

BRISTOL CITY OF CIRCUS

CELEBRATING 250 YEARS

As far back as the 1200s, in the grounds of St James Priory (largely believed to be the oldest remaining building in Bristol) an annual fair came to town. The fair attracted traders from across the country and by the mid 1700s, as the entertainment side increased, visitors were promised a chance to witness wild and exotic beasts, acrobats and conjurers, magicians, musicians and a mermaid. Amongst these thrills, were early performers such as the daring Tom Maddox.

"In the year 1786, I was at Moscow, and met in a large company a Mr. Maddox [...] Being much delighted. [...] 'Many a time have I acted Punch, and played on the salt-box, in the gallery, at the corner of Silver-street, I think you call it; and Seward is my uncle, who brought me up from a child.' 'By your name, Mr. Maddox,' I replied, 'I suppose you are some relation to the famous Tom Maddox, the rope-dancer; who, with all his family and troop, (except one infant that floated ashore in the cradle,) were lost, about 1757, in a packet off Holyhead?' 'Mr. Harford, I'm that child!' [...] I frequently dined with this extraordinary character, who always spoke with pleasure of St. James's fair."

Replica extract from Lady's Monthly Museum, 1823

Just over a stone's throw from St James's Fair, in Backfields, circular stables were being used from 1761, seven years before the father of modern circus Philip Astley established his 'Amphitheatre' in London.

(Map ref: 2)



After Astley visited the Downs with his trick riders and acrobats in 1772, Backfields was to become Bristol's standard circus site with ex-ostler Ben Handy constructing a covered wooden amphitheatre, in a field adjoining the Full Moon pub in Stokes Croft in 1790.

(Map ref: 8)

As well as equestrian skills, Handy and Franklin's Riding School offered dancing, tumbling and acrobatics. Although the term 'circus' had yet to be coined, could this have been Bristol's first 'circus' school?

It was Andrew Ducrow who returned the Backfields site to entertainment in 1832, having enjoyed several successful seasons at the Theatre Royal. Despite its less than ideal location, the Backfields site changed hands amongst circus proprietors for the next 30 years, including Pablo Fanque, who was its last showman before the site fell silent.



Courtesy of the University of Bristol Theatre Collection, ref: PR/3985.

There is some irony that whilst Edmond's Menagerie had to settle for the 'Moon Field' (Map ref: 8), "where he is obliged to spend a large sum of money in clearing away the perfect sea of mud to render it approachable" (Bristol Mirror 6th February 1858), the newly converted Rifle Drill Hall, (now the site of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery) was deliberately flooded by the renowned Charles Hengler for his 'Water Spectacle'. This remained a popular venue for circus until the end of the 19th century.

Other circuses came... and went...

MESSRS. PRICE AND POWELL'S
Circus Royal, Milk-Street

Extract from Bristol Mercury, 16th April 1842

TO CARPENTERS, BUILDERS, &c.
TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,
By Mr. JOHN CROSSE,
On THURSDAY next, the 16th June, at the CIRCUS,
BARRS-LANE and MILK-STREET, lately occupied
by Messrs. PRICE & POWELL.

Extract from Bristol Mercury, 11th June 1842

...and came back again.



Cirque Bijou, Cabot Circus, Dec 2016, featuring rope walker Jake Hirsch-Holland. Photo André Pattenden



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