Career Record: [click]
Birth Name: William Thomas Wells
Nationality: British
Birthplace: Mile End, London
Hometown: Ealing, London
Born: 1889-08-31
Died: 1967-06-12
Age at Death: 77
Stance: Orthodox
Height: 6' 3
Reach: 79
Division: Heavyweight

Date of birth also said to have been August 31, 1887: [click]

From BBC London:
"Bombardier" Billy Wells from London's East End was the first British Heavyweight to win the Lonsdale Belt back in 1911 where he defeated Ian Hague with a knockout in the sixth round.

He defended the title thirteen times, a record that stood for many years, before losing against Joe Beckett in February 1919. The Lonsdale Belt that he won was the original heavyweight belt and is crafted from 22 carat gold unlike later belts.

BBC London have managed to track down this historic belt and we can exclusively reveal that the Belt is kept at The Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich, South East London. The belt however is not on display to the general public.

Wells was the only boxer to hit the gong at the beginning of all Rank Organization Films.


Retrieved from "http://www.boxrec.com/media/index.php/Bombadier_Billy_Wells"
BOMBARDIER WELLS has a most peculiar record. The chart of his successes and failures is like conventionalised lightning. He began with success and then failed miserably: then up again to the top of the tree and down again to the bottom of the ladder. His career, his temperament, the state of his nerves, have been more widely and more portentously discussed than the weight of Tom Sayers, the muscle of Tom Cribb, or the reach of Peter Jackson.

One school maintains that Wells is a first-rate boxer, another that he is a bad boxer. It all depends upon what you mean by boxing. If boxing is a game as golf is a game, an almost theoretical attack and defence, the rudest expression of which is what we call an "Exhibition" then Wells is a first-rater. But if boxing is the translation into rude and rough sport of a quite practical defence and offence, whereby one man disables another (but confined within rules which are unlikely to be obeyed in a very serious affair, any more than the Geneva Convention is obeyed in very serious wars) if, within these rules boxing means the real conflict between two men whose strength and endurance as well as skill are supremely tested then Wells is, on the whole, a bad boxer.

The explanation of Wells is extremely simple: he is a scientific boxer who does not really like fighting.

When we talk of a "natural fighter " we mean a man who, however good-natured and good nature has nothing to do with it enjoys bashing people and is willing to run the risk of being bashed. He may be skilful too, though that is beside the point. Wells has been called a coward which is frankly absurd. He has never provided any evidence of cowardice. He does, no doubt,
know the meaning of fear": the bravest men always do. The "man who does not know what fear is "clearly is a very useful man indeed, but he is not so brave as the man who knows all about it, is indeed afraid, but keeps his fear in hand. In this sort of discussion too sharp a line is usually drawn between brave men and cowards: too sharp a line is usually drawn in any discussion about primitive qualities. I don't suppose that Wells enjoys being hurt any more than I do, but his difficulty lies in the fact, that he gets no enjoyment from hurting or, let us say rather, winning physical domination over other people. A boxer to be a good boxer must have the instinct for bashing. This may not be a highly civilised instinct, it may (for all I know) be highly reprehensible, but it is present in successful pugilists, and they can't get on without it.

Wells was born in 1889, and as a soldier and amateur won the Championship of all India by beating Private Clohessey in 1909. Two years later he won the English Heavy-weight Championship by knocking out Iron Hague at the National Sporting Club in six rounds. Wells was one of the names mentioned as a "White Hope" at the time when England, Australia, and America were being ransacked for a champion to beat Johnson. The match was actually arranged, but it was very wisely stopped by order of the Home Office. There was, as already said, a great deal too much "feeling" associated with the proposed contest which had nothing at all to do with the sport of boxing. It is impossible to say how any fight that never took place would have gone, and retrospective surmise is fairly unprofitable: but so far as we can judge from the two men's respective records, there seems to be no doubt that Johnson would have won quickly and with the utmost ease.

The two most interesting encounters in Wells's career were those with Georges Carpentier. The Frenchman's record will be described in more detail later: it is enough to say for the present that he was the first French boxer of the highest order, the first to make us realise that boxing was not the sole prerogative of the English-speaking races.

The first encounter took place at the Ghent Exhibition, on June 1st, 1913. Wells stands 6 feet 3 inches, and his weight is generally in the neighbourhood of 13 stone. Carpentier is half an inch under six feet, and in those days was probably little more than a middle-weight, if that. On this occasion he fought, if not at home, at least near home: and there was a big crowd present of colliers from Lens, just over the border, amongst whom he had been born and bred.

Natural advantage was with the Bombardier. Three and a half inches is a great "pull" in height, and he had a corresponding superiority in reach. So it was plain to Carpentier and his advisers that he must do his utmost to get close to his man and to keep there. Wells, on the other hand, under-rated his opponent. Like most Englishmen at the time he could not understand how a Frenchman could be a real boxer. It seemed to be against the settled order of nature.

Now Wells was weak in the body, and he knew it. He could see that Carpentier was strong, and soon found him a hard hitter, and as he kept on attacking the body, the Englishman propped him off with long straight lefts. And for a time he kept at a distance, and Carpentier, misjudging the extra reach of his opponent lowered his guard. Then Wells sent in a hard blow at long range and all but beat him. A hard blow, perfectly timed, but not quite hard enough. Carpentier tumbled forward and remained down for nine seconds. But Carpentier really loves fighting for fighting's
sake, or did then. He had been all but knocked out, but he had in a superlative degree the will-to-go-on. And Wells, as had happened before, as happened afterwards too, failed to follow up his advantage with hot but reasoned haste. Having put in a good blow he was always rather prone to stand aside, so to speak, and admire its effects; thus allowing those effects to pass off. So it was now. It is true that he had decidedly the better of the second round, leading off with a splendid strong and long straight left: but he failed to bustle and worry Carpentier, and the Frenchman, as the very seconds went by, recovered. And in the third round Carpentier was himself again. Wells was utterly astonished. He had quite forgotten that the stunning force of a punch on the jaw passes very quickly: and he allowed himself to be flustered and confused, and he snowed plainly that he was puzzled. He forgot to box and hit wildly and wide of his mark. And now Carpentier had got back nearly all the strength that had been beaten out of him in the first round. He sent in a vicious right to the jaw which shook Wells. When a blow on the "point" has done damage short of knocking a man down, he generally gives the fact away by an involuntary tapping of his right foot upon the floor. It is like a strong electric shock which, communicated first to the brain, runs instantly through the whole nervous system. So the spectators could see that Wells had been more than "touched." And then the fourth round began and Wells was careless and in his turn lowered his guard: and Carpentier's right hand whipped across over the shoulder to the English champion's jaw, whilst an instant later his left came, bent, with his weight behind it, to the stomach. And that was all. Wells was counted out, and, as well they might, the colliers from Lens wildly yelled their triumph.

This encounter, pricking as it did the bubble of an age-old tradition, yet had very little effect on the admirers of the Bombardier. Or rather it was, perhaps, that they refused to believe that the Champion of England (however little that title may mean) could be really beaten by any one across the Channel.

They regarded the final knock-out as an accident. After all, Wells had all but won at the very outset, and for some inscrutable reason he had given the fight away, first by lack of energy and then from sheer carelessness. This would surely have taught him a lesson?

There followed after the affair at Ghent three contests in which Wells proved eminently successful. He knocked out Packey Mahoney in thirteen rounds at the National Sporting Club, after receiving early in the fight two very hard right handers in the body which made him visibly squirm. That was one of Wells's chief defects he showed when he was hurt. But it was interesting to be shown that, because it was not supposed that he could stand two such blows on the body. Yet he recovered from them gradually and did not, this time, forget his boxing.

The next fight was a very unequal affair with Pat O'Keefe, Middle-weight Champion of England, and subsequently winner outright of the Lonsdale Belt. O'Keefe was a fine, fair boxer, but he was giving a couple of stone, and Wells's head was right over him. He boxed with the utmost pluck and gave the heavyweight a lot of trouble before finally he was quite worn out and sent down beaten in the fifteenth round.

Then Wells knocked out Gunner Moir quite easily in five rounds, thus turning the tables, for
Moir had knocked out the Bombardier more by good luck than by sound judgment two years before.

And then at last on December 5th, 1913, six months after his defeat at Ghent, the return match with Carpentier was arranged and took place at the National Sporting Club.

Of course, if you regard sport only from a competitive standpoint, this affair will seem to you a sheer disaster. It was England against France, and France decisively won. It is only human nature, I suppose, which sticks the national labels so prominently on to an event of this kind, but it seems unnecessary and rather a pity. There was really no England and no France in the matter, but two boxers called respectively Carpentier and Wells, who met in a roped ring to hit each other with padded fists for the ludicrously excessive stakes of £300 a side and a purse of £3000. And now that we are more used to the idea of Frenchmen boxing than we were in those days, the international habit of thought has largely, and fortunately, dropped into the background of our minds.

It is worth mentioning that members at the National Sporting Club that night paid for their guests' seats five, ten, and as many as fifteen guineas. One onlooker, just before the men entered the ring for the big contest of the evening, left the hall. "I'll be back presently," he said to a friend, "when they've settled down. I don't want to see all the preliminaries and handshaking." So he left his fifteen-guinea seat and went into another part of the club. On his return he found that it was all over. Rather an expensive drink, in fact.

The contest had lasted precisely seventy-three seconds. It was a dismal affair, and brief as the test was there was no possible doubt but that Carpentier was Wells's master. Both the men were extremely well-trained. Wells was in excellent health and could make no excuse on that score. At the very outset the Frenchman went straight for his man and planted a good left at his body before he knew the round had begun. Then

he came in close and vigorously attacked him with a succession of short half-arm blows. He danced away for a moment and was at Wells again. The Englishman was entirely flabbergasted. His presence of mind was all gone. He sank his left in a futile attempt to guard his body, but Carpentier's right was past it in a flash, whilst his left followed instantly to Wells's nose. Wells tucked away his stomach and took a step back. Carpentier reached the body again, nevertheless; and as they went apart for a moment it was seen that Wells was stupefied more by the very speed of the onslaught, spectators said, than by punishment. Which is as may be. Carpentier hit to hurt, and it is exceedingly unlikely that he failed. But it was again the science of boxing which deserted Wells. He seemed to be paralysed. He did nothing: no long left came out to keep the Frenchman away. He wouldn't be kept away. A great lot of nonsense has been talked about his actual hypnotic power or that of his ebullient manager, M. Descamps. But the reason why Carpentier won victories in those days and has won others and greater ones since, is simply that he is an extremely good boxer with any amount of fighting spirit the love of fighting, the sheer intention to win. That form of will-power does communicate itself to an opponent in the ring and with disastrous results, if he be a man of less vitality. Then Carpentier moved forward again and swung left followed by right hard upon Wells's jaw. Then left and right at the body.
Both blows landed on the mark and it was all over. Wells reeled for an instant and then sank forward. At the call of Four he rolled over on to his back. He tried to draw up his knees, but he was completely knocked out, paralysed, and done. And for those who like the national labels the Champion of England lay beaten at the feet of the Champion of France, without having struck a single blow.

CHAPTER IX
JOE BECKETT AND BOMBARDIER WELLS

AT the time of writing this chapter, Joe Beckett is the Heavy-weight Champion of England, and has been ever since the contest described below when, on February 27th, 1919, he first met Bombardier Wells. He is not a very good champion. His skill is not of the first order, and he has neither the height nor weight to supply his deficiencies. Carpentier disposed of him in a round, because Carpentier is incomparably the better boxer. Wells is also a better boxer so far as skill one might almost say "mere "skill goes, but as some one said of him once, "He's too bally refined," which is a better description of the Bombardier than most loose generalisations. He is too bally (and I might dare also to add "blinking ") refined, both in his style of boxing and in his appearance. The old-time pug-faced bruiser is dying out, not only because men no longer fight with their bare knuckles, but because their skill is so much greater in defence than it used to be, that a broken nose is a comparatively rare accident; and modern surgery can make a job of the worst battered faces. Your opponent aims chiefly for those places which are most susceptible to temporary but overwhelming effect the jaw and the mark. The most terrific blows on either spot do not produce disfigurement. What is known as a "thick ear" is common enough still many amateurs have it; but Wells has managed to avoid even that. His profile might easily be called Greek at all events by someone who had once seen a photograph of Praxiteles' Hermes and had rather forgotten it. Even Carpentier, whose personal appearance is discussed much as a good-looking actor's, and by the same sort of people, looks, at close quarters, more of a bruiser than does Wells.

Punch chose to be amusing on this subject not long before the war, satirizing the old and new methods of the manner in which celebrities of the ring were photographed. In one drawing you see the old bruiser, a doughty ruffian, stripped to the waist, with a flattened nose, beetle-browed, with a long aggressive chin, piggy eyes and short-cropped hair; in the other you have a smiling young man dressed in the last palpitating extremity of fashion, with longish hair brushed back
from a somewhat noble brow, whilst beside him a beautiful young woman smiles into a baby's cot. The source of Mr. Punch's inspiration was not far to seek. In the old days a boxer was portrayed at his job just as actors and actresses were, because his job it was that interested people. And like actors and actresses he is still photographed at his job. But to-day just as you will see in the illustrated papers photographs of theatrical people playing quite irrelevant games of golf or making hay which has nothing to do with the point, so you will see photographs of feather-weight champions dandling purely inapposite infants. It is an age when people like to assure themselves (for some inscrutable reason) that show-people are just exactly like people who are not on show.

For good or for ill, boxing has become more and more a matter of exact science in which the quick use of brains has, to some extent, superseded purely physical qualities. And a new type of professional boxer has therefore been evolved. Nevertheless, it is worth observing here that the most important quality of all for success in the ring remains unchanged from the very dawn of fist-fighting, a quality possessed by Tom Johnson, by Jem Belcher, by Tom Spring, Sayers, Fitzsimmons, Carpentier what we call "character." Now Joe Beckett (to continue for a moment this unseemly discussion of other men's personal appearance) is in the old tradition of English champions. He "looks a bruiser." This is largely due, no doubt, to much rough and tumble fighting in his youth, when he travelled with a booth, which is still (as it has been in the past) a first-rate school for a hardy young bruiser. In this way he won a great many contests, which have never been recorded, and then began a regular career of no particular distinction in 1914. In the following year he retired after fighting Pat O'Keefe for eight rounds. In 1917 he was knocked out also in eight rounds by Frank Goddard, on whom, however, he had his revenge in two rounds two years later. He lost on points to Dick Smith, who was once a policeman and amateur champion, after a contest of twenty rounds. Indeed the people who beat Beckett were better known and better boxers than the people whom he beat. But all this time he was improving as a boxer and getting fitter and stronger.

When he entered the ring at the Holborn Stadium with Bombardier Wells he was, as they say, a picture. He was in perfect, buoyant health; a mass of loose, easy, supple muscle slid and rolled under his bronzed and shining skin, he was obviously eager and ready for a good fight.

Wells led off with his academic straight left, and landed lightly. Joe Beckett dodged the next blow, came close in and sent in a hot right-hander with a bent and vigorous arm to the body. Wells doubled up and went down. On his rising Beckett went for him again, put another right on the body and followed it quickly with a severe punch rather high on the jaw which knocked Wells down again for a count of nine. Beckett ought to have beaten him then, but Wells boxed with great pluck and covered himself with care. During the rest of that round he never took another blow, and, after a rest, came up for the second fully recovered. Beckett rushed at him clumsily, trying to get close, and Wells used his long reach with much skill and promptitude, propping him off, hitting him with his clean and sure straight left, moving quickly on his feet, so that, try as he would, Beckett failed to come to close quarters. Just at the end of the round Wells gave his man a really hard blow on the chin which made Beckett exceedingly glad to hear the bell which announced time. And in the third round, too, Wells kept his opponent at a distance, boxing brilliantly, and adding up points in his own favour.
In the fourth Wells was really happy. He had suppressed Beckett, he thought; and sent a hard right-hander to the jaw which would have staggered less hard a man. But Beckett is very strong, and replied with a couple of body-blows, without, however, doing any damage to speak of. Again it was Wells's round. He had quite forgotten the beginning of the fight and how nearly he had been beaten then. He was acutely conscious of being the better boxer, and consequently underrated Beckett's strength and persistence. At the start of the fifth round he was not prepared for the rush with which his antagonist came for him, so that Beckett got quite close to him before he could think about propping him away. Right and left came Beckett's gloves with a will into Wells's slim body, and then a short jolting blow went upwards to his jaw, and Wells went down. He was up again very quickly, not seriously hurt, and Beckett darted in again. This time Wells was ready and did his utmost to use his long reach. But Beckett's greater strength and his willingness to run a little risk told in his favour. He was fighting hard, but not wildly or foolishly; he ducked under the long arm and began to punish Wells severely about the body. Another blow on the head sent Wells to the ground for nine seconds. Wells rose feeling dazed and helpless, he tried to cover his jaw, but Beckett darted in and sent in a hard right over his shoulder to the point, and Wells was knocked out. And the Championship of England again changed hands.

A return match was arranged a year later, and on May 20th, 1920, this pair fought again for the Championship at Olympia. Beckett in the meantime had been summarily knocked out by Carpentier, but had himself knocked out Frank Goddard in two rounds, Eddie McGoorty in seventeen, and Dick Smith in five. He had become more confident, more adept. He was not a great boxer, is not now, and is never likely to be. But he had improved. Nor had Wells been idle. He had knocked out Jack Curphey in two rounds, Harry Reeves in four, Paul Journee, the Frenchman, in thirteen, and Eddie McGoorty in sixteen. This last was a terrific fight, but McGoorty was quite out of training. Wells had also beaten Arthur Townley, who retired at the end of the ninth round.

What I might call the cochranisation of boxing has now for some time past enabled vast crowds of people to watch, in comfort, altogether too great a number of championship fights. The popular excitement about these contests, or the majority of them, is largely artificial almost as artificial as the reputations of the "champions" themselves, the result, that is to say, of purely commercial advertisement. Of course, the case of Bombardier Wells is singular. Long ago, before the war, he had his hold upon the popular imagination (if such a thing exists), because he was tall, and good-looking, and "temperamental."

As for his methods, a friend of mine who used to judge Army Competitions in India, and who saw the All India Championship of 1909, used to say that he never knew a boxer who so persistently stuck to the plan of campaign that he had previously thought out as did Bombardier Wells. Perhaps that is the secret of his mercurial career: perhaps he always has a plan of campaign and sticks to it successfully or not, according to the plan of his antagonist. Wells's antagonists have a disconcerting way of doing something fresh and unexpected, and the plan is liable to be a hindrance. The most crafty boxer may have a plan which he prefers, but he is able at an instant's notice to substitute an alternative scheme suited especially to the caprice of the man he desires to beat. Carpentier does that. Wells, as already said, likes scientific boxing just as other people like golf, and he is apt to be disconcerted by fierce sloggers just as a golfer would be disconcerted (I imagine) by some one who invented and employed some explosive device for
driving little white balls much farther away than can be done with the implements at present in use. Circumstances or the advice of friends pushed Wells in the first instance possibly without any special desire of his own into the professional ring. And people still flock to see him there, or at all events they did so in 1920, chiefly because the ring was, for him, so strikingly inappropriate a setting. Beckett, on the other hand, takes naturally to fighting. He is not nearly such a "good boxer," his style is not so finished as Wells's, his footwork, though variable, is not so adept. But he knows how to smash people, and I should say (intending no libel upon a gallant as well as a successful bruiser) likes doing it.

The majority of people who came to Olympia to watch the second fight between those men probably wanted Wells to win, for the inadequate reason that he looked so much less like a boxer than his adversary. They were disappointed. Wells began better than usual, for he seemed ready to fight: but his own science was at fault in that he accepted Beckett's invitation to bouts of in-fighting, when he ought to have done his utmost to keep his man at long range. Beckett accepted the situation comfortably, and sent in some hard punches to the body and a left swing to the head. During the last minute of the round Wells did succeed in keeping him away and landed a succession of fine straight lefts; but these were not hard blows, nor did Wells attempt to follow them up. Joe Beckett was imperturbable and dogged, but very cautious too. He kept his left shoulder well up to protect his jaw from Wells's right, and when he did hit he hit hard. There was no sting, no spring, no potency in Wells's hitting. And he was careless. He gave Beckett an excellent opening in the second round, which the new champion used admirably with a hooked left, sending Wells down for seven seconds. And he kept on pushing his way in for the rest of that round, once leaving himself unguarded in his turn and inviting the blow with which Wells, if he had put his weight into it, might well have knocked him out. But the blow was too high and not hard enough. The third round was the last. Beckett gave his man a hard left, and Wells broke ground, somewhat staggered. They came together and for half a minute or more there was a really fine rally, Beckett hit the harder all the time, and presently with a swinging left to the body and a beautifully clean and true right hook to the jaw he knocked Wells out.