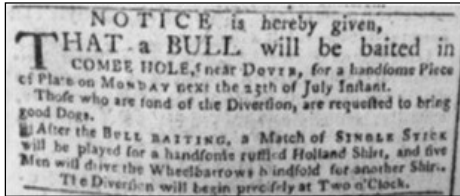


# A Fond Diversion

## Barry O'Brien – Dover Tales

The following announcement appeared in the Kentish Gazette July 1785



Whilst it is, sadly, all too obvious what is meant by the term 'Bull Baiting', especially with the advice given in the above article, to "bring good dogs", there may not be too many people today who are familiar with the sport of 'Single Stick' nor indeed, that many amongst us who are aware what a Holland Shirt might be. Emerging during the 16th Century, Singlestick, perhaps unsurprisingly, uses, as its weapon, a single wooden stick about 1 inch (25mm) in diameter and 34 inches (86 cm) in length. Traditionally, made of ash the Singlestick became popular as a way of training soldiers in the use of the backsword, a type of sword characterised by having a single-edged blade and a hilt with a single-handed grip; the weapon was so called because the cross section gives a flat back edge. Being easier and cheaper to make than double-edged swords, backswords became the favoured sidearm of common infantry, although they were also often the secondary weapons of 17th Century Cavalrymen.

The 'guards', 'cuts' and 'parries' used in Singlestick play were at first identical to those of backsword play with no 'thrusts' allowed. Although, in the early days, it was considered unfair to hit below the waist, as the sport evolved into the 18th Century other parts of the body came into play with bouts sometimes only being decided by the

drawing of blood from one of the contestant's heads.

By the time of the event advertised in the Kentish Gazette the rules of Singlestick had, though, become even more clearly defined with the players now placed closer together, their feet remaining immovable, and all strokes being delivered with a whip like action of the wrist. As far as can be ascertained no protective 'armour' was used at this time. Blows were, once again, restricted to any part of the body above the waist although each bout was decided only by the delivery of a blow to the head that drew blood. The prize for the eventual winner of that 1785 competition held in Combe Hole, was a Gentleman's fine bleached shirt. The whiteness of a man's shirt, at the time, being, outwardly, even more socially important than his own personal hygiene. Whilst a plain woven unbleached or dull-finish linen was used to make a labourer's, 'Holland', shirt, of rough Osnaburg, a term widely used for general utility and housework materials, with Grades containing from 10 to 15 picks per inch.

The sport of Singlestick is still practised by some fencing veterans and also has a degree of popularity within the, British, Royal Navy. A version was even included in the 1904 St Louis Olympics although it most likely, by this time, bore closer resemblance to the less aggressive French sport of Canne de Combat, the 'canne' or stick being much lighter and made of chestnut wood and slightly tapered. Furthermore, participants now wear a padded suit and fencing mask for protection.

So, that's the Bull Baiting and the Singlestick taken care of, Blindfolded Wheelbarrow Racing anyone?