



PEAKY BLINDERS THE LEGACY

The real story of Britain's most
notorious 1920s gangs



CARL CHINN

PEAKY BLINDERS

Professor Carl Chinn, MBE, PhD, is a social historian, writer, public speaker, and teacher. An off-course bookmaker himself until 1984, he is the son and grandson of illegal bookmakers in Sparkbrook, whilst his mother's family were factory workers in Aston. His writings are deeply affected by his family's working-class background and life in the back-to-backs of Birmingham, and have earned him a national following. He believes passionately that history must be democratised because each and every person has made their mark upon history and has a story to tell. *Peaky Blinders: The Real Story* is his thirty-third book.

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INTRODUCTION

THE PEAKY BLINDERS' LEGACY

The Roaring Twenties of the popular imagination is an exuberant, joyous, fashionable and, above all, youthful decade encapsulated by the self-indulgent Bright Young Things. A mixture of rich aristocrats and bohemians disdainful of social norms, they delighted in their wild behaviour, spectacular parties, expensive cocktails, drug-taking and outrageous excesses. This impression of the 1920s is infused with the riches and privilege of a tiny minority, yet the decade was an exciting one for many more who relished new-found freedoms. Released from their stays and hoops, young women known as 'flappers' went out more confidently in skirts shortened to the knee and with bobbed hair covered trendily by bell-shaped cloche hats worn low on the forehead. Smoking and drinking like young men, they too embraced the jazz craze, the dance craze, the cinema craze, the Charleston craze and all the other crazes of the decade.

As for the middle-aged middle class, the 1920s may not have been roistering but they were pleasurable. Growing in numbers and secure in their employment, they could afford to buy modern semi-detached houses in the suburbs and to spend their disposable income on the cars that took them to and from work and on day trips. Yet millions faced a harsher reality. Britain was riven by gender and class inequalities. Working-class women may have gained the vote in 1928 but they were far from equal in education, health, the workplace and opportunities; huge numbers of

working-class people still lived in badly built and overcrowded housing in polluted neighbourhoods; and working-class men were much more likely than others to suffer the indignities and hopelessness of unemployment. The older industries that had propelled Britain into industrial supremacy were in rapid decline, and the closure of cotton mills, iron works, coal mines and shipyards devastated whole communities across Britain. In a land of plenty, unhappily the only abundant thing in the lives of the poor was poverty. The Roaring Twenties may have been a party-time for a few, but for countless numbers it was a hard and hungry time.

These grim realities are ignored in dramatised versions of the decade, which are also deeply affected by Hollywood's portrayals of 'Jazz Age' America with its mobsters and their molls, singers, dancers, bootleggers, decadent socialites, speakeasies, shootouts, and escapades. Gangsters, in particular, have become ingrained in the popular consciousness as a peculiarly 1920s American phenomenon, but more recently a stylish, peak-capped and charismatic British version has arisen through the acclaimed television series, *Peaky Blinders*. These gangsters take their name from real peaky blinders, who also wore flat caps, but, unlike their fictional counterparts, they were neither well-dressed nor alluring. Vicious thugs, they had made Birmingham notorious as one of the most violent cities in Britain, not in the 1920s but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Belonging to numerous street gangs, they revelled in fighting each other, attacking the police and preying upon the decent majority of the poor amongst whom they lived.

As explored in *Peaky Blinders: The Real Story*, they disappeared before the First World War, thanks to stronger policing, sterner sentences for violent crime and the provision of youth and sports clubs for lads. Yet though their reign of ruffianism was ended in Birmingham, they passed on a violent legacy because men who had been peaky blinders sparked the first major gangland war in Britain. Belonging to a loose combination of villains known as the Birmingham Gang, by 1920, they controlled the pickpocketing of racegoers and the blackmailing of bookmakers on most of England's racecourses. Such criminality was lucrative and the Birmingham Gang's dominance was quickly challenged in the South by London's Sabini Gang. The resulting Racecourse War of the spring and summer of 1921 was a new and shocking phenomenon. Previously, street gangs within one city had brawled with each other simply to assert which was the hardest; now, two gangs of criminals from different cities clashed

over making money illegally. The fighting between them was brutal, provoking headlines in newspapers across the country. Men were scarred by slashes from cut-throat razors; others were shot; and many were battered with hammers and other weapons. And at the forefront of the fighting were former peaky blinders.

During their heyday in the 1890s, it was noticed that ‘senior peaky blinders’ had become racecourses rogues, travelling the country during the more thrilling Flat racing season of the spring and summer.¹ Racecourses were ‘happy hunting grounds’ for them because of the large amounts of money carried by bookmakers and punters. Cash betting was illegal anywhere else, a factor that encouraged rising attendances at Flat meetings in a period when there was an expanding middle class and an extending railway network that facilitated travel. The result was an extraordinary growth in ready-money betting.² This was a magnet to thieves, who were able to rob and intimidate virtually with impunity because of the lack of control on racecourses. Too few police were employed to keep order and some of them were susceptible to bribes ‘to look the other way’.³ This state of affairs made it easy for gangs of six, seven and eight men to surround and trip up their victims to rob them or else to snatch purses, watches and chains. Travelling to and from the racecourse by train, teams from each gang also worked as card sharps upon gullible fellow passengers.⁴ Such pickpockets and card sharps increasingly intimidated bookmakers to pay into ‘collections’, and they were joined by welching gangs. Two or three men, protected by several others, would set up as bookmakers, disappearing before they had to pay out winning bets.⁵

Racecourse pests, as the police termed them, were known colloquially as ‘the Boys’, and the Birmingham Boys, also called the Brummagem Boys, ranged wide, but they were not alone. In Scotland, crews of roughs from the East End of Glasgow and ‘other notorious regions were foremost in a reprehensible system that had been in vogue at Scottish race meetings for a considerable time – forcing money from bookmakers’.⁶ South of the border, the Newcastle Boys plagued the racecourses of the North-East, extorting ‘protection’ money from bookies; whilst another gang, the Mexborough Boys from South Yorkshire, focused on ‘megging’ – an expression for the three-card trick, also called ‘find the lady’.⁷ Yet it was the ‘Brums’ who were the most feared, and for a short time they were brought together into a fearsome force under the overall leadership of Billy Kimber.⁸

Portrayed in the series *Peaky Blinders* as a small, dapper Londoner, in reality he was a burly Brummie with a formidable reputation as a street fighter. Born in 1882, he had been a peaky blinder but, by his early twenties, he had followed others in moving away from backstreet rowdiness and into pickpocketing. Under Kimber, the medley of small gangs that made up the Birmingham Boys came together as a slightly more coherent entity known as the Birmingham Gang or Brummagem Gang. By the early twentieth century, it ruled with a rod of iron the racecourses of the Midlands and the North of England, up to the border with the Newcastle Boys. But Kimber had bigger ambitions. He wanted to organise and control the highly profitable rackets on the more numerous racecourses of southern England, leading him to abandon his family and move to London in 1910. He achieved his ambition, and although racing was curtailed during the First World War, he reasserted his dominance in 1920. But his success was short-lived because the Birmingham Gang's takeover fuelled the resentment and envy of London gangs, and violence soon broke out.

A world city and centre of the British Empire, London expanded massively in the 1920s. Propelled by the expansion of the railway and underground systems, it burst out of its bounds, rapidly overlaying the surrounding countryside with large-scale suburban development. In sharp contrast to the comfortable homes, pleasant settings and prosperous lives of the suburbanites, the poor of London's older central districts endured unfit housing and insanitary conditions and struggled to get by on low-paid and intermittent work. Just as Britain was a nation rent apart by class so too was London, perhaps more starkly so, as the wealth of the City and the West End was so close to some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. It was from these poorer areas which emerged the gangs that became embroiled in the Racecourse War of 1921. Like Birmingham, parts of the capital had also been infested by backstreet gangs in the later nineteenth century. Commonly known as hooligans, they had much in common with the peaky blinders in that they were territorial, motivated by asserting their fighting prowess, and fought with belts and knives as well as fists and feet.⁹ But there were also crucial differences. There was a wider use of revolvers and pistols in London, where neighbourhood gangs also emerged – and some of these developed into more organised criminal groupings. They included the Titanics, a pickpocketing gang from Hoxton, and the Elephant Boys of South London, which became an important ally

of Kimber through his friendship with two of their top men – brothers Wag and Wal McDonald. In a city decisively split by the River Thames, Kimber cleverly secured back-up from the other side of the divide thanks to George ‘Brummy’ Sage, who would go on to lead the Camden Town Gang.

During a period when ‘un-Englishness’ was despised, when foreigners were demeaned as inferior, and when Eastern European Jewish immigration was restricted by laws targeting ‘undesirable’ aliens, racism coursed through the Birmingham Gang and their London allies. They especially hated Jewish bookmakers, who were subjected even more than others to blackmailing for ‘protection’. It was the brutish beating of one of them that was the catalyst for conflict. The victim was Alfie Solomon. Dramatised in *Peaky Blinders* as Alfie Solomons, and as if he were from an Orthodox Jewish background, he actually belonged to a secular Anglo-Jewish family. After his mauling in March 1921, Solomon and other Jewish bookies turned to another gang leader for help, this leader would later be portrayed in the drama – Darby Sabini. Depicted on screen as a smartly dressed Italian gangster, he was really an Anglo-Italian who identified as an Englishman. He led a gang of men like himself from London’s Little Italy in Clerkenwell, but the gang also included those from solely English backgrounds and Anglo-Jewish men from the East End. At its core, though, the Sabini Gang was tightly organised under one clear leader bolstered by an intimate inner circle that included two of Sabini’s brothers, as well as close friends with whom he had grown up.

The bloody conflict between the Sabini Gang and the Birmingham Gang and its London allies was marked by serious outbreaks of violence at Alexandra Park racecourse, which led to the death of a Jewish bookie; at the Epsom Road Battle, in which several mostly Jewish bookmakers were savagely assaulted, and at Bath races, where there were wild scenes when the Birmingham Gang went on the rampage. The nation watched on in horror as the gangs clashed not only on southern racecourses but also on the streets of North London. But in the autumn of 1921, and in a startling turn of events, the Birmingham Gang and the Sabinis declared a truce and agreed to divide the racecourse rackets between them on a regional basis. However, Kimber’s London allies were left out of the agreement. Determined to wrest power back from the Sabinis, in 1922, Sage formed the Camden Town Gang, which was supported by Hoxton’s Titanics and the Elephant Boys. Another violent confrontation broke out in North

London and on racecourses around the capital. Yet again the Sabinis were the winners, and for a short period there was peace. Then, in 1925, the Sabini Gang was again challenged fiercely within London whilst in Sheffield a man was murdered in a war between the Mooney Gang and the Garvin Gang. Both leaders were racing men who had belonged to street gangs and both were embedded in poor districts close to the centre of a city famed for its production of steel. But their bitter quarrel was not over racecourse rackets – it was over control of a gambling site close to Sheffield city centre.

That gang war was put down by forceful policing and, in another unexpected twist, and for a variety of reasons that will be made clear, the racecourse gangs of London and Birmingham soon faded away. They had caused mayhem, terrorised bookmakers and racegoers, inflicted terrible wounds, triggered fearful headlines, and had seemed all but invincible. Yet now some of the gangsters sought legitimacy for themselves and respectability for their families; others carried on as petty criminals; and a handful became leading figures in London's gangland. Most have been all but forgotten, and none have been glamorised in gangland mythology – none except for Darby Sabini. He has been depicted as if he were a 1920s-type American mobster, a Mafia-style don and 'Britain's Godfather' from whom later London gang leaders took inspiration. He was no such thing. Nor were the other 1920s gangsters audacious and exciting anti-heroes. They were dangerous, nasty, mob-handed racketeers who blackmailed, intimidated and maimed. Yet they were as noticeable and important a feature of the Roaring Twenties as the dissolute Bright Young Things, the carefree young flappers and jazzers, the few glamorous wealthy, the favoured suburbanites, and the unfortunate many who were unemployed and poor. This is the story of those real gangsters. It is the story of Britain's most notorious 1920s gangs and of the legacy of the peaky blinders.



Chapter 1

PEAKY BLINDERS TO THE BIRMINGHAM BOYS

THE EPSOM ROAD AMBUSH

On Friday 3 June 1921, *London's Evening News* carried the attention-grabbing headline: 'The Epsom Road Ambush'. In an alarming report, readers were told of how, after that day's racing at Epsom, a battle had caused panic and, in a dramatic raid, a charabanc (motor-coach) party of men had been surprised in a beer garden by a force of a hundred police. They had made twenty-eight arrests, including two men with loaded revolvers. A vivid, attention-grabbing spread told of an attack the previous afternoon next to the Brick Kiln pub at Ewell Corner when a gang had assaulted a group of men in a vehicle, some of whom were hospitalised. The attackers had then easily escaped because racegoers leaving the Epsom meeting had fled from them. People shouted in fright at their drivers to turn around and many scuttled back to Epsom or took other routes home. One startled resident saw what had happened. Opposite the pub, a private car had been running and beside it a man with a pair of field glasses was watching the road. When he said, 'Here they come, boys,' the car was driven at full speed across the road. Its front tyres burst with loud bangs as it crashed into an oncoming vehicle, whose occupants were attacked by a gang of ten to fifteen men wielding hammers, hatchets,

bottles, bricks and hedge sticks. There was a charabanc nearby and then many of the gang jumped in and made off.¹⁰

With the newspapers carrying daily reports of the guerrilla conflict between British forces and Irish republican fighters in the Irish War of Independence, fears were heightened, and so a few witnesses actually believed that some sort of terrorism was afoot – one telephone caller warning the local police that a Sinn Fein riot was taking place.¹¹ Gathering a number of officers, a detective inspector immediately made his way to the scene. By the roadside, he found three men suffering from wounds, as well as two badly damaged cars. He transmitted details of the attackers' charabanc to all stations in the Metropolitan Police area.¹² A young PC noticed a motor tallying the description at the George and Dragon hotel on Kingston Hill. After he passed on this information, over twenty uniformed and plain-clothes policemen hurried to the hotel on bicycles and in commandeered vehicles. Reinforcements swiftly followed in police motor tenders, and altogether the force numbered about a hundred.¹³ They surrounded the pub and garden where the men from the charabanc were drinking. One officer pulled out the vehicle's spark plugs so it couldn't be driven and then others approached the lawn. Sergeant Dawson was the first to confront the men. Holding up his revolver, he announced, 'I will shoot the first man that tries to escape.' After the arrests were made, the police saw that the charabanc floor was smeared with blood and covered with broken glass; they found a loaded Mauser pistol, hammers, large stones, a chopper and a hammer with the handle missing as if it had been broken off in the fight.¹⁴

The next day, twenty-eight men were charged with committing grievous bodily harm to ten others. But they were not members of Sinn Fein and they had nothing to do with the Irish War of Independence. As the *Evening News* revealed, they were well known on racecourses, although they were not bookmakers.¹⁵ These observations were well founded. Most of them belonged to the Birmingham Gang, which was battling London's Sabini Gang over control of the rackets on southern England's racecourses. However, the victims were not Londoners; they were bookmakers from Leeds. Previously regarded as allies of the Birmingham Gang, they'd recently switched allegiance to the Sabinis and therefore, in the eyes of the Birmingham Gang, had to be punished. The Epsom Road Ambush was a major event in that struggle for supremacy. Involving a large number of attackers, it was well planned and was a

bloody warning to bookmakers of what would happen if they deserted the Birmingham Gang. And as the victims were mostly Jewish, it was also an opportunity for venomous anti-Semitism.

Yet the Epsom Road Ambush did not work out as the Birmingham Gang had intended. It ensured that London's bookmakers, Jewish and non-Jewish, would look even more towards the Sabini Gang for protection. It attracted widespread condemnation in the press; it energised the police against the gang; and it resulted in the imprisonment of seventeen of the most menacing of the Birmingham Gang. The disturbing details of their attack and the sentences passed on them will be recounted later, but it is important here to emphasise that most of them had been peaky blinders, and that a discussion of their early lives informs an understanding of how the legacy of the peaky blinders was both the Birmingham Gang and Britain's first major gangland war.

BANKS'S MOB

Amongst the men arrested and convicted was Edward Banks, formerly Edward Pankhurst, and the man who had arranged the trip to Epsom.¹⁶ Born in 1878 and the eldest of a big family of siblings, Banks was short at 5 foot 3 inches. Despite this, he was ever ready to brawl, and by 1904 he had received seven convictions for fighting and assault. One of them in particular highlighted his volatile nature. In December 1903, after a policeman had remonstrated with him for using bad language, Banks ran into his house and, from the attic window, threw a soda-water bottle that hit the officer in the chest.¹⁷ By then, he had also been found guilty of petty theft and warehouse breaking, whilst he had been fortunate to have been given the benefit of the doubt on a charge of loitering. Under the 1824 Vagrancy Act, the police were allowed to arrest those they suspected of frequenting public spaces with the intent of committing an arrestable offence. This section also applied to those loitering with intent and was regularly applied to suspected pickpockets. By now, Banks was one of the Birmingham Boys and, like them, he moved across the Midlands to rob. In 1904, he and an accomplice were found guilty of breaking and entering a shop in Nottingham and stealing gold and silver watches, gold rings and other items worth £100. He was sent to prison for twelve months.¹⁸ The court was told that Banks was the leader of a gang of Birmingham thieves

and that he was a very bad character.¹⁹ He was indeed and, once released, he became embroiled in the infamous Garrison Lane Vendetta.

As detailed in *Peaky Blinders. The Real Story*, this was an especially violent backstreet gang war that was regarded as ‘The End of the Peaky Blinders’.²⁰ Fought between 1908 and 1912 by men who were near neighbours in Bordesley and Deritend, close to the city centre, it pitched the disreputable Sheldon brothers, the inspiration for the Shelby family in the series *Peaky Blinders*, against a hard man called Billy Beach and his pals.²¹ Banks was with the Sheldons, and in January 1909, men brandishing revolvers forced their way into his house looking for him. They did not find him.²² The next year, in August 1910, Banks was arrested for possessing a loaded firearm whilst drunk. In his defence, he said that three evenings previously, his enemies had again broken into his house, kicking in the door and smashing the windows. Afterwards, he had bought the revolver to prevent a recurrence. Banks denied that he had threatened to shoot Beach, but after he was sentenced to one month with hard labour, he vowed, ‘I will get twelve months for him when I come out, or swing for him.’²³

As it was, Banks did not swing for Beach, and over the next decade he seemed to transform his life. He was not arrested for any serious offence and his economic standing improved markedly. Formerly a hawker who made a precarious living traipsing the streets selling vegetables from a handcart, he had lived in badly built back-to-backs; however, by 1921, Banks had a greengrocery shop at 67 Digbeth, just below the Bull Ring markets, and he and his wife lived on the premises. Nearby, he had another shop selling fish and rabbits.²⁴ In total, he employed fourteen people, and after his arrest he was able to bail himself for the huge sum of £1,000 and secure seven sureties totalling £3,000.²⁵ His success was most unusual and, given his previous and later criminality, it is likely that it was achieved from illegal activities.

It was apparent that Banks also headed a group within the Birmingham Gang. Although the notorious Billy Kimber may have been its main leader, this gang was nothing like that of a modern organised crime syndicate, and nor did it have the compactness of the Sabini Gang. It was a rowdy assortment of small bands of rogues. Because of this splintering, due to the Birmingham Gang being based neither in one neighbourhood nor around one family, and because it operated outside the city and did not spawn a successor gang, it has not passed into folklore, and memories of