

Snitterton Bull Ring.

BY G. LE BLANC SMITH.



IN the Statement of Accounts for the year 1906, which were published in the last number of the *Journal*, there occurs the following item:—

“Repairs to Snitterton Bull Ring, £0 15s. od.”

This little item, if ever noticed, would probably convey but little meaning to many people, but as a matter of fact there is much of interest in this payment.

Bull Rings were the places where, in the early part of the last century, the sporting proclivities of the nobility, gentry, and commoners found vent in a debasing and disgusting practice termed Bull-baiting.

Few of these rings now exist, but, after much inquiry, I have discovered that there are six in existence, still *in situ*, and one removed from its original position; seven in all. They are at:

Snitterton, Derbyshire.	Horsham, Sussex.
Battle, Sussex (lately buried).	Loppington, Shropshire.
Cellarhead, Staffs.	Kilham, Yorks. (not <i>in situ</i>).
Brading, Isle of Wight.	

At Eyam and Foolow specimens are said to exist under the ground.

Now, as to the actual baiting.

A detailed history of this now obsolete sport remains to be written, but the actual measure suppressing this barbarity was

safely passed in 1835. A similar measure was attempted in 1809, but one fiery member spoke warmly and eloquently in favour of the continued observance of this custom, maintaining that this "manly (!) exercise was one of the prime reasons of our growth of population and survival of military ardour." The result of this impassioned eloquence was that the Bill for the suppression of bull-baiting was thrown out by a majority of 45 votes—73 to 28.

When, however, the Bill at last became law, some twenty-six years later, the greatest adherents to the sport were compromised by a present of beef, not altogether to their complete satisfaction, as at Wokingham, as we shall see later.

Despite the law, however, the baiting of bulls continued till 1840 at the "wakes" at Eccles, Lancashire. In 1853, the practice still continued at West Derby, Liverpool.

The *Globe* quotes an instance of a correspondent to a provincial paper who mentioned, not long ago, that he had been talking only recently with a lady who remembered witnessing, as a child, the baiting both of a bull and a bear, at places in Cheshire near the Shropshire border!

The Stamford "bull-running" expired in 1840, but not without very much more than verbal protest. The Home Secretary at that time, Lord John Russell, together with a dragoon regiment and many hundred special constables, endeavoured for five years to stop it, but the cleverness with which bulls were smuggled into the town and released in the streets always baffled their united forces.

Finally, good sense came to the rescue, and on November 3rd, 1840, the inhabitants, at a public meeting, decided, owing to the large cost of the military necessary, to cease this cruel system of torture, from no sympathy with the bull. Somewhat similar scenes took place at Wokingham, whose people took a pride in their bull ring, and when the Corporation ordered the suppression of the game in 1822, great resentment was aroused locally.



FIG. 1.—BULL RING, PRIOR TO PRESERVATION.

A certain George Staverton had bequeathed two bulls annually, to be baited and then given away to the poor. When the Corporation stepped in, and decided to kill the bulls in a more humane way, the populace rose in anger. Year after year the yard where the bulls were to be decently despatched was broken into by the infuriated mob and their legal prize carried off, and secretly, or rather informally, baited to death; this occurred certainly once in 1835, and we are told that one amateur and enthusiastic bull-baiter "lying on the ground, actually seized the poor brute by the nostril with his teeth."

This cruel tethered baiting subsided for good in 1840, after a stiff sentence of imprisonment had been passed on the ring-leaders.

Aylesbury rejoiced in a bull-baiting at the termination of the trial of Queen Caroline, and "the jubilee of George the Third at Windsor by a like performance," and so late as 1828 there was a baiting at Oakley, for which the bull was dosed with beer and gin "to promote a little excitement in him!"

The name of "bull ring" still clings to many a locality at this day, perhaps the most notorious being that at Birmingham; others are at Ashburton and Cullompton, in Devonshire, the latter place having two, termed the Higher and the Lower Rings respectively; Shropshire, in addition to that still in existence at Loppington, possessed two others, namely, at Whitchurch and Ludlow, while Staffordshire used to have one at Great Chatwell. Southwark High Street, in London, had one prior to 1560, when it was demolished. The top of Corve Street, Ludlow, is called the "Bull Ring," and it is presumed that baiting took place here between the top of the hill, Corve Street, and the streets, Old Street, Gaolford, and the Narrows.

The existing bull ring at Cellarhead is in perfect preservation, and *in situ*. Cellarhead is near to Werrington, is four miles from Hanley, three miles north of Caverswall; and is partly in

the parish of Cheddleston. The ring is now enclosed in the grounds of an ancient hotel, fixed in the centre of a natural amphitheatre.

The ring at Horsham, Sussex, is to be found near the village stocks, in a small enclosure near the Carfax—as the point from which the main streets of the town radiate is called. This specimen is said to have last been used about 1814.

Lancashire seems to have been much to the fore in the enjoyment of this form of "Sport," as at Preston there is still a stone to be seen in the Market Place, in which a ring was once fixed; it has, however, disappeared, and now only the stone remains. Chesterfield, Derbyshire, also had one in the Market Place, for a local bye-law enacts that every bull killed for human consumption should previously be baited in the Market Place, unless the butcher should care to pay a fine of 3s. 4d. It would seem very doubtful whether any butcher—for butchers are not as a rule the most tender-hearted and humanitarian members of society—would miss seeing a helpless creature tormented, the chance of a good tender carcase, or lose his 3s. 4d.

The ring at Battle, Sussex, has of late years been buried beneath an inch or two of soil, just in front of the Abbey gate, during levelling operations.

There was a ring at Guildford, and the stone yet remains *in situ*, though the great leather collar which secured the bull is in the possession of Dr. Williamson, of Guildford.

At Totnes, Devon, the baitings were carried out at a spot known as the Plains, near the bridge, and in 1900 a ring was dug up here which doubtless was used in this barbarous sport. Plymouth celebrated its last bull-baiting in 1830, in a field in Gilbert's Lane, Milehouse. The admittance was a shilling. "The bull was tethered to the ground, and dog after dog was let loose to worry it, preparatory to the slaughter. By degrees the bull turned up the ground to find a refuge for its nose and mouth; and again and again, one dog was tossed, another gored,

a third was caught by the farmer's wife—who ran about holding her apron open so that she might intercept the pets, and break their falls. 'Fresh dog—form a lane!' was the periodical cry, as a new trainer came forward to gain experience for his animal and to prove its expertness."—(From Mr. H. Whitfield's *Plymouth and Devonport: In times of War and Peace* [1900].)

Apart from the love of "sport," which is the Englishman's chief inheritance, there was an idea that the meat was improved in quality. The provision of suitable bulls fell, at Southampton, on the shoulders of the Mayor; at Weymouth a special detective seems to have been kept to spy upon the local butchers, for according to *The Encyclopædia of Sport*, in 1618, one Edward Hardy, butcher, "one of the searchers sworn and appointed for the viewing and searching of corrupt flesh killed within borough and town, sayeth and presented upon his said oath that John Hingston, butcher there, upon Friday, being the fourteenth day of this instant month (August), did kill a bull unbaited, and did put the flesh thereof unto sale, and thereupon he is amerced by Mr. Mayor at iijs. iijd."

In 1646, another member of the same family, Justinian Hingston, was fined for the same offence.

One of the reasons given for the baiting of bulls was that the flesh of bulls was unfit for food unless previously baited with dogs.

A writer in *The Globe* quotes from an ancient book on "Natural Magick" of 1669, by J. P. Porta, in which the following occurs:—

"The flesh of old oxen is hard and dry and will not easily boil," therefore "the butchers set hounds at them, and let them prey upon them, and they will for some hours defend themselves with their horns; at last, being overcome by multitudes of dogs, they fall with their ears torn, and bit in their skin; these, brought into the shambles, and cut up, are more tender than ordinary."

Thomas Muffett, in his *Health's Improvement*, 1655, says:—

“ Bull's flesh, unless it be very young, is utterly unwholesome and hard of digestion, yea, almost invincible. Of how hard and binding a nature bull's blood is may appear by the place where they are killed; for it glazeth the ground and maketh it of a stony hardness. To prevent which mischief either bulls in old time were torn by lions, or hunted by men, or baited by dogs, as we use them: to the intent that violent heat and motion might attenuate their blood, resolve their hardness, and make the flesh softer in digestion. Bull's flesh being thus prepared, strong stomachs may receive some good thereby, though to weak, yea, to temperate stomachs, it will prove hurtful.”

With this consolation, perhaps, those who were kind-hearted enough to see the pain inflicted, comforted themselves.

Bye-laws were in force at other places in addition to Chesterfield for the propagation of this cruel pastime, as, in the recently edited Leicester Borough Records, it is enacted that:

“ no bocher kylle no bull to sell within this town, but yf it be bayted before in payne of a forfeiture thereof.”

The bull was tied by either his nose-ring or else by a leather collar to the ring fixed in the ground.

The “tethered” manner of baiting a bull, as was in use at Snitterton, is thus described by a writer at the end of the seventeenth century:—

“ I'll say something of baiting the bull; which is by having a collar about his neck, fastened to a thick rope about 3, 4 or 5 yards long, hung to a hook so fastened to a stake that it will turn round; with this the bull circulates to watch his enemy, which is a mastiff dog (commonly used to the sport) with a short nose that his teeth may take the better hold. This dog, if right, will creep upon his belly that he may, if possible, get the bull by the nose, which the bull carefully tries to defend by laying it close to the ground, when his

horns are also ready to do what in them lies to toss this dog; and this is true sport. But if more dogs than one come at once, or they are cowardly and come under his legs, he will, if he can, stamp their guts out."

At Liverpool, one particularly plucky bull succeeded in so pleasing the spectators that it was, as a great treat, *taken to the play!* It was dragged off in triumph and coloured ribbons, and installed with due ceremony in one of the boxes of the Liverpool theatre!

In later years this obsolete custom had in some way deteriorated, and became more brutal even, in that there was no excuse about tough meat, as the meat was not devoured. In 1716 the following advertisement was made public:—

"At the request of several persons of quality, on Monday, the 11th of this instant of June, is one of the largest and most mischievous of bears that ever was seen in England to be *baited to death*, with other variety of bull-baiting and bear-baiting; as also a wild bull to be turned loose in the same place, with fireworks all over him."

Again, in 1730, despite efforts to suppress the sport, we have the following advertisement of His Majesty's Bear Garden:—

"A mad bull to be dressed up with fireworks and turned loose in the game place. Likewise a dog to be dressed up with fireworks over him, and turned loose with the bull among the men in the ground. Also a bear to be turned loose at the same time; and a cat to be tied to the bull's tail.

"NOTE.—The doors will be opened at four and the sport begin at five exactly, because the diversion will last long and the days grow short."

A very instructive article appeared in *The Encyclopædia of Sport*, giving many references to past tournaments.

The bull was always in worse plight than the bear, in that the latter was a considerable expense, bulls were cheap and their

meat was improved by the treatment they received; he had, though, a fair, but not always a certain, chance of having a game with his persecutors. One case in particular deserves mention; it is told of a worthy publican at Stamford who, heated with the chase and excitement, was pursued by the tormented animal to the river's brink. He plunged in and promptly expired from apoplexy brought on by the shock.

In the work previously referred to the following occurs:—

“It is well to distinguish between the bull-running and the bull-baiting proper, of which the former was seen in its greatest perfection at Tutbury, Staffs., and at Stamford.

“The traditional origin at Stamford was a chance fight between two bulls in a meadow by the town. A dog interfered in the fight and drove one of the bulls into the town, where it was promptly beset by all the other dogs, and ‘became so stark mad that it ran over man, woman and child that stood in its way.’ The Lord of the town, William, Earl of Warenne, was attracted by the tumult, and it appealed so keenly to his sense of humour that he bestowed the meadows in which the quarrel started upon the butchers of the town, upon condition that they should provide a mad bull, for the continuance of that sport, every year on the day or week before Christmas.

“The bull was always stabled overnight in an alderman's outhouse, and for the next day all shops were closed, all business suspended. The only rule of the game seems to have been that there must be no iron on the bull-clubs. The bull was turned out, and then, in butcher's picturesque style, ‘hivie, shivie, tag and rag,’ men, women and children of all sorts and sizes, with all the dogs in the town, promiscuously run after him, with their bull-clubs scattering dirt in each other's faces, as when Theseus and Pirithous conquered Hell and punished Cerberus. ‘A ragged troupe of boys and girls do follow him with stones, with clubs and



FIG. 2.—THE BULL RING, AS NOW PRESERVED.

whips, and many nips, they part his skin from bones.' And (which is the greater shame) I have seen both senatores majorum gentium et matrones (*sic*) de eodem gradu, following this bulling business."

Tutbury has already been mentioned in regard to its bull-running, and the following account appears in Blount's *Tenures of Land and Customs of Manors*:—

"After dinner, all the minstrels repair to the Priory Gate, in Tutbury, without any manner of weapons, attending the turning out of the bull, which the bailiff of the Manor is obliged to provide, and is there to have *the tips of his horns sawed off, his ears and tail cut off, his body smeared all over with soap, and his nose blown full of beaten pepper*.¹ Then the steward causes proclamation to be made that all manner of persons, except minstrels, shall give way to the bull, and not come within forty foot of him, at their own peril, nor hinder the minstrels in their pursuit of him; after which proclamation the Prior's bailiff turns out the bull among the minstrels, and if any of them can cut off a piece of his skin before he runs into Derbyshire, then he is the King of Music's bull, but if the bull gets into Derbyshire, sound and uncut, he is the Lord Prior's again. If the bull be taken and a piece of him cut off, he is then brought to the bailiff's house, and there collared and roped, *and so brought to the bull-ring, in the high street at Tutbury, and there baited with dogs*;² the first course in honour of the King of Music, the second in honour of the Prior, the third for the town, and if more, for the divertisement of the spectators, and after he is baited the King³ may dispose of him as he pleases.

"This usage is of late perverted; the young men of Stafford and Derbyshires contend with cudgels about a yard

¹ The italics are mine.

² The italics are mine.

³ Evidently the "King of Music."

long, the one party to drive the bull into Derbyshire, the other to keep him in Staffordshire, in which contest many heads are often broken. The King of Music and the bailiff have also of late compounded, the bailiff giving the King five nobles (£1 13s. 4d.) in lieu of his right to the bull, and then sends him to the Duke of Devonshire's Manor at Hardwicke, to be fed and given to the poor at Christmas."

The Duke of Devonshire stopped this disgusting series of exhibitions in 1778, "respecting," we are told, "rather civility than antiquity."

A contributor to *Notes and Queries*, some years ago, states that the owner of a dog, which was thought to have the pluck necessary to bait a bull, paid 1s. as entrance fee for the privilege, the dog "pinning" the bull to receive five shillings.

The example at Snitterton is situated near the north-eastern apex of the triangle enclosed by the junction of the Matlock to Snitterton Hall road, the Snitterton Hall to Wensley road, and that from Wensley to Matlock. The staple, through which the ring passes, is considerably worn, showing that it has had no slight usage; the whole is very massive, as though the people in the locality had been in no mind to be baited *by* the bull, instead of *vice versa*.

This Derbyshire bull ring was, during the year of grace 1906, excellently preserved by setting the staple in concrete 6 ins. deep, and, above that, 3 ins. of cement. The cement extends for a considerable distance at the top (3 sq. ft.), and protects the staple and ring from the effects of the water, which used to cover it after every storm of rain,¹ when it was in the condition shown in fig. 1. Fig. 2 shows it since restoration.

During the operation of digging down to the stone in which the staple is secured below ground, I had the good fortune to hear the views and recollections of several old villagers. One man, in particular, told me that he was told by his father that

¹ Owing to children playing with it, it was left lying in a hollow scooped out by them.

often in the evenings men from Winster, Wensley, and other neighbouring villages would bring down their bull-dogs to be tried against a bull at Snitterton, or else matched against one another. The constant use to which the ring and staple were thus subjected made the substitution of a new set of bull-baiting paraphernalia for the old a wise precaution. I am told that last century the new stone was put in; it was 7 ft. deep and 2 ft. broad, and weighed so much that four horses were required for its carriage to Snitterton. When the stone was dug down to, this tale was found to be perfectly true in so far as the dimensions were concerned, and the staple—which projects 2 ft. from the top of the stone in order to reach the surface—was found to be quite sound, but somewhat worn at the top from use. The ring was likewise worn at one point. My informant described the importance of Snitterton during the early years of the past century, when it was on the turnpike road from Newhaven House to Nottingham, and “there were three pubs. once on a time.”

There are now no public-houses at Snitterton, and the village has apparently been growing beautifully less for some years.

To revert to the actual bull-baiting. My informant told me that his father described the bull-dogs to him, and that they were much smaller and longer than the modern bull-dog (which he considered “no good at all”), and more like the bull-terrier as regards head and neck, but shorter on the forelegs and generally brindled.

The inhabitants of Snitterton take the keenest interest in their bull ring, and were much delighted to see the effectual steps towards its perpetual protection which the Derbyshire Archæological Society so wisely undertook. The ring may not be so valuable nowadays as it will be, and when the barbarous sport is considered to be of sufficient archæological interest to form the subject of a monograph—as may happen in a few centuries—let us hope that the bull ring at Snitterton may not be the only one left to tell its tale.

The photographs show the situation of the ring in fig. 1, while in fig. 2 may be seen the ring itself since its preservation. In fig. 1 the arrow points directly to it.

Much of the above has been quoted verbatim from an article of mine, on the same subject, published in the January number of *The Reliquary and Illustrated Archaeologist* for 1907.