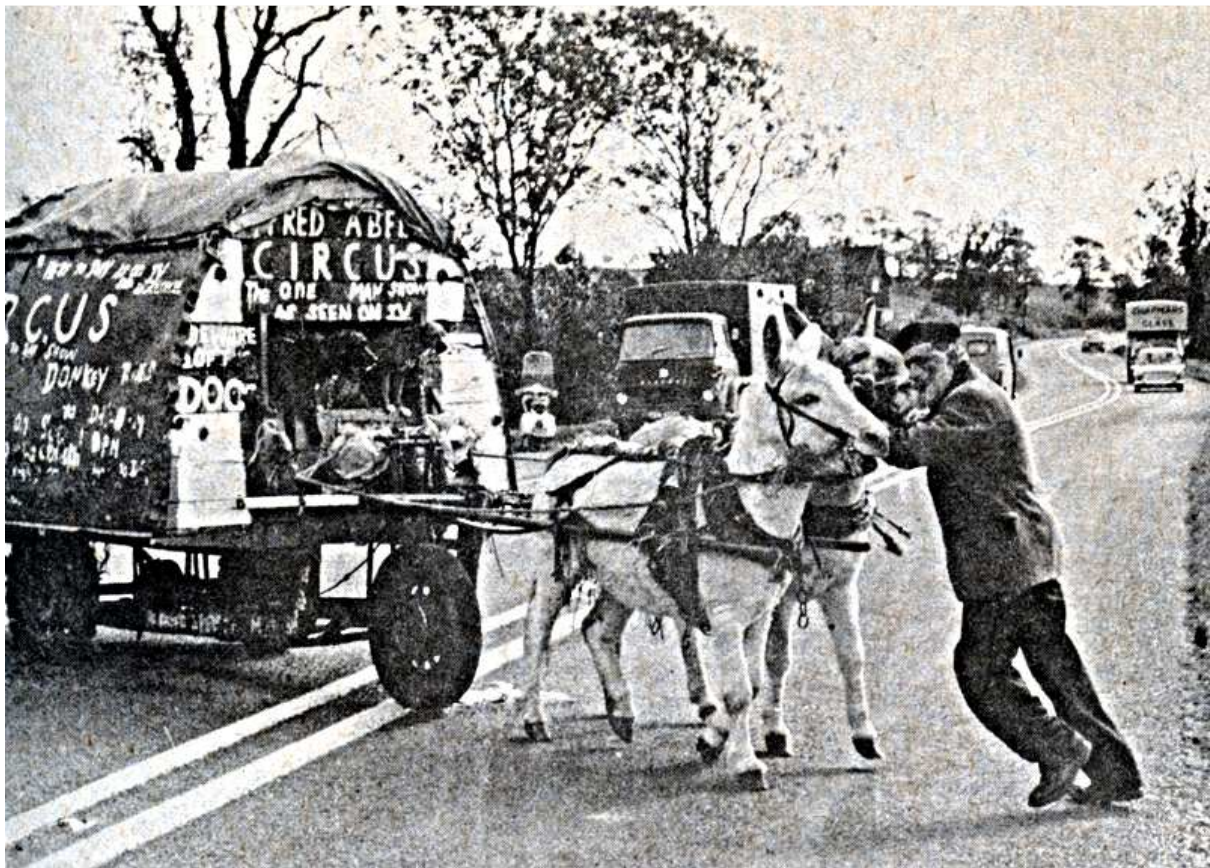


## MEMORIES OF FRED AND HIS ANIMAL ENTOURAGE Published in The Banbury Guardian 08 August 2002



**TRAVELLING** entertainer Fred Abel touched the hearts of many when he toured the area in the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

For years slight, bearded Fred was a familiar sight as he sat outside his caravan at different spots between Banbury and Southam surrounded by his dogs and donkeys.

He was a much-loved man of the road and now, 20 years after his death, Southam journalist Edward Salsbury is piecing together Fred's life for a magazine article and history booklet.

After appealing in the Banbury Guardian for information about the character, stories have been coming in thick and fast.

Mr Salsbury, who works at Banbury Farm and General Supplies, said: "I remember Fred from the 1960s. My late father drove a cattle truck and I used to accompany him. We would see Fred at various locations on the Southam to Oxford road.

"Fred was such a character whose life probably nobody thought to record and he could just disappear from history. I think he should be recorded."

Fred, who was born on a farm in Norfolk, started his travels in 1951 and served in both the first and second world wars. His Abel's Animal Antics and Abel's Flea Circus were well known to children and their parents all over the area. He was interviewed on radio and television and had a scrapbook full of newspaper cuttings and photographs.

He had a regular route and would stop every three or four miles. His friends and fellow travellers were two donkeys, 19 rats and three dogs.

Donkeys Benjy and Will pulled Fred's caravan along all the roads and country lanes.

One woman remembers scratching for a fortnight after seeing Fred's fleas in action and her mother refusing to let her in to the house after she had seen his show.

She said: "It was exciting when you could see him coming with his cart. He had a box and glass lid that he would put the fleas in and they would go around in a little chariot."

Fred was a welcome visitor at the home of Ann Shore. She lived at Oathill Farm in Cropredy with her family including brother Ken. Fred would stay at the bottom of the drive and come up to the house to perform for the children.

Ann, 64, now of Creampot Lane, Cropredy, said: "He would come to visit every day and we used to make him tea, sandwiches and cakes. Both he and my mother Dorothy Cullimore were from Norfolk and they would talk about the places they both knew."

When Fred's wagon was raided in 1975 his popularity was such that hundreds of pounds flooded in to the appeal launched by Sir George Beaumont of Deddington Mill to cover the cost of the 200 he had lost.

Colonel Lewis, of Tadmerton House Farm, and his staff renovated a chicken house where lived for four years before he suffered a heart attack in 1979.

Fred died aged 72 in February 1982 at the Horton Hospital in Banbury where he had been living for two years following the heart attack.

When he was taken into hospital the RSPCA took charge of his dogs and Sir George gave Benjy a home at his wife's donkey stud. Jean Finch, 75, of Ashcroft Road, Banbury, remembers seeing Fred at the hospital where he had been given a corner of the ward to himself. She said: "He was in the Horton Hospital at the same time as my dad Robert Hutt. The Horton arranged it so he was right in the corner with enough space for two. I think because he had been outdoors all his life they gave him a bit of privacy."