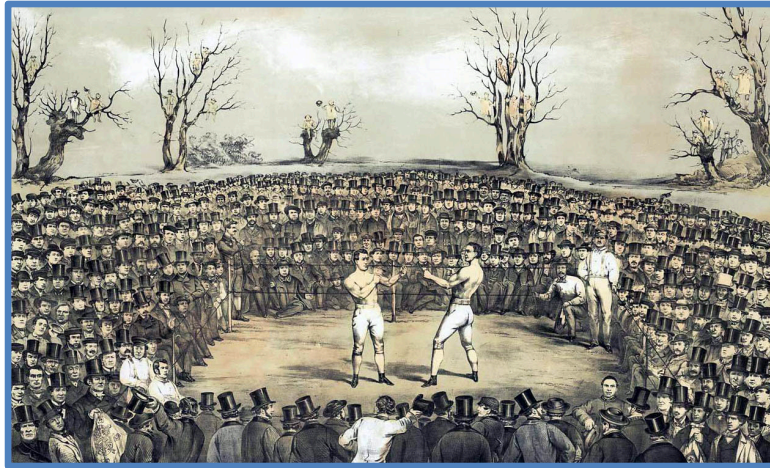
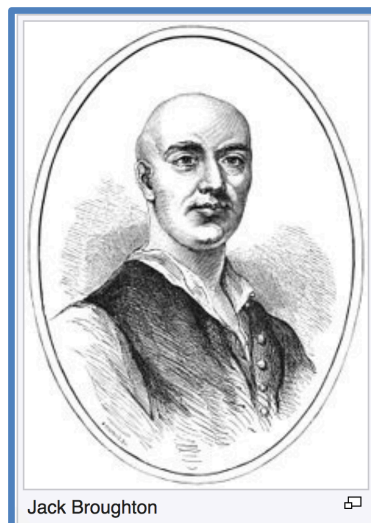


The Prize Fights at Acorn Bridge

By Neil Maw



Although Boxing was illegal in England in the 18th century, the Prize Fighter James Figg had so captured the public's imagination that he was acclaimed champion of England, a distinction that he held for 15 years. It was so popular with the public that it led to legal laxity and inconsistency of enforcement. One of Figg's pupils, Jack Broughton, is credited with taking the first steps towards boxing's acceptance as a respectable athletic sport.



Jack Broughton

One of the greatest bare-knuckle Prize Fighters in history, Broughton devised the modern sport's first set of rules in 1743, and those rules, with only minor changes, governed Boxing until they were replaced by the more detailed London Prize Ring rules in 1838.



The new rules spread quickly and were first used in a championship fight in 1839. The new rules provided for a ring 24 feet square bounded by two ropes. When a fighter went down, the round ended, and he was helped to his corner. The next round would begin 30 seconds later, with each boxer required to reach, unaided, a mark in the centre of the ring. This mark, or scratch in the dirt was made to divide the ring and at the start of each round, both fighters were required to put their toes up against the line to show they were fit enough to continue. This rule has stayed with our language even today with expressions such as, *doesn't come up to scratch, start from scratch and, not up to the mark*. If a fighter could not come up to the mark within eight seconds, he was declared the loser. Another interesting expression from this period in Prize Fighting and still used today is the word 'Draw' to declare no clear winner. This comes from the stakes that were used to secure the ropes of

the fighting ring and would be '*drawn*' out of the ground, and came to symbolise the end of an inconclusive fight. The money that would go to the winner was placed in a bag and hung on one of the ring stakes, and this became known as stake money. (Information above from Encyclopedia Britannica, photos from Wikipedia.)

The long awaited match between Ben Terry of Birmingham and Harry Broome of London was a big Prize Fight that took place just outside of Shrivenham on Tuesday 3rd February 1846. The two young men were successful fighters and the Stake money was for £100 each. It was suggested that the location for the match should be half-way between Birmingham and London and mutually agreed that it should be in the vicinity of Swindon. The publication called, '*Bell's Life*' in London, dated 8th February 1846, states that the, '*Broms had to make a circuitous route to Gloucester, and from thence through Cirencester, while the Londoners were enabled to go direct to the spot. On the evening before, the bustle in the quiet town of Swindon was sufficiently indicative of something being "up."* The night trains from Gloucester brought large accessions from the hardware country, to which the six o'clock train from London made considerable additions, and then came such a demand for horses and carriages that vehicles of every possible denomination were quickly monopolised. The article goes on to give more information on the location; '*It was agreed that the ring should be formed on the borders of Berkshire, about five miles from Swindon, and a mile and a half from Shrivenham station. There were so many people arriving in Swindon that many had to walk to the site and were forced to, wade through muddy roads and slimy paths, to push on for the scene of action. On crossing Acorn Bridge, which throws its arch over a stream dividing the counties of Wilts and Berks, the commissary (organiser) took possession of a meadow, in the centre of which he was fortunate enough to discover a favourable piece of sward (green turf), upon which the 'lists' (ring) were quickly formed.*' It goes on to describe the huge amount of people who were swarming on to the site and some idea of the ground conditions can be learned when the Reporter stated, '*From the swampy state of the ground, vicissitudes of no pleasant character were necessarily encountered, but by the aid of gig cushions, great coats, and other expedients, something like sitting places were formed close to the ropes and stakes; while close in the rear a motley assemblage of spectators, among whom we noticed a much larger portion than was anticipated of the Birmingham division.*' It also informs us about the weather with, '*The morning was lowery, and a misty rain added anything but pleasure to the feelings of the congregated mass, which was every moment increasing from the arrival of stragglers.*'



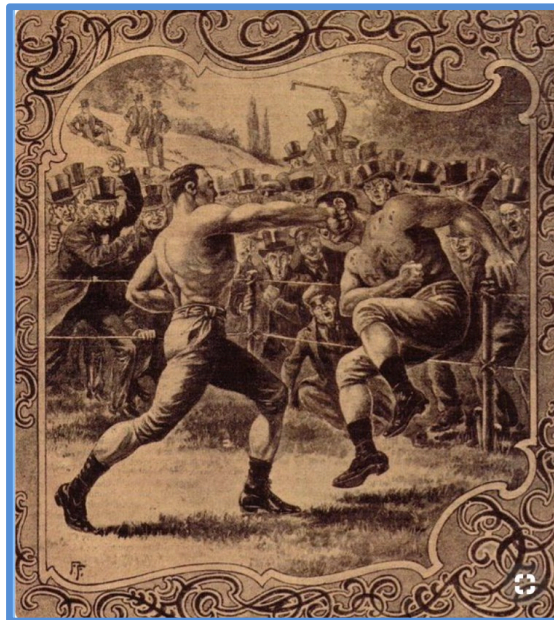
Somewhere near here was the Fighting Field. At that time there were farm buildings in the centre of this photo. So which field was it ?

There was a problem as to who would be the Referee. Various names were put forward and rejected by either side, but eventually it was agreed that a, *'gentleman from Birmingham, well known for his impartiality and integrity, and who confessed that he was a backer of Broome, was selected.'* More of him later.

The Reporter wrote that a huge amount of betting took place and that Broome was the favourite to win at odds of 6 to 4 and that the clamour for betting was a rowdy affair. As for the two fighters, the Reporter wrote, *'Terry looked remarkably well, and as hard as old nails; he stood about 5 feet 9 ½ inches and weighed 10 stone 4 lbs; his confidence had evidently been screwed to the sticking place, and defeat was foreign to his anticipations; he looked thinner than his opponent, and did not seem to us to have the advantage either in height or length. Broome, who stands 5 feet 9 inches, exhibited equal confidence, but not the same elasticity of spirit; in fact it struck us that he was serious and meditative. As his manner is usually quiet and steady, however, this did not appear to us extraordinary. His muscles were well developed, and his action firm and springy.'*

The fight started at noon precisely, *'the men were delivered at the scratch and their seconds retired to their corners.'* There then followed 48 rounds at the end of which time Ben Terry seemed to be the more exhausted of the two fighters. The Reporter describes what happened in Round 49; *'Terry, steel to the backbone, came up to make a last effort. Broome waited*

for him, and as he came in made a poke at his body with his left – he got home on the waistband, and let fly right and left; Terry reeled back to his corner – upon which Coates (Terry's Second) rushed forward and cried "Foul" – a cry which was reiterated by a hundred of the surrounding Broms. The Referee held up his hands, but had no time to give his decision before he was surrounded by a crowd of "roughs" who with sticks upheld denounced vengeance on him if he did not assent to Coates' claim. The Referee, terrified at the jeopardy in which he was placed, hesitated, and gave no decision. After a short pause, during which the Referee was overwhelmed by the mob, Terry was taken out of the ring, Broome standing up, and looking utter astonishment, as he was perfectly unconscious of having in any way violated the Rules of the Ring.'



Drawing featuring Harry Broome who fought at Acorn Bridge. Picture from the Hulton Archive depicts a fight from 1855 between Harry Broome & Tom Paddock

The scene by this time was one of complete chaos and it was only by the timely intervention of friends of the Referee who managed to extricate him from the Ring, onto a pony and away to Swindon. The Reporter was of the opinion that had the Referee been protected from the mob and allowed to have made his decision, he would have declared on the side of Harry Broome. Several letters were received by the Editor of the *Bell's Life* in London, including Ben Terry and Harry Broome and not surprisingly they made argument as to why they felt each of them was the winner.

In a publication called *'The Era,'* dated Sunday 22nd February 1846, the Referee, who we discover is called W.M. Aston, wrote a letter to the Stakeholder (Promoter) James Burn. He pointed out that from the outset he did not want to be the Referee as he had a bet on Broome and he wasn't sufficiently acquainted with the rules and he quotes, *'However, nothing would pacify either party but that I must take it.'* At the end of the letter he describes that, *'When I arrived at the Inn in Swindon, I met with friends of both parties soliciting my opinion. I told them that I could not give one; that I was so disgusted with the whole proceedings, that I should wash my hands of the whole affair.'* And he concludes most emphatically, *'I beg to be understood that I shall not in any way, directly or indirectly, verbally or otherwise, answer or acknowledge any letter or communication that may be addressed or made to me upon the subject, but wipe my hands of the whole affair altogether.'*



Somewhere between the bridge at Bourton (mid photo) and Acorn Bridge, lay the Prize Boxing site. But which field ...?

Later that year there were two more Prize Fights at the same location. The first took place on 7th December 1846 and 'The Sun' newspaper of London dated Wednesday evening, 9th December 1846, reported it between William Herbert (The Mouse) and James Edwards, of Cheltenham, for £50. They described that, '*The betting at the Barrington Arms, Shrivenham, "ruled" as the commercial men say, "at par," and the notes we saw transferred to the Stakeholder (Promotor?) were laid at even with sovereigns (gold £1 coins) or other convertible medium. At twelve the belligerents were on the ground, an elastic piece of turf, about two miles from the town (Shrivenham), and a trifle less from the Railway Station which marks the 72 miles from London.*' It is interesting to note that Harry Broome who fought here in February as described above, was a Second for James Edwards.

The newspaper Reporter goes on to describe the fight which endured for a staggering 167 Rounds and lasted for four hours and thirty-one minutes, '*at the close of which, darkness put an end to the contest.*' He describes the fighters as, '*Herbert, a miniature Hercules in shoulder, breast and biceps, compact and close-knit, seemed calculated for lengthened wear and tear, added to which his heart was evidently in the right place. Edwards was his contrast in all but courage – thin, greyhoundish, long reached and hatchet-faced, standing right foot foremost, and shifting with most provoking activity and coolness.*' The Reporter gives more information on how the fight progressed and for any reader who would like that information, please let me know. The pair were fairly closely matched and as darkness came, the Referee declared a draw.

Another fight took place at the same site just over a week later on Thursday 16th December 1846. The two combatants were Henry Coles of Swindon and John Gale of Cirencester. *The Era* newspaper dated Sunday 20th December 1846 reported on the fight, '*Gale, who is an Excavator, it will be remembered, challenged to fight any man in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, which offer was accepted by Coles, a Swindon Publican.*' Another advert for the fight states he's from Old Town. *The Sun*, newspaper of London, dated Friday 18th December reported that, '*The encounter between these provincial professors came off at Shrivenham, on the same battle field as that erewhile contested on by Harry Broome and Ben Terry, and more recently by Edwards of Cheltenham and William Herbert. The Cirencester champion is a Deaf-Burkish sort of personage, barely 5 feet 7 inches in height, and weighing 12 stone of bone and muscle. Coles of Swindon, a far more likely lad, is a few inches taller.*' The Sun Reporter stated that the favourite was John Gale and the betting odds were 5 to 4.

The two newspapers do include quite a lot of detail on the fight and how it progressed but the description of the conclusion states, *'Gale took to slinking down on purpose to get his man to strike foul, but Coles was extremely careful, and not to be done. Gale's friends finding all things against them, wisely put an end to the contest in the twenty second round, by declaring Coles the winner.'* The whole contest lasted 62 two minutes.

I hope you have enjoyed this look at Prize Fighting so close to our neighbourhood 170 years ago. It must have presented quite a spectacle with hundreds of people gathered around the Ring, probably in varying states of inebriation. I would like to locate the exact spot more precisely, and if after reading this you have any ideas on how to pin-point the site, please let me know.

