

# The sad demise of Brighton Bill

by Richard Barber

As an Inspector for the British Boxing Board of Control I am well aware of the modern safeguards in place for the protection of professional boxers. Among the stringent regulations it is stated that the contests cannot proceed without paramedics in attendance and the presence of at least one doctor at ringside who must be trained in the resuscitation of an unconscious person. A thorough pre-contest medical check is carried out as well as a post contest one. An unconscious boxer should receive oxygen within the first minute of being knocked out to help in his/her recovery should a brain injury occur and this equipment is at ringside should it be needed.

Prior to the contest, the Inspector will make sure everything is in place and, if it is not, then the contest will not take place. There are no exceptions to this, four-rounder or world championship alike.

Let's take a look at the difference in the conditions that existed when William Phelps, a.k.a. Brighton Bill, fought in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

William Phelps boxed out of Brighton in the 1830s. Sadly

he is remembered more for his death and the fact that his bout with Owen Swift was one of the main reasons that the Broughton Rules, which had been in operation for nearly a century, were superseded by the London Prize Ring Rules in 1838.

This is a contemporary account of the final stages of the bout with Swift which took place on March 13, 1838 near Royston in Hertfordshire for £50 a side.

*In the 80<sup>th</sup> round, the din about the ring was deafening with cries of "Go it, Bill" and "Go it, Owen" and other exclamations to arouse the expiring energies of the men. Swift, feeble as he was, never lost his self-possession. Seeing that his man was all abroad, he collected his strength for a final effort, shot in his right and left, closed, and giving Bill his leg threw him another heavy fall, dropping with all his weight on top of him. This was the coup de grace. It shook out of Phelps the last remnants of fight left in him, yet to the everlasting disgrace of his backers and seconds, the hopelessly beaten and helpless man was carried up for five rounds more.*

*At the commencement of the 82<sup>nd</sup>, Owen himself appealed to Curtis, imploring him to*

*take his man away, pointing to Phelps who stood with legs wide apart, arms hanging by his side, breathing like a man in fit and apparently unconscious of all around him. But Phelps's backers, with no other thought than of their dirty money, shouted to Curtis to leave Bill alone. "One fling of his right will win the fight yet" said they. A simple shove from Swift's hand was enough to send Phelps down. Owen never really hit him after the 80<sup>th</sup> round. At last Dick Curtis, at the close of the 85<sup>th</sup> round, would not allow Phelps to fight any more. Owen walked up to Phelps and shook hands with him and Bill immediately fell dropped back into Curtis's arms. Swift just managed to walk back to his own corner and fainted clean away on his second's knee. So ended this extraordinary fight which lasted one hour and thirty five minutes and which all who witnessed it declared to have been one of the most gamely contested on record.*

*And now let me hasten on to the tragic sequel to that memorable day's sport at Royston. Both men were hurried off to their quarters immediately after the fight. Owen to the Bull public house at Royston and*

*Phelps to the Wheatsheaf at the nearby village of Barkway. Swift's condition to all appearance was little better than that of his beaten foe and all that night his friends had a very anxious time, for the medical man in attendance was fearful of syncope from exhaustion and for hours Owen's life was considered to be in danger. But the remedies applied were successful, the next day he was pronounced out of danger, and he was, at his own request, conveyed back to town.*

*Brighton Bill's case was much more serious. When he was carried to his room at the Wheatsheaf he was senseless and motionless. Mr James Balding, a surgeon of repute, was sent for, and he saw at a glance that the man was in an alarming condition. He administered cordials, had the feet wrapped in hot flannels, and used every means to restore the vitality which exhaustion had reduced to the lowest ebb, but only with partial success. At intervals the man apparently recognised the faces and voices of those at his bedside but he was unable to speak. On Thursday morning the doctor thought him worse, and leeches and cupping were resorted to. After the cupping Bill turned on his hands and knees and moved himself from one side of the bed to the other. This was the only movement suggestive of consciousness that he made. On Friday*

*morning he passed away quietly, not having spoken a word since he fainted in Curtis's arms in the ring.*

*On the Monday an inquest was held by Mr Longmore, the coroner, at which several witnesses were examined who saw the battle. They all asserted that they thought it fairly fought throughout and stated that, in their opinion, no blame attached to Swift, whose manly forbearance was admired by all. Thomas Butler, landlord of the Wheatsheaf, deposed that the deceased came to his house on the Saturday before the fight, by the Lynn coach, accompanied by Curtis and Brown. Cross, the coachman, said, as a witness, that the men had come down to fight, but the parties themselves did not mention their business. They left the house on the Tuesday, about noon, in a coach and four. There were fourteen or fifteen persons on the coach, who, from their dress and manners, appeared to be gentlemen. Three or four hours later, the deceased was bought back in an insensible condition and carried to bed.*

*The medical evidence, founded on the post-mortem examination, showed that the external injuries were sufficient to account for death. There was a quantity of extravasated blood between the bone and the brain on the left side of the head. The lung was gorged with*

*blood, and so was the cavity in the chest under the lung. The surgeon thought that the unfortunate man was sensible long enough to feel his defeat and was aware that he had lost the battle.*

*"I saw him", said the doctor, "take the hand of one of his friends, and afterwards put his arm round his friend's neck and kiss him twice. I am bound to say that the persons who attended him showed the greatest possible kindness, and were unremitting in their attention to him."*

This was the second fight in which Swift's opponent had died, the first being Anthony Noon in 1834. Thankfully this sort of account is unrecognisable from the modern sport and the ring is a much safer and well regulated place now. There is always room for improvement and we at the Boxing Board are always looking for ways to improve. Not many sports can compare with the safety regime that is now in force in boxing in this country. We know boxing will always be dangerous, but the regulated sport will never go back to the days of 'Brighton Bill', but we have learned from them.

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**BOXING NEWS**