



George Hampshire

Cockfighting was deeply woven into British social life between 1750 and 1835, with wagering playing on its popularity. Over time, 'cocking' became a battleground in broader cultural debates about blood sports and the evolving relationship between humans and animals. Opposition emerged from two fronts: growing concerns about the suffering of the birds and criticism of the behaviour of spectators, particularly around gambling and alcohol. Although popular reporting on working-class cockfights declined after 1800, the sport retained strong support among certain elite groups well into the 1830s and after.

Humanitarian worries about animal treatment were increasing, though they had not yet gained widespread acceptance. Reformers made headway not simply because of compassion for animals, but because they effectively tied cockfighting to concerns about moral decay, using social behaviours like drinking and betting as leverage. From the 1770s, local magistrates began attacking these behaviours, with parliamentary pressure growing in the 1820s. Broader social changes in the early 1830s ultimately paved the way for the successful passage of the 1835 Act of Parliament that legally suppressed the sport.¹

¹ From popularity to suppression: Cockfighting and English Society, c1730 to 1835 Cruelty to Animals Act. Mike Huggins

Even though this activity was discouraged among the lower classes, it continued to thrive among the upper classes for much longer.

In 1888, a case in the Magistrates' Court involved certain gentry and local business owners.

At Newton Abbot, before a full bench of magistrates, Henry Magor, gentleman, Newton; John Dennie, Newton; Thomas Bowden, Shoemaker, Newton; Jame Thomas Mallett, Publican, Newton; George Stockman, Manure merchant, Newton; Samuel Widdecombe, Carter, Newton; William Bowden, Painter, Exeters Lewis Major, Asylum attendant, Wonford, Exeter; Amos Short, Cab proprietor, Torquay; and Alfred Chard, baker, Abbotskerswell were summoned for participating in a cock fight in a barn on Combe Farm, Staverton.

Mr Friend, of Exeter, prosecuted on behalf of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, win different solicitors representing the defendants. The case caused great interest in the district, and the court was crowded. John House, a gardener, said he was in the barn neighbourhood on the day in question to meet the hounds, and after seeing several people going in the direction of the barn, he followed them. Without being questioned by anyone, he entered with others, about seventy in number. He saw half a dozen matches between gamecocks, which occupied several hours. Some of the contestants were attacked with great brutality. After a nearly seven-hour hearing, Stockman and Short were discharged, the Bench being of the opinion that there was no evidence against them, and the other defendants' cases were adjourned. The witness House was hissed by the crowd on leaving the court.²

IMPRISONMENT FOR COCK- FIGHTING. The adjourned inquiry into the charges preferred by an officer of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals against Henry Major, gentleman; Lewis Major, asylum attendant; Alfred Chard, baker; Thomas Bowden, shoemaker; John Dennis, railway guard; William Bowden, painter; James Thomas Mallett, publican; and Samuel Widdecombe, carter, for participating in cockfighting on Jan. 13 last at Staverton, has been resumed and concluded before the Newton Abbot magistrates. After additional evidence for the defence was heard, the prisoners, except Widdecombe, were convicted; and Dennis and Thomas Bowden were sentenced to one month's imprisonment, with hard labour; Lewis Major, Henry Major, and Chard were ordered to pay a fine of £5 and costs; Mallett £3 and costs, and William Bowden £2 and costs.³

In 1900, Tom Bowden, the Shoemaker of the 1888 case, of No. 10 Court, East Street, Newton Abbot, passed away at seventy-five. He was one of the most

²The Illustrated Police News February 25, 1888

³ North Devon Advertiser February 24, 1888

infamous Cock Fighting celebrities not only of his own county, but throughout England. In his early days Cock Fighting was a popular sport in the rural districts, and many were fought in the open, and nowhere more so than at Diptford, near South Brent, where battles were fought for hundreds of pounds. Many of his battles took place on the banks of the River Avon, and he, as a rule, came off the winner. He even commanded the patronage of Sir John Astley. Tom went to Newton Abbot in 1866, where he fought battles in secluded spots. The Police were aware of what was going on, and Tom was caught in 1888, with several others, in the neighbourhood of Staverton, for which he had to spend a month in prison. But when liberated, he continued to carry on the old game, only with greater circumspection.⁴

Stories were told about Tom years after his death, usually in admiration, even by the gentry of Newton Abbot. 1912 Mr Vicary of the Tanning family recalled the 1888 case when Tom was convicted of organising Cock Fights in Staverton and sentenced to a £5 fine or one month's imprisonment, with hard Labour. Mr Vicary said he felt sorry for Tom, who was well past 60, and had organised a collection to pay the fine. He visited Tom in the local jail and offered five gold sovereigns to pay the fine. Tom thanked Mr Vicary but asked if he could keep the five sovereigns and serve the Prison sentence. Apparently, he asked in such a droll way that Mr Vicary found it irresistible and agreed he could keep the money. When Tom was released and returned home, he withdrew with great satisfaction the "five good thick 'uns", and he thought it was a waste to spend them on those Lawyer chaps.

According to a 2017 report by the [RSPCA](#), cockfighting in England and Wales was at a five-year high.

- **Animal Welfare Act 2006** (England and Wales): This Act makes it an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to an animal, including participating in or facilitating cockfighting. Penalties include imprisonment for up to 51 weeks, a fine of up to £20,000, or both.

⁴ Western Morning News, October 29, 1900.