

John Gully— Butcher, Prize Fighter, Publican, Gambler, M.P. and Durham Pit Owner

One associates the great Durham coal owners of the last century with the landed gentry and aristocracy, Lord Londonderry, Lord Lambton, Lord Hawden, Sir William Chaytor etc.; the names trip off the tongue like a page from Debrett. Yet one of the most rich and venturesome, certainly the most colourful, was plain Mr John Gully, son of a humble butcher and one-time champion prize-fighter of England.

Gully made a second fortune from sinking pits in the county at Hetton, Thornley, Trimdon and Wingate. His first fortune came from his manifold sporting activities. It can truly be said that no man in the history of English sport had a more remarkable career.

Gully was born to be a butcher, was by natural tastes a prize-fighter, successfully a publican, professional gambler, a Member of Parliament and finally a great Durham colliery owner. Such was the varied course of this energetic and successful career of John Gully.

In Prison

Gully was born at Wick in Gloucester, on August 21st 1773. His father moved to Bristol, where young John entered the family butchering business. His father, however, died when he was still in his teens and the business quickly declined, young John caring more for the prize-ring than the shop. The business failed completely and at the age of 21, John Gully found himself lodged in the King's Bench prison for debtors in London

A biographer at this time describes him as being " a fine, strong young man, over 6 feet high with rather an open and ingenious countenance, rather an innocent tip-tilted nose and beautiful hands of which all his life he was extremely proud."

In prison he now had nothing else to do but keep himself in condition with the game of "fives", the athletic debtor's one relaxation, and with a pair of Broughton boxing gloves which he still possessed.

Honoured

Gully's fame as a prize-fighter had preceded him and he was honoured one day by a visit from the celebrated Hen Pearce, "The Game Chicken", champion prize-fighter of England and a fellow Bristolian.

The host and visitor had a set-to with the gloves and although good humour prevailed, as it always did with Gully, he nevertheless made Pearce go all the way and got in some really telling blows.

Every sporting public house in London rang with the news of the bout and of the new star from Bristol. Mr Fletcher-Reid a great patron of the prize-ring visited Gully and saw in the youthful giant a future champion. He promptly paid off his debts and took him to Virginia Water for training. The pair aimed their sights high. A challenge was issued to Pearce for a title match for 500 guineas. The match came off at Hailsham in Sussex on October 8th 1805, 13 days before Trafalgar. In fact it was the very day that Nelson wrote urgently to the Admiralty beseeching reinforcements.

The great heart of the English people, however, was more interested in the annihilation of the Chicken or Gully - Cadiz was a long way off and one Englishman could lick three Frenchmen any day.

Hailsham was besieged for the fight, peers of the realm rubbing shoulders with costermongers. The Duke of Clarence afterwards King William IV rode over from Brighton and stood up in his stirrups at the most exciting moments. It was one of his topics of conversation for the rest of his life, garnishing with many a "God Dammy!"

The fight proved to be a terrific affair, Gully failing to come up to scratch at the end of the 64th round. Both men were dreadfully battered. Pearce shook hands and exclaimed "You are a good fellow, John Gully; you are the only man who has ever stood up to me." After the retirement of Hen Pearce, Gully was matched with Bob Gregson, the "Lancashire Giant," for the vacant title.

Champion

They fought at Newmarket on October 14th 1807 and after a terrific maul of fluctuating fortunes which lasted for 36 rounds, Gully was declared champion, Gregson being carried unconscious from the ring.

A return match took place at Sir John Sebright's Park in Hertfordshire.

The whole park was covered in onlookers. The local populace, when they saw the strange invaders, fancied the French had landed and called out the volunteers.

Both men wore silk stockings and white breeches and fought without shoes. The fight lasted 28 rounds and was of one and a quarter hours duration.

Once again Gregson was badly battered, and Gully's hand was raised in victory. From the ringside Gully announced his retirement and at the same time got in "a commercial". He told his patrons that he had now taken a tavern, The Plough, in Carey Street, and would be pleased to see them there. He was then driven back to Town by Lord Barrymore.

As Punter

- After a few years as a tavern keeper where he earned the greatest respect, Gully went in for turf speculation. He proved to be such a good judge that in a short time he became quite rich. He bought Hare Park, one of the stateliest homes in Yorkshire, and here some of the greatest in the land were entertained on equal terms by John Gully Esquire.

Gully became famous as a spirited breeder and owner. He was appointed Official Betting Agent to H.R.H. The Prince of Wales, later George IV, and he made a great deal of money for betting on commissions for various noblemen and gentlemen connected with Newmarket.

Gully became the owner of some of the finest racehorses of the day, and the readiness and good humour with which at Doncaster in 1827 he paid out in losses to the tune of £40,000 when Mildred beat his celebrated Mameluke, raised him high among the most honourable members of the turf.

Successes

- His classic successes were the Derby in 1846 and 1854 with Pyrrhus and Andover, the Oaks in 1846 with Mendicant, the St. Leger in 1832 with Margrove and the 2000 Guineas in 1854 with Hermit.

In 1832 Mr. John Gully was elected to the first Reformed Parliament being returned as Liberal M.P. for Pontefract. He also represented the same borough in the next election.

Despite his great sporting triumphs, however, Gully is best remembered in County Durham as an enterprising colliery owner and venturesome sinker of

new pits. He also withdrew from all direct gambling and invested a large proportion of his considerable fortune in the coal development of County Durham. His famous lilac jacket was seen less and less on the turf. The Hetton Company was formed to work coal in the famous Durham Royalty.

Gully bought a large number of shares at a comparatively low price. The original speculation was considered a hazardous, even foolhardy one, as before that time geologists believed that the quantity of coal under the Permian strata was so poor as to hardly worth working.

In With a Chance

Gully's partners in the venture were Capt. Archibald Cochrane, of Eppleton Hall, a younger brother of the celebrated Lord Cochrane, afterwards Earl of Dundonald, whose daughter Lord Cochrane married, Mr Baker of Elemore Hall and subsequently Mr. Nicholas Wood. The latter went to Hetton to manage the colliery in 1844. Robert Stephenson was chief engineer of the company. His father George Stephenson was also employed. Thus the partners were in with a chance.

" We will show 'em whether we cannot make Wallsend coal," said Gully. The partners did so. They obtained a higher price on the London market than the original Wallsends did.

The Hetton venture succeeded beyond the partner's wildest hopes. Gully held on to his shares until they showed a huge profit then he sold out. In 1835 he joined another ambitious speculation, the sinking of the Thornley pits. His chief allies were Sir William Chaytor, who had married his sister in law, Mr Thomas Wood and Mr John Burrell.

There was no difficulty in winning the colliery, but labour relations were difficult from the start. Gully was a frequent visitor to the colliery and must have enjoyed the tussles with the colliers and the newly-formed Miners' Union. He maintained his interest in Thornley until it was sold to a liability company. Again he made a huge profit.

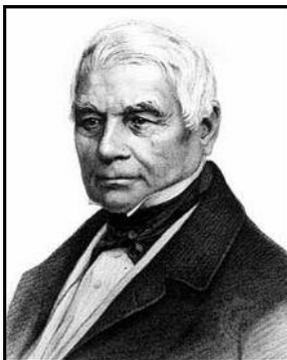
Gully also entered partnership with Wood and Burrell in the sinking of Trimdon Colliery - the old pit and also in the sinking of Trimdon Grange. On January 3rd 1861 he paid The Right Hon. John Hobart, Baron Howden, £20,000 for the Wingate Estate and Colliery and remained the sole owner until the day of his death.

Erect at 78

Gully moved to lovely Cocken Hall on the banks of the River Wear immediately below Finchale Abbey. In his old age a biographer tells us he was still full of spirit. At 78 he was still as erect as ever and his mind was as clear and good as it had ever been.

He was still going racing in 1860, for at that year's 2000 Guineas he met Tom Sayers, fresh from his battle with Heenan. He introduced Sayers to Sir Tatton Sykes, who rose to the occasion. "I shall now go home and sleep sound", he said, "for I have shaken hands with the two bravest men in England."

Only in the last few months of his life did Gully's great strength fail him and it was then that he moved into 7, North Bailey, Durham City. He died there at the age of 79 on March 3rd 1863. He was buried with great honour at Ackworth Park, Pontefract. The mute bell tolled. The Mayor and Corporation from Durham went to the funeral and the carriages of half of Yorkshire and Durham drove in the procession to pay their tribute to John Gully Esquire, champion of England. Gully was married twice and had 24 children, 12 to each wife, - a truly remarkable man.



John Gully in old age



John Gully as a young man



John Gully in his prime. Taken from an old sporting print



John Gully's Graveyard

This small private graveyard, at the eastern end of St Cuthbert's Churchyard, Ackworth, is the resting place of John Gully and some of his family. There is no access to the small graveyard, which is locally reputed not to be hallowed ground, from St Cuthbert's Church or the Churchyard.

On the south wall of Ackworth Church is a memorial to **Robert Gully**, son of John Gully

'Sacred to the memory of Robert Gully, son of John Gully, Esq., who, after suffering the horrors and privations of shipwreck on the Island of Formosa, in the brig Ann, on the night of the 10th of March, 1842, in which vessel he was passenger; he was, together with the rest of the crew, taken prisoner by the Chinese, and suffered the greatest privations and hardships, which he bore with the most exemplary fortitude, manly and cheerful resignation, to about the 13th of August, when he, together with about 300 other British subjects, was most barbarously murdered in cold blood by the Chinese authorities, in the town of Tywan Foo, aged 28 years. He was endeared to a large circle of friends for his manly virtues and kindness of heart. This tablet was erected by a bereaved and afflicted father.'

(Article By J.C.Kirk 1966)