



THE
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WERE HIGH

The Extraordinary Life of John Gully,
From Bruiser and Bookie to Fine
Old English Gentleman

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Contents

Acknowledgements	6
Preface	8
1. The Early Days	11
2. Prize Fighting	18
3. Hen Pearce	30
4. Bob Gregson.	38
5. The Racing World	48
6. The Blacklegs	65
7. The Lure of the Turf	78
8. William Crockford	88
9. Bob Ridsdale	100
10. Member of Parliament	111
11. The Danebury Confederacy.	123
12. Lord George Bentinck	133
13. Running Rein	141
14. At Home	148
15. Robert Gully	163
16. Coal Mining.	172
Conclusion	182
Bibliography	189
Index.	190

Preface

*'A most distinguished sportsman of
the Turf.'*

IN 1832 the young Lord Milton, heir to the earldom of Fitzwilliam, came of age. As was the custom of the family, a grand celebration to mark the occasion was held at the family seat of Wentworth Woodhouse, near Rotherham, Yorkshire. Invited to attend were all the notabilities of the three Ridings of the county of Yorkshire, together with the leading gentry and their wives.

Also invited were the Members of Parliament in the county who had been elected at the recent general election, although it has to be admitted that the Great Reform Act had brought about representation of a large number of new members who would have hardly been invited to Wentworth House as private individuals. One new member however was there as a matter of course since James Silk Buckingham, the flamboyant new MP for nearby Sheffield, was well known as a world adventurer, author and social reformer – just the sort of company Lord Milton was very happy to greet.

Buckingham later described it as the most splendid occasion he had ever witnessed. The enormous eastern facade of the

PREFACE

mansion, twice as long as Buckingham Palace, was one blaze of light. The great park itself was also brilliantly illuminated, and from nine in the evening until midnight a succession of carriages wended their way up the drive to the mansion.

Lord Fitzwilliam stood at the head of the staircase at the entrance to the marble saloon to receive his guests, to all of whom he had something kind or complimentary to say. The festivities were to continue throughout the night, the company departing only in the early hours of the morning.

Some 2,000 guests had assembled dressed in their gayest and finest clothes. There was, said Buckingham, 'a blaze of diamonds and jewellery, especially on some of the elderly ladies, whose natural beauty having departed, was sought to be replaced by artificial attractions, in which rouge, false hair, and other auxiliaries were used to harmonise with an openness of neck and bosom that was anything but appropriate'.¹

But his gaze soon came to be drawn to a group of three people in particular. As they passed from room to room, he noticed they were shown special attention. The central figure was a handsome man with a fine, well formed and graceful looking figure, and resting on either of his arms were two of the loveliest women of all the assembled multitude. They were about 18 to 20 years old and dressed in plain green velvet, without a single ornament or jewel of any kind, 'but with such exquisite figures, blooming complexions, bright eyes, and rich and abundant hair, as might make either of them a worthy representative of the Venus of Cnidus, of Medicis, or of Canova.'²

Buckingham's curiosity was heightened by the fact no one seemed to know who they were or where they came from, and yet were receiving just as much if not more attention, from Lord Fitzwilliam as any other guests. At length, from

1 Autobiography of James Silk Buckingham, 1855, p.246

2 Ibid. p.247

THE STAKES WERE HIGH

discreet inquiries, it came to light that the gentleman's name was John Gully, a former prize fighter and the new Member of Parliament for Pontefract, and he was present with two of his daughters.

The news came as a great surprise to James Buckingham for he suddenly recalled that some 25 years earlier he had met the same man in much different circumstances at a small public house, The Plough, in Carey Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields in London. He had gone there to pay tribute to a popular young bare-knuckle fighter who had just become the undisputed champion of England by beating Bob Gregson in a terribly bloody fight.

Buckingham remembered seeing Gully as a tall, handsome young man of about 21 years of age, his head fearfully battered, cuts all over his face, and both eyes barely open. He was struck at the time by just how agreeable and gay in spirits Gully was as he celebrated his latest triumph. Wearing a little white apron, he had served his visitors with whatever drink they wanted, while his young wife, described by Buckingham as 'an exceedingly pretty woman though of the St Giles's style of beauty', assisted him in a most smiling and gracious manner.

Buckingham was even more astonished to be told that the same John Gully had not only reached the exalted position of Member of Parliament for Pontefract, but had acquired a great fortune as 'a most distinguished sportsman of the Turf'. Moreover, he was making a name for himself as the owner of several Durham coal mining collieries. He and his wife were now moving in the best of society, and lived nearby at his Ackworth Park estate, in a style of some elegance.

1

The Early Days

*'Gully, fight me. It will make
your fortune'*

VERY little is known of John Gully's early years. He was born on 21 August 1783 to Richard and Susanna Gully at the Crown Inn in the village of Wick in Gloucestershire. Richard was the innkeeper of the 17th-century building in the village, which still occupies a prominent position on the London Road, although the inn is now called the Rose and Crown.

John had a younger brother and sister and their father soon found that running the inn provided only a meagre existence and was insufficient to support a growing family. He decided to move the family to the nearby town of Bristol, believing that he had better chances of success by becoming a butcher there.

Bristol, by the middle of the 18th century, had become England's second biggest city. Industry and the population were booming and it was the major port for trade with the American colonies and the West Indies. However, Richard's butcher's shop failed to thrive. Whether he lacked the skills to

make a success of his shop, or it was poorly situated, is not clear. Moreover his health was not good and he died suddenly of a heart attack when John was only 13. John, as his eldest son, was left to run a business that was clearly in trouble. It was never going to work. Lacking a proper apprenticeship, John knew little of the trade and had never taken much interest in the shop. A lively and energetic lad, he was much more concerned with sporting activities.

Growing Up

He grew into a fine strong young man, described as being around six feet tall with rather an open and ingenuous countenance and with beautiful hands, of which all his life he was extremely proud. He was soon taking an active part in a number of sports and he would have been well aware that the Bristol and Bath area had at that time become the cradle of British bare-knuckle fighting. It could boast of producing several champions of England, known as the 'Bristol Boys'. They included fine fighters such as Ben Brain, Jem Belcher, Henry Pearce and the great Tom Cribb.

John would have taken the opportunity to see and learn more about boxing, particularly by attending the local fairs where various physical contests, notably boxing, were often the main attraction. The most important of all was the notorious St James Fair held in the heart of Bristol. It was the largest of the Bristol fairs and the annual week-long occasion attracted a great deal of trading, business and amusements in the numerous stalls and booths in the streets around the church.

For many ambitious young pugilists anxious to make their mark, the boxing booth would have been a prime attraction, since it was always crammed full of wealthy aristocrats and sportsmen from London, keen perhaps to spot another champion fighter. Whether John actually fought at the St James Fair is not known, but it seems very likely he would

have found the penny entrance fee to view the bouts and learn something of the skills involved. He may well have tried his luck in an occasional bout or two at other smaller fairs which were a feature of the age.

He seems to have learned fast for there are a number of recorded incidents that suggest John had become very handy indeed with his fists. Some are clearly apocryphal. For example, after the criminal celebrity and highwayman – ‘16 String’ Jack Rand – who weighed some 18st, had beaten a much lighter opponent called Bill Hooper, the ‘Flying Tin Man of Bath’, at Lansdown Fair, he then boasted he would send anyone else home in a cart if they so much as had the courage to fight him. Young John, after a word with his family, was said to have thrown his hat in the ring, and it was the unfortunate Jack who had to be carted away after being battered into submission. A rousing story but hardly a genuine one since Jack was hanged in 1774 for his crimes before Gully was born.

More credible is the account of Gully soundly thrashing a big bully at Bristol for unfairly setting his dog at a bull which he and his gang were baiting. Gully was pleased to hear later his defeated opponent was in fact a prize fighter who was something of a terror in the neighbourhood. And on another occasion John came across a number of ruffians torturing a dog and John was so incensed at the sight he went in with fists flying and managed to scatter the gang who fled into the night. Incidents like that would have whetted his appetite to try his hand in the prize ring.

However, with the butchery business still failing to prosper, John and the family were soon in deep financial trouble. He was clever with figures but knew very little about important aspects of the trade, such as sourcing and buying good meat, cutting, boning and trimming the meat, and striking a good bargain. He had no one to turn to as the debts grew and the creditors were demanding to be paid.

THE STAKES WERE HIGH

He was faced with the problem that even if he sold the business and the house, he would still be unable to settle all his debts. Moreover, John, barely 18 years old, also had a wife to support. In July 1801 he married a pretty local girl called Mary Mealing, a little older than himself, at the old church of St Thomas a Becket in the village of Pucklechurch, near Bristol.

At the age of 22 Gully decided to go to London. It is possible that he made the journey in response to a legal summons concerning the sums of money he owed. A more probable explanation was that Gully went to London without any definite objective in mind beyond a hope to try to restore his fortunes and at least escape the attention of his creditors back at home.

Whatever the reason, he had no success and soon had to admit to the authorities when they apprehended him that he was simply unable to settle his debts. He declared himself bankrupt, and 1805 found himself languishing in the notorious Fleet Prison in London.

Imprisonment

Bankruptcy in Georgian England was regarded as a serious offence. The Fleet Prison, together with the King's Bench and Marshalsea prisons in Southwark, were reserved exclusively for debtors. A prison term did not alleviate a person's debt, and an inmate was typically required to repay the creditor(s) in full before being released.

Wives and children were sometimes forced to join their husbands and fathers in prison if they did not have the means to support themselves, but there is no record of that happening with Gully. The likelihood is that his new wife Mary had not accompanied John to London and remained resident in Bristol with family members.

The Fleet Prison had a very poor reputation and was regarded by some as something of a 'hell hole' from which many

never regained their freedom. It usually contained some 300 prisoners. Since debt was a classless offence, many people from all sections of society could find themselves confined there.

From what we know of his subsequent career, Gully was a resilient character, but as a callow young man he must have been dismayed by the strange and sorry company he now found himself mixing with. There was the 'cleaned-out gambler, the dissipated spendthrift, the debauchee, the extravagant, dishonest and fashionable tradesman, the pretended merchant, the pettifogging lawyer, the fraudulent bankrupt, the bold smuggler, the broken-down captain, the rogue, the fool, the schemer, the swindler, the hypocrite, the well-meaning but unfortunate gentleman'.³

Although conditions were undoubtedly overall harsh, some of the rules at the Fleet at that time were relatively relaxed, compared with other types of prison, probably more through mismanagement, than design. Visitors and tradesmen were allowed to mix freely with those imprisoned and at times it seemed just like a public house. On Monday night there was a wine club, and on Thursday night a beer club, each lasting usually until one or two in the morning.

With plenty of time on his hands, Gully made good use of the recreational activities available at the prison to keep him fit and active. Games of skittles and fives were played by the prisoners in the courtyard and Gully may well have even tried his hand at rackets which had become a popular pastime in both London's Fleet and King's Bench prisons. But it was the opportunity to practise his boxing skills by friendly bouts with other inmates that appealed most.

He soon made quite a reputation for himself and the word seems to have got round both within the prison and among visitors that he was a young man with real promise as a strong and brave young fighter. It was not long before the news

³ Thormanby. *Famous Racing Men*. p.73

reached a man also from Bristol – a successful prize fighter called Henry Pearce. It is possible that Pearce may have met John earlier and knew something about him, but in any event he decided to visit the prison to see for himself just how good this young Gully was as a budding fighter.

The Game Chicken

Henry ‘Hen’ Pearce had become nationally a very popular bare-knuckle fighter, ‘a splendid figure in many ways’ and widely known in sporting circles as the ‘Game Chicken’. He had a relatively short but spectacular career and was said to have shot across the boxing horizon like a meteor and to fall extinguished just as fast.⁴

The Game Chicken is the first of a succession of remarkable sporting characters and eccentrics we shall meet in this book – drawn from princes and lords, gamblers and bookies, boxers and jockeys, racehorse owners and trainers – whose paths were destined to cross with John.

How long Gully may have languished in the Fleet Prison is impossible to say, but doubtless it would have been a good deal longer had not Pearce taken that momentous decision early in 1805 to make his visit to John at the prison.

Gully was pleased to greet his fellow Bristolian, and after some friendly conversation, he happily accepted the offer of some friendly sparring. A set of Broughton boxing gloves was available and the two men set to box over some good-humoured rounds. Gully acquitted himself remarkably well as a virtual novice and was able to lay a few good blows on the Game Chicken.

One account is that the experience alone was enough for Pearce, a veteran fighter who had something of a sentimental streak, to take pity on Gully’s plight, and to remark to his

⁴ Downes Miles, Henry. *Pugilistica – The History of British Boxing*. p.167

muscular young opponent, 'Gully, fight me. It will make your fortune. I don't know which will win, but I think I may. Still, it is to be a very close and exciting thing.'⁵

Another more likely version, is that it took a number of other close bouts at the prison for Pearce and his patrons to hatch a plan for a prize fight between the two men that would not only extricate Gully from debt and prison, but which could also be promoted as a popular and lucrative bare-knuckle fight. Gully was surprised to receive such a proposal, but he needed little persuasion to agree to it.

As we shall see in Chapter 3, from then onwards events moved fast. Gully's release from prison was secured. News soon spread quickly around the sporting clubs and pubs of London that another promising young boxer from Bristol had been found and that a fine match was in prospect. Gully was about to venture into what was known as the noble art of bare-knuckle fighting or pugilism, which would lead eventually to him becoming one of the most famous sporting characters of 19th-century England. Before we turn to Gully's fighting career, it is worthwhile saying a little more about the sport itself which was about to enter its golden age.

⁵ Day, William. *Reminiscences of the Turf*. p.55