

GRAVEYARD OF CHAMPIONS

THE FASCINATING STORY
OF LIVERPOOL'S LEGENDARY
BOXING STADIUM

STEPHEN BARR

Foreword by John Conteh MBE



CONTENTS

Dedication	9
Foreword	10
Acknowledgements	12
Preface	14
Introduction	18
ROUND 1: The Liverpool Stadium – Pudsey Street (1911–1931)	21
The Liverpool Sporting Association Formation	24
Early Boxing Venues in Liverpool	25
Jem Mace (years active – 1845 to 1897)	27
Opening Night	27
Ike Bradley (years active – 1902 to 1916)	31
Jimmy Wilde (years active – 1911 to 1923)	36
Dixie Kid (years active – 1900 to 1920)	41
The Graveyard of Champions Epitaph Is Born	45
Johnny Basham (years active – 1907 to 1929)	47
A Death in the Pudsey Street Ring	49
Mr Arnold James Wilson, later Major Arnold Wilson	50
The Colour Bar in Boxing	55
A.H. ‘Pa’ Taylor	61
The Stadium Revival Under Johnny Best Sr.	64
Dom Volante (years active – 1923 to 1935)	66
Nel Tarleton (years active – 1925 to 1945)	74
Dick Burke (years active – 1929 to 1934)	88
Lifelong Friendships Forged in Battle	103
Alf Howard (years active – 1924 to 1937)	104
Larry Gains (years active – 1923 to 1942)	109

Mugs Alley Origin.....	111
Final Night	114
ROUND 2: Interim Venues	118
New Brighton Tower Theatre	118
Lyric Theatre, Everton Valley.....	122
The Winter Gardens, Southport	124
Liverpool Football Ground, Anfield	125
ROUND 3: The New Stadium, St Paul's Square,	
Bixteth Street: 1932–1987	134
Liverpool Stadium Ltd	134
Built on a Graveyard.....	135
Overcoming Barriers.....	139
The Building	139
Foundation Stone	143
Opening Night: 20 October 1932.....	144
The Graveyard of Champions.....	147
The Cockpit and Cradle of Champions.....	148
First Championship Match – Nel Tarleton vs Tommy Watson	153
Tarleton's Two World Championship Fights vs Freddie Miller	156
Jimmy Walsh (years active – 1929 to 1940).....	158
Jimmy Stewart (years active – 1931 to 1937)	164
Ernie Roderick (years active – 1931 to 1950).....	167
Chris 'Ginge' Foran (years active – 1931 to 1942).....	171
Peter Kane (years active – 1932 to 1951).....	172
Joe Curran (years active – 1932 to 1948).....	177
The War Years	178
Ronnie Clayton (years active – 1941 to 1954)	184
Johnny Molloy (years active – 1943 to 1953)	187
Frankie Kelly (years active – 1942 to 1950).....	187
Jimmy Molloy (years active – 1939 to 1952).....	188
Stan Rowan (years active – 1942 to 1953)	189

Overseas Boxers	191
The Tanner Brothers.....	195
Dom and Tony Vairo	196
The Best Family.....	197
Johnny Best Sr.....	198
Johnny Best Jr	201
Bill Best and Wrestling.....	206
Stadium's Other Uses.....	208
Empire Boxers	210
Peter Banasko (years active – 1933 to 1945).....	212
Hogan 'Kid' Bassey (years active – 1947 to 1959).....	217
Dick Tiger (years active – 1952 to 1970).....	224
Birkenhead Boxers - the 1950s	230
Wally Thom (years active – 1949 to 1956).....	231
Pat McAteer (years active – 1952 to 1958).....	233
Tommy Molloy (years active – 1955 to 1963)	236
The 1960s	237
Johnny Cooke (years active – 1960 to 1971).....	238
Alan Rudkin (years active – 1962 to 1972).....	242
Harry Scott (years active – 1960 to 1973).....	248
Les McAteer (years active – 1965 to 1979).....	253
1970s and 1980s	255
Robbie Davies (years active – 1977 to 1980).....	256
Joey Singleton (years active – 1973 to 1982).....	259
John Conteh (years active – 1971 to 1980).....	263
Final Night at the Liverpool Stadium	267
Stadium Promoters	270
Stadium Foundation Stone Saved.....	270
Former Boxers' Stadium Recollections.....	272
Liverpool Stadium Commemorative Stone Unveiled.....	279
 Bibliography	 284

ROUND 1

THE LIVERPOOL STADIUM – PUDSEY STREET (1911–1931)

THE PEOPLE of Liverpool were unaware of the tumultuous events about to unfold in their city and across the country as they welcomed in the new year of 1911.

After the 1910 general election the Conservative Party, led by Arthur Balfour, was in power, along with their Liberal Unionist allies and the Liberal Party, headed by Prime Minister H.H. Asquith. Winston Churchill served as Home Secretary.



*London Road 1913 from Wellington's Column,
showing the Stadium behind the Empire Theatre*



Pudsey Street Stadium interior

King George V and his wife, Mary, were crowned King and Queen of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and other realms and territories following the death of his father, King Edward VII, in 1910.

The Suffragettes stormed Parliament, demanding the right to vote for women. All the Suffragettes were arrested and opted for prison sentences. They also boycotted the 1911 census, which showed that one in seven employed women was a domestic servant.

The ocean liner Royal Mail Ship, RMS *Titanic*, was launched in Belfast on 31 May, and her sister ship, RMS *Olympic*, set sail for Liverpool the same day to commence the transatlantic service.

England endured a severe heatwave and drought; Raunds, Northamptonshire, recorded a temperature of 36.7°C, the highest temperature in the UK until 1990.

Closer to home in Liverpool, the Royal Liver Building was completed on 22 June, and the clocks in its towers were started simultaneously with the coronation. Meanwhile, RMS *Olympic* was decorated for the occasion in New York.

Throughout the summer of 1911, workers in Liverpool brought the city to a standstill. A strike that began in shipping quickly spread to the docks and all transport. On Sunday, 13 August, the centre of Liverpool was rocked by violence, earning it the name ‘Bloody Sunday’. A meeting of striking transport workers was held on St George’s Plateau, next to St George’s Hall, on Lime Street, to listen to the strike organiser, Tom Mann. An estimated 85,000 people gathered, but the event was disrupted by police and soldiers, resulting in serious injuries to both officers and strikers. Such ‘union bashing’, as one rail worker on a picket outside Lime Street Station described it, is hardly surprising for a Conservative Party whose hero, Winston Churchill, attempted to break the strike by sending a gunboat up the Mersey and ordering police to baton-charge a rally at St George’s Hall. Tragically, on 15 August, two men were shot dead on Liverpool’s Vauxhall Road by mounted troops of the 18th Hussars during the continued unrest following Bloody Sunday.¹

Against this backdrop, many working-class people in Merseyside sought diversion through sport. Boxing was especially popular among working-class men during this time. Boxing events in Liverpool and across the country were usually held in small, dingy halls where trouble often occurred. Patrons were fortunate if they could sit on hard chairs or benches ringside, while those less fortunate stood

1 ‘The strike, one of the most significant in British history, involved numerous overlapping disputes among ship stewards, seamen, dock labourers, carters, and railway workers, to name a few. The government mobilised approximately 50,000 troops across the country to address unrest as the strike spread nationwide. The government could not use the railways to transport troops, as railway workers were part of the strike, compelling them to settle with the last group of workers ... The strike lasted for ten weeks, from June 14 until August 24.’ (Tom Wood, Britain: Lessons of the 1911 Liverpool General Transport Strike, 23 August 2022).

on a makeshift floor primarily made of ‘clinkers’, a stony residue from burned coal or a furnace. In many of these old halls, it was not uncommon to see a patron, frustrated by a decision, throw a chair into the ring.

The Liverpool Sporting Association Formation

This atmosphere was about to change for the better when, in 1911, a new company, Liverpool Sporting Association, Ltd, was registered. With a capital of £3,000 in £1 shares, the company took over the stadium on Pudsey Street, Liverpool, which was then occupied by the Albert Hall Skating Rink Co., Ltd. The plan was to adapt it to showcase boxing, fencing, weightlifting, wrestling and various athletic exercises, games and sports.

Two original shareholders, Arnold James Wilson (A.J. Wilson), who later became known as Major Arnold Wilson, and A.H. ‘Pa’ Taylor, emerged as influential and popular boxing promoters at the Pudsey Street Stadium. Under the newly formed company, the rink was transformed into a 3,200-seat boxing arena, managed by its first promoter, A.J. Wilson. It opened on Thursday, 6 July 1911, and went on to host bouts every Thursday night.

The Stadium quickly established itself as one of the great boxing arenas of the early 20th century and was instrumental in elevating the sport from a furtive pastime to one associated with a clean, healthy lifestyle. The boxers themselves also benefited, for while they had earlier fought for a mere pittance, they gradually realised that their status was being significantly raised. The hall, previously known as ‘the Graveyard of Champions’, became recognised by boxers across the country as ‘the Gold Coast’.

Pudsey Street also became the venue for Merseyside boxing’s remarkable revival and where some of the city’s most renowned homegrown fighters built their reputations.

Early Boxing Venues in Liverpool

Long before the doors of Pudsey Street Stadium opened, Merseyside was already a thriving hub for the ‘sweet science’, with a landscape dotted with legendary gyms and storied arenas.

The region’s boxing heritage was anchored by a network of local landmarks, each with its own character. On Pembroke Place, the energy was tangible; the street housed Jim ‘Jem’ Butler’s Continental Chequered Club alongside both the Lyceum Theatre and the Pembroke. The spirit of the sport extended into Cleveland Square, where the Malakoff flourished under Dan Lowery’s direction and, subsequently, under that of William and George Vaughn. Across the city, other hubs of activity kept boxing alive.

Tom Meadows’s Liverpool Boxing Club served as a cornerstone on Pitt Street. The Gaiety on Camden Street and Whitty’s Gymnasium provided vital stages for emerging talent. Harry Thorne’s Liverpool Gymnasium Club on Dale Street and the International A.C. on Midghall Street rounded out a vibrant circuit that cemented Merseyside’s reputation as a premier boxing destination long before its most famous stadium arrived.

In 1902, the Coronation Gymnasium, previously known as the Adelphi Theatre and later the Arena, opened on Christian Street and became the venue for numerous historic boxing matches. This venue hosted early fights featuring Welshman Freddie Welsh (born Frederick Hall Thomas), who would later bring Britain the World lightweight title. It also hosted many of the early contests of the beloved Liverpool fighter Ike Bradley.

On 7 August 1902, at the Malakoff Club, a Black South African named Andrew Jephtha made his British

debut. Jephtha later made history as the first Black man to win a British title, defeating Curly Watson at Wonderland in Whitechapel, London, on 25 March 1907, to claim the English 144lbs welterweight title. However, his championship reign was short-lived; in 1911, a colour bar was introduced, preventing people of colour from challenging for formal British boxing titles. This bar was lifted in 1948, making Dick Turpin the first Black boxer of the modern era to win a British title, defeating Vince Hawkins for the middleweight title in June 1948.

Boxing during these early years differed from today's scene, as many venues operated as private members' clubs. This meant that attendees had to be either registered members or legitimate guests. Occasionally, police officers disguised as civilians would try to enter these clubs by paying at the door. If they were allowed in, the clubs faced potential prosecution in the local Magistrates' Court, often resulting in fines and closure. This scenario played out multiple times at venues on Dale Street, Christian Street and the International Athletic Club on Midghall Street.

In addition to the venues in Liverpool, promoters such as Harry Thorne, Dan Whelligan and Mr Harrison organised shows across the river in Birkenhead, playing a crucial role in sustaining boxing across Merseyside.

As recounted by his son, an article in the *Liverpool Echo* from July 1931 credited Mr Bucky Taylor as the sole person responsible for booking boxing venues in Liverpool or Birkenhead during the 1880s. During that era, Taylor rented the Lord Nelson Hall, the Malakoff and a small venue behind St John's Market on Queen Anne Street, often on Jem Mace's behalf, who would routinely contact Taylor when setting up fights in Liverpool.

Jem Mace (years active – 1845 to 1897)

Often heralded as the ‘father of modern boxing,’ Jem Mace was a transformative figure who bridged the gap between two eras of combat. After securing the English middleweight title, Mace sought new horizons in the US in 1869. It was there that his victory over Tom Allen for the American heavyweight title – then the recognised world title – solidified his status as a global icon. While he’s remembered as the final world champion of the bare-knuckle era, his true contribution lay in his vision for the sport’s future. By prioritising speed and technical precision over raw strength and endurance, and by championing the Marquess of Queensberry Rules across the US and Australia, Mace effectively engineered the transition to the modern gloved era.

On a more personal level, he supported coloured boxers when racism affected the sport and was prominent in backing Canadian boxer Sam Langford’s bid for a world title.

Although born in Beeston, Norfolk, he was popular in Liverpool, where he had lived for some time and managed a bar. When he died in 1910, Mace was buried in an unmarked grave in Liverpool’s Anfield Cemetery, marked only by a brick bearing the number 594. His legacy endured; almost a century later, in 2002, the Merseyside and Wirral Former Boxers Association, led by Jim Jenkinson, arranged for a black marble memorial headstone to be placed on his grave.

Opening Night

The opening of Pudsey Street Stadium on 6 July 1911 significantly influenced boxing in the city. The noble art of self-defence was gaining new respect, and the new hall became popular among men who would never have

considered visiting the older venues. Boxing at Pudsey Street took place every Thursday, with only occasional breaks.

Situated on Pudsey Street, just off London Road, the building was originally designed as stables for the Liverpool United Tramways Omnibus Company. The council took it over in 1897 and briefly used it as a roller-skating rink (Albert Hall Skating Rink). Before this, the Liverpool School for the Indigent Blind was built on this future Stadium site in 1800. The benefactor of the Liverpool School for the Blind was Pudsey Dawson, hence the name Pudsey Street.

At that time, there were only two purpose-built boxing venues in Britain: the NSC in London and St James' Hall in Newcastle.

A *Mirror of Life* report on 8 July 1911 described Pudsey Street Stadium as follows:

It was a huge and beautifully airy building with seating accommodation provided for 3,200 spectators. A platform 18ft. square and raised 3ft. 6ins. from the floor was erected in the centre of the hall on which exhibitions were to be given. To each end of the auditorium, the floor sloped so that everyone had a perfect view of the contests, which are intended to be of the most scientific character, the desire of the proprietors being to elevate the tone of the sport and only to engage the best talent.

The ring was brilliantly illuminated with electronic lamps giving in the aggregate 3,200 candle power. In addition, four lamps were arranged in the centre of the building and from one of these an electric device was attached showing the progress of the contest. In a railed-off space immediately

around the platform/ring, plush-upholstered tie-up chairs were placed, and the floor was covered with rich Turkey carpet. The second-class seats were also similar, and in the cheap parts every spectator was provided with a chair. The balcony was also suitably furnished and in the centre there is a box luxuriously carpeted and arranged with divan chairs for the accommodation of special patrons.

A most important aspect was that the chairs throughout the building were so arranged that no spectator was immediately behind the person in front, so that everyone had an uninterrupted view of the stage/ring. Another special feature of the arrangements was that the contests would be run through without any interval, and with none of the tedious waiting between turns which so often marked entertainment of this description at the time. There was a simple cloakroom accommodation and a lounge for patrons of the higher-priced seats. For use in hot weather there was a sliding glass roof, and by this means the hall was kept cool and well-ventilated. There were no fewer than nine exits, and in this way ample provision was made to ensure public safety. The attendants numbered 35, all ex-policemen, who thoroughly understood the handling of crowds, so that every precaution was taken by the management to ensure both comfort and good order.

The opening night at Pudsey Street Stadium proved highly successful. Although the Stadium could seat 3,200, nearly every seat was filled by the time the first contest began, and,

shortly after, hundreds were turned away at the doors. The great hall was deceptive in its capacity to accommodate spectators, as around 5,000 have been known to have been housed there.

An article in the *Mirror of Life* dated 15 July 1911 recorded the opening night:

The first pair in the ring were Young Baker, Liverpool, and Will Gill, Seaforth, who met to go 10 rounds. The lads were well matched, and from commencement mixed matters in fine style, and with half the rounds completed there was little dividing them on points. Afterwards, however, Baker stayed on the best, and using his left well on his man's face and ribs he was given the decision at the end of the stipulated rounds. A 15-round contest followed, Harry Jones, Cardiff, meeting Fred Sidney (USA). The Cardiff man settled down quickest and due to him forcing matters was given the decision on points at the end of a fine contest. The principal attraction was a catchweight 20-round bout between Alf Langford (USA) and Bandsman Rice (London). Rice was down twice in the second round with six tame rounds following, with no damage being done by either of the men, only getting home very light punches. The next four rounds went in Rice's favour, who reached the head with his right while Langford got in a couple of body punches. A series of poor rounds followed, the men being very cautious and frequently clinching; the contest went on these lines to the end of the allotted rounds, when the decision was given to Rice on points.



Ike Bradley (years active – 1902 to 1916)

The following Thursday, 13 July, saw Liverpool's Ike Bradley make his Pudsey Street debut, with over 2,000 spectators turning out to see him face London's Johnny Hughes in a match over 20 three-minute rounds. The combatants weighed in at 8st 3lb each, and it was announced that the winner would be scheduled to meet Digger Stanley for the World title, the first-ever world title fight held at Pudsey Street Stadium. The contest proved to be a short one, as Hughes performed well until halfway through the second round, when Bradley landed a powerful left to the jaw and knocked him out.

There were three other bouts on this second night at Pudsey Street: Young Cook, Blackpool, gained a points victory over Fred Weston, Liverpool; Dubliner Driver Knox won on points against Arthur Upton, New Brighton; and Birmingham's Frank Escott's corner threw in the towel in round three against Liverpool's Jim Lloyd.

During his many years in the fight game, Ike had developed an in-depth knowledge of all aspects of boxing, and those who watched him in action regarded him as the greatest bantamweight Liverpool had ever produced. He gained experience fighting in nearly every hall and arena in Liverpool during his early career, including the Liverpool Gymnastics Club, The Arena, The Malakoff Club, The Coronation Gym, The International Athletic Club and the Adelphi Theatre. He also made a brief, unsuccessful trip to the US in 1906, losing all three of his fights.

Johnny Best Jr, in his 'Graveyard of Champions' series, which appeared in the *Liverpool Echo* in 1963, recounts an intriguing fight involving Ike, offering insights into boxing

GRAVEYARD OF CHAMPIONS

THESE MEN MADE LIVERPOOL BOXING HISTORY.



Ike Bradley (Liverpool), right, and Digger Stanley sparring up before their world bantamweight championship fight at Pudsey-street Stadium in 1911. This was the first world title fight to be staged in Liverpool. Stanley retained his title by winning on points over 20 rounds. Also in the picture are Jim Lloyd, Nat Williams, and Frank Benson.

conditions in the early 1900s. The year was 1910, and the venue was the old Arena on Christian Street.

Ike Bradley's original opponent was Young Cohen from Aldgate, a top-class fighter managed by Bill Ames, who many years later promoted the famous Tommy Harrison–Charles Ledoux contest at Liverpool Stadium in partnership with Norman Hurst.²

Young Cohen sustained an injury and could not appear, so Bill Ames contacted Sam Russell, who was then boxing as Young Russell, and persuaded him not only to take Young Cohen's place but also to use his name.

² Norman Hurst was a prominent journalist who wrote for various northern newspapers, including the *Sporting Chronicle*, *Athletic News*, *Manchester Evening News* and *Sheffield Daily Independent*. He also authored books such as *Big Fight Thrills* and *Thrilling Fights*, both of which detail top boxers and fights he had witnessed.

They made the journey to Liverpool, and Sam was introduced to the promoter, Mr Harrison, as Young Cohen. Mr Harrison was heard to remark that Cohen was tall for a bantam.

As they were leaving the building, Dom Vairo, who was with Ames and Russell, spotted Ike in the distance. Sam was wearing a long overcoat and was immediately instructed to bend his knees and make himself look as small as possible.

Introductions were made. As Ike shook hands with Sam, he gave a firm pull and nearly knocked Sam off balance. Upon seeing Sam's true height, Ike grinned. He never worried much about whom he fought or how big they were. He had raised a family of six sons and three daughters, and boxing was his bread and butter.

Aside from Dom Vairo, Ike muttered, 'If I hit Cohen on his chin, I'll break his neck.'

When they entered the ring, the height difference between the two men sparked considerable commentary. Ike decided that his best strategy was to make Sam's body his target, which he proceeded to do. However, Russell kept him at bay with his long-left hook in the first round and won the round.

In round two, Ike got to work. With Sam pinned against the ropes, he floored him with a body punch for a count of eight. Sam got to his feet, only to be knocked down again by a similar punch. He claimed it was a low blow, and the referee agreed, promptly disqualifying Ike.

Pandemonium broke loose. Ike was furious and, before anyone could stop him, unleashed one of his

specials, which struck the target of his anger – the referee. That unfortunate official hit the canvas with a crash.

When order was finally restored, Ike came back to apologise, but he still claimed he'd been robbed.

Those were the tough days of British boxing – four-ounce gloves (often skintight after wear), pickled hands and faces, small purses and no Board of Control. Boxing was not considered respectable. The gentry would put on a cloth cap and slip a scarf around the neck before venturing into a fight arena.

Bradley's most notable fight at Pudsey Street was in September 1911, when he fought 20 exciting rounds against Digger Stanley in what was advertised as the World, British and European bantamweight title. The Lonsdale Belt was not up for grabs since the contest took place outside the NSC.

The choice of Liverpool as the venue for such a prestigious event was clearly due to the establishment of Pudsey Street Stadium as the leading boxing arena in Great Britain. The *Evening Express* summed up the prospect of the 'Big Fight' as follows:

BOXING	
STADIUM. LIVERPOOL	
TONIGHT THURSDAY. AT 8.	
A Great Night's Sport.	
Fifteen Rounds Feather-weight Contest:	
YOUNG BROOKS (London), a tough Feather-weight, v. FRED JACKS (London), the man with a splendid record.	
Liverpool Taxi-Cab Trade Championship—	
Special Ten Rounds Contest: IKE BRADLEY (Liverpool) v. JOHNNY BELL (Liverpool).	
Also Other Contests.	
Prices: 1s., 2s., and 5s., Plus Tax.	
PEDESTRIANISM.	

Pudsey Street advertisement for the Taxi-Cab Trade Championship

In the Stadium the city can boast one of the finest boxing halls in the country, the spacious appointments being all that could be desired. It is only fitting, therefore, that championship matches should be staged there, and tomorrow evening, for the first time in the history of boxing, a contest for the world's championship in a provincial city.

On the night, the stadium was packed to the doors, and at the final bell Stanley, whose superior cleverness ultimately made the difference, was declared the winner after what was described as one of the best fights ever seen in Liverpool.

Ike's final of 12 contests at Pudsey Street was against Fred Anderson from London, who outpointed him over ten rounds. Although an idol of his day, Ike often, after a fight, would drive off in a hansom cab and throw a handful of coins to waiting crowds. After retiring, he took up driving taxis in Liverpool.

Interestingly, he later made a winning return to boxing in June 1916, beating fellow cabbie Johnny Bell at Pudsey Street to win the championship of the Liverpool taxi profession.

Clad in his signature white top, Ike was a standout figure in the corners of Pudsey Street Stadium and the St Paul's Square arena. As a respected 'second', he was a mainstay of the local ring and a favourite among fans. His long-standing association with both venues only ended with his death in 1951 at the age of 68.

Ike was reputed to have fought over 400 times, but the excellent online boxing database BoxRec lists 125 professional bouts.