

## 'FOR THE BENEFIT OF MR KITE....'

(Lennon-McCartney)

### BURTON'S CIRCUS AT RICHMOND 1855

Peter MacFie ©

In June 1855 a famous troupe of entertainers, Burton's National Circus, performed at Richmond for two days, en route to Launceston. The circus, led by performer/manager Henry Burton, was one of the first to travel around provincial Australia - and there's even a connection with a song of the Beatles.....

The *Mercury* newspaper regretted the unique troupe's unsuccessful visit to Hobart, due in part to the 'severe inclemency of the weather.' - it was the middle of winter after all;

... it is admitted by all that an equestrian troupe has never visited this colony in any way comparable to that of Mr Burton's..'

The paper hoped they would be 'more liberally patronised (at Launceston) than they had been in Hobart Town.

'Circus' of the mid-19th century featured acrobats who rode and used performing horses as part of their act. The only 'wild' animals were two monkeys.

A feature of the bill of Burton's Circus was 'the very extraordinary feats of Signor Pablo Fanque, and other celebrities.' Pablo Fanque the advertisement emphasised, was

**'The GREATEST TIGHT ROPE DANCER in the WORLD!'**

Which is where the connection with the Beatles comes in - for those who know their *Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club* album.

After leaving Richmond the troupe intended moving to Launceston via Richmond, O'Brien's Bridge (Glenorchy), New Norfolk, Brighton, Green Ponds (Kempton), Oatlands, Ross, Campbell Town, Longford, Westbury, and Evandale.<sup>1</sup>

Henry Burton, - the circus' leader - was entrepreneur, ring-master and entertainer whose training employed a variety of skills. He was born in Lincolnshire in 1823 and trained as a ring-master in the circus of James Cook which toured Scotland. Burton emigrated to Australia with his wife and family in December 1849, landing at Adelaide where he performed as part of a quartet, the Blythe Waterland Ethiopian Minstrels, singing Negro minstrels with tambourine and an accordion player.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mercury 4/6/1855 p 3. AOT

Henry moved to Sydney and opened a riding school at *Sir Joseph Banks Hotel*, Botany Bay, set among 'the zoological and botanical gardens where exotic animals roamed.' His new circus was based around the use of Maitland ponies which he bred and trained with his troupe performing bare-back riding and jumping feats.<sup>2</sup> After opening in Sydney they introduced the new Negro minstrel craze to audiences at Melbourne, Launceston and Hobart during January 1850, all under vice-regal patronage.

A feature of Burton's circus was the English-style vaudeville act with Burton, featuring as the comic in 'Billy Button's Ride to Brentford.' An apparent drunken show-off leaves the audience and demands that the ring-master allow him to ride a galloping pony. After resisting unsuccessfully, the 'drunken' clown proceeds to stay attached to the pony, gradually regaining control, and finally throws off his ragged clothes to reveal his real identity as the champion horseman.

After a rough crossing on Bass Strait taking 11 days, the troupe received a warm welcome in Launceston, and travelled to Hobart on an old stage coach. They were surprised at the well-made highway from Launceston to Hobart. On their return, residents at Oatlands were excited by their arrival and stopped the coach. The company was begged to give a show and a stage was erected over the benches of the local court-house. 50 pounds was handed over to the performers and a couple of private carriages ran the company to Launceston in time for their engagement there.<sup>3</sup>

During the Gold-rush the troupe performed to diggers. When the gold fever subsided, the circus again toured the 'provinces' including Adelaide, Melbourne and Hobart and as far north as Rockhampton in Queensland. During this period in June 1855, they visited Tasmania, including Richmond.

Burton's circus again visited Tasmania in 1873 performing in a large tent supported by two poles on the lower cricket ground, capable of seating 2000.

A repeat performance from the 1855 visit were the antics of 'Major John Downey, the Monkey Rider' which was 'an ape three foot high' (probably a chimpanzee) who 'took a glass of wine with the clown' and rode a pony - Beeswing - equestrian-fashion over hoops and balloons.<sup>4</sup>

A major feature of the advertisement for Burton's Circus was the presence of Pablo Fanque,, the Tight Rope Walker. A Fair named after him was celebrated in the Beatles song *For the Benefit of Mr Kite*. This song features on the album *Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band* and

---

2 Teale, Ruth in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 3, p. 308-9.

3 St Leon, M. Spangles and Sawdust, P 22.

4 Merc 4/3/1873 p 2.1

portrays John Lennon and Paul McCartney's idea of an album with a Music Hall format into which this particular track fitted perfectly.

The song itself was based on an old circus poster John Lennon saw in an antique shop. Lennon's words are a direct copy of the poster's advertising the entertainers.

For the Benefit of Mr Kite  
 There Will be a Show Tonight on trampoline  
 The Hendersons will all be there  
 Late of Pablo Fanques Fair - what a scene!  
 Over men and horse lastly through a hogs head of real fire!  
 In this way Mr K will challenge the world!<sup>5</sup>

Lennon found the poster in Surrey while filming for the TV special *Strawberry Fields Forever*. John Lennon describes how the words for the song arose;

It was from an old poster I'd bought in an antique shop. ....There was a break (from the filming) and I went into this shop and bought an old poster advertising a variety show which starred Mister Kite. It said, the Hendersons will all be there, late of Pablo Fanques Fair. There were hoops and horses and someone going through a hogs head of real fire. Then there was Henry the Horse. The band would start at ten to six. All at Bishopsgate. I hardly made a word up - just connecting lines together word for word really....<sup>6</sup>

John Lennon 'purchased the poster from a shop in Sevenoaks, Kent, and it referred to a fair held in Rochdale, Lancashire in February 1843.'<sup>7</sup> For reasons that are unclear, the famous tight rope walker's name was celebrated in the 'Pablo Fanques Fair.' Eight years later Pablo Fanque was touring the Australian colonies with Henry Burton, performing at Hobart - and at Richmond.

From the 'hoops and horses' and jumping 'through a hogshead of real fire,' the circus performance described in the poster used by John Lennon for the song *Mr Kite* strongly resembles the acts that Tasmanian colonists saw in Burton's travelling show in 1855.

Where in Richmond was the circus situated? Perhaps on the site of the Richmond Races, or perhaps we will never know, but the picture of Burton's Circus can be conjured by newspapers of the day - and with a 'Little Help' from the Beatles.

.oOo.

---

5 Lennon & McCartney, quoted in Aldridge, Alan *The Beatles Illustrated Lyrics*, London, 1990.

6 Quoted in Harry, Bill: *The Ultimate Beatles Encyclopaedia*, London 1992, p 84.

7 *ibid* p 84.

## Index

accordion .....	1	Fanque, Pablo .....	1, 2, 3
acrobats .....	1	<i>For the Benefit of Mr Kite</i> .....	2
Adelaide.....	1	horses (clowning).....	2
bare-back riding.....	2	horses (performing).....	1
Beatles .....	1, 2, 3	Lennon, John.....	3
Billy Button's Ride to Brentford .....	2	Maitland ponies .....	2
Blythe Waterland Ethiopian Minstrels .....	1	McCartney, Paul.....	3
Botany Bay.....	2	Monkey Rider .....	<i>See Downey, Major John</i>
Burton, Henry .....	1, 2, 3	monkeys. ....	1
Burton's National Circus .....	1, 2	Negro minstrels.....	1, 2
chimpanzee.....	2	Oatlands .....	2
circus .....	1	Richmond.....	1
circus poster .....	3	<i>Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club</i> album .....	1
clowns .....	2	<i>Sir Joseph Banks Hotel</i> .....	2
Cook, ? (Mrs James).....	1	tambourine.....	1
Cook, James .....	1	tightrope dancer.....	1
Downey, Major John .....	2	vaudeville.....	2

.o0o.