

Pugilisms First heroes and crooks

James Figg was born in Thame in February 1684, the youngest of seven children born to Francis and Elizabeth Figg whom popular opinion believe lived in a row of cottages in Priestend. Being from a poor family in an agricultural town, his early life would not have been easy. He appears to have gained himself a reputation at prize fighting and is known to have frequented the booths at local fairs.

He made his headquarters at the Greyhound Inn in Cornmarket, Thame. However to earn a living as a prize-fighter he would have had to venture far away from Thame. During Southwark Fair he used to keep a great tiled booth on the bowling green where he entertained from noon to night.

By 1719 he was claiming to be the Champion of England and challenging all comers. Regular Prize Fights were held at a venue called the Boarded House in the Bear Garden in Marylebone Fields off Oxford Street in London. When Figg announced the opening of his theatre he became the first person to openly advertise the teaching of boxing and exhibitions of skill. The curious thing about Figg was that he was more expert as a cudgeller than as a Pugilist, being a master of the sword and expert fencer.

It was Figg who made the sport popular and many other amphitheatres - to use the correct term - were to open after his where wooden rails, rather than ropes, formed the ring which was raised up on a stage with the ref safely conducting the proceedings from outside the ring. Figg's business card was designed by his good friend Hogarth and was distributed amongst the crowds and was the first form of advertisement used to promote the then new sport of boxing.

"Here I am Jemmy Figg from Thame, I will fight any man in England".

That was the cry heard around the Marylebone area of London in the early 18th Century where James Figg opened an academy of arms, including boxing.

He died in London on December 8, 1734. and is buried at the Old Parish Church of St. Marylebone, London, England. In 1723 the Boarded House held contests every Wednesday and James Figg is advertised as featuring approximately once a month. Challengers came from far and wide and included;

Christopher Clarkson (the Lancashire soldier), Philip McDonald (the Dublin carpenter), William Finn of Ireland, James Stokes Citizen of London, Rowland Bennet from Ireland.

Not only were there men fighting at the Boarded House but often women were advertised and many animals would be baited to fight each other.

A host of other fighters were on the supporting bills to these fights and James Figg gained a reputation as a tutor and trainer. He formed his school probably near to his house on Oxford Street. Figg's Amphitheatre or Great House was the prototype of several other schools of pugilism that were developed in this area of London.

This Great House stood at the corner of Castle Street and Marylebone Fields and just north of Figg's house at the Sign of the City of Oxford in Oxford Road. These streets still exist although they are now known as Eastcastle Street, Wells Street and Oxford Street. It may be assumed that Figg was also a victualer and supplemented his income as a publican with income from his school where he instructed the nobility in the noble arts.

It is claimed that Figg had over 270 fights and only one defeat. That was to Edward Sutton of Gravesend when he was ill. He won the re-match and then came the third and deciding bout with Mr Sutton which was recorded in verse by James Byrom the diarist who wrote in the Spectator.

Upon a Trial of Skill

I

Long was the great Figg, by the prize-fighting swains,
Sole monarch acknowledged of Mary-bone plains,
To the towns, far and near, did his valour extend,
And swam down the river from Thame to Gravesend;
Where lived Mr. Sutton, pipe-maker by trade,
Who hearing that Figg was thought such a stout blade,
Resolved to put in for a share of his fame,
And so sent to challenge the champion of Thame.

II

With alternate advantage two rubbers had past,
When they fought out the rubbers on Wednesday last;
To see such a contest the house was so full,

There hardly was room left to thrust in your skull.
With a prelude of cudgells we first were saluted,
And two or three shoulders most handsomely fluted,
Till weary at last with inferior disasters,
All the company cry'd, come the masters, the masters.

III

Whereupon the bold Sutton first mounted the stage,
Made his honors as usual, and yearn'd to engage;
Then Figg, with a visage so fierce, yet sedate,
Came and entered the lists, with his fresh-shaven pate;
Their arms were encircled with armigers too,
With a red ribbon Sutton's, and Figg's with a blue;
Thus adorned the two heroes, betwixt shoulder and elbow,
Shook hands, and to't, and the word it was bilboe.

IV

Sure such a concern, in the eyes of spectators,
Was never yet seen in our amphitheatres;
Our commons and peers, from the several places,
To half an inch distance all pointed their faces ;
While the rays of old Phoebus, that shot-thro' the sky-light,
Seemed to make on the stage a new kind of twilight;
And the gods without doubt, if one could but have seen'em,
Were peeping there through, to do justice between 'em.

V

Figg struck the first stroke, and with a vast fury,
That lie broke his huge weapon in twain I assure you;
And if his brave rival this blow had not warded,
His head from his shoulders had been quite discarded.
Figg armed him again, and they took t'other tilt,
And then Sutton's blade ran away from its hilt;
The weapons were frightened, but as for the men,
In truth they ne'er- minded, but at it again.

VI

Such a force in their blows, you'd have thought it a wonder
Every stroke they received did not cleave 'em asunder,

Yet so great was their courage, so equal their skill,
That they both seemed as safe as a thief in a mill;
While in doubtful attention Dame Victory stood,
And which side to take could not tell for her blood,
But remained like the ass 'twixt the bundles of hay,
Without ever stirring an inch either way.

VII

Till Jove to the Gods signified his intention,
In a speech that he made, too tedious to mention;
But the upshot on't was, that at that very bout,
From a wound in Figg's side the hot blood spouted out;
Her ladyship then seemed to think the case plain,
But Figg stepping forth, with a sullen disdain
Shew'd the gash, and appealed to the company round,
If his own broken sword had not given the wound.

VIII

That bruises and wounds a man's spirit should touch,
With danger so little, with honor so much!
Well, they both took a drain, and returned to the battle,
And with a fresh fury they made their swords rattle;
While Sutton's right arm was observed to bleed,
By a touch from his rival, so Jove had decreed;
Just enough for to; show that his blood was not icor,
But made up, like Figg's, of the common red liquor.

IX

Again they both rush'd with as equal a fire on,
Till the company, cried, hold enough of cold iron,
To the quarter-staff now lads. So first having dram'd it,
They took to their wood, and i' faith never sham'd it.
The first bout they had was so fair and so handsome,
That to make a fair bargain, was worth a king's ransom
And Sutton such bangs on his neighbour imparted,
Would have made any fibres, but Figg's, to have smarted.

X

Then after that bout they went on to another,

Rut the matter must end on some fashion or other;
So Jove told the gods he had made a decree,
That Figg should hit Sutton a stroke on the knee.
Tho' Sutton, disabled as soon as he hit him,
Would still have fought on, but Jove would not permit him;
'Twas his fate, not his fault, that constrain'd him to yield,
And thus the great Figg became lord of the field.

James Byrom, 1726

He was not forgotten in his native Thame and his portrait used to hang in the bar of the Greyhound Inn in Cornmarket proudly displayed by the landlord Mr Wall for long after his death.

Figg resigned his title in 1734 and died in 1740 and his pupil George Taylor claimed the title which he retained until 1740 when he was beaten by Jack Broughton, the father of boxing rules and inventor of the boxing glove, in 1740 in front of a large crowd at one of Taylor's own boxing booths. The gloves (mufflers) at that time were only used in sparring exhibitions.

He devised the mufflers for use of his pupils, many from the aristocratic families of the day, to lessen the risk of facial damage during lessons at his private school. Presumably the lords and ladies of the day were non to keen on having Sunday lunch looking across the table at there little offspring with a face cut to bits and resembling a bag of spanners.

The Broughton rules – seven short paragraphs – barred gouging and hitting a fallen opponent but a wide latitude was still there for wrestling and rough and tumble fighting – which to be sure was taken full advantage of. Broughton lived to the age of 85, amazing when one considers his life style, and was buried with the British elite in Westminster abbey. His friendship with the Duke of Cumberland helped.

Previously boxing had been a toe to toe affair but Broughton, who studied defence and attack, introduced stopping, blocking, hitting and retreating. His rules were to govern boxing from 1743 to 1838 when the

new code of “The London Prize Ring Rules” was adopted.

Broughton had been a well-respected man and after his retirement from the scene and any notions that the honesty for which he was known was to continue was soon to vanish when Jack Slack came on the scene.

Slack was a butcher and known as the “Knight of the Cleaver” who not only “tossed fights” but also assisted in other “cross affairs of the knuckles” – great descriptions of the day-. Slack won due to fearlessness, rather than ability, and was credited for introducing the “Chopper” – appropriate given his job as a butcher – which is the equivalent of the rabbit punch.

Slack’s reign was from 1750 to 1760 a decade when boxing went into decline as the public had lost faith in the sport due to the allegations of shady deals made by prominent fighters. The Duke of Cumberland backed Slack against Bill “The Nailer” Stevens” for the crown who had the Duke of York as his patron, facts in themselves speaks volumes for the quality of judgement the two Dukes had. The fight took place on 17th June 1760 with “The Nailer” , someone notorious for his double-crosses –winning the title.

Slack then went on to back George Meggs against Stevens, who he hid bribed to lose, and received a fee for the fix of fifty guineas from Meggs. Meggs soon lost the title to Baker Milson who then lost to Tom Juchau. Then came Bill Darts who held on for nearly five years until in 1769 Tom Lyons “The Waterman “ took the title. However Lyons was far from being overwhelmed by his new found fame and within two weeks went back to his more peaceful job of ferrying People across the Thames. Darts regained the title but then lost it in what is said to be record time – the fight lasted less than a minute – to Peter Corcoran. The first Irishman to win the title.

"Here I am Jemmy Figg from Thame, I will fight any man in England".

That was the cry heard around the Marylebone area of London in the early 18th Century where James Figg opened an academy of arms, including boxing.

Standing 6 feet (1.8m) and weighing 185 pounds (84kg), Figg was a stalwart figure who was always ready to accept a challenge to fight. He lost only one match, and on that occasion he was said to be ill.

Figg was the first recognised champion of England at fighting with bare fists. Also an expert at wrestling, swordplay, and fighting with cudgels, he became prominent as a pugilist about 1719 and claimed the title 'Champion of England' from then until about 1730.

He died in London on December 8, 1734. and is buried at the Old Parish Church of St. Marylebone, London, England.

[James Figg's grave.](#)

James Figg was born in Thame in February 1684, the youngest of seven children born to Francis and Elizabeth Figg whom popular opinion believe lived in a row of cottages in Priestend.

Being from a poor family in an agricultural town, his early life would not have been easy. He appears to have gained himself a reputation at prize fighting and is known to have frequented the booths at local fairs.

He made his headquarters at the Greyhound Inn in Cornmarket, Thame. However to earn a living as a prize-fighter he would have had to venture far away from Thame.

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55
AT the Boarded-House in Marybone-Fields,
 this present Wednesday, being the 19th Day of June, will be
 perform'd a Tryal of Skill by the following Masters.

Whereas I ROWLAND BENNET, from Ireland, Master of the
 Noble Science of Defence, having since my last Arrival in England,
 had the Opportunity to see Mr. James Figg exercise the usual Weapons
 on the Stage, the particulars of which I forbear to Instance in, but by
 what I was then an Eye-witness of, am fully perswaded, that if the
 proper Method be executed against him, he (like Sampson with his
 Hair off) is like other Men. For a Tryal of which, I do now invite
 him to meet me, and Exercise the usual Weapons fought on the Stage.

I JAMES FIGG, from Thame in Oxfordshire, Master of the said
 Science, to give the said Rowland Bennet an Opportunity of putting
 this proper Method in Execution, will not fail to meet at the Place and
 Time appointed, hoping the Spectators may from thence receive en-
 tire Satisfaction, assuring him before-hand, that what Method I shall
 make use of, will be by the way of Old Style. N.B. The Door
 will be open at Four, and the Masters mount at Six precisely.

1723.

In 1723 the Boarded House held contests every Wednesday and James Figg is advertised as featuring approximately once a month. Challengers came from far and wide and included;

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Rocque's map of 1746 with a key to places of interest.

1. St Marylebone Parish Church
2. The School House, formerly the Manor House
3. Burial Ground
4. Marylebone Gardens
5. Marylebone Basin
6. The Oxford Market

This map drawn in 1746 gives a flavour to this part of London. The grid pattern of streets north of Oxford Street are in the process of development and to the North of these streets, lanes lead to green fields. To the east of the map Marybone Fd is a survivor of earlier lanes and Mr Figg's Great House was located at its junction with Castle Street.

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in the bar of the Greyhound Inn in Cornmarket proudly displayed by the landlord Mr Wall for long after his death.

*The Mighty Combatant the first in Fame,
The lasting Glory of his native Thame,
Rash & unthinking Men at length be Wise,
Consult your safety and Resign the Prize,
Nor tempt Superior Force; but Timely Fly
The Vigour of his Arm, the quickness of his eye.*

These words were underneath his portrait in the Greyhound Inn.

His death was recorded in all the newspapers of the day, but probably this article is one of the most prophetic;

Last Saturday there was a Trial of Skill between the unconquered Hero, Death, on the one side and till then the unconquered Hero Mr James Figg, the famous Prize-Fighter and Master of the Noble Science of Defence on the other: The Battle was most obstinately fought on both sides, but at last the former obtained an Entire Victory and the latter tho' he was obliged to submit to a Superior Foe yet fearless and with Disdain he retired and that Evening expired at his house in Oxford Road.

James Figg was 50 when he died and left a wife and many children, one of his grandsons also became a Boxing Champion some years later.

Figg may be regarded as the first boxing champion, but he was also the first boxing coach, manager and promoter and a true all round fighter, though he was as proficient with a stick and sword as with his fists.

As modern day martial artists, we owe a great deal to those who formulated and developed our arts. I love to read their works, and stories about these great men and women. By studying the past greats we can gain inspiration and we can fully appreciate our arts as we can view them in their correct historical perspective.

There is a good chance that the art you practice originated in the orient. However, we should not forget about our own indigenous fighting systems and their masters, as they are every bit as effective as their oriental counterparts and they also make up a large part of our martial heritage. I would class myself as a "traditional karateka," and yet as a regular part of my training I hit a punch bag, jump rope and spar using boxing gloves - as I'm sure many of those reading this article do also. The western art of boxing has had a huge influence on all the martial arts. Hence, in addition to studying oriental martial arts masters, I also like to read about the masters of the native art of boxing. One such master was James Figg.

James Figg was born in Thame Village, Oxfordshire in 1695 and went onto become the first recognised champion of boxing. Figg was six feet tall, weighed 185 pounds and was well versed in both armed and unarmed combat. History tells us that it was the Earl of Peterborough who first spotted Figg's potential after witnessing him giving a demonstration of boxing, fencing and the use of the quarter-staff on the village green. The Earl took Figg down to London where he would fight all comers, teach his fighting methods and give demonstrations of his skills. Figg became a popular figure and many people wished to learn from him and watch him fight. In 1719, Figg opened a boxing academy, which held over 1000 people, where he and his students would teach and demonstrate their skills. Figg's business card for his academy declared him to be, "Master of the noble science of defence." Figg never lost a fight and was considered to be the champion of Great Britain until he retired in 1730.

As Figg's reputation grew, more and more "gentleman amateurs" took up boxing as a pastime and sought out Figg's tuition. One of Figg's students was a 'Captain Godfrey' who wrote, "I have purchased my knowledge with many a broken head, and bruises in every part of me." This statement emphasises the realistic, and sometimes harsh, nature of Figg's tuition. Figg also drew upon his extensive knowledge of fencing to enhance the empty-handed fighting skills of his students. The parries & ripostes of fencing had a large influence upon what became parries & counter-punches of modern boxing.

The boxing that Figg taught and practised was markedly different from the boxing of today. Although hitting with fists was emphasised, a boxer could grapple and throw his opponent (the cross-buttock throw being the favourite) and then either hit him when he was down, or continue to grapple whilst on the ground. Indeed, it was not until 1743 - 13 years after Figg's retirement - that kicking an opponent whilst he was down ("purring" as it was called at the time) and gouging were banned from the

'sport'. Whilst the original art of boxing was a complete system that covered all ranges, the skills of kicking, grappling and ground work are completely omitted from the arts modern offspring. And this situation is by no means unique to boxing. As examples, Judo and Aikido tend not to include the striking skills that were once a fundamental part of the art. And the vast majority of karateka no longer include the grappling and groundwork associated with the karate katas in their training (read my book, "Karate's Grappling Methods" for further details). This "specialisation" does have an upside however, as it has resulted in these specific skills being taken to extremely high levels. There can be little doubt that when it comes to punching, modern boxing is head and shoulders above all other arts.

As an example of how complete boxing was, I shall tell the tale of one of Figg's most famous fights. On the 6th of June 1727, James Figg fought Ned Sutton - a pipe maker from Gravesend. The bout generated huge interest and amongst the audience were many important names of the time, including Sir Robert Walpole - the Prime Minister.

The first match was to be with swords! Which goes to illustrate that the use of weapons were also part of a boxer's training - Much the same as weapons were also a part of the training of the majority of eastern martial arts. The first thirty minutes of the bout were fairly uneventful until Sutton went on the attack, which resulted in Figg cutting his arm on his own sword. Under the rules this did not count, and hence the bout continued. It was in the sixth round that Figg cut Sutton's shoulder, which resulted in Figg being granted the first victory.

After a thirty-minute interval, the "Fist-Fighting" began. After eight minutes Sutton executed a throw which resulted in Figg being dumped at the umpire's feet. Figg immediately regained his feet and went onto to throw Sutton such that he required time to recover as the result of the bad and heavy landing. When the bout continued, Sutton landed a blow that was so powerful that Figg was knocked clean off the stage (ropes were not used at the time) and into the audience. Figg recovered and went onto punch Sutton to the floor, where he then grappled Sutton into submission.

The final bout was with Cudgels, during which Figg broke Sutton's knee and hence secured a three-nil victory. The description of Figg vs. Sutton bout shows how grappling, groundwork and weapons skills were as much a part of boxing as the punching for which the art is so revered today. This tale also helps to show just how skilful and knowledgeable a martial artist Figg was. How many of today's martial artists would have the skills and the courage to fight in no-holds-barred contests where the contests

fought with bare knuckles, and live swords & cudgels! When you consider that Figg was also never beaten, I think it becomes clear just how talented a martial artist he was.

Not only was Figg a great fighter himself, but he was also a great teacher. When Figg retired in 1730, the title of Champion was claimed by one of Figg's pupils - Jack Broughton, who was to retain the title of champion for 20 years! In 1741, Broughton fought George Stevenson. The fight lasted just under 40 minutes and was considered "brutal" even for the day. Both men took severe punishment until Broughton landed a solid blow just below Stevenson's heart. Stevenson dropped to the floor and did not get up. Broughton was heard to say, "What have I done? I've killed him!" Stevenson eventually recovered enough to pay his respects to Broughton before once again losing consciousness. Stevenson never recovered and died from his injuries a month later. During that month the two pugilists had become good friends and the death of Stevenson greatly upset Broughton. So much so that Broughton went on to devise the first set of rules in an attempt to make boxing matches safer. Amongst these rules was the declaration that at the beginning of each round a man would be given 30 seconds to make his way to a line at the centre of the ring, if they failed then they forfeited the bout. This line was referred to as the "scratch," and the term "not up to scratch" has now found its way into everyday usage. Broughton is also accredited with inventing the first ever pair of boxing gloves, or "mufflers" as they were called. However these "mufflers" were only used in training and were not worn in bouts proper.

James Figg is without a doubt one of history's greatest martial artists. I'm sure many would argue that the art he practised was brutal (as was life at the time) and horrific (they would be right) and hence we would be wrong to class him as a martial artist at all! It is here that I must disagree. All of the arts were born out of violence and violent times. That is why they were necessary in the first place. One of my favourite quotes is that of Master Azato (one of the karate teachers of Gichin Funakoshi - founder of Shotokan) he said, "A true martial artist is one whose smile will warm the hearts of little children, and whose anger will make tigers cower in fear." I think this perfectly sums up the paradox that all true martial artists should aspire to - on the one hand, to be kind, gentle and benevolent, and on the other hand, to be capable of dealing with violence when no other option is available. If we simply try to ignore the brutality of combat, we fail to adequately prepare ourselves, and, by default, we actually promote violence! It is only when we fully acknowledge just how futile and revolting violence can be, that we will do everything in our power to avoid it. And if we can't, then we are greatly indebted to men like James Figg for the sacrifices they have made

to ensure we have the knowledge to deal with the violent behaviour of others. Although the boxing that Figg practised was brutal, it was also considered, "noble" and a fitting pastime for society gentlemen. Like its Oriental equivalents, Boxing was considered to be not only a means of self-defence, but also as a means through which people could better themselves through discipline and the overcoming of adversity, and hence be of more use to society.

After his retirement James Figg continued to teach his "noble art," but he did not have long left to live. James Figg died, aged 40, on the 8th of December 1734, leaving behind a wife and several children

Pugilisms First heroes and crooks

Boxing became a popular sport in the early part of the 18th century with the acknowledgement of James Figg as the first heavyweight king of Britain in 1719 and to many the story of the heavyweights is the story of boxing itself. When Figg announced the opening of his theatre he became the first person to openly advertise the teaching of boxing and exhibitions of skill. The curious thing about Figg was that he was more expert as a cudgeller than as a Pugilist, being a master of the sword and expert fencer.

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Jack Slack, a Norwich butcher and the conqueror of Broughton was known as the "Knight of the Cleaver." Slack, the grandson of James Figg, held the title for ten years—1750 to 1760.

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