchester markets, see A. Redford, *The History of Local Government in Manchester*, volume 3 (1940), chapter XXXII.
7. The principal studies of leisure in this period include P. Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control* (1978); H. Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution, 1780-1880* (1980) and S.G. Jones, *Workers at Play: A Social and Economic History of Leisure 1918-1939* (1986); none of which mentions markets as an arena for leisure.
8. Engels described the system whereby workers received their wages, and the role of Saturday night markets in the 1840s, in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Oxford, 1971 ed.) p.80. Greenwood attached considerable importance to the special atmosphere of Saturday as pay day in the 1930s, *There was a Time* (1976), p.26.
9. Felix Folio, *The Hawkers and Street Dealers of the North of England Manufacturing Districts ...* (2nd ed, Manchester, 1858). Page used the pseudonym because the book consisted of observations of the deceptions practised by the traders, some of whom he had interviewed.
10. *Ibid.* p.32.
11. *Ibid.* p.72-4.

12. Ibid. p.77.
13. See C. Hindley (ed.), *The Life and Adventures of a Cheap Jack. By One of the Fraternity* (1876) which describes the profession in the 1840s.
14. Page. *Hawkers*, p.37-56.
15. Ibid. p.27-8. F. Jordan described gambling conducted in a similar style. *Night in the City*, p.331-2.
16. Page. *Hawkers*, p.31-2.
17. Anon. 'A Ramble through Shudehill Market'. *Free Lance*, vol.2, no.53, 1867, p.200-1.
18. Ibid. p.201.
19. Anon. 'Shudehill Market — Saturday, Eight p.m.'. *Shadow*, 16 April 1870, p.243-4.
20. Ibid. p.244.
21. Anon. 'A Stroll in Shudehill', *City Lantern*, IV, no.190, 17 May 1878, p.271.
22. Ibid. p.271.
23. On drinking, see V. Hey, *Patriarchy and Pub Culture* (1986).
24. Anon. 'Revival of the Flat Iron Market', *City Jackdaw*, IV, no.205, 17 October 1879, p.391.
25. Ibid. p.391.
26. R. Roberts, *The Classic Slum* (Harmondsworth, 1973) p.39.
27. W.H. Wood, *The History of Salford* (Salford, 1890) p.12.
28. *Salford Weekly Chronicle*, 5 Dec. 1885.
29. *Manchester Evening News*, 19 July 1904; *Manchester Guardian*, 26 May 1906. See also the manuscript autobiography by Jack Lanigan, *Thy Kingdom Did Come*, held in Brunel University Library, p:7-8.
30. *Manchester Guardian*, 26 May 1906.
31. *Manchester City News*, 17 Sept. 1908; *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, 6 Oct. 1908; *Manchester City News*, 23 May 1925; *Manchester Guardian*, 31 July 1925; *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, 12 June 1939; *Manchester City News*, 17 June 1939.
32. Manchester Studies Tape Collection (hereafter M.S.T.C.), held at Manchester Polytechnic; Tape no.556/7. Respondent born 1903. Ordsall.
33. A. Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, (Manchester, 1973) p.26.
34. Interview with Mrs. E.H. Born 1904, Bolton. Father a domestic servant (gardener). Respondent the oldest of nine children. In a study of Barrow and Lancaster between 1890 and 1914, Elizabeth Roberts noted that cheap meat and vegetables could be obtained from the market by those who waited until late on Saturday night. 'Learning and Living — Socialisation outside School', *Oral History*, vol.3, no.2, 1975, p.15.
35. E. Osman, *For the Love of Ada ... and Salford* (Swinton, 1984) p.16-17.
36. Interview with Mrs. B.D. Born 1925, Greengate. Father a timber carrier.
37. Roberts described Saturday afternoon treks to Shudehill by youths from his village in *A Ragged Schooling* (Manchester, 1976) p.204-5.
38. See Roberts, *Classic Slum*, p.81-3, 105.
39. C. Bundy and D. Healy in 'Aspects of Urban Poverty', *Oral History*, 6, no.1, 1978, p.86.
40. Roberts, *Ragged Schooling*, p.8-9.
41. M. Bertenshaw, *Sunrise to Sunset: A Vivid Personal Account of Life in Early Manchester* (Manchester, 1980) p.79-80.
42. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*, p.80; Osman, *For the Love of Ada*, p.29.
43. R. Heaton, *Salford my Home Town* (Swinton, 1982) p.1
44. Engels, *Condition of the Working Class*, p.80.
45. Interview with Mrs. G.R. Born 1918, Ordsall. Father was a checker on the railway.
46. Ibid. See also Greenwood, *There was a Time* (1976) p.26.
47. Interview with Mrs. B.R. Born Ordsall, 1913. Father a dock labourer, died in 1920. Mother took in washing.
48. M.S.T.C. 816. Born 1907, Greengate. Mother a widow, machinist. Brother born in 1891 at home.
49. For an analysis of women as household managers, see E. Roberts, *A Woman's Place* (Oxford, 1984).
50. Manchester University Settlement, *Ancoats: A Study of a Clearance Area* (Manchester, 1945) p.21.
51. Heaton, *Salford*.
52. Ibid. p.16.
53. Interview with Mrs. J.P. Born 1910, Lower Broughton. Mother ran a boarding house near the racecourse.
54. Interview with Elsie Osman.
55. The lack of published research on married women's leisure means that we know little about any other opportunities for this kind of behaviour.
56. M.S.T.C. 816.
57. Ibid.
58. Interview with Mrs. E.H.
59. C.E.B. Russell, *Manchester Boys: Sketches of Manchester Lads at Work and Play* (1984 reprint) p.29.
60. The monkey runs attracted groups of young people of either sex, who used the walk for strolling, and as an opportunity to meet people of the opposite sex. Salford's monkey runs included Lower Broughton Road, Regent Road, Liverpool Street, Ellor Street and Eccles New Road.
61. Russell, *Manchester Boys*, p.29.
62. J. Toole, *Fighting through Life* (1935) p.37.
63. F. Roberts, taped recollections published as *Memories of a Victorian Childhood and Working Life in Miles Platting, Manchester* (Swinton, 1983).
64. F. Doran, *Down Memory Lane*, manuscript autobiography held in the Local History Department of Manchester Reference Library; p.23.
65. Ibid. p.13.
66. Interview with Mr. B.R.
67. Interview with Mr. J.P.
68. R. Low, *The History of the British Film, 1906-1914* (1949) p.51.
69. Interview with Mrs. B.D.
70. M.S.T.C. 780. Respondent born 1900, grew up on Trafford Park estate.
71. Engels, *Condition of the Working Class*, p.80-1.
72. Redford describes the work of the Markets and Sanitary Committees in *The History of Local Government in Manchester* vol.3, p.75-6.
73. Jordan, *Night in the City*, p.325.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid. p.328.
76. Ibid. p.333.
77. Other forms of working-class leisure, like lounging on street corners, were also described in this way. I have argued elsewhere that such forms of 'killing time' were in fact central to recreation in poorer districts. (Chapter on 'Street Life' in my forthcoming thesis.)
78. Interview with Mr. B.R.
79. See R. McKibbin, 'Work and Hobbies in Britain, 1880-1950', in J. Winter (ed.) *The Working Class in Modern British History* (Cambridge, 1983).
80. This contrasts with the claim that during the Victorian period, the seaside holiday was exceptional as a form of leisure which brought families together; found in J. Walvin, *Leisure and Society 1830-1950* (1978) p.77.