

19th CENTURY CIRCUS IN THE BRITISH ISLES

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Travelling zoological exhibitions (menageries), acrobats and trick animal acts were common forms of entertainment in the eighteenth century and earlier. Philip Astley was perhaps the first of the showmen to combine such acts in a show in a circular structure. The performance at "Astley's Amphitheatre" in London in 1768 featured trick horseback riding and live music. His later rival, Charles Dibdin, opened "The Royal Circus" in London in 1772, from which the term circus is said to have been popularised.



Astley's Royal Amphitheatre

By the 1850's travelling circuses and menageries had become widespread in the British Isles, ranging from small, tented affairs to large operations housed in semi-permanent buildings. Originally the circus was mainly performed in wooden buildings rather than in tents, and proprietors such as Frederick "Charles" Hengler constructed purpose-built buildings known as hippodromes, circuses, and amphitheatres in various locations throughout the country. Eventually some permanent sites were established for a few circuses.

Tents to house circuses were imported as a concept from America in the 1840's. The touring shows largely switched over to canvas which was cheaper to maintain and considerably quicker to erect and pull down in each location than the earlier wooden structures.

Each show, be it circus, menagerie or travelling theatre/ vaudeville, had its collection of wagons, which were gaily or even gaudily painted, housing the performers, the animals, the equipment, and the tents. Many of the larger enterprises included musical bands, to provide enthusiastic music during

or before the individual acts, and to entertain the audiences before the shows and during the parades which often announced the arrival of a show to each town.

The make-up of the bands varied considerably – some were only a few players, usually brass (greatest volume), others reached numbers of up to twenty. The larger and more established bands were of sufficient quality and ability to deliver complex operatic and classical pieces as well as the "traditional" show music of marches, polkas, and waltzes that were associated with such bands. Sadly, at the lower end of the quality spectrum, circus bands tended to get a bad name due to the poor quality of the music of some of them.



Bostock & Wombwell's Bandwagon, c. 1910

The menagerie and circus bands were not limited to performing in their shows, they would often be engaged or offer their services for local events in the towns they visited, either augmenting a local band or providing the music on their own.

Circuses and menageries usually arrived in a town with a processional flourish. An example is Sanger's Circus in the 1880's with its main carriage drawn by four horses in 'royal state harness' as part of the grand procession. All the carved woodwork on the carriage was gilded. Sanger's wife, Mademoiselle Pauline de Vere, sometimes dressed as Britannia and rode on top of a carriage holding a Union Jack shield, a gold trident, and wearing a Greek helmet. The circus lion, Nero, and a lamb sat together at her feet. After this came a string of camels, a herd of elephants, numerous other costumed characters, exotic animals either in cages, or led by their trainers, and of course, the circus band.

As a means of popular entertainment, these travelling shows were a great success in the 19th century and they criss-crossed the country moving from town to town, residing in each for a time before heading off to the next location. There was usually great excitement accompanying their visits, especially when the parades took part. These processions were generally eagerly awaited by the local populace, only a few curmudgeons complaining about the noise, the effect on their business, or the bawdiness of the performers.



Sanger's Circus bandwagon

Sadly, a number of accidents and similar occurrences resulted from the passing of a circus or menagerie band in a parade. People were injured or even killed when, through inattention in watching or listening to the band, something happens to them. Similarly, horses bolted and carts and wagons ran away when their draft animals were frightened by the band's sudden appearance or loud music, sometimes hitting or running over a nearby pedestrian, causing injury or death.



FATAL ACCIDENT TO A MENAGERIE BAND

The worst of these happened in the USA, in May 1870, when the James Robinson & Co.'s Circus Band, led by Professor M.C. Sexton, was mounted on the roof of the lion carriage.

In turning a corner during the street parade in Middletown, Missouri, the carriage hit a rock causing the roof to give way and throw the musicians in with the lions. Four windjammers were killed and many of the others had severe lacerations.

Contemporary with the circus and menageries, other travelling shows also entertained audiences across the country. These included minstrel shows, waxworks, theatres and sideshow "fairs". Some of these also had accompanying bands.

Another aspect of popular entertainment in the Victorian era was the establishment of the public park, open spaces within which people could meet, congregate, and enjoy various entertainment. To begin with, some of these were private enterprises – such as the very popular Vauxhall Gardens in London – but gradually the "corporation" public parks began to appear and the private, professional parks concentrated more on being an entertainment venue. Many of these earlier amusement parks and gardens had a resident professional brass band to entertain the crowds. Their players would be well-employed during the summer season, but then had a lean time in the winter when much of the activity in such places wound down. The public parks, of course, engaged or allowed local amateur brass bands to perform in their spaces.

During the 19th century there were many of these professional bands attached to the travelling and static entertainment operations. Some were permanent, a fixed attraction which, over time, matured in its competence and quality. Many, however, were transient, often engaged through advertisement as a whole or as individual players for the season or part thereof. In all cases, their employment was dependent on the success of the entertainers and the time of year - some enterprises laid themselves up for the winter. As the Victorian entertainment industries expanded, the various attractions increasingly made use of musicians, sometimes as string bands, but more often as brass bands (with occasional woodwind instruments).



Fanciful trapeze artists in a multi-ring circus, with horse racing track - no sign of a band!