

Ron Historyo's
Time Travel
to the

Wrestlers of the
Golden Age

Peter Bannan

We all know a little about what we have commonly called the Hackenschmidt Era over here in the UK and in particular the Music Halls. Those with a smattering of Knowledge know that Lancashire is attributed to be the home and Origin of Catch-as-catch-can wrestling.

I draw a distinction here because Hackenschmidt was a heavyweight and Lancashire wrestling was about the smaller men. As such only a few of us appreciate who the real greats of the first decade of the twentieth century were when it comes to middle weight downwards.

Peter Bannan of Burnley was one of them. One hell of a wrestler and much unknown about him, but like a lot of gifted people he also was a stick of dynamite. Had he been an exemplary figure I think perhaps he would have had a statue in Burnley Town Centre.

As it transpires he leaves a story for this writer.

In 1908 Ogdens did a series of 50 cigarette cards of Pugilists and Wrestlers and the following year added another 25. You can still bid for them on ebay.

The photo on the card won't reveal his past though, but I will.

Firstly we have the spelling, he always signed his name Bannan but was often in the papers as Bannon.

His birth was registered in Burnley in 1878, born 15th May and baptised Roman Catholic at St Mary of the Assumption. James Bannan had married Susanah Holland there in 1873 and dad was a coal miner. Dad states he was from Standish in Wigan, a great place for wrestling roots. Some census returns suggest mother could have been Irish.



Early life was spent at Angle Street and Ryland Street. In 1899 Bannan was in the Militia Reserve. I suspect by now he was probably wrestling, but I could not find him making the papers until late in 1902. Bannan was in Burnley Crown Court because he struck his second and then his opponent J.W.Price and the referee cancelled the match. The court case was that Bannan's father had kept the money that had been put up.

By day Bannan was a Miner and in 1901 he and his father were mining in Durham living with Peter's eldest sister. Other children had been born in Durham, but mother had tired of of Durham and gone back to Burnley. She stated that she was a widow on the 1901 census. Dad must have gone back because more children were born in Burnley and Peter Bannan stated in one paper that he had Twelve sisters.

At this stage Peter Bannan does not seem to be a main player in the Music Hall scene, but on 27th September 1902 I found a 24 years old Peter Bannan on the Campania at Liverpool sailing to America. He was not alone. His companion was Joe Carroll age 33, initial destination New York and as England's Middleweight Champion.

In November 1902 Carroll gave away a stone and a half and was defeated by Tom Jenkins in a very big match, but for Peter Bannan I had a hard job finding him. However in February 1903 I did find him fighting John J Little at Fall River in Massachusetts.

It was becoming a bit obvious now that Bannan had a temper. The men ended up fist fighting and the ref gave the bout to Little. Not only could Bannan wrestle but he was a fair boxer.

By June of 1903 Bannan was back in England and Lancashire Wrestlers were realizing that money could be made in the Music Hall scene.

The bill below was at Leeds Queens Theatre.



Hackenschmidt needed a few opponents to work through most nights. In reality some may have been famous but he was beating small men in comparison to himself.

The USA had taken Bannan up to the highest level.

The idea was that after 10 minutes survival you got a pound a minute. £25 if Hack failed to throw you in 15 minutes and £100 if you could throw the great man. Hack's first opponent lasted four minutes. Bannan was many stones lighter and baffled Hackenschmidt at times. He wrestled with real accomplishment and lasted eleven minutes. In conceding the fall Bannan earned a Sovereign. The crowd roared.

In January 1904 Peter Bannan won the 12 stone international title at the Oxford Theatre London. To appreciate the men of that time at that weight here are the tournament results.

1st Round

Bannan beat Froelicher
Connor beat Barker

2nd Round

Bannan beat Joyce
Connor beat Peter Gotz

Semifinal

Bannan beat Lauritz Neilsen
Connor beat Whistler (Jack Carroll???)

Final

Bannan beat Connor, by disqualification

In the summer of 1904 Bannan won the 11 stone tournament. This was the national Wrestling Association Prize-money and gold medal to the champion.

Could this be the veteran Joe Carroll passing the Baton? Again the tournament results.

1st Round

Job Shambley beat C.Leggot
Peter Bannan beat W. Fielding
Reice beat Schmidt
Joe Carroll beat A. Ahmedro

Semifinals

Peter Bannan beat Job Shambley
Joe Carroll beat Reice

Final

Peter Bannan drew Joe Carroll
*Prize money was divided between these two champions
According to Burnley papers Bannan was "given the medal".*

1904 was a big year with wins over Lauritz Neilson at The Royal Music Hall in Holborne, Ferdinand Gruhn the German at the National Sports Club, and he also showed himself in his home town at the Gaiety Theatre against Joe Nixon.

1905 and 1906 was completely different and it was as though the pinnacle had been reached in 1904. It was hard to find Peter Bannan wrestling at all. What I did find was a newspaper article that said several big time Lancashire Catch Wrestlers had retired and Bannan was included. 1905 had in fact been a poor year for wrestling popularity in another end of year report.

Could it be that some of these Lancashire men were disillusioned with the Music Hall approach to their game, or had some of them such as Joe Carroll and Tom Connors simply grown old?

To actually dispute some of this I did find a Peter Bannan in Ohio USA in March 1906. He was English, this could only have been him. He threw Peter Schmidt and Joe Ramsey (The Brooklyn Strong Boy) in thirteen minutes.



Back home in May 1907 it was not the Music halls but I found Bannan in a well advertised fight with George Cornelius at Hull's Boulevard Ground. This seemed hardly competitive despite the unbeaten policeman being taller and three stones heavier.

The title though was at stake and the advertising brought in a crowd of 2000 people. Cornelius lost the bout 2-1 and donated £50 to charity. He was on the defensive throughout.

The next stage of Bannan's time in wrestling suggests that for him Wrestling in England was perhaps not exciting enough. It may well have been via America but by late 1907 I found him in Australia. He was not the only one there either as Willie Withers Bain of Scotland was working on the same circuit.

Hard to believe that back in 1907 this wrestling seemed so much like what we saw many decades later. It was late November in Melbourne and Buttan Singh took the ring to fight Withers Bain but met a replacement in Peter Bannan. The match was a real rough house experience for Singh.

Bannan was toweling down like Mick McManus and talking to the crowd. There was head butting and fingers in mouths, a lot of skill from Singh but Bannan was very accomplished and was eventually awarded the match.

To me though the promoters had found a show and Bannan and Singh took their grudge to different venues, always a hard fought match. They met again in July 1908 in Melbourne at the Cyclorama in a fine contest that Singh won and then in August a draw in Adelaide at the City Baths. October they were on at the Theatre Royal in Perth where it was a draw. This led to a Championship of Australia match at Kalgoorlie later that month. Bannan and his manager a Mr Robert Benjamin stayed in the Duke of Cornwall Hotel. All these matches were Catch -as-Catch-Can.

Bannan won and was now Australian Champ. Then the show went back to the Theatre Royal in Perth in November. There was a similar formula including matches with the Flame Haired George Dinnie from Scotland against Buttan Singh.

GAOL FOR PETER BANNAN.
—
"The Most Violent Person This
Side the Atlantic."
—
BLACKPOOL POLICEMAN ASSAULTED

By the end of 1908 the lid blew off and it was all over the papers that Bannan, Benjamin and Dinnie were Bilkers. They had found backers, embezzled money from them and quit the territory quickly, eventually ending up leaving Australia quickly at the year end. Bannan and Benjamin are thought to

have stowed on the Steam Ship Paroo to Singapore.

Of course Peter Bannan did have other opponents whilst in Australia and perhaps his greatest moment might have been an open air match with Clarence Weber. Weber was about three stones heavier. They met twice that I can see, once at the Melbourne Athletic Club and also at the Saucer Cycling track. Weber had one win and there was a draw. Weber stating that Bannan was his best ever opponent.

Bannan also worked as physical Training Instructor in his time in Australia. But Peter Bannan also had vices that were to blight his life, and one of them was drink.

Out in Perth one night he was drunk and flashing his money about in a bar in Hay Street. Three very undesirable muggers thought he would be easy. Two were knocked down cellar steps and the third one dealt a finishing punch. Peter Bannan evaded a debtors warrant and skipped the country in the nick of time with Benjamin.

Bannan's CV continues though with a stop off in India. In Calcutta at the Hippodrome he had a match with William Higson known as Big Ben of the Shropshire regiment. At eleven stones four Bannan gave away almost three stones in weight but easily had the tools to win 2-0.

In 1909 Bannan did some wrestling in the North of England but finished the year with more trouble. Another vice along with drink was Horse Racing. He hired a taxi driver and clocked up 170 miles. He called in at places in Yorkshire watching Coursing and Horse racing and then refused to pay the fare. The case went to court but Bannan did not attend and a friend stated that he was in strict training to defend his world title. He was fined and had to pay costs.

I was surprised to find in 1910 that the National Sports Club had him at the Alhambra for the yearly tournaments. However Bannan hurt himself wrestling Bob Berry of Wigan and had to withdraw. Bob Berry beat Bannan's old mate Button Singh in the final of the Middleweights.

Despite wrestling from time to time, the red mist had descended and Peter Bannan was to spend a lot of time in courts for drunken behaviour, violence, even threatening to whip a woman in her own home. I believe he did a month in jail. Right up to the war Bannan was in court or arrested several times a year. He had a particular dislike for young constables and waved his fist in their faces.

By the end of 1920 Bannan had eighteen convictions, usually for drunkenness or assault,

he was a complete nuisance to the public houses of Burnley. By March 1921 after trouble on a train he had 28 convictions and often failed to turn up in court. This time he got two months hard labour. The drink problems carried on as did more and more court appearances, usually assault.

He was even advised by a judge to keep off drink. For a while he changes town and lived in Blackpool where again he cause so much trouble that he was described by the Police as the most dangerous man this side if the Atlantic. This culminated, in July 1928, with him getting six months hard labour for assaulting a policeman.

Late 1930 and he got another two months hard labour for bilking a taxi driver. He was described as a Music Hall Artist and frequenter of Race courses and worked at a Dog Track. He also had current work at Burnley Hippodrome. In 1931 he clocked up his 39th court appearance. Later that year he got another 3 months hard labour for smashing up the working Men's Club in Coal Street.

In an amazing turn of events in 1932 Bannan at the age of 54 tried a wrestling comeback. Even though the new age of wrestling had begun this was a tournament in the open air at The Wagoner's Inn against Tom Sharkey. Billy Riley was Sharkey's coach and had to admit that he was impressed by Bannan's victory. He had rolled back the years.

Bannan then met Dan Kelly at The Globe Cinema in Padiham.

In January 1933 William "Apollo" Bankier put on a show at Nelson with Ben Sherman, Black Tiger, Mitchell Gill and George Gregory. Bannan challenged them all and Bankier stated that he would try and find him an opponent in the future. Looks to me like a publicity stunt.

In the summer of 1933 he was back in court in Accrington after fighting in the street outside the Slater's Arms in Burnley. The judge gave him a small fine and let him off stating that he should now settle down as he was growing old. Drink was again the Catalyst.

Trouble again in 1937, and finally in 1938 demanding money with menace on Ascot Racecourse. He was simply short of money to get home. He had committed so many offenses that he was called a Race Course Pest. Best yet, he got two years hard labour. His new abode H.M Prison Oxfordshire.

Peter Bannan never changed. In 1954 he was in his mid seventies, invited a neighbour into his house and then locked the door. An accomplice gave him a violent beating because Bannan said he was a "Police Nark".

Peter Bannan was buried in Burnley General Cemetery on the 5th April 1955. His last abode had been hospital. It could have all been so different, he could have been a local hero never to be forgotten.

Ron Historyo

Special thanks to Ruslan Pashayev over in the USA for providing some career details.