

Secrets of the Bullring

On Christmas morning in 1884, just after daybreak, a group of about 30 people met at a secluded location between Northampton and Wellingborough. They had come together to watch a bare-knuckled prize fight between John Simpson from Northampton and a fighter from Birmingham known as 'Birmingham Jemmy'. The fight was long and gruelling. It lasted for 54 rounds over 1½ hours but, in the end, the Northampton man was victorious. It is said that he received a 'substantial' reward.

Although such fights were illegal they were often supported by the rich and powerful. In 1842, for example, the 6th Viscount Chegwain was charged with organising a prize fight in rural Bedfordshire. However, it is on record that the 1884 Christmas fight was not interrupted by Police. But where did it take place?

Contemporary newspaper reports say that the location was known as 'the Bull-ring' and I believe this to be the ring of lime trees in Eastfield Park that has been known as the Bullring for a great many years. While it is true that today we would not describe it as being 'between Northampton and Wellingborough', back in 1884 when the fight took place, the land that now forms Eastfield Park was divided between the parishes of Abington and Weston Favell. The Bullring was in Abington and Abington, of course, was on the road from Northampton to Wellingborough.

The fight may help to explain why the Bullring is so far from the Abington Manor House (now Abington Park Museum). A late 18th Century map of the Abington Estate shows the Bullring at the intersection of two avenues of trees; one avenue leading from the Kettering Road to nowhere in particular, the other leading both to and from nowhere in particular. This has puzzled me for some time. If such a feature was purely ornamental, why should it be so far from the manor house and gardens? However, if the Bullring was associated with illegal activities, its remote location is easily explained and the avenues of trees could well form different routes for spectators and the two opponents with their seconds to approach the 'ring'. (Interesting that we still use the term 'ring' for the arena in which a boxing match takes place, even though it is now square in shape.)

There has been speculation that the Bullring may have been used for bull-baiting which became illegal in Britain in 1835. An association with prize fighting does not rule out the possibility of an earlier link with bull-baiting. Bull-baiting was often associated with other rough so-called 'sports' including bear baiting, cock fighting and pugilism.

It should be pointed out that all this has nothing to do with the comparatively recent plinth that now stands at the centre of the Bullring. This plinth once supported a statue of a hunter and his dog attacking a wild boar, but these features did not appear in the ring until after 1900 when the land was acquired by James Manfield and became part of the grounds of Weston Favell House.

The Bullring is possibly the most important and most interesting feature in Eastfield Park and it is essential that it should be conserved for future generations. I am sure that it has many other secrets to reveal.

(The information about the Christmas fight was published in a number of contemporary newspapers including the *Hampshire Advertiser* dated Saturday 3rd January 1885. These newspapers can be read online at www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk © 2017 Findmypast Newspaper Archive Limited.)