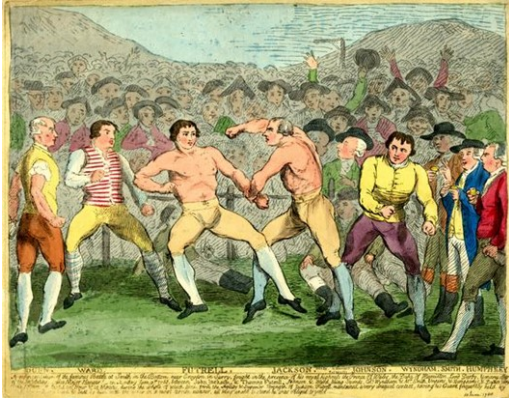


## COULSDON ART TRAIL

### BARE-KNUCKLE FIGHTING ON LION GREEN IN GEORGIAN ENGLAND

By Eric Jenkinson

George, Prince of Wales, (later King George IV) was a great fan of boxing even though bare-knuckle fighting was illegal – the law considered bare-knuckle fights an assault or affray. So, it was not surprising that the Prince should attend a prize fight on Lion Green, Smitham Bottom (*now Coulsdon being near enough to London for the prince to attend but far enough away from the police*). The fight between a promising amateur boxer in his first prize fight, “Gentleman” John Jackson, and the grizzled veteran from Birmingham, Thomas Futtrell, or William Futrell (also spelled Fewterell) as he was sometimes called.



**Boxing match between Thomas Futtrell and “Gentleman” John Jackson 9 June 1788 by James Gillray (1757-1815) ©Trustees of the British Museum**

In the 16th and 17th centuries, bare knuckle fighting, or fisticuffs, had grown to be one of England's most popular spectator sports which was enjoyed by the aristocracy and commoners alike. Bare knuckle fighting to a broad set of common rules had been called boxing from at least 1605. The boxing culture had grown rapidly, especially in London. The first documented account of a boxing match was in the London Protestant Mercury in 1681.

The Duke of Albemarle arranged a bout between his butler and his butcher. The butcher won the prize money. The first known use of the term prize fight came in 1706. In this early form of prize fighting, a purse would be agreed between the fighters or their representatives. Side bets could be taken by the contestants themselves, their entourage and by the watching crowd.

In the 18th century it was not uncommon for the most popular fights to attract crowds of 20,000. For a fight involving the most famous prize fighters, wagers totalling as high as £200,000 could change hands

A boxing match in Georgian times was markedly different from what we know today. As formal bouts were frowned on by the magistrates, fights were mostly held out of town, sometimes in open fields or recreational areas such as Lion Green. Lion Green was a large village green with the Red Lion coaching inn at one corner where Aldi is now. The ring was an eighteen-foot square which was roped off with stakes at each corner. Boxers wearing breeches fought with bare knuckles and bared chests. Each fighter had a knee man and a bottle man. The knee man knelt with one knee up for the boxer to sit on between rounds. The bottle man provided water for the boxer, a sponge and an orange to provide his fighter a burst of energy. He also kept time on the rounds and breaks in between. Brandy was on hand to revive the boxer in emergencies. A pair of umpires kept the two boxers apart and agreed beforehand how to deal with questionable practices like holding a man's hair to keep him in place to be hit. Wrestling holds, kicks, throws, eye-gouging and chokes were allowed. The bouts consisted of rounds; each round lasted until at least one of the men was knocked or forced off his feet. A fight could last up to 50 rounds. Breaks between rounds lasted only 30 seconds.

The popularity of boxing during the Georgian period saw the rise of several influential figures who changed and formalised boxing rules into the sport more recognisable today. As in the arts, prize fighters had to attract the sponsorship of aristocracy if they were to rise to the top. James Figg (1695-1740) was a 6ft tall multi-disciplinary fighter from Thame in Oxfordshire. Figg is generally considered to be the first heavyweight boxing champion. Figg held the title for 15 years until his retirement in 1734. He was a popular entertainer at fairs and exhibitions and considered an expert at fencing and fighting with a quarterstaff as well as bare knuckle fighting. Figg became a popular figure with the gentry. His patron was the Earl of Peterborough, and he was good friends with the artist William Hogarth. He opened his English School of Arms and Art of Self-Defense Academy (also called Figg's Academy) in 1719, on Tottenham Court Road, London.

One of James Figg's students was John 'Jack' Broughton. Broughton, known as the Father of English Boxing, was the bare-knuckle boxing champion from around 1729 – 1750. In 1743, Broughton devised the first set of recognisable boxing rules. Under Broughton's rules, a round continued until a man was knocked down. After 30 seconds the downed man had to get up and face his opponent standing no more than a yard apart (called squaring off). If he did not get up within that time, he was declared to have lost the bout. Hitting an opponent while he was on the ground was forbidden. Broughton also introduced protective headgear for use in training as well as protection for the hands called muffers, which would evolve into boxing gloves. Broughton's Rules governed boxing until 1838 when they were overtaken by a new set of rules initiated by the British Pugilists' Protective Association which were called the London Prize Ring Rules. The new rules provided for a "ring" 24 feet square enclosed by two parallel 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 a mark in the centre of the ring (the scratch line) unaided. If a fighter could not reach that mark (come up to scratch) by the end of 8 additional seconds, he was declared the loser. Kicking, gouging, head-butting, biting, and low blows were all declared fouls.

The London Prize Ring Rules were eventually superseded by the Marquis of Queensbury Rules which broadly govern boxing today. The Queensbury Rules were written by a Welsh sportsman, journalist and founder member of the Amateur Athletics Association, John Graham Chambers. They originally consisted of a set of 12 rules and were published in 1867 under the sponsorship of the 9<sup>th</sup> Marquis of Queensbury. He was a talented amateur sportsman in his youth who became a patron of sport and a boxing enthusiast.



**Thomas Futrell, 1788**  
(etching by Henry Kingsbury)  
© The British Sporting Art Trust



**The Coudsdon Art Trail Finial**  
**Outside Coudsdon Library**



**John Gentleman Jackson**  
© National Portrait Gallery,  
London

At the turn of the Regency era, one of the most famous of the Regency era boxers was "Gentleman" John Jackson. Born in 1769 into a Worcestershire family of builders, John became an exceptionally talented amateur boxer at the age of 19 against his parents' wishes. He was 5 feet 11 inches tall and 14 stone. He spoke with a cultured voice and dressed well which earned him his nickname and made Jackson a favourite of the aristocracy. Gentleman Jackson only fought in three prize fights before retiring and opening a school of self-defence in Bond Street. He is credited with a scientific style of boxing using posture and good judgement of distance to improve effectiveness and efficiency in fighting. Jackson was chosen to be a guard during the coronation of George IV in 1821. Jackson gathered a group of fellow fighters to assist in keeping order.

Jackson's first professional fight was against the undefeated Thomas (William) Futrell at Smitham Bottom in 1788 which is depicted in the James Gillray hand-coloured etching at the top of this article. Futrell was an imposing figure. His main claim to fame was his victory in 35 minutes over the Highland Giant in Edinburgh on 23 March 1753, the first recorded prize-fight in Scotland. So, Futrell was an experienced fighter who was unbeaten in 18 fights when he met the 19-year-old John Jackson at Smitham Bottom. The novice Jackson was considered to have no chance. During the bout, Jackson avoided Futrell's advances and frequently held on to Futrell's guard arm, as he can be seen doing in the etching. Gentleman Jackson gradually wore Futrell down until Futrell retired exhausted after 1 hour and 7 minutes. An inveterate gambler, Futrell lost most of his considerable earnings from his fighting career. His main contribution to the sport was that he wrote the first published paper on boxing. The famous fight has been commemorated by the recent addition to the Coudsdon Art Trail of a finial on a finger pole outside Coudsdon library.