

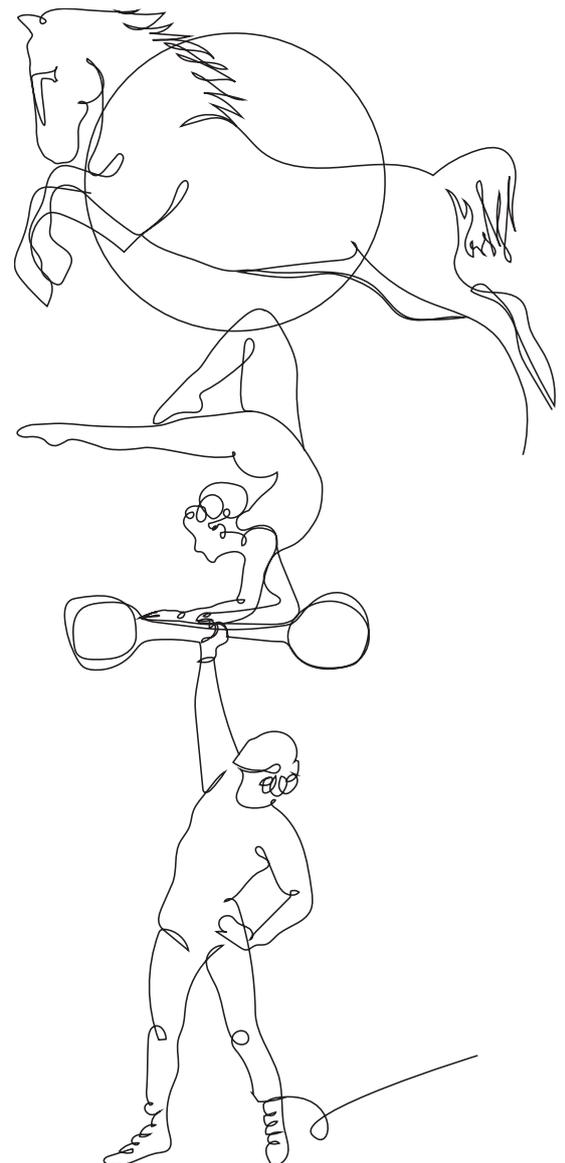
THE  
**PHILIP  
ASTLEY**  
PROJECT

THE FATHER OF MODERN DAY CIRCUS

# THE PHILIP ASTLEY PROJECT

THE FATHER OF MODERN DAY CIRCUS

Facts about Astley	3
Astley family tree	4
Timeline: key dates in Philip Astley's life	6
Newcastle-under-Lyme in the mid-eighteenth century	8
Astley's early life	9
Equestrianism	10
War Hero	11
Astley the ringmaster	12
Father of the modern circus	13
Astley's legacy	14
Find out more	16
Secondary sources	17



# Facts about Astley



**War hero:** At age 17, Astley joined the 15th Regiment of Light Dragoons and went on to become a master equestrian and war hero.

13m (42ft)

**Circus inventor:** Astley was the first to bring different acts together such as horsemanship, clowns, acrobats and jugglers, laying the foundations for what was to become the modern-day circus. His 13m (42ft) diameter circus ring is still the standard size of a circus ring today.



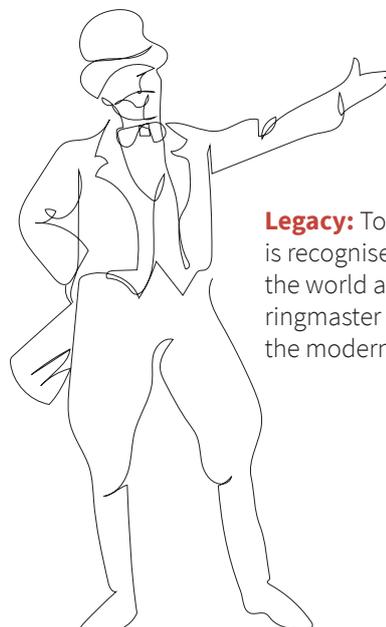
**Resting place:** Philip Astley died in Paris in October 1814, aged 72-years-old. He had previously been diagnosed with 'gout of the stomach'. Astley is buried in an unmarked grave in the Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris. His last will and testament is held at the Public Records Office, Chancery Lane, London. PROB 11/1562.

## 8th January 1742

**Son of Newcastle-under-Lyme:** Philip Astley was born on 8 January 1742 and spent his early life in Newcastle-under-Lyme.



**Entrepreneur:** Astley opened his first amphitheatre in London in the late eighteenth century and went on to open as many as 18 more in cities across Europe, including Paris and Dublin. He also took his circus on the road, touring England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Belgium and Serbia.



**Legacy:** To this day, Astley is recognised around the world as the original ringmaster and 'father of the modern circus'.

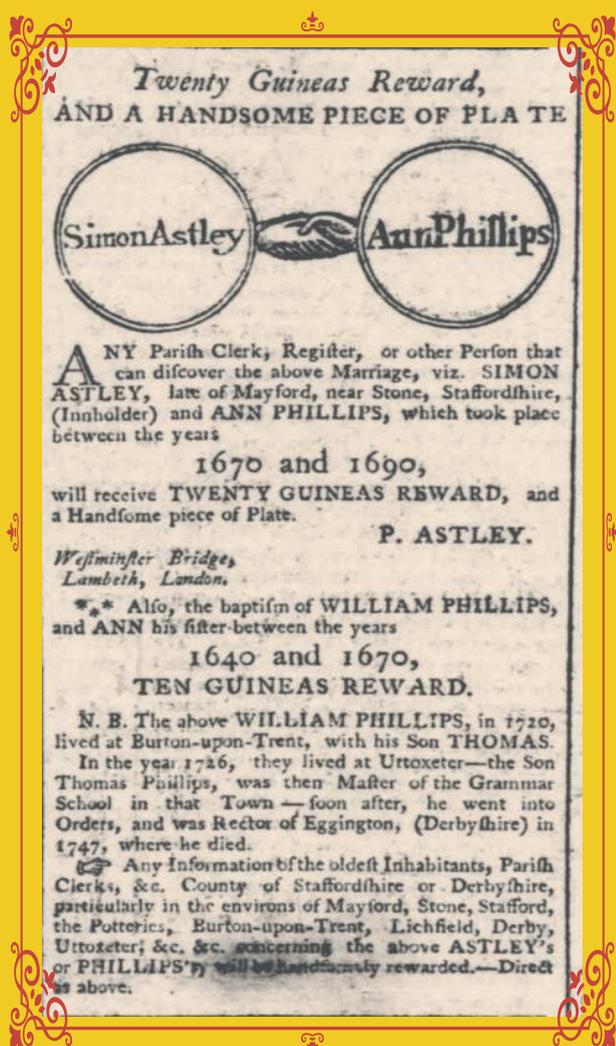
# Astley family tree



On 3 June 1797 Philip Astley placed an interesting personal advertisement in the Staffordshire Advertiser. Clearly keen to trace his ancestry, Philip offered a reward for evidence of the marriage of a Simon Astley and Ann Phillips and included information he had received about the Phillips family.

We don't know whether Philip received any information as a result of his advertisement but in 2017 the museum's archive team discovered that Simon Astley was called Simon Ashley and was Philip Astley's great-grandfather. He was an innkeeper from a well-to-do family at Meaford, a little hamlet just outside Stone, nine miles from Newcastle-under-Lyme. He married Ann Phillips in 1689 and they had three children – Edward, Elizabeth and Philip (Philip Astley's paternal grandfather), who was born in 1698.

Simon died in 1699, he was 31-years-old. In his will he left goods to the value of £109 2s 5d.



3 June 1797, Staffordshire Advertiser William Salt Library, Stafford

## Text from image:

Twenty Guineas Reward  
AND A HANDSOME PIECE OF PLATE

Simon Ashley & Ann Phillips.

Any Parish Clerk, Register, or other Person that can discover the above Marriage, viz SIMON ASTLEY, late of Mayford, near Stone, Staffordshire, (Innholder) and ANN PHILLIPS, which took place between the years

1670 and 1690

will receive TWENTY GUINEAS REWARD, and a handsome piece of Plate

P. ASTLEY.

Westminster Bridge,  
Lambeth, London.

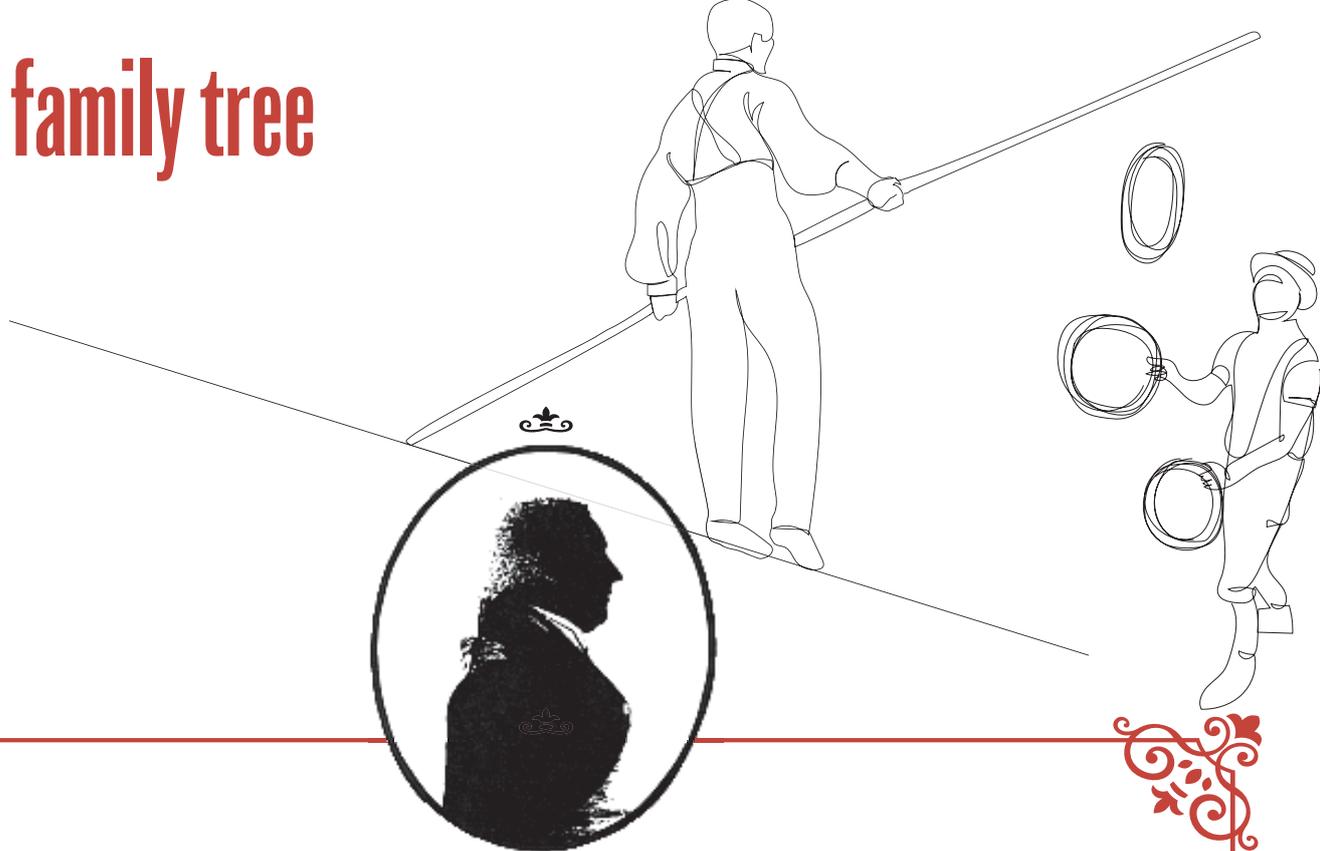
Also, the baptism of WILLIAM PHILLIPS and ANN his sister between the years

1640 and 1670,  
TEN GUINEAS REWARD.

N.B. The above WILLIAM PHILLIPS, in 1720 lived at Burton-upon-Trent, with his son THOMAS. In the year 1726, they lived at Uttoxeter - the Son Thomas Phillips, was then Master of the Grammar School in that Town - soon after, he went into Orders, and was Rector of Eggington (Derbyshire) in 1747, when he died.

Any Information of the oldest Inhabitants, Parish Clerks, &c. county of Staffordshire or Derbyshire, particularly in the environs of Mayford, Stone, Stafford, the Potteries, Burton-upon Trent, Lichfield, Derby, Uttoxeter, &c &c concerning the above ASTLEYS or PHILLIPS will be handsomely rewarded. Direct as above.

# Astley family tree



Philip Ashley — Elizabeth Milligane  
(Married 21 April 1720)

Samuel Leech — Jana Dowling  
(Married 15 Dec 1717)

Edward Astley — Sarah Leech  
(Married 3 May 1741)

(The family name 'Ashley' becomes 'Astley')

**Philip Astley**

Born 1742  
Died 1814

Martha Mary  
(Patty) Jones

(Married 8 July 1765)

John Conway Philip Astley — Hannah Waldo Smith

Born 21 May 1767  
Died 19 Oct 1821

(Married January 1802)

Sarah Astley  
Born 1743

Elizabeth Astley  
Born 1745

John Astley  
Born 1747



# Timeline: key dates in Philip Astley's life

Key dates in Philip Astley's life alongside other key dates of relevance.

The grey references are linked directly to Astley. The red references put his life in the wider context of what was going on during that time in history.

<b>8 January 1742</b>	Philip Astley was born
<b>11 February 1742</b>	Sir Robert Walpole, often viewed as the first British Prime Minister, resigns after 20 years in power. Spencer Compton, 1st Earl of Wilmington becomes Prime Minister.
<b>27 June 1743</b>	King George II becomes the last British monarch to lead his army into battle at the Battle of Dettingen in Germany.
<b>2 July 1743</b>	Spencer Compton dies and Henry Pelham becomes Prime Minister. Pelham's government passes The Marriage Act 1753, encasing in law a minimum age of consent for marriage.
<b>25 July 1745</b>	Prince Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie) lands in Scotland to raise rebellion, the Jacobite Rising, an attempt to claim the British throne from George II.
<b>16 April 1746</b>	The last battle on British soil sees the Jacobites defeated at Culloden. Charles Edward Stuart evades capture and escapes to France.
<b>1751</b>	Philip Astley is apprenticed as a cabinet maker
<b>May 1756</b>	The 'Seven Years' war between Britain and France begins.
<b>1759</b>	Philip Astley enlists in the 15th Light Dragoons, the first Light Cavalry Regiment of the British Army (Muster Lists 15th Light Dragoons).
<b>25 October 1760</b>	King George III succeeds his grandfather King George II.
<b>8 July 1765</b>	Astley marries Patty Jones at St. George in Hanover Square, London.
<b>1766</b>	Astley is honorably discharged from the army
<b>1766</b>	Astley registers as a cabinet maker in St Anne's, Soho and employs two apprentices, John Hughes and Thomas Philips.
<b>20 April 1767</b>	Philip and Patty's son, John Conway Philip Astley is born.
<b>1768</b>	Astley opens a Riding School at Ha'penny Hatch, near Lambeth.
<b>1769</b>	Astley moves the Riding School to the site near Westminster Bridge Road, known as Astley's Riding School.
<b>January 1770</b>	Lord Frederick North becomes Prime Minister. His government introduces the Tea Act 1773: which sparks the Boston Tea party and leads to the American Revolution in 1776.



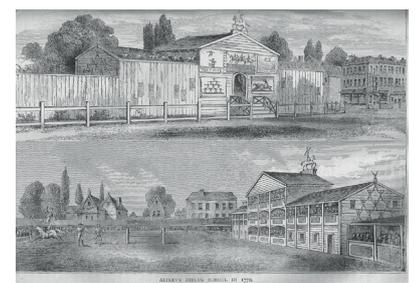
Newcastle-under-Lyme



Henry Pelham



King George III



Philip Astley's Riding School

# Timeline: key dates in Philip Astley's life

<b>1771</b>	A new era of factory production begins when Richard Arkwright opens the first cotton mill at Cromford, Derbyshire.
<b>1772</b>	Astley's five-year-old son, John begins giving riding displays.
<b>1772</b>	Astley and his wife, Patty are invited to Versailles to perform in front of Louis XV of France.
<b>1773</b>	Astley travelled Ireland for six months to sell-out audiences.
<b>1779</b>	Astley opens a covered amphitheatre in London.
<b>1782</b>	King George III grants Astley a 14-year patent for his method to desensitise horses to the sound of gunfire.
<b>1783</b>	Astley opens Amphithéâtre Anglais at Rue du Faubourg du Temple in Paris.
<b>1783</b>	William Pitt the Younger becomes Britain's youngest Prime Minister, aged 24-years-old.
<b>14 July 1789</b>	The French revolution begins with the storming of the Bastille.
<b>1 February 1793</b>	Britain goes to war with France.
<b>1793</b>	Astley closes his Paris circus and volunteers to serve with his old regiment on the outbreak of hostilities against France.
<b>1794</b>	Astley's Royal Saloon Amphitheatre burns down. It is rebuilt and renamed Astley's New Amphitheatre of the Arts.
<b>1 January 1801</b>	The Act of Union, uniting Great Britain (England, Wales and Scotland) with the Kingdom of Ireland into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.
<b>1802</b>	Treaty of Amiens achieving a peace in Europe for 14 months during the Napoleonic Wars.
<b>1803</b>	Astley's London amphitheatre is destroyed by fire again.
<b>1804</b>	Astley opens a new amphitheatre in London.
<b>21 October 1805</b>	The Royal Navy, under Admiral Lord Nelson, defeats a combined French and Spanish fleet at the Battle of Trafalgar. Nelson is killed while leading the attack.
<b>25 March 1807</b>	Britain abolishes the slave trade.
<b>1811 - 1812</b>	Luddites destroy industrial machinery in protest against low wages and unemployment.
<b>1814</b>	Philip Astley dies in Paris and is buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery.



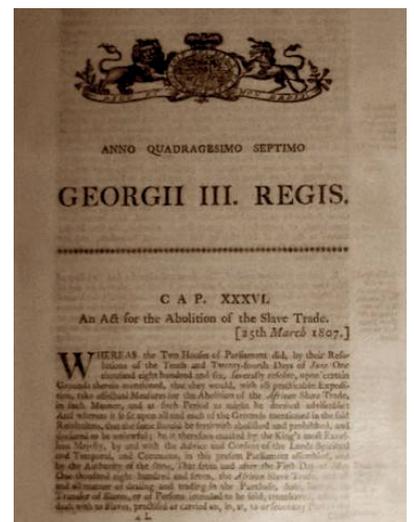
*The first cotton mill at Cromford*



*Amphithéâtre Anglais*



*Storming of the Bastille*



*Abolition of the slave trade*

# Newcastle-under-Lyme in the mid-eighteenth century



*Sketch of Newcastle-under-Lyme*

The Newcastle of Astley's time was a busy market town with a population of 2000, described as, 'the capital of the potteries.' The town's commercial success was due largely to its central location, along the main London to Carlisle highway. As the main road north out of London on the west side of the country, the route was bustling with drovers, carts, waggons and coaches.

In addition to being a well-travelled thoroughfare, Newcastle was a trading centre for the wider Staffordshire area, which included the expanding pottery towns to the east. The town supported weekly markets selling corn and other agricultural produce, cattle and horses, as well as hosting a huge agricultural fair five times a year.

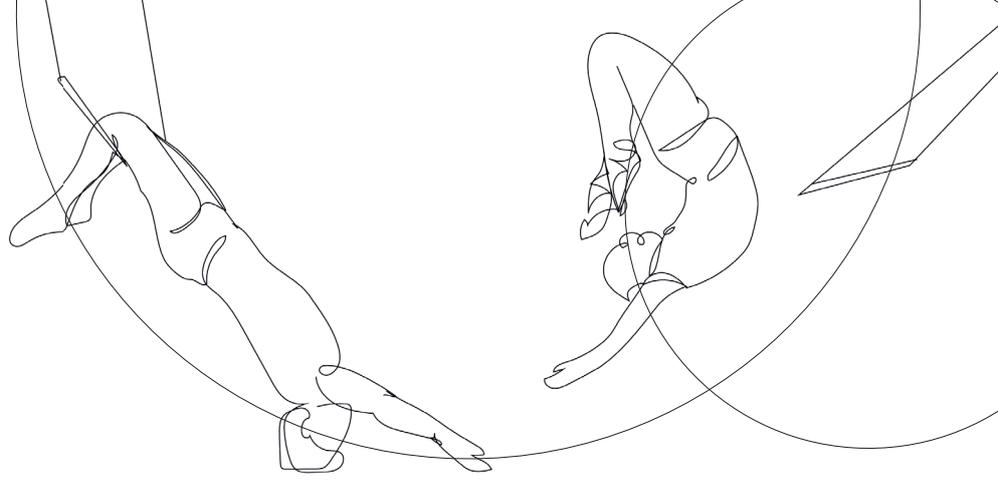
Road tolls along the route meant the town benefited financially from increased traffic from 1740 onwards, and travellers supported other business, including more than 70 pubs and coaching inns. These public houses were not simply sites for weary travellers to find sustenance and rest, they were centres for the town's social and leisure activities which included theatrical performances, concerts, a book club and the registration of horses for the annual Brampton races. Important business facilities such as the post office could be found there too, and Astley's uncle, Richard Milligane, worked in one as the town's postmaster.

Although much has changed since that time, Astley would recognise some of landmarks of his youth. The Guild Hall, rebuilt in 1713-4, remains a central landmark on the High Street. The Parish Church of St Giles, where his siblings were christened, still houses a lively congregation on Church St; and the old timber framed house once The Golden Ball Inn on High Street, known then as Bridge Street, still stands, now home to Plant and Wilton, Butchers.



*Newcastle-under-Lyme Guild Hall*

# Astley's early life



**Philip Astley was born on 8 January 1742, the son of Edward Astley and Sarah Leech, and spent his early life in Penkull Street, Newcastle-under-Lyme. It wasn't long before the family of three had grown to five with the birth of Philip's two sisters, Sarah and Elizabeth in 1743 and 1745.**

Struggling to make ends meet, the family moved to Lad Lane, where they shared a house with a shoemaker called, Joseph Edwards. Joseph and his wife had six children. Two of their sons, John and Robert, died in infancy. The surviving three daughters and a son lived with them in the same small house into which the couple welcomed the Astley family. It must have been a cramped existence. The house was smaller than many others nearby because it was registered for a window tax of 2s, at a time when almost half of the houses on the street were paying two to three times as much. Nevertheless, the Astleys made it their home, welcoming another son, John, two years later in 1747.

At nine-years-old, Philip Astley was apprenticed to his father, as a cabinet maker. At this time, the trade would probably have involved making cabinets for clockmakers and blocks for hatters, among other commissions. By this time the family had moved to London, renting a house in Wych Street, a central location just off The Strand, at a cost of £20 per year, almost twice the rent of most houses in the vicinity. Three years later, in 1754, Edward's business was struggling and the family moved to a much cheaper house in Porters-block, in the parish of St Sepulchre.

Unfortunately this move was not enough to solve the family's financial worries. Recognising the business was failing, Philip joined the army in 1759 and it is likely his sister, Elizabeth returned to Newcastle to live with her uncle, Richard Milligane. Shortly after, in 1761, Edward Astley was imprisoned for debt.

Elizabeth went on to marry James Hall, a hatter of Newcastle. It was their grandson, James Astley Hall, also a hat manufacturer, who presented a clock to the Borough of Newcastle in 1861, which can still be seen today at the top of the Guild Hall.

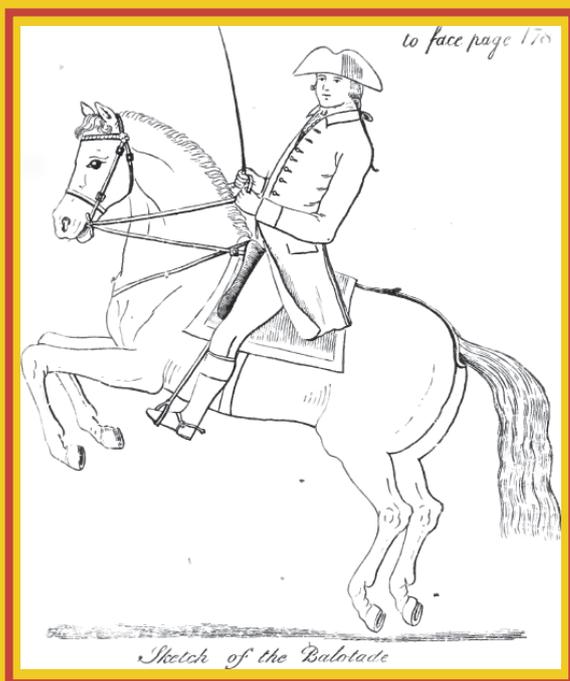


*Newcastle-under-Lyme Guild Hall*



*Penkull Street*

# Equestrianism



A sketch taken from Astley's 'A System of Equestrian Education' published 1802



## Philip Astley was considered the greatest horse trainer of his time.

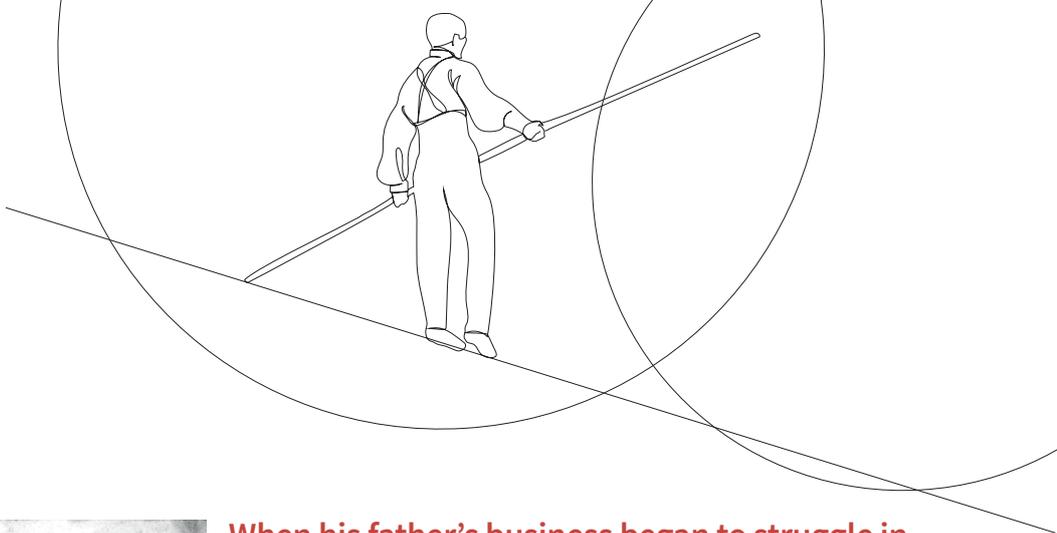
A sought-after expert of his day, Astley published books on his innovative training methods: 'A System of Equestrian Education' and 'The Modern Riding Master', copies of which can be found in the British Library. His expert advice was taken at the highest levels, and in 1782, King George III granted him a 14 year patent for his method to desensitise horses to the sound of gunfire – a vital attribute for war horses.

These equestrian skills also formed the core of Astley's success. What was his riding school by day became an entertainment venue at night, where Astley and his wife, Patty performed acrobatic tricks on horseback. Playbills from the time give us an insight into the types of trick riding crowds gathered to see:

*Mr. Astley will display the broad-sword, also ride on a single horse, with one foot on the saddle, the other on his head, and every other feat which can be exhibited by any other. With an addition of twenty extraordinary feats such as riding at full-speed, with his head on a common pint pot, at the rate of twelve miles an hour.*

Astley performed in a ring because its circular shape gave the audience a better view of the show. His original sawdust ring measured 19m in diameter, but after a period of experimentation he changed this size to 13m. This, he believed, was the ideal diameter for trick riders to stay on the back of their horses while performing for the public, being the minimum size in which a horse can comfortably canter or gallop.

Although less a feature of contemporary circus, the types of astonishing feats Astley called trick riding can be seen in competitive equestrian vaulting today. The 13m diameter ring is one of Astley's greatest legacies and is now the standard size of a circus ring.



**When his father's business began to struggle in 1759, 17-year-old Astley left his apprenticeship as a cabinet-maker and signed-up to join the military.**

At this time Britain was at war with France over frontier tensions in North America. This global conflict, known as the Seven Years' War, or in America as the French and Indian War, involved all major European powers of the time with Great Britain, Prussia, and Hanover on one side and France, Austria, Saxony, Sweden, and Russia on the other.

Astley was one of the first to enlist in the 15th Light Dragoons. The newly formed regiment was the first light cavalry of the British army, and it was here that Astley discovered the love of horses that was to shape the rest of his life.

At over six-feet tall Astley must have been an imposing figure and an ideal recruit – young, active and ambitious. Within months of enlisting, he was selected for extra training under the direction of Lord Pembroke's horse trainer, Dominic Angelo – which included trick riding. It is clear from techniques recorded in Pembroke's book 'Remarks on the Profession of the Soldier' that the time spent here greatly influenced Astley's riding school, opened some years later.

During his eight years as a Dragoon, Astley distinguished himself on and off the battlefield. Accounts of his heroic

behaviour tell how he rescued men and horses from an overturned boat saving them from being drowned. During the Battle of Emsdorf, despite being wounded, he captured the enemy's colours during a battle. On return to England the Dragoons were given a Royal Review in Hyde Park, London, where Astley presented the captured colours to the King.

On returning to war Astley saved the life of the hereditary Prince of Brunswick, commander of the mixed Hanoverian and Hessian troops, by charging through enemy lines to bring the wounded Prince to safety.

By the time Astley was honorably discharged he had risen to the ranks of Sergeant Major. Astley told people at the time he wanted to 'better himself' by exhibiting feats of horsemanship, and on 21 June 1766, aged 24, he left the Dragoons and returned to London for his next adventure.

In 1793, when war again broke out again with France, Astley left his son, John in charge of his circus business and re-joined his old regiment, this time in charge of the horses.

# Astley the Ringmaster

Philip Astley opened his first riding school in 1768 on 'Ha'Penny Hatch', a small piece of land on the south bank of the Thames in London. A year later Astley relocated his riding school to a site he purchased near Westminster Bridge Road. Ever the showman, Astley claimed he bought the land two years earlier with money from the sale of a diamond ring he stumbled upon while crossing nearby Westminster Bridge. However, his uncle's will, a copy of which is held in the Brampton Museum archives, tells a different story.

Richard Milligane, postmaster of Newcastle-under-Lyme, died in 1767 leaving £50 to Astley in his estate. It's likely this inheritance gave Astley the resources he needed to begin his circus empire.

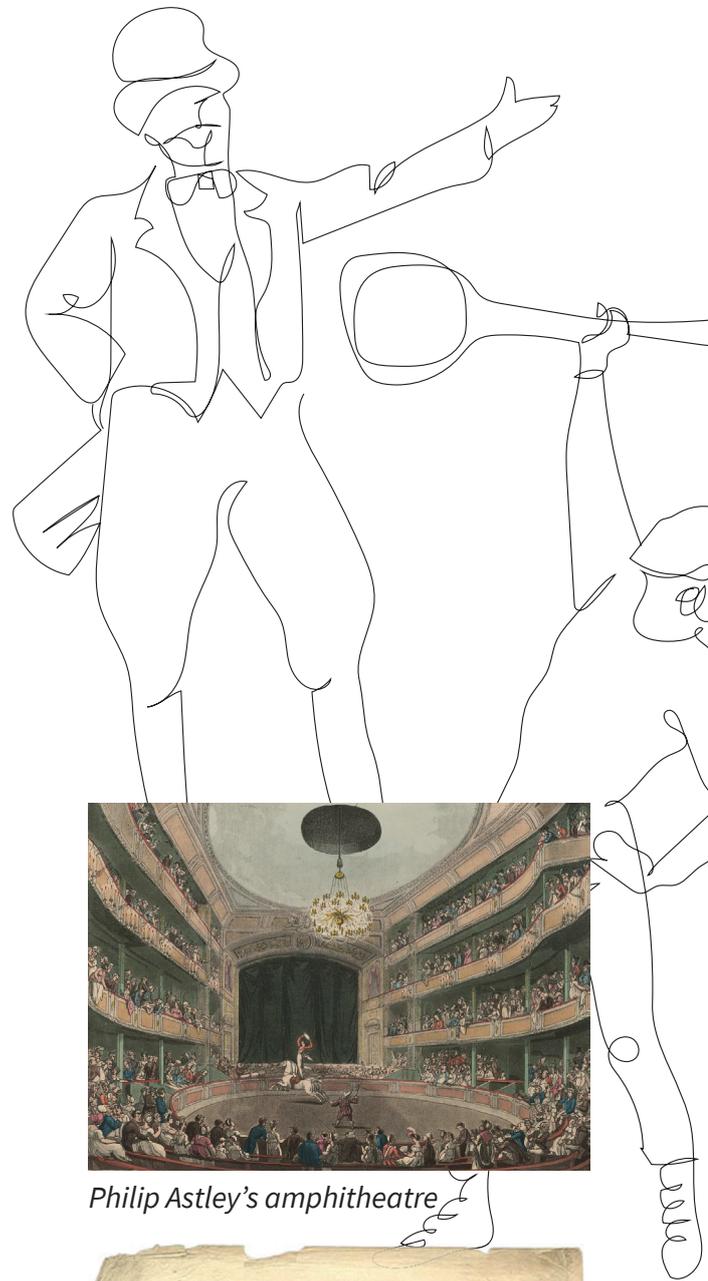
The equestrian skills Astley developed during his military career were central to his success. On discharge from the military he was gifted a horse and established Ha'Penny Hatch, initially as a riding school.

Along with wife, Patty, also a skilled horse-rider, the couple began attracting crowds by performing tricks, such as having a horse canter around the ring, while Astley rode, his head on its back and his heels in the air.

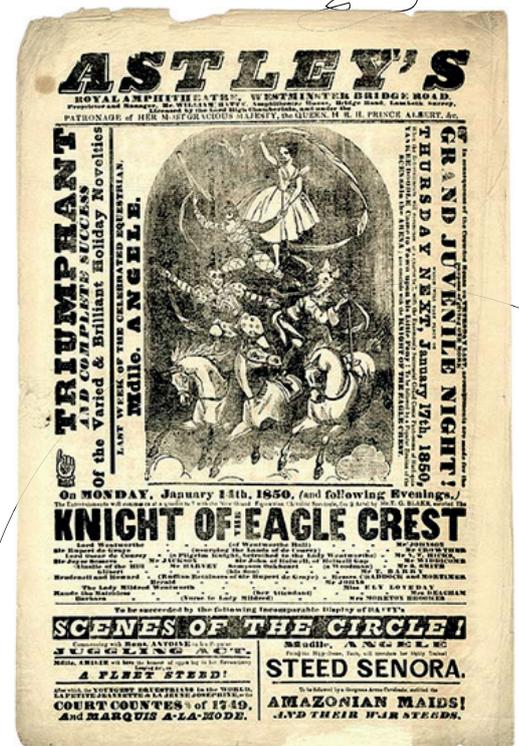
For the experience, Astley charged an entrance fee of one shilling for a seat and sixpence standing. A natural publicist, to drum up custom he rode his striking white charger horse through the streets, wearing his military uniform of red coat and white breeches.

News of this new form of entertainment spread rapidly, and the following year the Astleys were invited to perform for King George III. Soon after, they received another royal invitation, this time from Louis XV in France.

Over time Astley expanded his programme to include music, clowns, slack rope acts, acrobatics, tableaux and fireworks. This initially led to license issues with officials who classed his new circus as 'theatrical entertainment.' During the dispute, Astley's London amphitheatre was forcibly closed for two years. Not to be deterred, Astley took his show on the road, and opened new amphitheatres in Bristol, Dublin, and Paris. Indeed, everywhere he toured Astley would build a wooden amphitheatre for his performances, because it was not until the 1840s that travelling circus tents became popular. Astley's show re-opened in 1775 and in 1779 he built a covered amphitheatre in London. Despite being burned down twice, once in 1794 and again in 1803, it was rebuilt and continued to entertain crowds on the site for nearly 125 years.

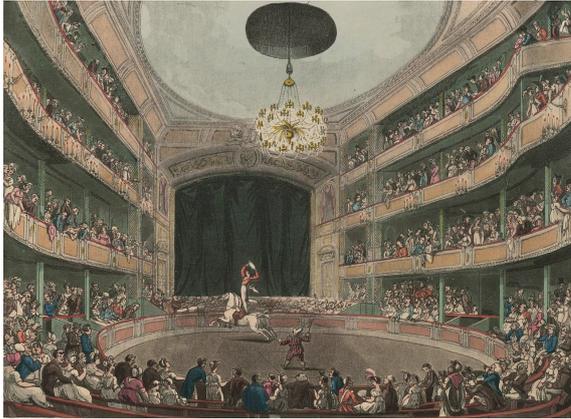
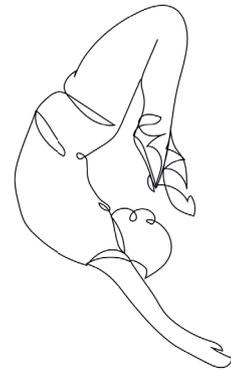
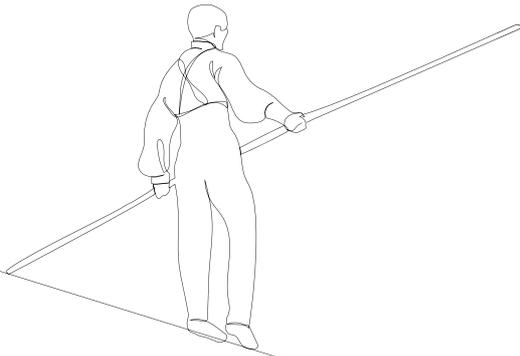


Philip Astley's amphitheatre



Philip Astley handbill

# Father of the modern circus



*Philip Astley's amphitheatre*



*Contemporary circus tent*

**Around the world, Philip Astley is recognised as the founder of circus as we know it today.**

Of course, the word circus existed way before Astley's time, being the Latin word for a ring or a circular line, as in the Roman chariot-racing stadium, Circus Maximus.

The acts of many performers now associated with circus – jugglers, acrobats, rope-walkers and clowns – also date back far beyond the opening of Astley's first shows in 1770. However, it was Astley who had the vision to bring these talents together in one show. And while Astley didn't call it circus, his idea has formed the basis of circus entertainment for more than 250 years.

Although Astley's amphitheatres are no longer in use, his ideal 13m diameter ring is still the international standard size of a circus ring. His innovation of off-setting high adrenaline tricks with the light-hearted foolery of the clown has also remained a mainstay in narratives of even the most celebrated of contemporary circuses like Cirque du Soleil.

Charles Dickens gives a glimpse into the excitement audiences experienced on a visit to Astley's when in *The Old Curiosity Shop* he writes: 'Dear, dear, what a place it looked that Astley's with all the paint, gilding and looking glass; the vague smell of horses suggestive of coming wonders; the curtain that hid such gorgeous mysteries; the clean white sawdust down in the circus... the clown who ventured on such familiarities with the military man in boots – the lady who jumped over the nine-and-twenty ribbons and came down safe upon the horse's back – everything was delightful, splendid, and surprising!' Further literary references to Astley's can be found in *The Newcomes* by William Makepeace Thackeray (1855) and Jane Austen's *Emma* (1833).

These 'gorgeous mysteries' of the circus and the fantastic feats of physical ingenuity on display continue to attract audiences to this day. No doubt they will for many years to come, and the joy this brings is Astley's greatest legacy.

# Astley's Legacy



Astley was a

## visionary entrepreneur

who recognised the potential in bringing together existing forms of entertainment to create a spectacular show with mass appeal. Today circus remains an inclusive entertainment that transcends language and age barriers.

Astley was considered the

## greatest horse trainer

of his time. As an entertainer he started out as an equestrian trick rider. Although less a feature of contemporary circus, the types of astonishing feats Astley called trick riding can be seen in competitive equestrian vaulting today.



Astley had so many amphitheatres because everywhere he toured he would build a wooden amphitheatre for his performances. The circus tent as we know it today became popular after it was brought to the UK by travelling circuses from America in the 1840s.

Astley did not invent the acts we associate with circus – jugglers, acrobats, rope-walkers and clowns

**but he had the vision to bring these talents together in one show.**

This idea has formed the basis of circus entertainment for

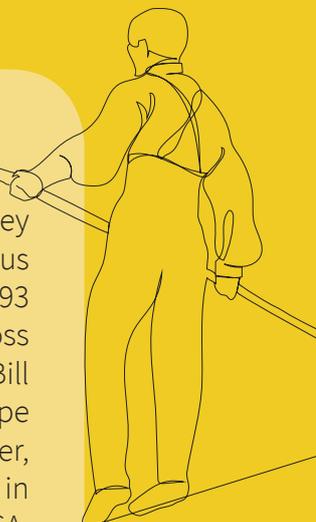
**more than 250 years.**

The word

## CIRCUS

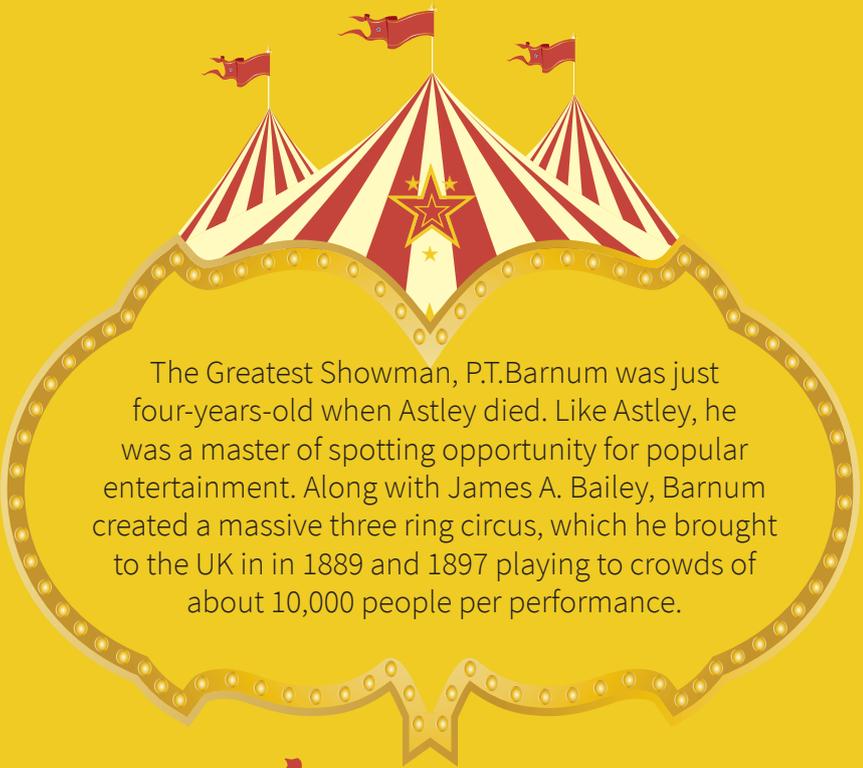
comes from the Latin word for a ring or a circular line, as in the Roman chariot-racing stadium, Circus Maximus and London's bustling, Piccadilly Circus.

During his lifetime Astley travelled with his circus throughout Europe. In 1793 his ideas spread across the Atlantic when John Bill Ricketts opened an Astley-type circus, featuring a rope-walker, a clown, and riding acts, in Philadelphia, USA.

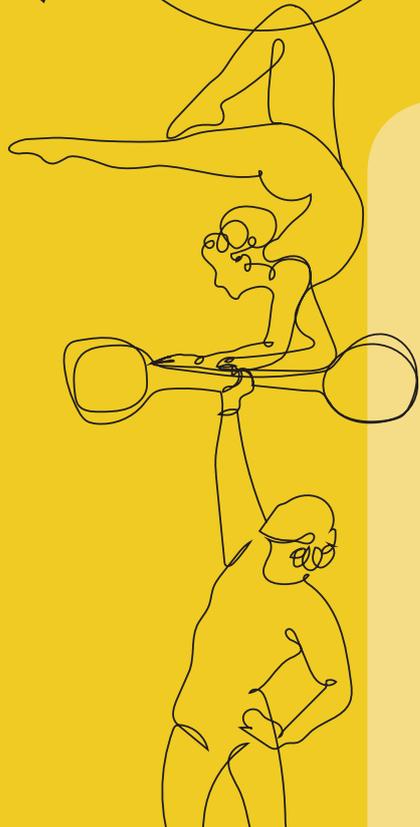


# Astley's Legacy

**A**stley's ideal 13m (42ft) diameter ring is still the international standard size of a circus ring used both by traditional big top circuses such as Gandeys and contemporary circus like Cirque du Soleil.



The Greatest Showman, P.T. Barnum was just four-years-old when Astley died. Like Astley, he was a master of spotting opportunity for popular entertainment. Along with James A. Bailey, Barnum created a massive three ring circus, which he brought to the UK in 1889 and 1897 playing to crowds of about 10,000 people per performance.



Today circus is not always performed in a 13-meter diameter ring but at its heart it always includes a mix of acts such as clowning and amazing human feats, in the way Astley brought together all those years ago.



**BRAZIL**

Today Astley's legacy stretches both north and southern hemispheres. In Brazil a small family circus has been part of his continued legacy, touring Circo Astley for more than 40 years to small towns in the Brazilian countryside.

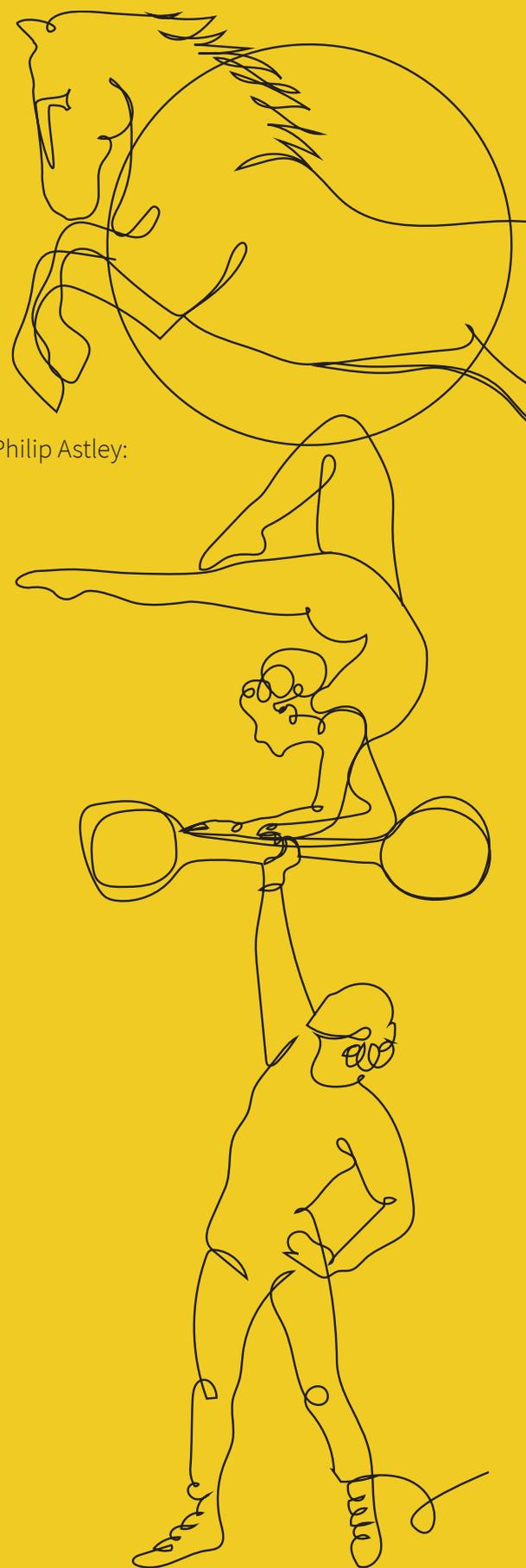


By the time of Astley's death in 1814 most circuses in Europe and America were based on a format he created.

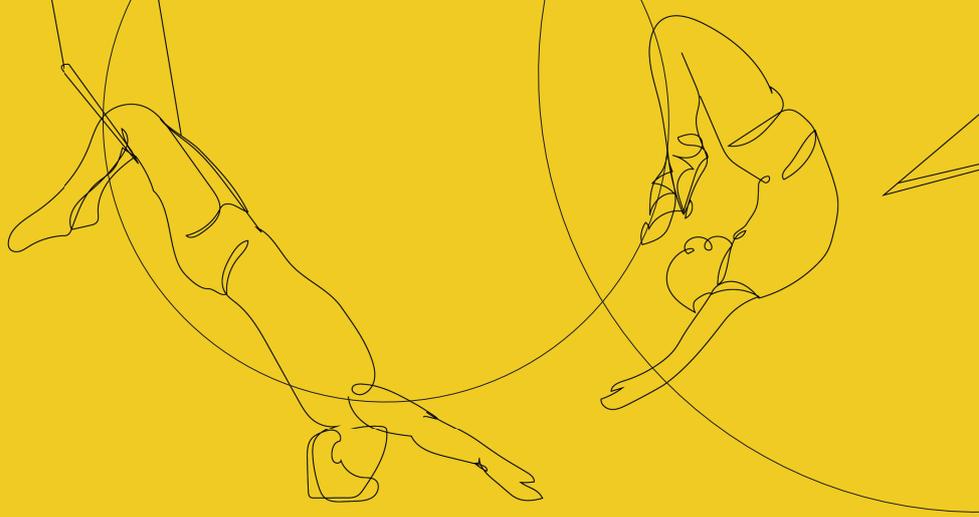
# Find out more

The following museum and archive collections hold materials relating to Philip Astley:

- Ancestry.co.uk
- Bodleian Library, Oxford
- Brampton Museum, Newcastle-under-Lyme
- British Library, London
- Chethams Library, Manchester
- Curning Museum, London
- Guildhall Library Prints Room, London
- Lichfield Record Office
- Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection, Beckenham
- Public Records Office, Chancery Lane, London
- Public Record Office, Kew
- Sheffield Fairground and Circus Archives
- Surrey History Archive
- Theatre Museum, London
- Victoria and Albert Museum, London



# Secondary sources



## Published:

- Bemrose, P. (1992): *Astley's Circus Genius. A tribute to Philip Astley 1742-1814*, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council (Re-published by Ray Johnson of Staffordshire Film Archive & Andrew Van Buren 250th Anniversary / Philip Astley Project Edition 2018).
- Cannon, R. (1841): *Historical Record of the Fifteenth, Or the King's Regiment of Light Dragoons*, London: J.W. Parker.
- DeCastro, J (1824) *The Memoirs of J DeCastro*. London: Sherwood Jones & Co.
- Goodby, M. (1992): *Sawdust and Spangles, Philip Astley and the English Circus*, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council.
- Jando, D. (2018): *Philip Astley and the Horsemen who Invented the Circus (1768-1814)*, CIRCopedia.
- Kotar, S.L. and J.E. Gessler, J.E. (2011): *The Rise of the American Circus, 1716-1899*, McFarland & Company.

## Unpublished thesis:

Kwint M. (1994): *Astley's Amphitheatre and the Early Circus in England 1768-1830*. Oxford University.

