

# TOO MANY COOKES?

DAVID P. WEBSTER

While the extraordinary number of circus performers named Cooke may make research difficult, there should never be complaints of too many Cookes as this great old family of showmen played an extremely important part in popularizing circuses and were, with good reason, great supporters of strongmen. They, more than anybody else, set the scene for the Golden Age of Strength. Many think that strongman acts began with Samson and Sandow in late Victorian times but that is far from true; there were good, well-known strongmen one hundred years earlier and what's more, they were very versatile performers capable of feats which are beyond the capabilities of most strongmen today.

The Cookes were descended from a baronet, Sir Thomas Cooke, Bart., of Holkham Hall, Norfolk, a strongman who founded one of the very first travelling circuses and thus earned an enviable place in history. It was also one of the first families to take a complete circus abroad—but that is getting a little ahead of the story.

The exact date of the founding of this circus is difficult to pinpoint and it is likely to be earlier than generally stated. Certainly they toured in the early 1800s, but if Cooke's Circus was much enjoyed by Scotland's national poet, as has been claimed, then it must have been quite a lot earlier than was generally believed as Robert Burns lived from 1759-1796. This fits in with other accepted dates, e.g. Thomas Taplin Cooke, son of the founder, was born into the circus family in Warwick in 1782, so they were already on the road at that time.

Scotland became one of the Cooke's major locations, and it was because of their lasting reputation in this area and their unbroken links with strongmen that the author made a special study of this

circus dynasty. I found a great deal of interest in many of their original circus posters from the early 1800s and was lucky enough to purchase several Cooke circus posters at a church book sale in Edinburgh. It did not take me long to reach the conclusion that the Cooke family made a very significant contribution to the development of the circus. Even their very early posters featured strength and posing acts, which is not surprising considering that the founder and some of his descendants were just such performers.

Thomas Taplin Cooke was a professional strongman with his father's circus and in his act he supported on his chest a platform on which ten men mounted and were held solidly to great applause. This might merely have been bearing the weight while lying on the ground, a stunt of no great merit, but "being held solidly to great applause," as stated in the contemporary report suggests that it could be one of the earliest recorded examples of the Tomb of Hercules feat. He became well known in the Scottish fairground booths of the late eighteenth century and became even more like his father when he, too, became a noted proprietor. Like most of the Cookes, Thomas Taplin was an all-round athlete, a competent tightrope walker and talented equestrian. As he took over from his dad, and became thought of as the patriarch, the strongman's offspring intermarried into shows throughout the world. It was almost certainly the first major circus family in existence.


By going to Spain and Portugal, and appearing in Lisbon in 1816, Thomas Cooke's became one of the first overseas touring circuses. It was probably the second to do so, the earliest being Astley's, recognized as being the first circus-type entertainment as we know it today. After getting quite rich from this tour, the Cooke

**Great Success!!**  
**Cooke's Equestrian Circus,**  
**Great Windmill Street,**  
**HAYMARKET.**

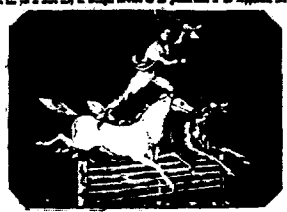
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**CHANGE OF PERFORMANCE,**  
**On MONDAY, APRIL 11, 1831,**  
**AND EVERY EVENING DURING THE WEEK,**  
**A GRAND EQUESTRIAN**  
**DISPLAY**  
**AND SPLENDID PAGEANT.**

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Mr. COOKE respectfully sheweth the Ability, Force, and Power, that the Performances of his Circus, for the Week will be presented to the  
**Before THEIR MAJESTIES, at the Royal Pavilion, Brighton,**  
 on the 10th of September, 1830, and of which THEIR MAJESTIES were pleased to witness an Exhibition of Performances, on the 10th of the same  
 Day, and to command that the said Performances should be presented to the said MAJESTIES, and that the said Performances  
 should be continued to the 15th of the same Month, and that the said Performances should be continued to the 15th of the same Month,  
 and that the said Performances should be continued to the 15th of the same Month, and that the said Performances should be continued to the 15th of the same Month.



MR. J. COOKE, A FIRST-RATE RIDERMAN OF THE PRESENT DAY,  
 Will perform a variety of Tricks, equal to the BEST.

And, while standing on the Back of the Horse, will also execute various Tricks, such as the "Iron Game"  
 and the "Cannon," in a manner never before seen.

**FOX HUNTER**  
 AND  
**AMAZONS and CHEVALIERS.**

**LILIPUTIAN BACCHUS!**  
 With the Assistance of Fiction, the Fables of Happiness and Peace.

**SICILIAN PONY**  
 Will display various Tricks, in a manner never before seen, and will also perform the "Iron Game" in a manner never before seen.

**TIGHT ROPE!**  
 Performed by Messrs. Wells & Furlong.

**RIVAL CLOWNS, by Messrs. Wells & Furlong.**  
 Directors of the Ride, Messrs. EDWIN & SMITH.

**Equestrianism**  
 Including the Three Divisions of the British Equestrian Circus.

**L'ACTION DE VOLTIGER!**  
 Exercises Suprants d'Equitation!

**BIRTH DAY!**  
**THE INBRIATED SOLDIER**  
 The beautiful and noble Horse, PEGASUS,  
 Will perform various Tricks, in a manner never before seen, and will also perform the "Iron Game" in a manner never before seen.

**BRITISH SAILOR**

AN 1831 POSTER ANNOUNCING A PERFORMANCE OF COOKE'S EQUESTRIAN CIRCUS AT THE HAYMARKET THEATER IN LONDON.

family decided to sail to America in 1817 but the idea was aborted after losing forty good horses in a bad storm in the Bay of Biscay. Back in Britain the family established a widespread circuit of indoor facilities, permanent and semi-permanent wooden buildings, particularly in Scotland where they had many venues in major cities and towns — Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen, Perth and Greenock.

Naturally, they had many locations in England too and they became Cooke's *Royal Circus* after a command performance before William IV and Queen Adelaide at the Royal Pavilion in Brighton in 1830. Six years later Thomas Cooke, with 130 performers (and forty of his family) eventually got to America in three sailing ships. In New York the strongman built an amphitheater seating two thousand people and erected another permanent building in Baltimore. Both were burnt down, all horses being lost in the second fire. They returned to Britain in 1837 and although disheartened, continued to build a circus empire. Old man Cooke died on 19 March 1866 at the age of eighty-four having seen his family become a circus legend.

While they have usually been associated with equestrianism, strength and physical acts were traditional in Cooke family shows. At Cooke's Royal Equestrian Establishment Circus at Dundee in February 1835, J. Cooke featured "Wonderful feats of strength by the Roman Hercules or Iron Arm." Woodcuts of Hercules were seen on many of the posters. Strength was also evident when a group of strongmen regularly gave "A surprising display of Agility by the numerous Artistes in which they formed many wonderful positions representing Ancient Pyramidic Devices." One of the early pyramid acts included Messrs. Ansell, H. Brown, R. Brown, Candler, Cunningham, Furlong, Gunn, and Taylor. These names crop up on many circus bills prior to 1850, often in solo acts in their own right. The earliest displayed advertisement of Astley's circus from 1788 included Mr. J. Taylor as a savage chief, a part suited to a man of fine physique, and one of the Browns became a proprietor working under the name of Toumaire in 1845.

William Cooke's touring circus in and around 1840 featured his personal strongman act and at various times other strongmen such as Carlo Spelterini of Italy and a Mr. Baker. The nationalities of these stalwarts was subject to change. Spelterini was either the Italian Hercules or the Patagonian Samson. Baker was the English Strongman or the Patagonian Samson. The latter professional name was perhaps an attempt to cash in on the fame of the recent Italian strongman, Giovanni Belzoni (1778-1823). Spelterini had long been associated with Cooke's and had done posing, balancing and strongman acts for them at a major event they staged in Vauxhall Gardens in London in 1827. He was also hired by William Cooke for Scottish dates in the early 1840s. One of his favorite stunts was to balance a large heavy plank, or a caber, on his chin. As a complete contrast and amusement, he was equally adept at balancing a peacock's feather in the same way.

Alfred Cooke's Circus in June 1842 advertised "Unprecedented Evolutions, Athletic Displays and Herculean Achievements not to be equalled by Modern Gymnastics." In 1841, Astley's Circus was destroyed by fire for the third time and the manager of the

new Astley's of the 1850s was the before-mentioned William Cooke (1808-1886), second oldest son of Thomas Taplin Cooke and Mary Ann Cooke (nee Thorpe 1784-1868). William was atypical Cooke, a strongman like his father and grandfather before him, a superb equestrian and a most acrobatic clown. He was also equally at home on tightrope or slack wire. On the latter he is said to have revolved one hundred times "standing erect on the cord." That would be a clever trick! We suspect this was what was known as "short swings" as opposed to grand circles or long swings. One of William Cooke's incredible strongman feats was performed high above the ring. He hung upside down from a small platform and held suspended from his hands a grown horse. No doubt he was well strapped but it was nevertheless a spectacular presentation and the earliest performance I know of such a feat, although it was soon being copied by others.

On 22 February 1836 there was a benefit for Mr. William Cooke at Aberdeen in the northeast of Scotland and, of course, the beneficiary was well featured. The large woodcut on the poster for this special event shows a strongman of bulky proportions fighting with a lion. We speculate whether this was supposed to represent the star of the show. Posing was popular at that time and an "Italian Statues" act was one of the highlights. William and his brother James had put such an act together and a month earlier had presented an attractive series of tableaux —Two Marble Statues —and ten gladiatorial poses were described in the adverts.

With the passing of the years William Cooke became less energetic and more involved with animal training just as Zass, the Amazing Samson did almost one hundred years later. William was not only a third generation strongman but also a third generation circus proprietor, and clearly a very approachable individual. In *Circus Life and Celebrities*, Frost records how a circus entrepreneur in difficulties travelled to London on the night train and roused William Cooke very early in the morning. In spite of the unearthly hour, Cooke helped greatly, hiring him nine horses and at the same time arrangements were made for Thomas Cooke to be ringmaster and his son James to be a rider.

William Cooke leased Astley's from William Batty from 1853 until 1860. He gave up the lease at that time as Batty, a very rich man, wished to raise the rent or, alternatively, to sell the property. Cooke refused the terms offered and Astley's went into decline and never recovered. There have been contradictory views on the success of Cooke's tenancy. Thomas Frost, in 1875, wrote that all Batty's successors *with the exception of William Cooke* had signally failed. Cooke's presentation at Astley's of the Battle of Waterloo was undoubtedly a great box office hit and they always found indoor venues to be cost effective. However, William also diversified with travelling, tented circuses and some authorities believe these subsidized Astley's — though it could have been the opposite.

William Cooke retired in 1860 and his son, another William, took over the management until 2 April 1862 when the company and its assets were sold. The senior William died in Brixton, London on 6 May 1886, leaving five children by his first wife Mary Ann and two by his second wife, Sarah. Cooke's circuses remained prominent in Scotland until after the start of World War I. On several occasions I listened with great pleasure to personal descriptions by Allan

Jamieson, an old athletic friend who had attended and loved these shows. He knew well John Henry Cooke's Royal Circus at Bridge Street, Aberdeen, in the 1890s. John Henry, son of Alfred, was born in New York during the Cooke's tour in 1836. Apart from the family enterprises he was a popular star with Sangers and Henglers. The Henglers and Cookes worked in each others' circuses and the families intermarried. In Glasgow, where Hengler's Circus had a great following, John Henry Cooke was famous as a boxer and the Saxon Trio was another star attraction with Hengler's in Glasgow at the beginning of the century. Of course John Henry was also an equestrian of exceptional merit, indeed of world class, and in addition to nine American tours he travelled all over the globe with great success. He died on 22 August 1917.

Another benefactor to strongmen of that era was William Batty (1801-1868), a man of indomitable energy and enterprise, who toured widely from the 1820s until the 1840s. In 1841, showing great opportunism when Astley's was burned, Batty converted Lambeth Baths, London, into a circus and did good business. A year later at the Olympic Arena, as he called his new establishment, Batty booked a fine strength act which featured stunts similar to those of William Cooke and should not be overlooked in this review. The athlete, Walker, hung suspended by his feet and supported the weight of six men. He also held six cartwheels in the same way, although two of them were on his feet and the weight taken by slings. The performer is almost certainly H. Walker who was a wirewalker with Batty and also Cooke's around that time.

Lavator Lee (1817-1891) appeared in the same programme and on a special benefit night he threw twelve fifty-six pound weights over his head, vaulted over fourteen horses, threw a back somersault on the back of a horse going at full speed and turned twenty-one forward somersaults without the aid of a springboard. Most important, Lee did the Roman Chair exercise with an iron bar weighing one hundred pounds. In past literature, Felice Prades, known as Napoli (born in 1821), Professor Atilla (Louis Durlacher 1844-1924) and Sandow (Friedrich Muller, 1867-1925), have all been credited with the origination of the Roman Chair feat but, undoubtedly, Lavator did it much earlier than any of them. Lavator Lee was a good horseman, gymnast and balancer. He died at Battersea, London, on 18 March 1871 and was buried at Norwood Cemetery.

Evan Dewhurst, the clown at this show, got into strength stunts by walking on his hands carrying in his mouth two fifty-six pound weights. This was the same Mr. Dewhurst who appeared with Astley's and in 1840 with Cooke's Royal Circus in an act called "great Gymnastic Efforts." Dewhurst had a nice line of patter and was famous for his witty observations and curious speeches.

These are just a few examples of strongmen who were active in my own locality and throughout Britain long before the great names of strength we know today. Their lifestyles were shocking by today's standards — poor food, unsanitary conditions, no scientific training or barbells, unhygienic living quarters, with many lesser performers doubling as beastminders and sleeping alongside the animals. Yet their performances were outstanding and we welcome the opportunity to share this information and give credit where credit is due.