

Images of two 19th-century pugilists, Iago Black (this page) and Tom Sayers (opposite) are painted in oil on panels of three planks of pine. These and three accompanying female figures once belonged to a fairground, but their exact date of creation and purpose are unknown



PUNCH LINES

Appearing – for ten days only – at London’s Olympia antiques fair this June, a group of naive painted panels evokes the heady, no-holds-barred days of Victorian prizefighting and the risqué razzmatazz of the circus. They’re knockouts, reports Sophie Barling from ringside ▷





NOT LONG AFTER 4AM on Tuesday 17 April 1860, a train departed London Bridge packed with over a thousand passengers clutching tickets 'to nowhere and back'. One journalist in an overloaded second-class carriage gleefully noted in his compartment the presence of 'a live lord, a live baronet, a member of parliament, the very gentlemanly editor of a distinguished sporting paper . . . , an aristocratic Scotchman, a clergyman of the Church of England, and a renowned poet of the tender passions'. For the first 15 miles of their journey, these illicit travellers would have seen, out of their carriage windows, the odd policeman posted ineffectually along the line. Deposited two hours later at the village of Farnborough in Hampshire, the motley crowd, joined by throngs more, tramped across difficult, muddy terrain to a spot where a 24sq ft enclosure was marked out with rope and stakes. Into this ring stepped Tom Sayers, England's champion bare-knuckle prize-fighter. The 34-year-old was there to fight – illegally – John Heenan, 25, for the championship of England and America, in effect the first international boxing match.

Expectations were high. Post-match reports in the press reached new heights of hyperbole, comparing the two pugilists to their Homeric antecedents, or to knights from a more chivalric age, blow-by-blow accounts speaking of 'the immortal Sayers' and 'the immortal Heenan'. A reporter from *The Times* put things more simply: 'Much as all decent people disliked the idea of two fine men meeting to beat each other half to death, it was nevertheless devoutly wished that, as somebody was to be beaten, it might be the American.' There were apparently few, decent or indecent, who disliked the idea so much as to stay away that morning. Among the crowd supporting 'Brighton Titch', as the vertically challenged Sayers was nicknamed, were a 19-year-old Prince of Wales, the prime minister Lord Palmerston, WM Thackeray and Charles Dickens. But they were to be disappointed in a decisive result, for the match finished on a draw 42 rounds and two and a half hours later, when Aldershot police broke it up, and the severely bloodied fighters fled – Sayers to quaff champagne at The Swan on the Old Kent Road.

Indecisive as it was, the meeting went down in sporting history. (With the introduction of the anti-prizefight act just around the corner, this was the last bare-knuckle boxing match of its kind in England.) Staffordshire flatback figure groups of Heenan and Sayers in action – one now in the Victoria & Albert Museum – were duly fashioned for fans to place proudly on their mantelpieces. It was Sayers's last fight, and it made him a national hero.

Set against an aptly coloured blood-red ground, a full-length, life-size depiction of Tom Sayers graces one of the painted-pine panels on these pages. And graceful the image certainly is: all rosy cheeks and lips, fists politely at the ready, perfectly honed from his brawny, drum-like trunk to his mirror-shiny black boxing boots. This man is up to scratch, no doubt. Like the Staffordshire figures, the stylised, naive oil painting makes little attempt at a real likeness. 'This kind of art does have a coarse quality to it,' agrees Lucy Johnson, who is showing the group at London's Olympia fair this June. 'It's meant to evoke an emotion rather than being a pure representation.' The kind of emotion, perhaps, stirred up by such cries as 'Roll up! Roll up!', 'And now, >



Top: the green-stockinged Miss Tilly is given a commemorative date of 1878, and her initials are embroidered on her daringly low-cut dress. Above right: written in chalk on the back of Iago Black's life-size panel are the words 'This way to the toilets', a clue to its positioning when it was in use at a fairground

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for my next trick' and 'Come and see the fattest lady in the world!' In other words, the thrill-promising exhortations and imperatives of the fairground or circus. For that sphere very likely engendered this depiction of Tom Sayers, as well as his (near-identical) boxing counterpart Iago Black, and three jaw-droppingly voluptuous, odalisque-like female performers: Miss Rosie, Miss Tilly and one Lola Ortez.

While the panels – created either in or some time after 1880 (the latest date commemorated on one of them) – came to a previous owner after the dispersal of the Nicholls Derby fairground, the exact circumstances of their conception are unknown. But it's safe to say that the stage – of one sort or another – was never far away from the boxing ring. (At the time of Sayers's historic fight against Heenan, the American had just married actress Adah Isaacs Menken, soon to appear 'naked' in nude-coloured tights for the title role of *Mazeppa* in Astley's circus.) Given the unofficial, gig-like nature of the prize ring at the time, fighters – even champions – had to supplement their income with other employment. (The path from pugilist to publican, for instance, was a well-trodden one.) 'Fistic tournaments' were a regular feature at English fairgrounds and travelling circuses in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the business of entertainment seemed to come particularly easily to some boxers. In 1861 the Norfolk-born champion Jem Mace advertised in *Bell's Life*: 'in addition to the daring and wonderful feats performed by the celebrated artistes of M. Pablo Fanque, Mace will set-to with his black from America, and show his Champion of England's belt...' Six years later, he was with Barrington's circus in Peckham: 'Jem Mace, Champion of England, will appear and delineate the Roman and Grecian statues, with lime-light effects, for six nights...' Tom Sayers, too, had a go at the Other Ring, briefly managing his own circus during his retirement.

No matter how humble his beginnings, there was no walk of life, it seems, that a bare-knuckle prizefighter in the 19th century might not experience. Jack Broughton, who wrote the first rules of boxing in 1743, was buried in Westminster Abbey; 'Gentleman' John Jackson became bosom buddies with Lord Byron who, along with fellow Romantic John Keats, was an avid boxing fan (*WoI* June 1997); Tom Spring – a butcher's son from Herefordshire 'discovered' by the Duke of Norfolk – modelled for Royal Academy students in between bouts and was one of 18 pugilists chosen to be pages at George IV's coronation. By Sayers's time, with the exception of his match against Heenan, prizefighting had fallen out of favour with the fanciest of the Fancy, as its followers were termed. Nevertheless, when he died five years after hanging up his gloves (so to speak), tens of thousands of people came out to see his cortège on its way to Highgate cemetery. Meanwhile, the identities and lives of Iago Black, Misses Rosie, Tilly and Lola Ortez are lost to the mists of time. But then, presumably, none of them saw off competition from a Yank ■

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Top: the bare-breasted Lola Ortez's costume, reminiscent of a trapeze artist's, is particularly risqué. Red buttons near her boots and a crease behind the knee betray the presence of leggings, but their flesh colour is intentionally deceptive. Above left: Brighton-born champion prizefighter Tom Sayers