

## 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, on Kildwick Ings.



When the circus visited Silsden in April 1998, Bobby Roberts, then aged 55, 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/](http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/archive/1998/04/25/Bradford+District+Archive/8077664.Circus+boss+recalls+ schooldays/)

The original newspaper article included a school photograph which showed a young Robert – not reproduced in the online version. A copy of this photograph has recently been donated to the History Group archive and is shown on the next page.



Bobby Roberts is third from the right on the front row.

A couple of anecdotes have been sent to us by Isobel Stirk, a friend of the Local History Group and one of our regular speakers.

- 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 Eastbum 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 ! (It did, see below.)
- Also there was another story about a circus animal in the area. 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.

An article in the [North Craven Heritage Trust Journal for 2011](#), written by Derek Soames who worked as a porter on the railway, also includes an anecdote about the lion:

*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.*

It appears that the elephant was 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.

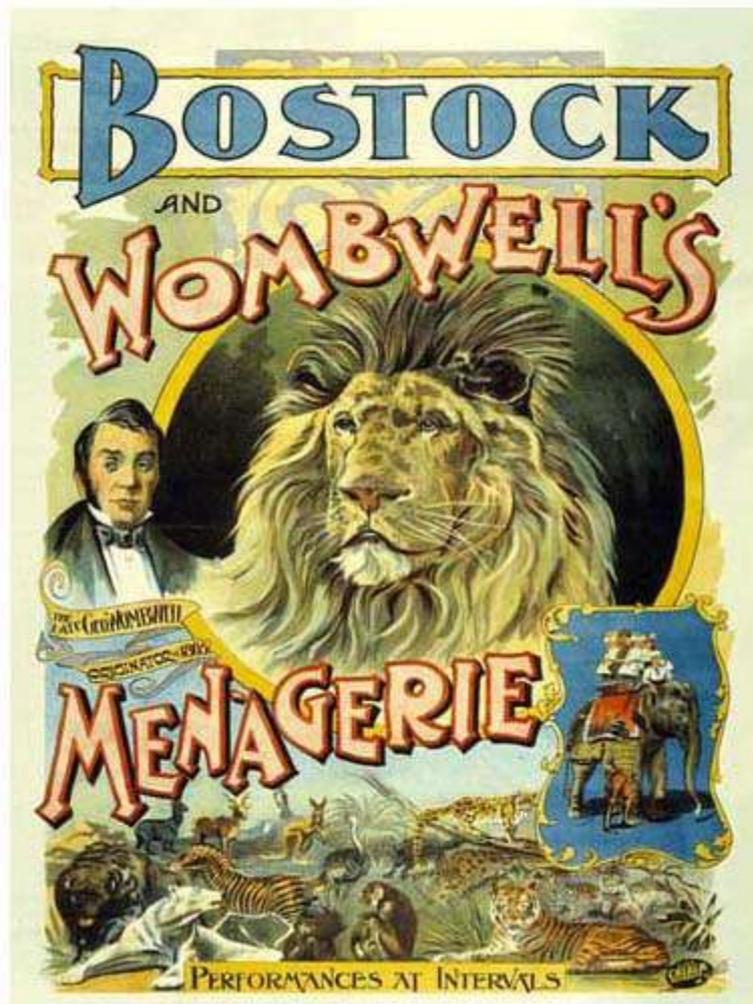
A number of people have told us the story of the elephant's sad demise. Apparently, during a bad winter (might this have been 1947 ?), electric heating was installed in its pen. The poor animal somehow came into contact with a bare cable and was electrocuted. This story is confirmed by Derek Soames; 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.*

## 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 22<sup>nd</sup> 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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 until 1932 when the animals were re-homed at Whipsnade Zoo. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LN9IOFm9tA>

### **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 ?

Can you identify any of the other children in the photograph ?

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](mailto:history@farnhill.co.uk).