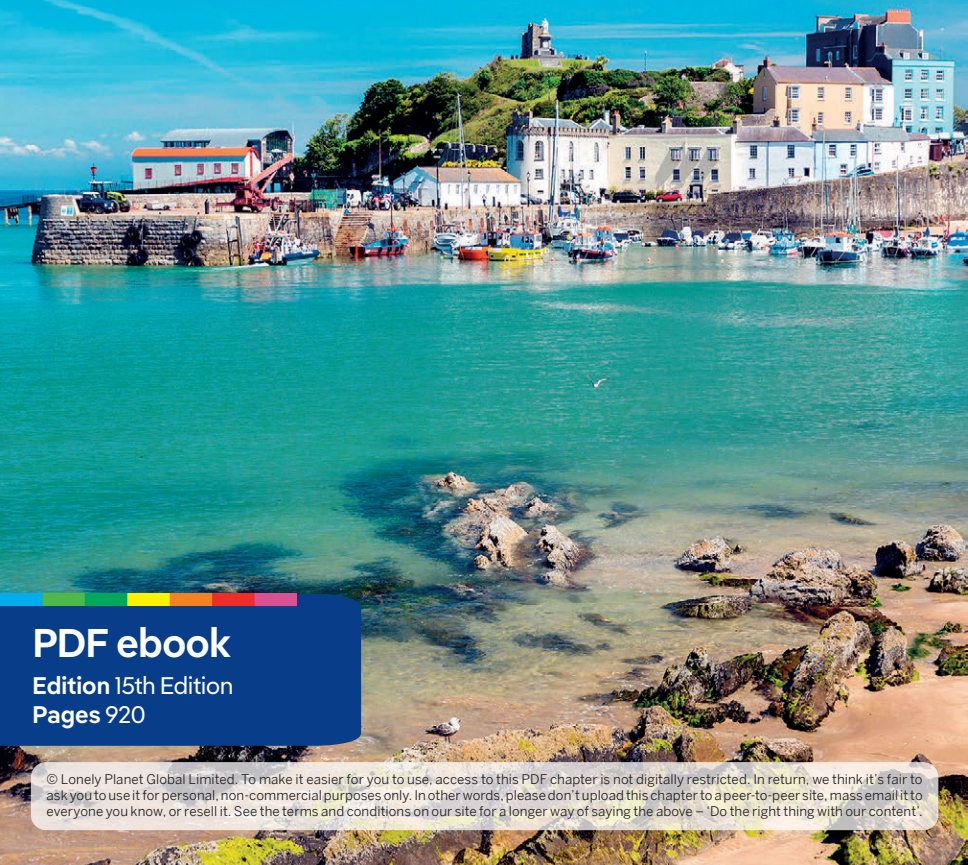


# Great Britain



PDF ebook

Edition 15th Edition  
Pages 920



# SPORTING BRITAIN

Great Britain and sport go hand in hand. Many of the world's most popular pastimes were codified here – and the passion for sport remains to this day. By Joseph Reaney

**HERE'S A SIMPLE** question: where was football invented? There are all kinds of theories that span the eras and the continents, from ancient Greece and ancient Rome through China's Han Dynasty to the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Oceania. The truth is we can never know who first decided to kick a spherical object towards a target. But when it comes to where modern football was invented, there's far less doubt. It was in Britain in 1877 that a single, unified set of rules for the game was unanimously agreed upon. From these humble origins less than 150 years ago, football has grown to become the world's most popular sport.

But if you asked someone from the Victorian era for a game of football, they might have asked for a little more clarification. In 19th-century Great Britain, football was the collective name for a whole family of team sports with the common aim of kicking a ball to score a goal. There was association football, which is what is commonly known as simply 'football' (or 'soccer') today. There was rugby football, which later split into two distinct codes: rugby union and rugby league. And there were many other forms of football, whose rules subsequently spread around the world and developed into major global sports such as

**Clockwise from top left: Cricket match, Cooper Park; 2022 UEFA Women's Euro finals; AIG Women's Open, Carnoustie; Cooper's Hill Cheese-Roll (p190)**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JASPER/AGE/SHUTTERSTOCK © PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK © MATT HOOPER/SHUTTERSTOCK © CAMERON SMITH/STRINGER/GETTY IMAGES ©

American football, Australian rules football and Gaelic football.

But laying down the law didn't end there. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Britons decided on the early rules or codes for all manner of sports, such as tennis, cricket, golf, field hockey, billiards, bowls, netball, water polo, baseball, horse racing, squash and boxing. In a way, the whole concept of modern sport was devised in Great Britain, and it remains an intrinsic part of British society today. So if you're keen to understand a key part of the British psyche, take the time to attend a sporting event – whether it's a world-class competition or a quirkier local one.

Let's start with the bucket list of British sporting venues. Tennis devotees can get to the heart of British sporting culture with a trip to Wimbledon's iconic Centre Court, while cricket fans can venture across the city to the equally hallowed Lord's Cricket Ground. Golfers should go north of the border to tackle the famous fairways of St Andrews, Gleneagles or Carnoustie, while horse-racing aficionados should drop into the races at Ascot, Cheltenham or Aintree. Rugby supporters can get a real insight into the distinct cultures of Britain by joining partisan crowds at the three national stadiums: Twickenham (England), Murrayfield (Scotland) and the Principality Stadium (Wales). Snooker lovers can head to the Crucible in Sheffield, darts buffs can congregate at Lakeside in Surrey, Formula One fans can flock to Silverstone...the list goes on. But perhaps the greatest insight into British culture is available at its illustrious football arenas. The Premier League is the world's biggest football competition, and seeing a game at a big-name stadium such as Old Trafford (Manchester United), Anfield (Liverpool), Stamford Bridge (Chelsea), St James' Park (Newcastle United) or the Etihad (Manchester City) offers visitors a spectacle of unbridled English passion that's rarely expressed elsewhere; any preconceptions you had about the locals being reserved will go straight out the window.

Looking for a more personal glimpse of Britain's sporting culture and an opportunity to mingle with the regular

fans? When it comes to football, the Premier League may be the icing on the cake, but it's an enormous cake, with hundreds of other professional clubs throughout England, Scotland and Wales – and thousands more part-time or amateur ones. From big-city (but lower-division) clubs with 20,000-plus-seater stadiums to tiny venues with standing room only, there are passionate crowds to be found at every level of the football pyramid, so why not look up the local team in whatever village, town or (part of the) city you're staying in? And don't forget, it's not all about the men: the women's game has grown exponentially in recent years, boosted in England by the women's national football team's victory in the UEFA Women's Euro 2022. Women's Super League (WSL) games increasingly attract large and dedicated crowds (the current attendance record is 47,367) but often have a more family-friendly vibe.

The same rule applies to other sports. Get to the heart of British tennis culture by swapping Wimbledon for the grass courts of Queens or Eastbourne. Instead of joining the waiting list for Ascot, consider heading to one of Britain's hundreds of other race meetings – there's one held somewhere almost every day. And instead of going to Lord's, head to any old village green on a Saturday afternoon to experience this quintessentially English sport at close range – you won't be charged to watch the game, and you can nip into the pub during a quiet period. Better yet, you can forgo the big-name sports altogether and opt for some distinctly local athletic curiosities, from Ashbourne's Royal Shrovetide Football Match (a mass 'medieval football' game with hundreds of players) to the Cooper's Hill Cheese Roll (where runners race down a steep slope after a round of cheese) to the Highland Games (where burly contestants compete in the caber toss, the tug o' war and the hammer throw, with bonus folk music and dancing thrown in).

Whether you're a sports fan or just culturally curious, incorporating a sporting event or two into your Great Britain adventure is the perfect way to dig a little deeper into British culture.