

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF 'LORD' GEORGE SANGER

Lester Smith

This tale may have been told before but it is worth repeating. My account is taken from *Seventy Years a Showman: The Life of 'Lord' George Sanger*, a 1927 republished copy of the 1910 original.

George Sanger's parents came from Wiltshire. His father James was 'press-ganged' at eighteen into the Royal Navy and served ten years before being severely wounded on HMS Victory at Trafalgar. Back in civilian life he made himself a peep show that he could carry on his back and toured nearby towns with his young son George, who well remembered calling out 'Walk up! Walk up!' to promote the attractions of his father's peep show, including exciting stories such as the murder of Maria Martin in the infamous red barn. No details were left out. The ghost of Maria duly appeared at the bedside of her mother three times, leading to the arrest of the murderer.

The peep show had twenty-six windows so this number of people could see the views at one time with scene changes achieved by pulling a string. The pictures measured 4ft x 2ft 6ins and were painted by a very talented Irishman named Jack Kelly who lived in Leather Lane, High Holborn, London – an eccentric fellow somewhat addicted to drink. He charged 3s 6d (17.5p) for ordinary crimes but battle scenes with lots of corpses, or King George IV on his death bed and his state funeral, were 7s 6d (37.5p). At night the show was illuminated by a row of tallow candles that needed constant trimming. The peep show could be relied on to generate money.

Over the next twenty years, George added conjuring and card tricks as well as performing birds, mice and even pigs. He helped his father with the lions and tigers, giraffes and elephants. He also tried his hand at levitation. There are stories of many skirmishes with rival circuses to secure the best spots in town. Overall they had many triumphs and disasters but it was a hand-to-mouth existence.

In 1850 George's father died and George married the love of his life, Nellie Chapman. His brothers William and John were by now partners, each looking after their own parts of the show. By 1852 George had replaced his father's peep show with one of

the 'new-fangled' magic lanterns. The Duke of Wellington had just died so he contacted a well-known lantern manufacturer in Sheffield

George Sanger outside his caravan.
The Romany and Traveller Family History Society (www.rtfhs.org.uk)



(probably Chadburn, c.1845–65¹) to supply him with two large lanterns and sixteen scenes of the Duke's funeral procession painted on glass, each slide measuring 15ins x 4ins. These, we are told, worked very well when projected by oxy-hydrogen flame on quicklime (limelight) onto a 20ft white screen, each slide following the other as a continuous panorama.

George ordered forty more slides, this time of the search for Sir John Franklin by Sir James Ross in the Arctic regions. He

soon learnt how to make oxygen gas from perchlorate of potash and other chemicals available on the high street, then used hydrogen from the ordinary town gas supplies. He booked various halls and rooms in the large towns of the Midlands for the winter tour of 1852.

One night George and his wife were making oxygen gas in their caravan ready for the show at the Town Hall, Northwich. He and Nellie were getting dressed when suddenly a tremendous explosion and a blinding flash all around them blew out the walls of the caravan.

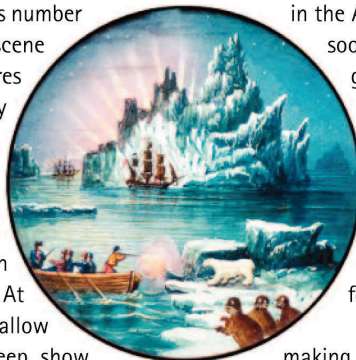
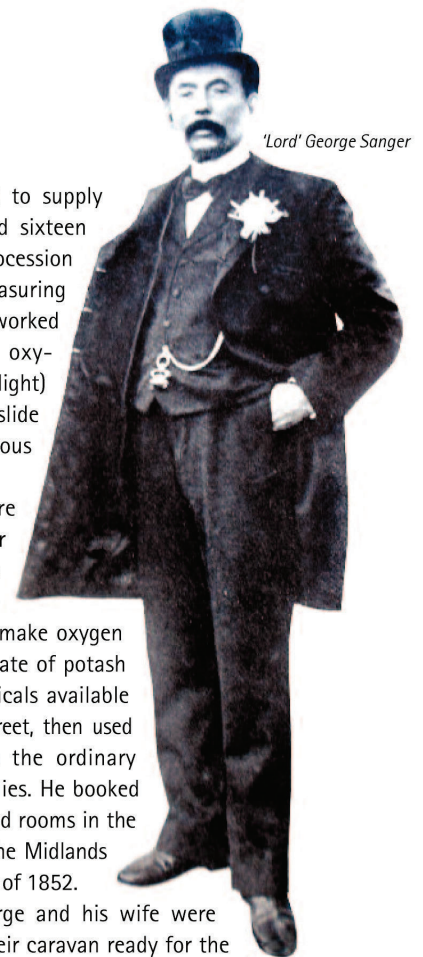
Their injuries were serious. Nellie had been blasted through the end of the caravan, suffering multiple burns and bruises, even losing her hair. George's head and face were scorched black, his hair and clothes badly burnt. All that was left of the caravan was the floor and the undercarriage. Three doctors turned up to treat them, two remaining all night to apply lint and liniment, and at intervals to give them doses of laudanum. The explosion turned out to be the fault of the chemist's assistant who had made up the oxygen-producing mixture.

After spending nine days recovering and having their caravan rebuilt by the circus hands – ever after it continually leaked in the rain and the wind whistled through the cracks – they finally reached Alton Towers. Their views of the Duke of Wellington's funeral and the Arctic exploration were shown to full houses, this time not using gas but seal oil and cotton wicks.

Over the next forty years 'Lord' George Sanger's circus went from strength to strength. He became the most famous showman of his day. George brought the circus to thousands in every town in the UK. In 1871 George bought Astley's Amphitheatre in Westminster Bridge Road, London. His circus also travelled all over Europe entertaining royalty, heads of state and the masses.

Queen Victoria herself desired to 'witness' the circus. A performance was given at Balmoral on 19 June 1898 and a procession through Windsor on 17 July 1899. She was very impressed, possibly amused, and asked her butler to reward Mr Sanger. George refused money and instead received a silver cigar box with his name inscribed on it. 'Lord' George Sanger retired in 1905 and died in 1911.

These are some of the incidents relating to optical entertainments from George Sanger's illustrious and eventful life. His seventy years as a showman were certainly full of ups and downs, sadness and joy – a book well worth reading.



Arctic scene

NOTE

1. From *Magic Images, A list of Magic Lantern Manufacturers and Dealers*, John Barnes, p. 19, The Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain, 1990.