

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

ULSTER HISTORY CIRCLE



CLARA (MA) COPLEY (1866-1949)

Clara (known as MA) Copley was born in Yorkshire in 1866. She was from a family in the travelling amusement business, including a circus, funfair and waxworks. She came to Belfast sometime in the 1920s with this business and travelled around, wintering in the Chapel Fields, then vacant ground opposite St Malachy's Church. However it is as a boxing promoter in the 1930s that she is best remembered.

During the 1930s the boxing contests were held in the Chapel fields. In the summer the fights took place outdoors; in the winter months the ring was erected in a marquee. Contests were conducted according to BBBC rules. Most fighters came from local clubs. Many of Ireland's best appeared in Ma's ring. Jimmy Warnock, the Shankill Road flyweight, was one who, despite twice defeating the reigning champion Benny Lynch, never held the championship because the matches were not recognised as title fights. Rinty Monaghan began his fighting career in Ma's tent and went on to hold the World, Commonwealth, European and British flyweight titles. Less successful was Cecil Creighton whose fancily kept a pet shop in Gresham Street, earning him the Nickname of The Birdman He was greeted with bird noise when he entered the ring. The frequency with which he ended up on his backside on the canvas prompted local wits to suggest that he had a 'cauliflower bum'.

Buck Alec Robinson was another local hero whose first appearance at the Fields, while still in his teens was when he was pushed forward to take the place of a contestant who had failed to show. Robinson's audience warm-up was more exciting than Creighton's trick of swallowing goldfish, he wrestled with a lion. He rated his pugilistic skills highly: "If I hit them, it was 'goodnight nurse'."

Other names well known at the Fields were Ginger Lecky, Pat Kelly, Buckets McGahey and Kid Derg, who is recorded as having 'the footwork of a ballerina but a stronger punch than Margot Fonteyn.'

When the Chapel Fields became no longer available around 1939, Mrs Copley rented the Ulster Hall for boxing bills on Wednesdays and Saturdays. When the Belfast Corporation proposed a hefty rent increase she decided it was time to retire.

Prizes awarded were small, five or ten shillings, but in the Hungry Thirties even a few shillings were welcome to a needy boxer. When asked to account for a perceived later falling off in quality among local boxers. Ma's matchmaker, Mick Ross, remarked 'There are no hungry fighters today'. Ma, a generous woman, was known to slip money to young boxers down on their luck.

On 29 August 1942 in the Ulster Hall, an event was held to honour Mrs, Clara Copley 'who for years had had the distinction of being Britain's only woman British Boxing Board of Control Licensed promoter'. A silver fruit bowl was presented to her. The inscription on the bowl records that it was given 'By the Patrons of the Ulster Hall as a token of appreciation of services rendered to the sport of Boxing'.

Location of plaque: 56 Donegall Pass, Belfast

[The Ulster History Circle erects blue plaques in public places throughout the province to commemorate people who have made a significant contribution to the community locally, regionally or in the wider world. Not all are well known and many have been forgotten in the place where they were born or worked.]

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