

FRED THE DONKEY MAN, 1908–82

'The Donkey Man is here!' shouted one excited village child to the other when the itinerant Fred Abel set up camp in Deddington. Fred, still remembered fondly today by Anne, Debbie, Mike and no doubt many others who grew up in our village 40 or 50 years ago, knew exactly where to find him, the heavily bearded man, with his menagerie of donkeys, dogs



and his shelter on wheels. Fred and his travelling circus became a well-known attraction to be met along the lanes and roads of our county. Tramp-like in appearance he kept himself tightly wrapped in mystery keeping children and adults guessing as to his origins and why he had chosen a life on the road.

Today Debbie's memories of Fred will no doubt reawaken in some of her contemporaries many more tales of Oxfordshire's much beloved Donkey Man. And who knows, we may even uncover a little fraction of the mystery which surrounded Fred.

Debbie's Story: 'I remember Fred as a kind man who was always grateful for help with gifts. He used to park his belongings along the 'Lane' (now Cosy Lane) by our house. My mother (Mary Churchill) used to fill his water cans and also give him a cooked meal, occasionally a Sunday roast. He always said 'Thank you ma'm, ta'. My mother told us that he travelled around like he did because he was jilted in love, but I have no proof of this. We were so excited when Fred called, because he used to give us donkey rides up and down the Lane.

My sister Anne, and brother John remember that he advertised his Flea Circus. I am sure that his dusty donkeys might have had fleas, but Fred got very upset when one village boy made this accusation to his face. Fred went to see the boy's parents who promised to take their rude son to task. Fred's cart looked like a big tent on wheels that gave him and his dogs shelter and in which he stored his possessions of pots and pans and a record player. I cannot remember if it worked!

On the outside of this mobile tent he had written in big letters: 'NO TV, NO TAX', indicating to those road users with thieving tendencies that he carried or owned no money. In spite of that advert to put off scroungers, there came the day when the sad news broke that Fred had been beaten and robbed. Today I still treasure a few photographs I have of Fred with my mother holding me in arms, of Fred leading a donkey and of Fred and dog surveying his worldly goods spread in front of his tented cart. And most of all I treasure the memory that Fred regarded my mother Mary and my father Jack as his friends. How do I know? He told my auntie Dorothy Michell.'

Mike Boyd had carefully cut out and set aside an article and pictures from the *Oxford Times* of 5 February 1982 entitled 'Farewell to Fred'. On pictures surrounding the unsigned obituary we see Fred, entitled the 'Ringmaster', in top hat sitting outside his 'tent' on wheels with one of his dogs. In the background a donkey is tucking into a generous bale of hay. The story goes

that one day in 1965, a hit-and-run motorist demolished his 'wheely tent' leaving him and his circus of animals homeless. His friends and admirers quickly collected enough money to buy him a brand new three-wheeled cart on which was painted in big white letters: ' FRED ABEL's CIRCUS', and underneath in smaller capitals 'AS SEEN ON TV'. It appears that in his younger days Fred, lover of animals great and small, made himself ringmaster over his collection to entertain folk on his travels, earning just enough to keep himself and his animal friends fed.

On yet another picture, probably taken in 1974, Fred is seen sitting outside his home, cuddling a little dog and holding up a fistful of £ notes. He is surrounded by children who have obviously just been told the story of his riches. It is a very sad story, luckily with a happy ending. Unthinking louts had broken into his cart and robbed him of savings he had scraped together over the years to buy himself a proper caravan. It is reported that this time his friends rallied round again and replaced all his money and a year later friends from Tadmarton Farm and Deddington Mill helped him buy a comfortable caravan complete with bunk bed, curtains and even a fitted carpet. When Fred retired from entertaining and travelling, he settled in or around Deddington. Mike Boyd remembers that Fred was always very polite and ticked off children who used bad language. Fred spoke with a quite pronounced stutter, looked always rather scruffy, but it was felt that had he lived in more settled conditions in his early youth, he might indeed have had a very good upbringing.

Sometime in 1979 PC Alan Rampley found Fred very ill. He had suffered a stroke and had to be admitted to hospital, but only after the RSPCA Inspector had taken charge of the three dogs who, fiercely protective, would not allow the ambulance crew anywhere near their master. I believe Fred never fully recovered. I remember seeing him in Horton Hospital and being told that his friends from Deddington Mill, who had taken charge of his donkeys, had brought them to the ward window where Fred could greet them from his wheelchair.

Debbie's and Mike's recollections brought this letter from Mrs Maureen Mazey (née French) from Banbury:

I have just been reading about the great Fred Abel. I too remember the lovely kind man that used to travel all over bringing joy to lots of the village children. I was born in Clifton and remember him parking his cart just down the road from my home in a nearby lane. Everyone used to look forward to him arriving and giving us rides on his donkeys. My dad, the late Gerald French, used to cut his hair for free and my mum, the late Violet French, would give him meals. I remember he used to love bread and cheese. He was such a polite man who never took things for granted. He was a very private man who had a lot of pride. I remember being told that he had passed away but I wonder if anyone knows where he was buried. It was a privilege to know such a nice and kind man as Fred!"

Like Maureen I wondered where the restless traveller Fred found his last resting place. No record of a grave in his name could be found on the register of burials in Banbury Cemetery. Eventually, with the kind assistance of a Banbury undertaker, I learned that Fred was cremated at Oxford Crematorium where his ashes were scattered. I should have known better than to search for a small grave in a big cemetery. Fred, the Donkey Man with the roving spirit, needed to be borne by the winds into God's beautiful countryside.

With this mystery solved some of us are still wondering where Fred spent his early youth and what made him choose life on the road. There are a few tales going the rounds that may hold clues. Let me know.

Do you remember Police House in Deddington? It was to Police House that PC Alan Rampley and his family moved in the 1970s and as soon as Deddingtonians discovered how seriously Alan took his community policing duties, it was to Police House they came for advice or help. Alan remembers that soon after his arrival in the area he received many enquiries about Fred Abel, the Donkey Man. Enquiries about his whereabouts, enquiries about his wellbeing, anxious and concerned enquiries from people who had not seen Fred for a while. And so Fred became an item, writ large, on Alan's beat. Alan is now retired from policing but has kindly taken time and trouble to jot down some of his memories of Fred, his menagerie, his primitive abodes on wheels and his beloved animals. He writes:

'Fred and his travelling circus were a familiar sight in stopping places along the Oxford/Banbury road where he regularly set up camp, sometimes just north of Deddington, other times near the Hopcroft Holt Hotel, Steeple Aston, or near the Shipton-on-Cherwell turn. When I first met him he was very friendly, but always refused stubbornly to give me just the tiniest clue why he had chosen a life on the road, He became even more withdrawn when asked about his own home background. Sadly, because of his eccentricity, his noble raggedness and his defencelessness he drew the attention of trouble-makers upon himself who convinced themselves that he must be a rich old fool who just might have a lot of money hidden in his cart. There were several incidents where someone entered and searched his van while he was away. Because of these attacks on his property he became very suspicious of people and even more reluctant to seek help. Even his dogs seemed to become bad tempered.

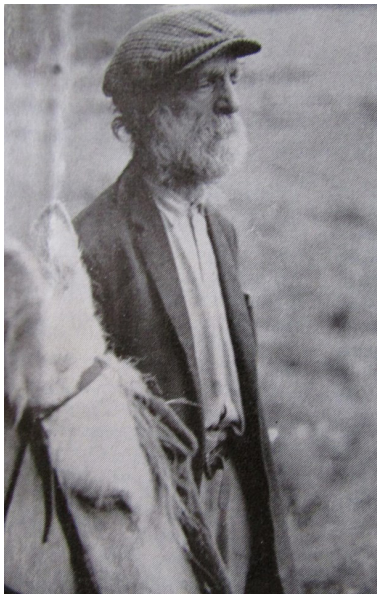
As he grew older he no longer moved very far from Deddington where he maintained his old trusted friendships with various families who welcomed him, gave him the odd meal, or even succeeded in coaxing him into having a bath. Passers-by dropped off clothes and food or left these for him at Police House. Fred never threw anything away and, as can be imagined, the inside of his caravan became less and less sweet smelling! Poor Fred, with his health and spirits broken, old age spelt big trouble. I made sure I stopped by on my beat to keep an eye on him, as much as he and his dogs would allow me to approach.

Disaster must have struck suddenly. On that day I was unable to get sight of Fred but suspected that he must be inside his caravan. After the RSPCA Inspector had managed to remove his guard dogs, the ambulance crew who stood by were able to examine him. Fred had suffered a major stroke which left him unable to move or speak. He was taken to the Horton Hospital, where doctors soon realised that he would need to live out his life, not on the open road, but in the care of kind medical staff. I was ordered to search through and clear out his caravan. What a distressful, and very smelly job that became and all to no avail. I found none of his personal papers nor information of next of kin. Regular road users did miss him, the man they had called 'the Gentleman of the Road'.

More than 20 years after his death, writing about him brought back many memories from villagers, but nowhere is there an authentic recollection of Fred the boy, or Fred in early manhood. He never talked of his past, and that makes me feel disloyal to him when dragging it up once more. On the other hand, I also feel that I owe it to our readers to recall what others had already put in

print. Just a few throw-away sentences I read in an article in the *Oxford Times* loaned to me by Mike. It is dated February 1982 and the unknown writer, after reporting Fred's death, refers to Fred's early background somewhat cautiously:

'It is believed that he grew up on a farm in Norfolk. He then worked in a factory until he joined the Royal Artillery at the outbreak of WWII. Disaster struck towards the end of the war, when his gun site was hit by a bomb, burying Fred under heaps of rubble. He survived, but thereafter could no longer settle into his civilian job, and might at that time have opted for a life on the road. A free agent, beholden to no one, moving from place to place must have been his dream of the good life. And so we meet him in the 1960s in and around Deddington. We remember him wearing his "circus ringmaster's" top hat, proudly showing off his donkeys, dogs and other pets who appeared as devoted to him as he to them.'



Fred would surely be most surprised that the children he entertained on his travels, now well into middle age, still remember a name of his dog, have kept receipts for money donated towards his new caravan, and treasure every faded sepia photo they possess of him. Fred the Donkey Man has to them become the symbol of that bygone age when their mothers happily gave them tuppence to enjoy his imaginary flea circus, in spite of the chance that the odd live flea might be carried home, when boys who begged their mothers for sausages to share a fry-up with Fred were given them, no matter how unhygienic his cooking utensils, and when a ride on one of his donkeys was a pleasure never forgotten. We can't imagine Fred doing his own thing in 21st-century Deddington, but his stubborn independence against all odds even then is a very precious memory.

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with thanks to Debbie, Mike, Maureen and Alan who shared their memories