

Travelling Showmen in Two World Wars

R.D. SEXTON

Many of the familiar features of town and country life, though having no obvious or direct connection with the prosecution of this century's two World Wars, nevertheless suffered changes as a consequence of them. But when a particular group of people and their industry experienced such contrasting fortunes in the years from 1914-18 and from 1939-45, then it is worthwhile examining the various forces at work. These may, of course, have been peculiar to the group or industry under consideration or may have been localized reflections of more general trends. The, usually, annual arrival of the amusement fair or the more erratic appearance of the circus branch of the showman's calling in a town or village was, in the years up to the outbreak of the 'Kaiser's war' and before the widespread increase in personal mobility or the development of a greater range of leisure opportunities, an event missed, in the south as elsewhere, by few of the local populace. They watched as the heavy equipment waggons lumbered onto the fair site, accompanied by the homes of the showmen themselves - people often as colourful as their caravans. Then after a few hours of feverish activity there arose a splendidly gaudy and noisy array of booths, rides, shows and 'side stuff'. There is today a tendency to hark back to the years immediately prior to the First World War as a 'golden age', but showmen do so with, perhaps, more justification than most as 'it was one of the most prosperous periods that the fairground had ever enjoyed'.¹

The mixture of entertainments which constituted a major fair in the early years of this century might include many items strange to modern eyes. The booths were still a major feature and many larger ones boasted heavy and ornate facades to advertise the wonders within. The owner acted as 'barker' to advise all and sundry of the spectacle offered; his title was an apt one as a strong voice was essential if he was to be heard above the general clamour. Once his 'coppers' had been paid, the expectant customer found himself in what was little more than a moderately sized tent with seating for, typically, from twenty to fifty people. The show itself lasted, perhaps, twenty minutes and might be anything from a human juggling or

acrobatic act to an animal performance – the ‘talking pony’ which would strike the ground with its hoof in response to judicious and unseen prods by the showman was a great favourite. Many of the shows were what are today thought of as typically circus-type offerings, and indeed many of them regularly appeared there and on the music-hall stage in winter and, particularly, around Christmas time.²

The element of theatre on the fairground which also included boxing booths, menageries and the first, silent film shows had to share ‘centre stage’, as it were, with the great steam-driven mechanical rides. Such amusements as the helter-skelter and swing-boats or even primitive roundabouts (driven by horse power or small boys eager to earn a penny or two) had long been known at the fair. But the first of a new breed of mechanical rides appeared in 1860 and were to become the major factor in the enormous surge in the amusement fair’s popularity in the decades up to 1914. They also helped to explain the eclipse of the circus’s fortunes whose greatest days immediately pre-dated the new rides’ general introduction. By the turn of the century they were the major feature of almost every fair; they dominated, for example, the one held four times a year on Bournemouth beach in Edwardian times. From relatively primitive beginnings, larger and improved sets of ‘gallopers’ emerged from the King’s Lynn, Norfolk works of Frederick Savage & Co. The horses soon went up-and-down as well as round-and-round and besides the machines becoming larger, the horses were replaced by more fantastic beasts, chariots or even, as one Sussex showman recalled, suitably adapted and fitted with yachts, the machine became the ‘Sea-on-Land’ ride. The steam engines were later fitted with dynamos to produce the new-fangled electricity to light the scene and power the mechanical organs.³

The blending of the older attractions of the fair with the new rides, which by 1914 included some very fine sets of ‘gallopers’ like the one which survives to this day (though, unfortunately, no longer steam powered) in the possession of the Noyce family based in Aldershot, produced an institution of powerful appeal to a wide section of the population. But it was a peak of prosperity from which it was to rapidly fall in 1914.

‘We saw what happened to some of the poor fairground people . . . thousands of people were destitute – you don’t hear much about that now’, was a recollection giving some measure of the impact of the First World War upon travelling showmen. There is, nevertheless,

some evidence that, initially at least, they were caught up in the widespread enthusiasm for the war. Though no figures are available it was, at the time, claimed that a high proportion of 'showlife men' had volunteered for the armed forces. 'We have sent the bravest and best of our sons to the front' because, it was patriotically explained. 'We are Britons first and showmen afterwards'. Showmen 'on reserve' were, of course, called up 'straight away' while the places in which they eventually served, such as Mesopotamia or Ireland in 1916, are still remembered. The effects of war soon bit deep among show people; by 1917 'at the present time we are only asking for the chance to carry on until our heroes return'. And at the end of the war it was even claimed on their behalf that 'showmen have felt the deprivations of war-time, and the attendant necessary sacrifices, more than any other class of worker'.⁴

One of the major problems which in 1914 immediately beset showmen was the loss of their means of transport, whether they were the better-off owners of heavy mechanical rides who used steam traction engines or the poorer showmen who still used horses for their stalls and booths. 'Thousands of our horses were commandeered' thus leaving many showmen immobile while, in the case of fine highly-trained circus horses, other families were effectively robbed of a major economic asset. Subterfuge was occasionally resorted to in order to save a valued or favourite animal. One showman had 'got this mare trained to go lame' as part of its performance and adroitly gave the appropriate signal before the army's commandeers. Out of an estimated 1,000 traction engines owned by showmen nationwide, it was estimated that 800 had been taken over by the military within a month of the outbreak of hostilities. In the South, many of the machines were used in camp construction work around Aldershot and on Salisbury Plain. When building work was complete they remained on duty hauling supplies, 'carting food and that'. The (especially circus) showmen's knowledge of horses was recognized; the father of one elderly showman was employed 'judging' or valuing for compensation purposes the beasts being commandeered. With the traction engines went '2,000 skilled workers' – that is, showmen. Some showmen say 'they were taken in the army with the engines' but, before conscription was introduced, it seems more likely that the showmen remained as civilian employees operating their commandeered machines around the south's military camps.⁵

Despite the difficulties a few showmen managed to continue to travel. In the first year or so of war the 'trade and business of the fairground suffered . . . (only) . . . a partial paralysis'. As conditions worsened, the 'extremely restricting effect' was to 'almost sound the

death knell' of the circus while, by 1916, 'the travelling showman business . . . (was) . . . brought almost to a complete standstill'. Those with light, easily transported equipment, such as 'coconut sheets and darts', could survive longest. To get from place to place, with severely depleted motive power, meant 'doubling back' in order to collect the remaining equipment trucks or caravans. It was a time-consuming and wearying process as 'such business as war restrictions . . . (allowed was) . . . done by the ineligible' for military service. One showman survived with his '22-shot Shooting Range', his round being a very restricted one among the army camps in the Warminster area while his wife supplemented the family income by taking in the officers' laundry. Displaying that resourcefulness in identifying and exploiting business opportunities of which showmen are still secretly rather proud, others set up more-or-less permanent shows at the new centres of custom, seemingly with official blessing; 'we have readily co-operated with the military authorities at the great training camps in providing recreation for our brave defenders'. Thus one family had a 'slide show' at Brookwood in Hampshire which included pictures purporting to show the sinking of the 'Titanic', then fresh in memory. The proprietor's young daughters sang a sentimental accompaniment which was very well received. The Chipperfield family, with experience of the infant but booming cinema which had been the newest wonder of the fairground in pre-war days, set up in business in a suitable building in Amesbury, at the heart of the Plain's numerous camps. But even the military custom proved fickle; in 1916, 'the Irish revolution came and all the troops went over there . . . and that left us with nothing'.⁶

It was in reply to what it called the 'official crusade' spearheaded by the Ministry of Munitions against the 'wholesome amusement of the workers' that the Showmen's Guild established the place which it still holds among travelling showmen. This organization had its origins in the activities of a little-known Victorian reformer, George Smith. He, who liked to style himself as 'of Coalville', had first become interested in another variety of traveller, the canal boatmen who carried away the products of the brickyards in which he worked in his native Leicestershire. The outcry against the conditions which he revealed on the boats led ultimately to parliament passing the first *Canal Boat Act* in 1877. Thus encouraged, Smith turned his attention to gypsies. His first book on the subject was entitled *Gypsy Life – Being an Account of our Gypsies and their Children*. Smith's feelings towards the objects of his benevolence were often less than tenderly expressed; gypsies, he considered, were 'living in the gutter'. To help them out of it he now proposed that their caravans should be

registered and subject to inspection by local sanitary and education authorities in much the same way as the boatmen's cabins. Thus the vehicles' cleanliness and the number of people they accommodated could be controlled and an attempt, at least, made to ensure that gypsy children no longer grew up completely unlettered. As a result of Smith's work, the first of several attempts to introduce legislation on the lines of the earlier *Canal Boat Acts* (a second had been passed in 1884) was made in 1889.⁷

Smith's proposals, had they become law, would have embraced all caravan dwellers. This, of course, would have included travelling showmen, a fact which Smith does not appear to have foreseen. The threat of legislation was brought to the attention of a number of prominent showmen by Dr. Crofts, a leading light of the Liberty and Property Defence League, an organization founded in 1882 and since described as a 'bunch of reactionaries'. Among the showmen contacted was 'Lord' George Sanger, the most famous of Victorian circus impresarios whose name was then a household one – and whose family, incidentally, hailed originally from Tisbury in Wiltshire. It was a measure of the opposition which was forming against Smith's ideas. A series of meetings was held around the country which crystallized into the formation of the 'United Kingdom Showmen and Van Dwellers Association', which, as the title implied, was open to any caravan dweller. By the early years of this century the organization had become, specifically, 'The Showmen's Guild' and, with that somewhat cavalier disregard for strict accuracy which the showmen's calling engenders, was referred to by Sanger as 'the Guild which I established'.⁸

The threat was successfully fought off by arguing that 'proper showmen' were nothing to do with gypsies and that the proposals would mean 'the punishment of the just for the unjust'. Membership of the embryo Guild had reached 'almost 1,000' at the height of the agitation but fell away rapidly to 251 by 1897 when the threat was disposed of. A renewed attempt at legislation followed the Liberal 'landslide' of 1906 and a Bill was introduced to the Upper House by Lord Clifford of Chudleigh. This was instrumental in reviving interest in the Guild which resisted the proposals on much the same grounds as before. Nevertheless, the organization which had to grapple with the problems facing showmen early in the First World War was not a powerful one, nor did it enjoy widespread recognition outside its own circle. Consequently the Guild at first scored only one or two local successes on behalf of its members. St Giles' Fair, Oxford in September, 1914, was saved by 'energetic action' despite the town's councillors thinking it 'inappropriate' to hold it. Nevertheless, in subsequent years, as casualty lists grew, the Guild agreed with this

fair's suppression; 'Oxford's reason . . . was so reasonable and right . . . No showman would wish to carry on a fair in the heart of a city that had become a vast hive of hospitals for wounded soldiers . . . (it was a) . . . purely human appeal . . . (and) . . . showmen made ready compliance with the demands of humanity'. Showmen were, however, less well disposed towards 'the military and the police' who attempted to suppress fairs showing even a reduced amount of light. A fair, the Guild argued, was no more a hazard than 'a row of shops' while references to the possibility of Zeppelin raids on fairs was dismissed as a mere pretext.⁹

But it was against the above-mentioned 'official crusade' of the Whitehall bureaucracy, 'completely at the mercy' of whom showmen considered themselves to be, that the Guild at first made little headway. The Ministry of Munitions was under considerable pressure from the army's 'top brass' who saw leisure activities for the workers as so many hours lost to the production of the shells and guns so desperately needed on the Western Front. No distinction was drawn between the principal areas of arms manufacture and other less industrialized districts and so the South's showmen were likewise adversely affected. 'Let the misguided and narrow-minded men', the Guild pleaded, 'fall in line with Lord Kitchener's advice, "Business as Usual"'. Not until 1917 did there come a change of heart by which time enthusiasm for the conflict had long since evaporated and war-weariness was increasingly evident among the civilian population. Some leisure and amusements were now recognized as 'a national necessity' and 'all classes of entertainers were helping to win the war by maintaining morale'. The change in the showmen's fortunes over the year 1917 was dramatic; whereas 'early in the year . . . great problems' were foreseen, in fact 'very few' fairs were ultimately lost. When the war was over, the Showmen's Guild claimed full credit for 'the complete reversal of the government's policy towards the curtailment of the people's open air amusements'.¹⁰

It is now necessary to consider the fortunes of the showmen's industry in the years between the two World Wars as these were to have a considerable though indirect effect on their story during the later conflict. In 1918 it was far from easy for showmen to start up in business again despite the Guild expressing the view that there was 'no reasonable excuse' for not immediately re-instating those fairs lost as a consequence of the war. Very few showmen got their commandeered horses back and the steam engines, which generally

were returned, exhibited every sign of heavy usage and neglected maintenance. Pre-war equipment had been lost or was past economic repair, in many instances, so there was little alternative but to start again with very simple home-made stalls and games. After the debacle of the Amesbury cinema, James Chipperfield began to travel again in this way, at first over a very limited circuit in Wiltshire. Most showmen contented themselves with building such things as 'hoop-la' stalls or 'penny dip' bran tubs but he soon added a novelty in the form of a 'snake pit', the safe capture and handling of vipers apparently presenting him with no problems. It was, under the circumstances, fortunate that business was good for a year or two. With 'war stagnation . . . over', during the post-war boom, 'money was plentiful – wherever . . . (the showmen) . . . went, they got plenty of money'. At the time it was said, 'never before . . . has so much money been taken at the fairs'. Even the circus, which had also suffered acutely during the First World War, was making a comeback, some showing 'three or four times a day'. But the boom was both short and fragile – and prices had risen tremendously since 1914. Many showmen had invested in much new equipment so that as business conditions rapidly worsened again in the early nineteen-twenties, many found themselves hopelessly in debt. Whereas, in 1920, it was happily stated that 'hardly a borough or hamlet' had not re-introduced its fairs, it was later said that 'country and small town fairs barely managed to survive the last war'.¹¹

The general economic history of the inter-war period was dominated by the slump and that of the fairground provides no exception. No doubt many of the showmen of the South suffered less than peers in older industrialized regions whose traditional areas of operation were more adversely affected, but pressure was put upon them by increased competition from those driven from depressed areas; a number moved from South Wales and gravitated towards London and the South Coast. The years from 1926 to 1929 were poor ones due to the 'slump in trade', but worse was to come; 1932 was the nadir with 'one of the most depressing years we have had'. Thereafter, though business on the fairground was never quite so bad again, the optimistically 'long looked for promised trade revival . . . (was) . . . slow at making its appearance'. There were, however, a number of significant changes occurring on the fairground. The large mechanical rides largely completed the transition begun half a century earlier and finally ousted all but a few of the booths as the showmen's major attraction. Some rides were adapted with racing cars replacing horses and new ones were built such as the 'Chair-o-planes' simulating the new wonder of powered flight. But it was the sets of 'Dodgem

cars', first introduced to this country from the U.S.A. in 1928, which were the major innovation and were to show 'staying power'. Another major change facing showmen concerned their motive power. The general introduction of petrol or diesel lorries coupled with the limitation upon the number of trailers which a tractor unit was permitted to pull, under the *Road Traffic Act, 1930*, made the steam traction engines redundant almost overnight. In the nineteen-twenties many showmen had invested in these machines; representing a considerable amount of their capital and now virtually unsaleable there was no option but to continue operating them but under-utilizing their haulage capacity.¹²

With the decline of the booths containing performers, both human and animal, went the final demise of the travelling menageries, once a common feature of many larger fairs, replaced by the increasing number of permanent zoos such as the one at Bristol. The human and animal acts gravitated to the circus which, against the general run of economic conditions, enjoyed a boom during the nineteen-thirties. The 'circus cult' was largely due to Bertram Mills, a 'rich outsider' whose incursion into the business after the First World War was resented by many showmen but the excellence of whose show was to have a most beneficial spin-off for other circus proprietors. The decline of the fairground booths and the varied fortunes of the fairground and circus sides of the showmen's business explain why they became regarded in the public mind as two quite distinct institutions, a situation which still exists today.¹³

As a result of its activities and the successes gained towards the end of the First World War, the years immediately following saw a considerable increase in Guild membership. It stood at 655 in 1919, increased to 949 in the following year and jumped again, to 1,620, a year later. In retrospect this was seen as the time when the Showmen's Guild 'got on it's feet'. In an industry which was no longer expanding, many showmen saw the need to band together for protection. Though there was a slowing up in the rate at which Guild membership increased in the nineteen-twenties, the growing economic difficulties experienced from the last years of that decade ensured a further consistent upturn in the numbers of showmen joining. To cater for both the higher level of membership and the problems which beset the business, the Guild set up what it called 'Sectional Working'. This entailed dividing the country into ten regions, each with its own area president and secretary. The regions covering the south of England were – and still are – 'London and the Home Counties' and 'Bristol and District' which includes Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Dorset, Hampshire, Devon and Cornwall. The

organization of the Guild rapidly became so effective and all-embracing that soon it was almost impossible for showmen to operate outside it. Like their fellows elsewhere, southern members had, by 1939, come to see the Guild as a 'very strong union' and 'if you wasn't in the Showmen's Guild . . . well, you'd got to be in it'. Membership had increased to 1,894 in 1932, for example, and continued to grow dramatically right up to the years following the Second World War. The figure for 1947 was 3,703 but concealed a change in registration practices over the years; whereas at least up to the First World War only the senior male of an extended family held Guild membership, by 1939 it was more usual for a man to join when he married. Since the Second World War a further change has, incidentally, taken place and now each young man applies to join on his eighteenth birthday. The growth and strength of the Showmen's Guild was such, however, as to make its claim that by 1939 it represented 95% of Britain's showmen, a reasonable one.¹⁴

Unlike the First World War which, despite many years of unease at Imperial Germany's military might and ambitions, broke out with unexpected suddenness in 1914, the later conflict had been widely foreseen as the international situation in Europe worsened over a period of some years. The Showmen's Guild anticipated the difficulties which war would bring to its members and, incidentally, in its judgement of the Prime Minister's conduct when it did eventually break out, accorded him more credit than he was generally given at the time or since. Chamberlain was praised for his 'tact and patience' in handling the 'rumblings' of war, successfully delaying its outbreak until Britain could fight on 'more equal terms'. Meanwhile, in 1939, the general secretary of the Guild was quietly corresponding with Sir John Anderson, Minister for Home Security. Widespread rationing was anticipated and arrangements made for showmen to receive special 'Traveller's Ration Cards' which could be used anywhere in the country. Another success was the classification of showmen's travel as 'essential motoring' with the attendant issue of 'Showmen's Vehicle Fuel Ration Cards'. Special arrangements were also sought in coal allowances though in this case it is not clear if the fuel was intended for domestic use or for the traction engines still in regular use. The memory of the wholesale commandeering of showmen's motive power in 1914 was remembered and attempts to prevent a repetition were made. To this end contact was made with the Ministries of Supply (Timber Control), Agriculture and Fisheries (Threshing) and Transport (Roads and Bridges) departments. As

events were to turn out as the war progressed, all the foregoing were wise precautions for the Showmen's Guild to take and provided a foundation without which the later developments might well have proved impossible. At the time the Guild could realistically claim 'we are in closer contact with Ministerial Department's of the Government than ever before'. If the Guild 'came of age' in the face of the near-disaster which hit the industry in the earlier conflict, then showmen were fortunate to have a mature and established organization to look after their interests during Hitler's war.¹⁵

Showmen were, nevertheless, to face great problems in the early part of the Second World War. 'A terrible state of affairs' developed for a brief period according to the Guild's national president. Everything 'came to a stop . . . for a time', showmen being 'stunned' when, on Wednesday, 30th August, 1939, the Home Office's A.R.P. department announced that, in view of the worsening prospects and possibility of air attack, all places of entertainment would be closed down forthwith. Churches were the only places where 'people could foregather'. The Guild's secretary immediately wrote to Sir John Anderson. As no reply was received, lobbying of parliament was turned to and resulted in a question being tabled in the Commons. This brought forth confirmation that 'fairs were not prohibited by any Order under the Defence Regulations' and the assurance was given that there was 'every desire to avoid interference with fairs, street markets and established institutions of all kinds'. In practice, exceptions were fairs in evacuation areas and designated militarily sensitive locations, of which there were, of course, considerable numbers in southern England, especially after the fall of France. Reverting to 1939, fairs were also required to close at 10.00.p.m. and were subject to the 'black out' regulations. Despite the gloomy prospects, showmen were warned against too precipitate action; 'when war broke out in 1914 many of us got into a panic and closed or disposed of our shows', they were reminded, 'a little later we regretted our haste'. It was good advice; before the end of 1940, it was admitted that showmen had been able to 'carry on with less difficulty than we had anticipated'.¹⁶

How many showmen served in the armed forces during the Second World War is not known but the loss of so many able-bodied men to the profession's family businesses led to calls from the Guild for what it termed 'key men' to be exempted from conscription. Shortage of labour was why at Abingdon, Berks., for example, 'owing to so many of the men usually employed on the machines having been called to the colours, only one ride was operating'. The demand for exemption apparently fell on deaf ears and showmen of the required age and

fitness continued to be called up, apart, of course, from those who had volunteered early in the war. At least one southern showman thus obtained the place he sought in the Royal Navy. Few could, however, equal the determination of Jimmy Chipperfield to become an air force pilot; he attended school at Stockbridge, Hants (where the family show had its winter quarters) for the first time at the age of twenty-six in order to meet the educational requirements. Many showmen who remained as civilians were involved in military construction work – as in the First World War – or in demolition requirements following bombing raids. The difference from the earlier conflict was that the showmen's engines and lorries were now 'hired', not 'commandeered'. 'Most of the women was on the land', part of the 'land army', though a substantial number went into factory work for the first time so contributing directly to the war effort. Yet despite the many demands made upon them, showmen were still able to find the resources necessary when government 'advocacy' ensured 'fairs . . . (were) . . . a leading feature' of the new 'Stay-at-Home' holidays scheme.¹⁷

'They liked us to do the 'Stay-at-Home' holidays because it kept the morale of the people up', showmen now recall. With many coastal areas 'out of bounds' to the general public and the Ministry of Transport appealing to people to 'stay put' to ease the burden on a sorely tried railway system, 'people couldn't go to the seaside'. The movement towards what was at first called the 'Holidays-at-Home Scheme' initially got under way in those industrial areas of the north of England which had regular holidays or 'wakes'. The Showmen's Guild was quick to see the 'great possibilities' the scheme, 'officially encouraged' at central government level, offered its members. Getting under way in 1941, the Guild soon foresaw, 'the movement to provide amusements for 'Stay at Home' holidaymakers is gaining in popularity'. At the same time 'plans are now being made by the government to encourage local authorities to do more next year'. The idea spread rapidly to all areas of the country and in the South, as elsewhere, showmen had the novel experience of being actively courted by local councils. Showmen 'were paid to come in' to set up their amusements 'at the very doorstep of the workers', often on prominent sites normally denied them; in Bristol, for example, the city's parks became regular venues for war-time fairs.¹⁸

The Guild's arguments early in the war that a fairground was a relatively safe place had obviously been accepted. Held in the open and, usually, on a soft grass surface people could, in the event of air attack, disperse easily and the effects of bomb blast would be lessened. Music levels were severely reduced so that air-raid sirens or

even approaching enemy aircraft could be heard. But the 'black out' restrictions, which had to be strictly adhered to, posed the greatest problems especially as much of the showmen's business is, of course, normally done well into the evening. 'Double Summer Time' proved a boon, the other option being to open earlier in the day. At Christchurch this was done; 'we opened at ten o'clock in the morning as we had to close at "black-out"' Nevertheless, showmen contrived ways of continuing after dark; on a side stall one elderly showman recalled managing 'with just a little light at night – just shining on the board'. In some cases it even became possible to cover in the whole fair; the one at Maidenhead, for example, met 'black-out' regulations 'with canvasses all over the top'.¹⁹

The fair which had previously been a mainly seasonal activity became, due to the 'enterprise and initiative' of local authorities working in co-operation with showmen, a year-round occupation. But as most fairs now lasted for many weeks on each site showmen, paradoxically, became less mobile than previously. Only thus was it possible to cope with the shortage of fuel and the absence of the labour required for frequent 'putting up' and 'taking down'. Fortunately there was sufficient public demand for long stays in one place; unemployment had become a thing of the past, wages were relatively high and, with so much else on ration, the fair was one of the few things not so restricted. In Hampshire, for example, there was sufficient demand for fairs lasting seven weeks each at Romsey, Winchester and Fareham. In Southampton fairs lasting for about two months were held on each of the Common, Hoglands and the Veracity and Shirley recreation ground sites. The local authority charged no rent and co-operated in the supply of fuel. Elsewhere in the south a period of two to three weeks seems to have been the norm for a fair's duration, as in Bristol and Taunton. On the other hand, 'a long time' of no less than nine weeks is recalled as having been allowed in Poole Park by the local authority there. Even the circus side of the business which had further to fall from its pre-war peak of popularity when war broke out, revived as the war progressed. Initially, some of the larger ones had to close down; the Chipperfield's circus was an example, the big cats and other wild animals having to be shot as it was no longer possible to feed them or provide the labour needed to tend them. It was the 'less pretentious' organizations which were able to carry on and such was the demand from a leisure-starved public that good profits could be made from what, a few years earlier, would have been considered a very depleted show. Incidentally, the circus generally had so recovered its old panache by the war's end that, in early 1945, Sir Robert Fossett's

set up was advertising in Reading the arrival of its 'Gigantic Circus and Zoo'.²⁰

Many showmen combined day time work of the sorts outlined above with running the fair during the evenings and at weekends, thus enjoying two sources of income. Only in one instance, as far as is known, was it possible to get a man eligible for military service exempted from conscription; the Bristol-based showman was described as the firm's 'manager'. Most commonly, the work of the fair devolved, at least during the day, upon the elderly. The wife of one southern showman who was serving in the Royal Navy did so with the help of elderly relatives. Discipline among the work-force sometimes posed difficulties, as did control of the clientele, who often included a number of boisterous soldiery on leave. No problems were thus posed for Granny Beach, the diminutive matriarch of her clan who presided over the covered-in fair at Maidenhead; standing on tip-toe she was known to have boxed the ears of many a burly young showman. Less frequently, the work of running the show fell to the young. 'We had to open, me and my youngest brother', when they got home from school; too much business stood to be lost in the couple of hours before the parents arrived home from their day time jobs to take over. The difficulties experienced by these schoolboy operators with certain uniformed fair-goers in Winchester is still ruefully remembered; 'the trouble we had with the Eighth Army when they came back – they was bleeders, they was'. Nevertheless, 'the money was there' and U.S. servicemen were particularly welcome. Among showmen's 'stories-of-the-war' is that of the 'G.I.'s' ordered to embark at Southampton at short notice and therefore unable to exchange their sterling allowances which they were not allowed to take out of the country. On their way to the docks they threw the money from the backs of their tanks and lorries to be caught by the local children who promptly spent it at the fair.²¹

Today though some showmen are prepared to admit 'business was very good in the war', others are clearly uneasy about the profits they made. Some will only acknowledge that they 'did quite well' but one elderly woman, on looking back, said, 'I took some nice money – but it was blood money'. At the time and among their own circle there were fewer inhibitions. When the 'Stay at Home' holidays scheme was new in 1941, it was only thought that 'we enjoyed, under the circumstances, a very prosperous season'. A year or two later the qualifications had disappeared and showmen everywhere did 'remarkably well'. Speaking to its members via the series of Year-books which were issued to them, the Showmen's Guild said 'our industry has received a tremendous fillip', it was 'flourishing' as they enjoyed

'phenomenal business'. And when the war was over, it was reflected that 'the past few years . . . (have been) . . . most beneficial to members'. Without the – for the showmen – particular advantages of wartime, business nevertheless remained good almost to the end of the nineteen-forties before levelling off. Nothing comparable to the slump conditions which followed so soon after the end of the First World War ensued but, as business settled down to more mundane levels in the following decades, the South's showmen, like their peers in other parts of the country, were well able to cope with changing leisure demands dependant upon the increase in personal mobility, the popularity of television and other modern phenomena. Capital accrued during the war years enabled showmen to diversify their interests; amusement arcades and seaside funfairs being two of the most favoured. It was, therefore, with some reason that, as one elderly showman expressed it, 'the war made the showmen'.²²

The two factors which explain the generally contrasting fortunes of showmen in the two World Wars were, therefore, the level of attention shown at central government level for maintaining the morale of the civilian population and the showmen's means to defend or pursue their interests. It was clear that, with memories of the Western Front still fresh in mind and aerial bombardment threatening to bring the whole of the population into the new conflict's 'front line', the Second World War would see none of the euphoria which characterized the months from August, 1914. Showmen, in 1939, were a cohesive group, forcefully and influentially represented by their Guild. Prior to the First World War, in an expanding industry there had been little need for them to unite; it may therefore be said that it was their experience during the years 1914–1918, followed by the economic difficulties of the inter-war period, which engendered the defensive and protective unity which was to stand them in such good stead. Thus for showmen in the South of England, as for those of the profession elsewhere, the group's response to their particular situation reflected the wider economic experience which, in turn, enabled them to take full advantage of a significantly changed circumstance of the Second World War; for them it was a most fortunate confluence.

Notes

My thanks are due to the President and Secretary of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain for allowing me access to the series of Yearbooks previously confidential to its members and to those, mainly elderly, showmen and women who offered their hospitality and willingly told their stories.

¹ Thomas Murphy, *History of the Showmen's Guild* (1948), p. 87.

² Mr. F. Bartlett, Poole, interview 30-1-86; Mr. J. Chipperfield, Southampton, interview 14-1-86; K. Middlemass, *The Life and Times of Edward VII*, illustration pp. 70-71.

³ Mrs. E. McKeowan, Andover, interview 17-2-86; Mr. R. Cothard, Steyning, Sx., interview 4-2-86; I. Stansmore *English Fairs* (1975) p. 65; T. Murphy (1948) p. 8; F.C. Roope, *Come to the Fair* (1961) p. 10; D. Dallas, *The Travelling People* (1971), p. 20.

⁴ R. Croft-Cooke, *The Circus Has No Home* (1950) p. 161 quoting 'Count Rosaire', circus proprietor, p. 164; *Showmen's Guild Yearbook* for 1915, pp. 15-16; for 1917, p. 13; p. 28; Mr. F. Bartlett, as above.

⁵ *S.G. Yearbook* for 1917, pp. 27-28; Mrs. V. Sandow, Southampton interview 8-9-86; Mr. R. Cothard, as above; Mr. C. Castle, Shoreham, Sx. interview 15-2-86.

⁶ *S.G. Yearbook* for 1915, pp. 15-16; for 1916, p. 13; for 1918, p. 34; Peter Verney, *Here Comes the Circus* (1978) p. 71; T. Murphy (1948) p. 105; Mrs. E. Simmonds, Exeter, interview 18-3-86; Mr. J. Graham, Totton, Hants., interview 22-1-86; Mrs. L. Hyatt, Ashford, Mx. interview 11-12-85; Mr. J. Chipperfield, as above.

⁷ *S.G. Yearbook* for 1915, p. 16; for 1918, p. 31; G. Smith, *Gypsy Life - Being an Account of our Gypsies and their Children* (1880); T. Murphy (1948) p. 12; T. Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change* (1974) pp. 109-111; B. Adams and others, *Gypsy Politics and Government Policy in England* (1975) p. 8.

⁸ T. Acton (1974) p. 111; G. Sanger, *Seventy Years a Showman* (1910) pp. 105-6; p. 256.

⁹ T. Acton (1974) p. 111; G. Sanger (1910) p. 105; T. Murphy (1948) p. 46; *S.G. Yearbook* for 1915, p. 15; for 1916, p. 15; p. 25; p. 41.

¹⁰ *S.G. Yearbook* for 1915, p. 25; for 1917, p. 13; p. 19; for 1918, p. 31; p. 44; T. Murphy (1948) p. 114; *World's Fair* (specialist weekly newspaper still patronized by most showmen) Saturday, 19-8-16, p. 17; Sat. 9-9-16, p. 12.

¹¹ *S.G. Yearbook* for 1919, p. 11; for 1920, p. 4; Mr. J. Chipperfield as above; Mr. J. Graham as above; *World's Fair*, Sat. 3-4-20, p. 1; T. Murphy (1948) p. 121; Mrs. L. Hyatt as above; M. Willson-Disher, *Fairs, Circuses and Music Halls* (1942) p. 9.

¹² Mr. J. Butlin, Totton, Hants., interview 22-1-86; *World's Fair*, Sat. 5-1-28, p. 15; p. 29; T. Murphy (1948) p. 184; D. Dallas (1971) p. 109; *S.G. Yearbook* for 1932, p. 28.

¹³ Sir G. Tyrwhitt-Drake, *The English Circus and Fairground* (1946) p. 188; R. Croft-Cooke (1950) p. 1; S. McKechnie, *Popular Entertainment Through the Ages* (1931) p. 221; Mr. K. MacManus, Ascot, interview 20-2-86.

¹⁴ *S.G. Yearbook* for 1919, p. 6; for 1920, p. 7; for 1922, p. 12; for 1932, p. 18, for 1947, p. 10; Mr. R. Cothard as above; Mrs. V. Sandow as above; F.C. Roope (1961) p. 108.

¹⁵ *S.G. Yearbook* for 1940, p. 72; pp. 81-82; p. 92; for 1941, p. 79; p. 82; *World's Fair*, Saturday 16-3-40; p. 1; T. Murphy (1948) p. 60.

¹⁶ *World's Fair*, Saturday 2-9-39; p. 1; Sat. 9-9-39, p. 1; Sat. 23-9-39, p. 1; *S.G. Yearbook* for 1940, p. 73; pp. 92-94; for 1941, p. 72; for 1945, p. 80.

¹⁷ *World's Fair*, Saturday, 23-9-39, p. 9; Sat. 18-5-40, p. 1; *S.G. Yearbook* for 1941, p. 82; for 1943, p. 83; Mr. J. Graham as above; Mr. J. Chipperfield as above; Mr. J. Wall, Hook, Hants., interview 13-3-86; Mr. C. Castle as above; Mrs. E. McKeowan as above; Mrs. J. Castle, Totton, Hants., interview 8-1-86; Mrs. E. Simmonds as above.

¹⁸ Mr. F. Bartlett as above; *World's Fair*, Saturday 31-5-41, p. 15; Sat. 30-5-42, p. 1; Sat. 19-12-42, p. 1; Sat. 19-2-44, p. 15; F.C. Roope (1961) p. 8; Mrs. V. Sandow as above.

¹⁹ *S.G. Yearbook* for 1941, pp. 77–78; for 1943, p. 97; for 1945, p. 80; Mr. F. Bartlett as above; Mr. C. Cole, Southampton interview 3–3–86; Mrs. L. Hyatt as above; Mr. J. Beach, Ashford, Mx., interview 3–12–85; *World's Fair*, Saturday, 2–12–39, p. 1.

²⁰ Mr. J. Graham as above; Mrs. J. Castle as above; Mr. C. Cole as above; Mr. H. Castle, Southampton interview 6–2–86; Mrs. E. Simmonds as above; Mr. F. Bartlett as above; Mr. J. Chipperfield as above; *World's Fair*, Saturday, 3–1–42; p. 15; *S.G. Yearbook* for 1941, p. 168.

²¹ Mrs. S. DeVey, Collumpton, Devon, interview 19–3–86; Mrs. E. Simmonds as above; Mr. J. Graham as above; Mr. J. Beach as above; Mr. C. Cole as above; Mr. C. DeVey, Bristol, interview 20–3–86; F.C. Roope (1961) p. 8.

²² Mrs. D. DeVey as above; Mr. C. Cole as above; Mrs. F. Bartlett as above; Mrs. V. Sandow as above; T. Murphy (1948) p. 249; *S.G. Yearbook* for 1941, p. 78; p. 151; for 1943, p. 97; for 1944, p. 69; *World's Fair*, Saturday, 10–1–42, p. 15.