

**HULL FOLK WHO MADE THEIR MARK****BARBARA BUTTRICK, BOXER**

*Photo courtesy of Boxing News*

**What a monstrous, degrading, disgusting idea! Would anyone like to go out with a girl sporting two lovely purple-black eyes?** *Peter Wilson, Sunday Pictorial 1948*

**Degrading to womanhood** *Variety Artists' Federation 1949*

**I think all this talk about girls not boxing is old fashioned. Girls aren't the delicate flowers they used to be.** *Barbara Buttrick, 1949 aged 19*

Barbara Buttrick was born in Cottingham in 1930 and was always small for her age. 'I was small, but I was mean' she once said. As a girl, she wanted to play football, but lack of interest from other girls prevented her from raising a team. Then, when she was 15, she chanced upon a copy of the Sunday Dispatch which contained an article about Polly Burns – 'Polly the Champ' – who was a prizefighter in the boxing booths of the early 1900s. Barbara was hooked, not least because boxing was something she could do without having to persuade ten others to form a team.

But she soon found that as a girl she wasn't welcome to train at local gyms, and to her parents' dismay eventually moved to London where she worked as a shorthand typist during the day and trained at a Mayfair gym in the evenings. Here she was coached by Len Smith, whom she later married. At weekends she would box in fairground booths, frequently fighting against men since few women would take up the challenge.

She was an unlikely candidate for a champion boxer, quite apart from being a woman in what was very much a man's world. She stood 4' 11" tall and at the peak of her career weighed 98 lbs (that's around 1.5 metres tall and 44.5 kgs in weight.) She worked remarkably hard. 'You were boxing 15 or 20 times in one day' she once commented on her time in the fairground booths, 'if you didn't do your roadwork you were in trouble.'

Her first appearance in the boxing booths was at Epsom on Derby day 1949 and during the next five years she boxed around 1000 exhibition bouts in England, France

and America. 'None of my challengers' she wrote 'have yet stayed the distance to collect their prize money.' Not for nothing was she known as the 'Mighty Atom of the Ring.'

Frustrated by the British boxing authorities' refusal to accept women boxers, Barbara and her husband moved to America in 1952. 'Boxing was taking off for women in America' she wrote 'but the real reason I stayed so long was the weather!' Later she moved to Dallas where she gained the first boxing licence granted to a woman in Texas. There she met a veteran fight manager named Mickey Riley who took her under his wing, describing her as 'the neatest fighting machine' he'd seen. Riley put her on a diet of steak and beer, hoping she'd put weight on. It didn't work, not least because Barbara was regularly working out in the Texas heat. In 1954 she took part in the first women's bout to be televised, and subsequently fought Phyllis Kugler in San Antonio for the first women's world title, which she won on points. She couldn't defeat the sexist attitudes surrounding the fight though, with one promotional poster declaring '*Wow – These Dolls can Really Fight!*' Another publicity photo showed both boxers in full makeup and wearing bikinis.

She had 32 professional fights, winning 30 of them – 12 by a knockout. Her only defeat came against JoAnn Hagen who was some 8" taller and more than two stone heavier than Buttrick. Her final fight was in 1960 when she was four months pregnant. Unsurprisingly perhaps, she did not retire rich – her largest purse was \$500 at a time when the top male boxers were earning many thousands more.

In retirement she became a ringside photographer and then founded and became president of the Women's International Boxing Federation. She was also elected as a member of the International Boxing and Wrestling Hall of Fame (yes - she'd even done a bit of wrestling during her career) and in 2015 met another celebrated Hull boxer – Olympic gold medallist Luke Campbell – at one of his training sessions in Miami.

During Hull's phenomenal year as UK City of Culture in 2017 Hull Truck theatre produced a play called *Mighty Atoms* based on Barbara's story – aged 87 she attended the play one evening and afterwards met the cast! Whilst back in Hull she also reflected on her life and career in an event organised by Women of the World, a charity that believes that a gender-equal world is desirable, possible and urgently required.

So how does Barbara see her legacy? Very positively!

**What girls do now is what they want to do, not what people tell them to do. We've come such a long way. I wish my parents were around to see all these girls boxing. They'd be amazed. Somebody had to get it started. But if I was a kid now I'd be a happy one .**

**Don Knibb - 27 June 2024**