

The Magic Lantern

WHO'S WHO IN CIRCUS MAGIC LANTERN SLIDES

Part 1. Charles Keith and Jean-Baptiste Auriol

Dick Moore

Who were the performers depicted in the many lantern circus slipping slides?

The circus and the magic lantern were among the most popular forms of entertainment in the 19th century. Thus it is no surprise that the two would become intertwined. Perhaps the unintended and unforeseen outcome was that lantern images now provide a unique historical view into the 'Golden Age' of the circus that evolved from Phillip Astley's dirt ring near Westminster Bridge, London, in 1768.

During this golden age, circus performers and their acts were well known to the international public. Images were immortalised in handbills, broadside advertisements, etchings and paintings. Lantern slide artists drew upon these resources, as well as their own personal observations of circuses, and, with artistic licence, they created numerous slides depicting these wonderful performers and their acts.

Drawing upon my research into Lapierre circus slide images, the following is an endeavour to identify the performers and acts portrayed in many of these exciting slides.

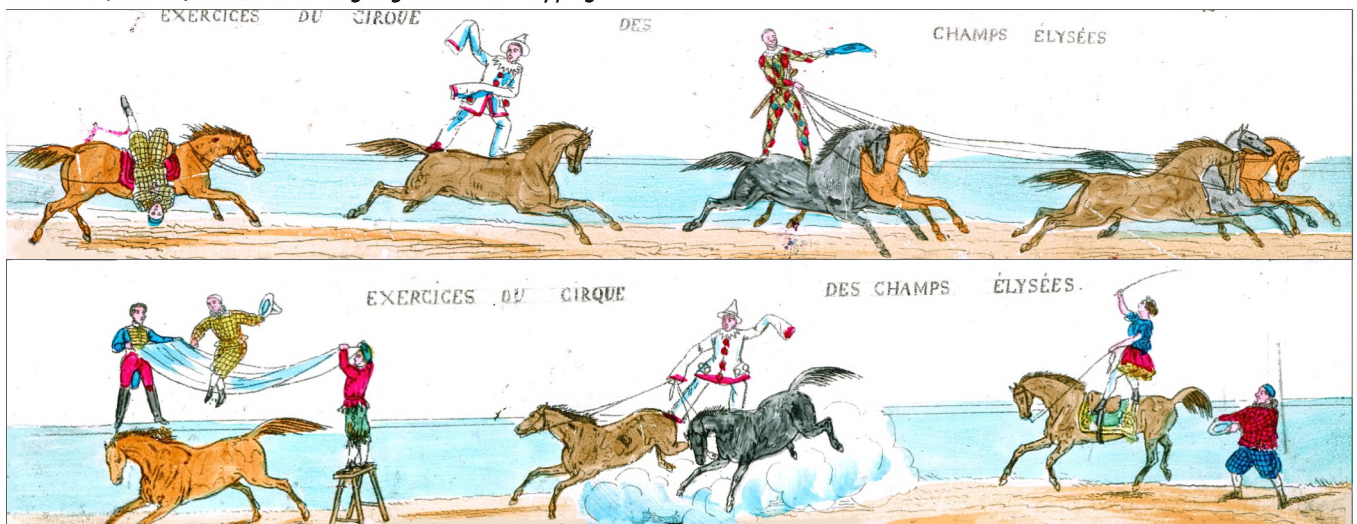
CHARLES KEITH (1836-1895)

The image in this wonderful slipping slide (Fig. 1) of a dancing clown is that of Charlie Keith, 'The Roving English Clown'. He was born in Clerkenwell, London, in 1836 and began his performing career as a child tumbler. As he gained recognition for his performance, he developed it into a clowning act.

After touring music hall theatres of the UK, in 1868 he established his own static circus, 'The Grand Cirque Imperial' in Exeter, featuring equestrian feats accompanied by juggling,



1. Charles ('Charlie') Keith, 'The Roving English Clown' – slipping slide



2. Two of the Lapierre slides showing Charlie Keith (the middle image in both slides) wearing a very similar costume to that in the slipping slide in Fig. 1

CONTENTS

Number 39 – June 2024

1. Who's Who in Circus Magic Lantern Slides: Part 1. Charles Keith and Jean-Baptiste Auriol *Dick Moore*
2. MLS Notice Board
- From the Chair *Richard Feltham*
5. Stories to Share: the MLS on Social Media *Anastasia Kerameos, Sandra Lawrence and Nicole Mollett*
7. Rorschach Hearts: a Magic Lantern Poem *Edward Murray*
9. The MLS Video Recordings Archive *George Auckland*
10. Industry, Liberty, and a Vision: the Life and Work of The Projection Box *Mo Heard and Richard Crangle*
12. Projection Photography: the World of John Neville Cohen *Mary Ann Auckland*
13. The Werner Nekes Conference *Gwen Sebus and Michael van de Leur*
15. Spring Meeting of the MLS *Mary Ann Auckland*

gymnastics and clowning. He also travelled his circus troupe internationally, building temporary circus structures (patented by himself) wherever they went, and performed for nobility and European royalty. During his lifetime he travelled the world as a circus proprietor and clown, erected as many as 65 circus buildings, and performed before royalty. He was appointed 'Clown of the Prince Imperial of France'.¹

His image was featured in three of the Lapierre circus slides (Figs 2 and 3). In the Victoria and Albert Museum in London there is silver-plated figurine in the form of a 19th-century clown holding two vases which are candle or taper holders. It shows the same costume as seen in these slides, and bears a mark of 1881 when Keith would have been 41.

(continued on page 3)



3. A detail from another Lapierre slide showing Keith at the Cirque Imperial



4. Two Lapierre slides of pre-show parades featuring Keith (far right in top slide; on first horse in bottom slide)

(continued from page 1)

In addition to the costumes seen in these slides, Keith was known for wearing a costume with his first or last name emblazoned upon his chest. As well as these performance-related images, Keith was also featured in two Lapierre slides of the pre-show 'paraders' whose purpose was to attract people to the show (Fig. 4).

JEAN-BAPTISTE AURIOL (1806-1881)

Born in Toulouse into a family of gymnasts and trained as an acrobat, Jean-Baptiste Auriol became a brilliant rider and clown who crystallised the combination of equestrian and acrobatic clowning skills. A main attraction of the Cirque d'Été and Cirque Imperial, he was known as the 'First French Clown'.

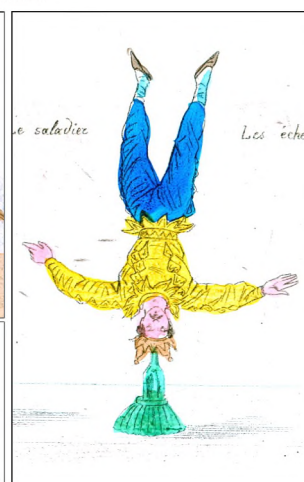
In 1859 the writer Théophile Gautier commented: "Auriol's talent is wonderfully flexible; he is encyclopaedic in his art: he is a jumper, juggler, tightrope walker, rope dancer, squire, grotesque actor and to all these qualities, he combines prodigious strengths."² Journalists and

columnists never stopped singing his praises. The following aphorism describing Auriol has been attributed to Honoré de Balzac: "What's lighter than a feather? dust. What's lighter than dust? the wind. What's lighter than the wind? Auriol."

He is featured in three of the Lapierre slides that were clearly labelled 'Auriol', and also appears alongside Charlie Keith in the lower slide of Fig. 2 (in the group on the left). The following six exciting acts by Auriol are featured in slipping slides (see Figs 5 to 10) and represent some of his most famous and popular feats.

The Gap

In this act Auriol leapt from a standing position onto the backs of two chairs. This act and variations with chairs are shown in the Lapierre slide (Fig. 5, centre image). There are two versions of the slipping slide (Fig. 6) and in one the performer seems to have a younger face. It's possible this second version represents Auriol's son, who was also trained as an acrobat, or possibly a more youthful Auriol.



5. These three Lapierre slides feature Jean-Baptiste Auriol exclusively. The two lower slides show him performing various acrobatic feats using ladders, chairs and a balance pole ('The Crutch'). The middle slide shows him balancing on a bottle (see also enlarged version above). These are skills for which Auriol was well known.

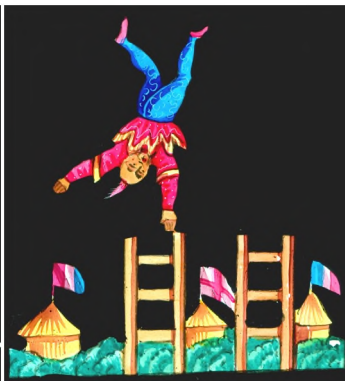
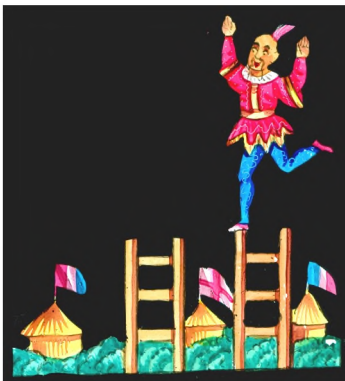
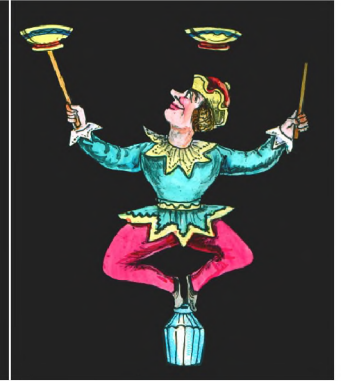
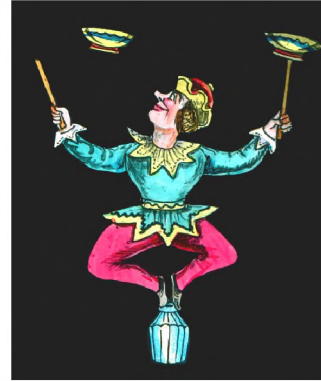


6. Auriol performing 'The Gap' in two slipping slides. The performer looks younger in the second slide – perhaps a more youthful Auriol or his son.

The Spinning Bowls

Auriol was famous for dancing on the tops of a group of bottles, knocking them down one by one until he was balancing on just one bottle. In one Lapiere slide image (Fig. 5, middle slide and enlargement) he is seen performing a one-bottle head balance. In another he is seen exhibiting spinning bowls on horseback (Fig. 5, top slide, figure on left). And a slipping slide (Fig. 7) shows him combining these two skills by balancing on only a single bottle while performing his act of spinning bowls.

7. Auriol performing 'The Spinning Bowls'



8. Auriol performing with ladders (above) and with 'The Crutch' (below)

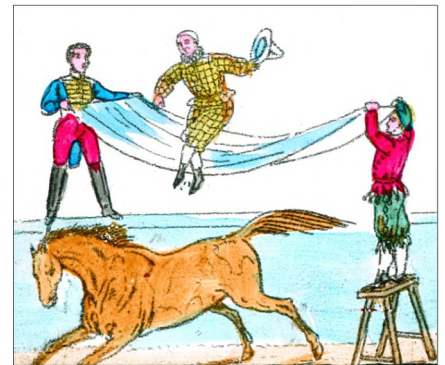


The Ladders and The Crutch

As seen in the Lapiere long slide (Fig. 5, lower slide) Auriol was also known for his skill in performing a variety of handstands and other acrobatic manoeuvres on ladders, the backs of chairs, and on the balance pole known as 'The Crutch'. In the ladders act he would come down by weaving his body in and out between the rungs (Fig. 8).

'Dainty Hercules' – The Leaper

As a 'leaper' Auriol demonstrated his astounding strength and agility; he was also known as 'The Dainty Hercules'.³ While in my slipping slide (Fig. 10, top of next page) Auriol is only jumping from a standing position over one 'garter', his more famous exploits included leaping from a springboard, passing over eight mounted horseman and 24 soldiers firing their rifles. He would also perform the leap over the garter on horseback as seen in this detail (above) of the lower slide in Fig. 2.



Strength of Wrists

Auriol was also an excellent equestrian. One of his famous exhibition acts includes his demonstration of his 'Strength of Wrists' (Fig. 5, top slide, middle group) which involved performing a handstand on the back of a galloping horse, similar to the feat shown in this slightly later slipping slide (Fig. 9).



9. A slightly more modern slipping slide showing Auriol's 'Strength of Wrists'



10. Slipping slide depicting Auriol's leaping ability

REFERENCES

1. University of Sheffield Archives, www.archives.shef.ac.uk/agents/people/567
2. Théophile Gautier, *History of Dramatic Art in France for 25 years*, Hetzel, Paris, 1859, pp. 25-26
3. Antony Hippisley Coxe, *A Seat at the Circus*, Archon Books, Hamden, Connecticut, 1980, pp. 215-216