

The de Relwyskow family - A forgotten Oakwood dynasty

by Tony Pattison

Not many people have heard of this Oakwood dynasty yet it contained:

- A double Olympic Medal winner
- A secret agent
- A TV star and international champion

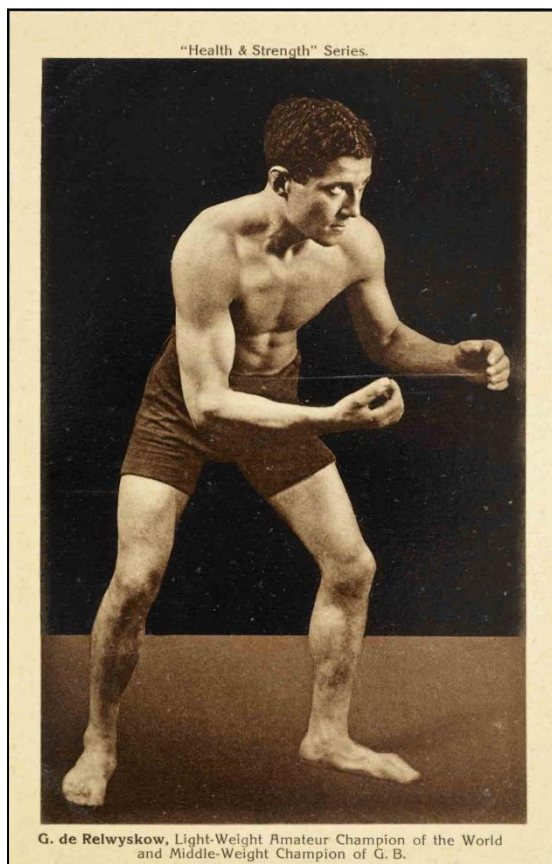
In 2003 their house at 6 Oakwood Lane, Leeds was emptied. It contained literally a ton of memorabilia. Three generations of wrestlers had lived there.

The Yorkshire Evening Post reported that Darren Ward, the sport's historian, had bought a second terraced house at Rothwell just to store it.



6 Oakwood Lane where three generations lived

George Frederick William de Relwyskow



Born at Kensington in 1887; his father was a Russian who came to Britain via Switzerland.

George moved to Oakwood in 1936/7 presumably to take advantage of its geographically central location. He had started the Pro Wrestling shows as we know them today in 1933, covering an area from London to Scotland and from Fleetwood to Hull.

He had started wrestling as a means of keeping fit whilst studying as an artist and designer.

By age 20 he had won 35 successive bouts and was English amateur champion in two weight classes, Lightweight and Middleweight, in 1907 and again in 1908.

In 1908 George was selected to represent Great Britain in the Olympic Games, held at White City

After winning a gold medal in the lightweight class he went on to compete in the middleweight division against opponents, not only heavier but far more experienced. One outweighed him by a stone (6.6 kilos) George was awarded a silver.

He was the only wrestler to hold medals in two weight classes and he won both in the same day. He was also the youngest to win a gold medal for wrestling. This record held for 70 years.

ENTRY FORM FOR WRESTLING.	
Entries Close 12th June, 1908.	
1. Country which the competitor represents ...	Great Britain
2. Name of competitor in full ...	George de Relwyskow.
3. Full postal address ...	60 College Place Chelsea, S.W.
4. Place of birth ...	Kensington London
5. Country in which he is resident (give Nationality Regulations).	England.
6. Length of such residence ...	Life
7. Club ...	Hammer Smith A. Wrestling Club and German G.S.
8. If the competitor be not a natural-born subject or citizen of the country he represents, but be qualified as a fully naturalized subject or citizen, date of Full Naturalization ...	
<p>Declaration to be signed by the Competitor. I hereby declare that the above facts are correct and that I am qualified as an Amateur under the following definition:— An Amateur is one who has never competed for a money prize or monetary consideration, or for any declared wager or stake bet, or who has never engaged in or taught any athletic exercise as a means of pecuniary gain, or who has never taken part in any competition with anyone who is not an Amateur; and will accept and observe the Rules, Regulations and Conditions of the Olympic Games of London, 1908.</p> <p>Signature of Competitor <i>George de Relwyskow</i></p>	
<p>Declaration to be signed by the Secretary. This Declaration must be signed by the Secretary of the Governing Association which enters the competitor, or (if not entered by a Governing Association) by the Secretary of the Olympic Committee of the Country which he represents.— I declare that the above statements are correct to the best of my knowledge and belief, and I nominate the above competitor for the following event:—</p> <p>Signature of Secretary <i>W. H. ...</i> Secretary of ...</p>	



After winning the Olympic gold medal he toured all over Great Britain. At that time professional wrestling was promoted as a variety act in theatres and music halls, such as the City Varieties in Leeds.

In 1909 he beat Frank Gotz at Pontefract in a bout lasting one hour to become lightweight champion of the world.

George was always top of the bill, offering £50 to anyone who could pin his shoulders to the mat. Apparently he never had to pay.

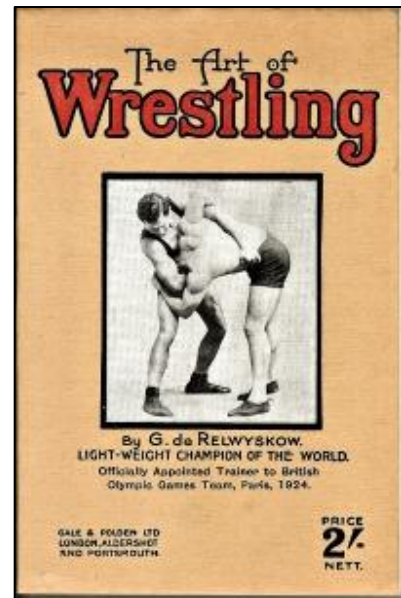
To put this fame into perspective: one poster had Arthur Lucan and Kitty McShane further down the billing with their 'Old Mother Riley' routine; and another dated around 1911 from a Southampton theatre listed "Local Comedian Charles Chaplin".

George also made a tour of South America but returned in 1914 to enlist in the army as an unarmed combat instructor. During World War One he was promoted to Sergeant major and posted to Australia. Later he was posted to France to train instructors. By 1918 he was stationed at Aldershot and taught wrestling – his own style – to the army.

He was appointed trainer to the 1924 Olympic Games Team.

In 1925 George wrote a book, a manual called 'The art of Wrestling'.

He continued to tour the variety theatres until about 1927.



George enlisted again at the start of World War Two and served as an Instructor in Unarmed Combat and Silent Killing with the Special Operations Executive (SOE). He served for a period as an Instructor to the SOE School in Canada – the Special Training School (STS) 103 (which was also known as "Camp X") – but felt that he was too old. He raised more than £7,000 for charities during the war, mainly from organising wrestling tournaments.

George died at 6 Oakwood Lane in Leeds address in 1942 (and not in Burma in 1943 as has been reported). He left a wife, Clara and two sons, George Jr. born in 1914 and Douglas.

George Frederick Henry de Relwyskow



George junior was known to every fan of television wrestling as one half of Relwyskow and Green Promotions. He was an outstanding wrestler in a short lived 1930s career. An injury whilst serving during World War Two brought this to an early end.

Ironically, the injuries that prevented a post-war career may, for wrestling fans, have been for the best because following the war George and his brother Doug (later a referee) turned to promotion.

It was for his contribution as a promoter, in which he formed a business partnership with Arthur Green, that George is most often remembered.

Between the wars gimmickry and showmanship on the American model had entered Britain and brought the sport into disrepute. It became known as 'All-In Wrestling.'

In 1947 **Admiral Lord Mountevans** a fan of the sport was prompted to create a committee to produce official rules. The style at the time was unique, with a strong emphasis on clean technical wrestling.

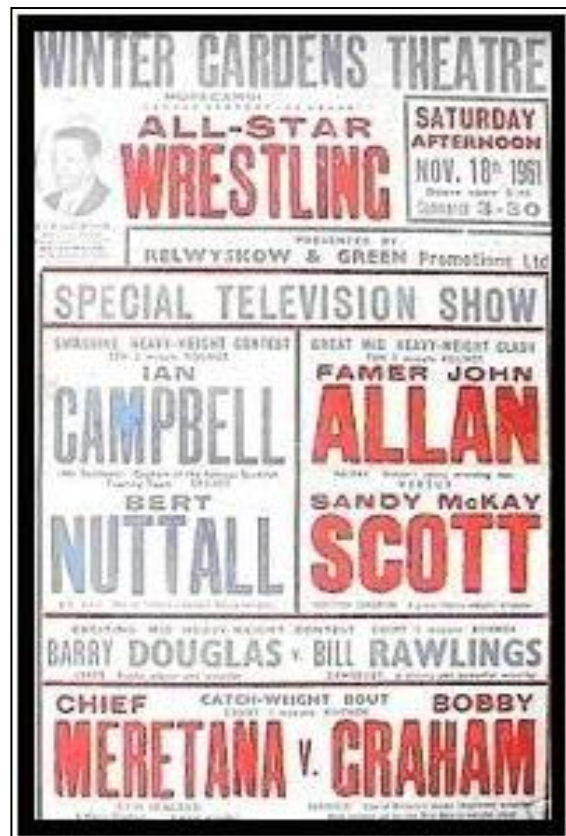
Promoters readily acknowledged the committee and in 1952 four (later six) of them formed an alliance under the name of Joint Promotions. One of these was Relwyskow and Green of 6 Oakwood Lane, Leeds.

Their principle activity was promotion throughout the United Kingdom. Every town of note had a show at least once a month, and more than 30 cities had a weekly date. By the mid-1960s, Joint Promotions had doubled their live event schedule to somewhere in the region of 4,500 shows a year.

Leeds was involved from the outset and Oakwood in particular.

From 1969 to the early 1980s live bouts were moved from the Town Hall to the (now demolished) **Astoria Ballroom** at the intersection of Gledhow Valley Road and Roundhay Road.

In the 1960s there was a wrestling gym over what is now **Rico's Restaurant** and the Gipton Hotel (now called **The Roundhay**) was a regular Sunday lunchtime social venue.



However, it was the exposure of wrestling on television that proved the ultimate boost. In its heyday wrestling attracted as many as 12 million viewers. At its peak an audience of 18 million tuned in. Kent Walton, instantly recognisable from his husky welcome at 4 o'clock each Saturday afternoon, hosted the wrestling for all of the 33 years that it appeared.

Oakwood's Secret agent

At the time of death secrets can be taken to the grave. It is for his contribution as a promoter that he is most often remembered but it transpired that, unknown to any of his friends and family, during the Second World War George had been a secret agent who on numerous occasions was parachuted behind enemy lines.

It was a secret that had been well kept. Even his wife, Elsie, only made the discovery as she went through his papers after she was widowed.

Just as his father had done in World War One, at the outbreak of war George signed up as a physical training instructor. He was shortly afterwards recruited by the **Special Air Service** and was seconded to a section known only by the name 'Room 98'. It is believed that they were involved in the training of agents in preparation for planting in the occupied countries of Europe – among them **Odette Sansom**, the French born British spy who was awarded the George Cross.

George trained agents in unarmed combat and parachuting and was one of the pioneers in using plastic explosives after parachuting into Libya. The injury which brought both this and any future wrestling career to an early end was caused by a land mine. It exploded under the jeep in which he was crossing enemy lines, causing head and leg injuries.

George de Relwyskow junior died in 1980. He left a brother Douglas and two nephews called Douglas b.1940 and George.

Douglas de Relwyskow (Barry Douglas) b.1940

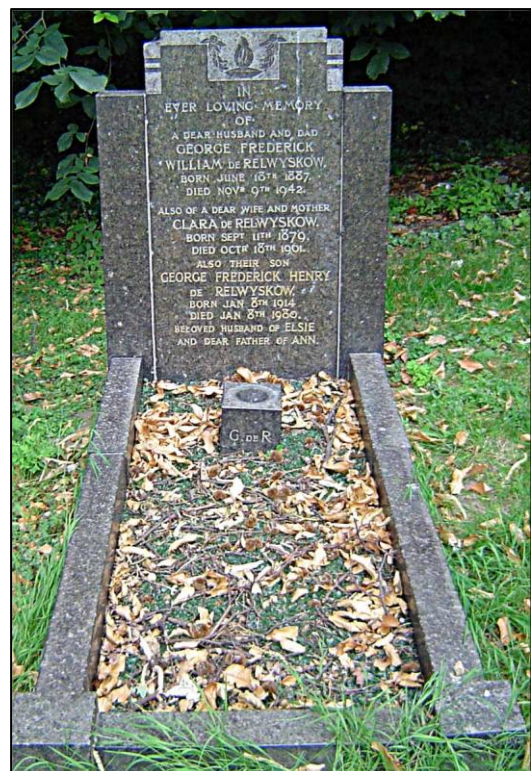
Douglas de Relwyskow was a TV referee. His great claim to fame was an appearance in a 1964 episode of Coronation Street, refereeing a match featuring Ian Campbell, himself an Oakwood resident who on retirement opened a Butchers shop here.

Douglas junior changed his name to Barry Douglas. Whilst aware and proud of his family's heritage it did him no favours and was resented by some of his colleagues. He wanted to be judged on his own merits.

Soon everyone acknowledged that Barry's achievements were a result of his own talent and hard work, nothing else. Few others, if any, can match them. His was a career that spanned six decades and covered the length and breadth of the UK and much of the world. It started in 1959 and ended in the early years of the twenty-first century; and then he started refereeing!

Barry was known throughout the world, wrestling regularly in France, Belgium and Spain, becoming one of the biggest names in the huge German tournaments and one of the first to work in Japan. Barry certainly touched the hearts and minds of hundreds of thousands of wrestling fans and perhaps his greatest accolade is the high esteem in which colleagues hold him.

Barry was undoubtedly one of British wrestling's great ambassadors.



The de Relwyskow family memorial at Rounday St John
Photo by Neville Hurworth

A brief history of wrestling

The sport of wrestling goes back thousands of years. Evidence of its existence has been found on every continent, in every country, and every society. It is, without a doubt, the oldest sport known to man. Many believe that it is also the hardest. It goes by many different names in different countries with a whole spectrum of different rules, but it is, nevertheless, still wrestling.

It is egalitarian, crossing social and intellectual boundaries: kings and presidents, peasants and singers, at country fairs and in national auditoria.

George Hackenschmidt was fluent in five languages, took a university degree very late in life and wrote three books on philosophy. This was besides being heavyweight champion of the world (and strongest man in the world).

The 1947 Mountevans Committee consisted of: an Olympic gold medal champion; Mountevans himself; a British peer; an admiral; a member of the then radio Brains Trust; and a Member of Parliament.

One of the first casualties of Joint Promotions was another English Peer **Sir Atholl Oakley** who was himself a wrestler and, between the wars, a promoter of 'All-In'.

The Queen (whose interest in the sport of Wrestling was mentioned by Richard Crossman's in his diaries) was a fan, as was the Queen Mother. A 1968 event held at the Royal Albert Hall featured, as a guest of honour, Prince Phillip the Duke of Edinburgh.

Televised wrestling ended in 1988. Joint Promotions was eclipsed partially by retirement but far more by the introduction of American Wrestling representing all that Mountevans had sought to avoid. Greg Dyke held that it could no longer be considered a sport.

Kent Walton died in 2003 aged 86.

There is an annual British Wrestlers Reunion (Leeds) held twice yearly for wrestlers and invited guests. A recent award was to Ian Campbell's daughter on his behalf.

One wrestler has remarked that *"Everything has to change but it is not always for the better"*.

In 1972 Olympic Champion Dan Gable stated *"Once you have wrestled, everything else in life is easy"*.