

# Edward James (Choppy) Warburton 1845-1897

## and his Little Black Bottle

This is the time of year for summer sporting events. One which I always enjoy watching on TV is the Tour de France cycling race, so it seems appropriate to look at the life of one of the earliest cycling trainers, one James Edward (Choppy) Warburton. Choppy has been the subject of at least 2 books as well as a BBC Radio program on drugs in sport, and a number of Internet entries. The most recent book is *The Little Black Bottle* by Gerry Moore, which in turn refers to the privately published 'Choppy' Warburton: *Long Distance Runner and Trainer of Cycling Champions* by Richard Watson (which I have yet to read; my copy is in the post).

In June 1896 Choppy was at the height of his powers as a trainer. The previous August one of his riders, Jimmy Michael of Aberaman in South Wales, had won the 100 km paced race at the first official World Championships. Then the previous month Arthur Linton, also from Aberaman, had been placed 1st in the Bordeaux-Paris race, the most prestigious road race of the day.



**Arthur Linton, Choppy, Jimmy Michael, and Tom Linton**

Choppy was a showman. According to the *Cycling Gazette* of Chicago he was "undoubtedly the most widely advertised figure in European cycle racing circles. His every movement created talk". The magazine *Paris Velo* described him thus: "In the track centre he is the only one you see. His great overcoat and his Derby hat pushed down to his ears, with a bang of his fist he gives an air of mystery that intrigues rivals. From his pocket he suddenly takes a small glass container, shows it to his rider, uncorks it with dramatic care, pours the unknown mixture that it contains into a milk bottle and then still running, knocking over anyone who gets in the way, gets himself to the other side of the track to pass it on to his rider".

Choppy himself said he only coached four riders, and three of them were World Champions, Jimmy Michael, Arthur Linton, and Arthur's younger brother Tom. This was not strictly true but made a good story. However it was 'the little black bottle' that was Choppy's downfall. He was very secretive about its contents. Some thought it a bluff, other's that it was something much more potent.

Early in June 1896 Choppy's riders were appearing at a meeting at Catford Race Track in London. Arthur Linton made an attempt on the 2 mile record but his lacklustre performance showed he was still suffering from his exertions in the Bordeaux-Paris race. However it was the performance of Jimmy Michael that was more worrying. Reports are contradictory. Reports say that after taking a drink from Choppy's bottle he was clearly unsteady on his bicycle; some say he actually set off in the wrong direction. What is known is that he failed to finish his race and blamed Choppy for poisoning him.

Worse was to follow. It was soon clear that Arthur Linton's poor form was due to more than tiredness. He was forced to return to South Wales to recuperate, but died of typhoid on July 23rd. It wasn't long before his demise was related to his efforts in the Bordeaux-Paris race, and that he was able to give such an effort because of the contents of Choppy's little black bottle.

An article in Cyclers's News by 'One Who Knows' described an episode in the race as follows: "I saw him (Arthur Linton) at Tours half way through the race at midnight when he came in with glassy eyes and tottering limbs and in a high state of nervous excitement. I then heard him swear, a very rare occurrence for him but after a rest he was off again though none of us expected he would go very far. At Orleans at 5 o'clock in the morning Choppy and I looked after a wreck, a corpse as Choppy called him, yet he had sufficient energy, heart, pluck, call it what you will to enable him to gain 18 minutes on the last 45 miles of hilly road." Although Linton finished first it transpired he hadn't followed the correct route so he was officially placed joint first with his French rival Gaston Rivierre.

On October 31st 1896 The National Cycling Union (NCU) held a hearing into Jimmy Michael's claims of poisoning and banned Choppy from all race meetings under the NCU's jurisdiction. Choppy continued to work abroad but through 1897 his health began to deteriorate and on 17th December 1897 he died, aged 52, of heart failure, in lodgings in Wood Green during a visit to London to plead his case in an appeal against his NCU ban.

Following his death his reputation continued to suffer and he became known as the man who introduced drugs to cycling. Arthur Linton was considered to be the first man to die from the use of drugs in cycling. But who exactly was Choppy Warburton, and did he deserve the reputation he gained after his death?

James Edward Warburton was born on the 13th November 1845 in Haslingden, Lancashire, just 2 months after the marriage of his father James, and mother Harriet Birtwistle. His parents had 13 children in all, but only 6, all boys, survived long enough to appear in censuses. Many sources say his nickname came from his father, a seaman, who, however rough the sea, would only admit it was a bit choppy. However James senior was a weaver in a cotton mill when James was born, and later became landlord of the Wagon and Horses public house in Haslingden. It would appear the seafarer was either an uncle, or from an earlier generation. James senior was one of several of that name born in Haslingden around 1822 so I have yet to identify Choppy's grandfather.

Choppy himself went to work in the mill at the age of eight. When he was seventeen one of his tasks was to go to the railway station at Helmshore whenever an engine was needed to come up to the mill to pull away the loaded wagons. It was Choppy's habit to run back alongside the engine, an act that was spotted by one of the mill's owners who was himself an amateur athlete. Impressed he invited Choppy to run at a local meeting, and he was subsequently signed up by the Haslingden Athletic Club. This was the start of a long amateur athletic career that culminated in him being acknowledged as the amateur champion of England in 1878.

Through most of his career he continued to work as a warehouseman in the mill. He also found time to marry, in 1874 to Mary Ann Johnson, and in 1878 their son James Allen (known as Jimmy) was born. A daughter Mary Ann followed in 1880.

Choppy's new found responsibilities led to a change in career. Shortly after his marriage he became the licensee of the Fisherman's Arms in Blackburn. This gave him an income and a place to live, but following the birth of his son he needed more. At the age of 34 he decided to turn professional. As an

amateur he had been able to make some money by selling prizes, but professionalism allowed him to win prize money.

In 1880 he was persuaded he could earn good money in America. His brother George had already emigrated to North Carolina. A second brother, the improbably named Doctor Warburton followed later and became a Professor of Music. Choppy's own American adventure was less successful. He found himself in a world of confidence tricksters, and villains. Gambling was rife and many races were fixed. Choppy often had to run to orders, though he sometimes won when he shouldn't. He originally planned to be in America for 3 months but only arrived home in August 1881, travelling under an assumed name to avoid some of the crooks who felt he owed them money. He had missed the birth of his daughter. He also left behind a tarnished reputation, one American newspaper considered he was "crooked all the way through after his first race, and ran in the interests of a gang of bullies and blacklegs who told him when to win and when to lose", though it did admit he was "persecuted, plundered, and punished...but he couldn't expect any better from the crowd he trained with".



Choppy continued running until 1892. He even returned to America, avoiding the acquaintances from his first trip, and possibly competing under an assumed name. His last race was a handicap race for veterans of fifty years and over. Choppy won easily but an objection was lodged, pointing out he was only 47. He was disqualified, and so his running career ended rather ignominiously.

Meanwhile in 1885 Choppy left the Fisherman's Arms to become manager and trainer of athletics in Stanley Park, Liverpool. However this was not a success and he returned to managing pubs, though by the 1891 census the family was living in Salford over a shop they appeared to be letting out. Choppy however was not at home.

Choppy first appeared as a cycling trainer in 1892 working with FJ Osmond, a former NCU champion. He clearly knew much about the conditioning of an athlete from his own career. He understood the importance of diet, and of the importance taking on food and drinks during long endurance events. He was himself a non-smoker and teetotaler who organised all his own training. An addition Choppy was excellent at instilling confidence and self-belief, whilst his showmanship allowed him to get the best exposure for his charges.

### **Choppy (right) in his running days**

Through most of his career as a trainer Choppy was based in Paris where he was manager of the cycling team of the Gladiator Cycling Company. Cycle companies saw cycle racing as an ideal way to

advertise their products and maintained strong teams. This was also the age of paced racing. Choppy's cyclists did their racing behind teams of pacers riding tandems, triplets, and machines for up to six riders. Choppy understood that good training and organisation of the pacing teams was essential for getting the best out of his riders. Including cyclists and pacers Choppy trained a team of about 30 riders.

The one skill Choppy lacked was any understanding of the mechanics of the bicycle. Nevertheless he had considerable success, though his life had a significant affect on his marriage. For a while his wife and daughter moved to Paris with him, but later returned to Lancashire, and at the time of his death they were planning to move to Australia. His son Jimmy became a cyclist, working with Choppy for a time, but when Choppy died he was living in America and riding as a pacer.

A central element in Choppy's showmanship was his little black bottle. It was clearly part of his act, and his secretiveness about its contents added to his allure. He certainly never tried to hide it. We shall probably never know its contents. The wildest suggestion was a mixture of strychnine, which in small quantities relaxed muscles, and heroin which numbed pain. Others thought it was all show, and probably contained water. More likely Choppy had developed a mixture of herbs and other ingredients that had given him energy and stimulation on his own long runs.

It should be remembered that at the time there were no rules about what competitors might take. Substances such as laudanum (an opium-based painkiller), cocaine, caffeine, arsenic, and strychnine were all available from the local pharmacy, and many preparations were advertised and marketed as stimulants and tonics that contained caffeine, or cocoa amongst their ingredients. The contents of the little black bottle would probably fail a modern drugs test, but by the standards of the time they were probably unremarkable.

Most professional athletes and cyclists of the time were from working class backgrounds, as were most of the crowds that watched them. They knew the hard backgrounds in the mills and mines that the athletes had escaped from, and understood why they would use whatever means available to further the athletic career that enabled them to escape. The amateur athletes, on the other hand, were mostly from the upper classes, typically university men who later progressed to serve on the various associations that ran the sports. They tended to regard the professionals, and especially their trainers and managers with deep suspicion. Choppy's brash showmanship would not go down well with the amateurs of the National Cycling Union, and they were probably delighted to have cause to ban him.

It has to be admitted that Choppy was not whiter than white. Race fixing associated with gambling was not unknown, and it is possible that nobbling a rider who wouldn't agree to toe the line occurred. However if we consider the incidents that most tarnished Choppy's reputation they can have a very different interpretation. Arthur Linton's ride in the Bordeaux-Paris race was certainly remarkable and probably aided by some sort of stimulant. However it stretches the imagination to suggest it was the cause of his death two months later. He clearly needed a rest and Choppy begged him to return to South Wales to recuperate, but Linton refused and continued to race for the best part of six weeks before it became clear he was ill. Typhoid, the cause of his death, was known as the scourge of the over-trained. His exertions in the Bordeaux-Paris race were probably just one element in the over-exertions that made him vulnerable to the disease.

The second incident, the supposed poisoning of Jimmy Michael, is easier to explain. Michael had been disenchanted by his contract with Choppy for some time. Choppy signed his riders to strict contracts which gave them a salary and bonuses, but gave Choppy half their prize money. As Michael became more successful he felt he should have more of his winnings. He was also keen to try America where the rewards were said to be greater. Choppy had planned to take his riders to America earlier in the year but Arthur Linton was prone to home sickness and refused to go, so the trip never materialised.

Then Michael was contacted by an American trainer called Thomas Eck who had brought a team to race in England. However they knew Michael's contract with Choppy would be difficult to break unless they could charge him with something serious. The events at Catford would seem to be designed to achieve this end, and before the end of August 1896 Jimmy Michael was in America with Eck.

Choppy was clearly a colourful character but the claim that he was uniquely responsible for the introduction of drugs into cycling would seem to be extremely unjust.

