

Fair fights and cut-throats

Clive Emsley surveys the cultural history of 'hard man' violence in Britain.

On 15 May 1919 Hugh Stanley Jolly was walking along Grimsby Street in Great Yarmouth with a girl on his arm. Jolly, a 26 year-old labourer, had recently been discharged from war service in the army. He was drunk. Three young women standing in the street appear to have giggled and passed some comment. Two of them quickly ran off. The third, Gladys May Upton aged 17, was slower. Jolly felt in his pocket, drew a cut-throat razor and slashed the girl across the throat with such force that she was nearly decapitated. At his trial, the following October, Jolly was found guilty, but insane.

The incident has modern resonances given the contemporary concerns about the carrying of knives or edged weapons, about stranger on stranger violence and about violence towards women. All of these, according to some commentators, to some parts of the media and to knee-jerk, populist politicians are new phenomena. Moreover at times it would appear that they are the only forms of

to these weapons being drawn and used. Court records have plenty of such examples. But these same records are also indicative of significant and shifting behaviours and cultural perspectives.

From the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries there appears to have been a significant shift in ideas of masculinity, particularly among gentlemen and tradesmen. A man's reputation began to depend less on his physicality and rather more on such things as his professional standing, his probity, his good works. By the early nineteenth century 'violence' was being defined and understood as a social problem. It was something that respectable people avoided and denigrated. They labelled violence as primitive and uncivilized. It was behaviour indulged in by the working class, by children, especially boys, and by the indigenous peoples of other lands that were being brought the benefits of civilization by imperial expansion. Elements of these changes can be found across western societies but the British, and specifically the

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crime. Over time things change, of course. But a study of the history of crime also suggests that there are many recurrent patterns within violent crime while supposed new panics and new policies often resemble well-worn retreads. Jolly's killing of Gladys Upton was reported in the national press. It came at a moment when concerns were being expressed about soldiers returning from the war brutalized by their training and their experiences in the trenches, and possibly disturbed mentally by what was then termed shell shock. Yet for all the fears of the time, such stranger on stranger violence was relatively rare. Moreover, as will be argued below, there were ways of dismissing such violence when it did occur as 'un-English'. Also, while violence was not everyone's automatic response to provocation or mockery, there appear to have been cultural inhibitors that militated against the use of weapons in spite of their ready availability, and the daily use of things such as cut-throat razors.

Gentry, and others, carried swords well into the eighteenth century and swords were used to settle quarrels. Until relatively recently many working men in Britain commonly carried some kind of sharp or edged weapon as a tool of their trade. An argument in a pub, or at home, occasionally led

'English', put an additional slant on them with the developing ideas of Englishness and, particularly, with the image of the English gentleman.

The idealized English gentleman was controlled and restrained. He fought only if severely provoked or to protect the weak. He fought fairly, and his favoured weapon was his fist. Boxing had become a popular sport in the eighteenth century involving all social classes. Its supporters boasted that it inculcated the courage and manliness that had given the English their decisive edge in battles from Crécy and Agincourt to Trafalgar and Waterloo. Continental Europeans, in contrast, were condemned for using knives, cudgels and stones and for attacking opponents in cowardly and sneaky ways rather than bravely facing them in a contest and shaking hands at the end. These ideas were reflected when homicides and assaults came to court. Foreigners who used knives in a fight on British soil were known to receive reduced sentences, coupled with a little homily from a magistrate or a judge that this was not how Englishmen behaved. Englishmen, who used knives, in contrast, were commonly given severe sentences and a very severe dressing down from the bench. Deaths that resulted from 'fair fights' with fists could be excused by the



A gang robs a victim on the street. Illustration by R&G Cruikshank in Egan's Life in London. Mary Evans Picture Library.

courts and by respectable gentlemen well into the nineteenth century. When, for example, in 1825 Lord Shaftesbury's youngest son died as a result of a 'fair' fight organised by boys at his school, his lordship declined to prosecute.

The attitude towards guns was similar to that towards knives. During the eighteenth century the pistol largely replaced the sword as the weapon to be used in a duel. But duelling with lethal weapons was increasingly frowned upon and had largely died out in Britain by the mid-nineteenth century. Firearms were not a common tool for a workingman but even so, as with knives, there was no restriction on gun ownership. Publicans were known to keep guns behind their bars to discourage troublemakers. There was a moral panic in the early 1880s over burglars allegedly buying cheap modern pistols from a major London department store. The official response was to arm some police officers. Yet for all the availability of guns in Victorian and Edwardian England – and unfortunately there appear to be no figures available – there seems to have been very

little crime involving firearms.

It is difficult to assess the impact of cultural ideas on behaviour. Yet it is at least arguable that the idea of the fair fist fight being the proper way for Englishmen to resolve an argument had some impact in discouraging some working men from using their workday knives in arguments. It may also discouraged use of firearms, in spite of what appears to have been potentially wide availability.

But if there were cultural inhibitors that may have discouraged the use of weapons acting within British society most notably in the Victorian, Edwardian and inter-war periods, there was still inter-personal violence. The extent of this violence is impossible to measure. As today, the Judicial Statistics reveal fewer crimes against the person than crimes against property. For what they are worth, both sets of figures declined gradually from the middle to the end of the nineteenth century and began gradually to rise again in the twentieth.

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Many instances of assault appear to have been taken before civil courts, but such cases await historical investigation. Evidence from the criminal courts, which has been much better studied, suggests that a high percentage of violence involved individuals that knew each other, and much of it was committed within the domestic sphere. In keeping with the perceptions of Englishness the wife-beater was demonized as a member of the rough working class, though in reality such offenders could be found in any social class. Evidence from the courts further suggests that judges and magistrates took the lead in condemning such behaviour. In some instances juries (all male until the early twentieth century) were less than keen to convict and often showed sympathy to the defence that the wife was a drunkard or not performing her domestic duties. Occasionally also the defence was accepted that the husband-assailant had been drunk and therefore not responsible for his actions.

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Within many working-class districts the old notions of masculinity depending upon physicality and a man's personal strength and preparedness to use that strength still existed. There were also no inhibitions among many of these hard men about the use of weapons. Youth street gangs were similar. They fought over territory and girls; sometimes their girls fought too. At the close of the nineteenth century they wore distinctive clothes with heavy brass buckles on their belts that could be used as weapons, together with boots, knives, razors, cudgels, brass knuckles and even firearms. Members of the public condemned this youth violence, yet they themselves were rarely at risk since the 'fighting gangs' were organised principally to fight with rivals. It was the same with criminal gangs. These were hard men, usually from the rough working-class districts, recruited by entrepreneurs whose business was illegal or on the fringe of legality. The best known of such gangs in the early twentieth-century were those employed by bookmakers to contest and defend territory. Again, such gangs were known to employ all kinds of weapons. But while the media might have a feeding frenzy when two gangs fought at, or travelling to or from a race meeting, and while scores might be settled in pubs, clubs or in the street, ordinary members of the public were rarely at risk.

The modern parallels with the youth gangs, the criminal gangs, the domestic violence and the occasional use of weapons are obvious. The problem of assessing the extent of change is far more difficult, not least because of the statistical problems. From press and anecdotal evidence it

seems reasonable to conclude that, while today working men rarely carry in their pocket or belt pointed or edged instruments as common tools of their trade, the carrying of knives by young people has increased considerably. For some knives seem to have become fashion accessories. Guns appear to have a similar appeal among some young men, though probably it remains the case that their use is confined primarily to strong-arm men linked with criminal entrepreneurial activity. The problem then becomes what to do about a more general use of weaponry if what appear to have been cultural inhibitors in the past, have now disappeared. For around 200 years the courts have been taking an increasingly tougher stance on domestic violence. Sometimes it would appear that the courts acted in advance of legislators and increasingly they appear to have brought juries, and others, on to their side. In few communities in Britain is it now acceptable to discipline a spouse or a child with a blow, a boot,

a belt or a stick. Cultural inhibitors would seem now to exist for most people; yet the problem of domestic violence remains and remains largely unquantifiable.

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