## Homepage

2025 marks 200 years since the birth of George Sanger, one of the most significant circus proprietors of all time.

We invite you to celebrate this date with a tour of his life, through the collections of the National Fairground and Circus Archive, part of The University of Sheffield library, special collections and archives. Follow the footsteps of George Sanger.

## Early Life

George Sanger was born in Newbury, Berkshire on 23 December 1825 and grew up travelling the fairs of the south of England and Wales with his parent's peepshow. George was homeschooled by his parents who taught him to read and write. He started to work in the family business from a very young age and was always encouraged to pay attention to what was happening around him and learn from it. By the time he was around eight years old he had already learnt the peepshow's patter and was helping his father, James Sanger, with the show.

Tragedies were always a big attraction and one of the shows they presented was The Murder in the Red Barn.The Murder in the Red Barn was based on the true story of Maria Marten's murder in 1827. Maria who at the time was 25 years old was shot dead by her lover William Corder at the Red Barn, a landmark in Polstead, Suffolk. Her stepmother claimed to have dreamt of the murder the night of the event, but Maria's body wasn't found until a year later. Corder was subsequently apprehended in London, tried and hanged.

## Roots in the Fairground

George's father was born in 1785 in Tisbury, Wiltshire, to a well to do farming family. He worked as a farmer and toolmaker until he was eighteen, at which time he went to London where he was pressganged by the Royal Navy and forced into naval service during the Napoleonic Wars. James spent ten years in service, during which time he fought at the Battle of Trafalgar under Admiral Lord Nelson in 1805.

A year later James was released from service with an annual pension of £10 and official permission to pursue any legal trade he wished. James invested his pension on a peepshow and became a fairground showman.His most popular show was the depiction of the Battle of Trafalgar, which he accompanied with his own eyewitness account of the events. During the battle of Trafalgar James was severely wounded, suffering a scalp wound, losing several fingers and having some ribs broken.

James married Sarah Elliott in 1805. Sarah was born c1787 in Wiltshire and worked as a lady's maid in Bristol where her mother kept the 'Black Horse' public house. The pair had known each other since childhood but it was at Bristol that they decided to get married. Sarah immediately joined her husband's showman's life and started to travel around the fairs with him. They had nine children together.

## Debut in Performance & Circus

George wanted to become an acrobat and started to learn to do somersaults, balancing and other tricks. He also took care of the running  of his family's roundabout, which his father had built and used to walk on the spars that carried the horses while in motion. It was during this time that George had an accident that prevented him from pursuing his acrobatic career. Instead in 1848, he and his brother John bought some canaries and mice and trained them for exhibition.

## Debut in Performance & Circus

Early fairground rides were rudimentary machines often made by the showmen using basic materials and crude craftsmanship. William Sanger's machine is described by George as 'a very primitive kind of roundabout', which he carried with him as an adjunct to his peepshow.

*"The horses were enlarged examples of the rough penny toys that please the little ones even now. Their legs were simply stiff round sticks. Their bodies were lumps of deal rounded on one side. Their heads were roughly cut from half-inch deal boards, and inserted in a groove in the bodies, while the tails and manes were made of strips of rabbit-skin. They were gaudy animals, however, their coats of paint being white, plentifully dotted with red and blue spots."*

Fairground rides are powerful machines and working on them can be dangerous. On one occasion George was walking towards the centre of his family's roundabout, which worked on a pivot in a kind of open truck, when his foot slipped and his right leg was jammed between the pivot and the spars tearing the flesh off his calf.

He was rushed to a doctor, who advised to amputate his leg. However, his father refused to accept that option and stitched him up himself instead. It is likely that William learnt some rudimentary emergency surgery procedures during his naval service, which put him in good stead to look after his family in the days before free health care. George was unable to walk for six weeks and was left with a disfiguring scar, but the leg was saved.

## Family Life

George married Ellen Chapman of the Chapman Circus family. Ellen and George knew each other since childhood, which wasn't unusual in the small world of travelling entertainment. In 1848, they met at Stepney Fair once again, while she was still working for Wombwell Menagerie.

## Family Life: Ellen Chapman

Ellen Chapman was one of the first ever female lion tamers in the world. She had been working with the famed Wombwell Menagerie from the age of 16 but started her training much younger. She performed as 'Madame Pauline de Vere' and was known as a 'Lion Queen', a term often used to refer to female wild cat performers at the time.

She appeared in pantomimes, performing the serpentine dance in the lions' den and impersonating 'Britannia' in the acclaimed Sanger's circus processions, which famously carried a live lion next to a lamb. Eventually, Ellen stopped performing cage acts to become the business head of the family.

Ellen worked with a mixed group of lions, tigers and leopards and was acclaimed as the first woman ever to put her head inside a lion's mouth. She performed for Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle in 1847, which gave her instant celebrity status. Her performance was said to rival Van Amburgh's, the man who introduced animal performance in circuses and was respected around the world for his abilities and talent.

This type of life was perilous; Ellen survived an explosion in her caravan at Northwich and at least two lion attacks, on one of them she was severely clawed down the back of her head and on the other she was bitten on the leg.

Ellen Chapman was so famous in her time that she was mentioned by Dickens in two letters, she was painted by George Christopher Horner and had her own Staffordshire ceramic figurine made to commemorate her Royal performance.

## Family Life: Laurina & Sarah

Sarah Harriet became an equestrian performer and became involved in the management of the family's circus. Sarah married Arthur Reeve in 1875. Arthur was the son of the Mayor of Margate, who owned the Hall by the Sea, which later was acquired by her father, George. Sarah and Arthur had four daughters, Marie, Hettie, Lillian and Florrie, and one son, Victor.

Laurina became an equestrian performer. She married Alexander Coleman, the clown 'Little Sandy' in 1874. They had four children; Georgina (b.1874), Alexander 'Sandy' (1876-1883), Ellen 'Topsy' (b.1878) and George (b.1880).

## The Growth of The Business

By 1858 Sanger's circus boasted of presenting the largest stud of horses ever seen in the European continent and visited over two hundred towns in a nine-month season, giving two shows a day. By 1871 the Sanger circus emporium owned ten permanent circuses between Plymouth and Aberdeen, including one in Sheffield and two of the most famous and reputable circus venues in London: The Royal Agricultural Hall and Astley's New Royal Amphitheatre.

Their travelling road train was also said to be two miles long and had around ten wagons to carry the tent and seating, a lamp wagon, ten living carriages, a foal wagon, ten wild animal wagons, a harness wagon, a portable blacksmith's forge, property wagons, wardrobe and dressing wagons, a band carriage and at least six great tableau parade cars

The Royal Agricultural Hall opened in 1862 in Islington, London. It was built by the Royal Smithfield Club to hold annual exhibitions of livestock, agricultural produce and implements. The Hall held the Smithfield Show from its inception until 1938, when it had grown so big that it was moved to Olympia. It was also the venue for the first ever Crufts dog show in 1891 and hosted the Royal Tournament from 1880 until it also became too large and had to be moved to Olympia in the early 20th century.

Other events held at the Hall were World's Fairs, circuses, musical recitals, grand balls, military tournaments and sporting events. During the Second World War, the hall was requisitioned by the Government, and served as a parcel depot sorting office. After the war the Hall was abandoned until Sam Morris bought it in 1986 to convert it into a modern exhibition venue and conference centre called The Business Design Centre, which continues operating today and it's a Grade II listed building.

Philip Astley is widely recognised as the father of circus, although others were developing the idea of circus at the same time as him. He was a Sergeant Major of the 15th Light Dragoons, who possessed a natural talent with horses and a strong ambition to make a name for himself. Upon retiring from military service, Astley made a living from equestrian trick riding and horse training.

Trick riding was one of the most fashionable types of popular entertainment at the time and it is from the combination of equestrian acts and travelling entertainers such as acrobats, clowns and actors that modern circus was born in London in 1768.

## Circus Parades

From 1874 Sanger also presented tenting shows on the Continent for fifteen seasons covering sites in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. He was travelling up to 160 horses, eleven elephants, a dozen camels and about 330 staff, which at the time was an extraordinary achievement.

The wagons were luxuriously decorated with carvings, cut mirrors, gold leaf and brightly coloured paint, and always attracted large crowds of people who lined the streets to witness the exuberance of the circus in anticipation of the shows. The parades were very effective spreading the word of the arrival and magnificence of the Sanger's circus.

## Royal Performances

During his extensive and impressive career as a circus proprietor George Sanger presented two Royal performances before Queen Victoria, the first at Sandringham on 8 January 1885 and the second at Balmoral Castle on 17 June 1898.

The Sanger Circus also entertained Queen Victoria and her children, in 1899 when they watched his circus from a carriage in the grounds of Windsor Castle. Royal request shows were exceptional occurrences only granted to extraordinary  performers or shows, thus a testament to the quality of the Sanger circus.

## The Hall by the Sea

The Hall by the Sea was a pleasure garden in Margate. The original Hall by the Sea opened as a restaurant and dance hall in 1867 but didn't enjoy a lot of success and by 1870 it had been sold to Thomas Dalby Reeve, who became Mayor of Margate four years later. George, who happened to be in Margate with his travelling circus at the time, saw a business opportunity and entered in partnership with Thomas in 1871 to run the hall.

They had big plans for the site, which involved the purchase of surrounding land to expand into. However, Thomas died in 1875 not having realised these dreams and George became the sole owner of the business. George continued the expansion of the site, eventually developing the Hall into an extravagant pleasure garden with rides, a lake, a menagerie, a skating rink and sideshows.

The site went into decline after George's death in 1911 and in 1919 it was sold to theme park entrepreneur John Henry Iles who turned it into Dreamland.

## Sanger's Passing

George sold his circus business in 1905 and retired aged 80 years old to Park Farm, a rural property he owned in East Finchley. He enjoyed a quiet life until he was violently murdered in November 1911 by one of the labourers working at his farm, Herbert Cooper. Herbert attacked George with a hatchet and injured two other employees before killing himself.

The reasons for the murder remain unknown, but George was said to be a good employer, and he had defended Cooper in a previous altercation and even left him a £50 bequest on his Will. George was buried with municipal honours at Margate in the family tomb. His funeral was attended by thousands of showmen from the UK, Europe and the USA, and was filmed and shown on fairgrounds around the country.

## Legacy

George Sanger was a respected businessman and member of the showland community and although he enjoyed most fame and success in the circus, he maintained a strong link to his fairground roots. He contributed to the establishment of the Van Dwellers' Association, later known as the Showman's Guild of Great Britain and became its President in 1900, a post he held until 1909. The United Kingdom Van Dwellers' Protection Association was founded in 1889 with the purpose of fighting the Moveable Dwellings Bill of 1888. This Bill threatened to end the way of life and businesses of a wide range of travelling people. The Van Dwellers' Association, was formed by leading showmen of the time and was successful in defeating the Bill.

George was one of the greatest showmen of his time and his showmanship had an impact in Great Britain, Europe and America. He famously sold one of his shows 'The Congress of Nations' to P.T. Barnum in 1874.