Theme 1 Victorians | Non-Fiction (Impersonal Writing)

The History of the CIRCUS

The word 'circus' is of Latin origin and means 'circle' or 'ring'. The Romans built circular stadiums for their chariot races and these were called 'circuses'. Philip Astley founded the first modern circus in London in about 1770. He gave horse displays accompanied by acrobats, musicians and a clown.

Astley found that his horses performed best in a circular place, so he enclosed his performance area by a ring. Astley called his show a riding school. A rival show set up by Charles Hughes in 1782, called the Royal Circus, was the first to use the word circus in the title. Following this, the idea of a circus performed in a ring spread to Europe and North America.

A Londoner, John Bill Rickets, set up the first circus in America. His circus followed the now established pattern of using performing horses and riders, acrobats and a clown but was the first to travel from town to town. Horses were the mainstay of the early circus performance but gradually other animals were introduced. The animal trainer Isaac Van Amburgh was said to be the first man to put his head inside a lion's mouth. America's first elephant arrived in 1796.

Among the first travelling circuses was that of Aaron Turner. In about 1830 it began performing outdoors under what may have been the first circus tent or 'big top'. Turner's tent was 28 metres across, providing space for a few hundred wooden seats, which could be dismantled and moved in a horse drawn wagon.

Travelling menageries (collections of animals) were popular about the same time. By 1870 the menagerie had become part of every circus. The circus was often presented in two tents, one for a variety of circus acts and a second reserved for the display of animals. Special wagons had to be built. The giraffe, for example, required a tall, padded wagon in order to protect its neck during transportation. The hippopotamus had a large tank of water built inside its wagon.

In 1871 P. T. Barnum formed a circus that was billed as 'The Greatest Show on Earth'. He purchased 65 railway carriages and became the first to transport his equipment, performers and animals in his own railway train. Other American circuses soon followed this idea as it was much easier than using horse drawn transport.

Clowns

Since the early days of the circus, clowns have been a major attraction, adding variety and humour to the show. When circus tents were small, the clowns entertained as singing and talking comedians. By 1870 circus tents had grown so large that not all the spectators could hear the clowns' voices. Since that time most clowns have mimed.

The Circus Ring

Although circuses have changed in many ways over the years the ring itself is still the same size in every land, 13 metres across. The circus programme has generally remained unchanged also. A traditional circus usually includes clowns, jugglers, horse acts and acrobats. Wild animal acts are now less popular than they once were.

Famous Animals

Jumbo the elephant was among the main attractions of the Barnum and London circus from 1882 until 1885, when he was struck and killed by a railway engine. His name has now come to mean anything big such as jumbo jets or jumbo sausages.

Famous Performers

Many performers became famous by the unusual nature of their acts. In 1897 Alan 'The Human Arrow' was the first to be shot through the air from a giant crossbow. Audiences were startled by the Zacchini Family's human cannonball act in which a family member was shot from a cannon and landed in a net.