

# FORGOTTEN MARTIAL ARTS OF GREAT BRITAIN

WRESTLING, BARTITSU,  
STICK FIGHTING,  
DEFENDU — GET  
ACQUAINTED WITH  
FIGHTING STYLES  
THAT SPAN THE  
SPECTRUM OF  
COMBAT!

*By Adam Murray*



## Contrary to popular belief, martial arts were practiced in Great Britain long before the kung fu craze of the 1970s.

During the Middle Ages, British warriors developed fighting styles that were a world away from their Asian counterparts. With a lack of written training manuals and a limited amount of surviving documentation, many British martial arts have either ceased to exist or are recalled in very limited capacities. The following is an overview of the major ones — and a historic effort to preserve them in the footsteps of modern martial artists.

### CORNISH WRESTLING

Claimed to be the oldest sport in Great Britain, Cornish wrestling is often compared to judo in that it heavily emphasizes locks, throws and sweeps.

The origins of Cornish wrestling stretch back to 1300 B.C., when the first chief of Cornwall created a game named long Mogg and three days into the era, Mylo made some highly rare evidence states that it was practiced during the fourth and fifth centuries by many Britons. Some scholars believe it was the earliest sport of Great Britain during this era.

From the eighth to 13<sup>th</sup> century, people from many cultures regularly would travel to Cornwall to compete with various styles of wrestling, including Irish collar, oil and Britain wrestling.



Cornish wrestling

The first manual dedicated to Cornish wrestling was written by Sir Thomas Parkyn in 1713. He developed his own style named "Walker class (style)." Although it includes many of the same forms, it focuses on self-defense rather than sport, and it contains chokeholds, locks, counter-attacks and throws.

Cornish wrestling bouts take place on open grass, usually in areas the size of a tennis court. The only required equipment is a canvas or leather jacket and a pair of shoes. Shoes and leathers are not allowed. Most moves include striking, holding or opponent before the work, striking with the foot above the knee and taking off the jacket.

Competition is judged by referees seated diagonally. Cornish wrestlers must shake hands and touch by holding each other's jacket before engaging in combat. If the hand is broken during a fight, the wrestler must stop, shake hands again and restart.

Being an open-air sport, Cornish events migrated to Victoria, Australia, Mineral Point, Wisconsin, and Great Falls, California. Naturally, they brought along many local traditions, including Cornish wrestling. Although mainstream competition in these areas died out many years ago, small organizations of wrestlers still look their skills in arms and the occasional tournament.

There are only two Cornish wrestling clubs in existence, both in Cornwall. The latest text on the sport is *The Art of Cornish Wrestling*, a 14-page book by Bryan H. Kendall published in 1998.

### BARITTSU

Often considered the most difficult of gentleman, baritsu combines elements of fencing, jujitsu, European wrestling, cane fighting and more. Although baritsu died out in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, its name survived through the writings of Arthur Conan Doyle in the fighting form of Sherlock Holmes.

Baritsu was developed by a railway carriage named Edward William Barton-Wright. He spent three years working as a chemical coating specialist for the U.S. Marine Co in Kobe, Japan. During this time, he developed an interest in jujitsu and studied with the Shinden Fudo Ryu dojo under Teruzuma Kamekura. When Barton-Wright returned to England, he opened his own jujitsu school.

The first essay on baritsu appeared in *Thomas's Magazine*, owned by Barton-Wright. It was titled "A New Art of Self-Defense." After it was published, he opened the Baritsu School of Arms and Physical Culture. Rather than teaching only his style, he invited help from some of the world's most respected martial artists, including jujitsu instructors K. Tanji, S. Tomizawa and Yukio Tani, Archibald and stick fighting coach Pierre Vigier, and wrestler Arthur Chappard.

Baritsu declined for three years, but by 1903, its practice had declined and the Baritsu School had closed. Many



LADIES GUIDE TO THE ART OF SELF-DEFENCE

Illustration by W. H. Wood

artists continued to work, developing their own styles and opening schools around London. Barton-Wright's baritsu refined baritsu and the 1930s, but eventually lost interest. The original form died with him in 1953.

Baritsu recently has been revitalized, re-designed and studied by the Baritsu Society. From 2002 to 2005, the group devoted itself to learning as much about Barton-Wright's self-defense system as possible. Its members managed to track down and review many of his magazines at Hales and library archives. The result was Volume 1 of *The Baritsu Compendium*, published in 2005.

Members of the Baritsu Society have cultural classes and held seminars in the United Kingdom, Canada, United States, Baritsu, Italy and Germany. Some conventional clubs are starting to merge, but there's currently no governing body, and instructors are free to develop their own approach toward the teachings.

Two of Barton-Wright's most famous articles — "The New Art of Self-Defense" and "Self-Defense With a Walking Stick" — can be viewed at [www.baritsu.com](http://www.baritsu.com). The only surviving manuscripts of the title in Percy Lowthart's 2005 and "Other Methods of Self-Defense." This publication has been described as "the closest thing to a baritsu manual produced during the previous period."



In 1901, Mrs. C. Woodhouse in the Baritsu, Ltd.



Custom singlestick used in Glasgow, 1800.

## SINGLESTICK

Singlestick was widely practiced in Victorian England. It originated during the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a way to teach children how to fence.

The system gained popularity not because of its self-defense benefits, but because of the high price of steel blades. This meant that most combatants had to use wooden sticks to practice sword fighting. The original singlestick was a small hatched sword from ash that was used for practice. By the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, many competitors began using clubs. By 1775 a wooden hatched had been incorporated into the design of the weapon to form a hand guard.

Throughout the reign of King George I and King George II, singlestick was heavily practiced in the British countryside. A rule system developed, and during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, stip-guards were established. Singlestick was taught with the same rules as the buckramed but with limited striking targets. As its popularity grew, injuries were allowed, and all parts of the body became valid targets in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Singlestick competitors are called gamsters. Traditionally, gamsters started by taking off their hat and coat, then bringing their hand through a string or scarf fastened to their belt. Although the string restricted movement, it was necessary so that when it was pulled tight, the opponent would reach the crown, thus providing the gamster with enough guard for the left side of his head. Competitors used a whip action to strike their opponent while playing their feet together. Malices were worn over the feet, gamsters drew blood to use the head of an opponent. Although blows to any part of the body were allowed, they served no purpose other than to gain an opening.

Early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, restrictions were re-applied. Competitors were no longer allowed to strike the upper body or the upper portion of the forearm leg. This caused the original form of singlestick to perish during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Some military academies revived the martial art soon after its demise, and it managed to regain enough recognition to be part of the 1908 Summer Olympics. However, the damage had already been done. Some British public schools continued to practice singlestick until the 1930s, but with the rise of light fulham fencing, singlestick became obsolete. Competition ceased in the 1930s.

Singlestick techniques have been passed down by fencing instructors, and the art experienced a slight revival in the 1980s at the hands of the Royal Navy. More recently the singlestick community has begun holding singlestick contests as members try to reconstruct practices from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## DEFENDU

A modern hybrid martial art, defendu was developed by British-born U.S. Col. William E. Fairbairn. It's a close-quarters system based on jujitsu and Fairbairn's experience in law enforcement.

Fairbairn was an avid practitioner of martial arts, studying religiously throughout his 30-year career with the Shanghai Municipal Police. He often trained his students on criminals as he tried to figure out what the most effective combat style was. He concluded that many Eastern martial arts techniques were difficult to use in urban scenarios and decided to develop a style composed of moves that could be executed without thought. The result was defendu.

Although many of Fairbairn's techniques were based on jujitsu moves, he made them simpler and more basic. He also decided to remove the philosophic elements of the Eastern art, a concept mirrored in the same "deflecta" translates to "gutter fighting." Deflecta contains no aerial techniques, high kicks or acrobatics. It includes moves that are illegal in many martial arts — such as biting, ear gouging and joint locks.

Fairbairn started teaching his system to Hong Kong police

officers in 1927 because they needed a fighting method that was quick to learn and effective in the field. Singlestick was considered one of the most dangerous cities in the world, and the police during the 1920s and 1930s — under the self-defense direction of Fairbairn — were regarded by many as the best-trained force of all time.

After receiving widespread recognition, Fairbairn was called on to teach officers of Hong Kong Service and Special Operations Executive members during World War II, but was commissioned by the British commander to develop and teach a new means to the creation of his fighting system. It produced a number of qualified instructors, including a U.S. Army officer who taught deflected techniques to U.S. Marines, Rangers, the FBI and the CIA.

Although deflected isn't widely practiced today, many regard it as the most effective fighting method ever developed. Some of its methods are still taught to military academies and police agencies around the world. Deflecta has survived through Fairbairn's books on self-defense, known by the FBI, but he did not set any reference to the term "deflecta" and never published it in subsequent books.

## QUARTERSTAFF

The martial art of choice for the Victorian Robin Hood, quarterstaff was practiced in England and in the Middle Ages. Although most people believe it was developed during this time, it was already considered an ancient martial art by then. Many thought quarterstaffing was used only as self-defense by the poor, but in 1711, London Master of Defense Zachary Wale said he considered the quarterstaff the national weapon of England.

The quarterstaff is versatile. Traditionally, it was made from ash and measured up to 5 1/2 feet long. Each end of the pole was fixed with iron thimble-like sleeves. When used on the battlefield, it could come as much damage as a sword or so. The smooth wood allowed combatants to adjust hand positions with ease as it could be used as a long or close-

range weapon. The head, collarbone, wrists, knees and ankles were regarded as the most vulnerable targets.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, use of the quarterstaff as a weapon in the field was discontinued. This preoccupied the development as a civilian sport. The modified version of the art is characterized by striking poses. Combatants dressed in a helmet, tunic, leg guards, gauntlets and padded gloves — the same uniform used by medieval fighting. Opponents stood facing each other 4 feet apart with the quarterstaff held in their right hand. The ends were fully open. They were allowed to hit any part of the body and could cause injury. Winners were determined by the specific rules laid out for the competition.

Because of the prohibition of firearms in battle, quarterstaffing began to die out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was taught only in a few fencing schools and at the Aldershot Military Academy. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a few hand-to-hand variants of the art were practiced by international Boy Scouts. However, because of the prohibited danger, it was omitted from the Boy Scout handbook in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There's very little so that material on the original form of quarterstaffing, and the martial art isn't widely practiced today. However, the British Quarterstaff Association has kept the art alive by holding seminars and classes.

## FUTURE OF BRITISH MARTIAL ARTS

Since the early 2000s, there has been increasing interest in reconstructing ancient self-defense systems. One example comes from the Historical European Martial Arts Coalition, which was formed in 2004 to study, promote and revive the European fighting systems.

Like other organizations, it's facing an uphill battle. The martial arts are constantly advancing, and the advancement is killing off older, less practical styles. However, it is also gaining the way for new forms of competitive fighting and self-defense. This could eventually result in a full revival and an update of some of Great Britain's forgotten martial arts. **W**



Quarterstaff training.