

UNDER THE BIG TOP

Philip Banham



1. Advance publicity for Robert Fossett & Bailey Circus



2. Typical horse-drawn caravan used by circus performers



3. Sylvia Dash with Chapman's elephant

BY THE USUAL MIXTURE OF CHANCE and good luck I recently acquired an important collection of circus slides. A string of apparently unrelated coincidences has made the investigation into these slides not only interesting but also exciting and rewarding.

Without my knowledge a reporter attended one of my lantern lectures in the north of England and published an account in a local newspaper. This resulted in a reader of the paper writing to me offering a quantity of photographic slides. Although welcoming the response, I was not initially very enthusiastic as most appeared to date from the 1920s and early 1930s. Normally I am interested only in slides from before 1900. The hopeful vendor had owned them for several decades but had never examined them or even opened the boxes; however, he believed them to relate to the circus and to be worth a lot of money.

It proved very difficult to find a mutually convenient date when the slides could be viewed. Because of the large quantity it was impractical to post the collection and in any case I was not keen to purchase the slides without first viewing them. After a year of occasional telephone conversations and letters it was eventually agreed that upon payment of a suitable deposit a sample of two slides would be sent for inspection. The vendor could have selected any two from the collection of several hundred slides, a bit like a lottery. Yet again good fortune played its part. One of the sample slides was an advertisement used in cinemas as advanced publicity for the Fossett and Bailey Circus, prior to their visit to one of the industrial towns of northern England (see fig. 1). It shows 'Sir' Robert Fossett together with his first elephants. Robert Fossett had become well known for he was one of the finest circus jockeys and had won a gold medal.

Now as it happens, a close friend had just purchased a wooden cabin in a field in Snitterfield, the village next to our own. Towering above the little cabin was a strangely shaped structure built as winter quarters to house the Fossett Circus elephants. Was it possible that the two elephants shown in this photograph were the same

elephants that lived in this small Warwickshire village? The search for appropriate information was now on, and I will return to this aspect of the story a little later.

The collection of slides had been assembled by Willan G. Bosworth, a circus enthusiast, to illustrate his public magic lantern lectures. Very little is known about him by his daughter, who is his only surviving relation. By profession he was a librarian at the public library in Altrincham, near Manchester. It appears that Mr Bosworth was not a family man; much of his leisure time was spent away from his home with circus people. He counted among his personal friends many of the foremost circus owners, including Bertram W. Mills, whom he affectionately called 'The Guv'nor'. These friendships gave him unrivalled access to life behind the scenes, enabling him to witness the private side of the circus. He was able to get to know the leading performers, have a drink with them in their caravans and, importantly, to observe the various trainers at work (see figs 3 and 4). Because of the considerable dangers, few people other than the animal handlers were permitted to watch training sessions with elephants, lions and tigers. However, Willan Bosworth was able to stand alongside the steel practice cage at the Tower Circus, Blackpool, or Belle Vue, Manchester, during training sessions with Alfred Court (see fig. 5), who presented the act for the animals' owner, Anton, and many others.

Willan Bosworth's passion for the circus, together with his intimate knowledge of performers and their life, gave him ample stories for use in his lantern lectures. As for the lantern slides, his good relations with so many circus bosses allowed him access to a wide range of circus photographs for use in his presentations. These included press photographs, advertising slides (see figs 6 and 7) and, perhaps of greatest interest, the personal photographic records of circus proprietors. A good example of this latter type of private photograph is the picture of the gang of lads erecting the Big Top for Bertram Mills's Circus in 1934 (see fig. 8) and that of the Boswell's stage arriving on a railway wagon (see fig. 11).



4. Alfred Court, lion tamer for the circus presenter Anton



5. Alfred Court and Violetta Delargent



6. Sanger's Circus street parade, c. 1895



7. The Medrano Sisters and their horses on the Blackpool sands in 1936



8. Gang erecting Big Top, Mills's Circus, 1934



9. Freddie Pickford with Fossett's elephant Lizzie, at the seaside

In addition, the lectures included a fourth category of slide. These were professional photographs of Willan Bosworth behind the scenes, thus demonstrating to his audiences in a visual way that he did have a very special relationship with circus people. A letter from Mr A.E. Palmer of the St John's Literary Society to Willan Bosworth expresses his appreciation:

I am writing on behalf of our Committee and members to say how pleased we all were with your delightful lecture. Your discourse was so full of matters not generally known, and the descriptions most interesting. Such a lecture could only be given by one who is a master of his subject. Illustrated as it was by a large series of beautiful slides it made a delightful evening.

And the *Sunday Observer* said of Bosworth's lantern lectures: 'He tells good stories of circus creators and circus stars ... the Romantic Historian of the Circus.'

Willan Bosworth's success as a lantern lecturer became known to the BBC, and he was invited to present a series of twelve radio broadcasts in the early 1930s. These created a lot of interest, and subsequently other circus personalities – including George Lockhart, ringmaster of the Tower Circus, Blackpool, and the Belle Vue Circus, Manchester – were invited to present a programme. When I was a schoolboy, our neighbour Alvar Liddell, the well-known radio newsreader, told me about the considerable formality of broadcasting during the early years. I had always considered it a myth that the unseen broadcasters were made to wear full formal evening dress. However, the photograph of George Lockhart inside the BBC studio indicates that this was not a rumour (see fig. 10). Unfortunately I have not been able to trace any of the scripts used in these circus broadcasts. At this time the scripts were typewritten on foolscap sheets, the content had to be approved by the producer, and then they were read word for word with no room for ad libbing. It appears that Bosworth worked on these broadcast scripts and they became the core of his books on the circus, which included *Wagon Wheels* (published by Heath Cranton) and *Tent Town* (published by Burns, Oates & Washbourne). Bosworth wrote several other books in collaboration with others, including *Grey Titan: The Book of Elephants* (with George Lockhart) and *Clowning Through* (with Frank Foster).

Having eventually purchased the collection of slides I was keen to identify the performing elephants of the Fossett Circus and to

establish if these were the same as the elephants that had been housed in Snitterfield. For instance, did Lizzie being exercised in the sea (see fig. 9) ever find her way to Warwickshire for the winter?

My wife Rosemary and I had the good fortune to meet Joseph Fossett, a former lion tamer, and received an invitation to have supper with him. His house was packed with circus memorabilia, including a toy lion owned by Leo, his two-year-old son. We had suggested that surviving members of the Fossett family might be interested to see some of the slides, and a lively, interactive audience of all ages was gathered to watch as they were projected. Joseph and his brother immediately recognised Candy the elephant (see fig. 1). When he was a small boy he had accompanied his father, Dennis Fossett, in their large truck to collect Candy from Southampton Docks. She had been chained up on the deck of the ship and one leg had become infected. Dennis Fossett was skilled at caring for his elephants and had developed a range of special cures – for example, a bucket of warm bran mixed with two bottles of whisky as a cure for a chill. Almost all of the performers featured in the slides were immediately identified: many of them were relations, including Joseph's grandmother, his father, his great uncle 'Sir' Robert Fossett and his aunts. Stories and memories came flooding out as the slides were projected, and Rosemary wrote pages of notes. Joseph's speciality had been working with lions, and he described how a close and trusting relationship had to be developed between a trainer and his animals. It is not every day that one has the opportunity to have supper with a lion tamer and his wife, and all thanks to some magic lantern slides!

Philip BANHAM is a professional magic lantern showman and lecturer. He gives lectures to fine arts societies, literary societies, art galleries and museums, and performs at arts festivals with his wife Rosemary. He has also taught a Victorian Social History course for the University of Warwick, using original lantern slides as the main source material.

A note on sources: This article was written after interviews with surviving members of the Fossett family and with the daughter of Willan Bosworth. Additional material and advice was sought from others who have had a lifelong interest in the circus or have worked with a traditional English travelling circus in the days when it was a popular attraction. Further information was obtained from numerous contemporary newspaper accounts, publicity leaflets and book reviews.

10. George Lockhart, ringmaster of the Tower Circus, Blackpool, giving a BBC broadcast



11. Travelling stage of Boswell's Circus, mounted on a railway wagon



12. Lions and tigers at Belle Vue Circus, Manchester

