WFHS Watkins Family History Society

HAROLD WATKINS
A Forest of Dean Champion

by Diane Watkins



For years my father-in-law, Harold Watkins, kept in his old desk in the cottage where he lived a wallet with some newspaper cuttings of his boxing days. On his death in 1965 they passed to my husband Geoff who kept them until the late 1980s and then gave them to Ruth Hirst who was compiling a file on Bream and its people at the time. It was while looking through one of Ruth's files that I came across these cuttings and asked if I could copy them down as, although Ruth had filed them away very carefully they were very brown, worn and unreadable in places.

Harold Baden Watkins was born on November 6th, 1900, the second son of Richard and Clara Watkins of Bream. From the age of 13 he was working at the coalface of the Princess Royal Colliery and at the age of 16 was alongside his 44 year old father when he died of a heart attack. Harold was left as the only breadwinner with a family of seven including his mother to provide for. This was in the middle of the Great War and the eldest son, Stanley was in the army. It must have been exceedingly hard and it is little wonder that Harold was willing to try anything to help feed the family. He could not have been very old when he started using his fists to earn a crust. He continued to work down the pit but by 1921 had become a bookmakers runner for a Mr. Tommy Hicks of Whitecroft before setting up on his own as a Bookmaker and General Dealer before 1925.

In those days it was quite normal for boxers of some note to stage exhibition bouts and tournaments with the help of backers. They would travel around the country and challenge the local lads to a few rounds in the ring. It was at just such a tournament in Cinderford that Harold really made a start on his boxing career, the challenger being Harvey Blanch, a well known Hereford boxer. Completely untrained Harold stepped into the ring and what happened from then on is related below. Unfortunately the dates of the various newspaper cuttings have not been recorded but all are prior to 1925.

Ambition of Harold Watkins

'The boxing tournament which was recently staged at Cinderford has imbued boxers in the Forest of Dean with the desire to go in for the game seriously, and all that is required to further popularise the sport is someone to come along to give the aspirants a helping hand. At present there is little to encourage the lads, who at present have to make their own camps. What is really needed is a gymnasium where the boxers can meet with someone to instruct them, and if this could only be done there is no reason why the Forest should not be able to supply the boxing world with good men.

A few lads who have shown some promise are Harold Watkins (Bream) Binkworth and Williams (Lydney) Mike Jordan and Meek (Drybrook) and Gardener (Ruardean). Williams has thrown out a challenge to Harvey Blanch Hereford, but so far it has not been accepted. All these boxers are anxious to persue the game but are handicapped through lack of training and an instructor.

Harold Watkins is a lad of distinct promise, and his display against Harvey Blanch proved that he is a boxer of no mean ability. He is exceptionally smart in ringcraft and all that is required to make him a class boxer is someone to take him in hand. Watkins heart is in the game, and he is anxious to get into a good school. He is 9st. 8lb. and is preparing to meet the best novice at his weight in Gloucestershire or South Wales for a small sidestake and the best purse offered.

Contests at Chepstow

One of the finest boxing entertainments ever staged at Chepstow will take place as announced in the Public Hall on Monday, December 18th. The promoters have on a 20 round contest between Charlie Berry of Newport and Seaman Cudland of Abertillery for £25 aside, who have met twice previously. So evenly matched where the men that the decision in each case was a draw and the local organisers are extremely fortunate in being able to secure a third meeting for the benefit of Chepstow and District sportsmen. Billy Hobbs the Chepstow lad of whom Mr. Jim Smith spoke so highly of recently will oppose Fletcher of Caldicott, over 10 rounds, and other contests will include Kid Love (Chepstow) v Young Watkins (Bream) for the 9st. Championship of the Forest of Dean, F. Kicke (Chepstow) v Steve Hutchings (Caldicott) and Johnny Malia (Chepstow) v Jimmy Owen (Chepstow).

Watkins was obviously successful in the above bout as a following edition of the newspaper reported:

Blanch v Gough fight fixed:

At the Drill hall, Hereford, the 29th march, the match between Harvey Blanch the Hereford boxer and Trevor Gough of Ludlow, has been fixed up and will take place on the above date. In the other fight over ten rounds Harold Watkins (Light-weight Champion of the Forest of Dean) will meet a hard fighter in George Jones Hereford. Jones who was in the late Jim Driscoll's school in France is an unknown quality and should give Watkins a rough time.

Caerphilly

.. in the forthcoming tournament at the Virginia Park, Caerphilly on Saturday next....

Others who will participate include Clarence Scantlebury (Caerphilly), who is to meet Harold Watkins (Forest of Dean). Scantlebury is a coloured boxer, and has fought scores of fights. He is a member of the Caerphilly Athletic Club, and is constantly training with a view to important future engagements.

Watkins is recognized as the champion of the Forest of Dean, so this contest will certainly prove a needle-bout.

Chepstow Competitors

Billy Hobbs (Chepstow) was to have boxed Harold Watkins (Bream), but had been called to the National Sporting Club. Watkins was opposed by Stoker Barradine (Gloucester), who flogged vigourously but was easily out-pointed. Watkins who was lighter by 8lbs., repeatedly jabbed Barradine with his left and drove him to the ropes time after time. Barradine gave up in the fifth round.

Shoeing Smith Davies (Monmouth) boxed a couple of interesting two-round exhibition contests with P.C. Trevor Llewellyn (Heavyweight Champion of Wales) and Bill Wagner (Gloucester).

Jimmy Owen (Chepstow) got the upper hand of Seaman Lyons (London) in the second round, Lyons being saved only by the bell. He came up for the third round, but Owen out pointed him against the ropes and landed punch after punch until he surrendered.

The Forest of Dean

Although boxing as regards contests, is at present a "dead letter" in the Forest of Dean, there seems to be plenty of interest to the noble art. Since the last tour, which was staged by Mr. Harvey Blanch, Hereford, there has been a certain amount of opposition to contests being held, but judging by what's heard, there is still plenty of scope for enterprising promoters. There is talent galore in the Forest and any promoter desiring to stage contests would not have the least difficulty in finding local lads only too willing to don the mitts.

The local lightweight Harold Watkins (Bream), described as the lightweight Champion of the Forest of Dean, has just had a contest in Gloucester. He was down to meet Billy Hobbs (Chepstow) the promising young lightweight but owing to Hobbs being called to the N.S.C. he was unable to appear, and he was deputised by Stoker Barradine (Gloucester). Barradine fought savagely and tried hard for a knockout but Watkins punished him with a series of short arm jabs and compelled him to retire in the fifth round.

Watkins is greatly improving, and no doubt we shall hear more of him in the future. He does not seem to get the number of contests he ought to; but if he goes on improving great things

are expected of him by his Forest of Dean supporters.

The above two reports appear to refer to the same contest held at Gloucester.

Contests at Monmouth

Two boxing contests were staged in the attractions at Monmouth Sports Club Carnival and Fete on Thursday night....

...The boxing match between Cecil Mackie, Monmouth, and Watkins, Bream, which took place at Little Chippenham on Thursday in connection with the Monmouth Sports Club was a keen affair. The men had met before at Monmouth when it was well remembered the local man gained the verdict. On Thursday however, the Bream boxer reversed the decision. The contest which was of ten rounds was exciting but not particularly scientific. Mackie started strongly and in the first round got in several good blows to the face with the left hand and Watkins failed to retaliate. The second round however was decidedly in favour of the Bream man for he frequently took the initiative. Third round was on similar lines, but in the forth Mackie had much the better of the exchanges and in addition to the face he got in several good blows to the body. The fifth round was very even but Watkins scored more frequently in the sixth. Mackie fought back strongly in the seventh and eighth rounds, but in the last two meetings his opponent must have scored more points, and the referees decision went in favour of Watkins.

The Challenge

Harold Watkins (Bream), is prepared to box Harvey Blanch (Hereford) over any number of rounds at 9st. 9lbs or 10st. Watkins would also like a return bout with Mackie of Monmouth. Two previous fights between Mackie and Watkins have resulted in a win each so a 'rubber' match would be of great interest. Watkins is also ready to meet any of the Welsh light-weights and would accept any reasonable offer in the way of a purse.

A reply to the above to Mr. D.W. Davies, Agincourt Hotel, Monmouth, or through these columns of this newspaper will lead to business.



The following reply was dated August 10th, 1923:

Harvey Blanch, Hereford, would like to know if Harold Watkins, Bream, wants something for nothing. Blanch is to bet £50 to £25 and a know-out in the deal. I should think Watkins and his backers take me for a fool to bet 2 to 1 and a knock-out over 10 rounds.

Come along Watkins and your backers, have a straight bet 15 round fight £50 to your £25, surely you don't want anything better! I should be pleased if you would put in next weeks paper if you want to fight or not.

Seeing Harold Watkins, Bream, is prepared to take £40 to £25 that Blanch does not stop him inside 15 rounds. Blanch is quite ready to bet the odds; one consideration that articles are signed on putting down of stake money. If Watkins and his backers will write Hop-Pole Hotel, Hereford, arrangements can be made for putting down of stakes. Stakeholder, and signing of articles etc.; Harvey Blanch.

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Harvey Blanch (Hereford) is to meet Harold Watkins (Bream) over fifteen two minute rounds some time this month.

The contest has arisen out of a challenge sent by the Bream boxer and in consequence a good side stake match has been arranged.

Blanch has laid £40 to £25 that he knocks out Watkins inside fifteen rounds, and Watkins arrived in Hereford today (Saturday) to sign articles and also to deposit his side stake.

The contest will be promoted in or near Cinderford, and great interest is being taken in the Forest over the match.

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At the time of writing the curtain is about to be rung up on another boxing season, and one which will prove to be the most interesting in the history of the magic circle.

Locally prospects of the inclusion of new blood unfortunately, seems to be once more lacking. Harvey Blanch, Hereford's only boxer of note, will (I understand) this year take a more serious interest in his profession, he has already been the recipient of several challenges.

The latest aspirant to throw down the gauntlet has been Harold Watkins of Bream. This challenge was the result of a ten-round contest in a boxing booth at Cinderford, in July, in which it took the Hereford boxer six rounds of hard punching to make Watkins give up. Watkins was of course, not trained at the time, and the two men signed articles at Hereford recently to meet at Cinderford, Blanch has laid £40 to £25 that he knocks Watkins out inside the fifteen rounds.

It was intended to hold the contest this month, but unforeseen circumstances have arisen. Stanley Phillips, the Lydbrook boxer, has been making big strides lately, and the fancy round about this district are keenly anticipating a match for their man with Blanch. The Hereford boxer has been quick to seize this opportunity as Phillips is to return to America shortly and he has challenged Phillips.

This contest will probably be staged before the first mentioned one. Blanch and Phillips have met twice before. In the first meeting the Hereford man defeated Phillips on points. The next match was fought under the stipulation that Blanch knocked out Phillips inside ten-rounds, Blanch, however failed to do this, although he was well ahead on points.

Phillips has since put on weight and now fights at 11st. 5lbs, so that Blanch will be taking on a big proposition this time as he at present only touches 9st. 11lbs.

Boxing at Cinderford

'Seldom has such a boxing tournament been staged in the Forest of Dean as that which was held at Cinderford on Saturday night. Despite the local Christian Churches determination to stamp out what they deem a 'growing evil and sin'. The two large marquees erect in the Railway Hotel field, with seating accommodation for 2,000 were packed to their fullest capacity. The unique attraction of the tournament undoubtedly was the contest between Harvey Blanch, the well known, Hereford Lightweight Champion, and who has backing to fight Englands Lightweight Champion, versus Harold Watkins of Bream the Forest of Dean Lightweight Champion, for £100 side stakes. The original challenge came from Blanch, who offered good odds and Watkins accepted the condition that it must be a knockout within 15 rounds. Watkins is a new product of the Forest, and is a promising young lad, whereas Blanch is an older hand at the game. Watkins was the first to enter the ring and received a great ovation from the crowd, whilst Blanch was accorded a similar compliment.

Personally I did not think the Bream man looked any too well, but Blanch appeared to be in the pink of condition. Much to my surprise Watkins led off well and in the opening round, after receiving a punch to the face he uppercut Blanch steely, and then landed a good right to the face, which he repeated several times before the gong sounded. The second round went in favour of Watkins, Blanch tried to connect his right with Watkins chin, a clever side step by Watkins saw Blanch's right shoot in the air, but the next second Blanch went for his man and got in several blows to the body of clinch followed and Blanch was cautioned by the referee Jack Smith of Manchester for hitting low. Watkins boxed quite cleverly and was having the best of the round; but though landing several times to the point of the jaw his blows lacked force, and good chances were missed.

Watkins led off well in the third round and his tactics seem to perplex Blanch. Watkins had him on the ropes for several seconds, peppering his ribs well with short arm punches, but the gong sounded. Up to now it had been Watkins fight but the forth round saw Blanch forcing things and getting home several good punches. Watkins evaded a terrific drive, and though fought gamely this was Harvey Blanch's round.

Round five found Blanch eager to end the fight, but though he played about Watkins body fairly freely, the latter was

exceptionally smart in side stepping and frequently made his opponent miss. Still Blanch was using first left and then the right to good advantage, but Watkins withstood the onslaught well.

Both men were spoken to by the referee for holding in the sixth round and though the crowd alleged that Watkins had been fouled the referee ruled otherwise.

Harvey opened strongly in the seventh round, and got plenty of power behind his blows but Watkins got in a beautiful right to the chin, which made the Hereford man sway. Both continued to box well, but Blanch missed badly in trying to land on Watkins chin.

In round eight Blanch got in a few kidney punches, and he appeared to be getting more power than ever behind his blows, using both hands well. In this round he hit often and hard, and Watkins was weakening. The Bream man fought gamely to the end and landed on Blanch's face, but his blows lacked strength and the round ended in favour of Blanch.

A punch marked the opening of the ninth and last round. Blanch did not forget to get in some powerful body blows, and in breaking away he forced his opponent on to the ropes. Extricating himself from a dangerous position Watkins was loudly applauded for his clever ducking, but Blanch did not fail to follow up, and landed a terrific right drive on to the heart. Realising this had done its mischief, Watkins gave in the fight going to Blanch.

I was personally impressed with the style of Watkins boxing. No one could be dissatisfied with his show against Blanch, who I consider is a greatly improved man. the latter has developed a punch I did not dream him capable three years ago.

Of the other contests, that between Albert Gardener, Ruardean and W. Brinkworth, Lydney, was the most interesting. This was a very fast fight in which plenty of hard knocks were received. The fight was awarded to the Lydney man who won on points.

Mike Jordan, Drybrook, was out in the second round in a return two-minute ten round contest with Billy Brown, Gloucester.

Whilst owing to disparity of the contest between Sid Meek, Drybook and Ted Baradno, Gloucester was cried off. All these exhibition bouts were arranged by Shoeing Smith Fred Davies, Monmouth, Sid Meek, Drybrook and Jack Smith, referee. Charlie

Trigg was the official time keeper, the latter was highly amusing before the exhibition showing how boxing should not be done. Mr. J. J. Mitchell of Hereford was M.C.

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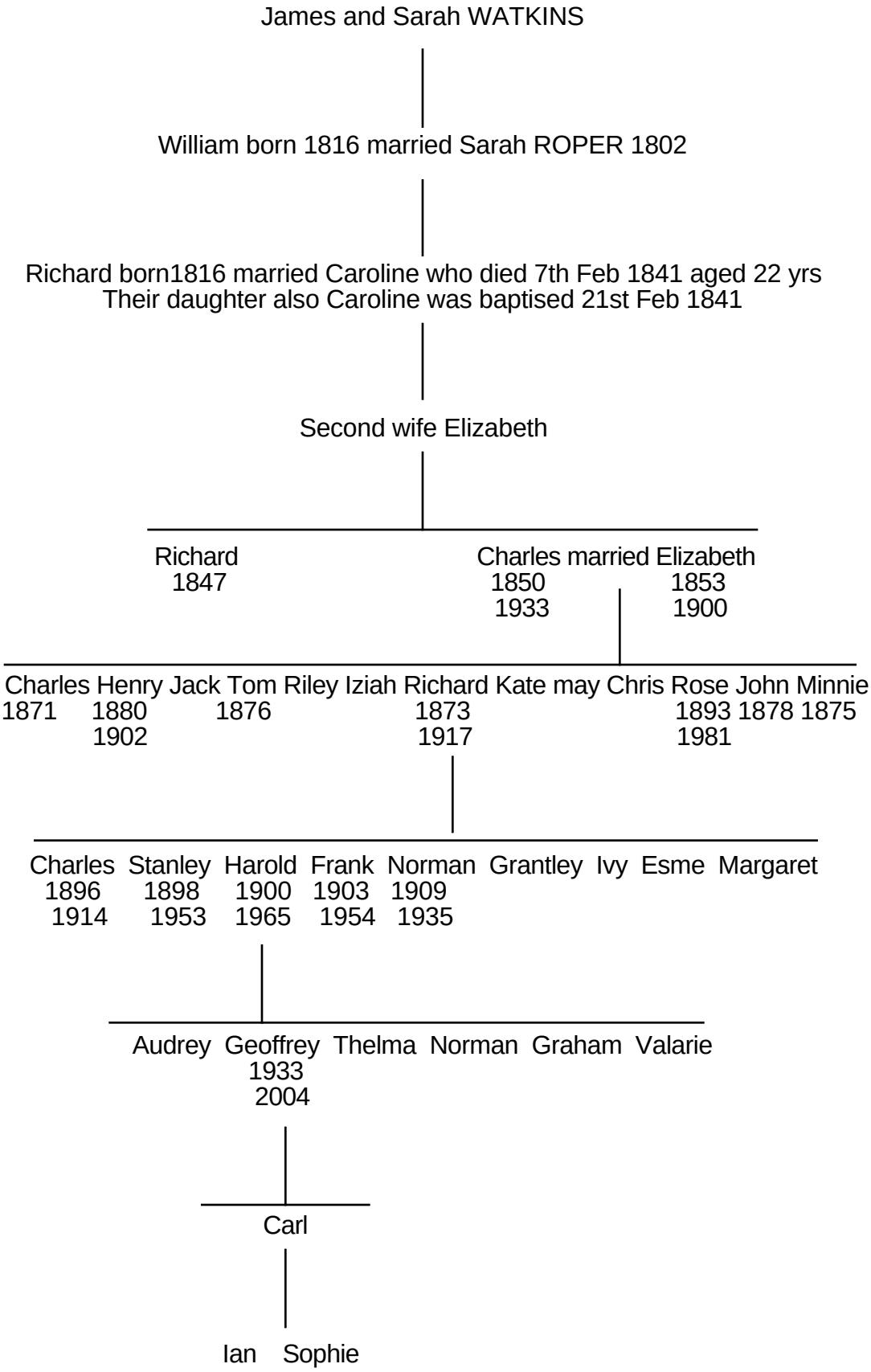
Harold Watkins chose to retire from the ring soon after the Harvey Blanch fight and in 1925 married Doreen (Dolly) Watts from Berkeley. She can remember him having only one fight after they married, bringing home a bag of money which he put on the kitchen table for her to count, but carried on for some years coaching young local lads in the art using an old shed as a gym. One who benefited from Harold's coaching was a J.E. Dunn who in 1938 as a corporal in the Royal Marines was in Cape Town, South Africa, when invited to box Nick Wolmarans the Empire and Olympic champion. He also promoted many a boxing match, including his brother Norman, at the old Bream Cinema, now the Rugby Club, well into the 1930s. He was a bookmaker until 1947 and carried on General Dealing until 1963. He died in 1965 having suffered ill health for a number of years. None of his sons followed him into the ring preferring the game of rugby. Harold's boxing gloves are in the proud possession of his grandson Carl.

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James and Sarah WATKINS
William born 1816 married Sarah ROPER 1802
Richard born1816 married Caroline who died 7th Feb 1841 aged 22 yrs
Their daughter also Caroline was baptised 21st Feb 1841
Second wife Elizabeth
Richard
1847
Charles married Elizabeth
1850 1853
1933 1900
Charles 1871
Henry 1880 1902
Jack
Tom 1876
Riley
Iziah
Richard 1873 1917
Kate
may
Chris
Rose 1893 1981
John 1878
Minnie 1875
Charles 1896 1914
Stanley 1898 1953
Harold 1900 1965
Frank 1903 1954
Norman 1909 1935
Grantley
Ivy
Esme
Margaret
Audrey
Geoffrey 1933 2004
Thelma
Norman
Graham
Valarie
Carl
Ian
Sophie