



HENGLER'S CIRCUS AND GLOUCESTERSHIRE

by John M Turner

When the famous Victorian circus proprietor Charles Hengler died in Hampstead, on 28 September 1887 he had just journeyed from his home at Cugley Farm, Newent.¹ As members of famous circus families, both he and his wife had spent their lives travelling the nation before settling in this corner of rural Gloucestershire, sometime in the early 1870s. Only a few years previously, 'Hengler's Grand Cirque Variete' had opened for the first time in Bristol whence it returned for many seasons. Briefly, between 1861 and 1869, when Charles Hengler's fortunes lay in the north, the family home had been in Liverpool.² But Gloucestershire had previously witnessed many visits by the Henglers, one of the most famous equestrian families of the Victorian age. After Charles' death in 1887, his family remained in Newent until about the turn of the century.

ORIGINS OF HENGLER'S CIRCUS

Charles Hengler, born in 1821 at Cambridge, together with his brothers and sisters, had travelled with their father 'Mons' Henry Hengler, a famous tight-rope artiste. Different members of the family appeared in a variety of roles with famous equestrian companies of the day including that of Philip Astley the inventor of circus as we understand it. All the Henglers, and there were many of them, developed circus skills. Charles' older brother, Edward Henry, was a truly amazing tightrope artiste, turning forward and backward somersaults on the rope whilst playing an overture on the violin, without missing a note! A younger brother, John Michael, developed a similar repertoire. By contrast, Charles was no funambulist but he was a splendid horse-trainer and equestrian. He was also an astute businessman.³

In time 'Herr' Edward Henry Hengler acquired enough capital to purchase his own equestrian company at least as early as 1845. He was the founder of the original⁶ 'Hengler's Circus Royal'. Brother Charles was Acting Manager, and their father was the Riding Master.⁴ After a year or so, with Edward Henry now away commanding large fees as a freelance performer, his circus was sold-up and Charles went to work for circus proprietor William Cooke, his new wife's uncle. As described many years later by James Frowde, of Gloucester:

'Charles in his old mummery booth days besides being a musician had a knowledge of scene painting and was a fair property master; consequently he was of great use to a concern of Mr Cooke's magnitude'.⁵

CHARLES HENGLER'S CIRCUS ROYAL

In July 1847 the opportunity arose for Charles to buy his own circus. His younger brother John Michael, 'the Prince of Tight Rope artists', then with John Cooke's circus in Manchester, saw the company get into financial difficulties. Probably with the encouragement of John Cooke's brother, William, Charles Hengler used £100 of his savings to set up on his own account.¹² The association of the Hengler and Cooke families persisted throughout the golden age of circus. James Frowde, Charles Hengler's young nephew, later gave a graphic account in the *Gloucester Journal* of what it was like to be a member of his uncle's company during its founding year.⁵

During the decade 1847-1856, Hengler's Circus was built from a small but excellent company into a gigantic and highly successful one. The usual pattern of the year was to winter in temporary wooden amphitheatres, erected by a local builder, and spend the summer 'tenting'. The first known visit of the company to Gloucestershire was in 1851. After a lengthy and successful winter season in the North, tenting commenced taking 'C. Hengler's Circus Royal and American Pavilion of Unequalled Wonders' to visit Stow-on-the-Wold, Moreton-in-Marsh, Chipping Campden, Evesham and Tewkesbury, during October. The 1851-2 winter season was spent in Cheltenham, opening on Monday 3 November.

'Hengler's Circus Royal', in St Margaret's Terrace, near the back of the Market Place, was a substantial building erected by a Mr W Williams. Charles Hengler's publicity claimed that it was his first visit to Cheltenham:

'... with the most talented company of artists out of London, and a matchless stud of forty horses and diminutive ponies ... Mr Charles Hengler calls the attention of the public to the opening of his new and elegant circus ... with a commodious arena of large dimensions, increased accommodation for visitors... The circus will be fitted up with every care for the comfort of its patrons ... and brilliantly illuminated with gas. Open every evening at a quarter to seven, the performance to commence precisely at a quarter past seven ...'⁶

Hengler's Circus became famous for a number of reasons. The artists were the most talented to be found, the entertainment was scrupulously inoffensive (a novelty) and everything ran like clockwork! In Cheltenham the qualities of the well organised establishment were quickly recognised by the 'elite and aristocracy of this fashionable town'.⁷ *The Cheltenham Looker-on* reported:

'Hengler's Circus seems likely to prove a fashionable speculation, if an opinion may be formed from the crowded audiences which nightly congregate to witness the equestrian and other performances exhibited ... We have, indeed, seldom known entertainments of the kind in Cheltenham so well supported, or having a better claim to be so'.⁸

The entertainments included the astounding evolutions of Herr Hengler on the tightrope, the clever riding of Messrs Barlow, Moreton, Carre, Young and Miss Rebecca Woolford, and the jests of the rival clowns Messrs Knight and Boswell. After several weeks in Cheltenham the circus closed in January 1852, proceeding to Exeter.

By this time James Frowde was with the company, shortly to become famous as a clown and an orator, destined to retire a wealthy man to Newent.

Hengler's company again visited Gloucester whilst tenting, in August 1852, Tewkesbury, Cheltenham and Gloucester during May 1854, and Gloucester for six weeks early in 1855.

'Hengler's New Roman Amphitheatre and Grand Cirque Variete' opened in the New Market, Gloucester on Monday 8 January 1855, in a spacious circular building erected by Mr Eassie. Some of the star performers were Mr Hengler junior (John Michael) on the tight rope, John Henderson (Charles Hengler's brother-in-law) on the high wire and Young Candler on the trapeze.⁹ The pantomime⁴ 'Turpin's Ride to York' was produced. At the last performance, on 19 February, 'The Battle of the Alma' was enacted with upwards of 100 'Real Military Auxiliaries' taking part. Such spectacular events, performed on horseback, with all the performers in colourful costumes, extolled the victories of Her Majesty's imperial armies and were very popular.

Gloucestershire was also visited during 1856, the tenting tour including Gloucester, Dursley, Minchinhampton and Tetbury, during April and Gloucester again in July.

URBAN SUCCESSES

The decade 1857-1866 saw a change in Charles Hengler's strategy, as he gradually established a chain of permanent buildings which his company occupied in rotation. After tenting in 1857 he visited Newnham, Gloucester, Cheltenham and Evesham during August. The company returned to his permanent Liverpool headquarters annually for the next twelve years, and less regularly until 1901.

The drift of the population from the country to the towns made cities attractive to the provider of popular entertainment. Charles Hengler opened new, or modified, buildings in major cities of Great Britain in the 1860s. The tented circus had visited Bristol on 26 August 1858 and Gloucester and Cheltenham on 15 and 18 July 1859. The very last tenting tour took place during the summer of 1861, when Gloucestershire was visited during June. Hengler established himself in the Rifle Drill Hall, Queens Road, Clifton in 1866 and played there every other year until July 1893.¹⁰

A long cherished ambition was realized when Charles Hengler bought the Palais Royal, in Argyll Street, London and successfully established Hengler's Grand Cirque Variete from 1871.³ Charles Hengler's fortunes were at their apogee and he was regularly patronised by royalty, giving a command performance at Windsor in 1886.

In September 1887, Charles Hengler died suddenly at Cambridge House, Hampstead. A son-in-law, Dr Alfred Fletcher, revealed that he had suffered a weak heart for several years.¹¹ The funeral, in Hampstead, was attended by many prominent circus families, including representatives of the Cookes.

Charles' two sons Fred and Albert Hengler were now in charge, their younger brother Walter being the successful manager of the family's farm and estate at Cugley. But a second death, that of Gloucester-born Fred Hengler, on 7 May 1889, was a terrible blow. Fred, aged 33, died at his mother's new home, Kent's Green House, Taynton, and was buried in his sister Julia's grave at Pauntley Court.

THE END OF A GOLDEN AGE

Albert Hengler, aged only 26, was now in sole charge. For many years he maintained his father's standards of excellence. Born in Liverpool in 1862, educated at Dursley College, Gloucestershire,¹² he acted as private secretary to his father from age 16, was more actively involved in the circus from age 19, and became a manager in 1886. By 1891, his own reputation as a circus entrepreneur was fully established.¹³

In April 1892 Albert married Julia Sterne Lane, the daughter of a wealthy Bristol butcher, at Clifton.¹⁴ Albert's sister Edith had married Joseph Hawkins, a land owner of Staunton Court, the previous year, and his sister Lydia married Captain Leonard Bagshaw of the 45th Regiment, at Highnam in July 1892. Charles Hengler's children were marrying well in the county of their adoption.

It was in 1892 that Albert purchased from his father's trustees the whole of his father's establishments and circus buildings, in Liverpool, Glasgow, Dublin and Hull, becoming the sole proprietor of the largest circus company in the United Kingdom. The London Cirque, still used by Hengler's, was apparently still in the hands of the trustees. In 1894 Albert was described as:

'A typical Englishman—an ardent sportsman, fond of fishing, shooting, rowing, cycling and polo, Captain of the Huntley Cricket Club. He spends one half of his time at his country residence, Huntley Court, Gloucestershire'¹⁵

But the golden age of circus was coming to an end. As Albert Hengler, said in an interview in 1894:

'There have been great changes in the tastes of the public and in the performances we have to give them now. We have to go on doing better and better or they do not come near us'.¹⁶

Over the next few years his empire crumbled, in spite of dramatic innovations in the arena such as the water spectacle which Albert had invented and perfected. In about 1897 he gave up Huntley Court and was living in London. Hengler's London circus, managed between 1889 and 1895 by Albert's uncle John Michael Hengler, closed in 1894; the Hull cirque had to be sold in 1898, that in Liverpool in 1901. By that time, the Henglers had left Gloucestershire. Both Albert and his mother had moved to Malpas, in Cheshire, living at Tilston Court and Tilston Cottage respectively. Mrs Hengler died there in 1902. Walter Hengler, never associated with the circus world, of the Ploddy House, Newent, in 1894, was then living in Croydon. In 1907, Albert reflected on:

'... the great success of the music-halls, in which the 'bills' were almost entirely made up of circus turns such as tumbling, acrobat feats, wire dancing, and even ballad singing itself'.¹⁷

Remarkably in view of the name, Hengler's Circus survived in Glasgow until 1924. Albert, its last proprietor, produced circus performances for a few years afterwards but his luck had run out. His wife had died in 1922 and he lost his fame and his family's fortunes. His only son, Geoffrey Charles Sterne Hengler, had nothing to do with the circus and dropped the family name sometime before the Second World War. Albert died in Hove in 1937.

Circuses still visit Gloucestershire, but of the tenting kind. Some might say that had Hengler's reverted to tenting, instead of retaining expensive and under-utilised buildings, the Henglers might still be resident in Gloucestershire.

SOURCES:

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2. *Gore's Directory of Liverpool; Liverpool Registers of Voters.*
3. Frost, T *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities*, Chatto & Windus, 1875.
4. *King Pole* Sept 1985.
5. *Gloucester Journal* 9 Sept 1899.
6. *Cheltenham Examiner* 29 Oct 1851.
7. *Era* 30 Nov 1851.
8. *Cheltenham Looker-on* 22 Nov 1851
9. *Gloucester Journal* 13 Jan 1855.
10. *Era* 15 July 1866.
11. *Gloucester Journal* 1 Oct 1887; *Era* 1 Oct 1887; *Bristol Observer* 1 Oct 1887.
12. *The Baillie* (Glasgow) 31 Dec 1890.
13. *Liverpool Daily Post* 28 Dec 1891.
14. *Western Daily Press* 26 April 1892.
15. *Birmingham Amusements No 37* 19 Mar 1894.
16. *The Sketch* 19 Dec 1894.
17. *The World's Fair* 9 Mar 1907.