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Playing Bingo with Mum – and Dad!

RUTH CHERRINGTON*

THIS IS A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF PLAYING BINGO with my parents at various stages of our lives at our local working men’s club in Coventry – the Canley Social Club and Institute. I know these memories will resonate with those who have any experience of club life. They also touch upon wider issues such as the local community that used the club and the rules, both official and unofficial, related to bingo and other forms of low-level gambling in social clubs.

Working men’s clubs began to appear from the mid-19th century as alternative social spaces to the profit-taking pubs. As private members clubs, set up by the men themselves, only those who had paid membership subscriptions were allowed to use them. Gambling was forbidden but fundraising was necessary to buy premises, furniture, equipment, and to provide events such as outings and children’s parties. Whist drives, raffles and later bingo were popular forms of fundraising though how clubs should legally run these was subject to changing gambling



Figure 1 Photograph: Ruth and her dad in the Canley Social Club, 1983 (Ruth Cherrington’s private collection).

policies over the twentieth century. Increasing regulation laid down strict limits on what could be spent on tickets and paid out as prizes and clubs, with the volunteer management committee members having to keep up with the laws. Research into clubs, their history and development, including in terms of gambling, has been relatively scarce given that clubs in their post-war heyday had over four million members nationwide.

* Ruth Cherrington is a freelance writer and researcher. She works on the website. She taught Cultural and Media Studies for over 25 years. Her experience includes working in and with universities around the world as a lecturer, trainer and materials writer. In recent years she has returned more to her roots, researching and writing about the social clubs which were often at the heart of working class communities. Her own experiences of going with her family to the local club and becoming familiar from an early age with the social life that took place there subsequently inspired her to find out more about the club movement. Her outputs include a book on clubs *Not Just Beer and Bingo! A Social History of Working Men’s Clubs* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2012), the website www.clubhistorians.co.uk as well as journal articles. Playing bingo was a familiar club practice and ritual and Ruth’s has both personal insights as well as scholarly ones into this game. Ruth is currently writing about leisure and nightlife in her home-town of Coventry in the 1970s and 1980s.

THE CLUB ACROSS THE STREET

Our local club was conveniently situated just across the street from our house on a post-war council estate. Mum told us that Dad was thrilled to bits when plans for the clubs were drawn up in the late 1940s. Having a local place to drink and play games like billiards and cribbage over a pint or two meant he would no longer have to trek to his old haunts on the other side of town. Like many local men on the estate, he threw himself into setting up the new club on the land allocated by the Corporation specifically for that purpose. The club opened in a wooden hut in 1948 and affiliated to the Club and Institute Union in 1950.

I didn't know any of that as a very small girl who was taken over to the club in the late 1950s. By that time the club had become the main space for social life on the estate. Hundreds of families used it on a regular basis, not just as a place to have a drink or, indeed, to play bingo. It was an unofficial community centre for families, not only the men who were members. Having helped set it up from scratch, it felt a lot like their own club.

WATCH WITH MOTHER – AND LEARN HOW TO PLAY BINGO

Some of my first memories of the club are sitting and listening to a neighbour play piano in the small room with people singing along. It felt very cosy, friendly, and so close to home that it was like an extension of it. Much of the entertainment then was of this “do it yourself” variety: it's what's people could afford and what they wanted. In addition to the communal singing there would be a few games of “housey-housey” – also known as tombola and later more frequently as bingo. When someone won, the phrase often shouted out was “house!”

The game was fun for us kids as well as for the adults who could win small sums of money. We weren't allowed to play, of course, but could join in vocally when certain numbers were called out. There would be a collective response such as whistling for “legs eleven.” We also loved to join in the chant addressed to the bingo caller to “shake ‘em up!” Back then, the 90 bingo numbers were pulled out of a bag, so he did shake them up every now and then, the little number chips clicking together in the bag. These actions and sounds were part of the ritual, part of the communal pleasure of the game. The callers were all men back then, usually a club committee member. Years later when electronic machines selected the numbers and they were lit up on a screen, people would still occasionally shout out this phrase. Old habits die hard.

Gambling was not something that was in the original ideal of working men's clubs but had become established at a low level as a means of fundraising. Strict rules forbid gambling amongst members themselves with no changing of money allowed. But raffles and bingo, run by the clubs themselves, were common. Any profit made after prizes were handed out, as well as additional sales of drinks consumed by the players, would be put back into the club's coffers.

Children also loved going to the clubs for the concerts, bottles of pop (which were a treat for us), and the annual Christmas parties. These were organised by the parents, who were on hand dishing out sandwiches, trifles, and cakes.



Figure 2 Photograph: Children's Christmas party with mums and dads on hand, undated (Ruth Cherrington's private collection).

Our club expanded as more members joined and spent money there. Their subscriptions plus bar and other takings were all ploughed back into the club as it was not a profit-making entity. The ethos of working men's clubs was that they were set up by and for the members, not to line the pockets of landlords, breweries, or private individuals.

I remember being impressed by the new games rooms and later a fairly luxurious concert room. Many clubs invested in new rooms and refurbishments throughout the 1960s, moving away from the temporary structures they started off in after the war or from pre-war buildings.

I still enjoyed the basics of club life, as did many kids, of being there for bingo and entertainment. I sat next to Mum and learned from her how to play the game and what the rules were. I was not alone in drawing up a "pretend" bingo ticket on paper and marking off my numbers. She warned me not to shout out if I actually marked all the numbers as that would bring the wrath of the committee men down on us.

When a "line" or "house" was called, the ticket would have to be checked by another committee man to make sure all was in order. If there was more than one caller, this took longer – for us children, this was the more boring side of things. I was impatient for the next game to start. I was also impatient for the day when I could play with real tickets and have the chance to shout out loud if I won. Children were encouraged to collect the used tickets from tables at the end of the bingo session and put them in a big drum at the front of the room, and then one of us would be asked to

pull out a few. These would win their owners a pound or two, providing they had written their name on the back.

In this manner we learned the rules and the rituals of the game, sitting alongside our mothers whilst the men were in the games room or in lounge. Our dads would come down during the break to buy drinks and see if we'd won. We learned to be quiet while the numbers were being called out, apart from when we shouted out the permitted phrases.

Men did play bingo sometimes and did so increasingly as industrial decline and job losses escalated in my home-town, which was heavily reliant on the car industry. It wasn't just about winning a bit of "pin money" but being able to pay a bill or two. During the 1980s, the loss of manufacturing jobs meant fewer people using the club and those who did having less money to spend. The club's coffers suffered, and like many others at that time increasingly looked half empty and shabby. The raffles, which used to offer bottles of spirits or fancy ornaments as prizes, were offering joints of meat instead. These were more in demand when times were hard.

When I visited my parents, we still went to the club to play bingo, have a drink and watch the concert together. It's what we did as a family, a natural thing to do. But fewer people used the club due to short-time working and smaller pay packets, or unemployment and no pay packet at all. Simultaneously, home-based entertainment options were expanding, such as more TV channels and video players. Fewer young people were becoming members as they saw clubs as "old fashioned." Taken together, these all contributed to decreasing club attendance and more empty seats. The signs were not good but we always hoped the "old days" might return.

A decade later, in the 1990s, my dad himself was in decline due to Alzheimers taking hold. He still went to the club nearly every night, but it was becoming difficult for him as he could get lost just going over the road and back. Sometimes a friendly fellow club member would bring him home. He wanted to play bingo and we didn't discourage him because we thought it was good for his troubled brain, plus being out in company was better for him and Mum than staying home.

He'd automatically get out his pens and lay them on the table, just like the old days, then sit and wait patiently for the game to start, with a pint to hand. But the once-confident man who won prizes for bagatelle, billiards and bowls, now lacked confidence and looked confused. I'd help him mark his tickets as I marked my own, not wanting him to miss any numbers and trying to keep him in the game. It was a difficult struggle, almost an analogy for trying to keep him in something like a "normal" life, because for us that would be sitting round a table in the club playing bingo.



Figure 3: Photograph: Glass commemorating Canley Social Club's 40th anniversary (1990) of the affiliation to the Club and Institute Movement. (Ruth Cherrington's private collection).

We lost the struggle to keep him in the game. Finally, he couldn't come to play bingo with us anymore. His club days, which had accounted for such a large part of his life, were over.

It was just my Mum and I then. We went less frequently as she grew frailer, but she still liked to play a game when she could. The club was even emptier, down to dozens playing bingo rather than hundreds. We knew everyone there. It was still a community but a rapidly shrinking and older one. Faces were disappearing fast, leaving more vacant seats behind. The club laid on lunch-time bingo sessions for the elderly a few times a week and people would turn up in dial-a-ride. It was a decent gesture to give these older members a break from their lonely homes and a chance to be with friends in a familiar space.

For Mum it became a treat for me to take her over to the club. Roles had been reversed. She had taken me as a little girl, and I took her in a wheelchair when she was old. I still sat next to Mum, playing bingo but keeping an eye on her and her tickets, glancing now and then at the empty seat where Dad would have sat.

Once Mum had gone, I went a few times and played alone, in my parents' absence. I shouted loudly if I won and hoped they could hear me. Between the 1970s and early 2000s, over half of the 4000 CIU-affiliated clubs across the country closed. Many other clubs struggled to stay open with smaller memberships and falling income.

Our club is gone now, a thing of the past. Closed down, vandalised, then burnt down, nothing is left of the place that was the centre of the community for over 60 years. No-one plays bingo there anymore.

Statement of Interest:

I have never received any funding for any of my research