

THE GOLDEN YEARS OF WISBECH CORN EXCHANGE (Part the Third)



10) The Story So Far



Jack Taylor's International Promotions counted takings from sell-out crowds turning out for his first full season at Wisbech Corn Exchange, from January to May 1967.



He had succeeded where Dale Martin failed, without the aid of TV names. The unlikely hero of the season had been a man brought in to be figure of hate. Wisbech adopted him, cheered him and loved him. He went through villains like a knife through butter. Doctor Death delivered the real thing, created many memories and set the bar remarkably high but this particular Doctor Death was no longer on the scene. What could Jack do to keep the fans happy in the follow-up season? They're a fickle lot, wrestling fans ...

Now read on

11) Curtain Up on Season Two

Jack kept with his roster of fortnightly Monday shows and planned to kick off before the end of the year. The first show was on Monday September 25 1967 at 8pm. The Corn Exchange provided an ideal setting for professional wrestling, and Jack was pleased to be the provider. He was excited and raring to start.

The big first night arrived. As I helped put all the chairs in position and test the ropes, the public address system would be tried out ... and the tune to open with was always the same. The punters used to start trickling in from 7 o'clock to the strains of Marvin Gaye and Kim Weston singing "It Takes Two." (You see what Jack did there?) A great tune ... and whenever I hear it today it takes me straight back to the Corn Exchange. Every hall had its own smell. The Corn Exchange was no exception. Remember, we all smoked and the fittings were caked in the residue, adding to the whole ambience.

The first bill Jack drew up was a bit of a coker. Klondike Bill had never appeared in Wisbech. He had been used in other halls, such as Kings Lynn. That was only 15

miles away but not a lot of fan travelling went on. So the big man was booked for Wisbech ... to face 24-stone Val Kirk, the former rugby player. Would the ring survive?



Jack knew Klondike would be a draw. He was right. Tickets sold like hot cakes. The under-card was pretty fair, too. Mick Collins and Taffy Jenkins would be dead certs to

thrill the crowd for the opener. Both were very popular with the Wisbech fans. Also on the bill, the first appearance of John Monk, who wrestled as Lord Snooty Monk, taking bits from the Gorgeous George act and Lord Bertie Topham's haughty style. His Lordship's schtick was usually to fight the local boy wherever he was appearing, rile the crowd with his tactics, and then in the last round the local blue-eye would start to get on top, only for the bell to ring. Lord Snooty would refuse the challenge to go one more round ... and the crowd would get louder. Then, suddenly, he would agree. As fans settled back ready to see him defeated, the bell would ring, he would grab his velvet cape as he vaulted from the ring and headed at top speed back to the dressing room to a crescendo of derision.



The most difficult job on the bill was probably going to be that faced by Doctor Death's old tag buddy, John Romeiro. He was in against Sheik Abdul Singh. As Sheik Mike Taylor from Kings Lynn he had achieved a level of fame from an appearance on the Dave Allen TV show having needles pushed through his neck. He would lie on broken glass in the ring (a nightmare for the seconds, like me, to clear up.) He lay on beds of nails. He said he could control pain. Sadly this control appeared to desert him when the bell rang and his limited wrestling abilities really did put the onus on his opponents to carry him through to a reasonable finish. So that was the line-up for the curtain-raiser, topped off with the super-heavyweights.

Alas, the best laid plans of mice and International Promotions

I quote from the Wisbech Standard's report of the night : *"Is it possible for a 40 stone giant to be physically able to wrestle? Wisbech fans were very doubtful after the non-appearance of Klondike Bill, billed as the giant from Alaska, at the Corn Exchange on Monday. Booked to fight him was Val Kirk, a 24 stone farmer, who also failed to turn up."*

Yes. Not just one top-of-the-bill no-show, but both of them! Not the most auspicious start to the season. MC Russell Plummer broke the news in the ring, and as the reality of the situation gradually dawned on the packed hall, disappointment soon turned to anger ... and this time there was no Doctor Death in the wings to save the day. Many had paid ten bob to see this clash! Could Jack pull a different rabbit from the hat to pacify the crowd?

12) Rescuing the Situation

The supporting bouts went pretty well. John Romeiro ran from the ring in terror of the Sheik's 'mystical' tactics. (Most thought his tactics were as much mystery as mystical, but he nevertheless left the ring the victor). Roger Ladair, the lone Anglo-Italian on this bill (!) bested the aristocratic Monk, and Mick Collins and Taffy Jenkins put on their usual showpiece draw. It was well received. But none of this made up for the complete absence of the head-liners.

Jack Taylor had been given a bit of notice that he would be facing a problem ... so he did have a little time to make frantic phone-calls and call in favours. He knew he would need experienced pros who knew what was needed to turn this Wisbech crowd. He found them.

Harry Bennett and Dwight J Ingleburgh had known each other for years. As Harry and Sam they had paid their dues in the business, having trained together at the Glover Junction Gym. Jack could not have found two better performers to lift a disappointed crowd out of the gloom, to forget the non-appearance of Klondike Bill and to scream the house down. Jack, Harry and Sam were great friends.

THE NORTHERN
BLOCKBUSTERS . . .

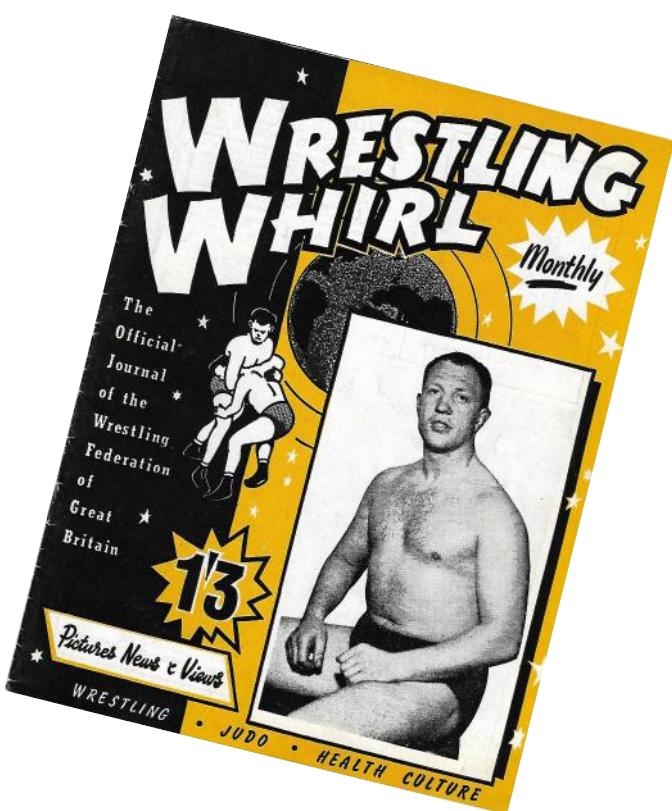


DOMINIC AND CASEY PYE

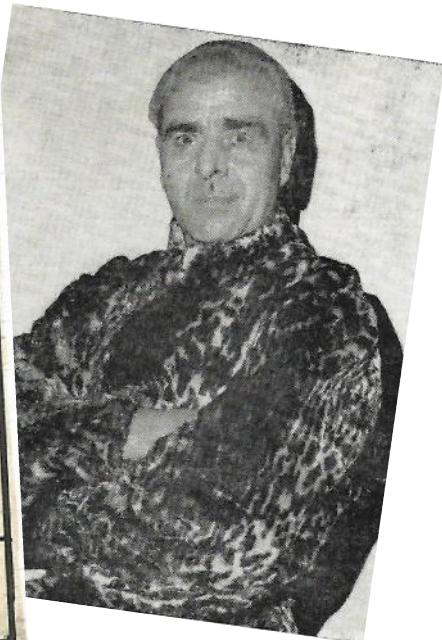
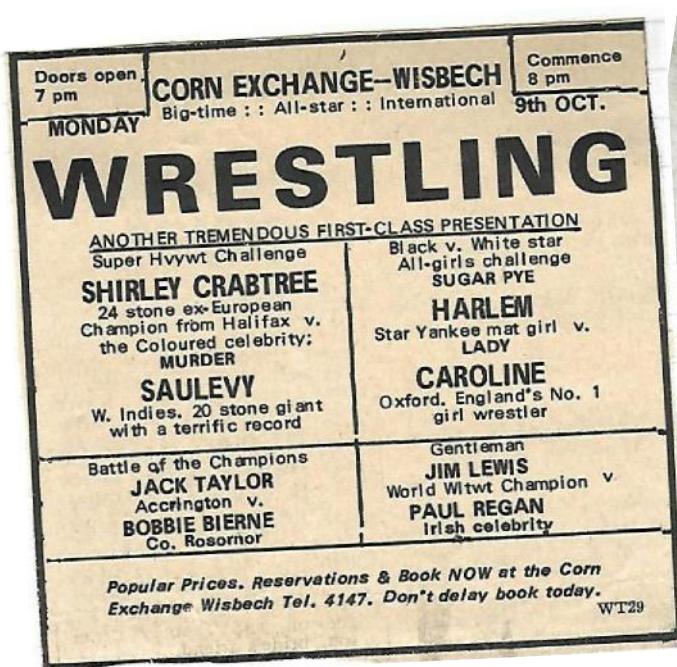
Harry Bennett travelled widely and had appeared in Wisbech once before. He was billed as 'Licker' Harry Bennett, although around the country he was variously billed as 'Rough-House' Harry Bennett, Gypsy Benito and even Casey Pye, a newly-found brother for Dominic Pye. His wild, curly black locks masked his face and added to the rough-house image. In a letter I received from Jack some years later when reminiscing about the old days, Taylor spoke fondly of Harry Bennett and the days they travelled to Wisbech and March. Both looked forward to those two venues.

Dwight J Ingleburgh (below on the cover of *Wrestling Whirl*), being billed as Floyd Patterson's sparring partner, was a real globe-trotter who became (and still is) a great

ambassador for the sport. He had boxed for half-crowns in boxing booths, but the Floyd Patterson line may just be a going a bit far for the Barnsley boy. Anyway, this was the replacement match. Licker Harry Bennett vs Dwight J Ingleburgh. Wisbech fans, having had sight of both grapplers in the past, had a fair idea what they were in for ... but nothing could have prepared them for the slug-fest to come. These old pros both pulled out all the stops, played the crowd like a fiddle and fought to a controversial Bennett win which resulted in chairs being thrown, punches being thrown and one spectator being hit on the head as Bennett fought his way to the safety of the dressing room. Not only had Jack Taylor managed to save the day he'd banked a return match that would clearly fill the hall.



For the second show of the season Jack turned to a double bill featuring super-heavyweights and the ladies. Shirley Crabtree, still able to use the ring at this stage was the big draw, alongside Jack's favourite lady, Lady Caroline. Crabtree was to face a relative unknown (and there appears to be a good reason for this retention of anonymity) called Murder Saulevy. Caroline was to go against Sugar Pye Harlem, who had headlined in the female tag-team match back in the 20th Century Promotions days. Jack himself faced Bobbie Bierne and Gentleman Jim Lewis (below) was to fight Ireland's Paul Regan.

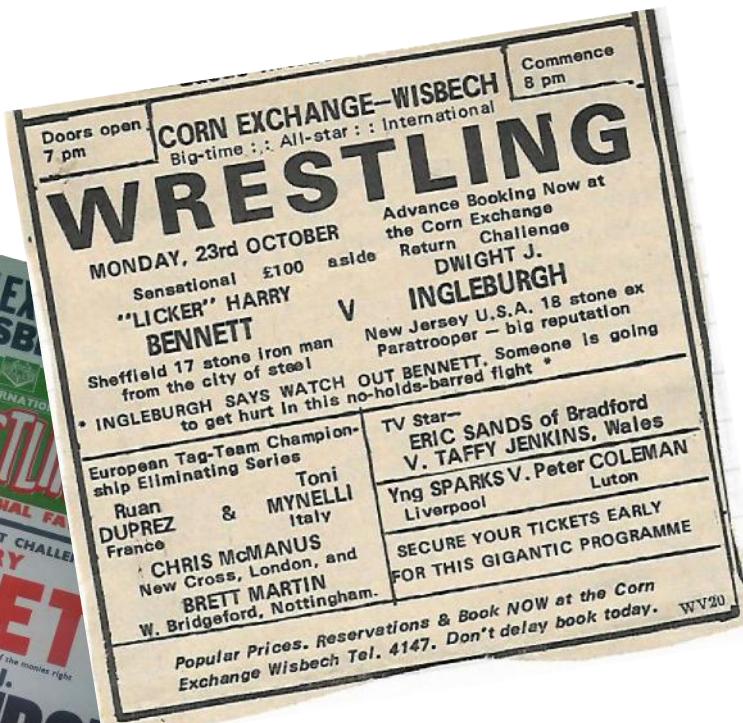
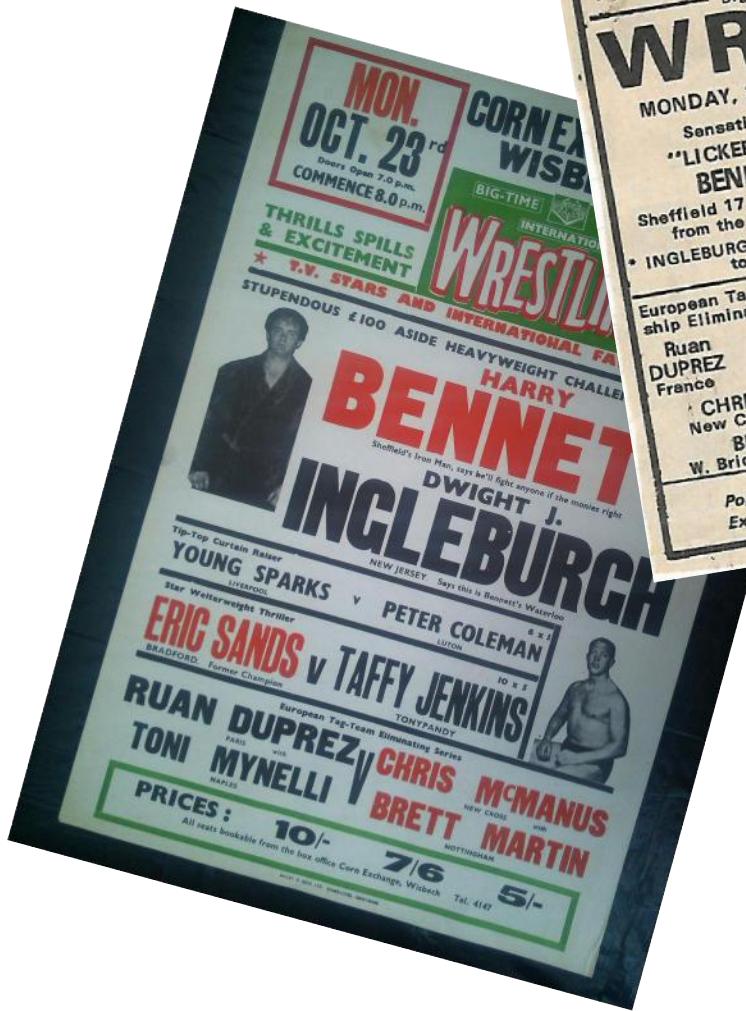


Not for the first time Shirley Crabtree disappointed. His opponent, Mr Saulevy, was clearly out of his class, but Crabtree's attempts to keep the battle going just resulted in slow hand-clapping and foot-stamping. Jack Taylor himself put on a great show in going down to Bobbie Bierne. Taylor was becoming very popular with the Wisbech crowd. Lady Caroline succumbed to Sugar Pye ... but the show-stealer was Gentleman Jim Lewis. And this night needed a show-stealer. Jim gave the crowd the full works. The comb through the hair, the careful folding of the jacket, the horror of the state of the ring stools and buckets, the crowing about his world championship ... he was on fire. The Leicester-based World Welterweight Champion, spurned by the TV boys after his attempt to create a wrestlers' union, saw what Jack needed after the Crabtree-Saulevy debacle. He needed fans to be leaving but wanting more. He had been to Wisbech before, but that night Gentleman Jim Lewis became the rule-breaking Public Enemy Number One in Wisbech. And yes, the fans wanted more of the villain in gold boots. In many ways Lewis had been regarded by some as having passed his peak. But not in Wisbech. He had just arrived.

The third show was probably going to be well-attended anyway, because it was the Bennett v Ingleburgh return. But Jack knew he couldn't afford bad nights. Jim Lewis had rescued his second, creating all the more interest in show three.

Little did he know that it would not just be the much-awaited return bout that fans would go home talking about

13) Don't Mess with Wisbech Fans



So the scene was set for what was billed as the "£100-a-side Return Challenge." The undercard was not exactly a fire-starter. Veteran Eric Sands was billed against Taffy Jenkins, for whom Wisbech was becoming a second home. Young

Sparks and Peter Coleman was the opener and the support match was to be a tag battle between continentals Ruan Duprez with Toni Mynelli facing Chris McManus with Brett Martin. That tag match would have a dramatic personnel change. More of that later.

Coleman beat Sparks in the opener and that was followed by Taffy Jenkins taking on and beating Al Rocco, who replaced Bradford's Sands. After the interval, and a quick trip to the pub for many, it was major showtime. Ingleburgh and Bennett did not disappoint. Dwight J snatched the first fall in round one, much to the delight of the crowd but gradually Bennett got back into the match and pulled off the equaliser. The action was top-notch as Ingleburgh threw Bennett out into row one and pinned him for the winner upon his return to the ring.

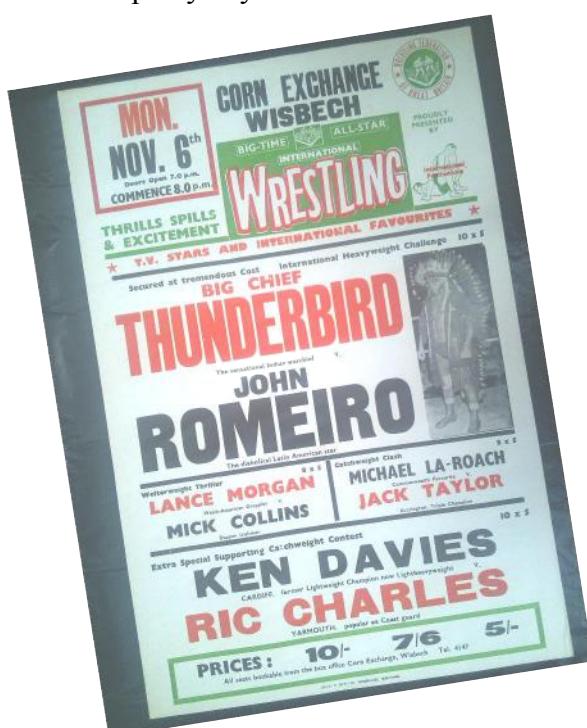
Now it was tag-team time, as Mr Walton would say. Out came Ruan Duprez with Toni Mynelli but it was announced their opponents would see a change from the advertised team of McManus and Martin. Out came two wrestlers dressed all in black with black masks and introduced as ... The Black Knights. Hmmm ... they looked familiar. Twenty minutes of mayhem ended with the disqualification of the Black

Knights. Many in the crowd felt they were being duped because they thought they could guess the identities of these two ... and fans poured towards the ring demanding an unmasking (not for Wisbech fans the tradition of a falls, submissions or knockout win triggering an unmasking). They were after .. if not blood .. masks. My Wisbech Advertiser front-page article (right) tells the tale of the half-hour 'siege' to which, it became clear later, the police had been called. They arrived after the last of the crowd had left

Wisbech had been host to some pretty hairy scenes over the years, but this one was up there with the hairiest. It was a fair demonstration that while the Wisbech crowd could be the most loyal a promoter could ask for, it wasn't to be messed with!

Looking back with hindsight I think the average fan became harder to please from this date. I don't think the actual 'siege' was the reason, but it marked the point at which Jack had to strive harder and harder to pack the hall. On most occasions he triumphed. Show four was not one of those shows.

Show four saw Big Chief Thunderbird topping the bill against Doctor Death's ex tag partner, John Romeiro. The undercard saw Jack himself against Mick LaRoache, Mick Collins against Lance Morgan and the support was Killer Ken Davies against Ric Charles. You might think the support was a strange one, given the weight disparity, but do not linger on this puzzle, because neither of them turned up anyway!



Jack opened the show and won by a knockout. I seem to remember

Mick LaRoache's finisher was often flying out of the ring into the front row and writhing on the floor to await his second (sometimes me) and maybe the St John Ambulance if they were on hand.

The rest of the card did not inspire .. neither in theory nor in practice ... and

Spectators 'besiege' wrestlers

THERE were some ugly scenes in Wisbech Corn Exchange on Monday night following the last wrestling bout.

Two wrestlers had to wait in the ring for more than thirty minutes before they could get out.

A forty-minute tag-team match between Ruan Duprez and Toni Mynelli and the Black Knights, flared up after some 20 minutes when the Black Knights were disqualified.

Spectators crowded round the ring chanting and demanding the Black Knights to remove their hoods. They refused.

LIGHTS OUT

Some of the demonstrators began to lift the ring off the floor. Efforts were made to disperse the crowd by turning amplifiers, playing marching tunes, to full volume. Lights were put out.

This proved more entertaining than ever and people began to shout and stamp.

After about thirty minutes the crowd began to disperse and shortly before eleven o'clock the two besieged wrestlers were able to leave the ring and reach the dressing rooms.

Jack must have been gutted to read my rival newspaper's account of the night. It didn't pull any punches in its précis of the night. "Unexciting Wrestling" was the headline. The Mayor, now Mr Pomeroy, had been present, but that cut no ice with the fans. Male v female matches did make for talking points, but rarely did they deliver the goods. It was not a great inclusion for the card.

So Jack needed some value-for-money grapplers for his next show ... and topping the list he chose Gentleman Jim Lewis lining him up to fight Pancho Gonzales as the support to the Undertakers, who would take part in individual contests. The original Undertakers, Nathaniel and Jonathan, had been exposed as Leno Larazzi and Vince Apollo, presumably as an inter-promotion spoiler, before they jumped ship to Joint. The resurrected Undertakers went by the names of Mathias and Hickory and were billed to face Lorenzo Marino and Taffy Jenkins respectively. Marino in particular was a great worker and I always felt it was a shame that it looked as if he was being billed as a poor man's Mike Marino. He was certainly no-one's fool.

The evening went well, after a terrible start in which Sheik Abdul Singh and Skull Murphy kicked off with a stinker of a match. The Undertakers' two matches were both thrillers. This was the second time Wisbech had been introduced to Undertakers (the originals were part of the last-of-the-season extravaganza). But the talk of the town was once again Gentleman Jim Lewis who threw Pancho Gonzales all over the place, while fans, probably harking back to the 'siege' atmosphere, threw all sorts of things in the ring. Scuffles broke out as Jim tried to get back to boot room. There were few wrestlers with Jim Lewis's ability to get heat with the raise of an eyebrow. Another success.

December approached, and Jack decided to do a full roster for this season, which would mean another 13 shows to run through to May 1968. That's another 13 shows that would spring surprises, titles and a strange (if brave) attempt to bring together the future and the past.

Unexciting wrestling

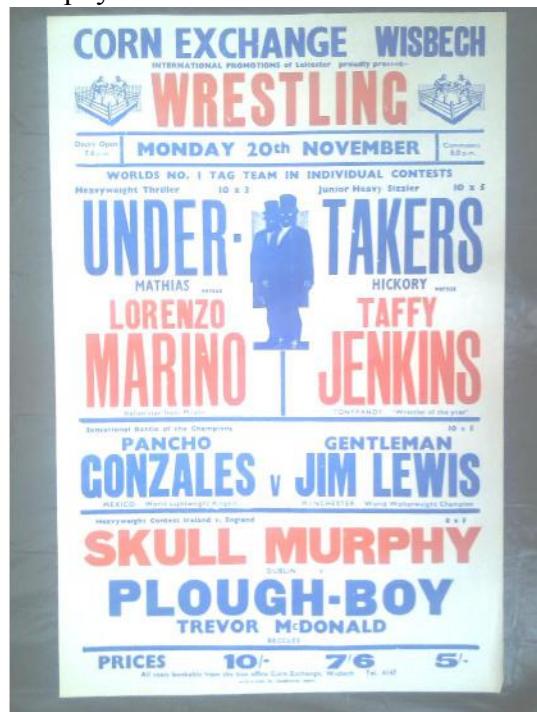
Wisbech wrestling fans were disappointed at the poor show put up by some of the eight wrestlers at the Corn Exchange, on Monday evening.

Only one of the four bouts had really great interest for the near-capacity crowd, and that was the main bout of the evening, a robust heavyweight contest between Big Chief Thunderbird and John Romeiro, who was knocked out.

Final bout, a welterweight contest between Lance Morgan and Irishman Mick Collins, ended quite sensationally, when Morgan hurled his opponent across the ring, and Collins literally hung through the ropes by his neck.

A male v female match between Lady Caroline and Lord Snooty Monk, replaced the billed catchweight contest between Ken Davies of Wales, and Yarmouth boy Ric Charles. Caroline was disqualified.

In the first bout of the evening, Jack Taylor beat Mick La Roach.



..... to be continued