Mill Bottom Jack: The Lost Lifting Stone of Oldham

A forgotten strongman, a public-house wager, and a missing boulder in industrial Lancashire.

HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION • OLDHAM, LANCASHIRE (NOW GREATER MANCHESTER)

IMAGE 01 — PRINCE OF WALES PUB
Image credited to Peter Ashworth, published on the Lost Pubs Project.
https://www.closedpubs.co.uk/lancashire/oldham_princeofwales.html



At a glance

Name	Mill Bottom Jack's Boulder
Reported location	Prince of Wales, Spencer Street, Oldham
Stone type	Large boulder; geological composition unknown
Weight / dimensions	Not documented
Reported feat	Lifted and carried from rear of public house to the front
Present whereabouts	Unknown
Evidence status	Family recollection published in April 2021

Introduction

Some of England's most intriguing accounts of stone lifting survive not in competition results, but through family memory. One takes us to the Prince of Wales public house on Spencer Street in Oldham, where a sizeable boulder reportedly remained for decades after a remarkable wager. A family recollection published in April 2021 identifies the man responsible as 'Mill Bottom Jack'. Although the stone itself has not been located, the story offers a compelling lead for research into the region's working class strength traditions. [1]

Who was Mill Bottom Jack?

The central testimony comes from Jeff Heywood, writing about his great grandfather on the Lost Pubs Project. Heywood recalled a man known as Mill Bottom Jack whose everyday work involved heavy stone, including building materials and Yorkstone paving flags. The family account suggests the surname Tomkinson, but this identification remains uncertain and requires confirmation from contemporary census, directory, or employment records. Working with irregular stones could develop significant practical strength, but details of Jack's employment have not yet been independently verified. [1]

The wager at the Prince of Wales

According to the recollection, a wager arose at the Prince of Wales over a large boulder at the rear of the premises. Jack reportedly accepted the challenge, raised the stone and carried it to the front of the pub. The exact date, route, distance, and whether the stone was set down are not documented. This is a remembered feat, not a contemporary press account. [1]

What did the stone look like?

The surviving account describes a large boulder. Heywood remembered the stone remaining outside the building and recalled children sitting on it. These details imply a sizeable, accessible street side object but do not establish a particular profile. No authenticated photograph has yet been identified that shows the boulder itself. Whether it was smooth, angular, rounded, weathered, or quarried is unknown. Its geological origin and weight cannot responsibly be estimated from the testimony alone. [1]

A lasting local landmark

One of the most striking elements is the stone's reported longevity. Heywood suggested it stood at the pub frontage for some 80 to 90 years, perhaps longer. If accurate, a single act of strength left a visible reminder in the streetscape that was familiar to later generations. There is no evidence at present that the stone became a regularly contested lifting stone; the historical importance lies in the reported original feat and the memory of the object. [1]

Oldham's industrial setting

Oldham's nineteenth century streets were shaped by cotton mills, engineering and construction trades. Brighton Mill is independently documented on Spencer Street, offering a useful geographical anchor in reconstructing the neighbourhood. The demands of stone handling work make the story plausible in its setting, but historical context cannot authenticate the individual lifting feat. Contemporary maps and photographs might establish the relationship between the pub entrance, its yard and the surrounding pavement. [2]

HISTORICAL IMAGE 02 — COTTON MILLS AND ENVIRONS OLDHAM 1947
Oldham - Local Heritage Hub | Historic England



Where did the boulder go?

By the time Heywood saw a later photograph of the Prince of Wales, he said the boulder was gone. He proposed that it may have been removed during pavement work, but this was a suggestion, not a confirmed council record. No dated removal report, inventory, or identified surviving stone has been found. The boulder might have been displaced during highway work or building alteration, but none of these explanations are verified. [1]

A lost lifting-stone tradition?

Mill Bottom Jack's story shares features with wider traditions of stone based strength challenges: an irregular object, an informal wager, and a notable individual remembered by a community. But the record must be treated carefully. The lifter's identity is not conclusively established, the reported achievement is based on later family testimony, and the stone's dimensions and fate remain unknown. These limitations do not erase the account's historical interest; they define what further evidence is needed.

Conclusion

For decades, a boulder reportedly stood outside a public house on Spencer Street, associated with a stoneworker whose exceptional feat survived in family memory. Whether it can ever be rediscovered is uncertain. For English Stonelifting, the case is a worthwhile research lead rather than a verified recovered historic stone. Some stones are remembered because they continued to be lifted; others survive only because someone remembered the person who once did.

References

[1] Jeff Heywood, family recollection, April 2021, Lost Pubs Project — Prince of Wales, Oldham.

https://www.closedpubs.co.uk/lancashire/oldham_princeofwales.html

[2] Duncan Gurr and Julian Hunt, The Cotton Mills of Oldham; inventory available through Manchester and Lancashire Family History Society.

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[3] Oldham Archives, Local Studies Sources.

https://hla.oldham.gov.uk/oldham-archives/local-studies-sources/

[4] Oldham Archives, collection and research information.

https://hla.oldham.gov.uk/oldham-archives/