

enslaved) places his hands on his knees and crouches for a better look. Other figures include Cribb's second, John Gully, and his bottle-holder Joe Ward. Note also the two pickpockets in the foreground - one male and one female - helping themselves from the distracted spectators; Thistleton residents perhaps?

Why Thistleton?

Bare knuckle boxing matches, though technically illegal in the 18th and 19th centuries, were hugely popular spectator events attracting big crowds from every echelon of society. Large sums of money were bet on the outcome of the matches. The boxers were sponsored by wealthy supporters, giving them semi-professional status with handsome amounts of prize money raised by subscription from the boxing faithful, 'The Fancy' as they were called at the time.

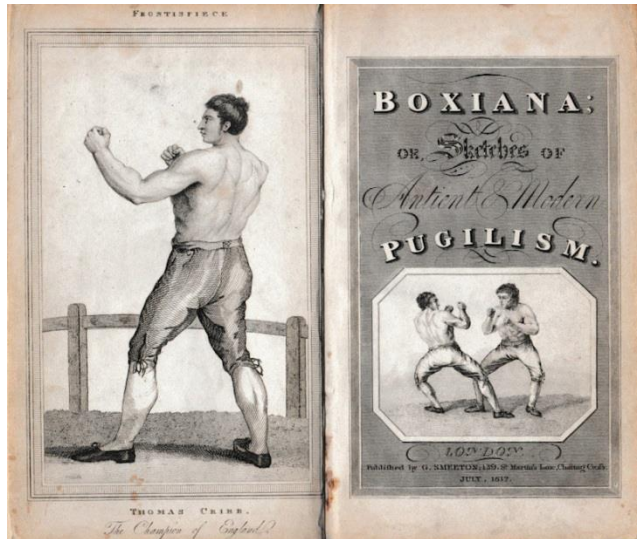
The boxing matches were often held in fields where county borders met in order that if magistrates turned up to stop the fight, the combatants and supporters could hop over the county border and avoid arrest. Magistrates or the law men of the time only had jurisdiction within the county where they were employed.



The position of Thistleton Gap just before the turning to Wymondham

Thistleton Gap lies on the border between Leicestershire, Rutland and Lincolnshire. Today the area is known as Cribb's Meadow and is an important nature reserve administered by the Leics & Rutland Wildlife Trust (Hall, 2021).

Pierce Egan (1772-1849) was a journalist, sportswriter and commentator on popular culture in the 19th century who wrote *Boxiana or Sketches of Pugilism*, a set of volumes about the bare-knuckle boxing matches of the day. A devoted follower of boxing, almost certainly he was present at the Cribb/Molineaux match at Thistleton Gap in Sep 1811. Cone (1982), suggests that he wrote knowledgeably about the art and science of boxing and had personal knowledge of the boxers of his day and that his books are generally regarded as accurate and authoritative. He is therefore an excellent source of material to explain what happened at Thistleton on that momentous day in our history.



What must this event have been like for the residents of Thistleton?

Presumably, rumours about the match must have circulated in the weeks before the event. The population of Thistleton in was 150 and most of them may have watched the match that day. Not least, it must have been an opportunity to make money from selling refreshments and offering to secure good positions from which to watch the match. The farmer who owned the field where the match took place was paid £50, a substantial sum of money for the time. Unsurprisingly, there is evidence that all the towns and villages along the Great North Road did very well from this exceptional event.

Thousands of people must have travelled through Thistleton in the days and nights before the match using Fosse Lane or Pear Tree Lane to locate the village and the field at Thistleton Gap. To get a sense of what it would have been like, imagine thousands of people walking or riding along Main Street outside Thistleton Church today

Contemporary reports record that nearly 20,000 people witnessed the match and that a significant number were aristocracy and the 'principal Corinthians of the State':

'Never was the sporting world so much interested, and for twenty miles within the seat of action not a bed could be obtained on the preceding night; and by six o'clock the next morning, hundreds were in motion to get a good place by the stage, which even at that early period proved a difficult task.' (Egan 2006)

Egan (2006) also records that no law men tried to break up this fight - they were probably all keen to attend - and that in the weeks leading up to the match there was much competition, albeit secretly, from towns in the midlands to host the event.

The Match

As so often happens, after all the hype and excitement, the actual event was all over rather quickly. Shortly after 12.00 noon Cribb climbed into the ring to a rapturous welcome. He was the undoubted favourite. England in 1811 was still rocking with triumphalism from the victory at Trafalgar and Cribb, a superstar of the moment, was seen as the epitome of an English hero. Molineaux, American and a very real threat to Cribb's title, received a more muted welcome from the crowd and had to be encouraged by his seconds to hide his nervousness and smile at the expectant throng. With the boxers' colours, tied to their respective corners, blue and white for Cribb and crimson and orange for Molineaux, the fight got underway.

Cribb definitely didn't have it all his own way, and there were several sticky moments for his supporters. Molineaux drew blood above Cribb's right eye in the second round and put him on the canvas in round five. However, Cribb's greater strength, size and level of fitness saw Molineaux beaten to the ground in round nine unable to get to his feet with his jaw broken in two places.

The financial rewards for the victors were great. Captain Barclay, Cribb's trainer and sponsor, received £10,000 for the Thistleton Gap Match. Cribb, as the winner, received £600 whilst poor Molineaux the paltry sum of £50 after the kindly referee, Gentleman Jackson, organised a whip round from the assembled great and good, (Egan 2006).

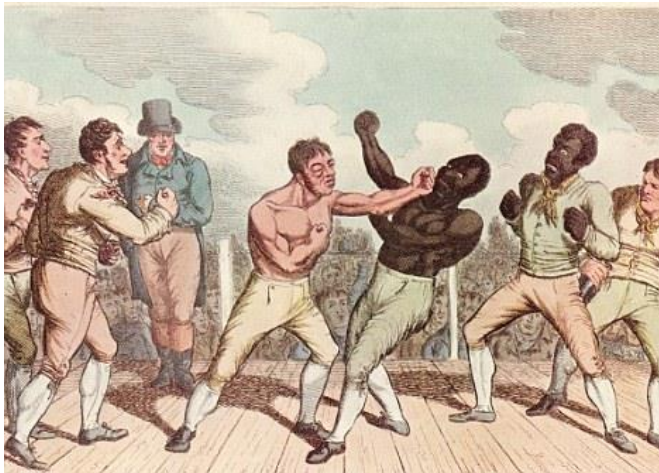
News travelled fast with the outcome of the contest having reached London by the evening of the event.

‘So much interest was felt in London concerning the issue of this contest....that on Saturday night an immense crowd assembled in front of Richmond’s house The Prad and Swimmer (Public House) to enquire the particulars, which so completely blocked up the street that the house was shut up at an early hour’ (Egan 2006)

Cribb returned to London a hero to be feasted and feted for many days and nights.

‘On the Champion’s return home in a barouche and four horses, decorated with blue ribbons, on the Monday following....he was cheered through all the towns he passed, after the manner of an officer bearing despatches of a victory, so much was it felt by the people of England’ (Egan, 2006).

Molineaux was cared for in Grantham; his broken bones mended, he returned to fight another day.



Author’s Notes

The Cribb/Molineaux championship boxing match at Thistleton Gap has been written about extensively from as early as a few weeks after the event right up to the present day. This Thistleton Story has only touched on the events of that momentous day from the perspective of what Thistleton residents might have witnessed.

For those who want a blow-by-blow account of the fight and the one preceding it which so nearly went Molineaux’s way, Pierce Egan’s *Boxiana* is a fascinating read. Recent articles have hinted strongly that Molineaux was

cheated out of the championship by the bigotry and prejudices of the time that wouldn't have seen a man of colour take the British Championship. Leafe's 2010 article published just before the 200-year anniversary of the match is something to think about.

More about the main characters

The stories of the four main characters of this tale are fascinating in their own right, providing background information of their lives and times that puts the importance of the Thistleton Gap Match into perspective. For that reason, some information has been included in this leaflet.

The boxers' trainers and sponsors, Tom Richmond and Captain Barclay were incredible athletes of their day, Barclay was known best for his incredible feat of pedestrianism, 1000 miles in 1000 hours, Peter Radford's book tells all.

Tom Cribb 1781- 1848: The Black Diamond



Tom Cribb was born in Gloucestershire in 1781. Apprenticed to a bell hanger from the age of 14, Tom's considerable size and strength, (5ft 10inches tall and around 14 stone) was developed in the dockyards and at sea. Retiring from the Royal Navy he became a coal porter at Wapping and was known by his nickname of The Black Diamond. His rise to British Champion was meteoric and during the early 19th century Tom Cribb was one of the most famous names in the country. In the age of Napoleonic aggression, Tom Cribb was seen as a 'patriotic exemplar of the virtues of strength courage and fortitude' (Williams 2015).

Undoubtedly a formidable adversary, Cribb owed his victory over Molineaux at Thistleton Gap to Capt Barclay. Perhaps realising how close Cribb came to losing the previous contest, Barclay spirited Cribb away to his home in

Scotland to endure a punishing training schedule for the three months prior to the match. Cribb emerged 'light, firm and free from complaint' vowing that he would sooner fight Molineaux any time than undergo another such a training regime again (Egan 2006).

Allegedly only having only ever lost one match, Cribb was a boxing superstar between the years 1805 – 1821. He semi-retired soon after the Thistleton Gap fight and returned to his work as a coal merchant then later as a Tavern Keeper finally ending up at the Union Arms in Panton Street which he had to sell in 1839 to pay creditors. He, along with other prize fighters, was given the honour of serving as a page for the coronation of George IV in 1821.

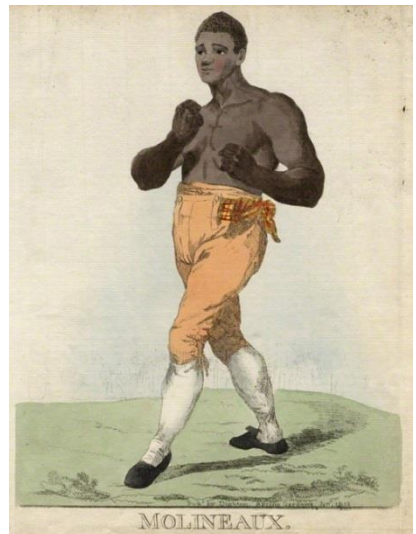


Remembered as placid, condescending and obliging and possessing a forbearance of temper, Egan (2006), Cribb lived a long life for the time – he died aged 67 at the home of his son who was a baker in Woolwich High Street (Cavendish 1998).

One of Tom Cribb's Taverns in Piccadilly London today

Tom Molineaux 1784 - 1818

Tom Molineaux was born into slavery on a Virginian plantation. He was taught bare knuckle boxing by his father and fought other slaves to entertain the plantation owners. His owner eventually rewarded him by giving him his freedom and \$500 (Hall, 2021). Feeling there was a chance for fame and fortune in other places, he used his winnings to sail for England in 1809. He must have known of Bill Richmond's exploits and keen to emulate his success he persuaded Richmond to train him. After winning several bouts in the UK, in 1810 he challenged England's



undefeated champion Tom Cribb for the England Title.

Molineaux and Cribb met for the first time on Dec 18th 1810 at East Grinstead in Sussex where the match, fought in the pouring rain over a gruelling 39 rounds, very nearly went Molineaux's way.

Greeted by a partisan crowd, a band struck up Yankee Doodle Dandy and then Heart of Oak, the Royal Navy's official marching song, as the two men took their place in the ring (Leafe 2010). As the two boxers squared up it became obvious that the home crowd were determined that no foreigner was going to take away Cribb's crown. In the age of Nelson and Waterloo

'The honour of the country was at stake, and no boxer ever entered the ring with so many wishes for his success as Tom Cribb.' (Egan 2006)

Whilst prepared to cheer Molineaux along as the two traded blow for blow, things changed in the eighteenth round when Cribb began to tire. Egan, (2006) tells us that at the beginning of the nineteenth round both boxers' faces were dreadfully beaten, their features undistinguishable. Somehow, Molineaux got Cribb against the ropes so neither boxer could move. Whilst the umpires deliberated how to untangle the pair, some 200 spectators rushed into the ring to try and free Cribb, in the process of which Molineaux's finger(s) of his left hand were severely injured maybe even broken.

Cribb went on to win the contest but Molineaux was quick to call for a rematch citing the terrible weather as the reason he had lost. Unfortunately, Molineaux was master of his later downfall. Fully enjoying the celebrity status that the championship brought him, whilst Cribb was undergoing Barclay's punishing training schedule in Scotland, Molineaux was sampling the delights that London had to offer. When the two met at Thistleton Gap, Egan (2006) recorded there was no doubt concerning the superiority of the combatants, Cribb winning the match in nineteen minutes and 10 seconds.

After the Thistleton match, Molineaux was dropped by Richmond who had become disillusioned with his protégé's failures both in and out of the ring. Without a proper sponsor Molineaux began to slide into decline. He continued to have some success, moving to Ireland in 1815 where he was eagerly welcomed into the Irish boxing scene. However, he developed a rising addiction to drink and womanising and died in relative poverty at the age of 34 most likely from liver failure, a sad end to a man who for a brief moment in history was as famous as Napoleon.

Bill Richmond: The Black Terror



On 19 July 1821, King George IV was crowned at Westminster Abbey in a lavish ceremony. Among the 18 ushers - all of whom were bare-knuckle boxers dressed as pages - was a 57-year-old man with frizzy white hair and dark skin. His name was Bill Richmond, and he was one of London's best-known sportsmen.

Richmond was Molineaux's trainer for the Thistleton Gap match and a hugely successful boxer of the period. Freed from slavery by Hugh Percy (later the Duke of Northumberland) during the period of the American War of Independence he was one of the most respected and

accomplished boxers of the era and possibly Britain's first black sports star.

Enrolled into service with the British Army at the tender age of 13 or 14 years, Richmond's talents must have extended far beyond just his ability to use his fists as on completion of his period of service, Hugh Percy paid for his passage to England and set him up with an apprenticeship as a cabinet maker in York, a profession he followed for many years.

Richmond married a local girl in York and seemed to have settled to family life. Contemporary reports suggest that he was noticed for 'going smart' and dressing in fine bright clothes which attracted unwelcome racial prejudice. Defending his honour and that of his family with his fists he came to the attention of a young aristocrat by the name of Lord Camelford who had a passion for gambling and sport. Travelling around the country with Camelford, Richmond became increasingly involved in the boxing scene and began to take part regularly in boxing bouts with the full support of his aristocratic sponsor. Following Lord Camelford's death in a duel, he settled in London and turned professional at the age of 41 years with some success soon becoming known as the 'Black Terror'.

Contemporary reports paint Bill Richmond as a highly intelligent and communicative individual who shunned the excesses of his contemporaries, eating well and drinking moderately. Aged 50, he apparently looked 15 years younger, weighing in at about 12 stone 12 pounds, some two stones lighter

than his average opponent. He earned his epithet by his 'hitting and getting away and dealing out severe punishment with his left hand' (Egan 2006).

Despite his prowess, Richmond was heavily defeated by Tom Cribb in 1805 just days before the Battle of Trafalgar. Realising that his age was now against him, he retired from the ring, ran his own tavern and gym and became a highly successful trainer and boxing promoter with royalty and celebrities of the day such as Lord Byron amongst his clients.

It is likely that Molineaux knew of his reputation and sought him out on his arrival in London. Richmond saw the potential in this herculean giant and also almost certainly saw an opportunity to get even with his nemesis Tom Cribb. He agreed to both protect and train him, kindness that was later ill repaid by Molineaux who became lazy and arrogant.

Following Molineaux's defeat at Thistleton Gap, Richmond cut ties with his pupil, but continued boxing into his 60's when eventually the money and sponsorship dried up. He sold the tavern and sadly his later years were spent in poverty, his wife and family eventually ending up in the workhouse. It is likely that he spent his final years propping up the bar in Tom Cribb's pub in the Haymarket – the two having finally reconciled their differences once their boxing days were over. He died on Dec 28th 1829 aged 66.

Capt Robert Barclay Allardice of Ury 1779 - 1854



Capt Barclay is an important figure in the story of the Thistleton boxing match as he was Cribb's trainer and sponsor and undoubtedly had much to do with Cribb's success against Molineaux on September 28th 1811.

Capt Barclay was a renowned athlete of the early 19th century whose most momentous feat was to walk 1000 miles in a thousand hours for 1000 guineas, an achievement that gave him national acclaim. The sport of pedestrianism (race walking) was almost as popular as boxing and horse racing in the 18th and 19th centuries. Almost all classes of society walked far greater distances than we

do today both for employment reasons and recreation and placing bets on the outcome of such athletic contests was a popular pastime.

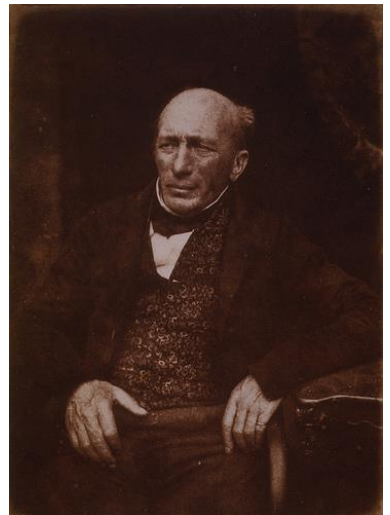
So titled for his service in the British army, Capt Barclay came from a family of Scottish aristocrats. It was to his family home in Ury in Kincardineshire that he took Tom Cribb in July of 1811 to get him fighting fit for his rematch against Molineaux. Cribb arrived in Ury on 7th July weighing 16 stone. Egan, (2006) records that

‘from his mode of living in London he had become corpulent, big-bellied, full of gross humours and short-breathed; and it was with difficulty that he could walk 10 miles’.

The training regime that Cribb endured under Barclay’s direction was challenging in the extreme. Firstly, he was purged with a course of physic, presumably to remove the gross humours! Soon after this, he commenced regular walking exercise of 10-12 miles per day; this was interspersed with periods of running at top speed. Gradually the walking was increased to upwards of 20 miles a day with regular sessions of ‘sweats’, the 18th century version of a sauna. Cribb’s weight was reduced to 13 stone 5 pounds, and he could walk upwards of 30 miles per day with ease (Egan 2006). All this was accomplished on a diet of oatmeal and grilled meat. Vegetables, dairy and bread, unless it was course unleavened bread, were all banned as was alcohol and sex.

On the night before the match Capt Barclay, Tom Cribb and the entire entourage stayed at the Black Bull in North Witham. Radford (2001) records that it was Barclay who negotiated the hire of a field at Thistleton Gap for the seriously high fee of £50. Up early on the morning of the match, Barclay ensured the erection of the ring was satisfactory and then returned to the Black Bull to supervise Cribb’s breakfast of two boiled eggs, (Radford, 2001).

The victory at Thistleton was as much Barclays’ as Cribb’s. Many of the hand coloured engravings produced in the days following the match pictured them both as national heroes. They returned to London in the days following the match to enjoy much feasting and celebration.



Capt Barclay in later life

Capt Barclay led a full and very active life continuing to be involved in all kinds of sport to the end of his days. He outlived many of his great friends and boxing heroes including Gentleman Jackson, the referee for the Thistleton Gap match, and Tom Cribb. He died at Ury in 1854 at the age of 74 following a kick to the head from a pony.

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