

When the circus came to town

Circuses have rather fallen out of fashion in recent years, but between the end of the Second World War and around the end of the 1970s the arrival of a circus in town was a matter of great excitement, and a night in the Big Top was a grand night out indeed.

The postcard below, which was found amongst papers belonging to Herman Lofthouse, is a reminder of the time when Roberts Brothers' Circus used to over-winter, with their animals, at White House Farm on Kildwick Ings.



The postcard is dated April 1946 but recent research has shown that the circus was in Kildwick for at least a few months prior to that – during which time, they took delivery of some new animals.

In February 1946 the Yorkshire Observer newspaper had the following article:

'Maharanee' comes to be trained in Kildwick

Maharanee has come to Kildwick. Complete with trunk she arrived by train, and is now happily settled in her new home – a stable at White House Farm, where she spends her spare time making merry on the tambourine or playing a mouth organ.

Maharanee is a 23-year-old Indian elephant, and has come to Kildwick from a zoo at Dudley, Warwickshire, where for 15 years she rendered good service to the children.

Now she is to be trained for the Roberts Brothers' Circus, which is wintering at Kildwick, and her Czecho-Slovak trainer, Mr. Jan Dokansky, has high hopes of her.

A Day's Feed

In the farmyard among the ducks Maharanee is to be put through her paces every day for the next six weeks, before the circus goes on tour at Easter.

Nearly nine feet high and weighing about 3 tons, Maharanee doesn't believe in dieting. She eats 12 stones of hay, two of bran, and two of oats per day, and as many potatoes and buns as she can get. Her thirst accounts for 24 buckets of water.

Two Kildwick men, Mr. Charles Windle and Mr. Lewis Thropes [Throup?], volunteered to help the trainer bring the elephant from Dudley. It was an experience they will never forget.

Unused to traffic, Maharanee was hard to pacify during the train journey. Once on the road at Kildwick she ran away and had to be chased through the village. Perhaps she thought the moors were the Himalayas !

The elephant was quite a celebrity and became well known to the congregation of St. Andrew's Church. We have been told by Rosemary and Susan Hargreaves that it was walked through part of Kildwick and, on a Sunday morning, was often to be found passing the bottom of the church steps just as the children came out from Sunday School or the morning service.

A couple of anecdotes about the circus have been sent to us by Isobel Stirk, a friend of the Local History Group, including this one about Maharanee:

I was born at Ashfield Farm – the farm on the left just over the railway crossing before the traffic lights by the antique centre. At that time, the family's land stretched from what was Landis Lund's factory at Eastburn to the river (this being before the dual-carriageway was built along the floor of the valley). My mother told me about when an elephant was wintering in the area and was put into a field belonging to a relative of the circus owners, which was adjacent to our farm's land. It wandered into one of our fields, after eating a whole wooden five-barred gate, and then went on to eat nearly a whole field of our turnips. Whether it survived I do not know !

The elephant did survive its turnip lunch, as a number of people have told us the real story of how it met its demise. Apparently, during a bad winter (might this have been 1947 ?), electric heating was installed in its pen. The poor animal somehow came into contact with a bare cable and was electrocuted. This story is confirmed by Derek Soames, who worked as a porter on the railway, in an article in the [North Craven Heritage Trust Journal for 2011](#); although he suggests that the accident took place in London, rather than in this area:

On being asked another time to deal with four elephant's feet in separate bags I assumed I was being leg-pulled. However, inside were elephant's feet. The poor elephant had electrocuted itself in London by pulling down cables with its trunk and for some reason the feet were being returned to the circus owner.

But Maharanee wasn't the only large animal that over-wintered in Kildwick. There was also a lion !

Another anecdote from Isobel Stirk:

The animals were unloaded from the railway carriages in the sidings, up the little lane leading from the railway crossing which connects with Station Road. Apparently, during the unloading, a lion escaped and everyone scattered not knowing what to do. Then someone remembered a man who lived in Crosshills who used to be a trapeze artiste in a circus, and he was sent for. My father said the man put a wad of tobacco in his mouth chewed it for a while and then, approaching the lion cautiously, spit the tobacco juice into the lion's eye. The lion cowered in a corner and was led into a waiting cage. All this happening in Crosshills and Kildwick – hard to believe really ! I suppose it would not be allowed today.

And this from the article by Derek Soames:

Kildwick was notable for parcels, chickens, milk and on one occasion a lion. The circus sent their animals to London for shows and once a lion caused trouble (it was in a cage!). The cage did not load easily and I reached down the side to pick up a piece of wood to use as a lever. The lion just missed patting my head with its paw. The lady lion keeper spoke fiercely to the lion which cowered in a corner, knowing who was in charge.

When the circus visited Silsden in April 1998, Bobby Roberts was interviewed by the Bradford Telegraph and Argus and could remember quite clearly where he lived in the village and the five years he attended Kildwick School.

http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/archive/1998/04/25/Bradford+District+Archive/8077664.Circus_boss_recalls_schooldays/

Earlier circuses in this area

Roberts Brothers' Circus wasn't the first circus to visit this area, as indicated by entries in the Kildwick School log book, made by the headmaster Thomas Appleby, in 1908 and 1914.

September 22nd 1908 The children were taken out of school this afternoon, for about 10 minutes, to see two elephants and four camels pass through the village.

September 15th 1914 School commenced at 1:15pm this afternoon in order that about 60 children could go at 3:15pm to Bostock and Wombwell's Menagerie, to see the various animals. The attention of the children was specially drawn to the hippopotamus, the llama, the lions and tigers, and a chimpanzee.



Bostock and Wombwell's Menagerie was a very well-known travelling exhibition of animals, begun by George Wombwell in 1805. We don't know where it was set up in September 1914, but there's an interesting article, with photographs, about its visit to Gargrave in 1912 at <http://www.gargrave.org.uk/times-past/bostock-and-wombwells-menagerie/>

The menagerie continued to visit the area until it was closed in 1932, when the animals were rehomed at Whipsnade Zoo. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LN910Fm9tA>

What next – can you help ?

Can you remember the circus staying in Kildwick ? Can you, for example, confirm the memory of one member of the Local History Group of animals being taken for a walk through the village ?

The Farnhill and Kildwick Local History Group would like to hear from you on any topic of local interest. Please contact history@farnhill.co.uk.