

Fools and Horses, the Victorian Circus.



A previous talk by Ann Featherstone was so enjoyable she was invited again to our last meeting of 2017. Her subject this time was the Victorian Circus.

The origin of the circus came from an eighteenth century ex-cavalry officer, Philip Astley, who built a wooden riding school in London to display the abilities of his horses, proof of his expert training. This became so successful he built others in Paris and Ireland.

The Victorian Circus had many firm traditions. The performances took place in a 42ft diameter ring surrounded by a barrier called the Ring Fence. The horses and equestrians entered through the Ring Fence Doors with the Master of the Horse who was in control of the three hour non-stop performance. Interestingly, a stage was adjacent to, but separate from the Ring on which plays were performed. It was considered the circus world represented real life, the stage the world of imagination. In later years, acrobats and trapeze artists took part and most importantly the Clown. He was the comic high spot often perched on the Ring Fence eyeing and targeting vulnerable people in the audience. The Clown was the comic, the Ringmaster the straight- man, a foretaste of the double act of today's comedians. The circus had its own rules and conventions. Children, often part of a circus family took part but were never the Clown. Women were popular, again often wives and mothers of circus folk.

Ann taught Drama at University. She always took her students to the world famous Tower Circus at Blackpool as an essential part of their studies. Another tradition?

This lively, amusing, enlightening evening was a fitting end to our 2017 programme. The applause brought the house down!