Zoah Hedges-Stocks grew up with the circus and can trace her showmen ancestors back to the 1820s. She shares her family’s heritage with *Your Family History*

Funtairs are a familiar sight in the summer, yet their history is something that rarely crosses people’s minds. Indeed, most don’t realize that funfairs are much more than a business. Most don’t realize that funfairs are a familiar sight in the summer, yet many are quite important to those who run them – they are a way of life. Travelling showmen, as we call ourselves, are very aware of our history and heritage. As we travel around the country, you might imagine that our family history would be very difficult to track - but you would be wrong. As a youngster, I was delighted by hearing my grandfather’s stories about his childhood and my ancestors, and this oral history really makes the past come alive in a way that dusty documents cannot. These memories have proved invaluable to the research of my family history.

My mother’s family, the Stocks, have run funfairs since at least 1820, when Charles Stock, father of Alfred Stock and my great great grandfather, is described on his son’s wedding certificate as a ‘steam circus owner’. Despite the fact that the Showmen’s Guild, the governing body for fairs in this country, has been known by that name since the very early 1900s, the term ‘travelling showman’ has taken a long time to enter common usage. It is important to bear in mind, when searching for evidence of showmen in your own family tree, that different terms may be used, such as ‘amusement caterer’, ‘roundabout proprietor’ or ‘travelling entertainer’. Families that may have had links with the travelling community include horse dealers and market stall keepers. For instance, Martha Hall, wife of Alfred Stock, met her husband when she was selling sweets on her family’s market stall.

The reason that families took into the business were quite diverse, but there has always been one thing in common in people who decided to take up travelling with the fairs: a willingness to take a chance and work hard for a better life. To a poor man in the 1800s, stuck with backbreaking labour in the confines of a mill or a mine, or a farm labourer, out of work for part of the year, the idea of being your own master, seeing the country and working with your family beside you must have been very attractive. It is easy, nowadays, for people to have a romanticized view of the travelling life, but in those days it really could be an adventure, and escape from poverty, and a welcome into a new, close-knit community – much more than just a business.

It wasn’t altogether an easy life, though, especially in the days before we used motorized power. My great grandfather Bert Stock (son of Alfred Stock) remembered, as a young boy in the early 1900s, going out in thunderstorms to look after the horses. In the days of horse-drawn wagons, sons would usually sleep underneath, with a tarpaulin to keep the weather out. Bert and his brothers, being relatively successful, had their own living wagons as boys – but this didn’t stop them from having to look after the horses in rough weather! As your means of transport, horses were invaluable, and if the thunder made them bolt you could find yourself stranded. Horses were so important to the way of life that my great great grand aunt was known her whole life as Tuppence Hedges because, as a little girl, she was paid a tuppence to take care of the horses, and the nickname stuck!

Whilst horses could be unreliable, steam power was not without its problems either. In 1912, George Hedges, Tuppence’s father, saw his Gallopers – or carousel, to the uninitiated – tip over on Maldon Hill, Essex, when the steam engine he had hired to take them up the hill failed. John Barker, a relative on the Stocks side of my family, had his own set of four-abreast Gallopers – a grand carousel with four rings of horses on it, and a very impressive ride to own. There were not many like it in the country at the time, and he displayed typical traveller tenacity when he came over from Ireland in the 1840s with barely a penny to his name and worked hard enough to afford them. Sadly, in 1897, he was crushed between two traction engines on Norwich Market Hill, Norfolk – a tragic death for a hard-working and dynamic man, who left behind 15 children. He is buried at the Rosary Cemetery in Norwich, where his impressive monument is a testament to a much-loved and respected man.

The travelling showpeople’s community is filled with such colourful and inspirational characters. Men who weren’t afraid to get their hands dirty, or take a financial risk, and who combined hard and heavy work with the flair, indeed, showmanship, needed to make the arrival of a fair the local event of the year. Charles Thurston was the uncle of my great great grandmother, and arguably, at the time of his death in 1928, was the best-known showman in the country. An entrepreneur, he made his name with travelling Bioscope shows at the turn of the century. These shows were the forerunners of modern cinema and the first exposure that many people had to moving pictures. Charles made a point of always giving a free show to the people of the local workhouse in every town he visited. This thoughtful gesture showcased the generosity given these poor people a welcome escape from their hard daily lives.

A patriotic man, he not only named one of his engines after King Edward VII, but exhibited a film of his funeral and gave the workhouse audience free...
ZOAHS FAMILY owned the 'Ark Ride' from at least the 1940s until it was sold in the 1970s. Jack Leeson Collection, National Fairground Archive, Univ of Sheffield.

Social History... Fairground Forebears

THE DINGLES FAIRGROUND Heritage Centre in Lifton, Devon, is an indoor museum where visitors can enjoy the National Fairground Collection of vintage rides and funfair memorabilia. The museum explores the darker side of funfairs past, such as freak shows and menageries, alongside the delights of mechanical music, cinematography and the re-invention of the big wheel. Don't miss the Autumn Fairground Weekend on 25-26 September 2010, when visiting fairground organs will join the usual collection along with special displays and photo exhibitions. Take a ride on the 1888 Rodeo Switchback and a 1940s Ghost Train, and visit the Hall of Mirrors and Vintage Penny Arcade.

Information
The Fairground Heritage Centre
Lifton
Devon
PL16 0AT
Tel: 01566 783425
Web: www.fairground-heritage.org.uk

HERITAGE CENTRE in Lifton, PL16 0AT, has been held every year since 1912. Books and journals about fairground heritage can be found in the extensive collections of documents, family papers, photos, posters and ephemera donated by showpeople, and found that ‘Stocks Brothers Funfair’ sounded better than ‘Stock Brothers’. Bert Stocks, his father died, he and his brothers took over the business and found that ‘Stocks Brothers Funfair’ sounded better than ‘Stock Brothers’. Again, he was an astute businessman who always kept enough money in his pocket to take an opportunity. My grandmother says that ‘You could send Bert to Buckingham Palace, and he’d talk the Queen round to letting him open the gardens.’ An old-fashioned gent, he always wore a shirt and tie, and a waistcoat with a gold chain. The staff had great respect for ‘the governor’, as they always called him, and my grandfather recalls one of the workers hitting another for not calling Charlotte Stocks, his mother, ‘Ma’am’. An over-the-top reaction, but symbolic of the high esteem in which Bert and his wife were held, and not just by their workers – there are still people in the small Suffolk towns we visit who speak fondly of ‘Old Bert Stocks’.

People may be surprised to know the role that funfairs played in the war effort. The government saw the value in funfairs for keeping up the spirits of the nation, and encouraged them with their ‘Stay At Home’ holidays campaign. Opening hours were completely changed, with fairs operating during the day, then shutting down as darkness fell, so as not to break the blackout. The Showmen’s Guild raised £5,000 to buy a new Spitfire for the RAF. It was named ‘All The Fun Of The Fair’ as thanks to the community, but unfortunately it was shot down over France.

The family celebrated Victory in Japan and the end of the war in 1945 by giving free rides to the schoolchildren of Southwold, a small town on the Suffolk coast. Southwold has a special place in my family history. Once a fishing village, a fair has been held in the picturesque town to celebrate the feast of the Holy Trinity since King Henry VII granted a royal charter in 1489. The date might surprise people, who do not realize how ancient many fairs are, but it is by no means the oldest in the country. St Giles’ fair in Oxford has been held every year since 1210. The Midsummer Fair at Cambridge, for long time the highlight of the showman’s social calendar and the inspiration for my choice of university, is not much younger, having been founded by King John in 1211. The heritage and traditions of such fairs is well respected by showmen, although sadly not always by local authorities. My grandfather remembers a year in which the Mayor of Southwold took a dislike to the fair and built a barricade of barrows from the local brewery. His uncle Sidney, brother to Bert, crushed the barrier with his traction engine and pointed out that as the fair had been granted by royal charter, he was going against the King and essentially committing treason! However, the Mayor still refused to hold the formal ceremony that would allow the fair to open. The townfolk were not pleased by this.

The Trinity fair was an important aspect of local tradition: the schools would have a half-day holiday, and every child would be given sixpence. In the end, the young boys of the town visited the Mayor’s house and begged him to change his mind. They succeeded, and the Trinity has lived on ever since. The Mayor still opens the fair, and apart from that one incident, the fair enjoys a very good relationship with the town, no doubt because we both admire the other’s sense of heritage and tradition.

George Cushing MBE, founder of the Thurford Steam Museum and champion of fairground history, recalled walking across the field to visit the funfair one summer’s evening, and, seeing a bright glow on the horizon, thought it was on fire! When he ran there to help put out the blaze, he discovered that the unnatural glow was not a fire at all, but the first time he had ever seen electrical light.

People sometimes claim that travelling funfairs are dying out, and whilst it is true that we now face competition from theme parks, the business is still going strong, if changing. Some showmen are supplementing their summer season by travelling as far afield as Iceland, Hong Kong and Dubai in the winter months. Others, such as my father’s family, are diversifying. He runs shops in the winter, whilst my uncle builds beautiful bespoke caravans, taught by my paternal grandfather. In a way, this echoes the present state of fairgrounds and showmen – we are adapting and reacting to modern times but not forgetting our heritage and traditions.

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