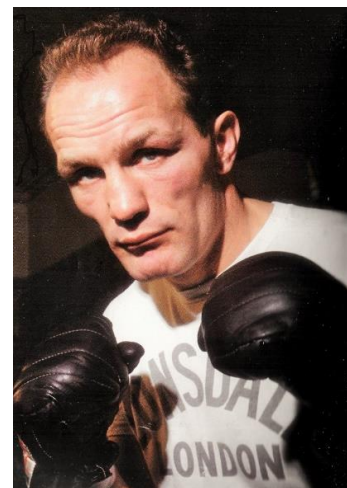


Henry Cooper of Wembley.

Henry Cooper was a professional boxer and sports personality very popular with the British public. Many people still remember his fight at Wembley Stadium in 1963, when he knocked down the American, Cassius Clay, more than half a century after it took place. But Henry Cooper's Wembley connections were much more than that, as his story told here will show.



Henry Cooper, training for a boxing match in 1966.
[Photo from "Henry Cooper – the authorised biography"]

Henry and his twin brother George were born in Lambeth on 3 May 1934. Their parents, Henry and Lily Cooper, were both from the Elephant & Castle area of South London, but in 1938 the family were rehoused, moving to a London County Council "cottage estate" at Bellingham. They had an eventful Second World War, with their home at Farmstead Road being badly damaged by a German bomb in 1940. The boys had been evacuated to Lancing, in Sussex; then the family was reunited for a time in Gloucestershire. After returning to Bellingham in late 1941, life was hard for Lily and her three sons, as their father was away for three years with the army in India. The boys did jobs such as paper rounds to help raise money, and Henry and his older brother Bernard narrowly survived, when caught in the blast from a V1 flying bomb while selling football pools in 1944.

One day, Henry and George were spotted having a mock boxing match in the street, and were invited to join the Bellingham Boxing Club in the estate's British Legion Hall. Their father had boxed for his Royal Horse Artillery regiment in the 1920's, and gave his consent, on condition that the twins never fought each other. By the time they left school in 1949, aged 15, they had joined the larger Eltham Amateur Boxing Club, and the trainer there helped to get them a job with a plastering firm. The physical work made them fitter and stronger, and they made a good team, both tall, with Henry left-handed and George right-handed.

Henry was just 17 when he won the Amateur Boxing Association light heavyweight championship. He was chosen to represent Great Britain at the 1952 Olympic Games, but lost



to a Russian boxer in the second round of the competition. He and George had to do their two years National Service soon afterwards, and both went into the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, which had a strong boxing tradition. They were based at Aldershot, and allowed to fight in ABA events in London, Henry winning his second ABA title in 1953, as well as for their battalion.

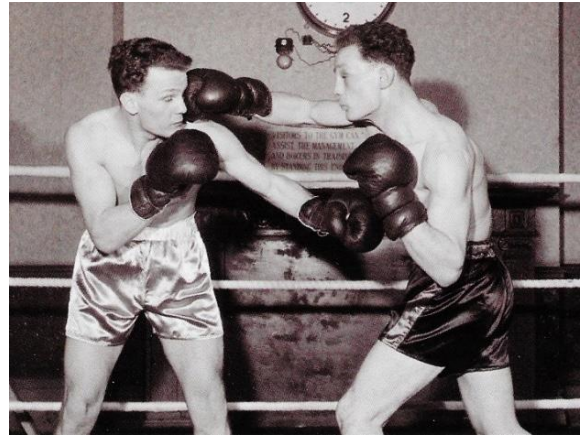
Henry Cooper v. Anatoli Petrov at the 1952 Olympic Games.
[Photo from the internet]

When they left the army in 1954, Henry and George Cooper signed up as professional boxers with manager Jim Wicks, who had been recommended to them by a family friend. Wicks, who had seen Henry win his 1953 ABA title, was happy to take them on. There was already a George Cooper registered as a professional boxer, so George had to fight under a different

first name. Mr Wicks had a simple answer: Jim Cooper! The Cooper twins continued to live at home, sharing a bedroom at Farmstead Road, and to work as plasterers for their old boss, Reg Reynolds; but their daily routine now also included training at Jim Wicks's gym, above the "Thomas à Becket" pub in the Old Kent Road.

Henry and George "Jim" Cooper, sparring at the "Thomas à Becket" gym in 1955.

[Photo from "Henry Cooper – the authorised biography"]



Between September 1954 and April 1955, Henry won his first nine professional fights, before losing two of the next four, including a British heavyweight title eliminator to Joe Erskine in November. In 1957, he lost three major fights in a row, including a European title fight to Ingemar Johansson in Sweden and another to Joe Erskine, who by then held the British and Commonwealth titles.



Henry's first contest at Wembley Arena saw him win against a top American, Zora Folley, in October 1958. This set him up for an excellent 1959, starting with a 15-round points victory over Brian London, where both boxers finished up bloodied from cuts, to win the British and Commonwealth crown for the first time. In two more fights that year, he retained the Commonwealth title against a South African, then successfully defended both titles against Joe Erskine.

Brian London and Henry Cooper before their heavyweight title fight in January 1959.

[Photo from the internet]

For the next nine months, Henry Cooper did not fight another contest, but with good reason. In January 1960 he married Albina Genepri, a waitress at her uncle's Italian restaurant in Soho (one of the places that Jim Wicks used to take Henry, for working dinners with promoters and the boxing press). Looking for a suitable married home, an advert in the "Evening Standard" brought them to 5 Ledway Drive in Wembley, where they were to live for the next 15 years. As Henry still trained with his brother every day, George moved in with them for a time; it was also handy having the twins there, with building skills, to make improvements to the house!

Henry won his next three fights, winning his first Lonsdale belt outright when he successfully defended his British heavyweight title against Joe Erskine in March 1961. He was getting a reputation for his very strong left hook punch, which Jim Wicks publicised (with cockney dropped H's) as "Enry's 'Ammer". Unfortunately, he and twin brother George also had a reputation for cutting easily over their eyes.

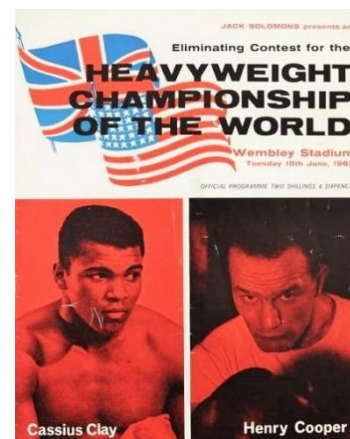
Because of his winning record, Wicks tried to get Henry a World title fight against Floyd Patterson in 1961, but a deal for this could not be agreed. Instead, another contest at Wembley Arena against the American, Zora Folley, was arranged for December 1961. Henry usually spent five weeks in a "training camp" before a big fight, to get "mean" as well as "fighting fit", but this time made the mistake of training at home, to be with his wife and baby son, Henry Marco. He came to the bout a few pounds over his optimum fighting weight of 13½ stone

(Albina's home cooking?), and not "sharp" enough, and suffered an embarrassing defeat in the second round!

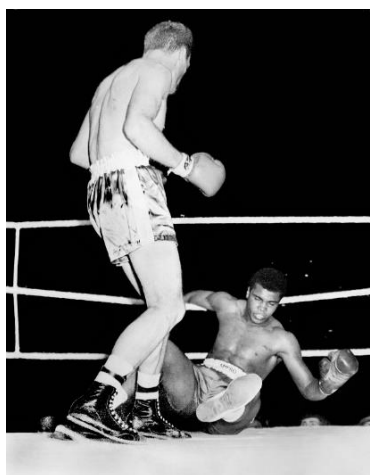
It took until 1963 before the possibility of another chance to challenge for the World Heavyweight Championship arrived. Four more victories, two against American opponents and two more successful defences of his British and Commonwealth titles (the second a fifth round knock-out of Dick Richardson at Wembley Arena, in March that year), led up to what was to be Henry Cooper's most famous fight.

**Programme for the Clay v. Cooper fight
at Wembley Stadium, 18 June 1963.**

[Image from the internet]



The contest, at Wembley Stadium in June 1963, was an official eliminator to decide who would challenge the winner of the Floyd Patterson v. Sonny Liston fight the following month. Henry's opponent was the 21 year old American, Cassius Clay, who had won the light heavyweight boxing gold medal at the 1960 Olympic Games. Clay was a brash extrovert, who had earned nicknames such as "Cass the Gas" and "the Louisville Lip". Although it was part of his boxing persona, being a "villain" to promote interest in his fights, Clay's rude comments about Cooper in advance of the contest turned the British press and public against him, and created a charged atmosphere in the stadium.



Henry started the fight aggressively, and probably won the first two rounds, landing many good punches. By the third round Clay, moving quickly and using his longer reach to jab at Henry's face, had caused a cut near his eye that started to bleed profusely. Good repair work between rounds by Henry's trainer, Danny Holland, got him out for the fourth round, but Clay continued his attack on Henry's face from distance. Then, near the end of the round, a perfect left hook from Cooper did what no other boxer had done before, and knocked Clay to the floor.

Henry Cooper floors Cassius Clay.

[Photo from the internet]

The bell for the end of the round rang at the referee's count of five, and Clay was able to stagger back to his corner. His trainer, Angelo Dundee, put smelling salts under his nose (illegally) to revive him, and enlarged a split in his glove, calling the referee over to inspect it, so giving his boxer a few extra seconds to recover. In the fifth round, Clay punched relentlessly at the cuts round Henry's eyes. Cooper stayed on his feet, but after two minutes, with so much blood pouring out, the referee stopped the fight, declaring Clay the winner.

**Henry Cooper and Cassius Clay,
after the June 1963 Wembley fight.**

[Photo from the internet]



Although Henry Cooper had lost the fight, his boxing ability, and his gentlemanly behaviour before and after it, had won the hearts of the British public. He was an ordinary, good humoured

and quite intelligent person, probably 'too nice' to be a boxer, but when he entered the ring, a fair and determined fighter. The press began referring to him as "Our 'Enry".



After losing to Clay, Henry Cooper continued his boxing career, including successful defences of his British and Commonwealth titles against Brian London and Johnny Prescott in 1964 and 1965. He was now into his thirties, and perhaps thinking of his future after boxing, especially as his brother George had recently retired from the ring and gone back to plastering. A chance meeting with a greengrocer, Harry Cooper (no relation), while on holiday in the Canary Islands, led to Henry agreeing to go into business with him. They set up a shop in Wembley, at 4 Ealing Road, near the junction with the High Road.

Advert for the new business, from the "Wembley News".

[Source: Brent Archives – local newspaper microfilms]

The "fruit and veg" shop got off to a good start when it opened on 9 November 1965. Although Henry was not always there, particularly when he was training for upcoming bouts, people were happy to come to the shop, for the chance to be served by "Our 'Enry", the heavyweight champion. His easy going manner, and willingness to chat with his customers (even children brought into the shop, just to shake his hand), made him a popular local character.

Henry Cooper serving customers at his greengrocers shop in Ealing Road, November 1965.

[Photo from the internet]



The "Henry Cooper – Fruiterer and Greengrocer" business continued for just over three years.



There were other greengrocers close by, including stalls in Wembley Market, just across the High Road in Lancelot Road, which were generally cheaper. At the end of 1968, Henry decided that he could not carry on with the shop, as it was taking up too much time and losing too much money. He estimated that the venture had cost him around £10,000, which may not sound much now, but would have bought two good houses in Wembley in the 1960's!

Henry Cooper with his greengrocers van, outside the shop.

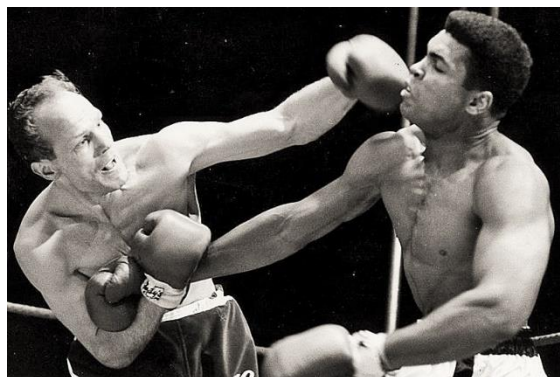
[Photo from the internet]

Henry's main "business", as a boxer, carried on throughout the time he had the greengrocers shop. After two good wins against American opponents in early 1966, his chance finally came to fight for the World Heavyweight title. Following their 1963 contest, Cassius Clay had gone on to take the title from Sonny Liston, then changed his name to Muhammed Ali, after converting to Islam. The second fight between them was originally going to be at Wembley Stadium again, but Arsenal Football Club made the promoter a better offer, and the contest took place at their Highbury Stadium on 21 May 1966. The 55,000 crowd, almost all on Henry's side, was charged with excitement as the two famous boxers entered the ring.

For the only time in his career, Henry's wife Albina was there, to show her support (although she felt unable to watch the fight itself). After his previous experience, Ali was wary of "Enry's 'Ammer", and kept his distance, dancing away as Cooper advanced, but using his advantage in reach to make long jabs. The first five rounds were fairly even, but early in the sixth, Ali was able to land a right hand punch which opened a deep cut above Henry's left eye. The heavy bleeding was soon making it difficult for Henry to see, and the referee had no alternative but to stop the fight in Ali's favour.

Henry Cooper taking the fight to Muhammed Ali, May 1966.

[Photo from the internet]



Cooper's next contest, at Wembley Arena four months later, saw him finally take on Floyd Patterson. Henry was knocked out by the former World champion, but resisted calls in the press for him now to retire from boxing. He was to prove the doubters wrong by winning his

next seven fights, including successful defences of his British and Commonwealth titles in 1967 against Jack Bodell and Billy Walker, which earned him a third outright Lonsdale Belt, an achievement which has never been equalled.



Henry Cooper with the BBC Sports Personality trophy.

[Photo from the internet]

His victories that year, and his high public profile, saw Henry Cooper voted BBC Sports Personality of the Year. (He would achieve the award again in

1970, becoming the first double winner.) His fame and popularity meant that he was often asked to appear at charity events, and he gave his time generously whenever he could. This brought about another award, an OBE for his services to charity, which the Queen bestowed on him in 1969.

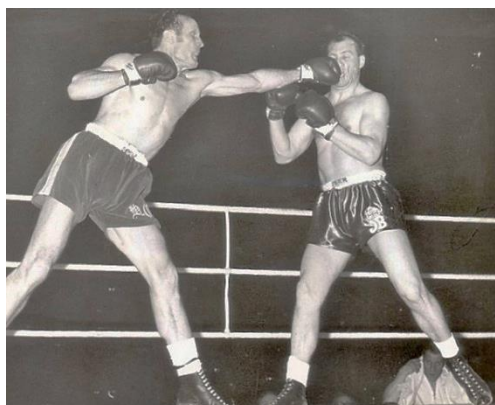
Henry, with his wife Albina and eldest son Henry Marco, outside Buckingham Palace after receiving his OBE.

[Photo from "Henry Cooper – the authorised biography"]



Three of Henry Cooper's last five fights saw him win or retain the European heavyweight title,

against German, Italian and Spanish opponents, the last against José Manuel Urtain at Wembley Arena in November 1970. Earlier that year he had again defended his British and Commonwealth titles against Jack Bodell, but the fact that it had taken him the full 15 rounds to win comfortably on points made him realise that he was getting towards the end of his boxing career.



Henry Cooper landing a punch on Jack Bodell.

[Photo from the internet]

Henry decided privately that his defence of all three of his titles against Joe Bugner, at Wembley Arena in March 1971, would be his final fight. He trained hard for it, only sharing his decision in a 'phone call to his wife two weeks before the contest. 21 year old Bugner was 15 years younger and two stone heavier than Cooper, but Henry boxed well, and most commentators thought that he had won at least 9 of the 15 rounds. There was uproar in the crowd when the referee, Harry Gibbs, awarded the contest to Bugner by 73.75 points to 73.5! Although surprised and disappointed, later saying *'I thought I did enough to clinch it'*, Henry Cooper congratulated his young opponent in the ring, before announcing his retirement.



Joe Bugner and Henry Cooper after their fight in March 1971.

[Photo from the internet]

Even before retiring from boxing, Henry's popularity had brought him opportunities in advertising and broadcasting, including being one of the original team captains for BBC TV's

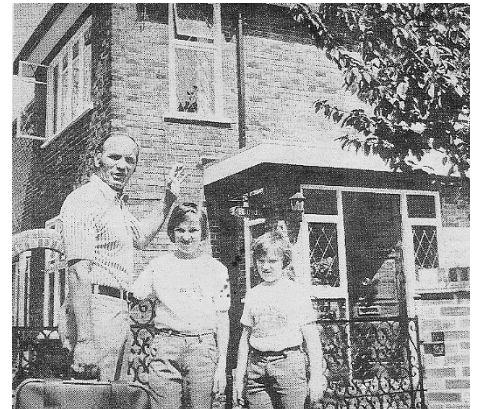


"A Question of Sport" from January 1970. That year also saw him take up a new sporting activity (he joined Ealing Golf Club), which was to give him pleasure for the rest of his life. He was able to combine this with his efforts for the Variety Club charity, which raised money for sick, disabled and disadvantaged children. Henry's charity work led to him being awarded a Papal Knighthood in 1978.

Henry signing autographs for charity at Kenton Grange, July 1969.

[Photo from the Wembley History Society Collection at Brent Archives]

In 1975, Henry Cooper and his family moved from Wembley to Hildenborough in Kent, to a home with a golf club (Nizels) nearby. Henry went on to become chairman of the Variety Club's golf society, and to organise celebrity golf events which over 30 years raised funds to buy many "Sunshine Coaches", to help schools and clubs enrich children's lives.



Henry, with sons Henry Marco and John Pietro, outside 5 Ledway Drive, near Preston Road, Wembley, in the 1970's.

[Local newspaper photograph, Wembley History Society]

Henry Cooper continued to make a living through television and radio work, advertising endorsements (especially for Brut aftershave) and after dinner speaking. He had invested as a "name" in the Lloyds of London insurance business, and found himself having to meet heavy losses in the early 1990's. Although celebrity friends offered to help him financially, he decided it was a problem he had to face himself, even though it meant selling his three prized Lonsdale belts at auction in 1993.

The greatest honour of his life came in 2000, when Henry Cooper was knighted. The award was special to him, because it was for his services to boxing, as well as for his charity work. Henry was now a senior citizen, and later that year he was chosen as the ideal person to front



a government health campaign, persuading people who were 65 or over to be immunised against influenza. *'Don't get knocked out by 'flu. Get your jab in first!'* was the perfect punchline for Henry to deliver.

Henry Cooper, posing for the 'flu adverts in 2000.
[Photo from the internet]

Sadly, Henry Cooper lost his wife, Albina, to a heart attack in 2008; then his twin brother George died in 2010. When Henry himself died, on 1 May 2011, tributes to him poured in from many people who had known or met him. One was from former opponent, Muhammed Ali (Cassius Clay), who out of mutual respect had become a friend. The man who claimed to be "The Greatest" (and many boxing fans would agree with that) said of Henry: *'I will miss my old friend. He was a great fighter and a gentleman.'*



Muhammed Ali and Henry Cooper, as friends after their boxing careers.
[Photo from the internet]



Henry Cooper's achievements mean that he will long be remembered, although his connections with Wembley could have been forgotten over time. However, when local resident Tony Royden found this photograph of himself (on the left) and his brother, Laurence, outside the greengrocers in 1966, he wondered why Henry was not commemorated in the borough. He decided to do something about it.

Tony and his brother outside 4 Ealing Road in 1966.
[Photograph © and courtesy of Tony Royden]

As a result of Tony's efforts, and support from everyone he mentioned the idea to, a Blue Plaque to Henry's memory was authorised. It was mounted on the wall above his former shop, in November 2018. Local people now have a permanent reminder of a man, admired as a boxer and much loved as a person: Sir Henry Cooper of Wembley.



The Blue Plaque on the wall at 4 Ealing Road.
[Photograph courtesy of Tony Royden]

Philip Grant, Wembley History Society, December 2018.

Acknowledgments:

"Henry Cooper, 1934 -2011 – the authorised biography" by Robert Edwards.

Details of Henry's professional boxing record: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Cooper