

BURTON, URIAH, 'Big Just' (c.1926 - 1986), bare-knuckle fighter and activist

Name: Uriah, 'big Just' Burton
Date of birth: c.1926
Date of death: 1986
Spouse: Hester Burton (née Smith)
Parent: Emily Dora Burton (née Buckland)
Parent: Ernest Burton
Gender: Male
Occupation: bare-knuckle fighter and activist
Area of activity: Sports and Leisure Pursuits; Activism
Author: Norman Burton

Uriah Burton was born c.1926, the second son of Ernest Burton (c.1892-1960), a Romany horse dealer, and his wife Emily Dora (née Buckland, c.1895-1951). Uriah's siblings were: Data Ashella Burton (b. c.1919), Matilda 'Tillie' (b. c. 1920), Hosea Noah 'Othea' Burton (b. c.1921), Esmeralda Burton (b. c.1925), Frederick Burton (b. c.1929), Dawn (b. 1931) and William 'Billy' Burton (b. c.1938).

Uriah Burton, who was also known as Yui or Hughy and by his soubriquet, 'Big Just', produced and self-published an autobiographical pamphlet sometime around 1979 - *Uriah Burton Big Just - His Life, His Aims, His Ideals*. In his pamphlet, Uriah says he was born in Liverpool in 1916. No civil birth registration or baptism has been found for him but it seems fairly certain that he was born much later than 1916. Uriah's age, as given on his marriage certificate, his death certificate, his cremation record and in newspaper reports, all support a birth year of 1926. It's quite possible that the 1916 date given in his pamphlet was a typographical error.

The Burtons were a Romany family which can be traced back to England and as far back as the 1700s. However, Uriah's branch of the family had strong connections to Wales and the English counties along the Welsh border. Like most of the Welsh Romany Burtons, Uriah was a descendant of Jeremiah 'Jerry' Burton (baptised in Somerset in 1813) and his wife Harriet (née Lovell), his great-great grandparents. Jeremiah and Harriet's eldest known son, Noah, was born in Shropshire c. 1833 but he later favoured the area around Llansantffraid-ym-Mechain in Montgomeryshire (now Powys), where he and many of his family are buried. Noah married Minderena Lee from a branch of the Romany Lee family who had also made Wales their home. Their son Noah (aka Othea), who was baptised in Pontesbury, Shropshire in 1865, married Ashella (aka Data), the daughter of Caradoc Price and Emily née Slender, another well-known Romany family already well established in Wales. Noah and Ashella are also known to have travelled under the name of Lee, the surname of Noah's mother, a fairly common practice in the Romany community. Noah and Ashella were Uriah Burton's grandparents. Uriah Burton's father, Ernest, was baptised in Rhymney, Monmouthshire on 6 January 1893. He married Emily Dora, a daughter of Emmanuel Buckland and Anselina née James. The Buckland and James families were both Romany and, like the Burton family, can be traced back to England as far back as the 1700s.

Not much is known about Uriah's early life, although the family is known to have travelled widely in Great Britain and Ireland. In his pamphlet, Uriah mentions that much of his childhood was spent around Cork in Ireland. In 1951 in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, he married Hester Smith, the daughter of Wisdom Smith and his wife Sarah (née Carter). According to their marriage certificate, Hester was a year younger than Uriah. They had one son and three daughters.

Uriah is probably best known among Travellers as a bare-knuckle fighter. However, he was also known as an activist who not only fought for the rights of Romany Gypsies and Travellers but also made a stand for law and order and for peace in Ireland.

In his pamphlet, Uriah asserts that he had been a 'knuckle-fighter' all his life, unbeaten at fisticuffs, even on his 62nd birthday and claims never to have thrown the first punch. There may be an element of exaggeration here as Uriah passed away in 1986 with all the records indicating that he was 60 years old at the time of his death. It's not clear when Uriah's 'career' as a bare-knuckle fighter actually began and ended but he was definitely well-known as a fighter by the late 1950s and through into the 1970s.

There are many stories about Uriah's fighting days and quite a few appear in his pamphlet. There are also a number of accounts in *King of the Gypsies*, the memoirs of another famous bare-knuckle fighter, Bartley Gorman. Gorman states that when he was sixteen, he admired only two fighters, Rocky Marciano and Uriah Burton. Gorman goes on to dedicate a whole chapter of his book to Uriah, with much of the content seemingly taken from Uriah's pamphlet.

Uriah also used his skill and notoriety as a fighter to support his activist campaigns. In 1978, he walked from Dublin to Belfast to publicise his campaign for peace in Ireland. On 24 February 1979, as Uriah was preparing to make another walk, the *Belfast Telegraph* published a report stating that he had offered to step into the boxing ring and meet anyone who objected to his peace theories. Uriah apparently added that he would not attack but only defend himself.

Two years later, on 25 September 1981, the *Manchester Evening News* reported that Uriah had challenged all comers to a prize fight in the name of law and order with the offer of £1,000 to anyone who could knock him out in the first round. The idea was that any challengers who lost would have to commit to fight alongside Uriah in his campaign for law and order.

A few years after his father's death in 1960, Uriah and his brother Hosea erected a granite monument in his memory on Moel y Golfa, the highest of the five peaks that form the Breidden Hills near Welshpool. In his pamphlet, Uriah relates the story of how he managed to build the 12-foot monument some 1,000 feet up the hill. Having first obtained special permission from the Earl of Powis, he set about trying to find a contractor to carry out the work but was told the task was impossible. Not one to give in easily, Uriah managed to persuade a number of family, friends and others to help him build the monument. However, when the time came, a number of these men failed to turn up. Uriah believed that a promise was a promise and set about 'kidnapping' the men and transporting them to the site in a bus. Eventually, some 75 men were involved in hauling several huge blocks of granite, weighing some 25 tons, to the summit of Moel y Golfa using two powerful bulldozers and a lorry. In addition, two ponies were used to carry the cement. Despite the large number of men involved and the machinery they had to help them, the task was extremely difficult and, at times, dangerous. The story caught the imagination of the press, appearing in several local newspapers. Uriah's achievement and his unconventional approach was also picked up by a national newspaper, *The People*, which published the story on 10 November 1963. After Uriah's death a plaque commemorating his achievements was added to the monument.

Later in life Uriah spent a lot of time in the Manchester area where he created and ran a large travellers site in Partington.

Uriah Burton died in the Park Hospital, Davyhulme on 5 November 1986, and was cremated at Altringham Crematorium on 10 November.

The boxers Hosea Noah Burton (b. 1988), former British light-heavyweight champion, and Tyson Fury (b. 1988), former World heavyweight champion, are grandsons of Uriah's brother Hosea Burton.

Author

Norman Burton

Sources

Oral history from family and friends

Uriah Burton, *Uriah Burton, Big Just*. A copy of this rare autobiographical pamphlet is held in the Robert Dawson Romany collection at the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) in Reading, Berkshire

Bartley Gorman with Peter Walsh, *King of the Gypsies* (Preston 2003)

British Newspaper Archive

Parish records, civil registration documents, etc.

Sources

A. N. Coward, 'A Romani Memorial on Moel y Golfâ', Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (2018)

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Ernest and Uriah Burton, People's Collection Wales

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