



# EDMUND

*the*

# LEARNED PIG



## *History: Setting The Scene*

Edmund The Learned Pig is set in a small circus touring the UK in the early 1920's. Like many small circuses at that time it is family owned with all members of the family doing all the jobs. The person who sold you your tickets and your sweets would the next minute be the woman or man balancing above your head in the high wire act. They would tour in small tents precursors to the big tops we see circuses in today and would travel on a circuit to cities, small towns and even villages. Edmund would be what is described as a novelty act. For small circuses like this it was a perilous hand to mouth existence. Here's a little bit more information about Circuses and Learned Pigs.

## ***A Short History of British Circus***

In the mid 19th century there were hundreds of circuses operating in Britain. Trick riding was one of the main attraction, but a variety of other animal acts developed alongside human acts, clowns, acrobats, jugglers and tightrope walkers. There was even an aquatic circus where the circus ring was flooded with water.

Such was the popularity of circuses that many 19th century theatres also presented circus acts and you were as likely to see jugglers and aerial acts on a trip to the music hall as at a circus. Trapeze wires would have been strung from the roof of Manchester's Palace Theatre when it was known as The Manchester Palace of Varieties and trapeze and high-wire artists would have performed above the crowds sitting in the stalls.

One of the factors that made circus so popular was that fairground entertainers travelled to their audiences. From the late 18th century circuses toured to even the smallest towns and villages and in the 19th century the development of the railways enabled circuses to travel further.

By the 1870s huge circuses were touring across Europe and America with two or three trainloads of equipment. However most people's experience of Circus was still mainly confined to small Circuses like Bonaparte's Circus and Menagerie, the one you see in "Edmund The Learned Pig" , who would bring their show 'straight to your doorstep'.

The earliest circuses in the UK to use some type of canvas construction for their performances were these small troupes like Barry Bonaparte's who appeared at local fairs. They were small operations, entirely manned by a single family. The company might include a couple of acrobats, a clown who performed a comic equestrian act such as 'The Tailor of Brentford', a tightrope walker, and as many horses as could be afforded - perhaps two trained to perform and two used to pull the cart from town to town. They would often have a speciality act such as a Learned Pig to draw the crowds.

Some would have small tents whilst other circuses performed in the open air with no more than a ring of rope and staves. The audience stood and watched from behind a wooden barrier onto which candles were tacked. Performances were repeated throughout the day whenever there was an audience to watch. Touring circus became known as 'tenting'. The type of tent that we associate with the circus today was first used by American circuses in the 1820's

A short show would be repeated several times from noon until night. All the performers had to play several parts, and in the days before the enclosed circus, the company would pass round a hat to collect money from the audience.

Each act had a special costume which was only worn for the show and it usually looked very colourful and bright. The acts would live in trailers, caravans and trucks that would have painted posters on the side that would advertise the attractions on view. Just like Bonaparte's most Circuses had a ringmaster, often the head of the family, who managed things and introduced the acts.

By the 1920's Barry Bonaparte's Circus was not alone in struggling to find an audience. Small circuses were gradually replaced by spectacular big top or three ring circuses created by producers such as Bertram Mills, and circus families like The Chipperfields and The Cottles until by the 1960's small circuses almost ceased to exist. Today there is more of a range of circuses available again though because of concerns about animal welfare it is unusual to see any animal acts

Many large Circuses such as Cirque De Soleil have cleaned up their act and gone indoors and now play only major concert venues or conference centres though smaller scale outfits like Zippo's and No Fit State Circus continue to fly the flag for smaller scale tented touring.

## **Novelty Acts**

Unusual acts like Edmunds' were vital to small circuses like Bonaparte's in the 1920's. Many of the human and other animal acts on show were fairly similar so in a crowded fair it was often the uniqueness of your novelty act that would draw people to you.

The original Learned Pig was exhibited by a Scotsman Samuel Bisset, who ran a travelling novelty show. By the use of letters and numbers on cards the Pig could answer questions, spell, tell the time and distinguish colours. The act proved hugely popular and led to a host of imitators over the next century including a famous mind reading Pig called Toby.

Thanks to the Victoria and Albert Museum website for some of the information on Circuses. If you want to find out more its a good place to start.

*A Learned Gentleman called Russell Potter has written a book based on the original Toby*

**[www.pygnovel.blogspot.co.uk/](http://www.pygnovel.blogspot.co.uk/)**

*and Edmunds tail - whoops! - tale was set to music by*

*The Tiger Lillies **[www.tigerlillies.com/](http://www.tigerlillies.com/)** on their album "The Gorey End".*

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