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THE SATURDAY SOAP BOX: WE HAVE TO MAKE JERUSALEM ENGLAND'S NATIONAL ANTHEM

WELCOME to our new weekly column where guests sound off on a current issue. Today, it's songwriter Billy Bragg...

By Billy Bragg

WATCHING the crowd in Trafalgar Square celebrating the Ashes win, I couldn't help but be amazed at how quickly the flag of St George has replaced the Union Jack in the affections of England fans.

A generation ago, England games looked a lot like Last Night of the Proms, with the red, white and blue firmly to the fore. Now, it seems, the English have begun to remember who they are.

I believe this trend began during Euro 96, when England were drawn in the same group as their Scottish neighbours.

When the Scots came to Wembley, England fans were suddenly made aware that, no matter how attached to it they felt, the Union Jack wasn't actually their flag. It belonged to the British.

Faced with this dilemma, they remembered England had its own flag, the flag of St George, which has now replaced the Union Jack at all English sporting events.

This didn't happen because someone in power decided it should. The fans, realising the Union Jack no longer represented them as England supporters, made the change.

Now we've reclaimed our own flag, isn't it time we had our own national anthem? Isn't God Save the Queen the musical equivalent of the Union Jack?

When England played Wales in Cardiff recently, I felt a bit envious of the Welsh who sang their own national anthem.

I'VE no idea what the words of Hen Wlad fy Nhadau actually mean, but I know what they say: They say "We're Welsh. We love our country. It's called Wales."

By contrast, the sight of the England team singing the British national anthem suggests we aren't really sure who we are, that maybe we're not yet mature enough to be trusted with our own anthem.

Now the Ashes series has drawn attention to the one song capable of doing the job - William Blake's Jerusalem.

You only had to see the tens of thousands of England fans singing it with the victorious men's - and women's - cricket teams in Trafalgar Square to make the case for adoption.

But Jerusalem has so much more going for it. Firstly, and this is a no-brainer, it mentions the name of our country whereas God Save The Queen, Rule Britannia, Land of Hope and Glory, and Swing Low, Sweet Chariot don't.

Secondly, Jerusalem is rich with sporting metaphors. The opening line, "And did those feet in ancient time" immediately conjures up memories of Bobby Moore, Martin Johnson and WG Grace leading

England out on to the pitch.

Doesn't "the countenance divine" make you think of Kelly Holmes' face as she crossed the finishing line to win gold at the Athens Olympics?

And couldn't Beckham and his millionaire buddies have done with a few of those "arrows of desire" against Northern Ireland last week?

Jerusalem would also make a great anthem for England because it's a song about idealism.

While the Scottish anthem, Flower of Scotland, goes on about beating the English 600 years ago, Jerusalem talks of the future, of fighting for something yet to be achieved "till we have built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land".

SOME detractors have sarcastically asked why should we want to built a Middle Eastern city in England. Duh! Blake isn't talking literally. Again, he is using mystical imagery.

His metaphorical Jerusalem is an aspiration, an ideal we should aim for as a nation, be it in sport or in society as a whole. "I shall not cease from mental fight, nor shall my sword sleep in my hand", the closing lines are actually saying, until we have achieved this glorious aim in England's green and pleasant land.

After all, Hubert Parry originally set Blake's poem to music for a rally in support of the Votes for Women campaign in 1918. The Women's Institute adopted it later.

Devoid of the jingoism that makes so many good tunes from that time sound dreadfully dated, Jerusalem's radical roots make it relevant to everyone in modern England. So how can we make it a glorious national anthem for England?

Well, the cricket fans have given us a rousing start. And on Monday night at the West Ham versus Aston Villa Premiership clash at Upton Park, football fans spontaneously sang it to mark the Ashes win.

Let's keep that going. Rugby fans should dispense with the embarrassing renditions of Swing Low, Sweet Chariot - originally sung ironically after a black player scored a hat-trick of tries, let's not forget - and adopt Jerusalem too.

As for God Save The Queen, let's sing that when Her Majesty is actually present, or when a Great Britain team is representing us all. It's a very special song for those occasions when we - the Scots, the Welsh, the Northern Irish and the English - are all on the same side.

When we are supporting England, we should sing our own song. We were the only team at the last World Cup without its own national anthem.

It's time that changed. And Blake's Jerusalem fits the bill.

And did those feet in ancient time

Walk upon England's mountains green?

And was the holy Lamb of God

On England's pleasant pastures seen?

And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic Mills?
Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire.
I shall not cease from Mental Fight
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green & pleasant Land.

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