

Sports Centres and their Wider Cultural Context

Question -What do the following jobs have in common?

Vet, Doctor, Teacher, Lawyer, Hotelier, Prison Warder, Shopkeeper, Vicar, Marketing Executive, Salesman, Radio DJ, Rag and Bone Man, Civil Servant and Dinner lady?

The answer of course is that they all have T.V. sitcoms based on their professions! (If you want a quiz question – name as many British T.V sitcoms as you can, based on these jobs? - Answers at the bottom of the page!)

As a relatively new profession (est. 1966) sports centre managers gained the dubious honour of joining this distinguished list in 1991 with the appearance of “The Brittas Empire.” Based on the well-meaning but incompetent manager of the fictional Whitbury Town Leisure centre, the show ran for 7 series from 1991 to 1997 and in all had 53 episodes including two Christmas specials plus a “Children in Need” sketch.

Gordon Brittas the eponymous lead was played by Chris Barrie who also starred in the spin-off, “Get fit with Brittas” (an early indication that fitness would come to dominate leisure centres?) He is supposed to have been trained at the fictional Aldershot Leisure Centre (possibly indicating a previous military career) not to be confused with the real Aldershot Pools and Fitness Centre or the Aldershot Garrison Sports Centre both run in partnership with Rushmore Borough Council. His propensity for coming up with half-baked ideas, upsetting staff and customers says little for the quality of that training. Some indoor and all of the outdoor location shots are actually of Ringwood Leisure Centre in Hampshire.



The Cast of “The Brittas Empire.” Gordon Brittas (Chris Barrie) Centre Front Row

The cast of characters includes an efficient and supportive female deputy manager, a dim-witted and medically suspect caretaker, a receptionist who keeps her children in her desk drawers (!) and a local Councillor who is constantly plotting Brittas’ dismissal and his exasperated and unfaithful wife.

Many real life centre managers, although appalled by the portrayal of their profession, enjoyed the humour and in some cases empathised with the problems of managing some of the problems associated with balancing the needs of staff, customers and politicians in the series. Most would

have been certain, however, that they would have been more competent in dealing with them than the hapless Brittias (some wishful thinking?)

Many outside the profession considered “The Brittias Empire” to be an accurate reflection on how centres were managed, a comment also later associated with the BBC’s “mockumentary” “Twenty-Two” which sent up the organisation of the London Olympics in another sports administration sitcom.

Various episodes of “The Brittias Empire” can be found on YouTube and other internet sites for anyone who missed it or would like to catch up.

Another widely accepted hurdle which any profession or social phenomenon needs to overcome if it is to be taken seriously and truly considered part of the national culture was achieved by sports centres in 1993 with the opening of the Leisure Centres in Radio 4’s “The Archers.” As well as a centre near to Ambridge at Felpersham which has a gym and pool as well as a sports hall, Borchester, the County town of Dorsetshire, has a larger centre with a wider range of facilities, although these are never spelt out in detail. Being part of the lives of “every day country folk” made centres a British cultural norm. Although both centres were mentioned in various episodes when Ambridge residents took advantage of the facilities, they were never a regular storyline, unlike the health club at the Grey Gables Hotel in Ambridge opened by then owner, Jack Woolley, which featured in several storylines in Britain’s favourite radio soap opera.

Even Craggy Island off the coast of Ireland and fictional home of “Father Ted” had its own sports centre which featured prominently in one of the 24 episodes of this series. The episode, called the “The all Priests 5-a-side, over 75’s indoor football challenge” is clearly a response to the Sports Council “50 plus and all to play for” campaign! There was also a curious real life footnote to this episode when two of the Arran Isles, both of which claimed to be the original Craggy Island (for tourist promotion purposes) were encouraged to settle the issue with a 5-a-side football match!

In the 1990’s and later many T.V. cop shows also featured their protagonists emerging from a vigorous work out on a squash court or discussing the current case in the changing rooms after some sporting encounter in a sports centre.

However, there is a more serious and realistic aspect to the role of sports centres in the broader cultural life of many of our communities.

We are all now familiar with TV pictures beamed from election counts during national election night broadcasts when tables full of ballot papers are set out amid badminton court markings while the count takes place and later the returning officer and candidates can be seen standing underneath a basketball backboard as the result is declared or a victorious politician interviewed from a viewing gallery with the sports hall in the background.

As well as election counts, Sports Halls have been used for a wide variety of political meetings and events from manifesto launches, to meetings and rallies.



Arthur Scargill addressing a rally of miners at Afan Lido during the miners' strike 1984-85

Of even more serious consequence to some communities is the role which centres are asked to play in the course of local emergencies. Written into most Local Authority statutory Local Emergency Plans is the need for local centres to provide “rest centres” in case people are forced to leave their homes in case of an emergency. Sports centre managers are often designated as “Rest Centre Coordinators” in such circumstances and are responsible for meeting the temporary emergency accommodation needs of large numbers of displaced people.

The most recent example, at the time of writing, was the use of the Westway Sports Centre as emergency accommodation for the residents of the fire-ravaged Grenfell Tower in June 2017 following the disaster which overtook their homes in the London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

Dating back almost to the origins of sports centres, sports halls have become familiar to non-sporting members of their local communities through their use for a wide range of events and activities. Local Flower Shows, Dog Shows, Record Fairs, Trade and Employment Fairs, Beer Festivals and Model Railway Exhibitions are only some of the non-sporting leisure related events which regularly feature in the annual programmes of many centres. Smaller halls and rooms are used by business organisations and community groups for meetings and training seminars etc.



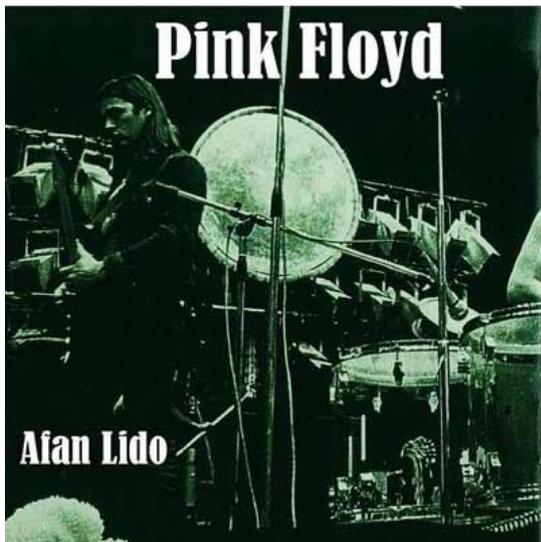
Dog Show at Whitton Sports Centre Ipswich 1984 – Ipswich Star



An Employment Fair - Newport Leisure Centre. South Wales

Halls in some communities have also been adapted, often as the only large accessible community space, for entertainment and arts purposes. As mentioned in Chapter 2 Afan Lido in its various incarnations hosted major acts from Tom Jones to Coldplay via Pink Floyd and many others, although as a local music fan recalled about a Floyd concert in 1969-

“The final Floyd gig was in my home town and was the worst in terms of sound and atmosphere. The Afan Lido was a gymnasium (*sports hall actually!*) situated next to the swimming pool of the recently constructed Lido and it had the acoustics to match the pool. Basically a brick rectangle. “



Pink Floyd 1969

Modern sports halls have adopted more sophisticated techniques to attenuate sound problems. They have also become the venues for a wide variety of other arts and cultural events from plays to opera; orchestral concerts to art exhibitions



Shakespeare's Globe Company perform on their UK tour at Lancing Manor Leisure Centre. West Sussex

All of these activities help to make centres a focus of community cultural life. The re-designation of “leisure” as “culture” (witness the Department of Culture, Media and Sport) could not have phased centre managers who have almost from the beginnings of their profession regarded themselves as part of the wider cultural life of their communities.

In the 1980's the Sports Council's Technical Unit for Sport (TUS) worked co-operatively with what was at the time the Arts Council's Housing the Arts Division on a joint initiative to house both sport and arts in a single building. The concept, rather unimaginatively called a “SPARTS” Centre never took off; partly due to the unwillingness of the Arts Council to become involved in capital funding (at

the time before the lottery its sole role was revenue funding for arts organisations) and partly due to the unwillingness of partner organisations to come forward to jointly fund and promote the idea. The concept was in essence an enlarged village hall type structure with a proscenium arch stage at one end of an 8 badminton court sports hall. By designing the changing accommodation to also double up as backstage dressing rooms and the entrance as an enhanced foyer, the partners hoped to produce a combined performance and activity space which would be adaptable for both uses.

A number of centres, for example Billingham Forum and Stevenage Leisure centre were built with theatres and sports halls in separate envelopes and the nearest to the “SPARTS” Concept was probably the Carlisle Sands Centre (below)



Many modern centres have taken the concepts of co-location further incorporating libraries, doctors surgeries, wellness centres, police offices and other community assets in the same building. Examples include the “Life Centres” operated by HALO Leisure for Bridgend County Borough Council. Bridgend Life Centre, Ogmere Vale Life Centre, Garw Valley Life Centre and Maesteg Sports centre all incorporate libraries as well as a full range of sports centre facilities.



The Library at
Bridgend Life
Centre

There is a well-considered argument that the emergence of sports clothing as a fashion item can be traced, in part, directly to the development of indoor sports centres. Before the advent of indoor centres the likelihood that anyone would walk the streets in muddy football kit or a heavy tracksuit was the province of only small boys with muddy knees. However, the opportunity to play sport in

warm, dry centres which offered showers and social facilities made it possible for customers to arrive and depart from sports centres in the clothing they would wear for their sport.



Sports fashion from the 1970's/80's/ 90's/2000's left to right

The contemporaneous development of flexible, man made fabrics such as nylon, polyester and later Lycra, spandex and cotton polyester blends also encouraged companies such as Adidas, Puma, Gola and Nike to produce clothing which was equally at home on the sports court or the High Street. These companies also identified the attraction of using sports stars as marketing aids to promote their brands.



Jahangir Khan, Bjorn Borg and Michael Jordan (above) are among those who have promoted their own or others' brands.

The evolution of the "sports training shoe" into the "Trainer" followed a similar path as indoor sports did not require a studded boot and the old fashioned gym shoe or plimsoll ("daps" to those who went to school in South Wales!) was less suited to a hard sports hall floor than a padded shoe which was equally at home when worn in the street. Again the manufacturers first followed and then led the trend towards marketing desirable trainers to the affluent young who favoured style and the not so young who sought comfort.

Morgan Stanley estimate that globally the sports clothing market will be worth over 170 billion U.S Dollars in 2018 with the UK market alone estimated to be worth over £8bn and that strong growth is forecast especially in Asia meaning that by 2024 the global market will surpass \$224 bn. Nike alone generated revenues of almost \$35bn in 2017.

Summary

Many sports centres were characterised as a “blind box” (and often disparaged as such by architects!) However, the ability of centre managers to “think outside the box” meant that they had a much greater impact on the cultural lives of their communities than merely containers for sport and their reference in TV, radio and the wider cultural community reflects their importance in the wider world and society.

THG

Quiz Answers

There are no prizes and these answers may only be a selection of all results!

Vet; All Creatures Great and Small/ Beast/ Heading Out

Doctor; Doctor in the House (and various spin offs)/ Doc Martin/ Dr. Finley’s Casebook

Teacher; Teachers/ Man Down/ Mind Your Language/ Bad Education

Lawyer; Rumpole of the Bailey

Hotelier; Fawlty Towers/ Hotel Babylon

Prison Warder; Porridge

Shopkeeper; Open all Hours/ Are you Being Served

Vicar; Vicar of Dibley/ Rev. / All Gas and Gaiters/ Father Ted

Marketing Executive; Absolutely Fabulous

Salesman; The Office/ White Gold

Radio DJ; I’m Alan Partridge/ Knowing me, knowing you/ FM/ The Kit Curren Radio Show

Rag and Bone Man; Steptoe and Son

Civil Servant; Yes Minister/ Yes Prime Minister/ The Thick of it

Dinner lady; Dinnerladies