

A Bare Knuckle Fight In Epping Forest

In 1861, Walthamstow was a rural area between Epping Forest and the River Lea and was made up of a collection of small Essex villages in the Parish of St Mary the Virgin.

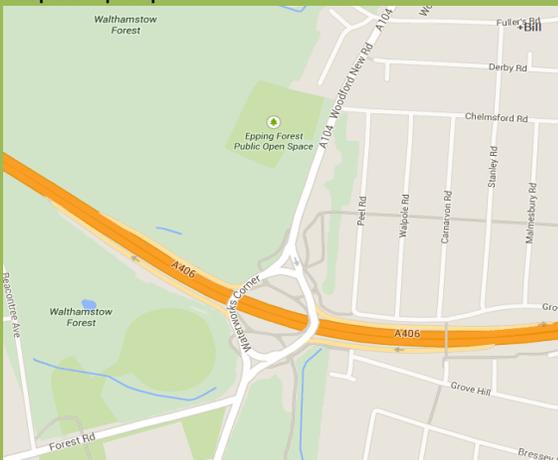
The word had gone out there was to be a bare knuckle prize fight in Epping Forest between two young up and coming scrappers. These were; seventeen year old *James Wallis* and nineteen year old *Alfred Tabraham*

A Crowd Gathers In The Forest

On Sunday morning on the 27th January 1861 in Walthamstow, a number of people made their way up Haggar Lane to Epping Forest to watch the fight. On reaching Wood Street, they were met by numbers of other people coming from Hackney who were also coming to watch the fight.

When they reached a large clearing in the highest part of Epping Forest near Walthamstow Mill, there were already a large number of people gathered for the same purpose. The ground had been cleared of debris and a long thick rope had been laid on the ground to form a large ring.

Below: Location map of the probable site of the fight. Walthamstow Mill was situated to the left of Derby Road above the area shown as an public open space.

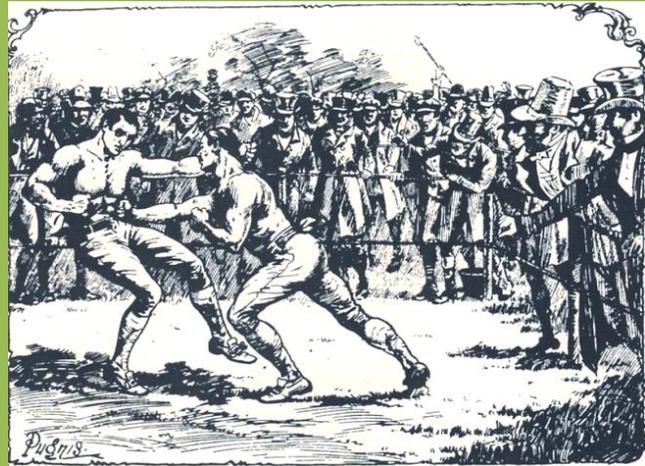


Below: Walthamstow Mill demolished c1800



A Festive Occasion

It had the air of a festive occasion. One of the many local beer shops had set up a barrel of ale on a trestle and was doing a busy trade. Somebody from one of the forest refreshment rooms was selling pies. Several bookmakers were laying odds and taking bets.



Opposite each other, outside of the ring, there were two groups of people each supporting a fighter. These were their trainers and friends. Among these were the 'seconds' of the fighters. Their role was to look after and tend their respective men between rounds.

Travelling Prize Fighters

The organisers of the prize fight were a small group of people who travelled the countryside with their own professional fighters. They would circulate by word of mouth that they would be coming to an area and that their fighter would challenge all comers to fight him for a golden Guinea (£1-1s-0d) A challenger would signify his intent to fight by throwing his hat into the ring.

London Rules

Although the Marquis of Queensbury rules were introduced in 1867, most boxing matches of the early 1800s were conducted under the 'London Rules', which were based on a set of rules laid down by an English boxer, Jack Broughton, in 1743. Under the London Prize Ring Rules, a round in a fight would last until a man went down. And there was a 30-second rest period between each round.

Following the rest period, each fighter would have eight seconds to come to 'come up to scratch'. This meant that they had to walk to a line scratched in the middle of the ring and be prepared to fight. The fight would end when one of the fighters could not stand, or could not make it to the scratch line.

Theoretically there was no limit to the number of rounds fought, so fights could go on for dozens of rounds. The fighters punched with bare hands and they could break their own

hands by attempting punches to their opponent's heads. This meant that fights tended to be long battles of endurance.

'Nobbings'

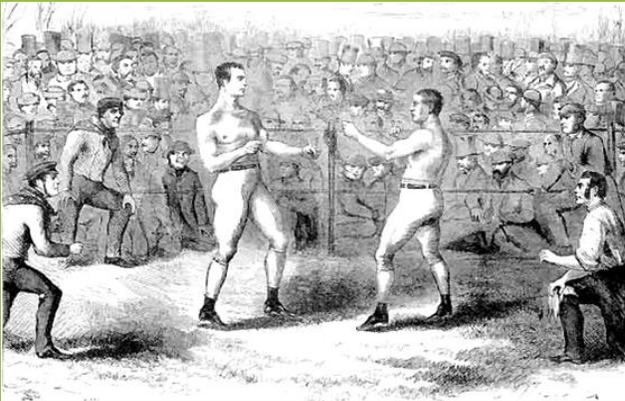
If the spectators thought that the fighters had fought well they would throw coins known as 'nobbings' into the ring to signify their appreciation. This money would be shared by the fighters and was a welcome addition to their income from the fight.

Challenge Accepted, Throw Your Hat In The Ring

The fight commenced when the fight promoter entered the ring and flashing a gold guinea in his hand challenged anybody present to fight his man - Jack Wallis . This challenge was met by Alfred Tabram's second by throwing a hat into the ring in acceptance of the challenge. As soon as the bookmakers saw both fighters stripped for action, they shouted out the odds on each man to win the fight to the assembled crowd.

The Fight

Both young men stripped to their waist and joined battle. After every round their seconds wiped off their sweat and any blood and gave them small sips of water and the bookmakers shouted out revised odds against each man for a win.



According to Henry Burden, a local spectator, he heard James Wallis say that he wanted to give up but he carried on. At about the tenth round, Wallis landed a hard blow on Alfred Tabram's chin. The two men grappled and fell with Alfred on the bottom. His second worked hard to try to get Alfred to come up to scratch but he was unconscious and it was obvious that he had been badly hurt. The fight was awarded to James Wallis.

The Death of Alfred Tabraham

Alfred's second and Henry, his older brother placed Alfred onto a horse drawn cart that took him to blacksmith, James Nicholl's house in Hagger Lane. There he was washed and they attempted to revive him. This didn't work so they took him to James Moseley's house in Cock & Castle Lane in Dalston, Hackney. They arrived at about 12 noon but Alfred was still unconscious and they called a doctor.

Doctor Charles Bewley arrived at 3.20pm. Alfred was still unconscious and could be roused. He found his head was slightly bruised with different protuberances about the head; and one rather severe blow under the chin. He died, without regaining consciousness later that evening just after 8pm.

The Coroner Orders A Post Mortem Examination

Afterwards, the Coroner instructed *George Duplex*, a Member of The Royal College of Physicians, to carry out a Post Mortem on the body of *Alfred Tabraham*, in order to try to determine the cause of death. In this Post Mortem examination Dr Duplex was assisted by Doctor Bewley who had attended the victim.

They found the brain to be generally healthy with some extravasation of fluid in the left hemisphere. On the front portion of the brain, on the left side, there was an escape of blood; about a teaspoonful. They found one external mark, a bruise. They concluded that the extravasation of the blood was the cause of death.

Following *Alfred Tabraham's* death, a number of people connected with the fight were charged with his death by manslaughter and were tried at the Old Bailey.

The following is an account of their trial at the Old Bailey on the 25th February 1861.

The Proceedings Of The Old Bailey

25th February 1861.

Reference Number: t18610225-243

JAMES WALLIS (17), CHARLES IMPEY (35), JOHN CUPIS (28), and HENRY NEIGHBOURS (41)

Charged with feloniously killing and slaying **Alfred Tabraham**. They were also charged on the Coroner's inquisition with the like offence.

MR. TAYLOR conducted the Prosecution.

JAMES MOSELEY .

I live at 12, Cock and Castle lane. On Sunday, 8th February, I went down into the neighbourhood of the Lea Bridge-road in a cart. The cart did not belong to me, only the horse. I did not come home in it; I walked. I saw *Tabraham*, the deceased man, there. He was brought home to my



house, by his brother's horse and cart I believe. I saw a horse and cart going along, and I followed it to the forest. I saw a fight, not on the marshes, but in the forest. I saw the prisoner Wallis there; he was fighting with young Tabraham, whose Christian name, I believe, is Alfred, not Henry Tabraham. I have seen the brother Henry Tabraham here to-day. I saw several rounds. There were so many people there, that you could not tell which was the best. They fell several times. I could not say which fell under. I did not see the end of it, or the beginning. I cannot say that I saw either of the other prisoners there. I saw one man wipe Wallis's face.

COURT.

Q. Did you see any of the other prisoners there?

A, IMPEY.

I did not see the man brought home. I saw him at home, after the fight, when I came home he was at my house. I believe he was then insensible, he could not speak. A doctor came to him. For what I know, it was between 11 and 12 o'clock in the morning that he was brought home. He died at 8 o'clock at night.

Cross-examined by MR. BEST.

Q. During the time you were there looking at the fight, was everything fair and straightforward?

A. Everything that I could see of it.

MARIA MOSELEY .

I am the wife of the last witness—the deceased was a distant relation of mine—he was brought to my house on the Sunday, between 11 and 12 o'clock. I was with him when he died.

HENRY BURDER .

I live at Wood Street, Walthamstow. I was present at the fight on the Forest, on Sunday morning, 27th January. I saw Wallis there. I saw eight or nine rounds, I should say. Wallis and the deceased were fighting. They fell at the end of each round. I cannot exactly say which generally fell underneath; one fell as much as the other. I also saw Neighbours and Impey. They were seconding the men; I could not tell which men. When the deceased or the prisoner was picked up, they washed him, and then both began again. I saw the last fall that took place. I believe Tabraham fell undermost then. I could not see what was the cause of that fall. I did not see any blow in particular on that occasion. He was taken afterwards to Nicholls', a blacksmith's shop, and washed.

Cross-examined by MR. BEST.

Q. What were you doing at this fight?

A. I was walking up Hagger Lane, it being Sunday morning; I saw a crowd, and went there. I was outside the crowd. I was not above ten yards from the ring where they were fighting. There were a lot of other persons between me and the ring. Two or three rounds before the fight was finished, I heard Wallis say that he wished to give up. I did not hear whether they would not let him stop or not. He went on again the next round.

Cross-examined by MR. RIBTON.

Q. Did you see Neighbours there?

A. Yes; I was not above ten yards from him. I am quite sure of that. I have always said so. I did not know Neighbours before. I saw him on the Wednesday afterwards at the coroner's inquest. The coroner pointed him out to me. He asked me if that man was one of the seconds, and then I said it was. I never said so before to-day, except to the coroner. I never said it before the Magistrate. He was not before the Magistrate. They told me his name. There were a great many people between me and him. I was standing on very high ground.

WILLIAM STRUTT .

I live at 29, King Henry Street, Back Road, Kingsland. On this Sunday morning I saw some horses and carts going along Shacklewell. I went with them. I saw two men fight in the Forest. I believe the deceased was one of the men. I did not know at the time who the other one was; I believe Wallis is the man. I did not see either of the other men there. I did not ride with the deceased in a cart.

HENRY TABRAHAM .

I live at Albion-place, Hornsey Road, and am a greengrocer. The dead man was my brother Alfred .I was at this fight on the Forest, on Sunday, 27th January. I was there at the second round. My brother and Wallis were fighting. Some of the other prisoners were there, but I could not swear to them. I have seen them before. I saw my brother fall to the ground at the last round. I did not see what caused that. I went home with my brother to Moseley's. It was about 1 o'clock when I got there.

CHARLES BEWLEY .

I am a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. On Sunday, 27th January, I was called to the house of Moseley, and saw the deceased man Tabraham. That was about 20 minutes past 3 o'clock. I found him perfectly insensible, in a state of collapse. I examined his body. I found his head slightly bruised; different protuberances about the head; and one rather severe blow under the chin—he was perfectly insensible, not to be roused up. He died that evening, about a little after 8 o'clock. I made a *post mortem* examination in conjunction with Mr. Duplex. I examined the head and state of the brain. I found the brain generally healthy; there was some amount of extravasation in the left hemisphere. On the front portion of the brain, on the left side, there was an escape of blood; about a teaspoonful. I found one external mark, a bruise, corresponding to that. That extravasation of the blood was the cause of death.

Cross-examined by MR. BEST.

Q. Might that blow be caused by the effect of a blow from a fist, or from a fall on the ground violently?

A. It might be caused by a fall.

COURT.

Q. Is it not more likely that the fall would cause it, than the blow?

A. I should think it was more likely than a blow.

Cross-examined by MR. RIBTON.

Q. Suppose a man carried home in a cart, put into the cart awkwardly; might it be caused by the striking of his head against any portion of the cart?

A. It might be. I think it quite possible.

GEORGE DUPLEX .

I reside at 60, Torrington Square, and am a member of the Royal College of Physicians, at Edinburgh. By order of the coroner I made a *post mortem* examination of the deceased man. I heard the last witness's evidence. There was a very considerable bruise on the left temple, which had disorganised the temporal muscle, completely lacerated it; and underneath the skull, corresponding with that locality, I found a quantity of blood extravasated, from the rupture of the vessel. Death unquestionably arose from that extravasation. The organs of the body generally were health. I infer, from what I saw, that the death of the man was occasioned by a fall.

Cross-examined by MR. BEST.

Q. Would such a fall as a senseless body being lifted into a cart, and then dropped down, would that cause death like **this**?

A. I should think that it would want a heavier blow than that.

Cross-examined by MR. RIBTON.

Q. If in any part of the transit his head might have been knocked against any portion of the cart, would that have caused concussion?

A. That would not have caused extravasation—I have no doubt at all myself as to the death being caused by the fall, and not by the blow of the fist, from the situation of the injury.

Verdict - NOT GUILTY .

The Trial Participants

Alfred Tabraham (Age 19) One of the two fighters and victim

James Wallis (Age 17) The other fighter. Probably a travelling prize fighter.

Charles Impey (Age 35) *Alfred Tabraham's* second for the fight who, presumably lived with the Moseley family.

Henry Neighbours (Age 41) James Wallis's second for the fight.

John Cupis (Age 28) Presumably connected with organizing the fight.

James & Maria Mosely. Were related to Alfred Tabraman. James was present at the fight and it was their house that Henry Tabraham took his brother after the fight.

Henry Burder. A local resident at Wood Street who was a spectator at the fight.

William Strutt. From King Henry Street, Dalston. A Spectator at the fight.

Henry Tabraham. Alfred's older brother. A Greengrocer from Hornsey Road.

Charles Bewley. A member of the Royal College of Surgeons who attended *Alfred Tabraham* after the fight and was present at the subsequent Post Mortem autopsy.

George Duplex. A member of the Royal College of Physicians who carried out the Post Mortem autopsy on *Alfred Tabraham*.

The Legal Personnel

Mr Taylor. Counsel for the prosecution

Mr Best. Counsel for the defendant

Mr Ribton. Counsel for the defendant

Haggar Lane. Was part of what is now Forest Road and ran from Hoe Street to the forest.

Walthamstow Mill. This was situated in one of the highest parts of Epping Forest on what is now Oak Hill Gardens at Mill Plain in Woodford Green.

Defence Counsel. On several occasions it was suggested that the fatal blow to Alfred Tabraham's head could have occurred by other means ie. By a fall or by banging his head while in the cart.

Some Notes



The fight venue would have had to be in a good sized flat area in the forest. I have inferred the place of the fight from the testimony of Henry Burders (A local man) and my knowledge of the forest in the area. Walthamstow Mill at Oak Hill was one of the highest parts of the forest and easily accessible from Haggar Lane. Critically, it was situated in an open part of the forest at Mill Plain.

We know that after the end of the fight, the fatally injured Alfred Tabraham was first taken to the blacksmith's home in Haggard Lane and then to Cock & Cart Lane in Dalston where they arrived between 11-12am. This would suggest that the fight took place no later than 9am in the morning!



Although bare knuckle prize fighting was illegal, many authorities turned a 'blind eye' to it providing it was carried out somewhere that was not a public frequented place. This is why Epping Forest was the venue for the fight because although not generally frequented by the public it was relatively easily accessible.

This would explain the surprisingly early time of the morning that the fight must have taken place on a winter Sunday. It would have been held on a Sunday because this was the only day in the week that ordinary working men had free and in winter because there would not be the number of east London day trippers that came to the forest in summer. It is a testament to the popularity of prize fighting that so many people attended so early on a Sunday morning.

Bill Bayliss

November 2014

Sources

The primary source for the article is:

<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=t18610225-243&div=t18610225-243&terms=walthamstow|1861#highlight>

I also consulted:

<http://historyofbkb.weebly.com/the-history-of-bkb.html>

<http://www.historyoffighting.com/bare-knuckle-boxing-champions.php>

Various Ancestry.UK records