

## Usworth Boxer John Edward McGuire

*Family historian, Susan McGuire, has uncovered the fascinating history of the boxing career of her ancestor, Usworth miner, John Edward McGuire, and has kindly set out his story below.*

John Edward McGuire, my great grandfather, known as ‘Jack’ McGuire, was a miner and also a boxer. Between at least the birth of his son Francis in 1904 and that of daughter Norah in July 1911, the family lived in Old Hall, Little Usworth- a tenement that had been the family seat of the Lawson family previously known as Little Usworth Manor<sup>1</sup>. They appear, from records, to have been the last family living in the Hall before it was demolished.

Jack was born in 1876 and had lived in Bridge Row, Great Usworth since just before the age of 14 where the 1891 census records him and his father, Peter, as miners. His was a relatively stable life for a miner at that time – living and working in Usworth for over twenty years, where all his six children born in the one place. Mining was still a very itinerant occupation with families always on the move in search of better pay and housing, as shown by the different places of birth of his brothers and sisters in earlier years.

Usworth Colliery was by no means unaccustomed to the sport of pitman boxers. In 1863 a notorious bare knuckle fight had taken place which led to the death of John Fisher, a 23 year old Usworth miner. His opponent was another miner, 30 year old Jack Gillow. Boxing was clearly part of the culture of the place. The match had taken place in a field between New Washington and Usworth Station. *The Newcastle Courant* wrote that there had been a dispute between the men a fortnight earlier but there was also the small prize of a sovereign to be gained. There was a large number of spectators, and the contest was said to be brutal. <sup>2</sup>

John Edward seems to have been a hot headed individual and not afraid of a fight. He took part in a similarly brutal contest ‘*a stubborn battle*’, which was advertised in *The Sporting Life* 18<sup>th</sup> March 1901, and reported on in a lengthy article on 20<sup>th</sup> March.

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1 See accompanying Research Articles on Little Usworth Manor and the Lawson Family

2 See [Byker Boxers \(raggyspelk.co.uk\)](http://BykerBoxers.raggyspelk.co.uk) for a vivid report of the fight

**T. MULLEN (WREKENTON) AND J. E. M'GUIRE  
(USWORTH). FOR £90.**

**TO-NIGHT, AT GATESHEAD.**

At the Standard Theatre, Gateshead, this evening, Thomas Mullen, of Wrekenton, and John E. M'Guire, of Usworth, box twenty three-min. rounds, with 1 min. intervals, under Queensberry rules, at catch-weight, for £25 a-side and a purse of £40 given by Mr. Landreth. £10 a-side has been deposited with the *Sporting Life*, and the remaining £15 a-side, together with the £40 purse, is to be handed to the stakholder at three o'clock p.m. The *Sporting Life* appoints a referee.

**GLOVE CONTEST AT GATESHEAD.**

**TOM MULLEN (WRECKINGTON) v. JACK M'GUIRE  
(USWORTH). FOR £90.**

**VICTORY OF MULLEN.**

That boxing continues popular in the North of England was manifest by the big crowd that assembled at the Standard Theatre, Gateshead, on Monday night, when Tom Mullen, of Wreckington, and Jack M'Guire, of Usworth, met to contest twenty rounds, each of 3 minutes' duration, with a minute's interval, at catch-weight, for £25 a-side and a purse of £40 given by Mr. Tot Landreth. Both combatants are pitmen, and are but little known to fame. Mullen, who is twenty-nine years of age, stands 5ft. 10in. in height, and brought down the beam at 10st 12lb, has won four or five local competitions, and trained for this event under that experienced old pedestrian, Jack Mutton, of the Waverley Hotel, Hendon, Sunderland, and was certainly as fit as possible; whilst M'Guire, who is twenty-four years old, 5ft. 9½in. in height, took his breathings under the care of George Chrisp, who meets Ben Taylor, of Woolwich, here on April 1, and weighed 12st, this being his maiden effort in a match for money. There was very little speculation over the event, Mullen being favourite. It was somewhat later than usual here when the men entered the ring, Mullen having as attendants his brothers Jack and Steve with Peter Welsh and his trainer, Jack Mutton, also in his corner; George Chrisp, Spider Carr, and Jem Callaghan attending to the wants of M'Guire; and everything being in readiness the officials took up their positions, Mr. J. T. Hulls, appointed by the *Sporting Life*, as referee, and Mr. Harry Snaith as timekeeper, with Professor Campbell as M.C.

### THE CONTEST.

On facing each other there was a marked disparity in their appearance, Mullen looking fine drawn in comparison to his opponent, who was certainly on the big side, and would have been better if he had reduced himself a trifle more. Both sparred cautiously for nearly a minute before a blow was struck, following which the exchanges were of the hurricane order, the pair boxing all over the ring, in favour of Mullen, who nearly had his man out just before they were ordered to their corners. The same style of fast fighting was continued in the next round, each in turn being sent to the boards. Mullen gaining first blood in the mouth, though M'Guire appeared to finish the stronger. Each took a breather in the third round, and apparently taking stock of each other, and the spectators, who had shouted themselves hoarse with excitement during the first and second rounds, were much quieter. Having apparently satisfied themselves as to each other's capabilities, they set to work again in real earnest during the next round, M'Guire, who forced the exchanges, getting home time after time on both the head and body without receiving anything in the shape of punishment in return, Mullen's deliveries being of a very erratic character. He, however, before the close caught his man a swinging hit on the nose which turned on the tap be ore going to their corners. When they again faced each other M'Guire boxed in a very determined manner, but Mullen dodged his onslaughts, and managed to get one or two straight punches on the dial, which again caused the ruby to flow freely, besides leaving a dark mark under M'Guire's left eye, both appearing very tired when the sound of the gong announced a temporary cessation of hostilities. Rounds 6 and 7 were of a regular ding-dong character, M'Guire failing to make much impression on his opponent's knowledge box, trying with both hands at the body, Mullen at this point showing manifest points of weakness. In round 8 M'Guire was again the aggressor, but his blows lacked power behind them, and Mullen, who at intervals got home one for nothing, visited his damaged peeper, which was now rapidly closing. Both boxed for all they were worth, and the excitement amongst the spectators was intense, as every blow delivered by either man that reached its destination was frantically cheered. Rounds 9 and 10 were well contested, although M'Guire's eye was evidently troubling him, as being scarcely able to see with it he frequently hit when out of distance, which enabled Mullen to drive his left home on the face at short intervals. The next round after a little sparring was of a very fierce character, M'Guire, who was the stronger, following his opponent all over the ring, delivering with both hands, Mullen being able to do little but defend himself against his powerful onslaughts, whilst the twelfth was of

a very similar character, M'Guire at the finish beginning to show symptoms of distress. Mullen now began to box with more determination, as want of condition was telling against the Usworth representative, many of whose efforts were spent in the air, and for the next three rounds he scored frequently, and cleverly evaded the returns of M'Guire. The last named, however, made a desperate bid for victory in the sixteenth round, and gave his adversary no rest. But this was an expiring effort, as, although he boxed pluckily and with great determination right up to the bitter end of the twentieth round, the exchanges were all in favour of Mullen, who at the conclusion was returned the winner, the verdict being a very popular one.

REMARKS.—As regards the contest, it is worthy of remark that it was fought out on the fairest lines from start to finish, neither man seeking in any manner to take unfair advantage of his opponent, thus furnishing an object lesson to some of the big guns of the profession who incessantly trouble a referee during a battle. That both men wanted to win on this occasion was evident from the commencement, and when we state there was not a single claim of foul from either side during the whole of the twenty rounds, and that after the second round the referee never once had to administer a caution for holding, or any other improper tactics, it may be gathered that the contest was a model one, creditable to both winner and loser.

It is interesting to note a couple of things about the report. One is the differences in the two men. Mullen, at 29, had got four or five victories already under his belt. Both were around the same height 5' 9<sup>1/2</sup>" and 5' 10". Mullen weighed in at 10st 12lbs whilst John Edward (24), whose '*maiden effort*' this was, weighed in on the heavy side as 12 stone. The '*marked disparity in their appearance*' was noted. Mullen looked '*fine drawn*' while John Edward could have done to '*reduce himself a bit*' and was said to have a '*want of condition*'. Mullen was noted as the favourite. Even so, as the contest is reported, John Edward certainly fought every step of the way despite a nasty bit of damage to his '*peeper*' which by the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> round was closing up. Mullen's onslaught with his left is noted during rounds 11 – 16. The remarks at the end of the article gave great credit to the fairness of the contest, creditable to both winner and loser, and the determination of both contestants.

But we are left with some doubts about the eventual outcome of the contest because this contradictory article appeared in a rival publication, *The Sportsman* of 19<sup>th</sup> March 1901.



## THE STANDARD THEATRE, GATESHEAD.

### PITMEN'S STUBBORN BATTLE.

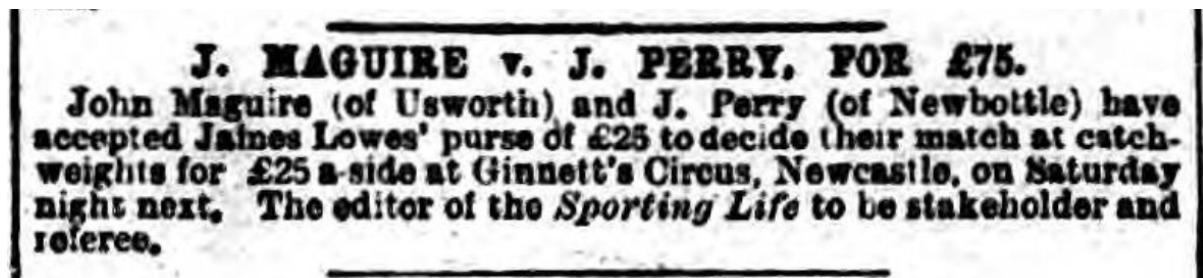
Notwithstanding that there was a big show at Ginnett's Circus, Newcastle, last night, an excellent company assembled at Mr Tot Landreth's Standard Theatre, Gateshead, where two pitmen were billed to go the best of twenty rounds, at catch-weights, for £25 aside and a purse of £40. The gallery was packed, and the higher-priced portions were also comfortably filled. The seconds for Tom Mullen, who hails from Wreken-ton, were his brothers, Jack and Steve, Jack Walsh, and Jack Mutton, while the other contestant, Jack McGuire, of Usworth, had as attendants "Spider" Carr (his trainer), George Chrisp, and Jim Callaghan. The referee was Mr J. T. Hulls, the timekeeper Mr Harry Snaith, and the M.C. Prof. Campbell. Usually pitmen's contests in the North are short and sweet, and the audiences that attend such shows are generally composed of those who prefer gore to science. The contest panned out to twenty rounds, however, and was of the severest possible character. In the first round McGuire showed up badly, after a clip on the jaw, and it was thought that two—or at most three—rounds would bring matters to a close. After the initial round, however, McGuire seemed more at home, and giving Mullen back all he sent, the pair battered away hammer and tongs, first won and then the other having the advantage. McGuire was the steadier of the two, however, and up to the seventh or eighth round the more likely to get in on the spot, besides which he gained much by body-punching. Mullen then started straight lefts, and, having a great advantage in reach, he got home the oftener, and kept his man at bay very nicely. McGuire scored best when close in. At last, however, the eye that had been receiving the left punches refused to perform its duties, being absolutely closed in the tenth round. From now to the last round he tried to get in the knock-out blow, but both were erratic, and, though the punishment was severe, neither could get on the point. In the last round, Mullen, who was a long way behind on points, made a gallant effort to knock out his man, but failed, and the verdict was given to McGuire on points.

At the end of this report '*the verdict was given to McGuire on points.*' This reporter filed the same account of the match to a third publication, *The Sporting Man*. Though many features of the gruelling twenty round battle are similarly reported including John Edward's bloody

eye and Mullen's '*straight lefts*' it seems certain that in the last paragraph the writer has accidentally got his Mullens and McGuires the wrong way round. We must trust *The Sporting Life* for the true verdict as the first advertisement notes that they actually appointed the referee.

Nonetheless the match must have been both a great satisfaction and a great disappointment to John Edward. It was a more than creditable first outing and he almost won the purse. Miles Templeton of the website *boxinghistory.org.uk* told me a little of the context for John Edward's boxing activities. John Edward would have been seen very much as a local hero, a representative of the sporting honour of Usworth pit and village. He would have been a community celebrity, captivating their attention and the match would have occasioned some heavy local betting. He would have probably been well 'looked after' by wealthier local individuals. They would have made sure he was fit and eating well and free food may have been sent to the family.

The next outing I can trace for John Edward was in June 1901 at Ginnet's Circus in Newcastle. During May and June *The Sporting Life* reported on a planned 20 round contest between Jack McGuire and Jack Perry for a sum of £50.00.



In a report of the match on 17<sup>th</sup> June Jack had won the contest in six 'fast and fierce rounds' rounds and the £50 prize money.

**TWENTY ROUNDS CONTEST,  
JACK M'GUIRE, OF UNSWORTH, DEFEATS JACK PERRY,  
OF NEWBOTTLE.**

**SIX FAST AND FIERCE ROUNDS.**

**Round 1.**—The combatants were no sooner delivered at the scratch than they commenced to hit out right and left. Perry's blows were the straighter of the two, but there was much more steam in the swings of the Habernian, and every blow that he delivered raised a lump or a bruise. Once he swung the right on the jaw, and the blow had force enough in it to make Perry stagger back in a very groggy state. The latter was almost a beaten man when the gong sounded, and he needed the minute's rest which followed the opening bout.

**Round 2.**—This was very even, first one taking the lead and then the other showing a trifle of advantage. Perry hit straight with the left in the face, and one of his flush hits turned on the tap from M'Guire's nose. This mishap did not seem to bother the Irishman, who landed several hard swinging hits on the side of his rival's head. The bout was even in the matter of points, but M'Guire had certainly done the most damage, and the respite between the rounds was most acceptable to Perry.

**Round 3.**—This time M'Guire changed his tactics. He played for the body, and landed several hits with both hands on the stomach and ribs. These visitations reduced Perry's stature considerably, and he was now no taller than his antagonist. This crouching attitude prevented M'Guire from reaching Perry's stomach, but the Irishman landed several heavy right-handers on the side of his rival's head. There was not much to choose in the matter of points, as Perry hit very straight with his left, and landed many facers. It was M'Guire's round in the point of punishment, however.

**Round 4.**—This was another even round as regards points, but M'Guire did all the forcing, and drove his antagonist round the ring. He kept driving Perry round and round the ring, but there was not much to pick between the combatants as regards points. M'Guire's straight punches and right-handed swings had almost demoralised his adversary, who was showing the greatest pluck,

Though he was repeatedly described as The Irishman in this article Jack had been born in Annfield Plan, Durham. His father Peter McGuire, who also worked at Usworth pit had come from Cavan in Ireland. £50.00 in 1901 would have been worth around £6,000 today so it was no mean amount to win. Again John Edward acquitted himself well. It is hard to believe, therefore, that I can find no newspaper evidence of more fighting in the ring. Why would he give it up at that stage?

He was obviously achieving some success and some acclaim for the ferocity of his fighting.

John Edward did not give up fighting altogether though. Obviously sensitive about his – or rather his father's Irish origins - in 1904 he got into a fight after a hotly contested election in Washington.

*Newcastle Evening Chronicle 10 March 1904*

## **ROWDY ELECTION SCENES AT WASHINGTON.**

A man, John McGuire, was charged at the Gateshead County Police Court, this afternoon, with assaulting Thos. Dixon.

Dixon said that, on the night of the Washington election, there were a series of disturbances. He was going home at 11.15 p.m., and was struck by the defendant. P.C. Hodgson saw it. Some of those about had had drink.

The constable named said that Dixon had shouted "Three cheers for Tom Richardson," whereupon McGuire hit him in the jaw. There were very rowdy scenes between the Irish and the other electors.

McGuire said that Dixon called him an Irish pig, hence the disturbance.

A witness said that the blow was more of the nature of a shove.

A fine of 5s. and costs was imposed, or 15s. 6d. in all.

Arising out of the same night's disturbances was another case in which John McGuire, Patrick Merrigan and Richard Rourke were charged with assaulting a man named John Dixon.—It was dismissed.

Tom Richardson was evidently not John Edward's preferred candidate. In fact I'd be fairly sure that John Edward was supporting Father Machin, the Catholic priest, who attracted only



34 votes less than Thomas Richardson. I don't know any more details about the incident with John Dixon but the fact that it involved Patrick Merrigan, John Edward's brother in law, whose family were from Co Wicklow Ireland, convinces me that it may have had the same issues at heart.

My cousins, Kevin McGuire and April Holder, have both told me a story handed down through their branches of John Edward's family. April's mother, Veronica McGuire, was actually one of the residents of Old Hall and so she had the account from an eye witness. John Edward passed on his boxing skills to his sons Peter and John. They would go out during lean times in the pit looking for private fist fights to earn money. On one such occasion when they were due to fight, and hopefully bring home cash, the pigs head stew that had been in the pot for days was thrown out by their mother. On their return home with the news that the fight they were expecting had either been cancelled or lost their mother promptly went to retrieve the remains of the pigs head from the waste and put it back in the pot!

John Edward's career as a boxer appears to have faded as quickly as it started. His career as a miner also came to an untimely end. Just a year after the 1911 census, in which their housing conditions seem to have been amongst the poorest, John Edward McGuire, my great grandfather, died of Enteric Fever – otherwise known as Typhoid in the Isolation Hospital in Chester Le Street, leaving a widow, Margaret, and five surviving children. His family had by this time moved to Old Row. Margaret married another Usworth miner, Francis McMahon, in 1913 and went on to have a further five children.

Registration District CHESTER-LE-STREET.									
1912 DEATHS in the Sub-District of CHESTER-LE-STREET, in the County of DURHAM.									
Columns :—									
1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	
No.	When and Where Died.	Name and Surname.	Sex.	Age.	Rank or Profession.	Cause of Death.	Signature, Description, and Residence of Informant.	When Registered.	Signature of Registrar.
302	Third January 1912 The Isolation Hospital, Chester-le-Street UD	John Edward McGuire	Male	36 years	A Colliery Stoneman of Old Row Usworth Colliery R.D.	Enteric Fever (1 month 4 days) Certified by John Taylor M.D.	Margaret McGuire Widow of deceased Old Row, Usworth Colliery	Third January 1912	J. H. Mole Registrar.

I am very interested in finding out if John Edward took part in any other bouts. If readers do come across him in their research do contact me through the Washington History Society on [washingtonhistorysoc@gmail.com](mailto:washingtonhistorysoc@gmail.com)

Susan McGuire December 2020

