

RYAN'S ROYAL CIRCUS VISITS VICTORIAN CHELTENHAM

by John M. Turner

The Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum Services possesses a fine collection of Victorian circus and theatrical playbills, several relating to Ryan's Circus. A group of these playbills is 150 years old this year. They conjure up the Golden Age of circus in the Victorian age. A fragment of one playbill, number 3105 in the collection, is reproduced here. The playbill is almost certainly unique. Readers may be curious to know a little more about James Ryan, his company of colourful artistes and of the 1840-41 scene in Cheltenham.

RYAN'S CIRCUS HISTORY

Ryan's Olympic Circus is first known to have visited Cheltenham in 1825, between 17 and 19 October, when Mr. Ryan appeared on the tight rope.¹ In that year he was aged just twenty-

six. His earliest known appearance was at Davis' Royal Amphitheatre in 1822.² Like all Victorian circus companies, the performances at Ryan's were basically equestrian, with the riders performing miraculous feats of horsemanship, on magnificent steeds the envy of all. Other performers were gymnasts, of various sorts, tight rope artistes, and clowns to counter and ridicule the serious artists. The visit of a circus to the town would have been an exciting event for many of its inhabitants.

Over the years James Ryan established himself as a proprietor of one of the best equestrian companies in the land, travelling extensively and becoming particularly popular in the Midlands. By 1828, Ryan had built an amphitheatre for circus performers in Birmingham, with an arena, and a stage 127 ft deep.³ In 1837 his building in Birmingham, which opened in Bradford Street on Whit

Monday, 15 May, was most substantially built.⁴ In the following year his Birmingham Amphitheatre became a permanent establishment when it could accommodate 2,000 persons with the interior surrounded by thirty-nine Doric columns.⁴

Some of the artistes commonly performing with Ryan's Circus at this time included members of the Ginnett, Hengler, Powell, Price, Hicken, Randall and Adams families. All are famous in the annals of circus history, many going on to form their own equestrian companies. The Henglers were particularly successful and had many Gloucestershire connections.⁵

As well as individual acts of horsemanship, athletics and clowning, spectacular 'scenes' were performed in the arena. These often commemorated some military battle or newsworthy event, in some far corner of the British Empire, and were enacted in sumptuous uniforms or other splendid costumes. Exotic animals, native of distant lands, were often introduced to the incredulous public for the first time in circus arenas. Novelty, colour and spectacle drew the crowds. Some popular dramatic events at Ryan's included 'England's Queen; or, the Homage of Nations', 'Persian Warlike Cavalry' and 'The Inca of Peru'. Individual acts, often humorous, were 'Sir Gilpin Cabbage; or, Beelzebub on Horseback', 'Jim Crow's Ride to the Devil', 'Little Love was a Mischievous Boy; or, the Enchanted Soot Bag' and 'Don Juan; or, the Libertine on Horseback'. All were heartily enjoyed by a broad spectrum of the populace, from the aristocracy to the horny-handed. The attendance of Royalty on some occasion would have encouraged the naming of the establishment as a Royal Circus.

WINTER 1840-41 IN CHELTENHAM

By December 1840, James Ryan's 'Equestrian Theatre' had returned to Cheltenham. It was reported that the extensive buildings would be erected on the premises called Wellington Mansion, at the Cambray end of the Bath road. From the expense which must have been incurred, it was presumed that Mr. Ryan intended to remain in Cheltenham for some time.⁶ Advertisements in the local press gave the address for 'Ryan's Royal Olympic Circus' as Wellington Street.⁷

Mellett's 1834 map of Cheltenham shows Wellington Mansion situated between Bath Place and Wellington Place. In 1840 the house was probably in a derelict or semi-derelict state but with grounds suitable for the erection of a wooden amphitheatre. An 1825 guide to Cheltenham contains an engraving of the mansion. According to the guide the house had acquired its name following a visit there, in 1816, by the Duke of Wellington. On that occasion he ceremonially planted an oak tree in the pleasure grounds. The proprietor, Colonel Riddell, subsequently erected an obelisk there, to commemorate the ceremony.⁸ The condition of the house at the time of Ryan's 1840-41 visit to its grounds may be judged from the fact that the building materials of the mansion were advertised for sale in 1843.⁹

For the opening performance on 21 December, and every evening until further notice, James Ryan advertised Mr. Paddington's 'Old English Act of Horsemanship'.⁶ Pablo Paddington was described as 'the man of colour', the contemporary term indicating that he was black. The artiste had been at Ryan's Birmingham amphitheatre earlier in the year, 'riding on his head on a quart bottle', and he performed the same feat there later in 1841.¹⁰ The feat must surely have been seen in Cheltenham. Also on the early bills was Mr. C. Adam in his celebrated act 'The Brigand; or, the Robber of the Alps'.⁷ Charles Adams the equestrian had been with Ryan since at least as early as 1835 when his company visited Liverpool,¹¹ although by 1843 he had joined Madame Ducrow, the widow of Andrew Ducrow the greatest circus performer of the age. James Ryan introduced his highly-trained horse 'Phoenix', billed to perform numerous docile feats.⁷

The weather in December 1840 was particularly wintry, with snow and frost. On the night of 15 December the temperature had been 14 degrees Fahrenheit below zero, with a further heavy fall of snow the following day. The Cheltenham stag hounds were confined close to their kennels in consequence of the severe frost.⁶ During the week when Ryan's opened it remained very cold, although the building was warmed with stoves, fixed on each side of the pit. In addition, the building was lighted with gas jets which would have added heat as a bonus. The risk of fire in a wooden building under such circumstances can be imagined! It seems that the cold weather deterred many circus goers, 'Ryan's Arena not boasting quite such overflowing audiences as the bills would alarm

us with'. Even so, it was extensively patronized, 'affording amusement to many hundreds of our most respectable families'.¹²

During the first week of 1841, along with other establishments, Ryan's Circus suffered the chilling effects of the cold weather. The thin houses must have discouraged the enterprising proprietor for he arranged an afternoon performance at 2 o'clock on Saturday 9 January 'for those who feared to brave the inclement weather after sun-set'.¹³ In the second week of January, the circus was better attended in boxes, pit and gallery, on account of the improved weather. The performers were duly encouraged. The athletic and dexterous feats of Signor Ambrosini, widely advertised on the playbills, and the slack rope performances of Mr. Paddington were singled out for especial mention by the press. Also praised was the horsemanship of Messrs. Powell and C. Adams, and the clowning of Mr. Usher, of Drury Lane, a Mr. Merryman whose tricks and jokes kept the house in a roar of laughter.¹⁴

Dicky Usher was the clown who trained a team of cats to pull him in a cart around the arena, and who amused Londoners by travelling on the Thames in a barrel drawn by four geese. In both cases, the vehicle was propelled by hidden means!¹³ Mr. Usher was notable as a comedian who told jokes, rather than just a miming clown. At his 'benefit' performance in Cheltenham, on 22 January 1841, the veteran clown of 60 years excelled himself, to the entire satisfaction of a house filled to overflowing.¹⁵

Of the artistes mentioned on the playbill of 8 February 1841, Mons. Gouffe, the Celebrated Man-Monkey, was pre-eminent. The nature of his performance is not clear, although an act called 'Jack Robinson and his Monkey' was popular at the time. In this, the monkey, by his agility and mischievous propensities, was adept at reducing his adversaries, including the sailor, to a horizontal position. Mons. Gouffe's act, called 'The Brazillian Ape'(sic) may have been along these lines, or perhaps a monkey-on-horseback act.

The equestrian nursery tale, 'arranged expressly for the juveniles' was styled 'The Ogress and Her Son; or Jack the Giant Killer'. This pantomime on horseback, with the chief characters wearing grotesque masks, was well-known and loved. Following this, Mr. Ryan introduced his highly trained pony 'Beauty'. A Troop(!) of Voltigeurs then gave an exhibition of extraordinary vaulting, leaping on and off the back of horses in motion. Mr. Price, 'The First Summerset Thrower in the World', who assisted in this act, was the Thomas Price who shortly went into partnership with William Powell, also mentioned on the playbill, taking the Henglers (also billed) with them. Price and Powell's Royal Circus, first known in October 1841, lasted for less than two years before Price left and eventually founded the Circo Price in Madrid, an institution at one time the most prestigious circus on the Continent.

Following Mons. Ambrosini's athletic *Tours de Force*, the Gorgeous Equestrian Spectacle 'Timour the Tartar' was enacted, featuring the Grand Entree of Zorilda and the Georgians on Horseback, Combat between the Rival Chieftains for the Fair Circassian, the Treacherous Conduct of Sanballat, and the Death of Kerim's Horse. Timour, portrayed in the woodcut, billed to be played by Mr. Ryan, seems to have been played by Mr. Randall according to a pencilled amendment! Characters in this interesting Asiatic spectacle, made up of a number of tableaux, included



Ryan's Circus Playbill

12. *Cheltenham Looker-On*, 2 January 1841.
13. *ibid*, 9 January 1841.
14. *ibid*, 15 January 1841.
15. *ibid*, 23 January 1841.
16. Playbill, dated 25 February 1841, item 3106 Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museums collection.
17. F. Boase *Modern English Biography*, III, 362, Netherton & Worth, Truro (1892).
18. D. Salbert *Ring Down the Curtain*, Cortney, Luton (1980).
19. W.F. Wallett *The Public Life of W.F. Wallett, the Queen's Jester*, Bemrose, London (1870)
20. R. Woods *Victorian Delights*, Evans, London (1976).
21. *Gloucester Journal*, 24 July 1852.
22. Playbill, dated 24 May 1854, item 3115 Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museums Collection.
23. C.W. Montague *Recollections of an Equestrian Manager*, Chambers, London (1881).
24. C. Keith *Circus Life and Amusements* (1879).