

The Turpin Family: From British Guiana to British Boxing Champions

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The Turpins were one of the first black families to settle in Leamington Spa. All three sons of the family went on to be renowned boxers, one becoming world champion.

Lionel Turpin was born in 1896 in British Guiana, now Guyana. As a teenager he joined the merchant navy and through his service came to Britain. By August 1915 he was living in North Shields and working as a labourer. That month he enlisted in the British Army. He joined the York and Lancaster Regiment, later serving in the Army Service Corps and the King's Royal Rifle Regiment. He went to France in 1916 and saw action for three years, suffering a serious gas shell wound in 1918. This affected his lungs, and he was discharged as unfit for service in 1919 with chronic bronchitis and pneumonia.

After hospital treatment Lionel was discharged to Hill House convalescent home in Warwick and received a small disability pension from the army. He was one of perhaps 30,000 black people living in Britain at that time, and possibly the first to live in Warwick and Leamington. In 1920 he met Beatrice Whitehouse through a friend in the convalescent home. They had a son, Lionel (known as Dick), but because they were unmarried he was brought up by his grandparents in Warwick. Lionel left the convalescent home, found work, and was able to afford to marry Beatrice in 1921. The couple then rented a flat in Willes Road.

Lionel and Beatrice had four more children – Joan, Kathy, John (known as Jackie) and Randolph. Life for the family was not easy and, as Jackie recalled in his memoir, they were treated by many people with a mixture of curiosity and prejudice. Lionel's health deteriorated and less than a year after Randolph's birth he died of bronchitis and emphysema, caused by the lung damage he suffered during the war.

Beatrice, aged only 25, was now a single mother of five children under the age of 10. She could not afford to keep the family together, so the children went to live with various relatives and friends. Life must have been very hard for the children, but they were taught by their mother to stand up for themselves. It is perhaps not surprising that all three boys took up boxing. They may have been encouraged by Beatrice's father, who had been a bare-knuckle fighter.

Dick was the first to make a career out of boxing. He made his debut in 1937 and by 1948 was reaching his peak. He won the Middleweight Championship of the British Empire on 18 May 1948, defeating Richard 'Bos' Murphy at the Butts Stadium in Coventry. However, he was prevented from competing for the British title because the British Boxing Board of Control had brought in a colour bar in 1911. Its regulations stated that anyone competing for a British title had to have been 'born of white parents.' Opposition to the colour bar grew but it was not repealed until 1947. Following the repeal, Dick Turpin defeated Vince Hawkins in June 1948 to become the first black boxer to win a British title.

Jackie Turpin also became a boxer. He had a 10-year professional career as a featherweight, retiring in 1954. He ran the Warwick Racing Boxing Club for many years and continued to train well into his seventies.

The most successful of the brothers was Randolph, the youngest. He began his career at boxing booths at local fairs with his brother Jackie. He was a member of Leamington Boys Club and continued to box while in the Navy, turning professional in 1946. After two defeats in 1948 he did a lot of weight training to build up his strength and went on a run of victories. He won the British middleweight title in October 1950 and the European title in February 1951.

This set him up with the chance to compete for the world title. On 10 July 1951 Randolph fought the American Sugar Ray Robinson, who many consider to be the best boxer ever, at Earls Court in London. He took the fight to Robinson and achieved a memorable victory, becoming the first British boxer to

win the world middleweight title since 1891. He became a sporting hero and a crowd of some 10,000 people welcomed him at a civic reception in Leamington two days later.

Under the terms of the contract agreed with Sugar Ray Robinson, the two were obliged to fight again within 90 days. The rematch took place in New York on 12 September. Turpin again fought well, but the referee stopped the fight in the 10th round, shortly after Robinson had knocked Turpin down with a big punch. Turpin's reign as champion was over after just 64 days.

Randolph had another attempt at the world title in 1953, following Robinson's retirement from boxing. He lost to Carl 'Bobo' Olsen, taking quite a battering in the fight, and was never the same boxer again. Although he won British, Commonwealth and European titles over the next few years, he also lost several fights and was clearly suffering from the many punches he had taken in his career. Turpin retired from boxing in 1958.

Away from the ring Randolph had many problems in his personal life and his relationships. After retirement he suffered from depression and from the effects of punches to his head. He also had serious financial problems. He was not good with money and was often badly advised, with the result that despite having earned an estimated £300,000 from boxing, he was declared bankrupt in 1962. In 1966 he faced bankruptcy again and on 17 May was found dead in his flat above the transport café he ran in Russell Street, Leamington. The official verdict on his death was suicide, though some people have disputed these findings.

Like his father Lionel, Randolph died tragically young. He is commemorated by a plaque at 6 Willes Road, a statue in Warwick and a place in the International Boxing Hall of Fame. The achievements of all three 'Fighting Turpins' were honoured by an award from the British Boxing Board of Control in 2022.