

British Library Newspapers: Family histories uncovered

THE MAGICAL TALE OF PROFESSOR BURKO

For thirty years, I have been researching my family history and had only the sparsest of details on my great-grandfather, George Meddings (1863-1936). I had pieced together some of the history of his intriguing life from a few fragments: a photograph, a birth certificate and a short obituary. He was a magician, it seems, from the Victorian Music Halls era known by the stage name of 'Professor Burko' or just 'Burko'. The obituary stated he had performed on music hall stages for over forty years, and starred in practically every town in Great Britain. It is alleged he even had the honour of performing for Queen Victoria at Osbourne House such was his fame.

Searching Newspapers

The turning point in my research came in 2007. A friend introduced me to *19th Century British Library Newspapers*, a collection of 19th century British newspapers held by the British Library and digitised by the publisher, Gale. Curious, I typed my great grandfather's stage name 'Burko' into the search field in the off-chance there might be some reference to him. To my surprise, 250 hits from *The Era* newspaper jumped out at me. Within minutes, this easy-to-use online collection allowed me to scan a variety of advertisements about him and his performances nationwide. In fact, I found that I could trace his performances around the country week by week for the twelve years up to 1900 and at the end of my research I obtained nearly 300 pieces of information about the Great Burko.

The Era

The chief source of material on Burko came from *The Era*, the principal newspaper for the theatrical profession of Victorian times, and the means to trace my great-grandfather's magical career. *The Era*, published from 1837 until 1939, was a weekly paper that served as the primary channel through which artists and agents obtained work and kept in touch with family and colleagues. It was crammed with information of all kinds: advertisements, reviews and articles about Victorian music halls and theatres. I found references to Burko mainly in small advertisements which he must have placed there himself or were placed there by the Music Hall.

The Story of Burko

In early 2008 I contacted Professor Edwin A.Dawes, a biographer, and historian of The Magic Circle, one of the world's premier magical societies. I asked if he could help me assemble the story of Burko and the fruits of our collaboration were published in a series of four articles in 'Rich Cabinet of Magical Curiosities' series in *The Magic Circular* early in 2009. Below are some edited extracts from the first of these articles:

The Silent Wizard

George Meddings, whose career as the professional magician, Professor Burko commenced in 1888, was born on 28 February 1863 in London, the third of a family of nine children. Despite a family background of hardship and poverty, Burko is first sighted in the pages of *The Era* at the age of twenty five appearing as "Professor Burko, the only Silent Wizard in the World. The Greatest Card Manipulator in the World, New and Original" at the Grand Theatre in Liverpool during the week commencing 19 November 1888.



The Great Burko

Written by Keith Meddings with edited extracts from *A Rich Cabinet of Magical Curiosities: The Story of 'The Great Burko'* by Professor Edwin A.Dawes, M.I.M.C., published in *The Magic Circular*, January 2009





BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO.

A Mystifier of Electric Smartness. Wizard.

Extraordinary show for Piers. Wizard.

Vacant August. Wizard.

GAIETY, NEWCASTLE. Wizard.

The Era 24 May 1890

The Laughter-Making Magician. BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO.

acknowledged to be the Finest Slight of Hand Performer in London. No Talking, but doing.

PERHAM VARIETIES..... 9 9

ROYAL STANDARD..... 10 30

Vacant, July 31. Good Show for Piers.

The Era 21 February 1891

The Laughter-making Magician. BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO.

a Mystifier of Electric Smartness, surprising success. BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO.

DAYS, BIRMINGHAM. BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO, BURKO.

Vacant dates from June.

The Era 12 April 1890

Hat trick

The Era traces the evolution of Burko's craft as he journeyed across the country. In July 1895, he was performing in Middlesex Music Hall when *The Era* carried this report: "Professor Burko executes some puzzling feats of legerdemain, the ingenious way in which he reduces a pack of cards to gradually diminishing sizes until finally it vanishes altogether exciting much surprise, which is intensified when, from an apparently empty hat, he produces yards upon yards of different coloured silks, and finally a rabbit 'all alive and kicking'. The Professor is warmly applauded by the audience, who, as usual, seem to enjoy being mystified."

Fugio Illusion

Novelty played an important part in any magician's act. In the programme of Glasgow's Gaiety and Scotia Theatres in 1895 we read "Professor Burko...in addition to several mysterious items, introduces his new illusion 'Fugio'." An indication of the nature of this illusion comes in the report of his act at the Empire in Birmingham in the first week of January 1896, namely "Professor Burko is very good, and so is the mystical illusion in which Fugio, a young lady, disappears from a cabinet prepared by Professor Burko, and reappears in the auditorium". Possibly the title of the illusion was derived from the Italian fuga, meaning 'escape'.

America

Then came Burko's exciting engagement in America. As recorded in the article on Henri Cazman (Dawes, 2008), Cazman, a contemporary of Burko, was at this time managing The Royal European Vaudeville Company's Tours in America and Canada and advertising in *The Era* for artistes. It is possible therefore that Burko's engagement came via this route. However that may be, he appeared at Proctor's Theatres in New York and on his return took out an advertisement in *The Era* on in July 1896 (appropriately!) to proclaim his success:

The Laughter-making Magician BURKO, Prince of Magicians. BURKO, the Greatest of all Sorcerers. BURKO, who says little but does much. Just Returned from Proctor's Theatres, New York. Enormous Success. The principal attraction at Procter's Pleasure Palace this week is a European magician, Burko, one of the best slight-of-hand performers ever visited New York. His style is far away from all others. He was loudly cheered for his wonderful skill.



Epilogue

George Meddings, Professor Burko, died in Hospital at the age of 72. There, prior to his death, he had been delirious, getting out of bed and going through his magic routines. An obituary notice included the statement that he had appeared before Queen Victoria at Osbourne House and King Edward VII, although independent confirmation of these engagements has yet to be secured. It was reported by Brunel White in his column *The World's Fair* that as the Great Burko lay unconscious and dying "he raised his hand, made imaginary passes in the air, and whispered 'the card completely disappears'".

I know there is so much more for me to discover in those pages about The Great Burko. I have only been able to research twelve years of Burko's career – he performed for another thirty years after that. My dream is that Gale digitises the remaining issues of *The Era* (1900-1939) so that I can complete Burko's biography, share it with my family and return him to his rightful place in the history of magic.

A SOLDIER'S TALE

Over the years I developed a strong interest in family and local history and spent many hours in the Bradford public library browsing through microfilmed old newspapers. Since my diagnosis with multiple sclerosis three years ago I now spend a great deal of time at home. Discovering this year that I was able to access the *19th Century British Library Newspapers* website using my library borrower's card without having to make the trip to the library has proved a great joy for me.

A Soldier of the Empire

My most recent triumph has been to follow the course of my great-grandfather's military career before the outbreak of the Crimean War. Service records obtained during the 1990s from The National Archives in Kew revealed that my great grandfather Richard Patten enlisted with the 30th Regiment of Foot in the West Midlands in 1839 at just 22 years old and 5' 7" tall. *19th Century British Library Newspapers* made it possible for me to compare these service records against newspaper reports and track the movements of his Regiment within the UK and on the continent, at times of peace and international crisis.

I discovered that Richard's regiment was stationed in Ireland where he married, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Manchester, Cephalonia [sic], Gibraltar, back to Ireland, and finally the Isle of Wight where he died. Notices in regional newspapers of concerts given by the regimental band enlivened my research as Richard may have been a musician and a band member.



The Sultan declares war against Russia – The Belfast News-Letter, December 11, 1854 © British Library. All rights reserved.

Searching Newspapers

Specifying dates but not newspaper titles I searched the collection using the keyword "30th Regiment". This search uncovered numerous articles referencing the 30th Regiment in newspapers like *The Belfast News-Letter*, *Freeman's Journal*, *Newcastle Courant*, *Lloyd's Weekly* and *The Morning Chronicle*. Searches were made easier by the fact that most national newspapers frequently carried lists of postings of regiments under the section heading of "Army & Navy News".

Fire

In Richard's first year in the army, I came across an interesting article in the *Belfast News-Letter* of Friday 1st November 1839. The 30th Regiment had travelled south from Belfast to Newry just in time to lend assistance at Newry Mill where a furious fire broke out in the late hours of a Monday evening. Within minutes the whole section of the building was engulfed in flames. Great praise was awarded to 'the officers and privates of the 30th Regiment, to the police, and to the inhabitants generally, every one vying with the other in rendering aid to check the progress of the fire.'

The Army's Many Faces

For all the comradeship and loyalty military life inspired, violence also played its part in the daily life of the Regiment. In March 1844, *Freeman's Journal* reported that a soldier of the 30th Regiment died at the hands of his comrades at Cork barracks. Three soldiers gave evidence at the inquest where it was alleged that Privates Edward Gower and Peter Hoey 'disputed over who had won a halfpenny which they'd tossed for.' After Hoey struck Gower the pair boxed and fought two rounds before they were separated. The next morning Gower was found insensible in bed, carried to hospital and died in the afternoon. The inquest produced a verdict of manslaughter against Hoey and committal to gaol for trial.

Regimental Drafts at Gibraltar – The Graphic, Saturday, July 9, 1892 © British Library. All rights reserved.

Born and educated near Bradford, Jean K Brown worked for more than thirty years at Bradford University before retiring in 1999.

For 20 years she has been a frequent user of her local library, researching family and local history. News articles she collected about Thornton between 1751 and 1938 appear in "Who'd 'Ave Thought It?" by Thornton Antiquarian Society published by Bank House Books.

DESTRUCTIVE FIRE AT THE NEWRY MILLS.— On Monday night, about ten o'clock, a fire broke out in the interior of the extensive mills of Newry, and in a few minutes the whole of that portion which contained the machinery for the manufacture of oatmeal was enveloped in a body of flame. The fire burned fiercely till the whole of the northern portion, the machinery, and what property could not be removed, were consumed; the communication, however, with the larger mill having been fortunately cut off, the destructive element did not reach it— or, at least, the damage done to it was comparatively trifling. We believe the concern was insured to a considerable amount. The greatest praise is due to the officers and privates of the 30th Regiment, to the police, and to the inhabitants generally, every one vying with the other in rendering aid to check the progress of the fire. We have heard that some derangement of the machinery in the engine-house was the cause of the commencement of the unfortunate occurrence.—*Newry Examiner*.
RIMMONTAM.—We understand, that, in consequence of

The Belfast News-Letter, November 1, 1839 © British Library. All rights reserved.



THE HAYNAU OF CEPHALONIA.

The lord high commissioner of the Ionian Islands, Sir Henry Ward, has published his account of the late insurrection in Cephalonia, and of the measures which he resorted to in order to suppress and to avenge it. We are not going, for the present, to dispute or question any of his excellency's assertions; although his admission that "he lives in an atmosphere where truth is unknown," must prompt every one to entertain doubts and scruples, as to what it may please even a high commissioner to assert from the testimony of such people. Our aim here shall be to form a judgment of Sir Henry Ward from his own accounts and admissions. And we must say, that these form the most singular self-portraiture of constitutional government by an ex-liberal that we have yet encountered.

On the morning of the 30th of August last, Sir Henry Ward received intelligence of a popular outbreak in Cephalonia, of which "he admits that he had no means of forming an opinion then, as to the origin or objects of the movement." Nevertheless, the first thing that this

Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper, March 17, 1850 © British Library. All rights reserved.

Insurrection in Cephalonia

Troubles within England and Ireland were to prepare my great-grandfather and his Regiment for troubles beyond Britain's shores. In late August 1849 insurrections on the Mediterranean islands of Cephalonia [sic] and Corfu required attention from the British Army. On Sunday 17th March 1850 *Lloyd's Weekly* printed Sir Henry Ward's version of the insurrection in Cephalonia, and what he had done to suppress it. The editor clearly disapproved of Sir Henry, who had brought in the British Army and ordered 68 trials by court martial. Most prisoners were executed and others were flogged. Punishments were regarded to have severely blemished the reputation of Britain's 30 year rule over Cephalonia. The editor accused Sir Henry Ward of being 'as blindly tyrannical and brutally vindictive as any purveyor of the gallows or wielder of the cat-o-nine-tails that ever forfeited the character of liberal, or disgraced the name of Englishman.'

Gold Fever

It was in this environment that Richard and his Regiment found themselves in early March 1851. What was life like for them? Hardly without incident it seems. *The Daily News* of Saturday 25th September 1852 printed a shock-horror tale of mutiny on the island. The 30th Regiment had been infected by gold fever. A plot had been hatched by some men to strike their officer in the hope of being transported, rather than executed or whipped. It would gain them free passage to Australia where – although convicts – they fondly imagined they'd be able to join the Gold Rush.

The War in Crimea

It wasn't long before Richard's military career moved him and his family from Cephalonia to Gibraltar. Soon after arriving however, Richard fell seriously ill. Richard was invalided home with his wife and surviving children on 30th April 1854 while Britain and France battled with Russia in Crimea. *The North Wales Chronicle* of Saturday April 29th 1854 reported under the heading 'Army and Navy': "The progress of our troops to the seat of war is being hastened with all energy and as fast as screw and paddle can convey them; several of our finest regiments are now on their way to strengthen the force at Gallipoli", including the 30th Regiment. Fortunately, Richard was not among them.

On 8th May 1857 Richard Patten was appointed Paymaster Sergeant of the 2nd Dept Battalion. He died aged only 40 on 6th February 1858 at Parkhurst Hospital from 'Phthisis Pul. Certified.' Of his five known children, only the two oldest (both girls) outlived him.

Family History Uncovered

I think *19th Century British Library Newspapers* is absolutely brilliant and I could not be more grateful to its creators. Having started this hunt with a very small amount of mostly inaccurate information I have gained enormous pleasure from collecting material about Richard Patten's background. Even if his personality can't be deduced, knowing why and how he went where, has clarified the picture and could almost certainly not have been achieved without reference to the newspapers website.

