East End’s boxing lives revealed with Heritage Lottery help

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Boxers from clubs in London’s East End have clinched an array of British, Olympic and world titles and the story of their efforts has also been a story of social integration. Now that story will be told for the first time, thanks to a grant of £50,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

A project tracing the history of East End boxing from 1891 to 1990 will develop an archive of photographs, programmes and other boxing memorabilia and make it available to boxing fans and the general public via the project web site. The project will also record the lives of up to 15 former boxers or those closely associated with the sport. These include Ronnie Cooper, who boxed for Britain at the 1948 Olympics, Terry Spinks MBE, who won gold for Britain at the 1956 Olympics and Sammy McCarthy a former British Featherweight Champion.

Run by the London Ex-Boxers Association, the history project will recall how the area’s boxing clubs often provided a refuge for young boys who had very few opportunities for social interaction in a very deprived area. The clubs attracted boys from London’s diverse communities which during the century concerned included Jewish, Italian, Irish and African-Caribbean immigrants. The project will also look at defunct and existing boxing venues. Venues such as York Hall in Bethnal Green, which has hosted boxing since 1933, will feature strongly as it will serve to illustrate that the East End of London has attracted boxers of national and international significance.

For the Heritage Lottery Fund, Head of HLF London, Sue Bowers, said: “Boxing clubs have long been part of the East End’s social fabric and this project will bring to life their achievements in both helping community cohesion and creating champions.”

The story is one of social integration as well as sport and the London Ex-Boxers Association will be interviewing a range of local people in what is seen as the first ever attempt to view East End boxing as a significant part of the cultural heritage of the area.

The project organisers will work with local boxing clubs and pupils from local schools to gather the material for the website. Eastside Community Heritage will also share its archive material with the researchers and, at the end of project, an exhibition including video interviews, archive film, photographs and memorabilia will be held at Hackney Museum.

For the London Ex-Boxers Association Charlie Wright, vice-chairman, said: “We are very excited about the whole project. For the first time the boxing heritage of the East End of London will told through the lives of the people who boxed, trained or worked with boxing. As we approach the London Olympics this is a story that will inspire many people especially young people looking for a sport that they can get involved within their locality.”

Former boxer James Cook welcomed the HLF grant, saying: “I arrived in England in 1968 from Jamaica as a nine-year-old and and found it very hard to integrate with other school children. It was a culture shock and then a friend took me along to a boxing club and the friendship shown to me was so different to my time spent on the street. It changed my lifestyle I was accepted as an equal and taught discipline in body and mind.”

After a successful amateur career Mr Cook turned professional eventually becoming a British and European Champion at Super-Middleweight.

Notes to editors

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported more than 28,800 projects, allocating over £4.3billion across the UK, with over £850 million granted in London alone.

Further information

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