BLOODLINE Podcast

Episode 3: *Royal Pasttime, Rabble Darling*
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Today we begin to dive into the history of game fowl and cocking in England. I had naively billed this as a single episode, but I soon realized it'd take at least two. We'll see how far we get.

My research pulls from existing works and I've put together a bibliography with a list of the titles I used on the website along with illustrations, maps and additional media at Bloodlinepodcast.com.

My aim in these episodes is to provide a historical timeline of a sport that captivated all ranks of the British for centuries. At its height in the 16 and 17-hundreds, it permeated the culture without exclusion occupying crown, court, church and countryman for over two hundred years. Called the Pleasure of Princes or the Royal Pasttime in books from those centuries, it was at the same time a rabble darling, a people's diversion.

In his 1909 book on the history of cockfighting in England, Sir Walter Gilbey says that "No pastime has ever held in England the position which was held for centuries by cockfighting."

Gilbey was no homer to the sport, but wrote extensively on agricultural topics and served as president of the Royal Agricultural Society. Writing over a century ago, Gilbey takes pains to impart the role of cockfighting in England.

"It was the spirit of the age," he writes. "It is very difficult for us to realize how great was the place in the life of our ancestors held by cockfighting. Many among the clergy took active part in the sport; it was not unusual when town beat town in a long main to ring the church bells in celebration of the victory."

ORIGINS

Many modern historians, encyclopedias, websites and even the introduction episode of this podcast, wrongly assert that the Romans introduced gamecocks to England, but the British relationship with gamecocks almost certainly pre-dates Roman influence.

Ancient Phoenicians had established trade routes to the island for metals mined in Cornwall and elsewhere centuries before Julius Cesar's earliest conquest there, a fact correctly noted by Gilbey as well as the ornithologist CA Finsterbusch in his comprehensive treatise on the history of gamefowl in human civilizations, Cockfighting All Over the World.

As I've already mentioned, Cornish history claims Cornwall as the origins of British cockfighting. The county is home to Gwenap's Pit, said to have been the oldest and largest cockpit in the country, starting operation before the Romans arrived, and serving as an open-air venue of the sport until at least the 1760s. The bowl-shaped amphitheater still exists today, and is the result of a depression in the ground caused by a collapsed mine cavity.

It is 150 yards around at its upper-most tier of seats, which descend down toward its cockpit floor in 12 rows, each a foot-and-a-half high and 3 feet wide. The center cockpit is 13-feet in diameter. Capable of seating around 1500 people, the venue is today a historical landmark—not because of its original use for cockfighting—but because of its host to the founding of Methodism.

Between 1762 and 1789, John Wesley—an opponent of cockfighting and other public diversions—delivered 18 sermons at the location, and according to Gilbey, at least one of the sermons was delayed when the preacher arrived to find a protracted battle in progress, forcing Wesley to wait patiently until it had concluded.

In his diary, Wesley admits to the prudent timing of sermons with the start of at least one other cockfight, hoping to divert some of the crowd from their intended diversion. Wesley appears to have a fascination with the pre-occupation of cockfighting, writing of an incident in Ireland, where he was confronted by a belligerent man, who once calmed down, offered to buy the preacher a cup of wine, admitting he'd avoided attending any sermons for fear that he might speak against cockfighting.

SHROVETIDE

Despite Wesley's aversion to the sport, much of cockfighting's popularity in England is marked by the Christian observance of Shrove Tuesday. As the Tuesday prior to Easter—the eve of Lent and Ash Wednesday—the Shrovetide celebration in England for centuries included annual cockfights for boys in grammar school, meant to provide the boys a model of unflinching bravery and tenacity in the fighting cocks.

It is not clear when the tradition began, but it is the occasion of the first mention of the sport in England. In the late 12th century, William Fitzstephen describes the Shrovetide cockfighting tradition in his Latin text on the amusements of London during King Henry II's reign, providing the earliest known reference to cockfighting in England. More than 400 years later, the tradition had not changed much.

Stipulations for the event were included in several school charters by the 1600s, dictating the wages schoolmasters should receive for officiating the event (some received pay, others were entitled to the losing birds). These documents also stipulate how much each boy would pay the schoolmaster for the procurement of the birds, which became known as cockpence.

The fee varied from school to school, but was generally a small amount per boy—usually a few pennies (modern equivalent to $5-10) with some schools even adopting a structured fee based on social standing.

Queen Elizabeth I gave rules of Hartlebury Grammar School, guaranteeing the schoolmasters there this payment, though this was customary practice.

We can only guess at how long the Shrovetide cockfight tradition had been practiced by the time Fitzstephen wrote of it in the 12th century, but it continued well into the 1800s.

Geologist Henry Miller describes the custom at Cromarty Grammar School, where he attended 1812-1815:

"The school, like almost all other grammar schools in Scotland, had its yearly cock-fight, preceded by two holidays and a half during which the boys occupied themselves in collecting and bringing up the cocks. And such always was the array of fighting birds mustered on the occasion that the day of the festival from morning till night used to be spent in fighting out the battles. For weeks after, the school floor retained its deeply stained blotches of blood, and the boys would be full of exciting narratives regarding the glories of gallant birds."

The centuries-long institution in the country played a major role in the popularity of cocking among the British people, but we'll return to the topic next episode when I speculate what role the Shrove tradition may have played in the demise of cocking among the Brits.

1500s

The sport had reached such esteem by the 1500s, that King Henry VIII OK'd the construction of what would be the first of several Royal Cockpits in Westminster. Unlike later kings and queens, the evidence from Henry VIII's daily personal accounts suggest he never stepped foot in a cockpit, as there are no line items

related to the sport or wagers there-of. Nevertheless, the sport thrived during his reign.

The construction of the building—like the birds tended by the royal court's Master of Gamecocks—were maintained as evidence of the sovereign's interest in the people's amusements, even for monarchs—like Henry—who appear to have taken no interest.

During Henry VIII time, we are said to have seen the first of the Duckwing bloodline during a main at the Royal Cockpit at Westminster, where Sir John Anderton we are told put down the first duck-winged cock and issued the following challenge:

"There's the jewel of England,
For a hundred in hand,
And a hundred in land,
I'll fight him 'gainst any cock in England."

Cockpits were sometimes privately operated, usually adjacent to an Inn, and sometimes alongside stables for race horses. Some were built under township authority, known as corporation cockpits.

The largest events lasted up to a week and were combined with horse races, which were, on occasion, Races took up less time and were costly compared to cockfighting for participants, meanwhile, wagering at cockfights could be made at any level, low or high.
Cockfights in England were conducted one-on-one in single fights or multi-fight events, known as mains. Less commonly, a tournament-style bracket was used in an event known as a Welsh Main, where winning roosters fought one another in subsequent matches until a single winner emerged.

For standard mains, two gamecock owners agree beforehand to bring a certain number of roosters at pre-determined weights to fight against one another in an odd-number of fights. The agreement would include the wager between the owners on each fight, and the wager for the cocker who wins the majority, called "the odd". Aside from the main event, the cockpit would allow one-off fights, known as "hack" fights between individuals.

By the mid-1500s, county vs. county or town vs. town mains were popular throughout England. In these events, cockers from one town would pool their roosters and resources to compete against a rival town.

These geographical cockfighting rivalries were an improbable favorite of British cockers if you consider that roosters were transported either by horseback or wagon in linen (sometimes flannel or silk) sacks over unforgiving roads. Cockers of the 1600s were well-aware of the adverse effect travel had on gamecocks, and often scheduled the weigh-in a day or two prior to the start of fighting. The mains would last anywhere from several days up to a week.

During the rule of James I, 1603-1625, Gervase Markham published the first instructive book on cocking, *Pleasure of Princes*, from which we can learn a great deal about both the skill and knowledge of cocking at the time.

For selection, Markham cautions against roosters that are too small as well as oversized roosters, which are today called shake bags or shakes for short, in Markham's time they called them turn pokes.

For conformation, he says the ideal gamecock is proud, upright with a beak like a sparrow hawk, large, quick eyes with legs strong in the beam and long, sharp spurs with a slight bend. The shape of the spur was of particular importance at the time because the British would not begin to popularize the use of artificial spurs until the end of the 1600s.

We can infer that it was not uncommon to out-breed gamecocks to barnyard fowl at the time.

Though Markham cautions against out-breeding gamecocks with barnyard fowl, but if it must be done, it should be with a game hen and a barnyard rooster. Today, the idea of breeding any gamefowl to a barnyard breed is a desecration in the eyes of most game fowl breeders—gameness, or willingness to fight being the sole identifying characteristic of all fighting bloodlines, but his advice suggests breeders in the 1600s had begun to develop some concept of prepotency in sexes.

Markham suggests hens and chicks should be kept indoors with a boarded floor until one month, fed oatmeal, cheeseparings and chilter meat before being moved to a grassy area with no foul puddles. He suggests trimming combs and wattles as soon as they're sexed, anointing with butter for a smooth head. Stags should be separated at the first sign of pecking and sent to farm walks.

Cockers of the 17th century valued healthy feet and tight leg conformation equated accurate striking fowl.

Aside from the diet, this is more-or-less in line with modern care of young chicks and stags. Modern feeders may take for granted that Markham's care includes instructions from Day 1, as well as treatments for injury and illness, in addition to pre-fight keep.

Here's the "keep" from the 1600s. Don't laugh; this keep was still in use 80 years later when Tregonwell Frampton, master of race horses and game cocks to William III and his successors quoted it almost verbatim as the method he's found most successful.

Days 1-4, 2-year old roosters fed maunchet, or high-quality white bread, in small pieces, a handful 3-4 times per day to scour worms.

Day 5: First sparring with muffs, then called "hots". After sparring, feed a clump of butter—the size of a man's thumb—rolled in fine chopped rosemary and white sugar candy. Next, place rooster a specially-made basket insulated with straw—a process known as sweating. Leave to sweat until 4 p.m. then give the head and eyes a good lick before returning to coop and give keep feed.

> **Keep feed recipe:** make a still dough of wheat meal and oatmeal mixed with ale, eggs and butter. Roll into thin cakes and let it rest 3-4 days. Optionally, the feeder might also mix into the feed aniseed, licorice or other spices.

Day 6: Rest

Day 7: Release the cock in an enclosed area and use a common cock to make the loose gamecock give chase and strike at. The idea was to keep the rooster running in a circle around the feeder, much like the process of lunging in horse training. The exercise was done for a half-hour for each rooster.

The process of sparring, sweating and lunging was repeated through the 6-week period leading up to the fight. Three days prior to the fight, roosters are rested. During this time, roosters were fought with natural spurs sharpened, no artificial heels and the feathers were trimmed beyond what most of the world's cockpits would allow today. Sickle feathers were trimmed up to the rump. Streamer feathers of the tail were cut even with the fan tail feathers. The hackle feathers were cut close to the neck, and the tips of the wing feathers were trimmed to a sloped edge.

The English Civil Wars—fought over religious freedom, among other things—took place 1642 to 1651, resulting in the execution of Charles I and the exile of his son, Charles II, replacing the monarch with the Commonwealth leader Oliver Cromwell and briefly his son Richard until 1659. During this period of military rule, Cromwell issued edicts in 1654, 1655 and 1659 which outlawed cockfighting and other diversions of public gathering, such as horse races, fearing they were the incubators of rebellions. Cromwell died in 1658 and the Commonwealth period of England ended shortly afterwards with the return of Charles II from exile in 1660.

Charles II, Cockfighting in the Restoration

Charles II reigned until 1685 and the sport flourished both in popularity as well as care and breeding. Charles II instituted annual mains at the Westminster cockpit which continued through the regency period. He frequented the Newmarket pit, often twice per day, and sometimes by candlelight into the night, and was credited with originating the Pile bloodline, which remained popular for two centuries afterwards.

The London Gazette, in 1678, began advertising fights for the Newmarket mains, and later reports from the newspaper reveal that professional feeders and breeders had begun working in the sport. These and other published reports are among some of the earliest forms of sports journalism.

In earnest, reporting of the sport began in the 1727 edition of Cheney's Racing Calendar and continued for every issue through 1840.

By 1684, Royal Cockpits were active at Windsor, York and Dublin. Diarist Samuel Pepys notes cockpits at Shoe Lane, Drury Lane, Aldersgate Street and another he called "the New Cockpit" by the King's Gate in Holborn. The Whitehall pit he refers only as a lodging. There was also a cockpit on Jewin Street, which served as a religious meeting house for Grimes and his followers for a period after the Great Fire of London burned much of the city, including 88 churches. Gray's Inn cockpit opened in the 1680s, closed during Commonwealth and is seen in a 1754 map of London.

The sport was so popular that smaller cockfights were sometimes held in churches, most of which did not have pews during this time. Parish Register of Hemingborough Yorks contains the Feb. 2, 1661 entry: "Upon fasting day last, they came with their cocks in to the church and fought them in the church—namely Thos Middleton of Cliff, John Coats, Ed Nidhouse and John Batley."

In 1681, Duke of York is said to have introduced the sport to Scotland and in 1683 the Leith Cockpit was constructed.

Up until this time, handlers matched cocks strictly by eye, resulting in mismatched weights. Among the advancements made during the period are Dr. Richard Astley's 1686 invention for gauging size of roosters, allowing closer matches. The device, an adjustable ruler which secured the rooster by its feet and at the neck for measuring length. A ring was used to measure body circumference. A patent-sketch for the device illustrating its functionality is available on the website at Bloodlinepodcast.com.

Though, as yet another indication of how quickly the sport advanced during this period, Astley's device was already outmoded a little over a decade after invention.

By 1698 advertisements for upcoming mains indicated “set weights” indicating the cockers had begun implementing scales for matching roosters.

In 1698, artificial spurs were implemented. Howlett—an outsider of the gamefowl community—like others since, argues that the implementation of artificial spurs was an inhumane departure for cockfighting, though it’s likely Howlett never witnessed a naked heel fight among gamefowl, where protracted battles are the norm, rather than the exception. Artificial spurs not only quickened the fight, thus reducing the amount of injury both winners and losers would receive, it also standardized the contest, levelling the playing field for both roosters in the fight.

The application of artificial spurs, along with the adoption of scales for matching roosters of equal weight in fights—each occurring along with the formation of a standardized set of rules at the end of the 1600s, and setting the stage for a boom period of cockfighting in 1700s England. In the next episode, we’ll pick up in the early 1700s, examining the earliest rules and behavior at cockpits of the time, including the sport’s prohibition in the mid-1800s.

We’ll stop this week’s episode here—just prior to the 1700s—a century in which the sport grew even more popular throughout England, capping at least 300 years of near-universal acceptance among the British rank and file. Despite this, there is very little mention of cockfighting in the historical and biographical texts written about the people and places from this time.

For a ready example of this under-representation, visit Wikipedia and look up some of the people or topics referenced in this podcast—Gwenap’s Pit, Charles II, Sports journalism and Shrove Tuesday, just to name a few examples—and you’ll find no mention of the role of cockfighting in these entries.

For those members of the gamefowl community, this under-representation in history is our fault. We can’t expect other people—historians, scholars—to do this for us. If they wind up helping, which they should, it’ll be welcome and much-needed, but we’ll have to speak up if we want to be heard. Editing these pages with proper citations to include the historical and cultural significance of cockfighting would not only be a service to the history of cockfighting, but to history. The pages play an important role in providing quick background information on topics for journalists, scholars and modern historians in addition to the greater public.

They are is easily edited with proper citations and would be an invaluable addition both to the community and the public, so I’d encourage you all to join me in updating those pages when you see this information missing because the knowledge is being lost to the extent that many members of the gamefowl community—myself included—are unaware of the historical role the sport had in the history of our ancestors.

Next week, we'll pick up with the 1700s in England. I'd like to thank Danny McClain in this episode for suggesting some of the reading material I've used. You can find a list of the works I've consulted for this episode on the website, Bloodlinepodcast.com, including supplemental material, such as maps, sketches and photographs. If you haven't already, search Facebook groups for Bloodline Podcast to join the discussion on episodes and bonus material. I'll post a link on the site to the group as well. Theme music for the episode is Lobo Loco, You Get the Blues. Bloodline is created by me, Jesse Sidlauskas.

Thanks for listening, and y'all keep'em crowing.