



**PLACE, A SENSE OF TASTE**  
**OR**  
**WHY PEOPLE LIKE DARTS IN STOKE-ON-TRENT**

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## Abstract

Stoke-on-Trent is, perhaps, the best place to play darts in the world. Reframed and rephrased more *sociologically*; Stoke has a taste for darts. Drawing on time spent in one of the city's popular leagues, this paper brings together questions of place and cultural taste. I argue that it is useful to think these fields of interest together, while not reducing the perspectives and pleasures of the dartists to well-worn arguments. The darts scene in Stoke holds together sets of values, isn't for 'posh knobs', and is uniquely exciting. I argue that a particular version of Stoke is made *coherent* in the darts scene, and appreciating this means thinking place and taste together.

## Introduction

*I am meeting Ian White on a Monday. Last week he beat Michael Van Gerwen in a major tournament—the top-ranked men's darts player in the world (note: currently 3<sup>rd</sup>). I arrive early to find a quiet corner for the interview—we have decided to meet at his local working men's club<sup>1</sup>. Ian plays for the club's darts team, and given there is a league game on tonight, this means he can do the interview and still play if they need him. I get a drink and explain to the bar staff who I am meeting. 'Oh yeah Ian, we know him well'. I commandeer the snug just off from the main bar.*

*Ian breezes in just after 7pm and says his hellos to the darts players, then hellos to everyone else in the club. At one time Ian, Phil Taylor (16-time world champion), Adrian Lewis (2-time world champion) and Andy Hamilton (former 5<sup>th</sup>-ranked player in the world) all played for the same darts team in Stoke. He orders a coke.*

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<sup>1</sup> Working men's clubs are cooperative venues mostly found in industrial and formerly industrial areas of the UK. Despite the name, women can be members—though this wasn't always the case, described by Cherrington (2009). Most have a bar and a larger hall.

*We sit down and I explain my research and ask if he has any good Stoke darts stories. He does:*

One night I played in the [team] that I'm in now, and Andy Hamilton had moved and had gone to another [team], and at the time he was quite high up in the [world] rankings and so was I, and we ended up playing each other on a local league night- we played in one of the pubs in Stoke, and the whole pub just stopped, stopped to watch us. We played, and I'm glad I won 2-1 but erm, and everyone just watched it. If you look at it, like me and Andy playing each other is like playing at the Ally Pally [Alexandra Palace] and people are watching it in the local league, local pub- it just all stopped, they all watched us and at the end they all cheered and everything- it was just a local game [laughs].

*Every year thousands of people go to Alexandra Palace to watch the best players compete for the world title prize—now £500,000 for the winner. In Stoke you can see the world's best in the local leagues—in a pub not a palace. Still smiling at Ian and Andy's game, I ask why he thinks darts is popular in Stoke:*

I think with [Eric] Bristow<sup>2</sup> and [Phil] Taylor putting it on the map, that was well before my time, but them putting it on the map all the young lads want to play darts now and the pubs in Stoke still have the dartboards, a lot of other towns have gone to food pubs and you do lose your dart board and lose your pool teams, but down in Stoke you've still got your pool, got your darts, your crib, your skittles which is an old game- we've got a league for that, y'know. So, they do keep the standard- the old pub games in Stoke [...] I don't think the kids want to go to school, I think they just want to play darts.

*Ian asks me what I think, and I repeat a joke Tony made: 'We have pubs in Stoke, we don't have wine bars. There aren't dart boards in wine bars!'*

Stoke-on-Trent and darts are linked. The above anecdote suggests this, but I will bolster the case. Between 1979 and 1985 the city hosted the World Professional Darts Championships at Jollees Cabaret Club in Longton, at a boom time for darts with household names like Jocky Wilson and John Lowe in their prime. Stoke is where Phil Taylor plied his darts trade, who went on to win 16 World Championship titles—and as well as Taylor, other notable

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<sup>2</sup> Eric 'The Crafty Cockney' Bristow was not from Stoke, as his moniker suggests, but moved to the city and ran a pub sharing his nickname in the 1980s. He was a celebrated player from darts' first golden age.

names like Maureen Flowers, Adrian Lewis and Ian White are associated with the city. Currently, DartsInStoke.com lists 13 leagues in and around Stoke. For context, London is the only other UK city I have found with a similar website, and CapitalArrows.com lists 11 leagues (London is roughly 36 times larger than Stoke in population). The DartsInStoke website features an annotated Google Map of all the places you can play, with the pubs marked by a dart board rather than a simple point. Zooming out to take them all in you can't actually read the name of the city, just *oke-on-*, with *St* and *Trent* lost in a sea of dart boards. Rather than just linked, we might say Stoke has a taste for darts.

Taste is a loaded sociological concept, where questions around personal and collective preference are subject to critical probing—'Because someone likes it' is not an adequate response, the *What* and *Why* are important. If Stoke has a taste for darts, the Interviewing Ian story can answer to some probing. *What* darts is, Ian suggested, is a game like pool and skittles. Darts is an activity at home in a pub or working men's club, and Tony's comparison to wine bars is instructive; darts fits with a certain milieu. This milieu was famously mocked on *Not the Nine O'clock News*<sup>3</sup>, as two darts players, 'Fat Belly' and 'Even Fatter Belly', stumble toward the oche<sup>4</sup> not to throw a dart, but pick up a drink instead; their success measured not by points on the board, but milligrams of alcohol consumed. Darts is also something, per Ian and Andy's *pub not a palace* game, that can be thrilling to watch and play—especially in Stoke. It is also competitive.

The *Why* is also gestured at—why might people like it? Ian makes a link between local history and infrastructure. Famous players like Taylor and Bristow bolstered a regional appetite for the game, and this appetite was and is appeased as pubs keep their dart boards rather than trading for more tables and seating. At least in Ian's account, the gastropub is yet to take over Stoke. Reading Tony's joke another way, and keeping with a sense of infrastructure, there aren't wine bars to draw punters away into other pleasures—darts might be a *preference of necessity*, invoking Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) famous sociology of cultural taste. But also, in the way Ian describes his game with Andy Hamilton, darts in Stoke seems uniquely exciting—Stokies like darts because darts in Stoke is great.

The purpose of this paper is to explore what it means that a place has a taste for something. I will do so by drawing on interviews and observations gathered over a year spent in the Collerton Darts League<sup>5</sup> in Stoke—per number of teams and divisions, a particularly popular league in the city.

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<sup>3</sup> *Not the Nine O'clock News* was a sketch comedy show, running from 1979 to 1982 on the BBC.

<sup>4</sup> The oche is the mark behind which darts players throw from.

<sup>5</sup> The name of the league, the names of pubs and clubs, and the names of dartists are changed.

Cultural taste and place, though two central concerns in social science work, are not often thought together; this perhaps owing to disciplinary leanings, one claimed more by sociology and the other by human geography. Using Stoke darts as an example, my aim is to offer an account of the significance of one place's cultural taste; and so muddy an account of *sense of place* with taste, and muddy ideas of *cultural taste* with a sense of place. More than this, I will ultimately ask, and suggest: might a place have a particular sense of taste—where that sense of place holds together various meanings and values? My goal is not to theorise a blanket idea of taste and place, but suggest how they might be productively brought together.

As well as advancing an account of taste and place, this paper also has a more general aim; to challenge already-understood flavours of analysis. Stoke-on-Trent, a small city in the English midlands, has become, much like darts in the *Not the Nine O'clock News* sketch, loaded with symbolic meaning. The weight of this symbolic meaning—of being left behind, being the *Brexit capital*—has flattened ideas of a complex place. Stoke was once the ceramics capital of the world and remains uniquely polycentric—the city the federation of six towns, still with six town centres. I would argue Stoke has become a victim of what Joe Kennedy (2018) describes as 'authentocrat' commentary; a commentary animated by a shifting terrain in British politics where the search for *real people in real places* has become a central anxiety. Where *real* is so often a stand-in for an idea of the industrial white working-classes, what could be more *real* than darts in Stoke?

I want to write against this neat hand-in-glove framing. My aim is not so much a positive sociology, but perhaps a more ambivalent one; where Stoke is not one thing, and nor is darts. People might play darts because it fits with a certain class experience and climate, of course, but not just for those reasons—and the dartists themselves not just the carriers of concrete dispositions. There is value, here, in thinking people and practice with more complexity<sup>6</sup>. To both introduce the Stoke darts scene, and establish my key concerns, I will start by presenting four characters—Tim, Tony, John and Annie—all of whom played at the same pub, The Brown Bear, and one of whom ran the darts league. These descriptions mix insights into both place and cultural taste that then set up the discussion that follows.

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<sup>6</sup> Articulating where British cultural studies differed from its Marxist influences, Stuart Hall identified, "a humanist objection which holds that the people cannot, should not, be thought of in such thin terms, especially since it is the purpose of cultural analysis to reaffirm their experiences, to bring them forward again in their richness and complexity, in a sense, to do something to pay them back for having been left out of the great tradition" ([1983] 2016, p. 47).

## Tim, Tony, John and Annie

Tim had been running the Collerton League for two years and been playing in it for 15, and like Ian White he had a few good stories. He once saw Adrian Lewis walk into a pub and throw back-to-back nine darters with borrowed darts—this the equivalent of a 147 in snooker or a golfing hole in one, very hard to do, and even harder if they aren't your darts. Having competed in darts tournaments around the UK, Tim insisted that Stoke-on-Trent was the home of darts,

“You know, it's just getting bigger and better in Stoke-on-Trent ... I mean you can play every single night of the week. You can go in a pub and there'll be a dart board or two dart boards, if you go in certain pubs there'll be eight or nine dart boards, and there'll always be someone practising or someone having a chuck, and you know you can go up and have a chuck- 'Yeah yeah, we can have a few chucks'. That's what I think I love about it.

It's the people who are in the league who make the league, the teams make the league, it's publicans always having a laugh and a joke and a bit of banter. While darts games are going on there's a lot of respect there for the other player. Whether you in or lose, you're always out for a night out, a few beers, so you know it's all good.

I think it's because it's such a close community, and we'll always look out for each other and always there for each other, if the neighbours get stuck, we help the neighbour out, and visa versa. And it's the same with the darts.”

As well as all the homegrown professionals, the Stoke leagues attracted international talent. Tim knew professionals from Australia, New Zealand and Canada who played or wanted to play in the Collerton league. Tim said it was the high standard, and the sheer number of games and leagues in Stoke that was so attractive. It wasn't managed like a professionals league, though, “It's getting the drinks in, having a laugh and a joke ... it's dead weird to explain because as soon as you walk in the pub you know there's going to be laughter. And many times, I've walked in a pub, and before I've even walked in the pub I'm like *oh my god* I'm going to have jaw ache tonight from laughing.” The league was swelling from 45 to 50 teams across four divisions. Quick to defer, Tim said this success was down to the players, and more broadly a sense of community and locality,

“I think what it is is that, because, we’re all there for each other, and it brings us a lot closer. [...] everybody else looks out [for each other] ... it’s great, I wouldn’t like to do the league anywhere else [...] It’s all through darts, you get to know that many people. It’s not just like the darts- you look at the likes of the plumbing side, [bricklayer], or a plasterer or an electrician. ‘Oh, I know he plays darts, I’ll ring him, I’d rather give him the money rather than someone else’.

Everyone wants to play in the Stoke leagues. It’s better leagues, simple as [...] I love darts myself, when everything is going right, I always like to look around and think *yeah*, everyone’s happy, and it’s great to see the expression on other people’s faces.”

Tony and his dad used to play together in the Collerton league. Tony sr. took up darts after emigrating from Italy to work in the pits around Stoke. Darts fitted around his shift work, and he introduced Tony to the game at home. Their living room wasn’t big enough to stand the proper distance, so Tony and Tony sr. threw from the hallway with the door propped open. When old enough Tony joined his dad’s team and has played in leagues ever since. Like Tim, Tony described a scene thriving on Stokie social capital,

“[...] the pot banks and the pits have long gone, but the people are still the same, still friendly people, and I’ve travelled around working different places and I can vouch for that, and I- and even when people do come to Stoke they say they’re dead friendly, know what I mean. And I think we are. So that’s part of this area which has always been like that, cos mainly Stoke has always been a poorly paid area [...] if you compared the wages to like other areas, North or South, Stoke was kept quite lowly paid [...] another thing about getting out after a hard day’s work is it’s nice to get out and have a pint. But certainly, when I’ve played in other areas, Stoke is a better class of player.”

At his pomp he played five nights a week, but was down to three or four nights. Even as a ‘casual’ player Tony practised two hours a day on top of this. And also, he fashioned his own darts; Tony liked to play with especially short and light darts that were out of style and not manufactured anymore. Everything from the grip to the weight was just to his liking, and seemingly no one else’s.

In his youth Tony worked at Jollees Cabaret Club when they hosted the World Professional Darts Championship. He remembers watching Jocky Wilson through the clouds of cigarette smoke and revelling in the special



atmosphere. Once more competitively, Tony had come to value darts more socially, “Meeting people you know, which unfortunately nowadays there isn’t many social things going on. You’re on these [phones] aren’t you, talking to each other on it. I’ve seen ’em, young’uns on there ordering drinks on phones, you don’t even have to go to the bar anymore, I hate it [...] Na, the old-fashioned way, queue up at the bar and get chatting to people.”

Tony was experienced, but John was even more so. Then in his 70s, John had been playing in Stoke leagues for over 50 years. He used to play on the same team as John Part—the two-time world champion who moved from Canada to play darts in Stoke. John saw Phil Taylor grow from pub player to world beater. By combination of age and too many broken fingers John didn’t play as much as he used to, but still played one or two nights a week. “Why’s it so good in Stoke? I don’t know, I mean Manchester you can’t play darts, when I’ve been I haven’t seen any darts”. He went on,

“It’s a working man’s game, you don’t get posh knobs bloody playing darts, y’know what mean? The *la-di-da* types, none of them playing darts [...] You’d have to ask them ... ask them in London [laughs]. You don’t get ... because you can walk in a pub in any dress, you don’t see anybody playing darts in ties, you come and play in working stuff and the working clothes [...] everybody is equal basically [...] everybody’s the same.”

As well as avoiding the *la-di-da* types, John was a fan of the social spontaneity that darts facilitated,

“It’s funny, you walk in a pub and people go ‘Want a bit of darts’, ‘We’ll have a bit of darts’. It’s the best way to meet people ... not like football. You go football match with your mates ... say me and you go football match, there’s just me and you, you don’t interact with anybody else, but when you play darts there’s 12 players, 15 players or whatever, you interact with everybody who comes in the pub to play you so that’s [...] every pub I go I know people, and that’s what darts is about. Everywhere you go you know somebody. If I didn’t play darts then I wouldn’t meet anybody. All’s I know is the people in the pub, y’know. So it’s a good way of making friends.”

Unlike Ian, Tim and Tony, Annie wasn’t a regular player in the Stoke leagues—she played in the odd game when needed, sometimes in the men’s leagues (where women often played), and a few times in the women’s leagues (where men did not play). She usually came along to support Nick,

her husband, who played twice a week, and to have a throw afterwards with the team. Belonging and being part of the group was important to her—and despite how Nick often described it, it wasn't just a 'crack on with the lads',

“Thing is, it's not the lads- most of the women will join in as well y'know, and they'll give the lads as much grief as what the lads give the girls ... The girls- there's always been this *girls [over] there, boys [over] there* even when you grow up, women that side men that side, and I'm one of these that's like, 'Why?' [...] I can throw a darts, I can play pool, I can play snooker- not very good at kicking a ball but can't do everything [laughs] [...] I love being involved, I hate sitting on the sidelines and watching everybody there.”

Annie's account was backed up by some of the women's captains in the Collerton league—referred to, tongue-in-cheek, as the 'housewives league'. At a monthly meeting of the captains, many similarly spoke about the fun of seeing different pubs and meeting different people, “It's a night out, more of a social gathering really. Lots of arguments [laughs]. Plenty of banter, lots of drink, lots of swearing”. The captains described these games as less competitive than the men's—this owing something to the men being able to get away and practice more, and also owing something to the arguments and bantering and drinking and swearing. These games were an opportunity for a midweek night-out; typically a male privilege orbiting around different games and hobbies. “They can do the cooking, we can do the drinking, see how they get on!”

### **A taste for darts in Stoke**

“As much as by the absence of luxury goods, whisky or paintings, champagne or concerts, cruises or art exhibitions, caviar or antiques, the working-class life-style is characterized by the presence of numerous cheap substitutes for these rare goods, 'sparkling white wine' for champagne, imitation leather for real leather, reproductions for paintings, indices of a dispossession at the second power, *which accepts the definition of the goods worthy of being possessed.*” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 386, emphasis added)

For many sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu is the starting point for questions of cultural taste. Not only cultural taste, Bourdieu's sociology is acutely class-conscious, so for more than one reason he is a good thinker to take darting in Stoke. This section starts in his theoretical and political mode, but then moves away from it. The dichotomy set-up, loosely between framings that

make softer or harder links between class and cultural taste, inform the next section—where place and taste and meaning are brought together.

In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu attacks with sobering survey data any notion that appreciation for art is neutral or shared, and insists on politicising the socially conditioned ‘pure gaze’ of ‘proper’ criticism. The ideas and language associated with artful insights—the world of aesthetics, with attributions of beauty and appraisals of form—is indeed generative, but only generative in serving to distance those that can perform this appraising from those that, crucially, can’t. “Taste classifies, and it classifies the taster. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed” (p. 6). Notions of ‘good taste’, in this way, are best understood as divisive and dividing tools—tools acquired through education and environment, and an economic ‘distance from necessity’ such that stood-apart and freer ways of appraising and appreciating can foster. To make the argument, Bourdieu deploys a critical taxonomy that links cultural consumption to forms of inequality; terms like habitus and cultural capital underline a sweeping assault on an intellectualism that unthinkingly reifies works and worlds of art and meaning. Also dismissed are any radical traditions which locate in the working classes the potential for revolutionary political possibilities—because discourses of politics and revolution are, already, alienating to those they wish to speak to. It is, in its essence, a destructive project.

In the last section, some of the Stoke darts players might have had Bourdieu nodding in approval. When Tim spoke about the neighbourliness of the leagues, this could be read as reflecting the habitus of Stoke dartsits—a habitus, for Bourdieu, being the conditioned modes and norms of perceiving and valuing within a group, “a system of *dispositions*” (Bourdieu, [2005] 2016, p. 43, emphasis in original), and in this case a disposition of convivial communitarianism. Tony makes a further link between this present sense of community and Stoke’s industrial history, connecting an easy friendliness and warmth to working-class labour; ‘the pot banks and the pits have long gone, but the people are still the same’. This sense of *long* class habitus is particularly Bourdieu-like, a historic ‘form of adaption’, and the value of a pint after a hard day’s work also echoes the ‘popular’, ‘vulgar’ and ‘sensation-driven’ judgements tackled in *Distinction*.

John’s ‘posh knobs’ comment and the wine bar joke might excite more than nodding approval, and this for two reasons: firstly, these are judgements driven by comparison—and comparisons between high and low culture animate the arguments in *Distinction*. And secondly, these judgements don’t have the rosy sheen of positive feeling; they are more critical, though also

said with a smile. John said that darts is not for posh knobs; instead, it is a 'working man's game'. He locates posh knobs geographically in London, and styles them as tie-wearing *la-di-da* types<sup>7</sup>. He attaches a value judgement to this; 'everybody is equal basically [...] everybody's the same'. Tony's joke functions on a similar equation, locating darts as symbolically opposite to a different set of wine bar practices—where *wine bars* reflect a physical, but also cultural habitus.

In these ways, Bourdieu offers a means of framing and understanding a taste for darts in Stoke—and an understanding that is insistently political in its recognition of cultural inequalities. In short, we might take that: a taste for darts in Stoke marks the posh knobs from the non-posh knobs, where classed norms manifest in pursuits and pleasures that sustain those norms. Most importantly, this cultural ecology ultimately functions to exclude the dartists from the artists, off in their wine bars away from the masses. However, while clear and forceful, this kind of argument involves dismissing a good amount of the other ways Tim, Tony, John and Annie talked about their treasured leisure. For one, with an emphasis on domination, rather than rejection, there is less scope to entertain what might be more positive associations—unless those positive associations are, despite what dartists might say, unspoken acceptances of hierarchies of value. The quote at the start of this header sees Bourdieu characterising working-class tastes as, when cultural in some sense, also aping the stylings of the elite. As well as decrying the posh knobs, John also compares darts to football—a very un-Bourdieu-like comparison. He describes playing in darts leagues as more sociable than going to watch football games; 'it's a good way of making friends'. This is not a comparison between high and low culture, but a more like-for-like explanation, symbolically, of the sociability of each activity. Bourdieu can say something about the sociologies of cheap fizz versus champagne, but not, in this case, between judgements of different kinds of sparkling wine.

*Distinction* is not without criticism. It has been criticised for, despite its class-conscious nature, manifesting the divisions it wishes to address (Rancière, [1983] 2004). Bourdieu's surveys test aesthetic talk more than aesthetics—not how someone is moved by music or an image, or darts, but how someone identifies with questions about those things—and by conflating aesthetic talk and experience, imposes a complete critique on the disenfranchised (ibid; Bennett, 2011). The result is a schematic in which working-class cultural practice is registered both 'passive' and 'spurious',

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<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu also makes reference to 'la-di-da' types in *Distinction*; kinds of pretension that are 'forbidden' to, especially, working-class men. Conceding to such tastes offends working-class masculinity because 'aesthetic refinement' is especially gendered in working-class contexts, with terms like 'pansies' cementing this, such that masculinity-cum-virility is especially at stake (p. 382).

“merely an illusory compensation for dispossession by experts” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 386). This argument performs a distance that Bourdieu is arguing against, though a different distance in nature; not the distance of the (posh) detached viewer, but a distance from the fullness of different, but not necessarily impoverished judgements and perspectives. As Ben Highmore (2016a) describes it, what is offered is a confirmational ‘complete picture’, but its completeness is a limitation—does a taste for darts over football, for instance, not also matter?<sup>8</sup>

Antoine Hennion (2001; 2007) offers a different sociology of taste, rejecting the ‘mechanical confirmation’ of subject and object (2021). Instead, Hennion embraces taste/tasting as a verb and with it an analysis, “which amounts to more than the actualizations of a taste ‘already there’, for they are redefined during the action, with a result that is partly uncertain” (2001, p. 1). Here taste is less an endpoint than an opportunity for invention, “not the end result of a passion [...] but a means, like an orchestra, voice, instrumental technique and the stage, of reaching certain states” (p. 3). The same, I think, is true for darts, though the means are the leagues and the boards and the pubs. Here Hennion helps us understand John’s choice much more; darts, rather than football, was a better means for John of ‘reaching certain states’ of sociability. Tim similarly described a dart board as a unique invitation—like a basketball hoop in a park.

With this willing curiosity, the senses and settings of a scene open up as key considerations in questions of taste. Retuning to Ian White’s *pub not a palace* story; ‘and the whole pub just stopped, stopped to watch us’. Here the whole room orbits around one activity with the dart board, in so many pubs relegated to background, in Stoke taking centre stage. During my time in the Collerton league, in many pubs, when it was appropriate to leave for a cigarette or get a drink from the bar was determined by whether or not a player was on an important double. Shortening breaths, beating hearts, the slow and inevitable tension as players work down from 501; these sensations are foregrounded when the endpoint of analysis is not principally a question of hierarchy. By embracing taste as transformational more than conformational, we might then better appreciate Annie’s darting affection, too; as a vehicle for these pleasures, and a sense of belonging denied to her when growing up. Here the activity is given a different kind of agency, and so too are the practitioners.

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<sup>8</sup> Highmore elaborates on the limits of ‘culture-at-a-distance’ critiques elsewhere, “cultural studies to my mind at least needs to learn aesthetic description and learn to spend time at the level of describing the cultural phenomena it is attentive to. Otherwise the world of ordinary sensual culture—the world of food, of bodies, of the senses—will end up as simply carriers of interpretations that have already been decreed in advance by the sort of ‘culture-at-a-distance’ accounts that are offered by the large-scale theory of Foucault, Bourdieu and others” (2016b, p. 116).

Returning to the Bourdieu quote that opened this section, in these different accounts the dartists are not accepting the value forms of aesthetes, but instead mobilising quite different sociable, communitarian, and excitable value frames—the posh knobs viewed with distain more than anything else. Highmore puts it, “we need to examine the shapes that tastes take; the way that they are freighted with feeling; the way that they are carried on the back of particular ‘ethoses’ while simultaneously shaping them” (2016a, p. 561). The point here is not to reject the insights that a Bourdieu-like argument offers, but to reflect on the questions being asked—and in this case, to maybe ask more open ones.

### **The place of darts in Stoke**

Whilst I have suggested that cultural taste and place are not often thought together, Loka Ashwood and Michael Bell (2017) do so in a rich and playful article that proposes an escape from Bourdieu’s hard frame. Thinking with *traditional* place-inspired music cultures and settings, Ashwood and Bell don’t add place as another axis of dispossession; but find that place complicates the picture. By paying attention to place, and so paying attention to the ways music acts in particular settings, they find clues to moments of transcendence of difference more than affirmation—borrowing from Highmore, moments of an emergent convivial ethos. The argument I want to make is different, but reflects a similar curiosity.

“The identity of places, indeed the very identification of places *as* places, is always in that sense temporary, uncertain, and in process.” (Massey, [1995] 2022, p. 174, emphasis in original)

What I have tried to show, to this point, is that Bourdieu’s sense of cultural taste does not fully address the question of why Stoke has a taste for darts—or rather, where it does, involves selective listening and interpretation. A passion for darts in Stoke is not ‘passive’; it is active, generative, and does not function as an imitation of something more bourgeois. More like Hennion and Highmore, following this sense of uncertainty and possibility is also how I want to approach Stoke’s sense of place through darts.

Though the Doreen Massey article quoted above does not explicitly deal with questions of cultural taste, it opens with vignettes speaking to similar concerns; about finding *the right kind* of café in Paris, rather than a not-so-French-seeming Kentucky Fried Chicken. Throughout Massey calls into question any essentialist claims to the identity of a place, and instead pulls out the focus spatially and temporally. The article is particularly interested

in the kinds of histories mobilised in defining an area's character, but while always questioning that character,

“The invention of tradition is here about the invention of the coherence of a place, about defining and naming it as a ‘place’ at all. It is for this reason that it may be useful to think of places, not as areas on maps, but as *constantly shifting articulations of social relations through time*; and to think of particular attempts to characterise them as attempts to define, and claim coherence and a particular meaning for, specific envelopes of space-time” (p. 172, first emphasis added)

The idea of a tradition bears some similarity with taste and preference, through a claim to taste over time—much like darts in Stoke. And thinking of any articulation of *place* as an articulation of *social relations* is instructive, as well as *coherency*; and it is a kind of place coherency that I want to inject into the previous discussion on cultural taste.

What is Stoke-ish in the accounts offered? How is Stoke invoked? Tim said he wouldn't run the league anywhere else because, ‘we're all there for each other’. Tony similarly suggests that the friendliness of Stokies, that he hasn't encountered anywhere else, is what makes the scene so special. And for John it's the shared unpretentiousness, of *working clothes* and a flat feeling of commonality, that mark Stoke out from other cities—particularly, for him, London. Stoke, of course, is not one thing—this apparent to anyone who has spent any time there, its six towns manifesting a heightened sense of the particular. And as Massey suggests, the effort here should not be to locate some essential place character, but to think about moments and practices of articulation and coherency. A version of Stoke, I am suggesting, is *made sense* through darts.

David Bell and Mark Jayne's book *Small Cities* (2006), though presenting a variety of examples, is inspired by their time in Stoke. They are interested in small cities not in size, but instead in terms of structures of feeling and aspiration. Bell and Jayne ask, “might it be possible to reconceive staying small as something other than stagnation or lack of ambition?” (p. 247). Stoke's smallness is in its keen sense of inter-town distinctions; it being in-between two larger cities in Manchester and Birmingham; in its shared rituals, as Rebecca Leach (2023) describes the haunting habit of turning over pottery to see its origins—and being disappointed if it isn't Stoke; its distinct dialect; it not having managed the urban post-modern transition to consumption after production (Edensor, 2000)—so another kind of city remains, and one with lots of dispersed pubs rather than central clubs. It is not the job of this paper to assess the merit of different notions of success,

but to return to Bell and Jayne's (2006) question, I want to suggest that *staying small*, or *staying* a particular kind of *Stoke*, succeeds in the darts scene. Unfashionable urban quirks, or social relations, that limit the city's ability to attract the kinds of investment fuelling the development in its larger neighbours (Jayne, 2004), here make sense—and a sense loaded with pride and positive feeling. This is what is at stake for Tony, for instance, when he worries about pubs where people order on their phones; a particular sense of place being lost—and a taste for something industrial rather than post-industrial.



*Figure 1: darts tournament*

The above photo was taken at one of the Collerton league's midseason tournaments. Five games were going on at once, and at this point over 50 people are sat and stood horseshoe round the action. As more players are knocked out those players join a swelling crowd. This is a weekday night in an unremarkable looking working men's club. The front hall held a smattering of folk watching an England game, but the real action was at the back. Hennion writes that, "[taste] is an active way of putting oneself in such a state that something may happen to oneself" (2007, p. 109). As well as an investment in a set of values, an emerging set of Stoke-ish values, I want to also suggest that this shared taste is also for that heightened sense of being in a scene, of something exciting—really, a kind of *joyful coherency*.



## Conclusion

“You go in some pubs and nobody talks to you, but with darts everybody talks to you”—John

This paper started with a simple proposition—that many people in Stoke like darts; that they have a taste for it—before attempting to develop a sociological understanding. This understanding brought questions of cultural taste and place together, using four dartists from the Collerton league to frame the discussion. I argued that a Bourdieu-like account of cultural taste takes us only so far in understanding the meaning and value of darts to enthusiasts. Such an account captures elements of a class politics at work, between wine bars and working clubs, for instance, but John’s darts-football comparison suggests the limits of this critique. Following Hennion and Highmore—and thinking cultural taste as less a confirmation of something, but rather thinking in terms of transformation—the sociable, communitarian, and lively and abundant qualities of Stoke darts can be factored into an account of cultural taste; less a *form of adaption*, than active investment in a set of values.

What I also want to propose is that a taste for darts in Stoke is in many ways an investment in the central significance of locality; an investment in the sensations of a storied history, and continuing present. It is also, as Massey suggests, an embodiment of particular kinds of social relations; of a neighbourliness bound up with industrial labour, narrated through practice. An idea of place coherency, here, is key. I don’t want to suggest all of this is a virtue, an innate good, though. While Annie’s experiences, and those of the ‘housewives league’, reflect a lack of cultural rigidity, questions of exclusion and inclusion are important; John says that with darts, ‘everybody talks to you’, and that ‘everybody’s the same’, but this of course depends who is in the pub. Such questions are beyond the scope of this paper, but are important.

The quiet argument driving this paper has been for willing complexity when thinking about forms of cultural practice, particularly in working-class contexts. The judgements the dartists made were not impoverished; they reflected a sense of place and a set of values. On the right night, in Stoke the pub becomes a palace, and those taking part knew it.

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