Introduction

‘England was gripped by gambling fever.’ ‘Men bet on political events, births, deaths – any future happening,’ while ‘Cards were the opium of the polite.’ So Roy Porter informed readers of his 1982 history of eighteenth-century English society.¹ It was a common observation in accounts of this period written in the second half of the previous century, being asserted by historians as different in type as J. H. Plumb and P. G. M. Dickson.² Gambling cut across gender and class boundaries, and its hold on society was, Gillian Russell remarked in 1980, one of the ‘enduring themes of eighteenth-century commentary’.³ Roger Munting, in his general history of gambling in Britain and the United States, published in 1996, asserted with equal assurance, ‘There is no doubt that this interest in gambling reached a peak in the eighteenth century and was one which affected all levels of society.’⁴

Insofar as general explanations were offered, two were favoured. In the first, gambling was viewed as a response to the harsh, brutal side to life in eighteenth-century England, performing an important role as a necessary, or entirely comprehensible at least, form of escapist pleasure-seeking. The second emphasized the impact of the changing moral and religious climate. According to this explanation, this was a period when restraints on pleasure were decisively loosened – wedged between what sceptical philosopher and historian David Hume was wont to

describe as the ‘gloomy spirit of the Puritans’ of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the Evangelically inspired respectability of the Victorians. This has the advantage at least of invoking a specific historical context; after all, misery and hardship were hardly peculiar inventions of the eighteenth century. If neither explanation was sufficient, however, it was still possible to invoke the idea that an impulse to gamble derived in some way from human nature, merely awaiting opportunities to find expression. Gambling was not a new phenomenon, going back to Roman times, if not earlier; it can also be found in most societies. When the chance arose, or was provided in a variety of new ways, as in England and Britain in this period, gambling inevitably flourished.5

More recent historical scholarship has tended to relegate gambling to the periphery of views of British society in the long eighteenth century. A recent book on the metropolitan fashionable elite includes not a single word on the subject.6 Studies of sport and recreation have also become less common than they were twenty years ago, which may partly explain it.7 It may also be because, while contemporary commentary on gambling is, as Russell says, abundant and has been studied in some detail,8 direct evidence for gambling is by its nature limited and highly selective. The silences are clamorous ones, and the question of how to interpret these is one to which we will need to turn at various points in this book.

More importantly, however, this neglect is symptomatic of major trends in the social and cultural history of the period during the last twenty years or so. To a quite striking degree these were set by Paul Langford in his now classic contribution to the New Oxford History of England series, A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1787 (Oxford, 1989). The main theme around which Langford’s account was organized was the growing influence of the urban middling sort. It was the achievement of this expanding, diversifying social stratum not just to create unexampled levels of economic dynamism and prosperity,

5 See e.g. John Habakkuk, Marriage, Debt and the Estates System: English Landownersh


7 Although see David Underdown, Start of Play: Cricket and Culture in Eighteenth-Century

England (London, 2000); Mike Huggins, Horse Racing and British Society in the Long

Eighteenth Century (Martlesham, 2018); Mike Huggins, ‘Popular Culture and Sporting

Life in the Rural Margins of Late Eighteenth-Century England: The World of Robert


8 Russell, ‘Faro’s Daughters’. See also Donna T. Andrew, Aristocratic Vice: The Attacks on

Duelling, Suicide, Adultery and Gambling in Eighteenth Century England (New Haven, CT

and London, 2013); Phyllis Deutch, ‘Moral Trespass in Georgian London: Gaming, Gender,

but to reshape society and the social order. They did so, Langford suggests, through a ‘revolution by conjunction’, quietly and subtly transforming cultural and social identities to reflect their priorities and preoccupations.\(^9\) The principal vehicle for this process was ‘politeness’, a set of values and code of manners which served to draw together the different elements of propertied society, and in so doing enabled the middling sort to gain enhanced social recognition whilst also subordinating the aristocratic elites, or at least a significant proportion of them, to the new cultural economy. This, amongst other things, led to the rise in the later eighteenth century of an increasingly sharp critique of aristocratic mores and culture, focused on upper class adultery and gambling.\(^10\) Where this left gambling practices is unclear – it coincided after all with what Langford dubbed ‘the age of vanity’ of the 1770s and 1780s, with its many episodes of high profile aristocratic delinquency, among which gaming featured prominently.\(^11\) Gambling was viewed, however, as an example of the immoral behaviour of an irresponsible aristocracy or conversely a dangerous contagion among the lower orders, the two groups positioned on opposite sides of the moral and social high-plateau inhabited by an increasingly self-assured middling sort. What we are seeing here is the prefiguring of patterns and divisions which are often seen as characterizing Victorian society. Where gambling features, in short, is mainly in terms of why opposition to it rose to become a powerful force in later Georgian England.

To be sure, not everyone accepts Langford’s portrayal of eighteenth-century English society. Notoriously, a few years prior to publication of Langford’s volume, Jonathan Clark portrayed England between 1660 and 1832 as an ‘ancien regime’, characterized, so he said, by the hegemonic influence of monarchy, aristocracy, and the established church.\(^12\) Others have sought to question Langford’s emphasis on emulation of those above them on the social ladder as the dominant and

\(^9\) Langford, \textit{Polite and Commercial People}, p. 67, where the author writes, ‘This was a revolution by conjunction rather than confrontation, but it was a revolution none the less, transforming the pattern of social relations, and subtly reshaping the role of that governing class which was the object of imitation.’

\(^10\) See also, more recently, in a work which in many ways mirrors and confirms Langford’s narrative, partly by emphasizing the role of the press as a vehicle of middling opinion, Andrew, \textit{Aristocratic Vice}.


\(^12\) J. C. D. Clark, \textit{English Society, 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancient Regime} (Cambridge, 1985). In the revised edition of this book, published in 2000, Clark pays greater attention to towns and politeness as forces in society, but portrays the latter, \textit{contra} Langford, as symptomatic of the cultural hegemony of the aristocracy and court.
binding social dynamic at work within the diverse middling sort, whilst at the same time questioning the extent of the influence of polite values and ideals at this level of society. The lives of many professionals, merchants, tradesmen, and shopkeepers were rather, it is argued, focused on industry, amenity, propriety, and self-government. This, in turn, meant contriving better means to regulate uncertainty and manage risk in their lives, which also meant, crucially, regulating themselves and those over whom they were expected to exercise control – wives, children, servants, and apprentices. Trade or the market on this view bred its own distinctive culture and values, with an emphasis on hard work, a rejection of ‘extravagance’, and strict, methodical accounting both for one’s conduct and income, an outlook which was (often) compatible with and reinforced by religious belief. In an economy which relied on widely extended chains of credit, such as prevailed in eighteenth-century England, an ideal of virtuous or prudential masculinity took an even tighter hold among the expanding ranks of the middling sort, while notions of female propriety, especially in respect of consumption and leisure, were constructed as complementary to this ideal. As Julian Hoppit neatly put it some years ago now, ‘credit went to the creditable’. Gambling, as a form of idleness and exemplifying rejection of self-government and equanimity, was something to be shunned and of which sternly to disapprove.


15 This is most starkly argued in Woodruff D. Smith, Consumption and the Making of Respectability (New York, 2002).

Or, as Janet Mullin proposes in an important exception to the general neglect of gambling, card playing was taken up and simultaneously tamed by middling people, being reconstituted as a near ubiquitous activity which served to confirm and inculcate their priorities of prudence and self-control. "The well documented restraint, moderation and discretion of the trade and professional classes", she declares, "permeated their hours away from work and shaped their choice of leisure activities, both in deciding what games to play and where and how to play them." On this view, Langford’s ‘polite and commercial people’ eagerly took to carding as an important element in their wider, developing culture of sociability. Typically, the games played – among which whist was pre-eminent – involved elements of calculation and cooperation, were for modest stakes, and were engaged in within strictly delimited time frames. Card playing was firmly embedded within a culture of gentility which emphatically lacked the individualistic performance, the hypercompetitiveness, the marathon sessions, and the heedless risk-taking which were (supposedly) the stuff of elite gambling. Alongside building and perpetuating social and business networks, card playing might also serve as a training for the young in the financial, numerical skills, and accounting which enabled the middling sort to exert greater control over themselves and their fortunes.

If there was a gambling mania in eighteenth-century Britain, therefore – we will shortly return to the question of Britain – the story to which more recent historiography seems to be leading us is one of a ‘mania’ that was being cumulatively drained of energy, or repressed, from the final third of the eighteenth century, if not earlier, and which was, in any case, less widespread than we might once have supposed. Or, more pointedly, oppositions between those who did and did not gamble were becoming more visible, pervasive, and decisive in impact. Certain qualifications to this account would be required. The early eighteenth century was hardly lacking after all in hostility to ‘immoral’ activities such as gambling, as testified to by the rise of the Reformation of Manners movement in the 1690s, which battled on with its campaign to eliminate ‘lewdness and bawdry’ for several decades in the face of mounting opposition and

17 Mullin, A Six Penny at Whist, p. 7. Mullin is fully aware that not all among the middling sort followed these protocols, that some among this group gambled in a much less prudent manner.

18 This is not to imply that self-presentation and concern about image were not very much part of the middling world of prudent card playing, but this was about subordination to a collective identity not a highly resistant, exhibitionist individualism.
indifference, before finally fizzling out in the later 1730s. It also presumes that attitudes towards gambling map fairly neatly onto social class or rank, a proposition which, while frequently repeated, is, as will be argued in subsequent chapters, highly doubtful.

I. A British ‘Gambling Mania’?

A new history, therefore, of gambling in eighteenth-century Britain should begin by looking afresh at the notion of a gambling mania which has cast its long historiographical shadow. It barely needs pointing out that the term is very ill-defined. It is, nevertheless, usually used in two, closely related senses: first, to imply a deep-seated and widespread impulse to gamble; and, second, to suggest something of the distinctive character of this impulse – as being marked by a peculiar intensity. Gambling, on this account, is portrayed as being essentially irrational.

To begin with the first of these notions – the remarkable social and geographical extent of the impulse to gamble: the salient question is not whether this was true – plenty of evidence for this will be provided at different points in this book – but how exceptional in this was eighteenth-century Britain. Was the eighteenth-century ‘gambling mania’ a peculiarly British phenomenon? Or, rather English, since it needs to be stated from the outset that Scottish society in this period has never been so described, and with good reason. For, even if the dread power of the ‘parish theocracy’ in Scotland can easily be exaggerated, the conjoined influences of the Kirk and a Calvinist Presbyterian religion that was overtly hostile to secular pleasures were evident enough. Scottish society was also significantly poorer than its neighbour to the south, while its urban and rural middling strata were smaller and collectively less influential before the early nineteenth century. Moreover, wealthy Scots disposed to gamble for large sums of money were more likely to do so in


20 This is not to deny the importance of the growing spirit of accommodation with secular currents in the Kirk, which lay behind the rise of so-called Moderate ascendancy from the middle of the eighteenth century. This, however, was not based on numerical or geographical hegemony, but political control; and the Popular Party remained well entrenched and dominant in many parishes, especially in the western lowlands.
London, Bath, or another of the English resort towns. We will meet several such people in this book.

Nevertheless, Scots in Scotland did gamble, albeit extant evidence for this is sparse. There was plenty of gambling, of various kinds, in the taverns which huddled on and off old Edinburgh’s main street, the High Street. In 1753, an Edinburgh vintner’s (wine merchant’s) was the site for a bet between a writer (lawyer) and a merchant for a hogshad of wine to see who could walk the fastest from the High Street to the top of Arthur’s Seat. 21 At the end of the eighteenth century, the infamous William ‘Deacon’ Brodie and his cronies were to be found gambling in clubs which met in taverns, such as Clark’s in Fleshmarket Close, one of the narrow alleys which ran off the High Street. 22 The rare glimpses afforded by the archives of gambling among the Scottish middling and lower orders suggest much more going on of this than that for which we have a record. In 1724, to cite one example, Robert Lermont and his wife were summoned before the Hawick kirk session for keeping a ‘gameing house’. Lermont had previously promised to desist from allowing ‘boyes and apprentices to resort to his house for gameing att ye cards’. He appeared before the session on 17 January, and was admonished for not keeping to his promise, but several days later he was back in trouble when it was reported ‘that manie did still haunt’ his house, for ‘gameing at cards’. Eight years earlier, a meeting of the same kirk session had rebuked several people, including the innkeeper where the incident took place, an excise officer, the town’s Baillie, and a merchant, for a brawl that had taken place after a raffle had been held to dispose of three-cornered hat. 23

Politics, war and diplomacy, and various sports – golf, bowling, cock-fighting, and from the second half of the century, horse racing – furnished plentiful opportunities for members of the Scots landed and urban elites, and, indeed, those below them on the social scale, to make wagers. 24 In 1801, a rather grumpy, elderly John Ramsay of Ochteryre described for his neighbour and regular correspondent, Elizabeth

---

21 NLS, Acc 6257, memorandum of wager in pocket book of David Bruce of Kinnaird, 14 Feb. 1753.
22 The Trial of William Brodie Wright and Cabinet Maker in Edinburgh and George Smith Grocer There, Before the High Court of Justiciary (Edinburgh, 1788).
24 For betting on politics, see e.g. NRS, Montrose Papers, GD220/5/454/9, Lord Justice Clerk to the Duke of Montrose, Edinburgh, 22 Jan. 1715; John Strang, Glasgow and its Clubs; Or Glimpses of the Condition, Manners, Characters, & Quiddities of the City, during the Past & Present Century (London and Glasgow, 1856), p. 465; NLS, Acc 11208, Papers of...
Graham, visiting the cockpit in Edinburgh where he had been ‘astonished at the mixture of peers and sharpers, lawyers and pickpockets’. For Ramsay, this offered the perfect excuse to bemoan, as he put it, the ‘sad landscape of modern manners’. His particular target was the ‘young men of fashion’, brought up in ‘unprincipled, half-educated style’. ‘They are’, he grizzled, ‘little less frivolous and licentious than the late French noblesse – heaven grant they are not visited a similar scourge.’

Such words might be dismissed as no more than the conservatism of the old, sharpened in this case by the turmoil and violence unleashed by the French Revolution, but the shifts they reflected in leisure habits and manners that had occurred in recent decades were far-reaching. Ramsay’s picture, shorn of the moral disapproval, might well fit a good deal of the life of the Edinburgh merchant Alexander Anderson. His later eighteenth-century world was one replete with fashionable clothes, entertainments, race meetings, golf, balls, assemblies, and card playing, at which he often seems to have lost a few pounds.

As we will see in later chapters, we can also find a good many Scots, including among the labouring classes, adventuring in the lottery. However, to talk of a gambling mania in eighteenth-century Scotland would simply be bizarre. If many Scots were speculators, it was in a rather different sense; their energies went into making money or securing career advancement. These traits, long present in Scottish society, were ones which became increasingly and starkly visible in the eagerness with which Scots seized on such opportunities beyond their country’s borders, which in the eighteenth century meant pre-eminently London, and even more strikingly North America, the Caribbean, and India.

25 Requests for photocopies or republication are welcome. The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers, 36–42, Bet Books, 1776–1826. In the absence of newspaper evidence, which historians of such things south of the border have mined very profitably to chart incidence of such events, the frequency of cockfighting matches north of the border is uncertain. Cockfighting came to Dunfermline in 1705, and appears to have been an annual occurrence on handsel Mondays until 1797. (Ebenezer Henderson, *The Annals of Dunfermline and Vicinity from the earlier authentic period to the present time AD 1069–1878* (Glasgow, 1879), p. 376.) Bowling greens were present in a good number of Scottish burghs. One of the best sources for this is town maps, where these exist. For horse racing, see ch. 1, pp. 49–62.

26 The literature on the importance of empire as a means of gaining or recovering fortunes for Scots in the eighteenth century has grown hugely in recent years, and is far too large.
The comparison, nevertheless, usually made in this context is not one between England and Scotland, although it must be borne in mind in what follows: rather, it is that between England and continental Europe, or more narrowly England and France. The British/English were unusual, so it is sometimes said, in their habit of betting on the outcome of political and international events and wars, while horse racing and cricket were among English exports to France in the eighteenth century. Whether this contrast really holds up is extremely doubtful. High stakes gambling – ‘deep play’ as it was commonly known – was readily found on the European mainland. It was this reality which enabled the Venetian adventurer Casanova to gain an entrée into the world of the European aristocracy – in France, Italy, the United Provinces, Russia, Spain, and various German states. The gambling capital of eighteenth-century Europe was the watering hole of Spa in Liège in the Austrian Netherlands (present-day Belgium).

Britons on or contemplating a grand tour were repeatedly warned about the dangers of gaming and other entrapments. Lord Lincoln, heir to the 2nd Duke of Newcastle, contrived to lose £6,000 to a Venetian sharper in Florence in 1771. At the start of his grand tour forty years earlier, Edward Mellish declared to his father, Joseph Mellish of Blyth Hall, Yorkshire:

My uncle desires … that I would make my observation of the People at Paris, & avoid all Play and Extravagance, which is very good advice. The French only regard strangers according to the money they spend and figure they make with their Equipages and provided you game and play you will be well received in the best company at Paris, where one risques [sic] losing five ten or fifteen pounds sterling in two hours time, besides at Games of Hazard [a dice game], the French of the very best Fashion make no scruple of cheating you …


University of Nottingham, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Newcastle (Clumber) Collection, Ne C 3023, G. Chamberlayne, Pisa, to the Duke of Newcastle, 20 Dec. 1771; 3022, same to same, Florence, 28 Dec. 1771; 3280, Lord Lincoln, Naples, to the Duke of Newcastle, 30 Jan. 1772.
much as it is possible, which is a most pernicious entertainment, & there is no Country in the World free from *except England* (my emphasis).32

Writing about the later eighteenth century, Leslie Mitchell notes that a young man who refused to gamble in Paris was known as ‘inutile’.33

The strict limits to British exceptionalism in this context are also strongly suggested by the history of official lotteries in eighteenth-century Europe. While the Dutch and English led the way from the 1690s in using such devices to raise public money, royal and public lotteries spread very widely in Europe – to Rome in 1732, Vienna in 1751, Brussels in 1760, Madrid and Berlin in 1763, and Warsaw in 1768, to name but a few places.34 In France, prior to 1776 and the establishment of the *Loterie Royale*, lotteries were mainly charitable or religious in purpose. Either they were a response by hospitals to climbing numbers of poor resulting from the combined effects of war and subsistence crises in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, or they were devices by congregations to finance church construction projects. Sales of tickets were not confined to Paris, and all operated under the oversight of the royal administration. Several of them became permanent. By the mid eighteenth century, lotteries were being more widely used in France to finance public projects, including, from 1757, a military school which had opened in Paris six years earlier, a lottery recently described by one historian as ‘by far the largest lottery Europe had ever known’.35 These lotteries were all suppressed, however, in 1776, when the *Loterie Royale* was founded. The French state lottery was a huge bureaucratic enterprise, with a presence throughout the country. Following the example of the *Loterie de L’École Militaire*, it used the Genoese style lottery, rather than, as was the case in England and earlier French lotteries, the Venetian one. Participants bet on a series of numbers being drawn, with the maximum sequence being five. They could also bet on the exact order in which the numbers were drawn.

The French state lottery in the eighteenth century was, in short, the gambler’s lottery *par excellence*. What it allowed was seven possible wagers – starting with one on any single number being drawn, then the

---

32 University of Nottingham, Manuscripts and Special Collections, The Mellish Collection, Ms C 24/3/18, Edward Mellish, Paris, to Joseph Mellish, 8 Nov. 1730; 24/3/10, Edward Mellish, Saumur, to Mrs Mellish, 25 Feb. 1731.

