

HORSEMAN OR NO HORSEMAN: CIRCUS IN VAN DIEMEN'S LAND, 1847 TO 1851

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Circus was one of the many manifestations of contemporary British culture transplanted to the new Australian colonies. Individual ropewalkers, gymnasts and equestrians appeared in New South Wales as early as the 1830s while complete circus programs were given as early as 1847 in Launceston. In Australia, as in most countries, circus has been an element, at times an important element, in the mosaic of its popular culture. The history of Ashton's, one of the world's oldest circuses – and certainly Australia's oldest – can be traced to the frenetic equestrian activity in Van Diemen's Land in the late 1840s.¹

In this paper, I will explain the origins of circus in Australia during the period 1847 to 1851; outline the career of its main protagonist, Robert Avis Radford; and illuminate the origins of Ashton's Circus.

Oral history

Despite the oral traditions of the Australian circus, documented sources are few. The London and Launceston origins of Australian circus, as well as names and dates, had largely passed from living memory by the 1970s when the first interviews were conducted with elderly circus people, already two or three generations removed from the people and events of its formative period. When questioned over the circus origins of their respective families, members of the Perry, Sole and St Leon families gave similar responses.

No, I wouldn't know. That's as far back as I can remember. My father used to tell me about starting from the Northampton Downs Hotel [but nothing else].²

There were a lot of arguments as to who had the first circus in Australia but it never worried us actually. We been [*sic*] in the business long enough. We were born in it.³

[Dad] never talked to us boys much. Mum never even told us ... No, never used to tell us anything.⁴

In fact, the origins of each of these circus families can be traced to the equestrian activity taking place in and around Launceston in the late 1840s.

The Ashton family can also trace its involvement in Australian circus to Launceston, and as far back as 1848. Interviewed in 1976, the proprietor of Ashton's Circus, Douglas Ashton, a great-grandson of the founder of this famous Australian company, felt it was 'good to know that Ashton's Circus has been going ... between 130 and 140 years'.⁵ However, a firm account of the origins of his family's circus in Australia at that time was lacking. The casual claims made in the Ashtons' promotional material during the 1960s and 1970s that the circus was 'founded in 1832' and was 'the oldest' in Australia defy substantiation. Nevertheless, writers have uncritically accepted these assertions as facts.⁶ The first circus under the name of Ashton came into existence, albeit briefly, in Launceston in 1851. Ashton's Circus was thus not the first circus in Australia

1 Following the proclamation of responsible government in October 1855, on 1 January 1856 the name of Van Diemen's Land was changed to Tasmania.

2 M Perry, in M St Leon, *Australian circus reminiscences*, the author, Sydney, 1984, p. 192.

3 M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p. 117.

4 A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p. 91.

5 D Ashton, in St Leon, 1984, p. 311.

6 C Higham, 'Death of the circus?' in *The Bulletin*, 27 July 1963, p. 18.

but it was among the earliest. The two Ashton family circuses that are operational in 2008 carry some 157 years of almost continuous history behind them. It would be fair to say that today they are the oldest circuses in the English-speaking world and among the oldest in the world.

Golden Ashton

According to his 1889 death certificate, 'James Henry Ashton' – the founder of Ashton's Circus – was born about the year 1819 at a place called 'Catchutn' in Essex. The document further states that he was the son of Golding [*sic*] Ashton, a circus proprietor.⁷ A descendant described James Henry as coming from a family of 'English gypsies', a term that is considered to refer to itinerant tinkers rather than gypsies in the ethnic sense.⁸ Other sources tell us that James Henry is supposed to have performed in his father's circus 'as a clog dancer' and that he spent a period as a stable boy at Greensted Hall, Essex.⁹ An obituary states that he served an equestrian apprenticeship from the time he was able to 'cross a horse' in the circuses of Bell and Batty which travelled the English counties.¹⁰

We know now that the true name of James Henry Ashton was Golden Ashton, and that he was baptised at St Andrew's Church of England at Rochford, near Colchester, on 19 March 1820, the eldest son of the six children of Golden [*sic*] Ashton and his wife Charlotte, nee Hardy.¹¹ The senior Golden's occupation is given as 'tinker' or 'travelling tinker' in the baptismal entries of each of his children. Since each was baptised at Rochford, the family, although a 'travelling' one, does not appear to have moved beyond the vicinity of this town.



Golding Ashton, later known as James Ashton
(Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales,
PIC ACC 5250, Mark St Leon Collection.)

7 Registrar-General, Queensland, Deaths, 1889/#407: James Henry Ashton, at Gladstone. As the name 'Catchutn' does not appear in contemporary maps or other records, it is possible that the spelling is a mistranscription of either Latchingdon, a village near Rochford, or Colchester, both in Essex.

8 F Perry, notes from conversation, c. 1976.

9 N Fernandez, *Circus saga*, Ashton's Circus, Sydney, 1971, p. 15; J Cannon with M St Leon, *Take a drum and beat it: the story of the astonishing Ashtons, 1848–1990s*, Tytherleigh Press, Sydney, 1997, p. 59.

10 *Queenslander*, 26 January 1889.

11 Essex Record Office, Rochford Baptismal Register, D/P 129/1/7. Variations on the spelling of 'Golden' have been noted in various records, such as 'Golding', 'Goulding', 'Guldon' and 'Goulder'.

What was a tinker?

'Tinker' is a title of baffling vagueness that could be applied to any mender of pots and pans but actually referred to a particular class of nomad ... Typically tinkers were gypsy-like in their habits and, while not necessarily dark-skinned, were gypsy-like in appearance, though their manner of life was more squalid ... In addition to their aptitude for rough metal work they had their own lore and customs ... There is one strong clue as to where the tinkers came from. Their characteristic talk among themselves was *Shelta*, a complex jargon that took in a number of Irish Gaelic words and corruptions ... Some of these ... nomads crossed into England ... Fairly clearly in Victorian times, these people of Irish origin formed at least the hard core of vagrant tinkers ... [They were] among the very lowest and roughest of the wanderers.¹²

The junior Golden would have grown up tending the horses of a tinker's wagon and was probably riding at a very early age. The senior Golden died at Rochford on 11 April 1833, probably leaving the junior Golden as the family's primary breadwinner. In 1836, the younger Golden was tried and convicted at the Essex Assizes for stealing a brooch and sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's Land for 14 years.¹³ On 14 May 1837 he was landed from the *Frances Charlotte* at Point Puer, near Port Arthur, along with other boy convicts. These were 'bewildered tykes, many of them hardened in theft and flashness'.¹⁴ The boy convicts received instruction on the voyage to the extent that 'each boy could read when he disembarked at Point Puer, although very few had been able to [read] at the beginning of the voyage'.¹⁵ Golden's occupation on arrival was described as 'sweep, tin man and brazier'.¹⁶ Some years after his death, Ashton's speaking style was remembered as 'brigandish' that featured 'a little Romany articulation and etymology a la St Giles', descriptions not inconsistent with tinker and boy convict associations.¹⁷

Early in 1840, Golden was placed with Mr Thomas Reiby, the owner of a landholding named *Entally*.¹⁸ If already a good rider, he may have worked for Reiby as a drover.¹⁹ He was released from servitude in 1844, well before the expiry of his 14-year sentence, and was recommended for conditional pardon in 1846. In Hobart Town at this time, 'numerous gaffs flourished on the Derwent'.²⁰ In any of these 'gaffs' Ashton could have further developed and refined his equestrian skills, and found new friends and mentors. In December 1848, Ashton first comes to our attention in the context of circus, when Robert Avis Radford presented him as the 'British horseman, Mr Ashton' in his Royal Amphitheatre in Hobart.²¹ From the foregoing, we may deduce that: Golden Ashton was imbued with the elements of horsemanship before departing England; as a boy convict, he may have been given the opportunity to work with horses or even improve his

12 K Chesney, *The Victorian underworld*, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1972, pp. 92–93. *Shelta* was a 'complex jargon' that embraced Irish Gaelic words and corruptions and 'inversions and cryptic devices typical of the jargons of outcast, oppressed and delinquent groups'.

13 *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 1 July 1836.

14 R Hughes, *The fatal shore: a history of the transportation of convicts to Australia, 1788–1868*, The Folio Society, London, 1998, p. 377.

15 J Slee, 'Every child', *Magazine of the Australian Early Childhood Association*, vol. 9 no. 2, 2003, p. 16.

16 Archives Office of Van Diemen's Land, CON 18/8, 31/2, Golden Ashton, convict. Some Ashton descendants and some researchers disdain the thought of a convict as an Ashton ancestor but an impartial reading of the available records cannot suggest otherwise.

17 *Bulletin*, 26 December 1891.

18 Entally Estate is at Hadsen, to the west of Launceston; nowadays a 15 minute journey by car.

19 K Tybell, personal communication, 2008. Mr Tybell is a descendant of James Henry Ashton.

20 *Sydney Spectator*, 5 February 1908, 10 September 1913. A 'gaff' or 'pennygaff' was London slang for any low place of amusement such as the open-air equestrian shows that could be seen on the city's outskirts. A showman was called a 'gaffer'.

21 AOT, CON 31/2; *Hobart Town Courier*, 6 December 1848.

riding capabilities; and, freed from servitude, he began to find outlets for his equestrian prowess.

Links with Astley's Amphitheatre, London

To understand the origins of circus in Australia, and of Ashton's Circus, it is necessary to unravel the origins of 'modern' circus.²² Philip Astley, a former cavalryman, gave open-air displays of trick riding in 1768 in a field at Lambeth on the south side of the Thames. These displays were eventually enclosed, roofed over and given in a building he called Astley's Amphitheatre. The establishment was popularly referred to as 'the circus', a word used to describe the open-air circular recreational riding tracks in and around London at the time. In 1807, the first *hippodramas* were produced at Astley's, staged equestrianised dramatic spectacles that combined circus and theatre as one. Among the more famous were *Richard III*, *Mazeppa* and *The Battle of Waterloo*.²³ These, and others, were produced by Robert Avis Radford in Van Diemen's Land during 1848 and 1849, although presumably on a reduced scale of extravagance.²⁴ Astley's remained the international fountainhead of circus well into the nineteenth century. Its programs were mimicked by peripatetic circus companies throughout the British Isles, continental Europe, the United States of America and eventually in the new colonies of Australia. Also mimicked were the exquisite equestrian pantomimes of Andrew Ducrow (1798–1842), the principal equestrian, lessee and manager of Astley's from 1825 until his death.

A bizarre twist linked the American and Australian branches of modern circus well before the first visits took place in the 1850s, a twist that co-incidentally found brief expression in the early history of Ashton's Circus. In 1822, the New York theatrical entrepreneurs, Price and Simpson, purchased the circus of the visiting Englishman James West as a going concern. They strengthened the company by the addition from Astley's



Philip Astley, a former cavalryman, gave open-air displays of trick riding in 1768 in a field at Lambeth on the south side of the Thames. By 1772 the field had been enclosed and a grandstand erected for the comfort of the audience. The establishment was then called Astley's New British Riding School.



By 1779, Astley's exhibitions at Lambeth took place in a permanent building. His new establishment was named Astley's Amphitheatre.

22 The term 'modern' circus is employed to distinguish the circus of Astley, his successors and imitators, from the circus of ancient times as exemplified by Rome's Circus Maximus.

23 A Hippiisley Cox, *A seat at the circus*, Macmillan, London, 1980, pp. 32–33.

24 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 15 January 1848; *Hobart Town Courier*, 28 October 1848; *Cornwall Chronicle*, 20 June 1849.

of the 'Yorkshire phenomenon' James Hunter, the pre-eminent equestrian of the day. Hunter astonished 'the new world with dazzling bareback feats never dreamed of'.²⁵ He was the first *bareback* rider to appear in the United States, performing on 'a horse in the rude state of nature' according to contemporary advertisements.²⁶ Hunter eschewed the saddle or pad used by lesser circus riders of the day upon which to stand, pose and perform acrobatic tricks.²⁷ In 1829 Hunter returned to England and continued his circus career as an equestrian and tightrope dancer. In 1834 he even performed at Astley's in 'his laughable scene on a barebacked horse called *The Drunken Hussar*', 'extraordinary feats on *The Corde Elastique*' and 'his astonishing performance on the rope with his feet in baskets'.²⁸

When Hunter stole some bedding from furnished lodgings, an earlier, minor offence counted against him and in the Surrey Assizes on 28 March 1842 he was sentenced to twelve years transportation to Van Diemen's Land. A nefarious period as a convict in the penal colony ensued, during which he absconded from custody, was placed in solitary confinement for insolence, and served several brief periods of hard labour for other misdemeanours. The available records show that James Hunter and Golden Ashton were in the same part of Van Diemen's Land in 1843 and again from 1845 to 1848. On 8 October 1850, Hunter was granted a ticket-of-leave, which allowed him his freedom within the colony. Hunter's brief and only known association with the circus in Australia took place in 1851, when he appeared in Ashton's Royal Amphitheatre in Launceston. While we have no corroborative evidence, it seems reasonable to presume that Hunter imparted his skills to the small but growing number of equestrians, ropewalkers and other performers evident in Van Diemen's Land at this time, among them, Golden Ashton.²⁹

Radford's Royal Circus

If Astley's Amphitheatre in London was the international fountainhead of modern circus, Radford's Royal Circus – later called Radford's Royal Amphitheatre – was its first important wellspring in the Australian colonies.

Robert Avis Radford was born in Devon, the son of George and Elizabeth Radford, née Avis, whose marriage had been solemnised in the parish of Broad Clyst near Exeter on 29 December 1814. George's occupation was noted as 'gardener'. The infant Robert was christened in St Peter's Cathedral, Exeter, on 2 July 1817. Specimens of the young Radford's handwriting suggest that he received a formal education, but nothing else of his Devonshire past has come to light.³⁰ Presumably, he had the opportunity to work with horses and to learn to ride at a young age. A small announcement that appeared in an Adelaide newspaper in 1841 is the earliest signpost to Radford's presence and early professional activities in Australia:

Robt Radford begs to inform the gentlemen of South Australia that he intends practising as a veterinary surgeon and also to undertake the breaking in of colts. The experience RR has had in these matters at the principal studs in England, as well as in France, entitles him to claim the fullest confidence of the public of South Australia.³¹

25 GC Odell, *Annals of the New York stage*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1894, p. 83.

26 S Thayer, *The performers: a history of circus acts*, Dauven and Thayer, Seattle, Washington, 2005, pp. 68–9.

27 S Thayer, 'James Hunter, the bareback rider', in *Bandwagon*, September–October, 1989, vol. 23, no. 5, pp. 36–7.

28 British Library, Playbills File, BL 172.

29 AOT, CON 33/31, James Hunter, convict; S Thayer, *Annals of the American circus, volume 1, 1793–1829*, Dauven & Thayer, Seattle, Washington, 1976, pp. 112–3, 172; G Speaight, *A history of the circus*, The Tantivy Press, London, 1980, p. 118; Thayer, 1989, p. 37; RWG Vail, *Random notes on the history of the early American circus*, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts, 1934, pp. 87–8.

30 AOT, CSO 24/4/58, correspondence between Colonial Secretary's Office and Robert Avis Radford.

31 *South Australian Register*, 24 April 1841.

Only a few weeks earlier, on the morning of 3 March 1841, Radford had disembarked in Port Adelaide from the *Corsair*, a 450-ton (459-tonne) steamer that had sailed from Deal the previous October and arrived via the Cape.³² The *Corsair*'s diverse cargo included the thoroughbred *Acteon* and several other fine horses imported by a Mr Whittington for his breeding stable. Radford was evidently charged with the care of these valuable horses during the long voyage to South Australia.³³

Within a year or two, Radford had moved on to Launceston. There the illiterate Louisa Stone bore him a son, christened on 8 February 1844.³⁴ By that time Radford was a horse-breaker and livery stablekeeper in the town:

Robert Radford begs to acknowledge the liberal support he has received from the public since he commenced this business and informs that he breaks horses into saddle and harness with the greatest care and at moderate charges ... York Street.³⁵

Throughout 1845 and 1846 Radford was known on the Launceston and Port Phillip racetracks, training and even jockeying several horses to success. His business and racing activities prospered sufficiently for him to marry Amelia Cannon at the Baptist Church in York Street, Launceston on 19 July 1845, when he gave his occupation as a 'training groom'.³⁶ With the earnings from his racetrack and livery-stable activities he successfully applied – in September 1845 – for a licence for the aptly named Horse & Jockey Inn, a drinking house also located in York Street.³⁷

A town of about 10,100 people, with men comprising about two-thirds of the population according to the colony's 1848 census, Launceston saw only intermittent and usually unsuccessful theatrical exhibitions in the 1840s. Two theatres, the Royal Victoria and the Royal Olympic, sustained only brief seasons of 'legitimate' drama from year to year, among them productions by the colonial impresario, George Selth Coppin. A penal settlement, with a significant ex-convict and a transient military population, Launceston and its district supported numerous drinking houses and sponsored regular race meetings. Popular entertainments, such as the ubiquitous fire-eater John Powell Courtier, the balloonist and ventriloquist Professor Rea, and the visiting gymnastic troupe of Luigi Dalle Case, entertained the town at one time or another. An 'American rope dancer', probably the colonial born John Quinn, appeared at the Royal Olympic Theatre in 1847.³⁸ Street performances by regimental military bands were appreciated.³⁹ Despite these diversions, the degree of Launceston's cultural progress may be gauged by brief reports of theatrical activity that sometimes appeared in the 'sporting' columns of the *Cornwall Chronicle*.⁴⁰ Indeed, contemporary observers expressed alarm at the island's cultural proclivities. Vandemonians preferred melodrama to the 'higher order of dramatic representations' and resembled the Americans in their 'presumption, ignorance, arrogance and conceit'.⁴¹ Apart from those who had recently arrived from 'home', the colonials appeared to be 'rough and coarse' with little to offer in terms of conversation.⁴²

32 *Adelaide Chronicle*, 3 March 1841.

33 *Adelaide Chronicle*, 24 April 1841.

34 Van Diemen's Land, Baptisms, 1844/#225: unnamed son, at Launceston.

35 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 16 March 1844.

36 Van Diemen's Land, Marriages, 1845/#2238: Robert Avis Radford and Amelia Cannon, at Baptist Church, York Street, Launceston.

37 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 3 September 1845.

38 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 13 November 1847.

39 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 6 February 1847.

40 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 2 February 1848.

41 LA Meredith, *My home in Van Diemen's Land, during a residence of nine years*, London, 1852, cited in H Love (ed.), *The Australian stage: a documentary history*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1984, pp.45–6; J Morris, *The Pax Britannica Trilogy, volume I: Heaven's command, an imperial progress*, The Folio Society, London, 1973, p. 115.

42 CMH Clark, *A history of Australia, volume III: the beginning of an Australian civilisation*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1973, p. 363.

Radford's interests lay mainly with horses and racing, rather than hotel keeping. He publicly challenged the owner of *Paganini* to race his *Van Dyke* for £50 over 'three miles and a distance'.⁴³ He shipped his thoroughbred racehorse, *Paul Jones*, to Port Phillip to run at the ensuing Melbourne Races.⁴⁴ In January 1847, Radford rode *Coronet*, 'the best horse in the colony', to victory in the New Norfolk races.⁴⁵ In March 1847, Radford's *Van Dyke*, a previously untrained 'hack', won the Launceston Town Plate.⁴⁶

By the 1840s, Van Diemen's Land was the home of more free persons than convicts, yet at its base its society continued to be organised around its penal purpose.⁴⁷ Possibly three-quarters of the population were convicts, ex-convicts or had some convict ancestry.⁴⁸ A small bourgeoisie of shopkeepers, publicans, tradesmen and farmers developed during the 1840s reflecting increased emigration to the colony. Launceston was probably as representative a microcosm of Australian colonial society as any town in the pre-gold rush era. It was 'more energetic' yet less class-conscious than the colony's capital, Hobart Town.⁴⁹

An equestrian-based theatrical entertainment could appeal to both the 'lower orders' as well as the more 'exceptionable' of the town's population.⁵⁰ An 'amphitheatre' modelled on Astley's Amphitheatre could bring together both equestrian and dramatic spectacles, not to mention exhibitions of acrobatics, ropewalking, singing and other forms of popular entertainment. It could also satisfy the moralists of the day. In England, civil, religious and moral leaders promoted 'rational' amusements to wean the labouring classes and the lower orders from idleness, drinking, gambling and fornication.⁵¹ Radford's proposed entertainments were 'rational'.⁵²

On 22 November 1847, Radford wrote to the Colonial Secretary in Hobart Town, James Bicheno, to request a twelve-month licence for 'the public exhibition of horsemanship in an arena ... situate in York Street, Launceston adjacent to my licenced house known by the sign of The Horse & Jockey'.⁵³ Within a week of receiving Bicheno's permission, this 'Astley's Amphitheatre on a limited scale' was under construction, as Radford intended to open his 'equestrian circus' by Christmas. The Horse & Jockey Inn was located in 'a central part' of Launceston.⁵⁴ Times were 'dull' in Launceston and cash was scarce, yet the townspeople managed to enjoy the Christmas festivities. 'Innocent recreations' were allowed at most of the houses in the town, the Royal Olympic Theatre opened with a dramatic performance, races were held at Evandale, while popular amusements such as greasy poling were also on offer at other places.⁵⁵

In the midst of this clamour, Radford announced that 'at considerable expense he has secured the services of Theatrical Equestrians, formerly attached to the London stage'.⁵⁶ It might be inferred that Radford had gone to the trouble and expense of importing a performing company from London. In fact Radford's initial *corps* consisted of locally-recruited 'artistes' at least one of whom, the acrobat John Jones, was a former convict who was once 'a tumbler at the Westminster Theatre' (most probably referring

43 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 17 January 1846.

44 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 18 March 1846.

45 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 30 January 1847.

46 *Port Phillip Herald*, 18 March 1847.

47 Morris, p. 381.

48 Clark, p. 199.

49 LL Robson, *A history of Van Diemen's Land, volume 1: Van Diemen's Land from the earliest times to 1855*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p. 176.

50 *Hobart Town Advertiser*, 8 September 1848.

51 JM Golby and AW Purdue, *The civilisation of the crowd: popular culture in England, 1750–1900*, Sutton Publishing Ltd, Stroud, 1999, pp. 91–2.

52 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 29 December 1847.

53 AOT, CSO 24/4/58.

54 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 1 December 1847.

55 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 25 December 1847.

56 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 22 December 1847.

to Astley's Amphitheatre) prior to his conviction for a petty crime and transportation.⁵⁷ Jones received his ticket-of-leave on 13 July 1847, a few months before the opening of the Royal Circus.⁵⁸ He appeared in Radford's Royal Circus, first as a dancer and an acrobat but later as an equestrian, presumably because of Radford's mentorship.⁵⁹

The Royal Circus, as it was called, opened on the evening of Boxing Day, Monday 27 December 1847.⁶⁰ For the next two years Radford's audiences were entertained for up to three evenings a week with a remarkable *savoir-faire* of contemporary British circus, popular theatre and music hall. The programs presented by Radford extended over a period of 25 months until 29 January 1850, when his company gave its last performance.

It has been speculated that James Hunter, the famous British performer transported to Van Diemen's Land, may have played a role in the establishment of Radford's Royal Circus.⁶¹ Although Hunter spent some of his servitude in or near Launceston in this period, there is nothing to suggest that Hunter performed in Radford's under his own or any other name. In any case, Hunter's convict record was embellished with the notation that he was 'not to be hired in Launceston by any publican'. This entry, dated 18 December 1847 nine days before the opening of the Royal Circus, effectively precluded Radford, a publican, from employing him.⁶²

The layout and construction of Radford's Royal Circus in Launceston is now a matter of conjecture. No illustrations, architectural plans or detailed descriptions are known to survive.⁶³ We do know that seating arrangements were divided into pit, gallery and boxes. Radford charged prices of one, two and three shillings, to these parts of the

RADFORD'S
ROYAL CIRCUS

Patronised by the Community of Van Diemen's Land.

ROBERT RADFORD

MOST respectfully begs to inform his friends and the public at large, that the entertainments for

THIS EVENING,
THURSDAY AND SATURDAY.

Will consist of—

THE DRUNKEN HUSSAR! VAULTING! BILLY BARLOW!
 HIGHLAND FLING. ... NAVAL HORNET
 GYMNASTIC FEATS!!
 AND BILLY BUTTON'S RIDE TO BRENTFORD

Drunk Hussar, ... Master **BALDWIN**
 Clown to the Circus, ... **Mr. AXTELL**
 Riding Master ... **Mr. CHAPPELL**
 Chinese Vaultier ... **Mr. RADFORD**
 Billow Barlow ... **Mr. GASKIN**

HIGHLAND FLING — — — **Mr. JONES.**

To be followed by

GYMNASTIC FEATS
 Of Astonishing Dexterity, performed by the
FOUR WONDERFUL ACROBATS.

The whole to conclude with

BILLY BUTTON'S
RIDE TO BRENTFORD.

Billy Button — — — **Mr. RADFORD**
 Jeremiah Stitches Starvell — — **Mr. RISELEY**

Doors open at half-past Seven o'clock, performances to commence at eight.
 PRICES OF ADMISSION.—Boxes, 2s.; Pit, 2s.; Gallery, 1s.
 December 29.

Advertisement for Radford's Royal Circus in the *Cornwall Chronicle* of 29 December 1847. (Archives Office of Tasmania)

57 H Buckler, *Central Criminal Court Session Papers. Twelfth Session*, George Herbert, Cheapside, London, 1842, pp. 1293–4; AOT, CON 14/23, John Jones, convict; Public Records Office, London, CRIM 4/208, John Jones, indictment.

58 AOT, CON 33/44, John Jones, ticket-of-leave.

59 Dancing and tumbling were fundamental to a career as a circus performer. (The author of this paper is John Jones's great-great-grandson.)

60 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 25 December 1847.

61 Speaight, p. 55.

62 AOT, CON 33/31, James Hunter, convict.

63 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 12 April 1851; 21 June 1848.

house, respectively.⁶⁴ The circus building was only a few weeks in the course of erection. It was described as 'a wooden building' when it was used by Ashton's company in 1851.⁶⁵ The structure may have been modelled on the portable amphitheatres or 'booths' erected by itinerant circus troupes in English provincial towns.

The Royal Circus was a 'hit' with the people of Launceston from the start.⁶⁶ To the native-born and bred, who 'thought nothing of England and could not bear the thought of going there', the equestrian-based theatrical entertainment was a novelty.⁶⁷ Radford's equestrian performances were 'bold and masterly'.⁶⁸ Despite Launceston's depressed state and the discouraging expectations of many, the Royal Circus attracted large audiences.⁶⁹ Although Radford catered for all tastes and classes, he wanted to attract 'the more respectable portion of society'. He 'sedulously' endeavoured to enforce good order to induce these 'portions' to witness his exhibitions.⁷⁰

Radford's entertainments followed a steady pattern throughout this first Launceston season. His program was changed weekly. It usually consisted of between six and ten items, invariably opening with a dramatic, equestrian or hippodramatic spectacle and inevitably closing with a farce or extravaganza. Interspersed were acts as diverse as a highland fling, naval hornpipe, clog or maypole dance by members of the company; the singing of a popular song of the day such as *Larry O'Gaff* or *Tippitywichtet*; gymnastic feats or vaulting by the four 'wonderful' acrobats; tightrope and slackrope performances; a comic act of horsemanship or gymnastic exercises on horseback; the feats of a diminutive trick pony; and *tableaux vivant* by one or more members of the company. Equestrian performances were usually accompanied by the antics of a clown in the ring. All contributed to the program of 'histrionic, comic and equestrian genius' presented in the ensuing months.⁷¹

Whether an attempt to set the Royal Circus on fire was the reason or not, Radford decided to remove his company to Hobart Town. On 3 March 1848 he wrote to Bicheno requesting that he be granted a licence to establish a circus on a large piece of ground at the rear of the Bath Arms, a public house in Murray Street, later the site of Tattersall's Hotel.⁷² Despite objections from the local acting community, Bicheno was unmoved. He considered that 'equestrian performances are less objectionable than some of the performances at the [Royal] Victoria [Theatre]' and that 'the more innocent amusements the people have the better'. On 14 March the Lieutenant Governor approved a licence for Radford's equestrian performances.⁷³ Radford had already confidently entered into 'extensive preparations' to capitalise on extra business during and after the Hobart Town race week.⁷⁴ The *Hobart Town Courier* alluded to 'a circus in humble imitation of Ducrow's Arena or Batty's Amphitheatre ... erected near the Bath Arms'.⁷⁵ Its ring was dressed with sawdust.⁷⁶ Improvements had been carried out to this unpretentious wooden structure by the time of a second Hobart Town season later in 1848.⁷⁷

64 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 29 December 1847.

65 Hodgkinson, in Cannon with St Leon, p. 1.

66 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 29 December 1847.

67 Robson, p. 177.

68 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 30 December 1848.

69 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 2 February 1848.

70 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 26 January 1848.

71 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 15 March 1848.

72 AOT, CSO 24/4/58; *Sydney Sportsman*, 5 February 1908.

73 AOT, CSO 24/4/58.

74 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 11 March 1848.

75 *Hobart Town Courier*, 29 March 1848.

76 *Sydney Sportsman*, 29 February 1911.

77 This building remained standing for several years. Known locally as 'The Amphitheatre', it was used by other circus troupes, such as those of John Sullivan Noble in 1853 and Henry Burton in 1855, both of which reached the colony from the mainland. *Tasmanian Colonist*, 17 October 1853; *Hobart Mercury*, 7 May 1855. In 1859 the building was demolished and the 'enormous quantity of seasoned timber in great variety' of which it was built was auctioned. *Hobart Mercury*, 14 February 1859.

Towards the end of March Radford and his stud of horses, his corps of equestrians, acrobats, actors and singers trundled overland from Launceston to Hobart Town. A fine convict-made road connected these main centres of population, along which many free settlers lived in gentlemanly style in substantial country houses.⁷⁸ Quite possibly, Radford's company may have given performances at townships along the way. As in England, burgeoning road systems were vital to the activities of itinerant colonial showmen.⁷⁹

Although the fit-out of the Bath Arms circus was not quite complete, the company opened to a crowded house on the evening of Thursday, 30 March 1848, many visitors having to occupy standing positions near the arena. The performances were 'very creditable' and 'a novelty in this colony', but a few more performances for both stud and corps were necessary to settle into the new surroundings.⁸⁰ Radford and his principal equestrian, Edmunds, performed an equestrian duet one evening to much applause, while Master Baldwin was showered with coins the night he gave his benefit.⁸¹ Favourite acts of horsemanship were introduced, such as *Shaw, The Life Guardsman*, which depicted a hero of Waterloo, leaving his country village to join the regiment, drilling, marching, firing his rifle in combat and, in the last moment of his life, throwing away his broken sword and fighting with his bare fists; *The Flying Zephyr*, an elaboration of one of Ducrow's characters; *The Fox Hunter*; and *The Shipwrecked Sailor*. A series of *tableaux vivants* from *The Brigands* was produced, as was a *Sir Roger de Coverley*, a country dance featuring eight horses.⁸² The last performance of the Hobart Town season was given on 17 May 1848 and the following week Radford and his troupe returned to Launceston. The company re-opened in its familiar Launceston venue, renovated during its absence, on the evening of the Queen's Birthday 1848 to an appreciative audience.⁸³

In the ensuing evenings the whole company presented the dramatic spectacles of *The Knight of the Brazen Shield* and *The Rescue*. The equestrian Mills performed *Punchinello* and *The Merry Swiss Boy*. Radford's introduction of four horses, two of which he stood astride while driving the other two, suggest the first Australian rendition of Ducrow's most popular equestrian piece, *The Courier of St Petersburg*.⁸⁴ Despite plans to visit Port Phillip, Radford and his company remained in Launceston for the winter.⁸⁵ The series of benefits given towards the end of the season resulted in a 'bumper' house each night.⁸⁶ Early in August, Radford presented another of Ducrow's famous equestrian pantomimes, *The Roman Gladiator*.⁸⁷ Soon after, Radford and his 'valuable stud and efficient company' again took to the road for Hobart Town.⁸⁸

Almost entirely rebuilt for a second Hobart Town season, the Bath Arms amphitheatre was 'as good a building as any of those erected by Batty, Adams, Cooke and other equestrian managers who had exhibited in English provincial towns'.⁸⁹ The new building was securely constructed of wood, properly roofed, and enclosed an immense space of ground. It could accommodate 1,500 people.⁹⁰ The performance of 25 September 1848 featured 'the Australian Tight Rope Dancer' Quinn, exhibiting a 'basket dance' in which he danced on his tightrope with his feet tied in baskets, an act he later

78 Morris, 1973, p. 381; M Salmon, 'An old time circus', in *Australian Town & Country Journal*, 3 August 1904, p. 34.

79 Golby, p. 37.

80 *Hobart Town Courier*, 1, 5, 19 April 1848.

81 *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 May 1848. A 'benefit' was an evening's performance dedicated to an outstanding performer in whose favour the financial proceeds of the performance accrued.

82 Speaight, pp. 57, 58; *Hobart Town Courier*, 15 April 1848.

83 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 24 May 1848.

84 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 31 May 1848.

85 *Melbourne Argus*, 20 June 1848; *Cornwall Chronicle*, 15 July 1848.

86 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 26 July 1848.

87 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 9 August 1848.

88 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 9 September 1848.

89 *Hobart Town Courier*, 26 August 1848.

90 *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 September 1848.



Ducrow's popular equestrian spectacle, *The Courier of St Petersburg*. (Courtesy V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London, CT1604)

performed with the clown upon his shoulders.⁹¹ The basket dance on the tightrope is precisely the type of act that James Hunter had performed in the 1820s and 1830s. We may speculate that Quinn, who is not known to have exhibited this act before, had learnt it from James Hunter, the veteran British performer serving periods of assigned labour to various masters in and around Launceston at this time.⁹²



Ducrow's famous equestrian pantomime, *The Roman Gladiator*. (Mark St Leon personal collection)

Radford's intention to 'bring out' (from London, presumably) the famous equestrian spectacle *Mazeppa*; or *The Wild Horse of Tartary* may account for his company moving to Hobart Town's Victoria Theatre, apparently better configured for an elaborate production.⁹³ The 'British horseman', Mr Ashton, made his first appearance in Radford's on the evening of 7 December 1848. This was the first documented appearance in the colonies of the equestrian whose circus dynasty survives to this day. Master Gill, Ashton's *protégé*, appeared with him.⁹⁴ Ashton's equestrian appearances were of 'a superior order', his 'bold and fearless style of riding' surpassing anything seen in the colony.⁹⁵ Yet, Ashton's name, like Radford's, does not appear in British circus bills of the day. Radford's production of *Mazeppa* was presented not long after Ashton's first appearance. Indeed, Ashton may well have played the title role, in which the miscreant was 'lashed' to the back of a white charger that was then set forth galloping over the steppes.⁹⁶

Radford and his troupe, with Ashton and Gill, returned to Launceston for the Christmas holidays of 1848.⁹⁷ Radford did not again present equestrian entertainments

91 *Hobart Town Courier*, 21 October 1848.

92 AOT, CON 33/31.

93 *Hobart Town Courier*, 28 October 1848. The equestrian spectacle *Mazeppa* was loosely based on Byron's epic poem of the same name.

94 *Hobart Town Courier*, 6 December 1848.

95 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 17 January 1849.

96 *Hobart Town Courier*, 20 December 1848.

97 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 13 December 1848.

ASTLEY'S

Grand Spectacles!



Monday, Aug. 5, 1833.

By Desire, — LORD BYRON's interesting and magnificent Drama of

Mazeppa AND THE Wild Horse

FOR TWELVE NIGHTS ONLY.
WITH NEW SCENERY, DRUMS, AND THE FOLLOWING CALCULATED WHOLLY IN THE CIRCLE AND ON THE SEW.

MR. DUCROW
WHO FOR THE FIRST TIME THESE THREE YEARS, travels on 16 RATED COURSES, in water-buff of the

CARNIVAL OF VENICE;
OR, A MASQUERADE ON HORSEBACK!
AT FULL SPEED — presenting the following Programme, without stopping the Horse:

PUNCH — PIERO — HARLEQUIN — COLUMBINE — RACCHUS — ADONIS.

Produce to which, (First Time) Mr. DUCROW'S Grand Horse of

24 HIGH-TRAINED STEEDS!
SINGLY CAPARNOED, AND MOUNTED BY DANCERS AND CAVALIERS, IN POMPON ATTIRE, DELINEATING THE RAPIDEST CAVALCADE OF

HENRY VIII.

And FRANCES I., with the Bessons, Kinsmen of Chas. Lords of the Crown, Adventure Venice, Experience Embracement, and singling with

A NEW GAVOTTE DANCED BY THE HORSES.
(Display will be produced, (for the First Time) A NEW GORG' EXTRAV-DANCE, executed by Messrs. A. and J. DUCROW, for the purpose of introducing
THE TRAINED HORSES, called

1st of September, or the Cockney Sportsman!

Mr. JENNINGS, ... Mr. A. DUCROW. ... Mr. KATHLEEN-WOOD, ... Mr. J. DUCROW.

The SHOOTING PONIES, by the Spanish Horse & Butterfly.
Wonderful Feats of VAULTING, by the Tartar Brothers,
ON A SINGLE HORSE, AT FULL SPEED.

Among the Forest in the Circle, (for the First Time) Mr. DUCROW'S People and Litteries first will appear, as the HISTORY OF FAIRY LANDS, on the

CUPIDS AND THEIR ELFIN STEEDS
— AFTER THE SPECTACLE OF MAZEPPA, THE

CHINESE SPRITE
Will go through his wonderful Performance in the Air, and introduce the Feat of **THE GYMNASTICAL LADDER**; accompanied by
the unequalled EVOLUTIONS of the terrible **RED MAN**, and Mr. DUCROW'S CHINESE BALLETS of the

16 DANCERS
OF FEAT — THE WHOLE TO CONCLUDE WITH THE WONDERFUL AND GRAND WILD DANCE, OF THE CAR-TAN

DRIVER AND HIS DOG!

CHARACTERS, SCENERY, &c. NEW BILLS OF THE DAY.

A playbill for Astley's production of *Mazeppa and the Wild Horse*, Monday 5 August 1833.
(Courtesy of V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London, CT10107)

in Hobart Town. It would be several years before a circus company of any consequence would again entertain the capital, while several years passed before touring circus companies began to visit Van Diemen's Land from the mainland.⁹⁸

On Boxing Day 1848, almost a year to the day since its inauguration, Radford's Royal Amphitheatre, as it was now called, was re-opened in Launceston, evidently in Radford's original venue. For a while this was almost the only venue for relaxation, fun, and frolic in the town and large attendances were generated.⁹⁹ Ashton made his last known appearance with Radford on the evening of Wednesday 14 February 1849, a benefit performance for Alfred Howson Senior, leader of the orchestra. On 17 March 1849, Ashton departed Launceston for Port Phillip by the *Shamrock*, accompanied by his girlfriend – probably his common law wife, Mary Byrne – for Ashton had been enticed there with a new offer of engagement.¹⁰⁰

At Port Phillip

In the years before the onset of the great gold rush, this colony-to-be underwent dramatic economic expansion. In 1846 Melbourne's population was 10,954, not much bigger than Launceston's. Five years later, in 1851, its population had grown to 23,143, an increase of some 111 per cent.¹⁰¹ During 1848, there had been talk of Radford's company visiting Melbourne.¹⁰² Although the plan did not materialise, Radford's early successes in presenting circus entertainments in Van Diemen's Land had evidently aroused interest on the mainland.

Thomas Henry Hayes was a 'respectable man' and an expert equestrian.¹⁰³ In April 1849, this Port Phillip entrepreneur made application to Superintendent Charles La Trobe 'for permission to open a circus in Little Bourke Street for the exhibition of feats of horsemanship and rope dancing.'¹⁰⁴ Hayes outlayed some £600 to erect a suitable building, purchase his stud of twelve horses and retain on full pay some 'long experienced parties from neighbouring colonies'.¹⁰⁵ The 'long experienced parties' comprised Ashton from Van Diemen's Land and his little troupe of performers that included Master Gill and Mr 'Risley' (actually Riley), a tightrope dancer and clown.¹⁰⁶ Ashton had by this time replaced his given name of 'Golden' with 'John' and then later 'James' (co-incidentally or not, the names of his younger brothers baptised at Rochford, Essex, in 1824 and 1826 respectively). These alterations were evidently made to distance himself from his convict origins as Golden Ashton. Furthermore, Ashton's career was suitably embellished for Port Phillip, for he was now 'Mr Ashton, formerly of Astley's and is very highly spoken of'.¹⁰⁷

Hayes's location was near Melbourne's 'notorious' Horse & Jockey Inn. There were complaints that the proposed circus would 'attract a crowd of disreputable characters to that locality'.¹⁰⁸ Hayes also had to contend with competition from at least two sources.¹⁰⁹

98 *Tasmanian Colonist*, 17 October 1853.

99 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 30 December 1848.

100 AOT, POL 220/1, p. 90; CON 44/5, Mary Byrne, convict; CON 52/2, p. 8, application for permission to marry, Golden Ashton and Mary Bryan [sic].

101 M Cannon, *Old Melbourne town before the gold rush*, Loch Haven Books, Main Ridge, Victoria, 1991, pp. 10–11.

102 *Melbourne Argus*, 20 June 1848.

103 *Port Phillip Gazette*, 17 May 1849.

104 *Argus*, 13 April 1849.

105 *Melbourne Daily News*, 28 April 1849.

106 The name of 'Risley' actually belonged to Richard Risley Carlisle who introduced the sensational act of juggling other performers on his feet, an act later known as a Risley act. Some of Golden Ashton's descendants, billed as 'The Seven Ashtons' were famous for their Risley act in the 1950s. Thayer, 2005, p. 134. A Hippisley Cox, *A seat at the circus*, Macmillan, London, 1980, p. 194.

107 *Melbourne Daily News*, 4 May 1849. As far as the record shows, no-one by the name of Ashton ever appeared in Astley's.

108 *Melbourne Daily News*, 23 April 1849.

109 *Port Phillip Gazette*, 17 April 1849.

At the corner of Queen and Little Bourke Streets stood the Queen's Theatre and its proprietor, John Thomas Smith, voiced his opposition to Hayes's application. At the same time the fire-eater, John Powell Courtier, once active in Launceston and Hobart but since late 1846 domiciled in Melbourne, made application to open a venue in Lonsdale Street.¹¹⁰ La Trobe referred the applications to the Town Magistracy which refused both on the grounds that the proposed exhibitions would spread 'crime and immorality ... by congregating depraved and abandoned characters'.¹¹¹ The Mayor agreed to allow Hayes and his company to give a single exhibition to a paying audience. An immense crowd attended the circus on the evening of Wednesday 9 May 1849 and the performance was 'well worth seeing'.¹¹² Encouraged by his reception, Hayes ignored the restriction and continued to exhibit into June. He opened his circus 'free' but each person attending had to purchase a cigar for two shillings and sixpence, light it and commence puffing before entering.¹¹³

Ashton appeared with his 'beautiful horse' *Gazelle*, leaping over four five-barred gates in the ring, posing, and jumping through hoops on the horse's back while at full speed. Master Gill performed acts of horsemanship entitled *The Mountain Sylph* and *The Highland Laddie*. The several feats that 'Risley' executed on the tightrope had 'never been witnessed in Port Phillip'. In *The Sailor's Farewell*, Ashton danced a sailor's hornpipe on the back of his horse. Ashton, Hayes and Gill appeared together in a triple horse act entitled *The African Hunters*.¹¹⁴ The Port Phillip press was as impressed by Ashton's riding as had been the press in Van Diemen's Land, for it 'surpasses anything of the sort seen in the Australian colonies. The ease and grace with which he performs ... astonish all the good folks of this city.'¹¹⁵

Although this unauthorised place of amusement flourished for a short time, and although only 'respectable persons' were admitted, the circus soon became as disreputable as the neighborhood, 'the most malignant ulcer of Melbourne's back slumtown'.¹¹⁶ On 18 June 1849 Ashton gave his second and farewell benefit.¹¹⁷ Before the authorities could close the circus, Hayes was bankrupted.¹¹⁸ The auction of Hayes's stud, organised for 19 June, was to be preceded by a bazaar at which the animals were to go through some of their extraordinary feats.¹¹⁹ At this point, it appears that Ashton left Port Phillip to push 'through unexplored scrub' to Sydney

... with a tiny, motley troupe, packhorses and an Aboriginal tracker. The going was primitive indeed. They slept out, used a ring of hewn logs and lit the show with lamps made of old socks burning in tins of fat ... brush corrals made a good ring.¹²⁰

Settlements along the way were starved for entertainment. The 'road' northwards was but a 'well defined track ... that meandered through the bush ... from water stop to water stop'.¹²¹ Oral tradition said that Ashton's first performances in Sydney were given in a ring made of brambles near where the city's Central Station now stands. Given the

110 *Melbourne Argus*, 7 August 1846.

111 *Melbourne Daily News*, 23 April 1849.

112 *Melbourne Daily News*, 11 May 1849.

113 E Finn ['Garryowen'], *The chronicles of early Melbourne, 1835-1852: historical, anecdotal and personal*, 1888, Fergusson & Mitchell, Melbourne, p. 490.

114 *Port Phillip Gazette*, 24, 29 May 1849.

115 *Port Phillip Gazette*, 5 June 1849.

116 Finn, p. 490.

117 *Port Phillip Gazette*, 16 June 1849.

118 Cannon, p. 420.

119 *Melbourne Daily News*, 19 June 1849.

120 Fernandez, p. 15.

121 Morris, p. 29.

apparent lack of a suitable indoor circus venue in Sydney at the time, and the knack for improvisation of Australia's early circus men, the scene is by no means implausible. In the years to follow, the vicinity – now known as the Haymarket – became Sydney's customary site for visiting circuses and petty showmen.¹²² Somewhat curiously, in view of its size and colonial pre-eminence, Sydney was not yet blessed with its own permanent circus establishment. Ashton inevitably spread word in the city of the circus activities taking place in Van Diemen's Land and Port Phillip. By the spring of 1850, some twelve months after Ashton's visit, Sydney's first amphitheatre opened at the rear of John Malcom's Adelphi Hotel in York Street as the Royal Australian Equestrian Circus.¹²³

Radford's decline

In Launceston, with Ashton and most of the other equestrian and acrobatic performers gone, the circus-based portions of Radford's entertainments assumed a less conspicuous role with each evening's program. Some of Radford's mounting financial problems during 1849 could be attributed to the departure of the 96th Regiment from the town earlier in the year, when it was relocated to India. The loss of officers and 500 rank and file soldiers, together with wives and children, removed an estimated £200,000 of annual expenditure from the town's economy. The small detachment that replaced the 96th hardly made up for this loss to the economy.¹²⁴ The remonstrances of the *Cornwall Chronicle* on Radford's behalf during 1849 became desperate by September.

Radford is a townsman and expends his money [that] he makes in the town; he does not come a stranger among us, for a month or two, to take away with him his profits – he therefore deserves patronage, and we hope he may realise his best expectations during the season.¹²⁵

An attractive and diverse program, a dedicated corps of professional and guest amateur actors, equestrians and singers, and the occasional reductions in prices could not save the Royal Amphitheatre, even when renamed the 'Royal Circus'. Nor could additional attractions in the ring, ranging from a grand balloon ascent to an exhibition of boxing by the celebrated black pugilist Perry, prior to his departure for England to compete for the national championship.¹²⁶

By November 1849, Ashton had returned to Launceston. He appeared with Radford again, now unostentatiously billed as 'Mr Goulder'.¹²⁷ When he gave a benefit at the Royal Circus on Tuesday evening, 29 January 1850, Ashton was inexplicably less coy about his identity and even boasted of the 'considerable fame' he had won in Port Phillip and Sydney.¹²⁸ It was the last performance given at the Royal Circus under Radford's management. Soon, Radford's numerous creditors foreclosed. His resources at an end, he could resurrect neither his amphitheatrical enterprise nor his racecourse activities. For a man accustomed to being his own master, Van Diemen's Land offered no future for Robert Avis Radford. Seeking a fresh start, he sailed for Adelaide by the *Queenstown* on 29 August 1850.¹²⁹

122. Fernandez, p. 15; S Fitzgerald, *Sydney, 1842–1992*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1992, pp. 26–7, 62.

123. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 October 1850.

124. *Cornwall Chronicle*, 10 January 1849.

125. *Cornwall Chronicle*, 1 September 1849.

126. *Cornwall Chronicle*, 23 January 1850.

127. *Cornwall Chronicle*, 17 November 1849.

128. *Cornwall Chronicle*, 26 January 1850.

129. *Cornwall Chronicle*, 31 August 1850.

Ashton's Royal Amphitheatre

In the twelve months following his brief re-appearance at Radford's Royal Circus during the summer of 1849–50, the activities of James Ashton do not come to the attention of the colonial press. However, in this 'missing year' he took Mary Ann Riley as a wife.¹³⁰ The identity of Mary Ann remains uncertain. Possibly she was the sister or daughter of the John Riley with whom Ashton had performed in Van Diemen's Land and Port Phillip. Another possibility is the Mary Ann Riley, a 16-year-old girl from Enniskillen in County Fermanagh who arrived at Port Melbourne on 11 January 1850 by the *Diadem*. A nursemaid, she served a twelve-month apprenticeship in a Melbourne household but may have become Ashton's wife, legal or common law, during this period.¹³¹ Although Ashton's movements during 1850 are uncertain there is at least a record of a 'J [John? James?] Ashton' voyaging by the *Shamrock* from Launceston to Melbourne on 18 November 1850.¹³² Whoever she was, the new 'Mrs Ashton' was sufficiently imbued with equestrian skills to make her debut about six weeks after her husband opened his Royal Amphitheatre in Launceston the following February.¹³³

In January 1851 Ashton applied to the Colonial-Secretary for a licence to conduct exhibitions of horsemanship at premises situated in Elizabeth Street, Launceston. This was described as a wooden building located near the stables of what would later be known as the Sydney Hotel.¹³⁴ Despite the different street address, these premises appear to be the ones in which Radford had conducted his Royal Circus during 1847–50, but with access from Elizabeth Street, a street that runs parallel to York Street. Granted permission by the Colonial Secretary, Ashton opened his 'Royal Amphitheatre' on the evening of 13 February 1851.¹³⁵

An early advertisement listed the following members of Ashton's company: Mr and Mrs Ashton, Master Lapittite [sic; La Petite?] Polaski, J Hunter, H Mills, A Palmer, H Felix, J Risley, Mr Rosetta, and Mr J Hudson and a 'grand orchestra'.¹³⁶ Later advertisements mention the acrobat Carter; a Mr Wilcocks



An advertisement for Ashton's Royal Amphitheatre in Elizabeth Street, Launceston, that appeared in the *Cornwall Chronicle* on 1 February 1851. (Archives Office of Tasmania)

130 Registrar-General, New South Wales, Burials, 1852, vol. 118, no. 1494: Mary Ann Ashton, at Maitland.

131 Kevin Tybell, personal communication, 2008.

132 AOT, POL 220/1, p. 295. The relevant shipping list notes that J Ashton, 'free by servitude', arrived by the convict transport *Navarino*. However, a check of the *Navarino's* list of convicts on arrival in Hobart Town in November 1840 shows no one of the name 'Ashton'. This leaves open the possibility that the *Shamrock's* 1850 passenger was, in fact, Golden Ashton and he was using the assumed name of 'John' or 'James' Ashton, as he had used elsewhere, in order to expedite his departure from the colony.

133 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 1 February, 29 March 1851.

134 Hodgkinson, in Cannon with St Leon, p. 1.

135 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 12 February 1851.

136 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 1 February 1851.

who danced a sailor's hornpipe; Templeton, a singer; and HB Jones as the ringmaster. Apart from the Ashtons, some of these names are immediately recognisable in the context of colonial circus. 'J Hunter', who had only received his ticket-of-leave in October 1850, was the 'Yorkshire phenomenon' mentioned earlier.¹³⁷ Mills was 'the oldest equestrian performer in Launceston' whose earlier acts of horsemanship in Radford's Royal Amphitheatre in 1849 'would not have disgraced Astley's'.¹³⁸ Alfred Palmer was an early, if passing, identity in colonial circus annals. He soon parted from Ashton as he was in Parramatta to act as ringmaster for the opening of Burton's New Equestrian Circus on 1 March 1851.¹³⁹ 'Risley' was evidently the John Riley who had been a member of Ashton's troupe in 1849. It is possible that 'Mr Rosetta' was the Irish rope and stilt-walker, Edward Hughes, known better by the *nom d'arena* of Edward La Rosiere and who had recently departed the Royal Australian Equestrian Circus in Sydney.¹⁴⁰ HB Jones was an actor in Radford's company during the summer of 1848–49. H Felix may have been the German musician Harry Frahligh who died at Dapto (NSW) in July 1856, while travelling the Illawarra with Ashton's Circus. The other names – Polaski, Hudson, Wilcocks and Templeton – do not elsewhere appear in colonial circus annals.

Ashton's new wife made her debut at the Royal Amphitheatre on 31 March 1851. She was announced as 'the first female equestrian of the day', the term 'first' meaning 'premier' in the contemporary vernacular.¹⁴¹ As no other equestriennes are known to have been professionally active in Van Diemen's Land at that time, the claim cannot be disputed. With her husband and mentor as her equestrian partner, she provided the principal attraction for the evening's entertainment, the traditional equestrian scene of *Jocky [sic] and Jenny, or The Road to Edinburgh Fair* – the only known rendition of the piece in a colonial circus. This scene had been presented at Astley's in London by two juvenile riders in 1828.¹⁴²

The earliest advertisements for Ashton's Royal Amphitheatre announce James Hunter as 'the American tight rope dancer'. His benefit was announced for the evening of 7 April 1851.¹⁴³ The *Cornwall Chronicle* lauded this fallen star of Astley's in their midst: 'Hunter, the favourite horseman of Ducrow, admired in England by nobility and even royalty, presented in England and in America with numberless marks of admiration, takes a benefit.'¹⁴⁴ Hunter performed 'some wonderful feats in baskets ... also the Wooden Shoe Dance, [the] first time ever attempted in this colony'.¹⁴⁵ One of Hunter's performances was to 'throw a summersault [*sic*] over a garter 10 feet high over 40 men's heads, concluding by throwing a summersault through 6 balloons', in fact hoops wrapped in tissue paper. For Hunter's benefit performance, Ashton and his wife presented *The Tyrolean Peasants*, their rendition of Ducrow's 1830 equestrian pantomime *The Swiss Milkmaid and Tyrolean Shepherd*.¹⁴⁶

Ashton's acrobat, Carter, threw out a 'novel challenge' to the celebrated tumbler Wang-Chang Pe-ki to tumble against him for the sum of £5 or £10, 'the choice of ground to be tossed for'. The identity of Wang-Chang Pe-ki remains a mystery but, if the text of the challenge is to be believed, he had 'just arrived from Hong Kong via Port Phillip'. In truth, Wang-Chang Pe-ki may have been an acrobat made up for the part.¹⁴⁷

137 AOT, CON 33/31.

138 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 18 July 1849.

139 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 March 1851.

140 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 January, 17 March 1851; *Goulburn Herald*, 22 February 1851.

141 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 29 March 1851.

142 AH Saxon, *The life and art of Andrew Ducrow and the romantic age of the English circus*, Archon Books, Hamden, Connecticut, 1978, p. 162.

143 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 2 April 1851.

144 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 5 April 1851.

145 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 12 April 1851.

146 Saxon, p. 220.

147 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 9 April 1851.



On the evening of 7 April 1851, Ashton and his wife presented *The Tyrolean Peasants*, This was their rendition of Ducrow's 1830 equestrian pantomime, *The Swiss Milkmaid and Tyrolean Shepherd* as depicted (above) in a contemporary theatrical portrait painted by R Lloyd in London.

On 12 April 1851, an illustrated advertisement announced the benefit for Mrs Ashton. The woodcut illustration showed a female equestrian (reputedly Mrs Ashton but in fact a stock woodcut) balancing on one foot atop her padded horse attired in a flowing knee-length gown, the customary attire for equestriennes of the day. A few lines of poetry accompanied the announcement.

*Ladies of Launceston, your favour I sue
For next Monday evening when I make my debut
As the first female equestrian who's appeared in the land
And if your kind patronage that night I command
I will no other favor ask, nor none other court
And acknowledge, with gratitude, your aid and support.*

A varied program was produced in support of Mrs Ashton. Mills appeared in an act of horsemanship entitled the *Jumper of Antwerp*. This was followed by Ashton's double act of horsemanship on a pair of barebacked steeds, entitled *Horseman or No Horseman*. Hunter performed the *Wooden Shoe Dance* upon the tightrope and, with his feet encased in baskets, other tricks on the tightrope. Ashton, 'the Monarch Horseman', appeared in an equestrian spectacle entitled *The Hearts of Oak; or The Perils of a British Tar*, during which he danced a hornpipe on his bareback steed. Ashton and his wife appeared on their 'two highly trained steeds' as *Mercury and Pandora*. Then Mrs Ashton appeared in a solo equestrian act as *The Bavarian Broom Girl*. A grand 'equestrian and pedestrian' act entitled *Yankee Doodle's Come to Town Upon his Little Pony* featured other members of the company in the earliest known colonial rendition of *commedia dell'arte*. In this piece, Ashton, Carter, Mills and Mrs Ashton assumed the traditional 'commedia' roles



A poster for Ashton's circus and zoo. (State Library of New South Wales.)

of harlequin, clown, pantaloone and columbine, respectively. The performance within the amphitheatre concluded with a mock Spanish bullfight by members of the company but – as patrons took their leave – they saw Hunter ‘walking the ascension rope from Elizabeth Street over the top of the circus into York Street’.¹⁴⁸

Despite unfavourable weather, Mrs Ashton’s benefit was well-attended and she astonished her audience in the performance of *Mercury and Pandora*.

Her graceful attitudes and the confidence she displayed, while the well-trained steeds were performing their evolutions, elicited much applause and were creditable alike to herself and her instructor, Mr Ashton.¹⁴⁹

Ashton’s *The Hearts of Oak; or The Perils of a British Tar* appears to have been the same as, or at least similar to, *The Vicissitudes of a Tar*, one of Ducrow’s most famous equestrian pantomimes. A representation of nautical life first presented at Astley’s in 1824, the piece had its genesis some years earlier during Ducrow’s tour of Europe.¹⁵⁰ As *The Sailor’s Return*, it was produced in Radford’s Royal Circus in January 1848 and in Sydney at the Royal Australian Equestrian Circus by the equestrian John Jones in October 1850.¹⁵¹ Another, *The Jumper of Antwerp*, appears to have been a modification of *The Post Boy of Antwerp*, an equestrian piece based on Ducrow’s most famous equestrian pantomime, *The Courier of St Petersburg*.¹⁵² It is possible that the Ashtons’ equestrian duet of *Mercury and Pandora* was an elaboration of the equestrian solo of *The Flight of Mercury*, one of Ducrow’s *poses plastique*.¹⁵³ The *Bavarian Broom Girl* may have corresponded to the piece, *Buy a Broom*, a ‘laughable act of horsemanship’ presented by Radford in 1848.¹⁵⁴ The other equestrian items presented by Ashton in Launceston in 1851, *Horseman or No Horseman* and *Yankee Doodle’s Come to Town Upon his Little Pony*, appear to be of American origin and do not elsewhere appear in colonial circus programs of the period. We may speculate that James Hunter learned these acts of horsemanship during his American sojourn of 1822 to 1829 and taught them to Ashton.

During the Launceston season, Ashton performed a special stunt – riding into the town standing astride two horses, one foot on the back of each horse. When a dispute arose with a member of the public over whether or not he had performed a particular feat within the stipulated time to win a wager, Ashton undertook to perform an even more arduous feat for the same amount of money. This was to ride seven horses at once from Hobler’s Bridge to an undisclosed destination at one o’clock on the afternoon of Monday 14 April.¹⁵⁵ However, there is no account extant of the spectacle probably because, despite the wager, the Ashtons suddenly took their leave of Launceston.

[He] decamped...without beat of drum, leaving numerous creditors to deplore his exit. He had taken his and his wife’s passage in the *Shamrock* for Port Phillip and when she was passing down river attempted to come on board from a boat but Captain Gilmore, who had been informed of his flight, would not allow him. He had been traced on the road to George Town and will, no doubt, hang about there until some vessel is going to Port Phillip, when he will elude the vigilance of that eagle-eyed magistrate, Mr Davis, and his notable constables as easily as many have done before.¹⁵⁶

148 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 12 April 1851.

149 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 16 April 1851.

150 Saxon, pp. 87, 97, 99.

151 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 1 January 1848; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 October 1850.

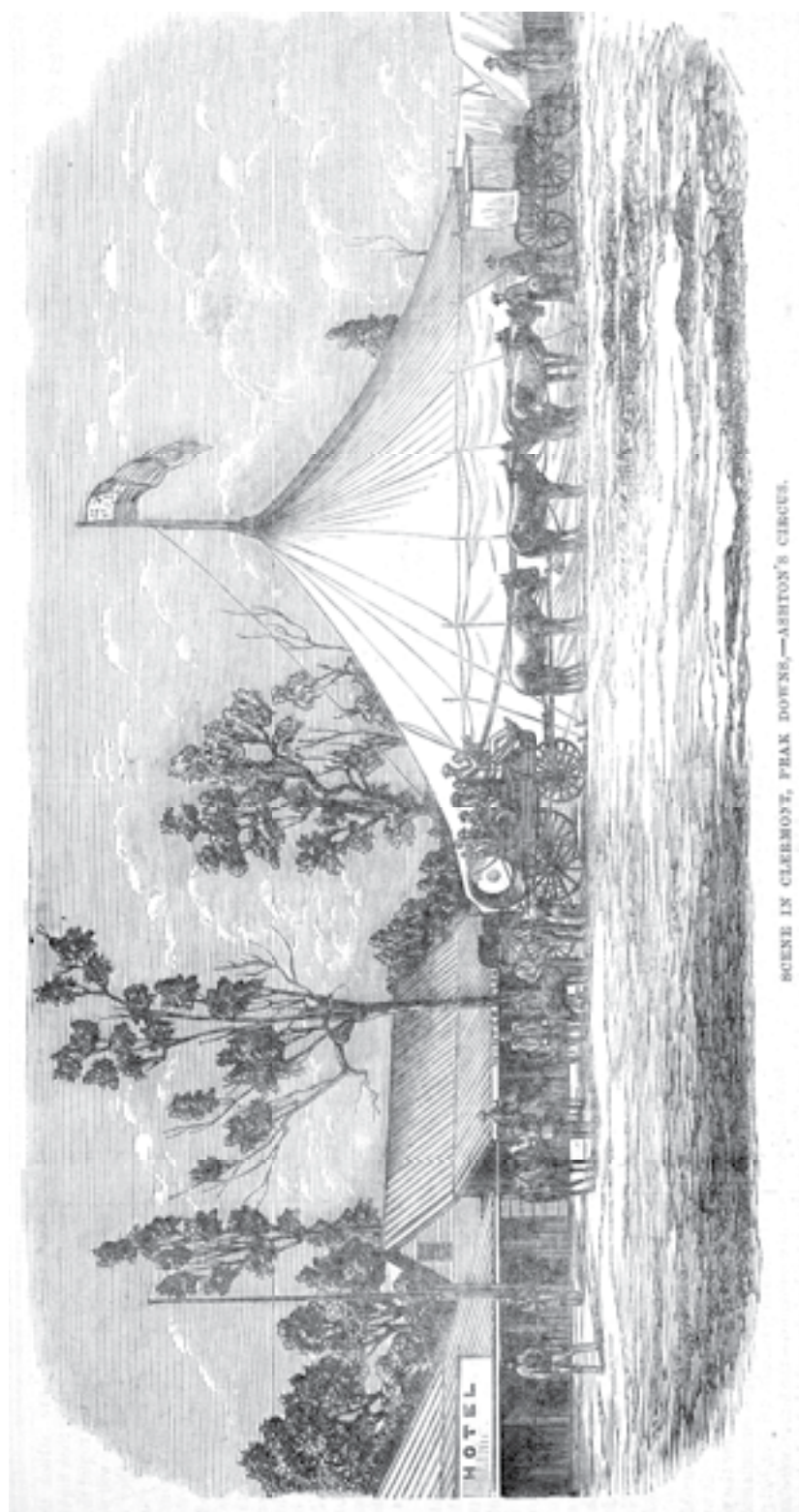
152 Speaight, p. 59.

153 Saxon, pp. 110, 123.

154 *Hobart Town Courier*, 24 May 1848.

155 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 12 April 1851.

156 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 19 April 1851.



Ashton's British-American Circus at Clermont, Queensland, from *Australian Town & Country Journal*, 3 May 1873. (Courtesy State Library of New South Wales).

Not long after Ashton left the Amphitheatre and his company ‘in such a disgraceful manner’, the establishment was re-opened under the management of James Hunter but after a short season closed again.¹⁵⁷ By August the Ashtons had arrived in Sydney.¹⁵⁸ Ashton never returned to Van Diemen’s Land. Although short-lived, Ashton’s Royal Amphitheatre in Launceston in 1851 marks the origins of the present day Ashton’s Circus.

It is recorded that Ashton opened a circus in Bourke Street East during 1851.¹⁵⁹ If correct, this must have taken place some time after his arrival from Launceston that April but prior to him sailing from Port Phillip to Sydney in August. Ashton and his wife arrived in Sydney by the *Shamrock* from Port Philip on 23 August 1851.¹⁶⁰ On that day, John Malcom re-opened the Royal Australian Circus after a period of renovations. Conveniently overlooking their surreptitious departure from Launceston, and Ashton’s convict past, Malcom touted

the arrival of Mr and Mrs Ashton from the amphitheatres of Dublin and Liverpool ... The feats of horsemanship achieved by Mr Ashton on bareback steeds must be seen to be appreciated, the great perfection to which the noble animals are brought must be, by everyholder, admired.¹⁶¹

By July 1852 Ashton had commenced his travels with his own peripatetic circus, named at first Ashton’s Olympic Circus.¹⁶² Despite changes in proprietorship over succeeding generations, and periods of enforced inactivity, Ashton’s Circus, in its various guises, remains in operation and in the hands of Ashton family descendants to the present day.¹⁶³

Radford’s demise

Despite the end to his pioneering entrepreneurial ventures in Van Diemen’s Land, Radford’s business acumen was undiminished. He found a new outlet for his entrepreneurial energies in Adelaide and would play a key role in introducing circus entertainments there. Describing himself as a ‘veterinary surgeon’, and forty years of age, Robert Radford married a widow, Letitia Baird, at Kapunda in July 1858.¹⁶⁴ Seven years later, after a brief illness, Radford died at his residence at Waterloo Plains near Kapunda on 30 March 1865 at the age of forty-eight years. He was buried the following day in a grave that remains unmarked.¹⁶⁵

Coincidentally, on the eve of Radford’s death two former members of his former equestrian company were in Adelaide. Golden Ashton, now calling himself ‘James Henry’ Ashton, was there with his own circus – Ashton’s Circus – which had travelled overland from Victoria.¹⁶⁶ At the Victoria Theatre, John Jones and his three young sons appeared as ‘The St Leon Troupe’. Their acrobatics and other entertainments formed the basis of the later St Leon’s Circus, founded in 1875, and the name by which this family eventually became known.¹⁶⁷

157 As far as gathered, Hunter had no further association with circus, either in Van Diemen’s Land or on the mainland. He may have been the ‘John’ Hunter [*sic*] who died at a pauper’s establishment in Hobart in 1873, aged 70 years.

158 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 August 1851.

159 *Benalla Standard*, 14 November 1879.

160 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 August 1851.

161 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 August 1851.

162 *Maitland Mercury*, 8 July 1852.

163 The two ‘Ashton’ circuses of today – Ashton’s Circus and the recently-organised Circus Joseph Ashton – are conducted by fifth and sixth generations of the family, respectively.

164 Registrar-General, South Australia, Marriages, 1858/#94: Robert Avis Radford and Letitia Baird, at Kapunda.

165 *South Australian Advertiser*, 5 April 1865.

166 Golden Ashton appears to have settled on the alternative name of ‘James Henry’ Ashton by late 1852. At that time he was travelling in New South Wales with his circus.

167 *South Australian Advertiser*, 27 March 1865.