

THE STORY OF
WELSH BOXING

PRIZE FIGHTERS OF WALES



LAWRENCE DAVIES

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Chapter 1

The Bold Welshmen and the Master of Montgomeryshire

In the first year of the 18th century, Mr Jones of North Wales ventured from his mountainous homeland to the city of London to demonstrate his ability as a 'prize fighter'. Shortly afterwards, the *True Protestant Mercury* newspaper of 24–26 April 1700 contained the following notice:

On Wednesday in the afternoon (24 April) a tryal of skill was performed between Joseph Thomas, Master of the noble science of self defence, and one Mr Jones, a gentleman that came out of North-Wales on purpose to fight him, at the Theater in Dorset Gardens, where were abundance of the nobility and gentry; and between each bout was a very fine consort of musick; but in the conclusion Mr Jones gained the day, with great applause.¹

It is possible that Mr Jones might be the earliest Welsh prize fighter to be recorded in print. Although the term 'prize fighter' is now more closely associated with fist fighting as opposed to any other form of combat, in the days of Mr Jones, these 'original' prize fighters were commonly what might be better termed as 'weapons exponents'. Prior to the above contest, held at the Dorset

1 This record of the prizefight between Mr Jones and Joseph Thomas was also recorded in *Anecdotes of the Manners and Customs of London During the Eighteenth Century*, Volume 2, by James Peller Malcolm, F.S.A (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1810) and in *La Belle Assemblée Or, Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine*, Volume 5, (London: J. Bell, 1808).

Gardens Theatre, at Whitefriars, prize fighting with weapons in gladiatorial contests had long been an entertainment that was patronised by the good and the great alike.

Samuel Pepys would record in his *Diary*² that he had attended one such 'prize' fought between 'Mathews' and 'Westwicke' on 1 June 1662, at the New Theatre near the Strand May-pole. The combatants 'fought at eight weapons, three bouts at each weapon'. Mathews was victorious, and Westwicke was 'soundly cut several times both in the head and legs, that he was all over blood; and other deadly blows they did give and take in the very good earnest, till Westwicke was in a sad pickle'. Perhaps expecting an element of trickery, Pepys examined one of the swords used, and 'found it to be very little, if at all blunter on the edge than the common swords are'. The diarist also recorded that he had been surprised by the large amount of money thrown upon the stage by the spectators between each bout.

A decade later, Monsieur Lorevin de Rocheford would recount that he had witnessed a bloody prize fight in his book *An Account of a Journey to the British Isles* (1672), which was held at the Bear Garden in Southwark. Rocheford found that these prize fights were fought without chicanery, and frequently resulted in considerable personal injuries to the combatants.

'We went to see the "Bergiardin" where combats are fought by all sorts of animals, and sometimes men, as we once saw. Commonly, when any fencing-masters are desirous of showing their courage and great skill, they issue mutual challenges, and before they engage, parade the town with drums and trumpets sounding, to inform the public there is a challenge between two brave masters of the science of defence, and that the battle will be fought on such a day.

'We went to see such a combat, which was performed on a stage in the middle of an amphitheatre, when, on the flourish of trumpets and the beats of drums, the combatants entered, stripped to their shirts. On a signal from the drum, they drew their swords and immediately began to fight, skirmishing a long time without wounds. They were both very skilful and courageous.

² *Diary and Correspondence of Samuel Pepys*, Volume 2, by Samuel Pepys (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1866).

The tallest had the advantage over the smallest, for, according to the English fashion of fencing, they endeavoured rather to cut than to thrust in the French manner, so that by his height he had the advantage of being able to strike his antagonist on the head, against which the little one was on his guard. He had in his turn one advantage over the tall man in being able to give him the Jarnac stroke, by cutting him on the right ham, which he left in a manner quite unguarded. So that, all things considered, they were equally matched. Nevertheless, the tall one struck the little one on the wrist, which he almost cut off, but this did not prevent him from continuing the fight, after he had been dressed, and taken a glass or two of wine to give him courage, when he took ample vengeance for his wound; for a little afterwards, making a feint at the ham, the tall man stooping in order to parry it, laid his whole head open, when the little one gave him a stroke which took off a slice of his head and almost all his ear. For my part, I think there is a barbarity and inhumanity in permitting men to kill each other for diversion. The surgeons immediately dressed them and bound up their wounds; which being done, they renewed the combat, and both being sensible of their respective disadvantages, they therefore were a long time without receiving or giving a wound, which was the cause that the little one, failing to parry so exactly, being tired with his long battle, received another stroke on his wounded wrist, which, dividing the sinews, he remained vanquished, and the tall conqueror received the applause of the spectators.³

While these stage fights benefitted the gladiators financially, with the men receiving the stakes deposited on the outcome of a contest, and often a share of the gate money, they also publicised the ability of a 'prize' fighter. Public demonstration of skill encouraged spectators to engage the services of the prize fighters as teachers if they had developed sufficient skill with weaponry to have earned the honourable title of 'Master of the Noble Science of Defence'. The title of 'Master' had official status and was only awarded to a weapons exponent of the highest rank, and might be thought of as being somewhat akin to a black belt awarded

3 As quoted in *Schools and Masters of Fencing From the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century*, Egerton Castle, (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1885) and *London in the Time of the Stuarts*, Volume 6, by Sir Walter Besant (London: A & C. Black, 1903).

to experienced martial artists. At another notorious London amphitheatre where such contests took place, the Bear Garden, located at Hockley in the Hole, the *True Protestant Mercury* of 21 June 1700 recorded a well-contested battle as having taken place between two Welshmen.

‘Yesterday, a prize was fought at the Bear-garden, between one King and another, said to be both Welshmen: they no way counterfeited, but cut each other to that degree that they both jump’d off together, and gave great satisfaction to the company.’

It seems possible that the unnamed combatant who engaged Mr King may have been Mr Jones himself, and that Mr Jones of North Wales might have studied the use of weaponry as a ‘scholar’ under a particularly well-regarded Master named James Harris from Herefordshire. A later advertisement printed in the *Post man* on 29 October announced a contest between James Harris, ‘a Herefordshire man, master of the noble science of defence (who hath fought fourscore and seventeen prizes, and was never worsted...’ and his opponent, Francis Gorman, ‘who lately cut down 3 famous men, master of the said science’. The advert also draws attention to Harris’s status as the ‘master to Mr Jones, the bold Welshman, and Mr King.’⁴

James Harris had fought 97 battles by this time, and was a ‘Master’ of standing, following a long career in which he met many skilled weapons exponents. Harris, like a number of early prize fighters, had prior experience in the use of weaponry due to his military background, in addition to having studied under a ‘Master’, as Harris’s later response to a challenge issued by George Gray of Norwich in 1709 suggests.⁵ By this time, Harris claimed...

4 The Mr King referred to in this advert is unlikely to be the ‘Welsh’ King referenced in the *Protestant Mercury* of 21 June 21 1700. It seems more likely that this is William King of ‘Tidbury’ (Tetbury) in Gloucestershire.

5 The famous Scottish prize fighter Donald McBane and Captain James Miller are two examples of prominent weapons exponents who came from a military background. McBane wrote a highly regarded and detailed manual of swordsmanship entitled *The Expert Sword-Man’s Companion* (Glasgow: J. Duncan, 1728), and claimed to have fought 37 prize fights. The skill of Captain James Miller was liberally praised by Captain John Godfrey, and Miller also authored an illustrated album entitled *A Treatise on backsword, sword, buckler, sword and dagger, sword and great gauntlet, falchion, quarterstaff* (London: 1738).

to have ‘fought a hundred and ten prizes’ and stated that he had ‘formerly rid in the horse-guards’.

At the Bear-garden in Hockley-in-the-hole, near Clerkenwell Green, a trial of skill shall be performed between two masters of the noble science on Wednesday next, at two of the clock precisely.

I GEORGE GRAY, born in the city of *Norwich*, who have fought in most part of the *West Indies*, namely, *Jamaica* and *Barbadoes*, and several other parts of the world, in all twenty-five times, and upon a stage, and never yet was worsted, and being now lately come to *London*, to invite James Harris to meet and exercise at these following weapons, namely, back-sword, sword and dagger, sword and buckler, single falchion, and case of falchions.

I JAMES HARRIS, master of the said noble science of defence, who formerly rid in the horse-guards, and hath fought a hundred and ten prizes, and never left a stage to any man, will not fail, God willing to meet this brave and bold inviter at the time and place appointed: desiring sharps swords and from him no favor. No person to be upon the stage but the seconds. VIVAT REGINA!⁶

The fame of James Harris ensured that he was ‘well known throughout England’, according to the *Daily Courant*, by 1709⁷. Harris’s proven ability with weapons meant that his services as a teacher were much in demand into his later years. An advert published in the *Ipswich Journal* in 1729 is especially intriguing, given his tuition of Welsh scholars, and notes that as ‘one of the best Swords-Men in England’, Harris had ‘the Honour to Teach Dukes and Lords, and abundance of Nobility in England, Ireland, Wales and Holland’.⁸ It might be imagined that James Harris may have been asked to teach the use of weaponry to the ‘Nobility’ in Wales by special invitation, given that at the time the largest

6 This challenge, issued by George Gray to James Harris is taken from a show bill, dated 13 July 1709.

7 As recorded in the *Daily Courant*, 30 August 1709.

8 As recorded in the *Ipswich Journal*, 2–9 August 1729.

financial rewards for a 'Master of the Noble Science of Defence' lay in teaching their art in the thriving towns and cities of England.

That Mr Jones of North Wales was a more than capable prize fighter with a variety of weapons appears certain given his defeat of the well-regarded prizefighter Joseph Thomas at the Dorset Gardens Theatre. Joseph Thomas is notable for having fought the skilful Master John Terrewest of Oundle in Northamptonshire, in 1701,⁹ and was also advertised to meet the accomplished Thomas Cook, and could therefore be considered to have been a prize fighter of some standing. An advert published in the *Post Man* in September of 1700 also draws attention to 'Jones the bold Welshman' having recently fought a 'Tryal of Skill' against the well-known weapons exponent William King, of 'Tidbury' (Tetbury) in Gloucestershire, at the 'Play house'.¹⁰

Sadly, of Mr Jones 'the bold Welshman' and Mr King, there does not appear to be any further information recorded. It seems likely that there may well have been other Welsh weapons exponents who regularly competed in the amphitheatres at this time, as Thomas Soon, another 'Bold Welshman' of 'Rixham',¹¹ Denbyshire, was advertised to meet John Terrewest, in August of 1711.¹² Soon was apparently viewed as having been of sufficient skill as to warrant a second meeting with Terrewest in May of 1712,¹³ with both fights billed to take place at the Bear Garden in Hockley in the Hole.

9 Joseph Thomas was stated to have recently fought John Terrewest in the *Post Man* of 5–8 July 1701. The *Post Boy* of the same date records that Thomas had fought William King. If the *Post Boy* is correct, it would not be as significant as Thomas fighting Terrewest, although King was a very capable fighter.

10 As recorded in the *Post Man* of 7–9 September 1700.

11 Thomas Soon is recorded as having come from 'Rixham', 'Wraxham', and 'Wrixham' in the *Daily Courant*. At this time, spelling had not yet been standardised.

12 As recorded in the *Daily Courant*, 29 August 1711. An earlier advertisement that appeared in the *Daily Courant*, 18 August 1711, confirms the reputation of the bear-garden as often having attracted an unruly crowd, stating that 'A peculiar Care will be taken towards the Suppression of the Mobb in the Gallerys that no Gentleman shall be molested'.

13 As recorded in the *Daily Courant*, 21 May 1712, the contest was to take place on the same day, at the Bear Garden in Hockley in the Hole.

Thomas Soon was then matched to fight against George Gray of Norwich a few months afterwards at the George Inn in the Borough of Southwark.¹⁴ Gray could be considered an opponent of some standing, albeit one of lesser reputation than John Terrewest.¹⁵

Thomas Soon was apparently proficient with a host of weapons, perhaps demonstrating enough ability to have attained the status of a 'Master of the Noble Science of Defence'. Certainly, he is remembered as such by John Lucas, the 18th century schoolmaster of Leeds, in his *Memoranda Book*.¹⁶ Thomas Soon exhibited his skills in the town in the company of one 'Thomas Pidgeon, the 'Champion of the West', in 1713:

Page 14: Memoranda 1713

Wednesday 19 August, Thomas Soon, the bold Welshman, and Thomas Pidgeon, Champion of the West, two masters of defence, fought with six or seven sorts of weapons in the Queen's Arms and the spectators paid 12s. & 6d.

Lucas was apparently not greatly impressed by the display, stating that 'the performers proved to the satisfaction of very few'.¹⁷ It

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- 14 As recorded in the *Daily Courant*, 14 July 1712, the contest was to take place on the same day, at the George Inn in the Borough of Southwark.
- 15 Master John Terrewest of Oundle, in Northamptonshire, was advertised to meet such accomplished weapons exponents as Timothy Buck, George Gray, James Harris, John Parkes, Adam Wood and Thomas Hesgate. Terrewest was included in a footnote in Egerton Castle's highly regarded *Schools and Masters of Fencing From the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century*, which names John Terrewest at the top of the list amongst the following 'well-known prize-fighters in the heyday of back-sword fighting' – John Terrewest, John Stokes, William Gill, Perkins and (*Michael*) Butler (both Irishmen), (*Ned*) Sutton, Mr. Johnson, Mr. (*William*) Sherlock and John Delforce. Captain Godfrey would record that the skill of Delforce ensured that he was 'a rival to Fig's memory' although 'he fought with the Cudgell only'.
- 16 *The Memoranda Book of John Lucas 1712–1750*, Vol. 16 by John Lucas, edited by Jonathan Oates, (Leeds: The Thoresby Society, 2006).
- 17 There appears to be little information recorded on Thomas Pidgeon, the 'Champion of the West'. Prior to this date, in the first decade of the 18th century, the title of 'Champion of the West' had been assumed by a prize fighter named John Davis.

seems plausible that this was a performance given as part of a tour undertaken by Thomas Soon, as the *Archaeologia Aeliana*, published by the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1860, records that in 1713, ‘two profound masters of the noble science of Defence, Thomas Soon of London, known as the “Bold Welshman” and William Emerson, the “Norfolk Champion” who lately fought the “Bold Indian” at Bridge-Town, Barbadoes’, appeared at the Nag’s Head public house in Gateshead. Perhaps the spectators were more impressed than John Lucas with the display that followed as, ‘there was convenience made for gentlemen and ladies,’ and the ‘heroes exhibited their skill with back-sword, sword-and-dagger, sword-and-buckler, single-falchion, case-of-falchions, and quarter-staff’.¹⁸ The ‘Bold Welshman’ and the ‘Norfolk Champion’ afterwards concluded their performance with a fight for ten guineas aside.¹⁹

The most famous of the early prize fighters was the celebrated James Figg, who was said to have been born in Thame, Oxfordshire, and is generally considered to have been the first pugilistic champion of England, although he was better known in his time for his expertise as a weapons exponent. By 1714, Figg was living in London and was learning the use of weaponry as a scholar under the notable Master, Timothy Buck of Clare Market, attaining such skill as to be given the title of Master later that year.²⁰ Timothy Buck’s ability with weaponry was commented upon by Captain John Godfrey in his book, *A Treatise Upon the Useful Science of Defence*,

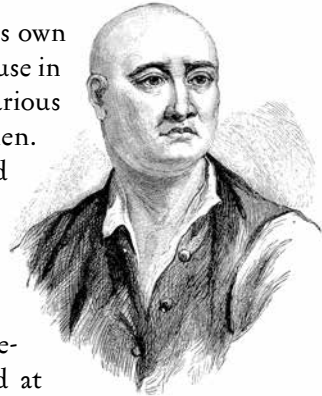
18 The ‘back-sword’ is a short, light, single-edged sword with a single-handed grip. The ‘buckler’ was a small round shield up to 18 inches in diameter used as a companion weapon to deflect the blow of an opponent’s sword. There are many variations of the ‘falchion’. The falchion pictured in Captain James Miller’s album *A Treatise on backsword, sword, buckler, sword and dagger, sword and great gauntlet, falchion, quarterstaff*, is a short one-handed sword with a curved single-edged blade featuring an integral knuckle guard. To fight with a ‘case-of-falchions’ appears to mean to fight with a falchion in either hand. The ‘quarterstaff’ was a hardwood pole measuring anywhere between 6 and 9ft long that was used as a striking weapon.

19 William Emmerson would appear to have been a man of considerable skill and some renown, having been advertised to meet Timothy Buck, the Master who taught James Figg, in the *Daily Courant* on 14 August 1711.

20 James Figg was frequently described as a ‘scholar’ of Timothy Buck, as can be seen in one example published in the *Daily Courant* on 16 October 1714.

in which Godfrey tells his readers that, ‘Timothy Buck was a most solid Master, it was apparent in his Performances, even when grown decrepid, and his old age could not hide his uncommon Judgement, He was the Pillar of the Art, and all his Followers, who excelled, built upon him.’

James Figg afterwards opened his own amphitheatre, which adjoined his house in Oxford Road, where he taught the various ‘manly arts’ to interested gentlemen. In time, Figg’s Amphitheatre would become London’s principal venue for sporting entertainments, featuring not only ‘trials of skill’ (involving weapons), but also ‘trials of manhood’ (using fists). Some of the most celebrated boxers of the day appeared at



James Figg, considered the first pugilistic champion of England.

Figg’s, including the Lincolnshire drover John Whitacre (Whitaker), a Westminster cabinet-maker by the name of John Gretton (Gretting), and a pipe maker from St Giles named Thomas Allen, better known as ‘Pipes’. Despite Figg now being regarded as having been the first pugilistic champion, his own achievements as regards boxing seem to have been mostly confined to his appearances on his booth at Southwark Fair. James Figg is recorded by Pierce Egan in *Boxiana* as having exhibited ‘his knowledge in various Combats – with the Foil, Back-sword, Cudgel and Fist’ at the Fair for the entertainment of the crowds.

Pierce Egan would maintain that James Figg was ‘indebted to strength and courage’ for his success in battle, stating that if ‘Figg’s method of fighting was subject to the criticism of the present day, he would be denominated more of a *slaughterer* than that of a neat, finished pugilist’. Egan attributes Figg’s expertise with the foil and cudgel to having given him a ‘decidedly superior advantage over the other boxers of that day by his thorough acquaintance with *time* and *measure*’.

The author of *A Treatise Upon the Useful Science of Defence*, Captain John Godfrey, is perhaps better placed to speak of James Figg’s skill with weaponry, having trained under him as his pupil.

AT
FIG'S GREAT TIL'D BOOTH,
On the Bowling-Green, Southwark,
During the time of the FAIR,
(Which begins on SATURDAY, the 18th of SEPTEMBER,)
The TOWN will be entertained with the
MANLY ARTS OF
Foil-play, Back-sword, Cudgelling, and Boxing,
in which

The noted PARKS, from Coventry, and the celebrated gentleman prize-fighter, Mr. MILLAR, will display their skill in a tilting-bout, showing the advantages of *Time* and *Measure*.

ALSO,

Mr. JOHNSON, the great Swordsman, superior to any man in the World for his unrivalled display of the *hanging-guard*, in a grand attack of SELF-DEFENCE, against the all-powerful arm of the renowned SUTTON.

DELFORCE, the finished Cudgeller, will likewise exhibit his uncommon feats with the *single-stick*; and who challenges any man in the kingdom to enter the lists with him for a *broken-head*, or a *belly-full*!

BUCKHORSE, and several other *Pugilists*, will show the Art of Boxing.
To conclude

With a GRAND PARADE by the Valiant FIG, who will exhibit his knowledge in various Combats—with the Foil, Back-sword, Cudgel, and Fist.

To begin each Day at Twelve o'Clock, and close at Ten.

Vivat Rex.

N. B. The Booth is fitted up in a most commodious manner, for the better reception of Gentlemen, &c. &c.

A handbill advertising Figg's booth at Southwark Fair (taken from Boxiana). Weapons exponents including John Parkes, Ned Sutton and the cudgeller, John Delforce, headline the bill. Unnamed pugilists other than 'Buckhorse' (John Smith) appear as a secondary entertainment.

I have purchased my Knowledge in the BACK-SWORD with many a broken Head, and Bruise in every Part of me. I chose to go mostly to FIG, and exercise with him; partly, as I knew him to be the ablest Master, and partly, as he was of a rugged Temper, and would spare no Man, high or low, who took up a Stick against him. I bore his rough

Treatment with determined Patience, and followed him so long, that FIG, at last, finding he could not have the beating of me at so cheap a Rate as usual, did not shew such Fondness for my Company.

Despite the hardness of his tuition at the hands of James Figg, or perhaps because of it, Godfrey remained convinced of Figg's superiority over the other weapons exponents of the time, stating that:

FIG was the Atlas of the Sword ... In him, Strength, Resolution, and unparallel'd Judgement conspired to form a matchless Master ... He was just as much a greater MASTER, than any other I ever saw, and he was a greater Judge of *Time* and *Measure*.

It can be imagined that those who chose to challenge James Figg were sorely treated, as the Irishman William Holmes would no doubt agree. Holmes was the unfortunate opponent of James Figg on the occasion of his 271st battle on 14 October 1730. It was the third time that they had met in two months and would be the last, the contest having terminated when the wrist of Holmes was cut to the bone. In *The Memoirs and Adventures of the Marquis De Bretagne and Duc D'Harcourt*, a graphic account of a sword fight between James Figg and an Irish Sergeant is described.²¹ This trial of skill had headlined a comprehensive bill of entertainments, with a number of 'diversions' consisting of cudgelling, boxing and wrestling amusing the spectators prior to the main event.

'The first Trial of skill was with Sticks, which the English call Cudgels. They use them after the Manner of Hangers (*swords*), and the Strokes are given with so good Will, that I cannot conceive how they can give each other so many without breaking Arms or Heads, for they fight quite naked. Whoever draws Blood from his Antagonist's Head first, is Conqueror.'

21 *The Memoirs and Adventures of the Marquis De Bretagne and Duc D'Harcourt*, Volume 2 by Antoine François Prévost d'Exiles, Translated from the Original French By Mr. Erskine, (London: T. Cooper at the Globe, 1743).

After having witnessed his first cudgelling match, the Marquis was then treated to a boxing contest, which proved to be a shocking spectacle for the uninitiated.

‘After cudgelling, comes boxing. The two Combatants strip, and are naked to the Belt, and the Strokes they give to one another are so violent, that they make the Blood sometimes spout out from the Mouth. I have seen some of them fall, and remain some Moments immoveable, but they soon recovered by the help of Vinegar put to their Nose. Upon which they get up, embrace their Adversary, and fall to Blows, till one or other has quite lost Strength, and sometimes Life itself. This Exercise seemed to me the most violent and dangerous.’

A wrestling bout followed the boxing contest, and was the final match prior to the main event between Figg and the Irish Sergeant.

‘You see two lusty well made Fellows approach one another softly, and with Precaution observing one another carefully for a few Minutes, turning round, as it were to discover the weak Part; touching Hough to Hough, and at last grappling, they squeeze and shake one another with a surprizing Force and Agility; and sometimes it is a considerable Time before any Inequality is observed; at length, when Victory has declared itself in Favour of one, he lends a helping Hand to raise the vanquished, and then they fall to it anew, ‘till one or other is quite spent.’

If the violence of the boxing match had shocked the Marquis, he must have been quite unprepared for the bloodshed that marked the sword fight between James Figg and the Irish Sergeant, who shortly afterwards appeared on the stage ready for battle.

‘Figg offered the Serjeant the Choice of Swords, of several that were brought upon the Stage, about two Inches in breadth, and the Points ground off. I had the Curiosity to take one of them in my Hand, and found that it was sharp edged enough to cut off an Arm or a Leg. The Combatants, after shaking Hands, as a Mark of Friendship and Esteem, put themselves in a Posture of Defence, crossed their Weapons, and began a furious Attack. We must not imagine that there was any foul play in the Case, or that they were not serious, they let fly at one another so heartily, and with such Vigour and Rapidity, that the Spectacle became terrible, and the whole Assembly was in a profound Silence. The Serjeant

made a Blow at Figg, which cut a pretty large Piece of his Stocking, without touching the Leg. Figg, whose Coolness and Judgement were surprizing, felt the Stroke; ho, ho! said he, I see thou hast a Mind to my Leg, but take Care of thy own, and with the same Breath whipped off a large Piece of the Calf of his Adversary's Leg, which fell upon the Stage; the general Applause was given to this clean Slash by clapping of Hands, and crying bravo, bravo, encora, encora, which is a sort of Approbation that they have learned from the Italians. The Serjeant, not able to support himself, sat down and looked at his Blood, which ran in Streams.'

Following the bloody outcome of this contest, the Marquis de Bretagne was convinced that Figg handled 'a broad Sword with the greatest Dexterity of any Man alive'. James Figg's greatest rival for prize fighting honours was Edward Sutton, the Gravesend pipe maker known as the 'Champion of Kent'. Figg and Sutton fought two matches with alternate success, and a third match was organised to decide which combatant could claim superiority over the other. Despite having been recorded by many as having been a boxing match, the contest between Figg and Sutton held on 14 April 1725, was a fight involving swords and quarterstaves. Figg attacked first with such vigour that it was thought that he might have succeeded in cleaving Sutton's head clean off, had his sword not been artfully deflected by the pipe maker. So powerful was Figg's attack that his sword broke in two, although Figg fought on with his broken weapon until Sutton's blade was also seen to 'run away from its hilt'. Figg and Sutton continued to do battle with their damaged weapons, until it was noticed that Figg had sustained an injury to his side from which 'hot blood spouted out'.

In a brief halt in proceedings, Figg appealed to the spectators, pointing out that his wound had been due to the broken blade of his own sword. The combatants then resumed the battle until Figg cut Sutton's right arm. Evenly matched, the crowd called for a trial of skill using the quarterstaff to settle the affair. In the first bout, Ned Sutton was seen to good advantage, and his forceful blows were thought likely to have downed a lesser man than James Figg.

The second bout brought the issue of whether Sutton or Figg was the better man to a swift and decisive conclusion when Figg

hit Sutton a blow to the knee of such force that it disabled the pipe maker, resulting in Figg's victory. After a long and celebrated career in which the name of James Figg became famous throughout the land, Figg died on 8 December 1734, at the house attached to his famous amphitheatre, and was buried three days later at the parish church of St Marylebone.

At around the same time as James Figg had been opening his amphitheatre in 1719, another Welsh weapons exponent by the name of Henry Davis, billed as having come from 'Rixham' in Wales, was advertised to meet opponents of proven ability at the Bear Garden in Hockley in the Hole.²² On 9 June 1719, Henry Davis was advertised to fight the London prize fighter, Robert Waldron.²³ The following month would see two further contests advertised in the *Daily Courant*, with Davis having been billed to pit his skills on both occasions against Irish opponent Thomas Barrett of Dublin.²⁴ That Henry Davis was obviously an accomplished prize fighter can be seen from the fact that both of his opponents tangled with some of the most prominent weapons exponents of the period. Robert Waldron was advertised to fight such notable figures as James Figg, James Miller, and the prolific gladiator John Parkes of Coventry, while the Irishman Thomas Barrett also contested against such skilled men as Michael Butler, Felix MacGuire and James Stokes.

While there appear to be no records of any Welsh weapons exponents having performed at the celebrated amphitheatre of James Figg, another 'Bold Welshman' and Welsh 'Master of the Noble Art of Defence' from Montgomeryshire was engaged to fight at the amphitheatre of one of his rivals. James Stokes was the proprietor of Stokes' Amphitheatre, which adjoined his house on Islington Road, near Sadler's Wells. A contest was advertised to take place at the amphitheatre on 13 March 1727, featuring

22 It seems likely that Henry Davis of 'Rixham' actually came from Wrexham, as well as Thomas Soon.

23 The advertisement for the trial of skill between Henry Davis and Robert Waldron appeared in the *Daily Courant* on 9 July 1719, and was scheduled for the same day.

24 The advertisements for the two trials of skill between Henry Davis and Thomas Barrett appeared in the *Daily Courant* on 6 July 1719, and 28 July 1719, and both contests were scheduled for the following day.

another Welsh weapons exponent. What is most surprising about the contest is that the Welshman, a Master from Montgomeryshire by the name of John Crumpton, challenged such a formidable opponent as the arch rival of James Figg, the pipe maker Ned Sutton. The following advert was published in the *Weekly Journal or the British Gazetteer* a couple of days previously:

ADVERTISEMENT

At Mr. Stokes's Amphitheatre joining to his House in Islington Road, on Monday next, being the 13th of March, will be performed a Trial of Skill by the following Masters.

I John Crumpton, from Montgomeryshire in Wales, Master of the Noble Science of Defence, about 6 Years past, fought three Battles in London, with good Success, and since, the best Masters in the Kingdom of Ireland, and North of England, and most parts of Great Britain: In my long Absence there are some Upstarts and Pretenders of the Sword, who feed themselves full of Vanity. I do invite Mr Sutton, who, I understand, makes it his Business to fight such Persons that does not know the Hilt from the Point, to gain a Character, at the usual Weapons practis'd on the Stage, desiring him to be Smart in Time of Action, and to use his utmost Skill, and the best judgement he is Master of, with the most Severity.

I Edward Sutton, from Gravesend, in the County of Kent, Master of the said Science, making no Apology, will not fail meeting this bold Welshman at the place above specified: where I believe I shall learn him to take Care how he deals with such Pretenders and Upstarts, which shall be my utmost Care, to please the Gentlemen with intire Satisfaction, as my usual Custom is.

The Boxes will be set at Three, and the Masters mount at Five.

N.B. There will be the Diversion of Cudgel playing before the Masters mount.

No person to be admitted under one shilling.

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There can be no doubt that John Crumpton must have been an accomplished weapons exponent to have challenged a Master of such standing as Sutton, less than two years after Sutton's famous battle with James Figg. That Crumpton also routinely fought his fellow Masters throughout the British Isles over the course of six years after having met challengers in London would suggest that John Crumpton was a man of considerable skill. Surprisingly, given the dangerous nature of fighting with bladed weapons and the high risk of personal injury, some prize fighters fought large numbers of battles over the course of their long careers. Few could probably rival the record of the famous gladiator John Parkes of Coventry, who, in a 25-year career, was remembered as having fought an astonishing 350 contests.²⁵ Sadly, reports on the outcomes of advertised prize fights between weapons exponents are few and far between, and the outcome of John Crumpton's meeting with Edward Sutton (or even if it took place) remains a mystery.

Perhaps the mysterious Mr Jones of North Wales, the obscure Mr King, Thomas Soon and Henry Davis of 'Rixham', along with the 'Master of Montgomeryshire', John Crumpton, are the only traces now remaining that 'Bold Welshmen' once fought and battled with the sword and staff alongside other weapons exponents in the days of James Figg. Of those who may have had the temerity to swap fists in boxing contests in the days of Figg, it appears that there is no trace left at all. The first Welshman who appears to have been recorded as having fought competitively with the fists emerged in the days of Jack Broughton, commonly known as the 'father of British Boxing', on the booth of his great rival, George Taylor.

25 John Parkes is buried in St Michael's churchyard, Coventry. His epitaph reads: 'To the memory of Mr John Parkes, a native of this city. He was a man of a mild disposition, A gladiator by profession, Who, after having fought 350 battles, In the principal parts of Europe, with honour and applause, At length quitted the stage, sheathed his sword, And with Christian resignation, Submitted to the Grand Victor, In the 52nd year of his life. Anno 1733.'