Entertainment in Devon in the 1920s

Rosalind Leveridge

Prior to the outbreak of war in 1914, larger towns and cities such as Plymouth, Exeter, and especially Torquay had a dynamic and varied entertainment provision which had gradually developed over previous decades. A wide range of amusements existed, catering for every pocket and taste. In the wider county of Devon, especially in more rural areas, the quality and frequency of entertainment available varied considerably from location to location. The high-class resort of Torquay:

> … regularly enjoyed grand spectacles and London performers, world class concerts and celebrity visits in sumptuous venues such as the Theatre Royal and Opera House, the Bath Saloons or the newly built Torquay Pavilion. Here audiences thrilled to the adventures of Scott of the Antarctic, Amundsen and Shackleton, heard the lectures of Sir Winston Churchill and watched performances by well-known names such as the actress Ellen Terry, music hall star George Robey, or the pianist Paderewski.[1]

Cinema-going became gradually established as a regular pursuit, as film began to find homes of its own. Few early cinemas in the region had been purpose-built – most had been created simply by adapting existing buildings such as drill halls, market halls or assembly rooms. In Sidmouth in 1913, for example, the proprietor Mr Ellis, had converted an empty restaurant to form what the press commended as 'a thoroughly up-to-date picture palace'.[2] In these pre-war years, as confidence in the industry grew, investment resulted in a few purpose-built picture palaces being built in the region, which boasted luxurious interiors, heating and lighting, and attractions and comforts to entice in its customers.[3]

In smaller localities, residents were dependent on travelling shows and professional touring companies – dioramas, myrioramas, circuses, fairs, lecturers and lanternists – to provide shows, which were often infrequent and irregular. Amateur entertainments, organised by churches, charities and local societies and held in local halls and schoolrooms, were numerous. Shows or lectures illustrated by magic lantern continued to be especially popular, with literary or scientific societies, church and missionary groups, Sunday schools and temperance groups making regular use of lantern slides for education and amusement.

The outbreak of war had a significant impact on entertainment provision. Only a few of the touring shows that had previously reached Devon managed to continue. In a welcome continuity with pre-war entertainment, the celebrated London magician David Devant, Poole's myrioramas, and Bostock's circus, all managed to visit. War had called an untimely halt to Bostock's tour of France and England, and on his return he toured the south-west of

[1] Rosalind Leveridge, '"From Gay to Grave": Entertainments at Home 1914–1918' in *Devon in the First World War* (Short Run Press, 2018), p. 53.
[2] *Sidmouth Observer*, 23 July 1913.
[3] Rosalind Leveridge, *Limelights and Shadows: Popular and Visual Culture in South West England, 1880–1914,* PhD thesis for the University of Exeter, 2011.

England, visiting such towns as Exmouth, Plymouth and Exeter. The difficulties they faced were enormous, as E. H. Bostock described in 1916:

> My menagerie is experiencing unenviable times on the road. Retaining staff and finding forage is another heartbreak. But the greatest of difficulties for circuses in England I find is the lighting restrictions, which impose a severe handicap on a show under a canvas roof.[4]

With the restrictions of war lifted and the return of men home from the fighting, some forms of entertainments could gradually resume their pre-war patterns. Men could return to manning projectors in cinemas, operating machinery at fairs, and travelling with shows and fairs once more. One of the first to seize the moment was E.H. Bostock himself, who wrote following the return of his son in March 1919: 'Lieut. John Reginald, Wombwell Bostock, has been released from the Army. I have made him a present of the Bostock and Wombwell Menagerie, lock stock and barrel, as it is time to take it back out on the road.'[5] It arrived in Exeter, in May 1920.[6]

Cinema

While many of the cinemas that had already existed before and during the war continued to operate, the 1920s ushered in a new period of investment in which brand-new, luxurious cinemas were designed, with every comfort to attract the modern cinema-goer. Mr. Lindsell, owner of cinemas in Torquay, Paignton and Dartmouth, thought the time right in 1920 to enlarge the Cinedrome, Plymouth, concluding: 'Sufficient time has elapsed since the end of the war to prove that the house was not enjoying an ephemeral war popularity… during the year since the armistice was signed, the clientele has grown, rather than diminished.'[7]

The continuing shortage of materials and furniture were illustrated by the difficulties encountered with his new cinema in Dartmouth. He explained how it had been:

> … specially built, and planned, furnished and equipped on modern lines. It should have been opened three months ago [however] only a portion of the tip-up seats was delivered: but the remainder turned up on the very morning that had been selected for opening and a big hustle was got on in order to fix them.[8]

In Plymouth, the Savoy Picture House opened in August 1921. It went to some lengths to distinguish itself from existing picture houses, designating itself as a 'super cinema':

> The Savoy is not a derelict kinema house refurbished. It is not a building altered and adapted to its present purpose. It is completely new and specially erected as a super-picture-house. A perfect view of the screen is obtainable from each of the 1,400 seats and at the same time the comfort of every patron has been studied in every detail.[9]

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[4] E. H. Bostock, 'c. Nov 1916: News from E.H. Bostock' in *La Bonche Circus Research*, <https://www.labonche.net/2017/02/war-circus-bostocks>.
[5] E. H. Bostock, 'c. March 1919: News from E.H. Bostock' in *La Bonche Circus Research*, <https://www.labonche.net/2017/02/war-circus-bostocks>.
[6] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 26 May 1920, p. 2.
[7] *The Bioscope*, 18 March 1920, p. 24.
[8] Ibid.
[9] *Western Morning News*, 30 July 1921, p. 3.

It was not just the size that set the Savoy apart – Plymouth cinema-goers here could also enjoy an eight-piece orchestra, tea lounge and café, and a high-class programme, which opened with travel, comedy and news films, and a 1920 film *His House in Order*, based on a play by Sir Arthur Pinero.[10]

Figure 1: Advertisement for the Savoy Cinema, Plymouth, in the *Western Morning News*, 1921.[11]

Another newly opened cinema was The Tudor in St. Marychurch, owned by a Mr Ellis who already had cinemas in Plymouth, Buckfastleigh, Tiverton and Paignton. The press report reflected the importance of a tasteful décor to attract the right clientele, as well as the emphasis on both projection and up-to-date technology in terms of comfort for the cinema-goers:

> A large foyer has been constructed sufficiently large to accommodate as many as the cinema will hold, thus obviating the necessity of adopting the queuing system. Leading up from the foyer are two staircases, with balustrades incorporating the Tudor rose, which has been picked out in scarlet and gold. In the foyer also there will be a chocolate kiosk. The lighting arrangements are both picturesque and effective. The electric lamps

[10] *Western Morning News*, 3 August 1921, p. 3.
[11] *Western Morning News*, 29 July 1921, p. 6.

are in solid oak cases, whilst from the ceiling hang pendants in the shape old fashioned spinning wheels on their sides and these hold electric candle lamps. Gaumont projectors have been installed, and the screen is of plaster. A novel system of heating has been employed, this consisting of electric elements in metal pipes which pass right under the seats. With the exception of one cinema in Scotland and another at Beadford, the Tudor will be the only one in the British Isles in which this system will be in use.[12]

Figure 2: The Tudor Cinema, Torquay.[13]

Towards the end of the decade, a new era of 'talkie' films was just beginning. Cinemas in Devon, as elsewhere in the country, had to decide when or whether to adopt the new technology of sound. New speakers and projectors were required to screen talkies, and not all local cinemas could commit immediately to the investment. It would be another two years before sound ceased to be a novelty, as Geoff Brown explains:

> British studios scrambled to assemble soundstages, proofed against the cacophony of silent film production; cinemas dithered over whether to invest in speaker systems (and if so, which system to buy); film-makers grappled with the difficulties of using a new method of production; actors fretted about how their voices 'recorded'; musicians across

[12] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 21 September 1928, p. 2.
[13] 'Tudor Theatre' in *Cinema Treasures* <https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/47057/photos>.

the UK faced the imminent loss of their livelihood; and cinema audiences attempted to make sense of a new – and struggling – form of entertainment.[14]

Figure 3: Burlington Cinema, Torquay.[15]

In Devon, in some cinemas in the larger towns at least, change kept pace reasonably well with the rest the country. In February 1929, the Burlington Cinema in Torquay screened *The Jazz Singer* (1927), proudly proclaiming that this was the first presentation in the West of England.[16] Starring Al Jolson and Mary McAvoy, it was the first feature film to have a soundtrack that included dialogue and it won an award for being a pioneer film for the talking industry. It reached Exeter's Empire Cinema in June 1929, and at the King's Hall, Exeter was described as a clever talking cartoon, yet there seemed to be little mention locally of the importance of the advent of sound or much awareness of its potential impact.

[14] Geoff Brown, quoted in Pamela Hutchinson, 'C'mon Feel the Noise: What Happened When the Talkies Came to Britain?", *The Guardian* (21 September 2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2015/sep/21/the-talkies-silent-film-british-cinema-alfred-hitchcock>.

[15] Guy Henderson, 'Empire of Lights Evokes Memories of Torquay's Lost Cinemas', *Devon Live* (15 January 2023) <https://www.devonlive.com/whats-on/whats-on-news/gallery/empire-light-cinemas-like-dreamland-8014833>.

[16] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 1 February 1929, p. 11.

Figure 4: Advertisement for *The Jazz Singer* in *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 1929.[17]

In December 1929, the Empire, Torquay was the first in the town to screen another landmark film – *Blackmail* (1929), a dark thriller starring Anny Ondra, and directed by Alfred Hitchcock.[18] This was the first British talking picture and it was a huge success. The Palladium, Exeter, very competitively screened the film just three months after its release.[19]

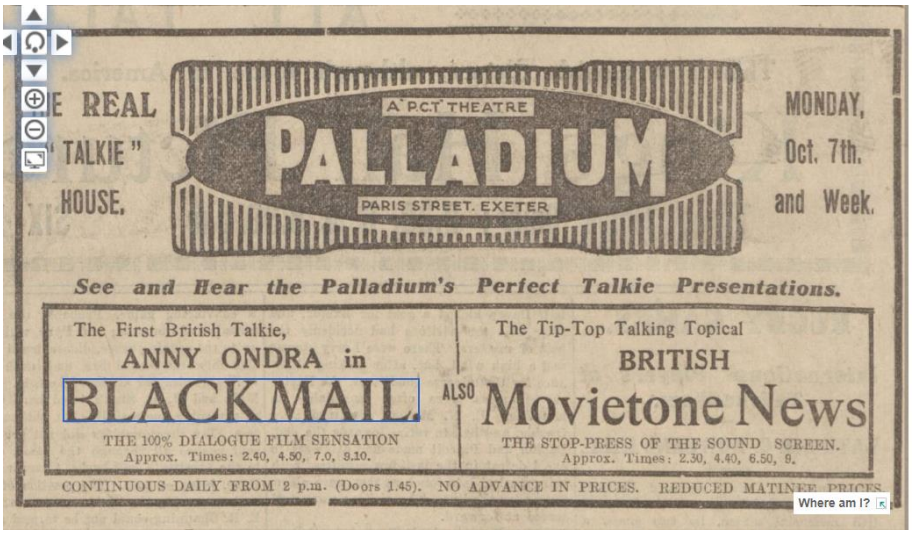

Figure 5: Advertisement for *Blackmail* in the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 1929.[20]

Describing itself as 'First in the West', the King's Hall, Exeter, while professing itself pleased to be able to screen talking pictures for Exonians, explained in a long article the technical difficulties of bringing sound pictures to local audiences:

> The "talkies", which Exonians will have an opportunity of hearing at the King's Hall next week, will be "put over" on British talking picture apparatus, a system with the

[17] Ibid.
[18] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 6 December 1929, p. 6.
[19] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 7 October 1929, p. 1.
[20] Ibid.

> soundtrack on the actual film. The demand is largely the result of announcements that several of the big American film producing companies will allow their products to be shown over specified British machines. Hitherto permission to show these films has been granted only to cinemas with American made equipment. … In some quarters, the British apparatus is regarded as inferior to that hailing from across the Atlantic, but better-informed critics contend that there is nothing to choose between the two. The problem of interchangeability of films made by different Companies has retarded the expansion of talking pictures until just recently, for the fear existed that Hollywood only would be in a position to supply sufficiency of audible features.[21]

The success of cinema was in part due to pricing structures that made it affordable to wider audiences. Patrons in Torquay wishing to see Charlie Chaplin in *The Gold Rush* (1925) in September 1926, for example, could do so for as little as 6d; the most expensive seats could be reserved, at 2s 4d.[22] This compares with prices two weeks previously at The Theatre Royal for *No No Nanette* – a musical comedy which the previous year had been a huge success on Broadway and in the West End – which were 1s 2d for an early door pit seat, or 7s for the front row of the balcony and £2 2s for a box.[23]

Some cinemas, however, also aimed at appealing to a more genteel clientele and thus provided select matinees, orchestras, tea lounges, waiting rooms, parcel collection services and even a free car park. They provided an environment where women could attend alone if they wished. In her diary for 1921 Beatrix Cresswell, a local author and historian, noted in her diary her attendance at the matinée performance of the film *Westward Ho!* and a comedy starring Charlie Chaplin at the Palladium, Exeter. It seems she did not much enjoy the experience – with characteristic candour, she commented: 'Pretty – but not *Westward Ho!* The story being considerably altered, and not for the better.'[24] This was at one of the famous Albany Ward's cinemas and the largest in the city with a capacity of over 800. Her choice of venue, within easy walking distance of Beatrix's home, was significant:

> It became a success because of its size, providing comfort and space that was missing from cinemas elsewhere in the city. The Palladium added a touch of class for the cinema goer, and attracted both the working man and his family, and the upper classes, who would never attend a performance at the smaller, more crowded rivals.[25]

[21] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 29 June 1929, p. 5.
[22] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser,* 10 September 1926, p. 1.
[23] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 27 August 1926, p. 1.
[24] *Diary of Beatrix F. Cresswell* (1921), Devon Heritage Centre, 4686M/F/58.
[25] 'Queen's Hall – Palladium Cinema', *Exeter Memories* (1 March 2018), <https://www.exetermemories.co.uk/em/_entertainment/palladium.php>.

Figure 6: Advertisement for *Westward Ho!* in the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 1921.[26]

The question of the morality and intellectual and educational value of cinema – for years a topic of heated national and local discussion – was still on the agenda in Devon at the end of the decade. In Barnstaple in October 1929, the council debated whether to rescind a resolution passed as late as 1927, prohibiting cinema performances in the Albert Hall. Councillors were torn between recognising the popularity of cinema-going and the certain revenue it would bring in, and the perception that using the Hall to show film would constitute a lowering of standards. One councillor argued:

> There was another section of the community. They might sneer; they might call them "high brows", but they were there. They were interested in social, educational, and religious matters —the intellectual side of life; and though they did not reap as much financial reward as a consequence, that was a side of the life of the community that ought not in his (the speaker's) opinion, to be ignored. There were moral values, and there were monetary values. There was a moral value in the Albert Hall.[27]

The idea of cinema as a means of helping to keep people entertained and off the streets on a Saturday night was raised by another councillor:

> Personally, he did not for the life of him see any objection to the possibility of an occasional cinema show in the Albert Hall, for after all some of them had to think just a little below Shaw and Shakespeare. He (the speaker) was assured by the Superintendent of Police that since entertainments had been provided in the Albert Hall it had been better from his point of view. There was a large public they had to cater for, who liked, particularly on Saturdays, an evening's entertainment. He submitted, with all due respect,

[26] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 18 January 1921, p. 3.
[27] 'Future of Barnstaple Albert Hall', *North Devon Journal*, 17 October 1929, p. 2.

> that it was an innocent evening's recreation, and that people were better off in the Hall than they would be in some other places.[28]

This was by no means a new idea. In Plymouth, a committee had formed in 1921 to try to counteract what they termed 'The Lure of the Streets', a problem of the morality of the town which it was thought might be solved by 'clearing the streets on Sunday evenings'.[29] Here, too, it was thought that popular entertainment might be the answer. Once again, it was their somewhat reluctant conclusion, that while people would likely be persuaded away from the streets by the attractions of the Palace Theatre, Savoy Picture House or Devonport Hippodrome, other proposed venues would put off 'the class of people they were trying to bring in':

> There was an air of sanctity in ecclesiastical buildings which was looked upon with suspicion, and frightened away the class of people they were trying to bring in. The fact was that the average church or chapel schoolroom was a dull, horrible place stowed away at the back, and did not tempt people.[30]

In these exchanges can be seen the class divides that had influenced entertainment locally in previous decades and which still governed attitudes in the 1920s. The tensions remained between maintaining high-class, high-cost entertainments affordably and catering for wider and more popular tastes. Councillors who were responsible for funding or overseeing provision usually inclined towards 'refined' entertainments, which included opera; high-quality lectures from guest celebrities, literary figures, scientists or musicians; musical concerts; and plays by distinguished playwrights or with London casts.

Firstly, there was the question of cost. Barnstaple councillors, having had the Albert Hall recently returned to their management, debated their options. One councillor concluded:

> Cinematograph films, however, did not cost half as much to bring down to Barnstaple as a Company, and if they decided to re-let, it would no doubt be a more paying concern if films were allowed, with the addition of suitable plays.[31]

From the very beginning of the decade, the challenge that cinemas posed to many other established forms of entertainment – theatre, lectures, dioramas – had been evident in Devon, as elsewhere, as this report from 1st January 1920 in *The Bioscope*, an illustrated weekly dedicated to the early years of cinema, demonstrates:

> The Provincial Cinematograph Theatres, Limited, are reported to have purchased the pile of buildings in Torquay which were commenced before the war by a syndicate in which Mr. James Glover, musical director, Drury Lane Theatre, and managing director of the Theatre Royal, Plymouth, was interested. Throughout the war the skeleton works have remained boarded up, war needs and restrictions preventing the completion of the contract. From the theatrical point of view, this was disappointing to Torquay, because it was intended to erect the finest theatre in the South-West. Now it is to be a super-cinema, with, in all probability, changes of programme which will enable Torquay from time to time, to see first-class plays and vaudeville shows. The price is said to be £ 50,000.[32]

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[28] Ibid.
[29] *Western Morning News*, 24 September 1921, p. 3.
[30] Ibid.
[31] 'Future of Barnstaple Albert Hall', *North Devon Journal*, 17 October 1929, p. 2.
[32] *The Bioscope*, 1 January 1920, p. 120.

Cinema companies had the considerable sums of money needed to invest locally in refurbishments and new buildings. Revenues from large seating capacities, weekly changes of programme and wider audiences made cinemas very competitive. An editorial in the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* observed:

> The gradual obliteration that is overtaking the old Victoria Hall premises Queen-street, Exeter, for the purpose of adaptation to the requirements of a well-known firm, is a forcible reminder of the change that has occurred in the public taste for entertainment during the past years. There was a time when the Victoria Hall was the home of all that was most novel and attractive in the entertainment life of the city. The passing of the myriorama and circus as universally popular forms of amusement, and the gradual growth of cinematograph enterprise, tended to alter the position of such places as the Victoria Hall in the sphere of public entertainment, and it is interesting to reflect on the tremendous strides that have been made in the cinema business since the days when it came into popular favour.[33]

Competition from cinemas continued to be fierce, and many venues – often with a degree of reluctance – interspersed shows, plays or concerts with film in a bid to stay open. In April 1922, the manager of the Theatre Royal in Torquay applied for a cinematograph licence, introducing an iron box at the back of the stage from which pictures would be screened, with the assurance that he would only show pictures when nothing else was on.[34] There were evident benefits for local audiences whose horizons were undoubtedly broadened through film: 'Live entertainment went into decline and variety theatres became movie palaces, where eager punters could see exactly the same entertainment as their fellows in Los Angeles, Berlin or Bombay.'[35] This was the fate that would befall the Theatre Royal in Torquay.

Skating

The popularity of film before the war had coincided with a public craze for roller skating, known as 'rinking'. Often the two had co-existed in venues that had maple floors installed for skating as well as a picture screen, such as at Torquay's earliest cinema, the Picturedrome. Weekly programmes were divided between skating and film entertainments, and for some time it seemed that rinking might overtake cinema in popularity. Rinking boasted novel events such as hockey matches, fancy dress competitions, carnivals and skating gymkhanas, and had the advantage that women could freely participate it, whether married or unmarried.

In her autobiography, Agatha Christie had recalled mornings spent on the Torquay rinks as 'a pastime much in vogue'.[36] The craze had mostly had its heyday before the war, but in Devon continued to be popular into the early 1920s. The Bath Saloons in Torquay, which boasted the largest rink in the area, held a skating carnival in 1921 in which local skaters, joined by a contingent from the Millbay Club in Plymouth, wore fancy dress costumes and won prizes

[33] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 19 February 1926, p. 9.
[34] E. N. Stevens and R. S. Casley, *The Theatre, Abbey Road, Torquay 1863–1933* (Torquay, 1995).
[35] '"The Power of the Cinema": Film in the 1920s and 1930s', *Warwick*, <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/archives_online/exhibitions/film>.
[36] Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (William Collins, 1977), p. 135.

for these as well as waltzing, and trick skating in front of an 'exceptionally large audience of spectators':

> … the scene presented by the grand procession in which the skaters carried lighted Chinese lanterns, was extremely pretty, the coloured lighting effects greatly adding to its charm. The competitions were keenly contested, and were productive of some wonderfully artistic skating, and some remarkable tricks.[37]

Mr Brock, of Millbay Rinkeries, assured the readers of the *Western Morning News* that 'roller skating continues to be one of the most popular amusements in Plymouth.'[38]

Figure 7: Advertisement for the Bath Saloons skating rink in the *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 1921.[39]

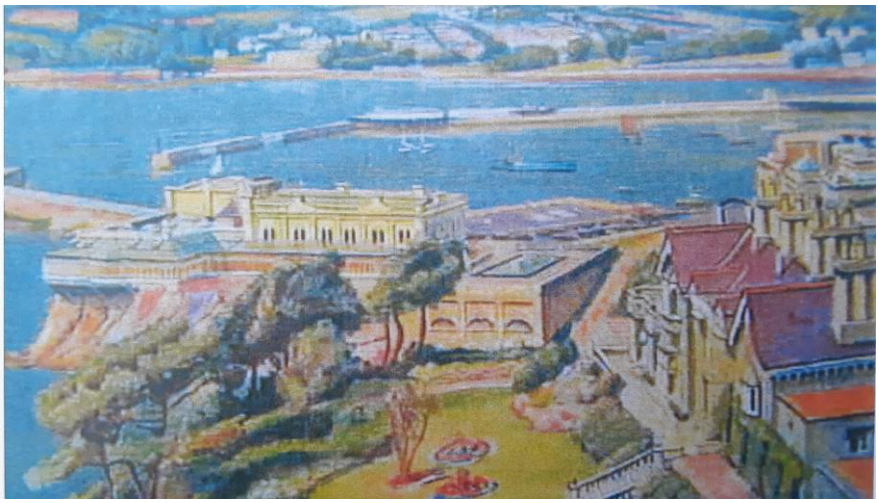


Figure 8: Bath Saloons, Torquay – postcard from the author's collection.

[37] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 4 March 1921, p. 5.
[38] *Western Morning News*, 9 August 1921, p. 3.
[39] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 11 March 1921, p. 1.

But in October 1922, two letters appeared in the *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser* from keen skaters dismayed at the closure of skating during the coming winter, saying that Torquay had 'very few winter amusements for young people'.[40] Difficult – and sometimes risky – decisions had to made about which direction to take when investing large sums in refurbishing and changing the use of entertainment venues for a public that could be very fickle in its tastes. By 1924, the large hall had been converted into the Baths Ballroom, to cater successfully for the current popularity in dancing with 'a series of weekly evening Dances and Dance Teas, in place of Roller-skating and Badminton, which had fallen away from public favour.'[41]

Trick roller skating also formed part of variety acts at this time. 'Wonders on Wheels', who appeared at the Hippodrome, Exeter in 1925, were a trio called 'Los Videos', impressing the spectators:

> Los Videos have struck what is a novelty in these days, really clever and artistic work on roller skates. The trio execute some clever dancing figures, and the male member does some attractive stunts, but the climax in wonderful trick skating is reached by the other member, – a lady who is evidently quite at home on the roller skate – "clog dance" on roller skates was attractive piece of work, but her concluding stunt on a raised platform fairly made the audience gasp.[42]

Yet in 1929, trends changed again. In Exeter, in a revival after a lapse of seventeen years, The Old Drill Hall was reopened:

> The original rock-maple wood floor, the hardest and best fitted for the pastime, is in excellent condition, and the hall has been re-conditioned and adapted to its present purpose. Every preparation has been made in anticipation of a large patronage of skating enthusiasts. Three hundred pairs of skates have been provided, and novices will have the benefit of the services of two skilled instructors. Boy attendants have also been engaged.[43]

The Western Skating Company was investing in the skaters of the future and looking ahead to the 1930s with hope.

[40] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 27 October 1922, p. 9.
[41] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 31 December 1926, p. 7.
[42] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 6 January 1925, p. 7.
[43] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 7 January 1929, p. 5.

Figure 9: Advertisement for The Old Drill Hall in the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*l, 1929.[44]

Dances

A wide diversity of dances began to feature prominently in the annual calendar. This was a form of entertainment that took place in the most varied of settings, from village halls to market halls, hotels to ballrooms, and in which all ages and all levels of society participated. Dance classes for children and adults were very popular during this period. Private teachers were available and routinely advertised in places such as Barnstaple, Exeter, Exmouth, Plymouth, Newton Abbot, Sidmouth, and also in Torquay, where they were especially numerous.

[44] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 9 January 1929, p. 1.

Figure 10: Miss Hickey's Dance Class, Torquay.[45]

Local interest in dancing reflected a national trend that had seen a rapid increase in the availability of venues. As Kathryn Reilly Yurkovsky notes:

> … soon major British cities also saw an influx of dancehalls, restaurants, clubs and other spaces with dance floors and dancing hours. Between 1919 and 1926, an estimated 11,000 dancing establishments were erected throughout the country.[46]

BROMLEY'S BALLROOM
THE STRAND, BARNSTAPLE
DEMONSTRATION
Ballroom Dances.
By Mr. Harry Cook,
A well-known Professional,
Partnered by
Miss Alice Cardens,
Including the New French
"TANGO" and "CHARLESTON,"
The Two NEW DANCES now so
Popular in London.
THURSDAY AFTERNOON NEXT,
NOVEMBER 19th,
FROM FOUR TO SIX.
ADMISSION TO BALLROOM 1/6,
Including Tea.
Dancing Free During Intervals.
DANCE
TUESDAY, NOV. 24th.
8 to 1.
TICKETS 3/6. REFRESHMENTS AT
POPULAR PRICES.
The Wednesday afternoon Dance will be
discontinued until further notice.
SPECIAL ATTRACTION!
TUESDAY, DEC. 15th,
THE FAMOUS
Blue Lagoon Band
(6 Performers).
8 P.M. TO 2.
TICKETS FOR DANCE 4/6.
LADY & GENTLEMAN 8/-
Please Book Early.
Interval, Supper 2/- extra. Buffet Refreshments at Popular Prices.
Our CHRISTMAS BAZAAR
IS NOW OPEN.
A REALLY FINE DISPLAY OF
Cossques, Chocolate Boxes,
Novelties, Christmas Cakes, &c.

Figure 11: Advertisement for dances in Barnstaple in the *North Devon Journal*, 1925.[47]

[45] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser Christmas Number 1925–30* (1925), p. vii.
[46] Kathryn Reilly Yurkovsky, *'The Mania of the Moment': Cinema, Dance Hall, and the Rise of 1920s Leisure Culture in Britain,* Thesis, (May 2015) <https://barnard.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/KathrynReillyYurkovsky_%27The%20Mania%20of%20the%20Moment%27_2015.pdf>, p. 24.
[47] *North Devon Journal*, 12 November 1925.

Light refreshments such as tea for afternoon dances might be served, or a buffet or supper for those held in the evening, sometimes at extra cost. Venues, often decorated for special occasions with flags, flowers, foliage or streamers, could be glittering ballrooms, hotel dance floors, halls of all kinds, a hut or even outdoors. A dance organised by the Axminster Liberal Association was held in the Drill Hall, for example, with music from the Palma Orchestra, Honiton and 200 dancers surrounded by 'large heaps of roses' decorating the room.[48]

Dress might be formal, informal or something in between – those attending the Armistice Eve Dance at the Barnfield Hall, Exeter in 1925, for example, were advised that evening dress was optional.[49] Music was provided by local orchestras and bands, both amateur and professional. Music shops, such as Guest's of Exeter, offered their services as agents for dance bands and orchestras. Katherine Howells how new styles of music and dance helped to democratise leisure:

> But it was not only the rich who were embracing new styles of music and dance. Dances took place all over the country in venues from village halls and pubs to specially built dance halls and Palais de Danse. Jazz and dance bands would be hired for these dances which had varying entrance fees and membership rules, meaning all but the very poorest were able to take part. Young women in particular revelled in the new dance scene, which offered newfound opportunities to socialise with their peers and meet potential romantic partners.[50]

Many dances were also held for fundraising purposes – these varied widely in scale and scope. At the Dolphin New Hall, Honiton, in aid of the Church of England's Waifs and Strays' Society, two dances were held – one for adults and one for 160 children dressed in 'quaint and original costumes.'[51] The Mayor's Unemployment Dance in January 1925 in Torquay Town Hall, with music by the locally well-known Mr. Prowse's orchestra, was 'an unqualified success'. The dance held in aid of the blind soldiers of St. Dunstan's in Westdown School room near Ilfracombe, with prizes for the lucky spot competition of a tray and teapot stand made by the soldiers, raised £4 1s 3d, a profit with which they were most content.[52]

[48] *Western Times,* 23 January 1925, p. 8.
[49] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 10 November 1925, p. 1.
[50] Katherine Howells, 'Jazz, the Charleston and Moral Panic: Music and Dance in 1920s Britain', *The National Archives* (13 May 2022) <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20speople-jazz-the-charleston-and-moral-panic-music-and-dance-in-1920s-britain>.
[51] *Western Times,* 16 January 1925, p. 2.
[52] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 16 January 1925, p. 8.; *North Devon Journal*, 5 November 1925, p. 8.

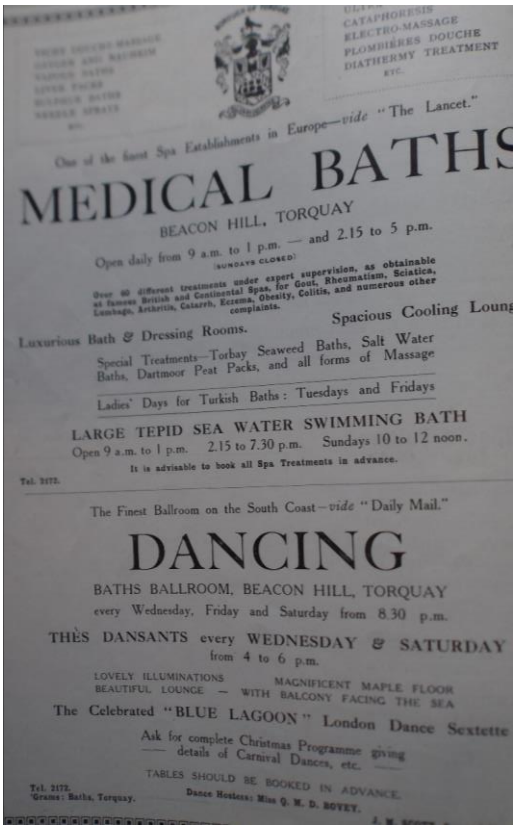


Figure 12: Advertisement for dancing at the Medical Baths, Torquay, 1925.[53]

Dances might be held weekly, monthly, annually or for a special occasion. In November 1926, the first of the Exeter and Broadclyst monthly dances took place on the fine dance floor in the beautiful setting of the Deller's Café, Exeter, with music by the Torquay Blue Lagoon Dance Band.[54] This same band played three times a week at the Medical Baths, Torquay – for 2s a 'dainty tea' was also included, rather less than the Torbay Hotel who held 'thés dansants' in their own ballroom every Wednesday and charged 3s 6d.[55] The Blue Lagoon Band also travelled to Barnstaple, where they were a special attraction with dance tickets costing 4s 6d.[56]

A completely different event was the special dance and confetti fête for sailors, arranged for sailors of the torpedo destroyers lying out in Torbay. The pier was illuminated with numerous fairy lights and a great crowd gathered to watch the dancers who, with their partners,

[53] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser Christmas Number 1925–30* (1925), p. vii.
[54] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 5 November 1926, p. 16.
[55] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 14 March 1924, p. 5; 11 November 1921, p. 1.
[56] *North Devon Journal*, 12 November 1925, p. 4.

numbered as many as 300, dancing in the open space just beyond the pier entrance to the music of The Torquay Prize Band.[57]

Figure 13: Deller's Café, Exeter. By kind permission of Colin Williams-Hawke.

Hunt balls

Hunt balls, held annually, were typically grand affairs attended by the prominent families in the district. Attendance lists were regularly published in the press, which indulged itself frequently in hugely detailed descriptions of the venue, decorations, evening gowns and jewellery. The Cheriton Otter Hunt was held at the ballroom at the Bromley Café, Barnstaple, and was considered at the time to be a glittering and successful event, with over 250 participants in 1925 and the Blue Lagoon Band once again providing the music. Supper was held in the restaurant, adorned with blue and white flowers, while the dancing took place in the ballroom, where 'from the electric light globes hung streamers of these colours, while hoops placed at intervals along the panelled walls, decorated with ribbon of similar hue and evergreens, formed framework for otter masks.' [58]

The other hunt ball in Barnstaple was organised by the Stevenstone Fox Hunt – in 1927 this was held at the Imperial Hotel, with dancing taking place in the large dining room decorated with the colours of the hunt, with navy blue and red streamers, and the traditional foxes'

[57] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 21 July 1922, p. 2.
[58] *North Devon Journal*, 27 August 1925, p. 6.

masks and brushes on the walls.[59] Supper was at tables in an adjacent room, with vases of white heather on the tables and a boar's head in the centre.[60]

In 1925 the Tiverton Hunt Ball was held at the Electric Theatre, Tiverton, which had been 'tastefully and artistically decorated', while the distinguished guests at the East Devon Hunt Ball, traditionally held at the Rougemont Hotel, Exeter, dazzled in the beautiful costumes, as did those attending the Otter Vale Beagles Ball in the handsome new Assembly Hall in Honiton:

> A smart frock of bead embroideries in Egyptian colourings and design was worn by Mrs. Weldon. Mrs George Green was in gracefully draped rust and gold tinsel brocade, with dark brown fur hemming the skirt. Miss Dewdney wore pale blue, with a double cape drapery of beautiful old Indian lace finishing the back of the corsage. Miss Molyneux had a turquoise taffetas frock, with lace panels falling from big bow at the side of the waist. A rose taffetas frock, appliqued with sprays of floral embroidery, was worn by Miss D. Linehan. Miss Dunning was in jade taffetas, with Victorian posy of rose and jade silk flowers, set in gold lace, at one side of the deep waist. A graceful black chiffon velvet frock, with diamante buckles holding the folds at the side, was worn by Mrs. Wayland-Smith, with a pearl neck-chain and long diamond earrings. Mrs. Turner was in black georgette, with the deep bodice of sequin embroideries…[61]

These balls were one of the most costly forms of entertainment at the time and tickets could be very expensive – for the Silverton Hunt Ball at the Rougemont Hotel, Exeter, in 1924, they were 10s 6d, for the Tetcott Hunt Ball, held in Holsworthy were 15s, while for the South Devon Hunt, entrance including supper cost 21s before 1 April, and 25s after that date.[62]

Village hops

Popular dances – known familiarly as 'hops' in towns and villages – were reasonably priced at 4d or 6d and took place in schoolrooms or village halls, usually on a Saturday evening. For Anne Gaw, from Okehampton, the 'Saturday night hop' represented regular affordable entertainment at a time when opportunities were few.[63] Bill Gliddon, a grocer's apprentice who had 3s per week to live on after paying his rent, described the fun of the dances:

> you used to go in the sixpenny 'op and..... no tickets or nothin' like that at all then – put a cross on yer arm with a blue pencil and things like that. So you wouldn't go out again. It'd be packed out but it was a thing that you went to every Saturday night. Course they 'ad to close at twelve, be on eight till twelve but they was all queuing up to get in there as teenagers – lovely.
>
> They never sold any drinks or anything – anything like that it was just the dance and dance only that's all. Everybody on the floor, whether you could dance or no and they used to 'ave Jimmy Gale and 'is band – 'ee 'ad the corner shop down there up top of North Street there,

[59] *North Devon Journal*, 3 January 1924, p. 5.
[60] Ibid.
[61] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 3 January 1925, p. 5: 3 April 1929, p. 7; *Western Times*, 18 January 1924, p. 8.
[62] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 12 December 1924, p. 14 ; *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette,* 10 December 1920, p. 13; *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 2 April 1926, p. 6.
[63] Ann Gaw, interviewed by Jayne Tyler, 13 April 1987, Okehampton interviews, A02.

> 'ee'd got a shop, 'ee was a barber and 'ee was umbrella repairer and a barber – that's the two things that 'ee done. 'Ee ran the town band as well and the dance band. Jimmy Gale's Dance Band.[64]

Not everyone approved of dancing, or the lateness of the hours. In Okehampton, an application for an extension from 11pm to 12am for dances held in the Market Hall aimed at young people, provoked a backlash. One councillor commented:

> … from a health and moral point of view the repeated holding of dances during long hours was not desirable… Time was when a couple of dances during the winter were considered sufficient, but now they were being held every week.'[65]

Others argued that dance was a good form of recreation for the young.[66] The application was granted, but a similar one for an extension until 1am for dances in Torrington's Market Hall was refused.[67]

On occasion, dances also caused people to brush with the law. In 1927, an eighteen-year-old domestic servant was charged with stealing an evening dress, worth £9 9s, from her mistress in order to go to a dance at Sidmouth.[68] Following a disturbance at a dance at the Hut, Longdown, near Exeter, appearing before magistrates were two defendants, accused of arriving drunk, entering without paying, fighting and using filthy language that caused several ladies to burst into tears and one to faint.[69] It was also held against them that the two men had danced together, owing, they argued, to a 'shortage of ladies'. A police constable, summoned from Ide to stop the fighting, had forcibly ejected the 'ringleader', who then struck the policemen on the head, knocking off his helmet. Despite evidence that the constable had been very heavy-handed, the two men both received fines, while the policeman had his summons dismissed.[70]

In 1928, following a church fête at Diptford Rectory Grounds and dance at the village hall, a fight broke out by the church, in which one man was smacked in the face, had blood drawn and was nearly throttled. It emerged that the two parties had been trading insults throughout the evening.[71] Dances, it seems, were not all just about the dancing.

[64] Bill Gliddon, Okehampton interviews, 22 April 1987, A05, part 3.
[65] *Western Times*, 19 August 1927, p. 3.
[66] *Western Times*, 19 August 1927, p. 3.
[67] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 16 April 1927, p. 2.
[68] *Western Times*, 9 September 1927, p. 14.
[69] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 18 December 1929, p. 4.
[70] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 18 December 1929, p. 4.
[71] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 9 October 1928, p. 2.

Leisured and wealthy

Figure 14: Promenade in Princess Gardens, Torquay.[72]

For the minority of very wealthy people, there existed a range of pursuits to fill their leisured hours. Torquay, with its villas for seasonal rent, high-class entertainments and natural beauty, had long been a favoured destination for the rich, titled or famous. Jane Doe, a columnist writing in the Daily Mirror and quoted in the *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, describes Torquay as 'England's Monte Carlo', a place of 'Jewelled Hills', 'Yachts and Beaches', 'Moonlight and Sunlight'. The paper comments how mentions of 'slums and chipped potatoes and cockles' were introduced into the delightful picture. Miss Doe continues: 'The only trippery items were two chip potato stands and a cockle stall. A pity, I thought. They could very well be moved up a sidestreet. But the harbour's really too gem-like to be vulgarised.'[73]

Regular visitors during the decade to Torquay included the Drewe family, who at the same time as building their new home, Castle Drogo on Dartmoor, owned a villa in Torquay named Kilmorie. Here many holidays were spent, both in summer and in winter, with the extended family all spending time in their beautiful house overlooking the bay above Meadfoot Beach. A glimpse into their leisured world is offered by the diary of Mary Drewe, daughter of Julius and Frances. Ownership of their yacht, the Devonia, meant that many days were spent

[72] *Torquay and South Devon Advertiser Christmas Number 1925–30*, 1928, p. 14.
[73] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 31 August 1928, p. 8.

enjoying sailing around the Devon coast. The entry for September 1923 reads: 'Went to Dartmouth to see the Devonia – it was very lovely to be on board again.'[74] Four days later, the diary records how Mary's little nephew is taken out on the water: 'A beautiful day. We took Francis on the yacht at 11. He enjoyed it very much. Went to Exmouth and back. And round the other side of Berry Head.'[75]

Having a car and a chauffeur opened up possibilities for pleasant activities for Mary, such as going to the town and shopping, having been dropped first 'by the Rolls', or touring around. She notes: 'We had a motor drive on the moor by Holne village. The moor looked lovely.'[76]

Fishing in Devon, a sport which Mary enjoyed on their private lake on their Sussex estate, was also made possible through the use of the car: 'I went to Drewsteignton to fish, the first time I had fished for salmon. We went the Whiddon side, it rained harder and we lunched in the car and came back after, it had thoroughly set in.'[77]

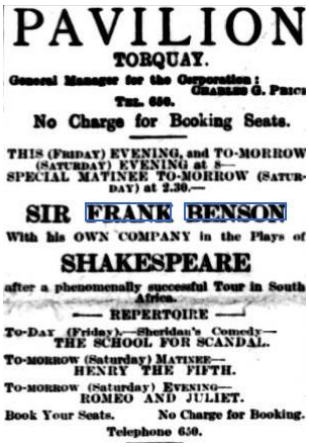

PAVILION
TORQUAY.
General Manager for the Corporation; CHARLES G. PRICE
Tel. 650.
No Charge for Booking Seats.
THIS (FRIDAY) EVENING, and TO-MORROW (SATURDAY) EVENING at 8.—
SPECIAL MATINEE TO-MORROW (SATURDAY) at 2.30.—
SIR FRANK BENSON
With his OWN COMPANY in the Plays of
SHAKESPEARE
after a phenomenally successful Tour in South Africa.
— REPERTOIRE —
To-Day (Friday).—Sheridan's Comedy—
THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL.
To-morrow (Saturday) Matinee—
HENRY THE FIFTH.
To-morrow (Saturday) Evening—
ROMEO AND JULIET.
Book Your Seats. No Charge for Booking.
Telephone 650.

Figure 15: Advertisement for the Pavilion, Torquay, 1923.[78]

The Drewes regularly attended the high-class entertainments, such as opera and theatre, offered by the prestigious companies visiting the impressive venues of Torquay. In March 1923, Mary went to Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, playing at the Pavilion. This was presented by the celebrated Sir Frank Benson, who typified the notable companies frequently visiting Torquay. Known for his productions of Shakespeare, Benson regularly toured the provinces, taking the leading roles himself. The local press lavished praise upon the production, noting: 'With Sir Frank Benson's company one knows beforehand that all will be

[74] *Diary of Mary Drewe, 1923*, unpublished, 3 September 1923, Castle Drogo NT archive.
[75] Ibid., 7 September 1923.
[76] Ibid., 22 September 1923.
[77] Ibid., 13 February 1923.
78 *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 23 March 1923, p. 1.

well. One knows that not only will the men and women players look their parts, but will play them with all their cultured intelligence and consummate art.'[79] Having been in the audience, Mary Drewe's assessment was no less positive, but somewhat briefer: 'We went to a *School for Scandal* – it was awfully good, most amusing.'[80]

Being wealthy sometimes had its disadvantages. Mary's sister Frances Drewe recalled that when they went to the theatre, their father always booked a box, which she termed 'a most overrated thing': they were 'at one side of the theatre where you got a most indifferent view of the stage, but that was always his plan and we had to screw ourselves round in the front of the box to see what we could.'[81]

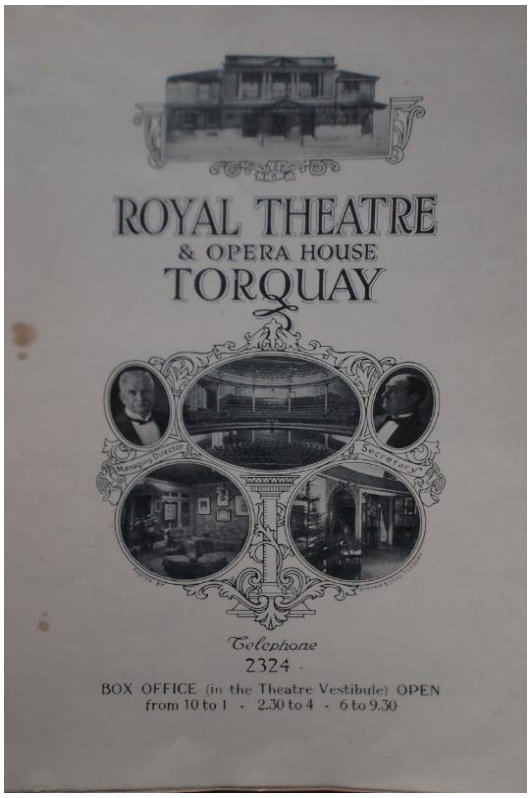


Figure 16: Royal Theatre & Opera House, Torquay. Courtesy of Torquay Library.

[79] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 16 March 1923, p. 10.
[80] *Diary of Mary Drewe 1923*, unpublished, 23 March 1923, Castle Drogo NT archive.
[81] Frances Drewe, quoted in Adrian Francis Drewe, *Wadhurst*, Castle Drogo NT archive, unpublished, p. 24.

The productions that her sister Frances Drewe describes seeing offer a snapshot of refined entertainment in Devon in the 1920s:

> I want to record the theatres we enjoyed so much during our stays in Torquay. The Theatre Royal …used to provide a wonderful variety of plays and opera. We used to go to plays when the well-known Forbes Robertson family came and acted themselves and we were very fortunate in having Sir Henry Lytton still travelling himself with the D'Oyly Carte company with the Gilbert and Sullivan operas. They were the highlights in our season when they came…Then the Pavilion at the end of Princes Gardens…had very good concerts and I remember hearing Clara Butt there. The Carl Rosa opera Company came regularly. My sister and I enjoyed travel lectures there which in those days were really something quite unusual and we looked forward very much to these lectures when we were taken to many parts of the continent![82]

Theatres

Many of the theatre shows came from London, or were of London standard, and suited the expectations of residents and visitors who were seeking cultured entertainment. It was not only Torquay that boasted fine theatres and repertoires.

Figure 17: 1920s postcard of Derry's Clock and Theatre, Plymouth. Courtesy of Matthew Lloyd.

In 1921, the Theatre Royal, Plymouth, announced their intention to 'give Plymouth nothing but the best of theatrical fare', offering that week the play *Brown Sugar* by Lady Arthur Lever, directly from a long run at the Garrick Theatre. The company included the successful Shakespearian actress Eileen Beldon as its leading lady who had played the part in the London production. In 1925, a production by the celebrated stage producer J. Bannister

[82] Frances Drewe, quoted in Adrian Francis Drewe, *Wadhurst*, Castle Drogo NT archive, unpublished, p. 24.

Howard's company of Noel Coward's hugely successful play *The Vortex*, written in 1924, came directly to Plymouth from the Gaiety Theatre London.[83]

The theatre regularly offered programmes of plays that had achieved success in London and the provinces, some played by lesser-known companies and leading actors, and others with those at the top of their profession. Thus, April 1925 saw both Shaw's *Arms and the Man* performed, as well as his very popular play *Pygmalion*, with the British actress Florence Jackson as Eliza Doolittle.[84]

During this period, Plymouth Repertory Theatre also brought quality productions to the city. Harry Wall's play *Havoc* came from the London's Haymarket in 1925 and the Pier Pavilion also hosted regular plays and shows, as well as cabaret evenings on Friday nights.[85]

Figure 18: Grand Theatre, Plymouth.[86]

Plymouth also boasted the Grand Theatre, which offered a varied and lively programme of plays, comedies, pantomimes, romantic dramas, musical comedies and revues.

[83] *Western Morning News*, 15 August 1925, p. 4.
[84] *Western Morning News*, 24 April 1925, p. 3.
[85] *Western Morning News*, 11 August 1925, p. 4.
[86] 'Grand Theatre', *Cinema Treasures*, <https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/33730>.

GRAND THEATRE, PLYMOUTH.
Proprietors and Managers: KING & PARRY.

TO-NIGHT AT 6.35 AND 8.45,
THE LATEST UP-TO-DATE DRAMA,
"A FLAPPER'S MARRIED LIFE."

PIER PAVILION, PLYMOUTH.

TO-DAY AT 3.15 AND 7.45 P.M. AND TWICE DAILY THROUGHOUT THE WEEK,
"THE J's" CONCERT COMPANY.
The Hall-Mark of Originality. (Companion Company to the Famous "Q's" from the London Coliseum). Artistes include Veda Carlysle, Soprano; Marie Vivian, Comedienne and Dancer; Archie Barrow, Pianiste-Baritone; Jack Mavis, Light Comedian and Dancer; Dudley Bishop, Comedian; Eric Rayle, Entertainer; and Ernest Hall, Operatic Tenor.
Pier Café Open Daily (Sundays Included) for Teas, &c., Chocolates, and Cigarettes. Rowing Boats on Hire at the Company's West Hoe Pier. Excursion Steamers leave the Pier Daily. For full particulars see Local Papers.

HIPPODROME, DEVONPORT. TEL. 142.
6.40—8.45. JUNE 7TH WEEK.
First Visit of ALAN MARTIN and TONY CASTLE, the Versatile Entertainers. 8 DAINTY MAIDS.
REEN & WALLER. VI TREVANION.
ROE HAMPTON.
JACK WILLIAMS Presents "A SISTER TO ASSIST 'ER."

REPERTORY THEATRE,
PLYMOUTH.
Lessees and Managers ..... KING and PARRY.

TO-NIGHT AT 7.30.
MATINEE SATURDAY, JUNE 12TH, AT 2.30.

H. B. Irving's Great Success, the Thrilling Play,
"THE BARTON MYSTERY."
From the Savoy Theatre, London.
FREDERICK VICTOR as "Beverley."
MARIE ROBSON as "Ethel Standish."
BERNARD MEREFIELD as "Richard Standish."
Box-office at the Repertory Theatre Open Daily from Ten a.m. to Five p.m. Booked and Reserved:—Orchestra Stalls, 5s. 6d.; Dress Circle, 3s.

NEXT WEEK:—The Successful American Comedy,
"OVER SUNDAY."

Figure 19: Plymouth theatres.[87]

ROYAL THEATRE,
TORQUAY.
PERCY H. HOLMSHAW Presents
A Big Christmas Attraction:
Cast to include
Miss May Royal,
Torquay's Favourite Comedienne,
as Dame Crusoe.
Robinson Crusoe Pantomime
Commencing Boxing Day, Dec. 26th
Matinee at 2.30, Evening at 7.30.
Dec. 27th, Matinee at 2.30, Evening at 7.30
Dec. 28th, Matinee at 2.30, Evening at 7.30
Week Commencing Dec. 30th, Matinees Daily at 2.30
Evenings at 7.30.
Following Weeks, Matinees Wednesday and Saturday at 2.30
Evenings at 7.30.
PERCY H. HOLMSHAW
MAY ROYAL

Figure 20: Advertisement for the *Robinson Crusoe Pantomime*, Theatre Royal, Torquay, 1928.[88]

[87] *Western Morning News*, 8 June 1920, p. 4.
[88] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser Christmas Number 1925–30* (1928), p. 40.

Pantomimes were very popular at Christmas in many Devon theatres and often lasted into the New Year. In 1923, the Theatre Royal, Exeter, was offering the 'super triumphant' production of *Cinderella* nightly at 7pm, and the following year, *Babes in the Wood*. Both The London and South-Western Railway and the Great Western Railway put on special pantomime trains to serve theatre-goers living outside Exeter. Thus, the special late trains left Exeter after the shows and made them accessible for residents in all the villages along the line between the city, as far afield as Dulverton, to get to the theatre.[89]

Throughout the 1920s, 'against all the odds, the Theatre Royal in Abbey Rd. Torquay held its own,' and at the end of the decade, it celebrated its jubilee with flowers, flags and bunting.[90] It continued to present long-running pantomimes such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Current and popular plays, which had often played successfully in the West End, continued to come to this distinguished theatre: Sir Gerald du Maurier's *S.O.S.* and local writer and dramatist, Eden Philpotts's *The Farmer's Wife*.[91] R.C. Sheriff's 1928 play, *Journey's End*, which was set in the trenches during the First World War and had starred Laurence Olivier when first performed in London, came to the theatre in the following year.[92] Successful musical comedies such as *Rose Marie* and *Hit the Deck* arrived from their London runs and the theatre hosted Sir Frank Benson's farewell tour in his final appearances in *The School for Scandal*.[93]

At the annual general meeting in 1929, it was felt that the Theatre Royal, Torquay, was in good condition, shareholders should be paid a dividend of 20%, and that despite the arrival of the 'talkies', the stage would always hold its own: 'It was evident that, despite the competition they had to meet from films, the public demanded the genuine article and the stage still held the field.'[94]

Even at the end of the decade, Devon audiences could still enjoy programmes that remained up-to-date and to a London standard. *Apron Strings*, for example, billed itself as 'A Modern Comedy for Modern People' and did indeed deal with very topical and contemporary themes, as a report in the press highlighted:

> "Apron Strings", the play which startled London with its amazingly daring humour during its successful season at the Vaudeville Theatre. This comedy, staged by Mr. J. Bannister Howard, is a riot of laughter from beginning to end. It is a comedy, not only outspoken and risqué, but brimful of clever and brilliant lines and delightfully funny situations. The story of "Apron Strings" is quite new and different from anything before seen on the English stage. It deals with the intimacies of a newly married couple, the bride a very modern and sophisticated young woman, and the young bridegroom a real "mammy's boy" who has hitherto shunned all lovemaking and "petting parties". Brought

[89] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 20 January 1923, p. 1.
[90] '"The Power of the Cinema": Film in the 1920s and 1930s', *Warwick*, <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/archives_online/exhibitions/film>.
[91] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser,* 19 April 1929, p. 1; 11 October 1929, p. 1; 8 March 1929, p. 2.
[92] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser,* 23 August 1929, p. 1.
[93] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 6 September 1929, p. 1.
[94] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 21 June 1929, p. 2.

into the midst of a very modern family, young Daniel Curtis is shocked at their viewpoint of life.[95]

Figure 21: Programme for *Apron Strings*, Theatre Royal Torquay. Courtesy of Torquay Library.

However, the advent of the 'talkies' was to deal a blow to live entertainment. The impact, though gradual, began to be felt at the end of the decade, and by 1932 even the Theatre Royal, Torquay – so full of confidence just three years previously – had succumbed to market forces and was converted into a cinema. The layout of the old theatre was reversed, 'talkie' equipment installed and the seating capacity increased from 765 to nearly 1,000.[96] Mr Vickery, the leaseholder, explained to the press how it was no longer viable to put on the type of shows the theatre had traditionally offered throughout its long existence: 'I view with regret the passing of the drama, but the town is such that audiences cannot be obtained to enable us to give consistently good plays.'[97]

A similar fate befell the Grand Theatre, Plymouth, which operated successfully throughout the 1920s, but which in 1930 moved to becoming a venue for films and variety, while retaining its stage licence, The proprietor, Ernest Davey, explained why he was following the lead of the Hippodrome and 'going over to the talkies': 'The reason is the difficulty in obtaining companies adequately to fill the bill of the theatre because the success of talkies has killed the little revue.'[98] At the same time, the Hippodrome, Exeter, which under the management of the celebrated Fred Karno had successfully offered regular variety shows and hosted the famous myrioramas of Charles and John Poole, underwent a huge refurbishment and became the Plaza Cinema.[99]

[95] *Hastings and St. Leonard's Observer*, 26 September 1931, p. 5.
[96] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 26 August 1932, p. 4.
[97] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 26 August 1932, p. 4.
[98] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 5 June 1930, p. 30.
[99] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 12 March 1931, p. 69.

Variety shows

Variety shows – a mixed bag of music, sketches, circus acts, magic and ventriloquism – remained a popular form of entertainment into the 1920s. Plymouth and Exeter both had venues that could accommodate large audiences. The Palace Theatre, Plymouth had been built in 1898 and was a fine ornate building with an art nouveau design.[100] With a capacity of 2,500 it was the first to cater specifically for music hall acts – such celebrities as Marie Lloyd, the two Harrys Tate and Champion, and Florrie Forde had performed on its stage, and throughout the 1920s others continued to visit, such as the world famous Russian dancer Anna Pavlova.[101]

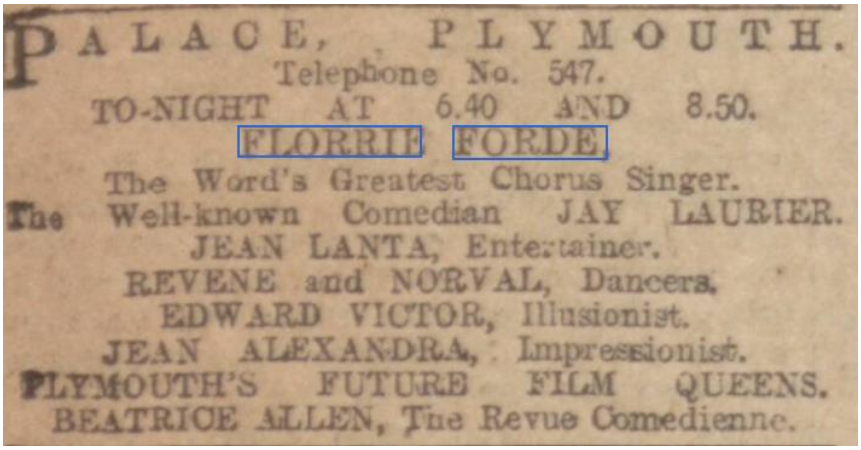

PALACE, PLYMOUTH.
Telephone No. 547.
TO-NIGHT AT 6.40 AND 8.50.
FLORRIE FORDE
The Word's Greatest Chorus Singer.
The Well-known Comedian JAY LAURIER.
JEAN LANTA, Entertainer.
REVENE and NORVAL, Dancers.
EDWARD VICTOR, Illusionist.
JEAN ALEXANDRA, Impressionist.
PLYMOUTH'S FUTURE FILM QUEENS.
BEATRICE ALLEN, The Revue Comedienne.

Figure 22: Advertisement for Florrie Ford at the Palace Theatre, Plymouth in the *Western Morning News*, 1923.[102]

Typical of this type of show was the 'excellent vaudeville bill' presented at Plymouth's Palace Theatre, which consisted of 'two comedians, a female vocalist, a comedian and dancer, and the Tossing Testros, who were balancers, jugglers and hat-throwers.'[103] [104]

In 1922, the celebrated Exeter-born impresario, Fred Karno, put on a revue entitled *1922* at the Palace Theatre, Plymouth, which starred the eminent artiste, Fred Kitchen.[105] Fred Karno would prove to be a hugely influential figure in the world of comedy, training and promoting such well-known figures as Will Hay, Billy Bennett, The Crazy Gang, Syd Walker, Frank

[100] Olivier Vergnault, 'Bid to Save Plymouth's Derelict Palace Theatre Before It's Too Late', *Plymouth Live* (11 April 2023) <https://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/news/history/bid-save-plymouths-derelict-palace-8339488>.
[101] *Western Morning News*, 18 July 1921, p. 3.
[102] *Western Morning News*, 25 August 1923, p. 4.
[103] *Western Morning News*, 28 May 1921, p. 3.
[104] Sarah Elmes, 'Plymouth's Palace Theatre – From the Very Beginning Until Now', *Plymouth Live* (15 February 2020) <https://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/news/history/gallery/plymouths-palace-theatre-very-beginning-3847783>.
[105] *Western Evening Herald*, 27 May 1922, p. 3.

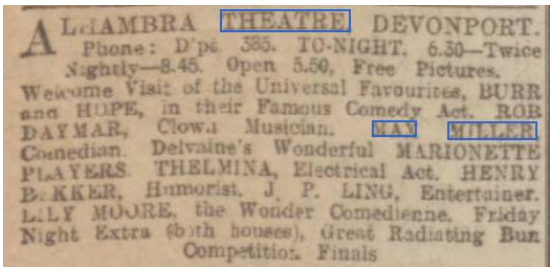
Randal, Fred Kitchen, Max Miller, and Sandy Powell.[106] He founded his own leading comedy group which toured music halls across the country, and was known for writing enduring comedy gags and sketches.

Professional.

SEARCH for Talent in Plymouth.—Wanted, Vocalists, Comedians, Dancers, Comediennes, Male Impersonators (Vesta Tilley types), Musicians, Elocutionists (acting), Specialities, and Cinema Artistes. Mr. Fred Karno begins his National Touring Campaign at the Palace, Plymouth, on Monday next, March 16th. £100 in prizes given weekly; £1,000 contract to most successful entrant of the campaign.—Apply daily, 11.30 a.m. to 1.30 p.m., Mr. S. C. Monkhouse, Advance Manager for Mr. Fred Karno, Palace, Plymouth.

Figure 23: Write-up about Fred Karno's touring campaign in the *Western Morning News*, 1925.[107]

In 1923, Gracie Fields appeared at the Hippodrome, Plymouth; the press describing her performance as 'a clear spring in the desert of revue mediocrity'.[108] Max Miller appeared at the Alhambra Theatre, Devonport in January 1925 and at the Devonport Hippodrome in July of the same year.[109]



ALHAMBRA THEATRE DEVONPORT. Phone: Dpt. 385. TO-NIGHT, 6.30—Twice Nightly—8.45. Open 5.50, Free Pictures. Welcome Visit of the Universal Favourites, BURR and HOPE, in their Famous Comedy Act. ROB DAYMAR, Clown Musician. MAX MILLER, Comedian. Delvaine's Wonderful MARIONETTE PLAYERS. THELMINA, Electrical Act. HENRY BEKKER, Humorist. J. P. LING, Entertainer. LILY MOORE, the Wonder Comedienne. Friday Night Extra (both houses), Great Radiating Bun Competition Finals

Figure 24: Advertisement for Max Miller's appearance in Alhambra Theatre, Devonport, in January 1925.[110]

[106] 'Fred Karno in the Spotlight: A Q & A With Karno Biographer David Krump', *The Lost Laugh* <https://thelostlaugh.com/2021/11/05/fred-karno-in-the-spotlight-a-q-a-with-karno-biographer-david-crump>.
[107] *Western Morning News*, 13 March 1925, p. 10.
[108] *Western Evening Herald*, 29 May 1923, p. 4.
[109] *Western Morning News,* 26 January 1925, p. 4.
[110] Ibid.

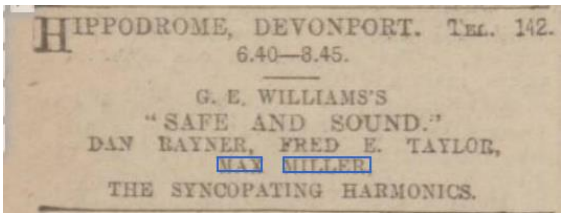

HIPPODROME, DEVONPORT. TEL. 142.
6.40—8.45.
G. E. WILLIAMS'S
"SAFE AND SOUND."
DAN RAYNER, FRED E. TAYLOR,
MAX MILLER
THE SYNCOPATING HARMONICS.

Figure 25: Advertisement for another appearance by Max Miller's in at the Devonport Hippodrome, July 1925.[111]

Plymothians could also view similar variety programmes at the Hippodrome, such as a show in May 1921 that featured a Scotch humourist who was said to be always popular with local audiences, as well as jugglers, comedians and dancers. Also incorporated into the live entertainment was film, in the form of the *Pathé Gazette*.[112]

However, an editorial in *The Era,* which appeared in December 1929, noted with dismay the decline of the live vaudeville act, and the closure of theatres whose buildings were subsequently turned into cinemas:

> Whilst the taste for variety has been stimulated by the presentation of many brilliant acts, unexpected happenings have narrowed the field of variety to an alarming extent. The "talkie short" came along and ousted the human variety act from the cinema, and although there are halls where the music hall artist still flourishes, it cannot be denied he has had a severe set-back…[113]

After the end of the decade, this same impact would be felt in Devon.

Amateur entertainments

For villages and rural areas, charities and churches, the homespun forms of entertainment that flourished were those that had become established in late Victorian times, which had continued into the Edwardian years and throughout the war. Musical events remained very popular throughout the decade. In the space of just four days in March 1929 in Barnstaple, for example, there were on offer a concert and dance at the RAOB Hall, a choir festival at the United Methodist Church, and a grand choir concert at the Congregational Church.[114]

A format widely popular in small towns and villages across the county was an evening of music, organised by a committee, with local amateur performers who offered a variety of musical items. Typical of this type of entertainment was a concert given in Braunton, the proceeds of which totalled £13 5s! There featured a Chopin étude, a piece by Scarlatti, a Rachmaninoff prelude and two compositions by Liszt and Ravine, a selection which, the reporter commented, 'amateurs are inclined to use to produce effect'.[115] These solos were

[111] *Western Morning News*, 3 July 1925, p. 4.
[112] *Western Morning News*, 28 May 1921, p. 3.
[113] *The Era*, 25 December 1929, p. 9.
[114] *North Devon Journal*, 28 February 1929, p. 1.
[115] *North Devon Journal*, 14 June 1923, p. 7.

followed by vocal renditions of such songs as 'Fairy Tales of Ireland', 'Arise o' Sun' and the 'Blind Ploughman', and two dramatic excerpts from *Alice though the Looking Glass*. 'It is worthy of notice,' commented the reporter, 'that all the artistes are living in or near Braunton. A very high level of talent was shown.'[116] Numerous advertisements and reports in the press feature this type of entertainment, which might have been for fundraising purposes or simply enjoyment.

Programmes for these concerts often also included sketches, recitals and dance. An entertainment at Brampford Speke in 1920, for example, was held in the school room, with the stage decorated with ferns and plants lent by one Captain Bramwell and the piano kindly lent by Miss Sinclair, another resident. The evening typically drew on local talent and performers and consisted of songs, recitations, musical monologues, fairy scenes and dances.[117] Others offered an even broader array of local talent – the Westward Ho Cricket Club concert in September 1929, for example, included songs at the piano, solos, sketches, magic and ventriloquial dialogues.[118] In addition to the usual village hall, church, town hall, school and small theatre venues, there were some more unusual ones. In January 1921, a concert was given by the 'Bim-Bims', a group from Plymouth, to the officers and boys aboard the *HMS Impregnable*.[119]

There were also amateur groups who met and performed regularly. In 1928, The Torquay Amateur Operatic Society put on *Merrie England* at the Theatre Royal.

[116] Ibid.
[117] *Western Times*, 30 March 1923, p. 3.
[118] *North Devon Journal*, 12 September 1929, p. 5.
[119] *Western Morning News*, 21 January 1921, p, 8.

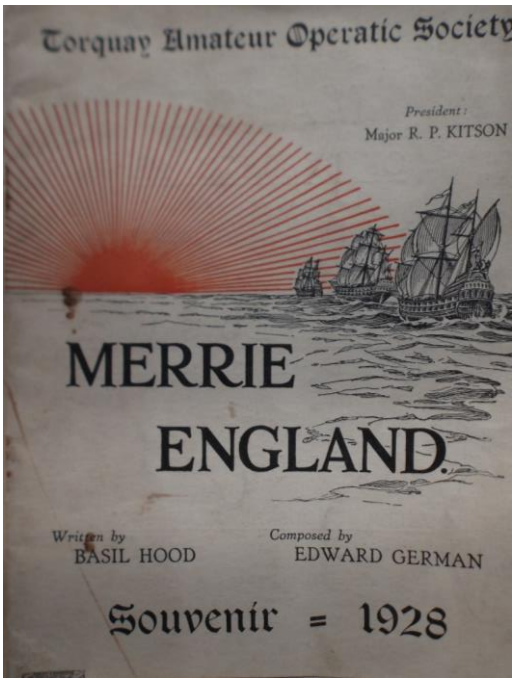


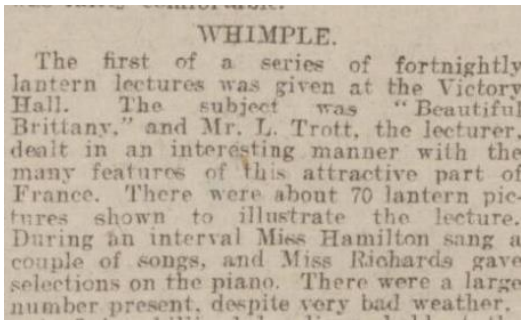
Figure 26: 1928 programme for *Merrie England.*[120]

Figure 27: Torquay Amateur Operatic Society.[121]

[120] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser Christmas Number 1925–30* (1928).
[121] Ibid., p. 9.

The frequency of lantern shows, which had been very popular in the region up to the war years, diminished considerably in the 1920s. Lantern slides had been traditionally used in a remarkable variety of contexts and instructive lantern lectures were commonplace at Sunday schools, literary and scientific societies, charity bazars, Christmas shows for the poor in workhouses and orphanages.

The versatility of the lantern locally was that it was as appropriate for small, community halls as large, expensive venues, equal to the task of illuminating slides from purchased sets or bringing travellers' scenes of unknown worlds to life, portable enough to reach the remotest rural areas of the South West. Slides formed the basis for many an entertainment, and this show in Whimple was following a long tradition:



WHIMPLE.

The first of a series of fortnightly lantern lectures was given at the Victory Hall. The subject was "Beautiful Brittany," and Mr. L. Trott, the lecturer, dealt in an interesting manner with the many features of this attractive part of France. There were about 70 lantern pictures shown to illustrate the lecture. During an interval Miss Hamilton sang a couple of songs, and Miss Richards gave selections on the piano. There were a large number present, despite very bad weather.

Figure 28: Write-up about a lantern lecture in Victory Hall, Whimple, 1925.[122]

Travelling shows

During the late Victorian period, a number of dioramas, variety shows, circuses, menageries and magic shows travelled the country and included Devon in their itinerary, often as part of a longer West Country stay. Small towns and rural areas, as well as the larger centres, often benefited from visits from such touring entertainments, which included major spectacles such as Ginnett's Circus, Fourpawrs Great Olympia and Barnum and Bailey's. Those who chose to tour the provincial areas of Devon faced a number of constraints – social, economic, geographical and logistical – since long distances and poor infrastructure added to the cost, time and difficulty of reaching all corners of the county.[123] The war years had disrupted this established pattern and dramatically reduced the frequency with which entertainment was possible.

After the war, some shows returned while others vanished for ever. The great Poole's myrioramas, which used vast moving canvases together with sound and light to entertain audiences and which had been so much a feature of entertainment in the South West for years, faded away. One Exeter reporter concluded:

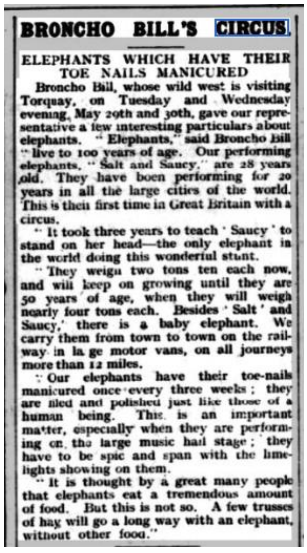
[122] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 10 November 1925, p. 7.
[123] Rosalind Leveridge, *Limelights and Shadows: Popular and Visual Culture in South West England, 1880–1914,* unpublished PhD thesis for the University of Exeter, 2011, pp. 157–8.

> Travelling shows in the nature of circuses and Wild West exhibitions have been growing less and less in number during years, and only the most popular and soundly established concerns have been able to weather the trade slump and compete with the host of cinema shows that have sprung up in all towns and many villages.[124]

Of the comparatively few shows that continued to come to Devon, however, some were well-known entertainments that toured nationally. One such was Broncho Bill's Circus, which visited Plymouth for four nights, Exeter and Torquay for two nights, and Tavistock, Dartmouth, Totnes, Kingsbridge, Newton Abbot, Teignmouth, Dawlish, Exmouth, Sidmouth, Ottery St. Mary, Honiton, Seaton and Paignton for one night each, in 1923.[125] They returned again in 1926 and 1928.[126]

> This was an entertainment to rival the cinema, with troupes of horses, celebrated elephants Salt and Saucy, Japanese acrobats, great Wild West exhibition, and the unlikely claim that the circus had visited "nearly every City and large Town in the World".[127]

With two shows daily, and vast seating capacities – 5,000 at the Exhibition Fields in Exeter – these were spectacles on a grand scale and with tickets starting at 1s 3d, democratically priced to attract huge crowds.



BRONCHO BILL'S CIRCUS.

ELEPHANTS WHICH HAVE THEIR TOE NAILS MANICURED

Broncho Bill, whose wild west is visiting Torquay, on Tuesday and Wednesday evening, May 29th and 30th, gave our representative a few interesting particulars about elephants. "Elephants," said Broncho Bill "live to 100 years of age. Our performing elephants, "Salt and Saucy," are 28 years old. They have been performing for 20 years in all the large cities of the world. This is their first time in Great Britain with a circus.

"It took three years to teach 'Saucy' to stand on her head—the only elephant in the world doing this wonderful stunt.

"They weigh two tons ten each now, and will keep on growing until they are 50 years of age, when they will weigh nearly four tons each. Besides 'Salt' and Saucy,' there is a baby elephant. We carry them from town to town on the railway in large motor vans, on all journeys more than 12 miles.

"Our elephants have their toe-nails manicured once every three weeks; they are filed and polished just like those of a human being. This is an important matter, especially when they are performing on the large music hall stage; they have to be spic and span with the limelights showing on them.

"It is thought by a great many people that elephants eat a tremendous amount of food. But this is not so. A few trusses of hay will go a long way with an elephant, without other food."

Figure 29: Write-up about Broncho Bill's Circus in the *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 1923.[128]

[124] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 5 June, 1923, p. 6.
[125] *Western Evening Herald*, 17 May 1923, p. 2; *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 25 May 1923, p. 6; *Western Times*, 1 June, 1923, p. 2.
[126] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 25 May 1928, p. 10.
[127] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 30 May 1923, p. 1.
[128] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 18 May 1923, p. 3.

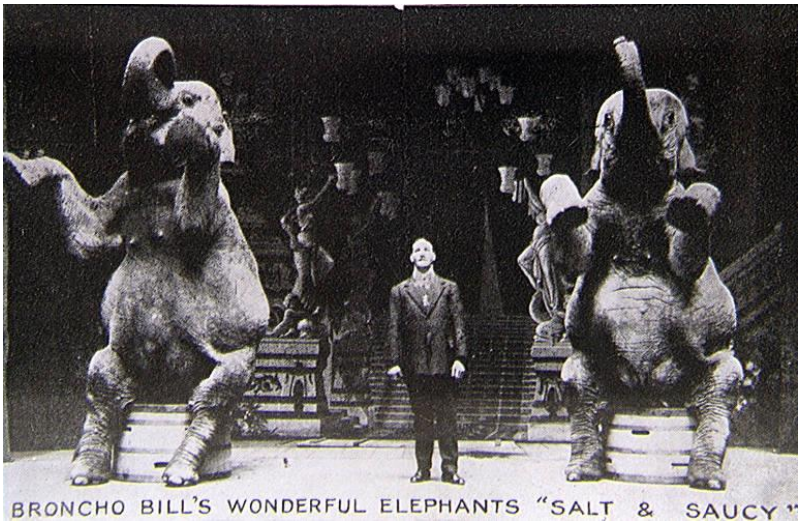
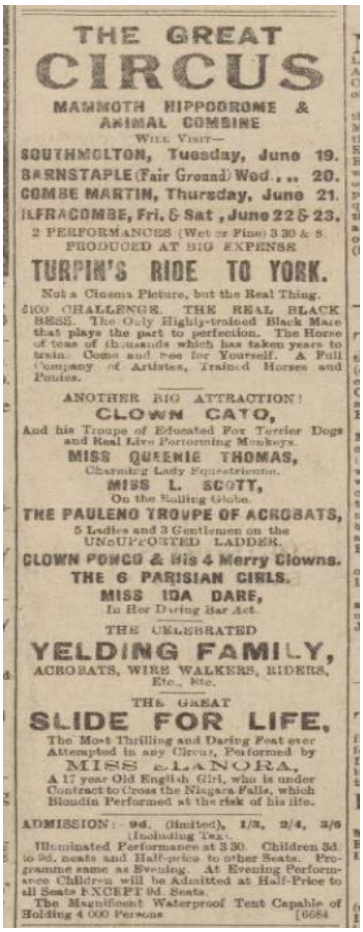


Figure 30: Photograph from Broncho Bill's Circus.
Reproduced with permission from University of Sheffield.

Touring at the same time, but in the north of the county, was the Great Circus, which offered a similar combination of acrobats and animals. Prices began at 9d, with 4,000 seats available in the grand tent, and the circus included acts such as the famous Yelding family.[129]

[129] *North Devon Journal*, 14 June 1923, p. 4.



THE GREAT
CIRCUS
MAMMOTH HIPPODROME &
ANIMAL COMBINE
WILL VISIT—
SOUTHMOLTON, Tuesday, June 19.
BARNSTAPLE (Fair Ground) Wed., 20.
COMBE MARTIN, Thursday, June 21.
ILFRACOMBE, Fri. & Sat., June 22 & 23.
2 PERFORMANCES (Wet or Fine) 3.30 & 8.
PRODUCED AT BIG EXPENSE
TURPIN'S RIDE TO YORK.
Not a Cinema Picture, but the Real Thing.
$100 CHALLENGE. THE REAL BLACK BESS. The Only Highly-trained Black Mare that plays the part to perfection. The Horse of tens of thousands which has taken years to train. Come and see for Yourself. A Full Company of Artistes, Trained Horses and Ponies.
ANOTHER BIG ATTRACTION!
CLOWN CATO,
And his Troupe of Educated Fox Terrier Dogs and Real Live Performing Monkeys.
MISS QUEENIE THOMAS,
Charming Lady Equestrienne.
MISS L. SCOTT,
On the Rolling Globe.
THE PAULENO TROUPE OF ACROBATS,
5 Ladies and 3 Gentlemen on the UNSUPPORTED LADDER.
CLOWN PONCO & His 4 Merry Clowns.
THE 6 PARISIAN GIRLS.
MISS IDA DARE,
In Her Daring Bar Act.
THE CELEBRATED
YELDING FAMILY,
ACROBATS, WIRE WALKERS, RIDERS, Etc., Etc.
THE GREAT
SLIDE FOR LIFE,
The Most Thrilling and Daring Feat ever Attempted in any Circus, Performed by
MISS ELANORA,
A 17 year Old English Girl, who is under Contract to Cross the Niagara Falls, which Blondin Performed at the risk of his life.
ADMISSION: 9d. (limited), 1/3, 2/4, 3/6 (Including Tax).
Illuminated Performance at 7.30. Children 3d. to 9d. seats and Half-price to other Seats. Programme same as Evening. At Evening Performance Children will be Admitted at Half-Price to all Seats EXCEPT 9d. Seats.
The Magnificent Waterproof Tent Capable of Holding 4,000 Persons [6684

Figure 31: Advertisement for The Great Circus in the *North Devon Journal,* 1923.[130]

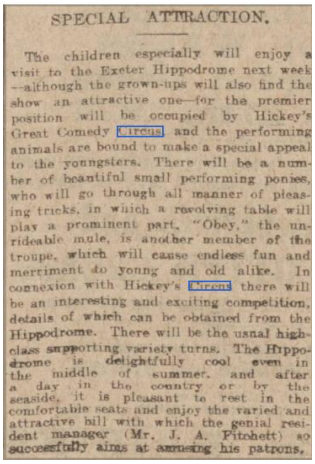
[130] *North Devon Journal*, 14 June 1923, p. 4.

Claiming, somewhat dubiously, to be the 'first real circus Since Barnum and Bailey', Plymothians were able to see The Royale Circus, more modest in scale with its Scotch collies and unrideable mule, at the Hippodrome in 1922.[131]

Figure 32: Advertisement for Royale Circus in the *Western Evening Herald*, 1922.[132]

[131] Ibid.
[132] *Western Evening Herald*, 16 September 1922, p. 2.

Featuring miniature performing ponies and the amusingly named 'Obey', another unrideable mule, was Hickey's Comedy Circus. Brave locals were invited to try their hand at riding it; these 'rough-riders' earning prizes of 10s or £1 if successful.[133]



SPECIAL ATTRACTION.

The children especially will enjoy a visit to the Exeter Hippodrome next week --although the grown-ups will also find the show an attractive one—for the premier position will be occupied by Hickey's Great Comedy Circus, and the performing animals are bound to make a special appeal to the youngsters. There will be a number of beautiful small performing ponies, who will go through all manner of pleasing tricks, in which a revolving table will play a prominent part. "Obey," the unrideable mule, is another member of the troupe, which will cause endless fun and merriment to young and old alike. In connexion with Hickey's Circus there will be an interesting and exciting competition, details of which can be obtained from the Hippodrome. There will be the usual high-class supporting variety turns. The Hippodrome is delightfully cool even in the middle of summer, and after a day in the country or by the seaside, it is pleasant to rest in the comfortable seats and enjoy the varied and attractive bill with which the genial resident manager (Mr. J. A. Pitchett) so successfully aims at amusing his patrons.

Figure 33: Article about a 'special attraction', Hickey's Circus in the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette,* 1924.[134]

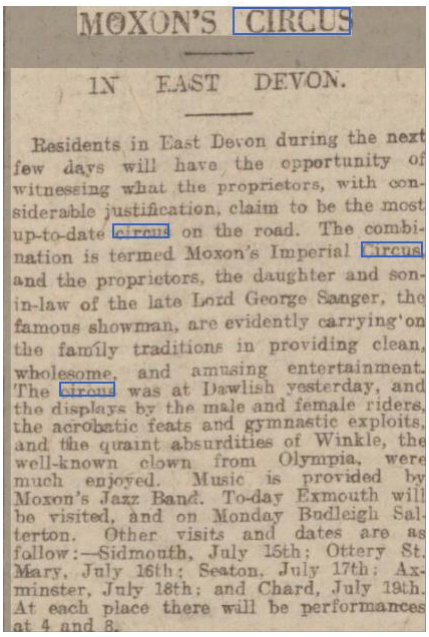
[133] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 1 July 1924, p. 7.
[134] Ibid.

Bostock's, who had made an early return to Devon after the war, brought their Royal Italian Circus to Plymouth in 1924, thrilling crowds with animals and artistes of all kinds.[135]

Figure 34: Advertisement for Bostock's at Plymouth in the *Western Evening Herald*, 1924.[136]

[135] *Western Evening Herald*, 12 March 1924, 2.
[136] Ibid.

Moxon's circus toured along the coast in 1924, taking in Dawlish, Exmouth, Budleigh Salterton, Sidmouth and Seaton, as well as Axminster and Ottery St. Mary.[137] While the name was not as well-known, the family connection with the celebrated showman and circus proprietor, Lord George Sanger, would have helped to sell some seats.[138]



MOXON'S CIRCUS

IN EAST DEVON.

Residents in East Devon during the next few days will have the opportunity of witnessing what the proprietors, with considerable justification, claim to be the most up-to-date circus on the road. The combination is termed Moxon's Imperial Circus, and the proprietors, the daughter and son-in-law of the late Lord George Sanger, the famous showman, are evidently carrying on the family traditions in providing clean, wholesome, and amusing entertainment. The circus was at Dawlish yesterday, and the displays by the male and female riders, the acrobatic feats and gymnastic exploits, and the quaint absurdities of Winkle, the well-known clown from Olympia, were much enjoyed. Music is provided by Moxon's Jazz Band. To-day Exmouth will be visited, and on Monday Budleigh Salterton. Other visits and dates are as follow:—Sidmouth, July 15th; Ottery St. Mary, July 16th; Seaton, July 17th; Axminster, July 18th; and Chard, July 19th. At each place there will be performances at 4 and 8.

Figure 35: Article about Moxon's Circus in the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 1924.[139]

[137] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette,* 12 July 1924, p. 5.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.

Figure 36: Pimpo the clown.[140]

Sangers' itself did continue to tour as far afield as Devon, and despite a terrible fire in 1920 while performing in Taunton, arrived in Plymouth for a fortnight in 1922.[141] Although Lord George Sanger himself was tragically murdered in 1911, his circuses had continued to tour, run by his nephew who took on his name.[142] His great-great-granddaughter was married to James Freeman, who as Pimpo the clown was a famous and much-loved member of the circus. One spectator described him thus:

> I can see him now, sitting in a motor car, strapped to an elephant's back, giving the hooter spasmodic blasts, while he raucously hailed the ringmaster, his diminutive figure clad in oversized dress-suit, a mass of ginger hair sprouting from the top of his head, and an enormous bow-tie.[143]

Local audiences in Devon were privileged to be able to see this most celebrated of circuses, which at the end of the decade was still returning to Devon, where Exonians were able to see their famous clown, Pimpo.

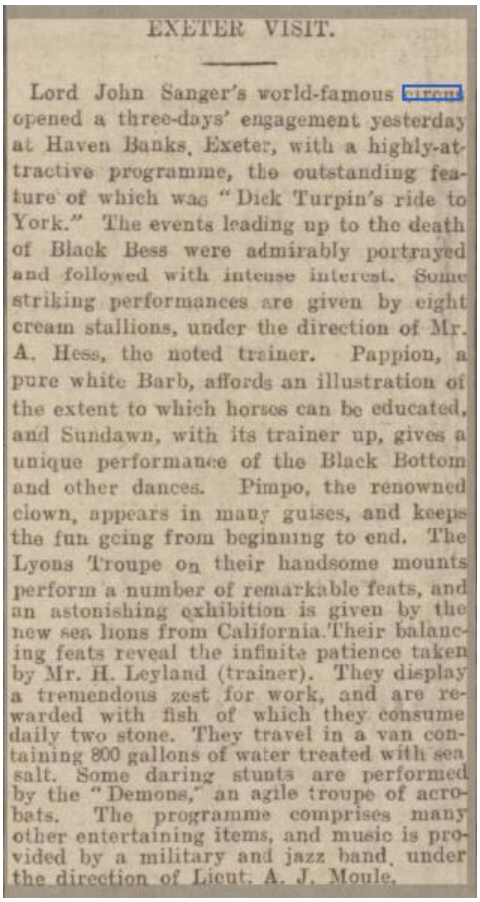
[140] Laura Linham, 'Dark Somerset: The Taunton Circus Disaster', *Somerset Live* (3 February 2018) <https://www.somersetlive.co.uk/news/history/dark-somerset-taunton-circus-disaster-1140490>.
[141] *Western Evening Herald*, 15 June 1922, p. 3.
[142] Donald Fullerton and Alastair MacIntyre, 'Travelling Circuses Came to Burgh', *Helensburgh Heritage Trust* (6 January 2020) <https://www.helensburgh-heritage.co.uk/index.php/heritage/business/1604-travelling-circuses-came-to-burgh>.
[143] Ibid.

With its century's history, Sanger's Circus is always popular and always up to date. The programme for its fortnight's visit to Plymouth, commencing next Monday, includes 17 star acts, among which are several by performing horses, elephants, and sea lions, and thrilling equestrian feats.

The dancing performance of Mlle. Trevoni and the horse Empress, the acrobatic feats by the Michelins, extraordinary trapeze artistes, giants and pigmies, and the performance of the Spanish equestrians, the Mazarines, are said to be clever and daring. Pimpo, the Admirable Crichton of circus clowns, in his various items is a host in himself, and keeps the audiences in fits of laughter, while as acrobat and horseman he creates endless merriment. People should not miss seeing the show and enjoying a programme so varied and artistes of such extraordinary merit. There will be two performances daily, at 2.30 and 8 p.m., and every item is worth seeing.

Figure 37: Article about Sanger's Circus in the *Western Evening Herald*, 1922.[144]

[144] *Western Evening Herald*, 15 June 1922, p. 3.



EXETER VISIT.

Lord John Sanger's world-famous circus opened a three-days' engagement yesterday at Haven Banks, Exeter, with a highly-attractive programme, the outstanding feature of which was "Dick Turpin's ride to York." The events leading up to the death of Black Bess were admirably portrayed and followed with intense interest. Some striking performances are given by eight cream stallions, under the direction of Mr. A. Hess, the noted trainer. Pappion, a pure white Barb, affords an illustration of the extent to which horses can be educated, and Sundawn, with its trainer up, gives a unique performance of the Black Bottom and other dances. Pimpo, the renowned clown, appears in many guises, and keeps the fun going from beginning to end. The Lyons Troupe on their handsome mounts perform a number of remarkable feats, and an astonishing exhibition is given by the new sea lions from California. Their balancing feats reveal the infinite patience taken by Mr. H. Leyland (trainer). They display a tremendous zest for work, and are rewarded with fish of which they consume daily two stone. They travel in a van containing 800 gallons of water treated with sea salt. Some daring stunts are performed by the "Demons," an agile troupe of acrobats. The programme comprises many other entertaining items, and music is provided by a military and jazz band, under the direction of Lieut. A. J. Moule.

Figure 38: Review of Sanger's Circus, Exeter in the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 1929.[145]

To maximise profits, travelling circuses often made only brief visits to each town, stopping one or two nights. During their 1922 visit to the South West, for example, Sanger's visited Exeter, followed by Newton Abbot, Teignmouth, Dawlish, Sidmouth and Seaton consecutively, with Sunday being the only day with no performances.[146]

[145] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 27 July 1929, p. 8.
[146] Ibid.

Figure 39: Advertisement for Ginetts at Plymouth in the *Western Evening Herald*, 1922.[147]

Ginett's Circus had a very long history and were already well-established by the outbreak of the war, during which time they were forced to close. In a departure from the Hippodrome's usual revue or variety programmes, they presented their own Grand Circus in Plymouth in 1922. It was to be 'a grand circus… a bona fide circus with performing animals, clowns and all manner of entertaining items. A feature of the show is "Beauty", claimed to be the most intelligent horse in the world.'[148]

Figure 40: Poppy Ginett, 1920, courtesy of Circus Ginett.

[147] *Western Evening Herald*, 22 July 1922, p. 5.
[148] Ibid., p. 3.

Fairs

Two immediate casualties of the First World War had been the traditional Devon regattas and fairs: 'By the first week of August 1914, the Babbacombe, Brixham, and even the prestigious Torquay Regatta had been abandoned indefinitely. Fairs also suffered enormously with showmen being called up and animals and machinery requisitioned by the government.'[149]

The long-established Barnstaple fair struggled through the war with its numbers halved but saw a resurgence immediately afterwards in 1919 with the demobilisation of men and the renewed desire of the public to indulge in some affordable entertainment.[150]

In Torquay, the annual regatta had annually attracted dozens of yachts, owned by the gentry and nobility, to compete in races.[151] While the town's elite identity as a fashionable and select resort had been enhanced by this event, which also included swimming and rowing matches, fireworks and the regatta ball, it had always been eclipsed in terms of popularity and excitement by its much less exclusive sideshow, the regatta fairs. Lively press reports regularly captured the drama, colour and exoticism of the fairs, which dared to be popular, outrageous and provocatively sited in the heart of Torquay's genteel streets:

> …the gorgeous roundabout … stood at the junction of the Strand and Vaughan Parade, and cast thousands of searchlight like rays over the vast crowds, whilst its wonderful organ sent out the strains of the latest popular airs. And who could help venturing threepence. on the chance of obtaining a dainty box of chocolates by sending his particular monkey higher up a brass pole than any of the ten or a dozen other speculators…? Of course, all the odds were with the proprietors, but what did that matter. And the varied forms of the houpla game, with prizes from clocks to half crowns. What crowds they drew, and how excited the winners became, so excited that they ventured all their winnings, lost them, and like the gambler, ventured more, and lost again. All the older forms of fun were there—the cocoa nut shies, shooting galleries, cheap Jacks, fortune-tellers, helter-skelters, boxing booths, the Dutch auctions. etc. Those who had a penchant for freaks were enabled to give full scope to it, for there were many. There was the three-legged girl, the human spider, the limbless lady, the giant school-girl, the half-lady-half-leopard freak, and "It". Each had his or her "agent" with a glib tongue, but a woeful lack of the King's English, telling the tale at the entrance in stentorian tones to the crowds with eyes sparkling and coppers in hand ready to crowd in to see the wonders within the canvas booth. And last but not least in the matter of popularity, were the chipped potato carts, which did a roaring trade in spite of their odour which followed one into the darkness when the flare of the electric lamps and the oil lamps had been left behind.[152]

This account, with its deliberately naïve enthusiasm and indulgent attitude towards the sideshows, however freakish or fraudulent, has many continuities with pre-war reports. The fairs, with their familiar booths and unchanging attractions, delivered fun and excitement and democratised entertainment, empowering huge numbers of people for whom entertainment

[149] Rosalind Leveridge, '"From Gay to Grave": Entertainments at Home 1914–1918' in *Devon in the First World War* (Short Run Press, 2018), p. 54.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Rosalind Leveridge, *Limelights and Shadows: Popular and Visual Culture in South West England, 1880–1914,* unpublished PhD thesis for the University of Exeter, 2011, p. 44.
[152] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 26 August 1921, p. 3.

was generally unaffordable. Yet it was not only the less well-off who patronised them; as the *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser* never failed to remind its readers, 'Everybody went to the fair'.[153] The 'dense mass of humanity' that monopolised the streets around the Strand and the pier contrasted sharply with the select residents who, enraged at the invasion, protested annually.[154]

Anderton and Rowlands, a company long in existence and well-known in the West Country, travelled a great number of novelty rides and attractions by the 1920s.[155]

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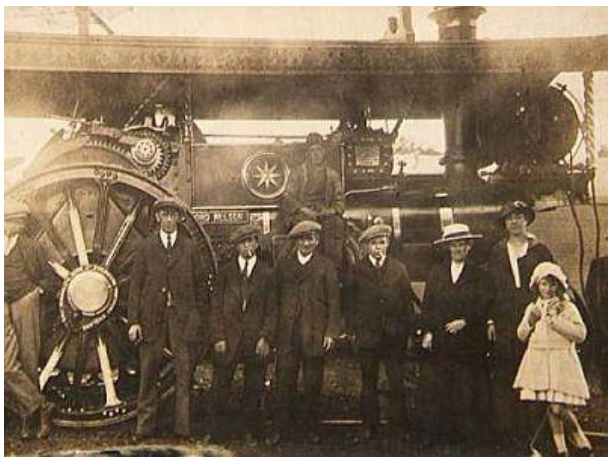

Figure 41: Anderton and Rowland's Burrell engine Lord Nelson, 1920.
Courtesy of the National Fairground and Circus Archive, University of Sheffield.

The Torquay fairs continued annually throughout the decade – little changing in popularity – with commentators regularly highlighting the noise, thronging crowds, open purses and delight of the participants, despite knowing the showmen's tricks. By the end of the decade, the lure of the fair was still apparent:

> It was a gay scene, especially at night, when above the din of the roundabouts and the hundred and one cries of the fair, and the lurid lights, attention was drawn by the sound of the rockets which illuminated the skies. The land and aquatic fireworks by Messrs. James Pain and Sons Ltd. were a fitting climax to a great festival.[156]

On Monday and Tuesday evenings, thousands of spectators assembled in the Princess Gardens and on Beacon Quay and watched the display of fireworks by Messrs. James Pain and Sons. It was a magnificent spectacle, the hills of Torquay being brilliantly illuminated with coloured lights. The set pieces were novel and effective and hundreds of rockets at

[153] Ibid.
[154] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser,* 25 August 1922, p. 4.
[155] <https://cornish-funfairs.org.uk/index.php/homepage/historic-showmen/7-anderton-rowlands>.
[156] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 31 August 1928, p. 8.

frequent intervals illuminated the dark sky, while the star spraying balloons were quite a feature.[157]

Figure 42: Torquay Regatta Fireworks, 1926.[158]

Barnstaple's fair was no less popular. Steeped in tradition, it was spread over three days and attracted hundreds of visitors who arrived by bus, train and the modern means of the motorcar. While the business side of the fair – the sale of sheep, cattle and horses (the latter diminishing because of the advent of cars) – occupied the first two days, the sideshows, amusements and caterers were present in great numbers. Visitors were drawn to the fair by the well-known rituals: the huge stuffed glove, filled with flowers and suspended in the Guildhall window, symbolising friendship; the perambulation and reading of the fair proclamation; the viewing of the borough plate; the traditional tasting of toast, spiced ale and fairings.[159] In 1928, every ticket to the opening ceremony was sold, and every inch of the fairground booked out, in what was considered to be a very successful event.[160]

By the end of the decade, the public's interest in freaks had not diminished, and in that year Barumites could view Sealina, the lobster-clawed girl, a 28 stone girl and a 24 inch man.[161] The conflict that existed in Torquay between the residents and the fairgoers was completely absent in Barnstaple, and here the fair was welcomed positively. There was an:

> … even larger and more attractive array of amusements than ever. Jollity and good spirits prevailed everywhere, and the general appearance of holiday time which the town presented was contributed to by the general bustle and excitement prevailing, the busy

[157] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 29 August 1924, p. 5.
[158] *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser Christmas Number 1925-30* (1926), p. xi.
[159] These same traditions continue to this day.
[160] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 20 September 1928, p. 7.
[161] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 19 September 1929, p. 7.

> hum of motors, the strains of the fair organs in the distance, [and a] hearty welcome extended to visitors.[162]

Smaller towns and rural areas of Devon might enjoy an annual visit from a travelling fair, but often these would be on a more modest scale and with shorter stays. In seaside towns, the amusements often accompanied the regattas, while in the countryside, the roundabouts and helter-skelters sat side by side with the livestock. The South Molton pleasure fair, for example, was held in the square and took place alongside the annual sheep fair.[163] Torrington May fair was revived in 1924 and enthusiastically reinstated old traditions such as ale-tasting and fairings, as well as hosting a pleasure fair.[164] Honiton fair, on the other hand, seemed in decline. It had similar traditions to Barnstaple and to the Lammas fair in Exeter, with an opening proclamation by the town crier, gilded glove and its roots in agriculture. Despite the traditional boxing booths and fancy stalls in the streets, the reporter concluded that by 1927, interest in the fair was 'waning'.[165]

Often the fairs brought controversy and conflict and were treated with suspicion locally by those in authority. There were frequent accusations of theft, deception and disorder by showmen or their employees. The siting of the fairs was often controversial and showmen sometimes were summonsed for offences in connection with their vehicles, their shows or their behaviour. Cases of misconduct arose, which often gave rise to colourful reports in the press, such as the one involving the celebrated Miss Sophia Hancock, who asked magistrates for protection from another women who 'brandishing a piece of brass had threatened to "knock her brains out"… Defendant complained of persecution by Miss Hancock. She admitted throwing the soap, but said it was not until the other woman took up a scrubbing brush.'[166]

An article in the Western Morning News used familiar arguments to challenge the very existence of the fairs:

> REGATTA FAIRS IS THE TIME COME FOR ABOLITION IN THE WEST? During the past few weeks South Devon resorts, from Exmouth to Dartmouth, have had a surfeit of the amusements which are so time-honoured a section of local regattas. Hitherto, these amusements have been indispensable to annual displays upon the South Devon seaboard, but would they be so greatly missed if it was decided to do without them? Exmouth now holds its regatta first and allows the amusements later. One is forced to remember that among the residents in the towns along the coast— Dawlish, Teignmouth, Torquay, Paignton, Dartmouth, &c. —are a number to whom the Fair is the be-all and end-all of the annual regatta. Also, in the past, the sturdy, brown-faced worker in the fields would lay aside his plough-share, and hie with mother and the children down to see the sights, and to wreck havoc among the coconut shies. The farmer's boy found new zest in life amid the shrieking of the showmen, the banging of drums, and the blare of the hurdy-gurdy. And when was all over back to the land they would go once more, facing the daily toil with stolid philosophy, tinged, mayhap, with a slight regret. But the feeling is growing that the merry go-round and the Aunt Sally have had their day, and especially is this view held among the trading communities. No-one will deny that their objections to

[162] Ibid.
[163] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 1 September 1922, p. 14.
[164] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette,* 6 May 1926, p. 5.
[165] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 20 July 1927, p. 4.
[166] *Western Morning News*, 20 February 1923, p. 3.

the amusements on the grounds that huge sums of money are taken out the town are very sound both in theory and practice. One can say with a great degree of confidence this year has seen the last of the Fair the Dawlish front at any rate, and with a lead thus set, who can say but what the example will be followed by other towns along the coast?[167]

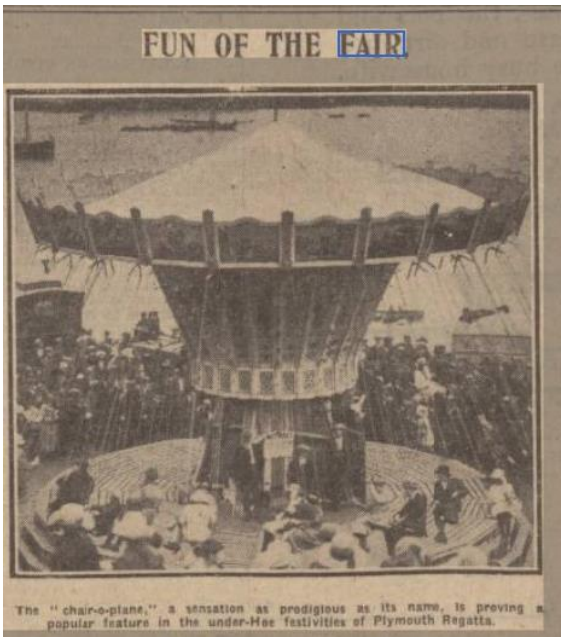

Figure 43: A 'chair-o-plane' in the 1922 Plymouth Regatta.[168]

Conclusion

In the 1920s, as in the two previous decades, there existed a broad spectrum of entertainment in Devon. Following the First World War years, during which some entertainments were severely curtailed or closed altogether, a new impetus was given to many venues and shows with the new decade. There was an enthusiasm on the part of artistes, showmen, managers and proprietors to revive the entertainment industry, and a desire on the part of the public to be entertained and enjoy themselves.

Cinema, in particular, took on a new dynamism and energy, which gradually over the course of the 1920s began to outshine other forms of entertainment. Aided by new technologies which brought about talking pictures at the end of the decade, it became a widespread and

[167] *Western Morning News*, 11 September 1925, p. 8.
[168] *Western Morning News*, 17 August 1922, p. 8.

successful form of entertainment. Dance, in all its forms, also grew rapidly in popularity. These were national trends which were evident in Devon, visible in the rapid revival of the fairs and regattas following the war, the popularity of dance, investment in cinemas and equipment locally, and the conversion of theatres to picture palaces.

The finest venues evidently were sited in the towns. For those who had the means, Devon provided many opportunities for refined and regular entertainment such as high-class concerts, lectures, plays and balls. Despite its distance from London, companies and performers regularly travelled to the county. Torquay, in particular, continued to offer its often distinguished residents and visitors an impressive choice of performances by fine companies and celebrities. At the other end of the spectrum, those with only a penny or two to spare could look forward to the annual fairs, where rides on the roundabouts, freak shows and chipped potatoes were cheap. In between lay a range of amusements that were broadly affordable to many, such as circuses, cinemas, vaudeville shows, dances and skating.

For those in more rural or isolated areas, there was a dependency on touring companies or home-grown entertainment. Musical entertainments were numerous and could be held in whatever space was available, usually town or village halls, or schoolrooms. These usually drew on local talent and had programmes that featured popular songs and humorous sketches. Dances catered for all ages and pockets and similarly were held in local venues.

Local cinemas performed the very important function of keeping distant Devon in touch with the glamorous world of stage and screen. The international screen stars of the era familiar to Devon audiences – Mary Pickford, Gloria Swanson, Norma Talmadge, Douglas Fairbanks, Greta Garbo and Charlie Chaplin, to name a few – were the same ones known and loved across the country. Cinema drew in young audiences, and along with dance, came to define the era, as Yurovsky notes:

> The 1920s leisure "mania" sparked an era defined by pleasure seeking and amusements. As important players in a modern, fashionable world, cinemas and dance halls redefined a generation of young Britons who came of age watching films and attending dances.[169]

These trends were visible here, as elsewhere, in the fluctuating fortunes of cinemas, concert venues, skating rinks, music halls, travelling shows and theatres of Devon in the 1920s.

[169] Kathryn Reilly Yurkovsky, *'The Mania of the Moment': Cinema, Dance Hall, and the Rise of 1920s Leisure Culture in Britain,* Thesis, (May 2015) <https://barnard.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/KathrynReillyYurkovsky_%27The%20Mania%20of%20the%20Moment%27_2015.pdf>, p. 59.