

FIGHTING MEN OF LONDON

VOICES FROM INSIDE THE ROPES

ALEX DALEY



"FASCINATING UNTOLD STORIES THAT PREDATE THE TELEVISION AGE. *FIGHTING MEN OF LONDON* IS A CAPTIVATING COLLECTION OF SEVEN VERY DIFFERENT TALES SET IN A LOST FISTIC ERA."

COLIN HART, THE SUN

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FOREWORD BY COLIN HART

WHEN I was a lad growing up in east London just after the Second World War, you could watch boxing every night of the week. In those days there were more than 3,000 boxers licensed by the British Boxing Board of Control.

With so many fighters looking for work it wasn't difficult for regular shows to be held at Leyton Baths, West Ham Baths, Hoxton Baths, Poplar Baths, Manor Place Baths, Lime Grove, York Hall, Seymour Hall, Mile End Arena and many other popular venues on both sides of the Thames.

And it wasn't uncommon in the 1940s and 50s for some fighters to perform four or even five times a month. Many were exploited by ruthless promoters who paid them a pittance for risking their lives.

With ringside seats costing just a few shillings many of the youngsters starting out on their careers were paid no more than a fiver a fight. And the facilities they had to put up with in the majority of arenas were spartan to say the least. For example, at the Mile End Arena there wasn't even a tap for the boys to have a wash when they got back to the dressing room.

Alex Daley, who has a deep love of boxing, wrote a riveting book about his grandfather, Nipper Pat Daly, and has followed it up with *Fighting Men of London*. He wanted to put on record what it was like for the fighters of 60 and 70 years ago; men who despite the hardships they faced and the little money they earned always gave London fans value for money.

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Daley, because he has such a feel for the sport, has produced seven fascinating interviews that make for a most enjoyable read. Sammy McCarthy, Teddy Lewis, Albert Carroll, Jack Streek, Jock Taylor, Ted Berry and Sid Nathan were a great credit to boxing. The stories they told Alex Daley are not only entertaining, I also found them educational.

Colin Hart was boxing correspondent of The Sun for 31 years. He left the staff on reaching retirement age 14 years ago and since then has written a regular boxing column for the paper. He broadcasts regularly on TV and radio. He was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame (IBHOF) at Canastota, USA in 2013.

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I would also like to thank Derek O'Dell, who introduced me to Jack Streek, and Mary Taylor (Nink) for introducing me to her wonderful father, Jock Taylor, through whom this book began. My thanks also to Mary's sister June for providing added insight into Jock's life after boxing.

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INTRODUCTION

FIGHTING *Men of London* started life one autumn day in 2011 – quite by chance. I had just spent an absorbing few hours talking boxing with Jock Taylor, one of Britain’s leading light-heavyweights of the late 1940s, after discovering we lived in the same town; and our chat planted the seed of an idea.

After my first book, *Nipper: the Amazing Story of Boxing’s Wonderboy*, I wanted to wait a few years before I even thought of starting another, but my conversation with Jock made me rethink my plans, as a realisation dawned on me...

British boxers of the 1940s and 50s with strong recollections of their fighting days were still around, but the details of their career and life experiences would, before long, be lost for ever. The job of recording their recollections could not wait five or ten years. If I wanted to preserve some of their stories (and I *did*), I needed to act now.

Thus began my quest to track down pro boxers of the 40s and 50s, with Jock as my first subject. Six other interviewees with interesting stories to tell were enlisted, the common theme being their connection to London boxing.

But why London? And why the men of the 40s and 50s?

Well, London in those days was the epicentre of British boxing. Innumerable top fighters came from other parts of the country, but London was where they flocked to get ahead, for it housed the nation’s leading managers, promoters and gyms. The places to get noticed and the people who pulled the strings were London-based on the whole.

The 1940s and 50s was a fantastic time to be a British boxer or boxing fan, and London was about the best place to experience this special era. Britain's working classes have long forgotten the love affair they had with boxing, both on the paid and unpaid side of the sport.

Yes, London – and Britain – were boxing-mad, and packed-out shows gave fight addicts their fix in a variety of permutations, ranging from the smoke-filled small hall (the grass roots of boxing) to the grandiose outdoor stadium. On almost any given night boxing took place somewhere, and there were then thousands of Brits trading leather for money (though they may have worked as labourers or market porters during the day).

The status of the British professional boxer then was much higher than it is now. Like today's Premier League footballers, British champion boxers were household names and schoolboy idols. And there were just eight British weight classes then (there are now 15), which made competition in each division all the more intense.

Globally, aside from disputes over vacated titles, boxing in the 40s and 50s had only one champion at each weight – that's just eight universally recognised world champions. By contrast, today world boxing has 17 weights with four bona fide titles up for grabs at each one. This means four men at 17 weights can all share the glory of being champions of the world; potentially that's 68 concurrent world champions, instead of eight. Given these facts, it's difficult to dispute that boxing titles were more meaningful years ago.

The stories in this book track the development of British boxing on several levels. The 1930s saw the sport reach its peak in popularity, both in the number of shows and the number of active pro fighters. There was an inevitable downturn during the Second World War when many boxers were called up. But a post-war boom brought the number of shows and active pros close to pre-war levels. Then, with little warning, a 33 per cent live entertainment tax introduced by the Tory government of 1952 put countless small-time promoters out of business – a blow from which British boxing never fully recovered.

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Then there were social and technological changes. The poor and the hungry have always flourished in professional rings. In pre-war London this meant a generation of young Jewish men, but in the late 40s and 50s they were replaced by fighters from the Caribbean and West Africa, who arrived in Britain in growing numbers. The rise of TV and cinema as rivals to live entertainment, improvements in living standards and eventually the disappearance of boxing from schools would finish the fight game as a sport of the British masses. Afterwards the country's once thriving fight industry lived on, but on a smaller scale and with narrower appeal.

I hope this information will set the scene for the boxing milieu of the men in this book. Before I finish I will briefly outline my intentions and methodology in writing it.

My aim was to understand what led the fighting men of this golden era to lace on gloves for a living. I wanted to find out what the fight game was really like then, to know about their backgrounds – where they came from, where their journeys in life had taken them – and to learn their thoughts, feelings and philosophies on boxing and life.

Theirs was a London far removed from the modern metropolis; a London of ration books, pea-soup fog and old-fashioned values; a site of much adversity where community spirit pulled people through. It was a simpler yet tougher time and the prize ring offered a route out of poverty. For countless working-class lads with a flair for fighting it was well worth the risks of this uncertain and unforgiving trade.

Memories are unique by their very nature, and the men in this book recall their lives and ring careers in different ways. Some will remember scant detail of their fights but will recall sparring sessions with big-name fighters or the atmosphere of a gym or fight hall vividly. Others will recall near every blow of a key fight but the venues they fought at meant little to them and the aesthetics of an arena, the sounds of its crowds and such ephemeral detail, have long faded from memory. For this reason each piece is structured around that boxer's recollections and seeks to tell his story from the angle he remembers it.

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I have endeavoured, where possible, to capture the idiosyncrasies of each man's speech, so not every quoted sentence follows the rules of grammar. In the interests of clarity, I have made small edits to some of the dialogue, but only where necessary.

Ultimately I hope this book will – to some degree – preserve an aspect of London culture and boxing history that is not well known or understood today.

Alex Daley

March 2014



TED BERRY (BETHNAL GREEN) 1948–49

MY NEXT interview takes me into the heart of London's East End, to an area that has been the lifeblood of London boxing more than any other. The district of Bethnal Green has changed unrecognisably since its fistic heyday and most of its native Cockney inhabitants have long since left. The once bustling pie and mash shops have given way to restaurants for Asian cuisine, and the hawkers and barrow boys have all gone west. But one lifelong resident, who has watched this transformation, will almost certainly never leave. For this area – and more particularly the street he lives on – are part of who he is.

For Ted Berry, Canrobert Street is a place of bittersweet memories, where the past and present meet. He witnessed the Second World War here – a time of fear and anxiety for most East End adults but a period of excitement for street-hardened youngsters such as he was then. It was on this street that his first boxing coach lived and it was to here that he returned after each of his ring victories. Yet it was from here that he got involved with the infamous Kray twins and it was close by this street that the most tragic event of his life occurred one evening in 1964. He has lived with the consequences ever since.



I had read scraps of information about Ted Berry, both in the context of professional boxing and his connection with Ronnie and Reggie Kray. But none of the accounts published on him have told his story with any real depth or clarity. There are many pieces missing from this intriguing puzzle.

The last couple of decades have seen a slew of books published about the Krays and Ted Berry's name crops up occasionally. His brother, Checker, is said to have been a good friend of the twins, while he and Ted, it has been written, worked for them in some capacity.

Most astonishing of all, however, is the claim made in several books that Ronnie Kray shot Ted, leading to the amputation of his right leg. When interviewed by Ron Olver of *Boxing News* in 1986, Ted said of the shooting, 'To this day I have no idea why this happened, who did it, or what I have done to deserve it. It was a dastardly deed,' and the reader is left to wonder if he knew more than he was saying.

This is a book about boxing, not the underworld; but in writing Ted's story it would be remiss not to include his connection with Britain's most notorious gangsters. So, while his impressive boxing career (he retired unbeaten after 19 pro fights) is the chief subject of the interview, I arrive at Ted's home hoping to also shed light on his life outside the ring.

I am not sure what to expect when I meet a former Kray associate, but I find Ted to be a hospitable, patient and friendly man. He is also a natural conversationalist and his reminiscences make enthralling listening. I can easily picture him regaling customers at the Old Horns, a Bethnal Green pub he ran for many years, with stories of his ring career.

In his boxing days Ted boasted a thick thatch of dark wavy hair, and today, though his hair is greyer and slightly thinner, he bears a resemblance to his younger self and looks more youthful than his 84 years. Though mobility is an issue for him these days and he spends much of his time indoors, there is a youthful vibrancy

to Ted's speech and mannerisms, and his long wiry arms, which move rapidly as he talks, still carry a look of latent power, as if ready to spring into action should the need arise.

Though his time in the fight game was all too brief, Ted's recollections provide a fascinating insight into the mindset of a hungry 1940s fighter. Here was a boxer from an underprivileged background who took up fighting both out of family tradition and to attain a better life. His was a raw, budding talent cut frustratingly short – a great promise unfulfilled.

Made in Bethnal Green

'I'm a self-made person. No one taught me nothing, no one give me nothing – I've never been dishonest, that's for sure. But I'm a known person in Bethnal Green, and I'm respected,' says Ted Berry, looking back on his remarkable life. 'You have to fight for respect, but... you get it.'

He says, 'I was born Edward Henry Berry – Edward after my grandfather and Henry after my dad. My mum's history goes back, many years ago, to Italian Sicily – her mother was half Sicilian – but my father was of Irish descent. I was born in the City of London Maternity Hospital, 1 September 1928, and I moved from there, when I come out of hospital, to Satchwell Street in Bethnal Green. We lived there till '41, when we got bombed out by the Nazis, and then we moved here.'

'Here' is Canrobert Street where Ted and his wife Joyce live in a house just a few doors from Ted's old family home, where incidentally Ted's sister now lives. 'My other sister lives round the corner,' he tells me, 'my daughter lives round the corner from there, my son lives in Bow and my brother lives in Covent Garden, so we all live in close proximity to each other.'

This is the traditional East End way. In days gone by, after leaving home, sons and daughters moved into houses near to their parents and other family members, which created a close-knit community.

'The East End was a wonderful place,' recalls Ted, casting his mind back to his childhood. 'From the Salmon and Ball to

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Cambridge Heath Station, from there to Shoreditch Church, and from there to the top of Bishopsgate and back down to the Salmon and Ball, was like a village – everyone knew each other. My aunty lived four streets away and an uncle of mine lived a couple of streets away.

‘Everyone got married but they all stayed in the same area, until the war started. The war cleaned everything up. A lot of people were evacuated and stayed there. A lot of our local boys got killed in the war and a lot of our places got bombed and the people had to move out the district, and from there it fell away.’

As a boy Ted attended Daniel Street Infants’ School and then as he matured, Columbia Road School, before switching to St Matthias School – all of which were in Bethnal Green. ‘My education’s come from what I’ve learnt myself, not from school,’ he declares. ‘I learnt to read and write at school but I never learnt anything else.’

Ted tells me that Bethnal Green was a tough place to grow up and he remembers gang wars between Bethnal Green youngsters and kids from Hoxton. I ask if he was involved in these skirmishes and he replies, ‘Well, when you’re a kid you get caught up in anything exciting – you just follow the crowd. I never got injured, thank God.’ I suspect there hang some interesting tales, but Ted will say no more on the subject. However, as I discover, there are other fascinating aspects of his life that he *will* discuss – in detail.

Wartime

‘The war came along when I was 11, and all the schools closed and I never went back to school,’ remembers Ted. ‘My dad had got discharged out the army for medical reasons and we needed the cash, so I went to work. I see this wanted notice in the window in Ingram’s in Bethnal Green Road, a radio shop. I went in and I told them I was 14 and they asked for the cards. I said, “Well, the war’s on, you can’t get no cards.” So they stood for me, kind of thing, and I worked there till I was 14.’

Ted’s job was to charge radio accumulators, which he tells me were ‘glass things filled with acid. You had batteries as well but

these were accumulators. People used to come in with their old accumulator to be charged and we used to rent them one while it was being charged. Sometimes I'd have 20 or 30 accumulators all lined up ready to charge for the next day.'

I recall Sid Nathan's unpleasant experiences of wartime London and wonder, knowing that Bethnal Green was among the most heavily bombed districts of the city, whether Ted suffered similar trauma. For him, however, the freedom afforded by the sudden termination of school, and the excitement of being plunged into a unique and unpredictable world event, came as a boon.

'I can say truthfully – I know it's sad – but the war was the best time of my life,' reveals Ted. 'I was only 11 and I was a free soul; I was working and I was getting wages. And I could go to the pictures; I could go and do whatever I liked. I had tailor-made clothes when I was 12 – I had suits made.

'During the war there was a fellowship,' he adds. 'If there was an air raid, which my mum used to get nervous about, she'd run to the woman next door and she'd let us sit in her passage. Half the street'd be sitting in her passage having tea! We were no more safe there than in our own places, but we'd all be sitting keeping each other company.'

At 14 Ted left the radio shop and worked for a time at a wholesale warehouse, before settling in to the Berry family trade.

Family Traditions

The Berry family had two traditions – and both were passed on to Ted. The first was the now defunct trade of hawking or wardrobe dealing, as it was also known. Bethnal Green was renowned for its hawkers, and entire families took part in the trade. The Smiths, Krays, Kellys, Harpers, and of course the Berrys, were the East End's best-known hawking families. Unlike the pedlar, who sells items from door to door, the hawker bought unwanted items from the householder and resold them, usually from a market stall.

'My dad was a hawker, bought second-hand clothes, sold second-hand clothes. It's been the family profession since my great-grandparents' time – they'd always had stalls in Brick Lane,

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selling clothes and items,' says Ted. 'We used to go out when I was a kid: my father and my uncle, almost all my family, and we'd call it "on the knocker". We used to drop leaflets, then go back and pick the leaflets up and buy old clothes, jewellery, antiques and such at the door.

'When the demob was on after the war we was going out buying all the demob suits. But the clothes had to be proper second-hand clothes – we didn't buy rag and bone – and we had a stall in the market where we used to sell them, at Brick Lane. There was a market on Cutlers Street where all the dealers buying clothes used to go, and we used to take our clothes there and sell them to the dealers. I did it from a kid. It's part of the family tradition. But then all these villains and thieves got around and it finished the trade – people wouldn't open their doors. That's the way of the world today.'

The second Berry family tradition that Ted was destined to follow was prize fighting. His grandfather had been a bare-knuckle fighter of Irish gypsy stock, and his father, Harry Kid Berry, was a top-line feather and lightweight of the 1920s and 30s under the management of Jack Burns.

'Everyone knew Harry Kid Berry,' Ted says proudly. 'He was a top fighter my dad, in his time.' As an amateur Ted's father won the London Federation of Boys' Clubs championships, capturing the junior and senior titles in the same year. 'The juniors was a couple of days, or a month, before his birthday,' remembers Ted, 'and when the seniors came along, he was old enough to be a senior and he entered that.' As a pro Harry Kid Berry took on such pre-war stars as Al Foreman and Nipper Pat Daly, and scored wins over top men such as Kid Socks and Lew Pinkus.

I'm curious to know what type of fighter Harry Kid Berry was and whether he and Ted had similar styles. 'He was a boxer, but I was made different to him,' Ted explains. 'He couldn't punch, the old man, you know, *I could punch*. He had a slippery style – ducking and diving, you've gotta find him to catch him – there he goes, where is he now? One of them type of fighters. He had speed; but I never had speed – I weren't a speedy fighter.'

The Webbe and the Repton

‘In our situation, in the East End – I’m going back to the old East End – you had to either be a fighter, a footballer or a cricketer; anything else, you got beaten up,’ chuckles Ted. ‘And so I followed in my father’s footsteps and became a fighter.’

Like so many other East End lads, Ted’s introduction to boxing arrived through a local boys’ club, the Webbe, for which his father had boxed a decade before him. Founded in memory of the cricketer and philanthropist Herbert Webbe in 1888, the Webbe Institute (to give it its full name) was run by the Oxford House Club, a religious institution set up to promote recreation and education among underprivileged men and boys.

When Ted joined, aged eight, the Webbe was on the corner of Cheshire Street and Hereford Street, but when the war arrived its premises moved to Oxford House. ‘As a kid you had nowhere to go,’ he tells me. ‘There was no entertainment and so you joined your local club. With the Webbe was a boxing club so automatically, whether you wanted to be a fighter or not, you joined the club. They had a canteen where you could have a cup of tea or a sandwich or cake and you’d have a spar in the ring. It was very popular. The Webbe was the Repton of its day.’

‘When the Webbe moved into Oxford House it had a hall downstairs and they had a portable ring. They’d have inter-club boxing, like the Hoxton club would fight Bethnal Green club, Stepney club would fight them, you know. We used to have our own shows. You joined a club and if you were in the boxing team and they had a show going, you were automatically put down on the show. You was told you was boxing so and so somewhere and that was it.’

At the Webbe at the same time as Ted was a tall, slightly older lad with a fine physique and a special talent for boxing. Ted and the other boys sat and watched in awe whenever Jimmy Davis took to the ring. ‘He was poetry to watch, and as an ex-fighter I can say that,’ says Ted with affection. ‘He had the greatest left-hand you’ve ever fucking seen. There was a guy at the club who used to call him pop-pop Jimmy. So when he was fighting he

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says, “Pop-pop, Jim, pop-pop”, meaning jab-jab-jab-jab. He was out of this world.

‘We grew up together as kids. Jimmy was a pigeon fancier, and pigeons was his life. When we was kids, there was the old Truman Brewery in Brick Lane and Jimmy used to go round there catching pigeons. He was so cute with it, you know. He’d put a little bit of seed down and he had this coat with a hole in the pocket. And he’d start going “Coo-coo, coo-coo”, doing a pigeon noise, then boomp, he snatched it. And he used to sell them to the Asians down Cable Street, ’cause they used to love pigeon pie.

‘We belonged to Father Jones’s church down the bottom of Old Bethnal Green Road, and every year all the church kids, church goers, used to get two weeks down at Chelmsford. You’d get your name picked out of the hat and have two weeks’ holiday. We’d never go to church until the holidays come up and all of a sudden we’d start going to church, to get picked out. Jimmy Davis, me and a load of the East End kids used to go down there for a fortnight’s holiday.’

Jimmy Davis, an uncle of the well-known trainer Tony Sims, reached the ABA welterweight final in 1944 but lost on a casting vote to future British welterweight champion Henry Hall of Sheffield (whom Davis, incidentally, later beat as a pro). Jimmy turned pro in September 1945 and was soon juggling his day job in Spitalfields Market, where he would work for 40 years, with a busy prize-fighting career.

‘How he never won a title I will never know. That man was a genius – he had everything,’ reflects Ted. ‘He could *move*, he was *clever* and he could read a fight. He wasn’t cagey or nothing like that; he didn’t have a knockout punch, but he had a damaging punch. He ended up as a middleweight, fought loads of big names. He was one of my idols actually. Great guy.’

Ted had a number of amateur fights before and during the Second World War, but then he gave up the game for a while. By the time he returned to boxing he was dating Joyce, his wife-to-be, and had joined the Repton boxing club (the Webbe by then had closed) purely to keep busy on the days he didn’t see Joyce.

He was to meet a man, however, who helped him see boxing as a more serious endeavour.

‘My father was an ex-professional fighter but he wasn’t much interested in me boxing – he didn’t want me to be a boxer,’ says Ted. ‘The chap who used to take me to boxing and started teaching me and working with me was a man called Ginger Owen – Ginger Charlie Owen, who lived across the road here in Canrobert Street. He was a well-known man in the fight trade; he was a steward at all the shows.

‘It started off, the first fights I had before I come back as an amateur, were at an open lightweight contest at the York Hall, and I were on my own. So I gets up in the ring on my own. There were three fights and I won the three fights. Anyway, I had the first fight and who happened to be sitting in the audience but Charlie. I was down in the dressing room waiting to get ready for the next one and he come down. We had a chat and he said “Who’s looking after you?” I said, “No one – I’m on me own.” So he says, “Mind if I come up in the corner?” I said, “It’d be my pleasure.” And Charlie looked after me. I won the contests, got the cup and for all my fights from then Charlie was with me.

‘He took me down all the gyms and I sparred with all the professionals. We used to go down to Klein’s gym and there was another one, the Torbay, over the water in Rotherhythe. And he spent a lot of time with me, took me to all these gyms and I sparred with *everyone* – I’ve gotta attribute the beginning of my career to him.

‘But my father, like anything else, you have a few fights, you win ’em – now they wanna take over. And that’s what happened: he wanted to take over and I didn’t want him to, but blood’s thicker than water. I had to tell Ginger, “I’m going with the old man now” and it hurt him. He used to go everywhere with me. He used to go to Ilford or wherever I was boxing. It was one of the saddest things in my career when I had to give Charlie up. I can’t live with it now even. Sad thing.’

Ted’s second amateur club, the Repton, is today among the most famous amateur boxing clubs in the world. With funding

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from Repton public school, Oxford House had established the Repton in 1895 to cater for 'a lower class of boys than the Webbe Institute'. At the Repton at the same time as Ted were several other future pros including Joe Lucy, Dennis Booty, Duggie Dugard and Ted's cousin Pat Berry.

'I was never much good as an amateur,' Ted says modestly. 'I can't explain it to you but it wasn't my style. There was too many rules and regulations and I could never settle down as an amateur. When you got in the ring and you got busy and all of a sudden the referee calls "hold it – you're doing this or you're doing that", and you ain't doing nothing intentional, it's just how boxing goes on. And it would take your concentration away.

'But I tried amateur, I went through to the ABAs [reaching the North-East London Divisional Championships at Bethnal Green, 8 April 1948]. Me and Joe Lucy got to the finals and he beat me on a casting vote. He was southpaw and I could never manage a southpaw. They make me not even wanna watch them: they seem so awkward and yet I'm left-handed myself.

'He beat me on points but then Joe was an exceptional boy. He *was fast*, and you spent half your time running after him, and when you're amateur you've only got three rounds to do it in. Of course Joe turned pro, he won the lightweight championship and he won a belt outright. So I wasn't beat by nothing.'

Turning Professional

After the Joe Lucy defeat Ted weighed up his future in the unpaid ranks and decided it was time to turn professional. He asked Charlie Owen to find him a manager and Owen introduced him to Jack Jordan, an experienced man based at Wembley who had managed Bethnal Green's famous British champion brothers, Dick and Harry Corbett. Ted's father, meanwhile, would act as his trainer.

Were his parents concerned about him boxing professionally? 'Mum – she'd been used to the old man, hadn't she, so she took it in her stride. The old man, I think he was glad he had something to go and blab with his friends about – that I was a professional fighter.'