

BRITAIN'S THOMAS INCH: MORE THAN A DUMBBELL

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Thomas Inch was an influential British physical culturist and weightlifter in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Described in 1920 in *Health & Strength* magazine as “the worthy figurehead of weightlifting,” Inch was highly regarded in that era for his strength and the role he played in organizing and promoting weightlifting. In more recent years, Inch has been primarily remembered for the large, heavy dumbbells he owned that are often referred to as Inch’s “Unliftable” Dumbbells.¹ In this profile of the early pioneer we attempt to unpack some of the stories surrounding his life and lifting accomplishments in the hope that Inch’s true legacy can be better understood.

Thomas Inch was born on 27 December 1881, in Scarborough, a small seaside town in the Northern part of Yorkshire. His interest in strength began at an early age. Reflecting on his life in physical culture, Inch declared that he began digging holes in his back yard “with the sole object of developing muscle” at eight years old. He was fascinated by the music hall strong men and read everything he could find on strength training. At the age of 12 he claimed he set himself a series of ambitious goals, including becoming the strongest man in Britain and possessing 17-inch biceps.²

The goal-oriented 12-year-old acquired his first set of dumbbells that same year and began researching what he later described as “various important works on physical culture.”³ One of these texts might well have been Professor Josef Szalay’s mail-order strength training course. In 1912 Szalay, a former performing strongman who ran an important gym in London, claimed that he gave Inch his first postal instructions for physical development while he was still living in Scarborough.⁴ Inch, like many

commercially minded physical culturists, however, later claimed that he was entirely self-taught and had “never had a lesson from any man.”⁵

In an autobiographical article published in 1933, Inch wrote that by age 13 he had acquired a set of both 5-pound and 56-pound dumbbells; a set of Indian clubs; a chest expander; and that he trained in the attic of his family home until his mother couldn’t stand the noise anymore. He reputedly then took over a gymnasium in Scarborough even though he was only 15 years old.⁶ In a census report from 1901, when he was approximately 20 years old, he is listed as still living at home in Scarborough with his mother, Hannah, his younger brother, George, and sisters, Blanche and Mabel. His profession is listed as “Physical Drill School Master,” and he is listed as self-employed.⁷ How successful his gym was at the early time in his life is not known as no records of his various businesses survive.⁸

Inch apparently began competing in lifting contests at age 16. In 1897, he won the first contest he entered, a strand-pulling (chest-expander) contest in Bradford, England. Author Gilbert Odd, in a retrospective piece on Inch published in *Health & Strength* in 1960, claimed Inch performed feats of strength at a circus in Scarborough when he was 17, and by age 19 was known as “The World’s Strongest Youth.”⁹ W.J. Lowry, the renowned chronicler of the early days of British lifting, explained in a 1960 article that because there were no official weightlifting organizations at this time, it was common for both amateur and professional lifters to claim records and make up titles for themselves.¹⁰

As “The World’s Strongest Youth” Inch held some impressive records. He was reported to have raised two 56-pound weights above his head with one hand, supposedly jumped over a chair while holding 120 pounds (probably two 60-pound dumbbells) in his hands, and

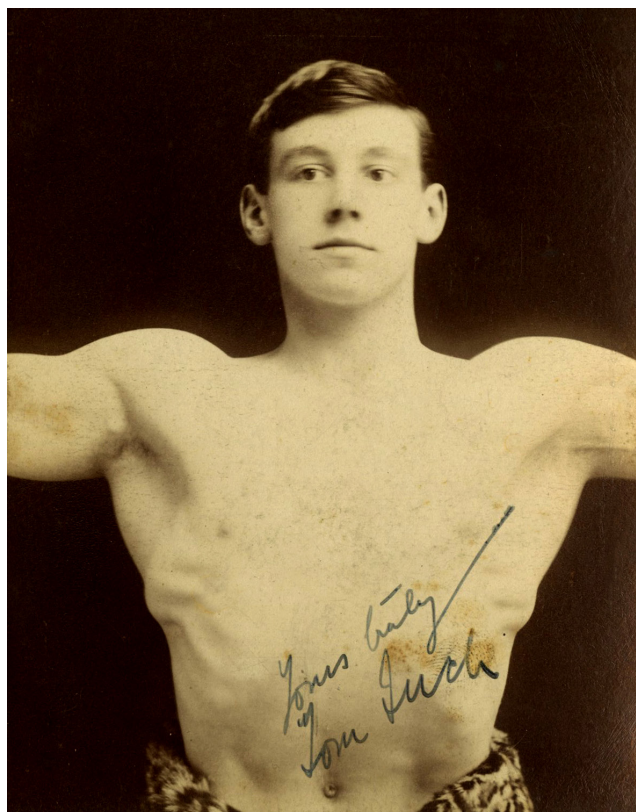
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he could perform a right-handed bent press of 204 pounds. He also worked hard on his grip and began to be recognized for his unusual hand strength.¹¹ Whether Inch really deserved the “World’s Strongest Youth” title, however, remains a question.

Not content with being just Scarborough’s strongest man, Inch decided to move to London, the epicenter of late nineteenth century weightlifting, to pursue his dream of being known as Britain’s Strongest Man. In a 1912 article in *Health & Strength*, Inch reported that he first visited the capital city in 1899 when he was 18 years old. He gravitated to Professor Szalay’s gymnasium where he was introduced to plate-loading barbells for the first time.¹² Szalay was an important figure in Britain’s fledgling Iron Game and was an influential coach, performer, and gym owner in the *fin de siècle* era. A 1912 newspaper article, in fact, described Szalay (not Sandow) as “The Pioneer of Weightlifting.”¹³

Whether he visited the offices of *Health & Strength* magazine on that trip is not known, but shortly after he returned to Scarborough, he published his first article in the magazine. “A Lecture on Physical Culture,” appeared in December 1900 and it detailed his recovery from scarlet fever through physical culture.¹⁴ The sickly youth who rebuilt his health by lifting was a much-used trope in the early days of physical culture. Sandow and Macfadden both told comparable stories.

Wishing to view himself as a writer and expert, Inch moved permanently to London in 1902 and began selling a physical culture training course through the postal service. It appears that Inch was also performing in stage shows at this time, since he was ordered by the courts to pay a debt of 37 shillings for the printing of stage programs in 1902. Inch fought the charge, claiming he was still legally a minor and could not be prosecuted, but the court found against him.¹⁵ Shortly afterwards, in 1903, he began appearing in advertisements for products such as Grape Nuts cereal, a sign of his rising popularity.¹⁶ That same year he opened an office at 60 Bishop’s Road, Fulham, and began selling his own shot-loading barbells and dumbbells.¹⁷ Although he was still in his early twenties, and had yet to win a major amateur contest, let alone a professional one, Inch’s self-confidence was unwavering and, according to *Health & Strength* author Lowry, the launch of Inch’s physical culture business went well and soon had a big impact on the Iron Game in Britain.¹⁸



Thomas Inch claimed that he decided to become The Strongest Man in Britain when he was just 12 years old. By the time this photograph was taken, at age 17, he had made considerable progress toward that goal and had won a strand-pulling contest at age 16 and had begun performing feats of strength in a circus in his hometown of Scarborough, England. On the back of this cabinet card someone has written, “Thomas Inch aged 17 – when he claimed the world’s junior championship.” As noted by the authors, “it was common for both amateur and professional lifters to claim records and make up titles for themselves.” They found no evidence of a “world junior championships” in weightlifting, but clearly Inch is already a strong man.

A large part of that impact came from Inch’s advocacy of heavy weight training. In his first book, *Scientific Weight-lifting*, released in 1905, Inch laid out his belief in the positive benefits of lifting heavy weights. The book was viewed as “unusual” and yet “authoritative” for its emphasis on heavy weights.¹⁹ While physical culturists such as Eugen Sandow had published manuals on exercise, Sandow, and most other early physical culture authors, took the safe course of recommending light dumbbells and calisthenics to their readers. The heavy-lifting craze, inspired by George Barker Windship of mid-nineteenth century America, had not yet fully migrated to the United Kingdom, and so Inch’s advice in *Scientific Weight-lifting* signaled a paradigm shift as it is one of the first descriptions of heavy weight training practices published in Britain.²⁰ In the years ahead, Inch would publish several other books. *The*

Art and Science of Lifting was released in 1910; *Inch on Fitness* existed by 1923; *Thomas Inch on Strength* appeared in 1932, and *Developing the Grip and Forearm* was released in 1955 in which he talks specifically about the Inch Challenge Dumbbell and how he trained to lift it.

Inch also helped shift the paradigm for lifting in Britain by his early sale of plate-loading barbells. As historian Jan Todd explained in her article on the history of barbells and dumbbells, the use of spherical plates on the end of barbells was relatively rare in the late-nineteenth century. Most barbells had globes of either solid iron or they were made hollow so they could be filled with lead or sand. However, in Germany, in the 1880s, there were at least two companies selling globe barbells that could be loaded with discs inside the spheres.²¹ In Britain and America, the use of plate-loading barbells was not well known until the early twentieth century when Alan Calvert founded the Milo Barbell Company and manufactured a plate-loading barbell/dumbbell combination he called the Milo Triplex in 1908.²² Inch also began selling a plate-loading barbell in approximately 1908, and wrote in 1933 that "I suppose I may take a little credit to myself for popularising the disc bell, as I stocked them and supplied them well over a quarter of a century ago."²³ Who manufactured the barbells and dumbbells he sold is not known, but their sale became a major part of his income stream. This was especially true after 1909 when he began advertising that barbells and dumbbells could be purchased on the instalment plan. While instalment plans were not unknown during this period, they were certainly not the norm, and Inch's adoption of selling on credit is another indication

HEALTH & STRENGTH

Sept. 19, 1908.

DISC BAR-BELLS FREE!



INCH'S ADVANCED

- SYSTEM -

To all pupils enrolling for my advanced course I present, gratis, a set of disc weights value 30/-

METHODS OF FAMOUS STRONG MEN.

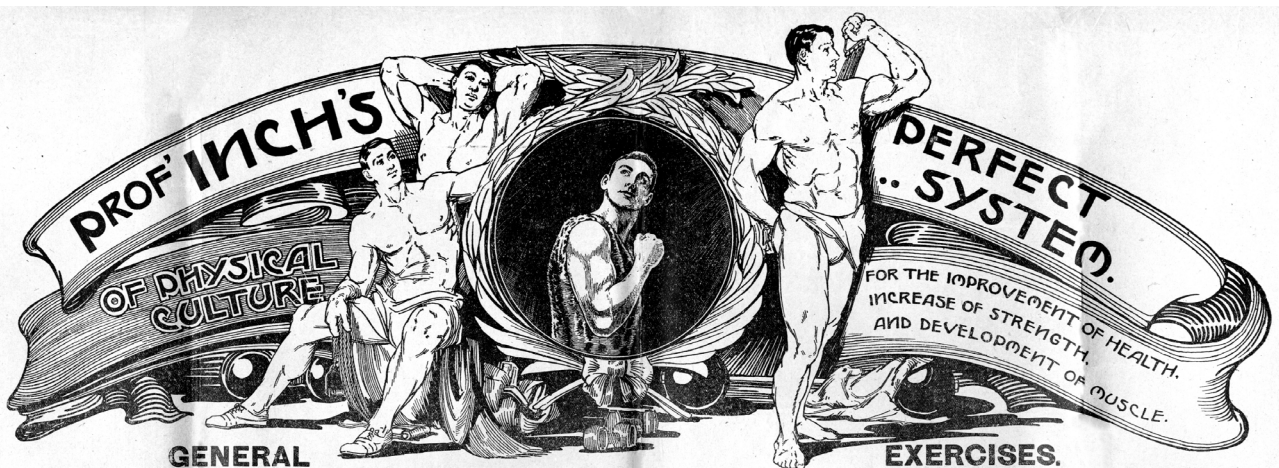
Georges Hackenschmidt, the world's most famous wrestler, and Arthur Saxon, the strongest man on earth, both say plainly that the best method of training, if huge strength and development is desired, is by gradual progressive movements with a special barbell of gradually increasing weight. They further claim that the reason other strong men have put on the market patent developers and asserted that such developers are the proper way to train for strength, is because there is more money in developers than in weights. It has been left to me to so perfect a method of home training, called "Advanced Training," that there is absolutely no danger of strain and an monopoly. For perfect muscular development and increased strength there is no method known which can possibly come up to my latest special course, the use of which led to my winning the world's middle-weight championship at weightlifting. I have over 15,000 pupils; many of them world's record holders, and to such a point have I brought my system that every pupil is enrolled under guarantee. Any person desiring further information and to know my terms is strongly urged to write at once to

T. INCH, Physical Culture Expert
DEPT. "H."

The Broadway, Fulham, London, S.W.
for "A Quick Route to Strength" which will be sent gratis and post paid by return mail. This book contains some startling information, and is most interesting and fully illustrated.

By 1908, Inch was selling plate loading barbells as well as training courses. In the hope that he'd sell more courses, he gave away free barbell sets to those students who signed up for his advanced course. It was a bold move but didn't work financially. He ended up moving back home for a time to recover, before returning to London during the war years.

of his entrepreneurial spirit.²⁴ Inch even advertised in September of 1908 that he would give a set of free disc barbells (worth 30 shillings) to those who signed up for his "Advanced System" mail order course. In that same ad in *Health & Strength* he claimed to have 15,000 students.²⁵



After Inch moved to London in 1902 he began to build his business empire. The first step was to claim to be a "professor" as countless other physical culturists did, after which he began selling mail order courses and, eventually, barbells and dumbbells. This image is from the top of an Inch training course poster, circa 1905.

THE PROFESSIONAL STRONGMAN

As part of his plan to sell courses and equipment, it was important for Inch to be seen as a champion of some sort and so his early years in London were filled with heavy training, exhibitions, and contests as he worked toward being known as Britain's Strongest Man. To launch his campaign, Inch placed a challenge in *The Sporting Life*, a newspaper that ran classified advertisements in which strongmen, boxers, wrestlers and other professional athletes set up matches by public challenges in the pages of the paper. In his notice, Inch declared he would meet "any man in the world for the Middle-Weight Lifting Championship," and offered a prize of £100 to the winner—the equivalent of \$3000 today. Inch hoped that his challenge would allow him to compete against Leon See, the French 12-stone (168-pound) champion, who in 1904 had won the British Amateur Championship for his weight class.²⁶ However, See did not rise to the bait. Lowry speculated that it may have been because Inch wanted to use the bent press as one of the six challenge lifts. The reason for these negotiations was that lifting competitions in this era were not run by national governing bodies that had set rules and lists of lifts. In early professional challenge matches, both athletes submitted lifts they wanted to include in the contest, they then negotiated terms, and generally were able to agree on a set of lifts that was unique to each engagement. The bent press inclusion may well have influenced See's unwillingness to meet with Inch, as the lift was not common in France and the rest of Europe.²⁷

Having published the challenge, however, it was still "out there" and on 20 April 1907, Inch competed against a little-known lifter named Bill Caswell at the German Gymnasium in St. Pancras, London. The contest consisted of six lifts; Inch won them all for a total of 1211.5 pounds to Caswell's 829 pounds. On closer inspection, however, Inch's claim that his win made him Britain's Strongest Man was a hollow victory. Caswell was suffering from an injury and only managed to perform four of the lifts. Caswell was also a decade Inch's senior and six inches shorter than the 5'10" Scarborough Hercules.²⁸

As Inch continued training, he outgrew the middle-weight division. In July 1908 he announced the results of a wager in which he set out to prove that a fully developed man could still "mould his body . . . [and] reduce or increase his weight and measurement at will."²⁹ From

November 1907 to July 1908, Inch improved his expanded chest size from 46½ to 50 inches while his biceps swelled from 16½ to 18 inches. He credited his transformation to a diet of porridge, brown bread, and mutton chops, and a varied training regime which alternated days of light dumbbell training with heavy weights, mixed with days of cardiovascular work such as walking, cycling, and boxing.³⁰ Inch was aware of the efficacy of light dumbbell work for muscular endurance, but he also believed it was not useful for building real muscle. As Inch put it, "such muscle will not have strength in proportion to its size unless heavier work is also tried."³¹

While Inch was bulking up, Max Sick, the German weightlifter, had set his sights on Inch's middle-weight title and challenged Inch to a contest in 1909. Inch weighed in at 186 pounds (13 stone, 4 pounds) that October, far above the 161 pounds (11 stone, 7 pounds) weight limit. The two men haggled over the details of the contest in the pages of *Health & Strength*. Inch asked

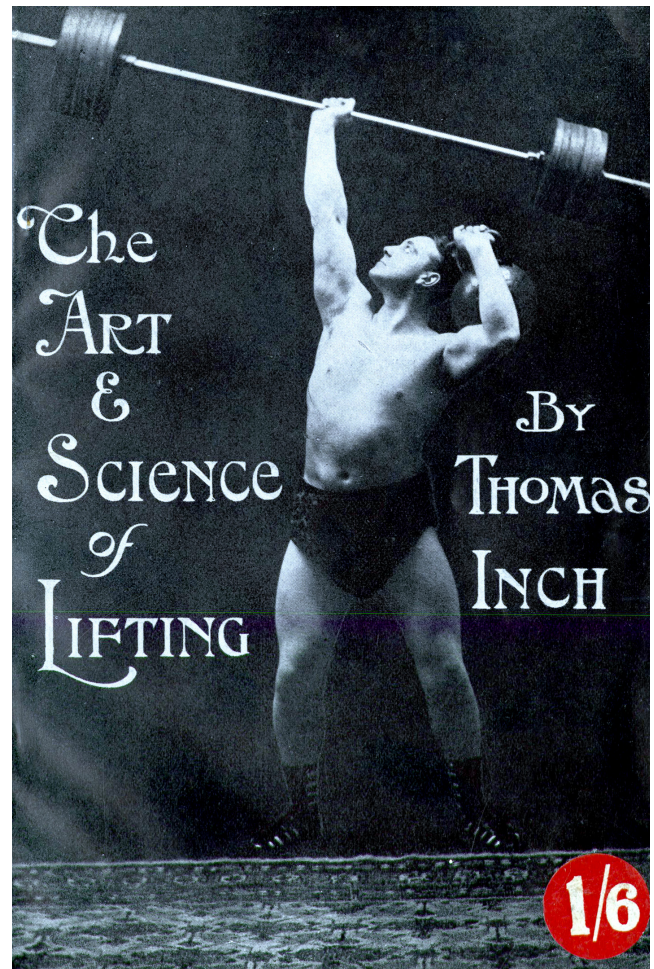


Thomas Inch also appeared as a professional strongman and at times would demonstrate his strength by lifting unusual things—such as this man and bicycle. While an impressive feat of strength, the man in the photo is fellow weightlifter W.L. Carquest who weighed normally under 130 pounds. As the bicycle probably weighed no more than 35 pounds, the total weight lifted was probably around 160 pounds.

Sick to allow him a period of several weeks to diet down and practice his lifts at a reduced weight. Sick was adamant that the competition should take place in two weeks—despite Inch's offer to pay him four weeks' expenses if he would postpone the contest.³² By November, Inch had decreased his weight to 181 pounds (12 stone, 13 pounds) in anticipation of a competition that never took place. Inch began to realize that he would lose too much strength with the weight loss and so bowed out. Having outgrown this classification, Inch set his sights instead on winning Britain's heavyweight title.

Inch announced his intention to be declared "Britain's Strongest Man" in the January 1910 edition of *Health & Strength* magazine.³³ The competition for the title took place on 10 June of the same year between Inch, Thomas Cressey, and another lifter known only as Teviotdale. Unbeknownst to his competition, Inch was secretly struggling with an injury that happened during a snatch lift ten days before. *Health & Strength* magazine noted that Inch was not in top form as he failed at many of his lifts and even had one lift disqualified. Despite this, he still managed to outlift his competition and received a standing ovation for his 230.8-pound "one-handed-anyhow."³⁴ Inch's other winning lifts were listed as an impressive 213.14-pound one-hand clean; and a 250-pound two-hands clean.³⁵ The author of the *Health & Strength* report was rhapsodic in his praise of Inch, writing "his development is remarkable . . . it has been acquired by persistent scientific endeavour . . . Before the contest he was beyond question the most scientific lifter in the land; he is now the champion lifter of the land, thereby eloquently vindicating the controlling power of science over sheer brute force."³⁶

This competition was important not just for Inch, but for the future of British weightlifting as well. Reporting for *Health & Strength* magazine, an enthusiastic writer declared, "[Inch] has brought weight-lifting into the forefront . . . and laid the foundation of an organisation that is destined to place this sport of strong men upon a firm foundation."³⁷ As Boucher and Heffernan document in their 2023 article titled, "A Great Weight Lifted: The History of the British Amateur Weight-lifting Association," the June 1910 contest played a significant role in the formation of the British Weightlifting Association—the first organization in Britain set up to regulate both amateur and professional weightlifting.³⁸ According to Boucher and Heffernan,



Thomas Inch published a number of training courses and several longer books. Among the most popular, however, was *The Art and Science of Lifting* published in England in 1900.

The contest came about when weight-lifter and strongman performer Thomas Inch issued a challenge to determine the British Heavy-Weight Champion. *Health and Strength* eagerly reported the dawn of a new age for British weight-lifting, claiming that the "immediate result of the great tournament" must be the "exaltation" of weight-lifting to its "proper place among our British sports." . . . After the initial meeting in October 1910, BAWLA decided that there would be two BAWLA branches—one governing professional and one amateur athletes. The amateur versus professional split was not, of course, uncommon in British sport and could be found everywhere from football to lawn tennis. What dis-

tinguished British weight-lifting was that it was, largely, free of class connotations. The amateur weight-lifter was not praised for their “love of the game” in the way that the amateur footballer was. The bifurcation between amateur and professional had far more to do with the chicanery and showbiz often associated with professional strongmen. . . . The separation between amateur and pro-fessional was a shrewd move by BAWLA to help legitimize amateur weight-lifting—free from the music hall—with popular strongmen.³⁹

Inch became a central figure in the development of BAWLA. He served as treasurer for the professional branch and was reportedly generous with both his time and money. He often announced at amateur contests and donated certificates, trophies, and medals to meet promoters.⁴⁰ He also helped establish the rules governing competition lifts and he personally believed that the one-handed barbell clean; the two-handed barbell clean; the one-handed barbell anyhow; and the two-handed anyhow, should be the lifts used in contests. He described this set of exercises as a fair test of strength, equally suited to the “scientific lifter” and the strongman.⁴¹

Inch held the heavyweight title for only a year before being defeated in 1911. Despite bulking up to an impressive 16 stone (225 pounds) and measuring 53” around the chest, Inch was outlifted by his smaller, former pupil, Edward Aston. This contest was held at the International Athletic School on Tottenham Court Road, London. On the six lifts done in this contest, Inch totaled 1167 pounds for his lifts, while Aston managed an

impressive 1215 pounds.⁴² Audience members travelled from far and wide, including Max Sick and the famous Arthur Saxon to watch the two men battle.⁴³ While Inch was defeated, he still made history at that contest by becoming the first British man to exceed 300 pounds in an overhead lift.⁴⁴

While Inch never reclaimed his heavy-weight title—a crown held by Aston for the next thirty-four years—Inch did continue competing and setting records well into his later years. In 1912, at age 29, he broke Eugen Sandow’s long-standing record of 269 pounds in the Bent Press by lifting 271.5 pounds.⁴⁵ One admirer reported that while preparing for the challenge, Inch warmed up with a 246-pound barbell and then proceeded to juggle a 301-pound barbell from one hand to the other as if it were “nothing more than a mere walking stick.”⁴⁶ According to strength historian David Willoughby, Inch’s professional records also include a 304.5 pound Right-Hand Press from Shoulder made in 1913 and the Two-Hand Anyhow with 356.5 pounds made in 1915. He also did a Right-Hand Military Press with 112 pounds and a Side Press (a form of bent press performed with straight legs) of 201 pounds.⁴⁷



Thomas Inch (in Homburg hat) was good friends with Arthur Saxon and his brothers, Hermann on the far left, and Kurt on the far right. Although the Saxons were born in Germany, Arthur married an English woman and made Britain his home base until World War I forced him to return to Germany. Inch met the Saxon Brothers shortly after he arrived in London and he and Arthur became good friends. They even trained together and Inch claimed later in his life that he had learned how to bent press from Arthur and how to jerk and press by watching Hermann and Kurt.

A HEAVY WEIGHT BUSINESS

As was the case with other physical culture entrepreneurs in this era, Inch's mail-order business—even though he claimed to have thousands of students—did not allow Inch to become a financial success. In 1913, Inch left London and returned to Scarborough for a time—the move he told a reporter was because of his wife's anxiety to return home, but may have also been driven by financial concerns. Where he had once been proprietor of a booming postal training business that employed as many as 50 clerks, he filed for bankruptcy in 1915. Inch told a reporter who covered his appearance in court that his financial problems were caused by the war and his loss of pupils.⁴⁸ In America, Alan Calvert faced similar economic challenges during World War I because of shortages of iron and paper and the widespread economic depression on both sides of the Atlantic.⁴⁹

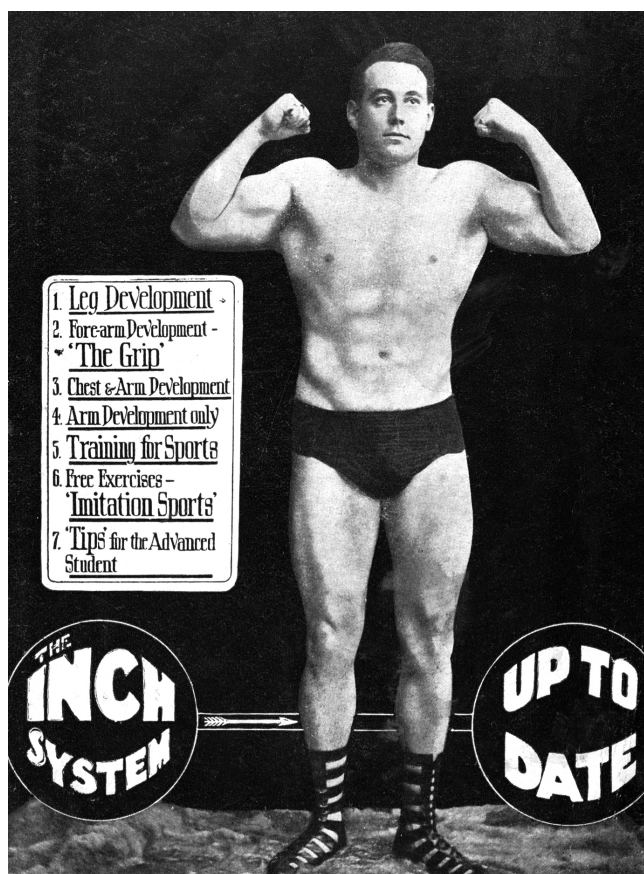
At some point during the War, Inch returned to London and began working as a therapist in Fulham Hospital. There he treated wounded soldiers with remedial exercises, mas-

sage, and bone manipulation in a rudimentary form of physical therapy.⁵⁰ He apparently had especially good luck working with “shell-shock” patients. An article in *Health & Strength* called him a “Health Hero” and explained that doctors at the hospital “used to hand Mr. Inch shell shock cases to deal with, and always with the happiest results.”⁵¹

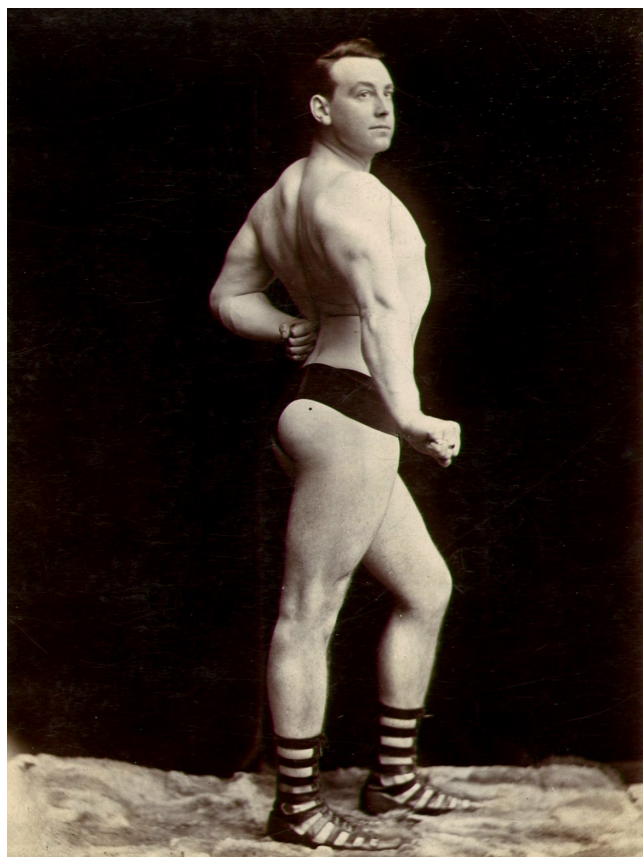
After the War, Inch stayed in London and began rebuilding his business. He was discussed in such non-lifting business magazines as *Method*, *Smith Premier Magazine*, and *Advertising World* where he was described as an innovative and remarkable businessman. One even lauded him for his color-schemed filing system that was “up to date, novel and instructive.”⁵² With Sandow's reign as Britain's leading physical culture expert in decline after the war, Inch was increasingly regarded as “England's authority on physical culture.”⁵³ By the mid-twenties his business encompassed such diverse fields as health care, the training of prize athletes, the selling of exercise equipment, and the selling of his books and his mail-order courses, although he reframed some of the courses that formerly had advocated heavy lifting for those seeking less muscular goals.⁵⁴ He also continued to train famous professional athletes such as W.L. Carquest, the lightweight lifting champion; Gunner Moir, a boxer who lasted ten rounds against Tommy Burns; champion boxer Bombardier Wells; and the 1908 Olympic champion in wrestling, George de Relwyskow, the son of Russian immigrants who also had a distinguished military career in the British army.⁵⁵

Inch also returned to professional weightlifting after the war.⁵⁶ In 1919 he beat his own world record of 163.5 pounds on the “arm push” with an excellent 190-pound lift.⁵⁷ In 1947, at the age of 66, Inch set a record on a hand-grip machine to claim a new world record of 556 pounds.⁵⁸ In 1949, at the age of 68, he set another record on the machine with a phenomenal 560 pounds.⁵⁹ Sadly, there is no information given in the articles on the mechanics of the hand-grip machine.

The feats of grip-strength Inch is best remembered for, however, are the lifts he made using what were called at various times Inch's “Unliftable” or “Challenge” dumbbells. Inch owned three dumbbells of different weights although they all looked remarkably similar. The first was manufactured before Inch left his native Scarborough for London around 1899. He had commissioned his local foundry to man-



In his early years in London Inch, like other physical culture entrepreneurs, struggled to make ends meet. He spent a great deal on advertising his courses and as can be seen in this advertisement he wanted people to know that he was on the cutting edge of strength knowledge.



Inch developed a fine, muscular physique and did not hesitate to display it. Photographing the body was an important part of being a showman and Inch had dozens of cabinet cards made over the years. This card reads at the bottom, "T. Inch, World's Middle Weight Champion Lifter. Poole & Co. Putney."

ufacture a weight for him, but when he went to pick it up, he found the weight considerably heavier and thicker than anticipated. According to historian David Willoughby, "... it was a heavy, unwieldy, cast-iron dumbbell having a short and thick handle." When he first got it, Inch could not lift this bell off the ground with one hand but began practicing with it virtually every day until he could do so. After he discovered that none of the men that he knew could lift the bell, "he offered increasingly higher amounts, up finally to £200 (then nearly \$1000) to anyone who could do so." According to Willoughby, "For over 50 years, it would seem, no one appeared who could lift Inch's 'Challenge Dumbbell.'"⁶⁰

During those long years, the measurements of the dumbbell were never disclosed by Inch, and it was never seen in public where others could try it. However, before his death he sold the dumbbell to Reg Park's Barbell Company, and they brought it to a weightlifting "sport revue" in Aberdeen, Scotland, organized by David Webster, who was good friends with Park.

There the bell was fully weighed and measured. It was 172 pounds in weight and 20 inches long. The diameter of the globes was 8.5 inches and the handle was 2.47 inches in diameter (almost the same size as a modern soda can.) But the most important measurement, Willoughby explained as to why the dumbbell was so difficult to lift, was that the length of the handle between the globes was only four inches. The significance of this, Willoughby wrote was that the four-inch handle would "stop any really large-handed lifter from picking up the bell, since anyone having a hand much wider than 4.5 inches could not get his fingers to fully encircle the handle." This, Willoughby continued, could explain why both of the strongest men living in Britain in the early twentieth century, Arthur Saxon, and Edward Aston, failed to lift it; both were known for having enormous hands. Clearly not impressed with Inch's stance on all this, Willoughby then added, "The idea that Arthur Saxon's gripping strength is inferior to Inch's is unthinkable."⁶¹

In the long passage in *The Super Athletes* about the Inch Dumbbell, Willoughby almost gleefully notes that at the Aberdeen Sport Review on 26 October 1956, when the dumbbell was first openly available for public trials, three men succeeded in lifting the Inch "unliftable" dumbbell.⁶² Inch also had a second dumbbell made that looked like the original and had the same thick, four-inch handle, however it weighed only 153 pounds. There was an even lighter one weighing 130 pounds, but it naturally appeared smaller.⁶³ Willoughby and others questioned whether some of Inch's famous lifts were made with the lighter dumbbell.⁶⁴ In our modern era, replicas of the big dumbbell have been made and sold and the lifting of the dumbbell is no longer regarded as impossible.

Sadly, Inch's legacy as a strongman has been riddled by concerns that he exaggerated claims and at times used weights that were not as heavy as announced. For historians such matters are nearly impossible to judge, especially when more than a century has passed. We cannot re-weigh the plates, photos were then quite rare, and lifting was not usually covered in the daily newspapers that are now digitized in growing on-line archives.

However, in Inch's case, he left behind two fascinating sources that suggest he was not above chicanery. The first is an early, silent newsreel, made in 1915, titled *The Light Lady Heavyweight*.⁶⁵ It opens with Inch on a stage with three kettlebells surrounding him. He is in a



In 1915, Inch participated in a short film made by the British Pathé company called *The Light Lady Heavyweight*. The film opened with some standard lifting stunts such as this showy lift involving two women, a barbell, and a kettlebell.

singlet and looks big and strong, but his body is not as lean and impressively built as those of his contemporaries Sandow and Hackenschmidt. He hits a single, and then a double biceps pose—but it is unlikely that any maidens in the audience swooned at this muscular display. The film then shifts and there are six men on stage with him and they are purportedly attempting to pull a giant spring expander. On each side, one man holds the expander's handle, the man behind him holds that man by the waist, and the third man holds the waist of the second man in an awkward tug-of-war. With their dress shoes slipping on the stage, they fail to extend the springs and the screen becomes cloudy before, almost like magic, we see Inch, holding the springs behind his head with his arms already fully extended. In his hands, along with the expander's handles are kettlebells of unknown weight. The men are gone from the stage in this scene and two small women stand behind him. Then, with his arms outstretched, the two women jump up, grab around his arms, and lift their feet from the ground. The scene ends and a black slide appears proclaiming, "The human barbell—two lively ladies and a ring weight—total 340 pounds!" The expander is not mentioned—nor is the other kettlebell. (Minor details, of course.) Inch does nothing in this part of the film except to stand with this "great weight."

The next segment shows him lifting the same small women in a Sitz apparatus in which the women sit on webbing seats attached to the end of the barbell.

Inch cleans the bar to his chest and pushes it overhead with a mighty jerk. He then walks toward a kettlebell on the floor while holding the women and bar overhead. Then, cautiously, he slides one hand toward the middle so he can free his other hand to reach down and pick up the kettlebell. It is an impressive feat, and he is able to stand back up and with his left hand presses the kettlebell to arm's length four times. Without the kettlebell, we can only guess at the weight that he is holding overhead, but it is probably about 250 pounds, at most. Two male spotters then grab the women and assist them to the floor, as Inch falls forward as if he is collapsing from exhaustion as the scene ends.

The third and final segment of the film involves Inch's attempts to lift the female vaudeville star known as "Resista."⁶⁶ Resista, we learn from the black slide that then appears in the movie, weighs only seven stones (98 pounds) and she should be light as a feather for a strongman like Inch. However, Resista's stage claim is that she can "alter her weight at will," so can only be lifted if she wants. Inch begins by taking her at the waist and easily lifting her over his head. The movie then explains that on the next attempt she will change her weight to 14 stones (196 pounds) and when he tries to lift her this time, Inch appears to struggle until he finally lifts her fully overhead again. As the movie continues, she then "changes her weight" to 28 stones (392 pounds) and he can only lift her to the height of his head. He barely manages to lift her off the ground when she has magically become 35 stones (490 pounds), and for the fi-



The second part of *The Light Lady Heavyweight* showed Inch attempting to lift the "unliftable" woman who claimed that, through mind control, she would weigh over 400 pounds. Even with this cheesy grimace, Inch was not believable, as the movie shows him unable to lift the woman.

nale, and despite Inch's "great effort" made evident by the closeups of his face, he is unable to lift her as she has now made herself weight 40 stones (560 pounds)! The film, and Inch's participation in it, is a farce on any number of levels, and it is hard to understand how the film would have helped Inch's reputation as he does not emerge victorious. In fact, the last slide in the film suggests that we must question who is really the weaker sex.⁶⁷

Unlike the silent film of 1915, *Inch by Inch!* made by the British Pathé Company in 1939, has sound and so we hear Inch prevaricate in his own voice regarding the weights he is lifting. "Allow me to present the famous Inch Challenge Dumbbell," the 58-year-old Inch says to open the film, although the dumbbell on the floor in front of him is a large globe weight with protruding caps on the ends. It is not the 172-pound Inch Challenge dumbbell. "Over a period of forty years," Inch continues, "the bell has never been raised an inch from off the ground by any strongman, although thousands have tried." World's Strongest Man Arthur Saxon, he says in his narration, "tried for fifteen years, off and on," and never succeeded. Maurice Deriaz, he adds, "came all the way from Paris to try it." Lionel Strongfort, whom he calls the Champion of Denmark, and even the great wrestler Ivan Poddubny of Russia, he explains, could never even break it from the floor. They were all "defeated" he tells the camera by the Inch Challenge Dumbbell.

After this introduction, two purported strongmen in street clothes attempt to lift the large globe weight, and although they appear to strain, the dumbbell does not move. Next a newspaperman comes out to verify the truthfulness of the dumbbell, takes a carpenter's hammer, and taps on each globe to "prove" that it is made of "genuine iron." We can concur that it is at least metal.

Looking straight into the camera, Inch then explains that he will next attempt to lift the dumbbell overhead with one hand and then reach down and grab a second dumbbell so that together the weight he will be lifting overhead is 276 pounds,

which beats "the record held by the late Eugen Sandow." He then reaches to the floor, swings the big dumbbell easily with one hand to his shoulder area, adjusts it higher, and then almost bent presses it overhead to arm's length. He then reaches down to bring the second dumbbell up, which is also unusual looking since you cannot see all the plates because of a shell that covers part of the area where plates would normally sit. He pulls this dumbbell from the floor to his knee, kicks it upward with his knee, and then easily presses it overhead as well. The announcer proclaims the lift "A Magnificent feat—and a World's Record" and the film closes.⁶⁸ But, of course it is not a magnificent feat or a world record. It is a fake record; this is not the Inch Challenge Dumbbell that he is lifting.⁶⁹ It is also not the most weight put overhead in a "two hands anyhow." Arthur Saxon officially lifted 445.33 pounds in Leipzig on 3 November 1905 and it remains the official record to this day.⁷⁰ Inch's participation in the film and the false statements he gives voice to make us wonder (as we often do, actually) whether as strength historians we can ever really know the truth. How many other lifts that he claimed in these early times might have also been fake?



In 1939, Inch again stepped before the cameras to make a film showcasing his ability to lift the dumbbell that came to be known as "The Inch." Again, however, the public is being tricked. The dumbbell used in the film was not "the" Inch dumbbell as the real Inch is a brutish thing cast as a single piece of iron and has no silver caps on the end. Sadly, Inch even states in the film that the dumbbell he's pressing in this photo is "the" Inch dumbbell.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Thomas Inch died in 1963 at age 81. He and his wife, Annie, were then living in Cobham, a village in Surrey, on the outskirts of London. Mrs. Inch, like Sandow's wife, was apparently not happy with her husband at the time of his death.⁷¹ Annie destroyed all of Inch's professional effects and papers and would not even let an obituary be published about him. Little is known of Inch's marriage, although they were married in Scarborough before he first moved to London, and she was a year older than he was. They had one daughter. In census records Annie is described as an "unpaid domestic," which probably suggests she was a "housewife," but she does not seem to have participated in his work.⁷² Inch praised her in an article for her "care, cooking and company, [without which] the name of Inch might never have been so well known," but she is not frequently mentioned in his articles.⁷³ Although not a full obituary, a death notice did appear in the *Surrey Advertiser*, titled "Death of Champion Weightlifter." The article contains scant information except to say that Inch died suddenly on 12 December 1963. He had been living in Cobham for some years and he had "conducted courses in weight lifting and physical culture for local teenagers and others with great success."⁷⁴ His funeral was held in Putney, England.

While Inch's contributions to the evolution of weightlifting (beyond his owning of the Challenge Dumbbell) may not be well known in our modern era, he was certainly an important figure during his time. W.J. Lowry credits the growth and legitimization of weightlifting as a sport in the United Kingdom principally to Thomas Inch. And, unlike other strongmen-turned-physical-culture-entrepreneurs before him in the British Isles, Inch always advocated the use of heavy dumbbells and barbells. Eugen Sandow had popularized training, but he urged the use of only light dumbbells. Bernarr Macfadden was never a heavy weight fan, and Charles Atlas, in America, promoted "Dynamic Tension" an exercise system that required no equipment.⁷⁵ Inch, however, "throughout his long and successful career . . . stuck loyally to the use of weights for all purposes." He should also, and rightfully, be credited with the popularization of the disc-loading barbell in the United Kingdom.⁷⁶ It is no understatement to say that without Thomas Inch, the sport of weightlifting might not have gained so much prominence and esteem in the United Kingdom as it did during the years when he was one of its

most important figureheads.

Separating the man who so clearly helped birth British lifting from the man who exaggerated his personal lifts and disparaged contemporaries such as Arthur Saxon, however, will require further excavation. The volume of coverage he received in the leading physical culture magazine, *Health & Strength*, is clearly evidence that Inch "mattered," and deserves to be remembered as part of the arcana of physical culture. We use "arcana" purposefully here as much of lifting history is both myth and fact. Inch's life, if we discovered anything of significance in the writing of this profile is precisely that. His is a mythic history that has been retold by others, and like myths the central truths are already somewhat obscured by time and the oral tradition. However, thinking about his story and how he will be remembered is yet more proof of why physical culture scholarship matters, and why we should interrogate the past.

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NOTES

1. "The Editor Chats," *Health & Strength*, 15 May 1920: 307.
2. Thomas Inch, "A Weight-Lifter's Romance," *Health & Strength*, 1 January 1910: 2.
3. Ibid, 3.
4. Professor Szalay, "An Impression of Inch's Lifting," *Health & Strength*, 28 December 1912: 649.
5. Inch, "A Weight-Lifter's Romance," 3.
6. See Thomas Inch, "Thirty-Three Years in Physical Culture," *Health & Strength*, 11 December 1926: 603; and "How I Retained Fitness for 33 Years," *Health & Strength*, 1 January 1910: 3.
7. 1901 England Census for Scarborough, Yorkshire, viewed at: https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/28917116:7814?tid=&pid=&queryId=6ebf90cc6a847e29fc55f1999d03adb6&_phsrc=LrP14&_phstart=successSource.
8. Following his death, Inch's wife Annie, destroyed all his personal and professional papers and refused to have an obituary printed.
9. Gilbert Odd, "The Mighty Inch," *Health & Strength*, 19 May 1960: 6.
10. William J. Lowry, "The Professional Era in British Weightlifting," *The British Amateur Weight-lifter & Body-builder* 3, no. 1 (January 1949): 21.
11. Ibid, 24.
12. Thomas Inch, "My Memories of Szalay," *Health & Strength*, 2 March 1912: 214.
13. "The Benefit to Professor Szalay: Pioneer of Weight Lifting," *Boxing World and Mirror of Life*, 2 March 1912.
14. Thomas Inch, "A Lecture on Physical Culture," *Health & Strength*, December 1900: 14.
15. "An 'Infant' Hercules," *The Weekly Dispatch*, 26 October 1902, 5.
16. "Remarkable Vigour Secured from a Scientific Food," *Coventry Herald and Free Press*, 5 June 1903, 6.
17. Advertisement in *Health & Strength*, September 1903: 338.
18. W.J. Lowry, "The Professional Era in British Weight-Lifting: Inch," *The British Amateur Weightlifter and Bodybuilder*, January 1949: 21.

19. Thomas Inch, *Scientific Weight-lifting* (London: the author, 1905).
20. Lowry, "The Professional Era," 24. Strongman Arthur Saxon's book, *The Development of Physical Power*, carried a similar theme and was published that same year.
21. Jan Todd, "From Milo to Milo: A History of Barbells, Dumbbells and Indian Clubs," *Iron Game History* 3, no. 6 (April 1995): 12.
22. Kim Beckwith and Jan Todd, "Strength: America's First Muscle Magazine: 1914-1935," *Iron Game History* 9, no. 1 (August 2005): 11-28; and Osmo Kiiha, "Collector's Corner," 29 December 2013, at: <https://www.naturalstrength.com/2013/12/collectors-corner-by-osmo-kiiha.html>.
23. Thomas Inch, "Famous Strongmen I Have Met, Part One," *The Superman*, June 1933: 20.
24. Instalment buying became popular in the 1920s. Selling on credit before then was exceedingly rare. "Instalment Buying, 1920-1930," *CQ Researcher* (Thousand Oaks, California: CQ Press, 1930), <https://doi.org/10.4135/cqresrre1930010100>.
25. "Disc Bar-Bells Free!" *Health & Strength*, 19 September 1908: 260.
26. At this time, the Continent did not acknowledge the "Middle-weight" class, but the 1905 World Championships in Berlin had just included the Middle-weight class for the first time, perhaps influencing Inch's ambitions.
27. Ibid, 26. See also: Lucy Boucher and Conor Heffernan, "A Great Weight Lifted the History of the British Amateur Weight-lifting Association," *Sport in History* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2023.2270946>.
28. W.J. Lowry, "How Thomas Inch Won the 1907 Professional Middle-Weight Title," *The British Amateur Weightlifter and Bodybuilder*, February 1949: 18.
29. Thomas Inch, "Weightlifting in the Open Air," *Health & Strength*, 4 July 1908: 18.
30. Ibid, 19.
31. Ibid.
32. See "Thomas Inch v. Max Sick," *Health & Strength*, 30 October 1909: 464, and "Inch and Sick," *Health & Strength*, 6 November 1909: 488.
33. Thomas Inch, "A Weight Lifter's Romance," 2.
34. Ibid, 654.
35. Thomas Inch, "How I Won," *Health & Strength*, 19 June 1910: 654.
36. Ibid.
37. "Among the Lifters," *Health & Strength*, 25 June 1910: 677.
38. "The Proposed Weight-lifter's Association," *Health & Strength*, 1 October 1910: 330. See also: Boucher and Heffernan, "Great Weight Lifted," 15.
39. Boucher and Heffernan, "Great Weight Lifted," 15.
40. See "Among the Lifters," *Health & Strength*, 8 April 1911: 343; Thomas Inch, "The Amateur Weight-Lifting Championship," *Health & Strength*, 1 July 1911: 10; "Lifting at Scarborough," *Health & Strength*, 7 December 1912: 548.
41. "Among the Lifters," *Health & Strength*, 26 November 1910: 552.
42. "Inch-Aston Match," *Health & Strength*, 6 January 1912: 6.
43. "Very Strong Man Wanted," *Daily Herald*, 20 January 1934.
44. W.J. Lowry, "Thomas Inch's Defeat by Aston in 1911," *B.A.W.B.*, March 1950: 20.
45. Professor Szalay, "An Impression of Inch's Weight-Lifting," *Health & Strength*, 28 December 1912: 649.
46. "Lifting at Scarborough," 548.
47. David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1970), 163; and "Sporting Paragraphs," *Nottingham Evening Post*, 18 January 1913; and "Sporting Paragraphs," *Nottingham Evening Post*, 15 December 1913.
48. *Health & Strength*, 13 September 1913: 274; see also: "Physical Culture Expert's Failure," *Daily Mail*, 12 January 1915. David Webster claimed Inch gambled away the £80,000 he had generated from his business ventures. See: David Webster, *The Iron Game: A Worldwide Review of the Strongest Men Throughout the Ages* (Irvine, Scotland: Webster, 1976), 42.
49. Nicholas Crafts, "Walking Wounded: The British Economy and the Aftermath of World War One," *VOX Eu*: 2014, viewed at: <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/walking-wounded-british-economy-aftermath-world-war-i#:~:text=Britain%20incurred%20715%2C000%20military%20deaths,Broadberry%20and%20Harrison%2C%202005>. See also: Beckwith and Todd, "Strength," 22.
50. "Strong Man Act," *Fulham Chronicle*, 17 October 1947.
51. "A Health Hero," *Health & Strength*, 22 May 1920: 332.
52. Ibid, 327.
53. During WWI, persons of German of descent, even those who had lived in Britain as long as Sandow, were viewed more skeptically by the public. In his biography of Sandow, historian David Chapman chronicles the decline of Sandow's various business ventures in the 1920s before his surprising death at age 58 in 1925. David Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994 and 2006).
54. "A Health Hero," 327. For example, see *Inch on Fitness*.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. "New World's Weightlifting Record," *Daily Herald*, 16 October 1920; and "Unbeatable Inch-New World's Record," *Health & Strength*, 2 October 1920: 217.
58. "Strong Man Act."
59. "Grip Record-New World Figure," *Daily Mail*, 27 October 1949.
60. Willoughby, *Super Athletes*, 163.
61. Ibid, 164.
62. Willoughby ended that sentence with an exclamation point.
63. "The Hundred Year History of the Inch Dumbbell," on *Grip-board*, posted 29 October 2001, at: <https://www.gripboard.com/topic/312-question-for-joe-roark/>.
64. Willoughby, *Super Athletes*, 164. See also: W.A. Pullum, "The Famous Inch Dumbbell," *Health & Strength*, 10 July 1952: 24; Thomas Woodcroffe, "Inside Sport," *Sunday Dispatch London*, 4 December 1938; and Edward Aston, *How to Develop a Powerful Grip* (London: The Mitre Press, 1946), 34.
65. *The Light Lady Heavyweight*, 1915. This British Pathé newsreel can be viewed on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrWuhtm__5A.
66. See "Resista—The Girl that Can't be Lifted" viewed at: <https://vaudevilleamerica.org/performance/resista-3/>. See also: "Resista," *Variety Magazine* 58 (October 1920): 22.
67. *Light Lady Heavyweight*.
68. *Inch by Inch!* Can be seen at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnh9fl106_Q. It was probably filmed at the Pathé studio in London. Made in 1939, Inch was then 58 years old.
69. Strength historian and grip expert David Horne has also written about this film and the deceptions inherent in it. David Horne, "Strongmen on Film - *Inch by Inch!*" at: <http://davidhorne-grip-master.com/historyarticles1.html>.
70. Saxon's lift was done using a barbell and kettlebell. Willoughby, *Super Athletes*, 79.
71. Mrs. Sandow would not allow a tombstone to be erected at Sandow's grave and also destroyed many of his papers. Joe Roark conversation with David Webster, 10 June 2001, at <http://www.ironhistoryarchives.com/InchTotal.pdf>.
72. "1939 English and Wales Registry," viewed at: <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/4266271:61596>.
73. Odd, "Mighty Inch," 18.
74. "Death of a Champion Weightlifter," *Surrey Advertiser*, 21 December 1963.
75. Lowry, "The Professional Era," 20.
76. Ibid, 21.