

Chapter 09

ENTERTAINMENT IN BINGLEY HALL

Most memorable for many, especially for those Birmingham children who were fortunate enough to see them and many did, were the circuses and fun-fairs presented in Bingley Hall, usually around Christmas and New Year. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, a branch of that renowned circus family of the time, the Cookes, started this tradition in October 1850, the very first people to use the new building.

The Cookes performed there again in February 1851, only a few months after that successful run in the brand-new building. Many years later the *Birmingham Mail* revived the story of that second visit.

The hall . . . had been fitted up to resemble a Roman amphitheatre . . . the circus was made up chiefly of equestrian acts . . . Henry Cooke was dancing gracefully on the tightrope, but he was wearing skates while doing so . . . there were so many people who could not find standing room in Bingley Hall that many managed to roost themselves among the girders and iron rods supporting the roof. (2)

If that highly dangerous “roosting” really happened, it is a marvel that no one was killed. It

would have been a very long way to fall. Quite rightly the practice would definitely not have gone down well with the health and safety inspectors of today!

The following February, on Shrove Tuesday 1852, Mr le Grand Smith and Mr Tonks, according to their leaflet, presented a “*Monster concert and musical congress*” in the hall, Taking into account the value of money at the time, tickets were rather expensive.

Celebrated artistes will appear . . . [and] by the kind permission of Major Dyson and Officers of the Third Dragoon Guards, the Splendid Band of the Regiment will attend. Private Box, 2s 6d: Select Box, 2s: Reserved & numbered Side Box, 1s 6d: Pit, 1s: Gallery and Promenade. 6d. (3)

Another branch of the Cooke family provided wintertime entertainment there in the following February. The “*manager and sole proprietor*”, their poster records, was William Cooke. (Due, presumably, to a printer’s error, the poster bears two dates, 1852 and 1853. The latter turns out to be the correct one). This time, although performances on horseback were still very much in evidence, there were elephants too, whilst Doughty, a clown, introduced his “*highly trained dog, Joe*” into the act. (4)

Bingley Hall was revamped later that year and renamed “*Tonks’s Colosseum*”. John Tonks conducted his various business activities from 85 New Street. He was not only a concert promoter

but ran a print shop too, “*a busy, bustling spirited little man*”, according to a contemporary writer. Wooden bench seating was provided for 4,500 patrons and Tonks proudly described the revamped hall as “*indisputably the most elegant lounge in Europe*”. (5) However, that seems outrageously boastful, especially as it seems unlikely that flooring had been laid down, although it is possible that the floor may have been carpeted. Certainly only a very few years later there was no flooring there when the Birmingham Volunteers began to use the hall as their headquarters in 1859. Dust constituted such a nuisance for the men when drilling that it had to be allayed with a mixture of dampened tan and gravel. (6) It must be said though that a huge quantity of timber was auctioned when Tonks sold up in 1854 so it is not entirely inconceivable that some of the planks had been used for flooring. But had that been the case surely the owners of the hall would have paid for it to be left in position.

Several posters for performances promoted in the hall by Tonks have survived in Birmingham Library’s collections. Unusually for such items, the year is given within their texts, the earliest one giving details of circus performances to take place on the last three days of December 1853.

Mr Tonks, while acknowledging with pride the immense success which has attended the performances of the great Equestrian Troupe, begs to announce a Grand Day Reception . . . such has been the attraction of the Novel and Extraordinary Feats of

Equestrianism . . . combined with a variety of amusing performances, that THOUSANDS have been unable to gain admission . . . the performance will begin with Mademoiselle Zameson, The Fascinating Equestrian . . . Young Leon as the Indian Warrior . . . Herr Hengler on the Horizontal Corde Tension, or Tight Rope, Clowns, Tom Barry and Little Wheel. (7)

Following the circus he presented a pantomime, “*Jack the Giant Killer*” (8). Amongst old newspaper cuttings held in Birmingham Central Library there is an item, a letter to the editor, clipped from the local “*Weekly Mercury*”. Undated, it appears to have been written in about 1900. The correspondent, who signed himself as “*A Playgoer Half a Century Ago*”, describes Bingley Hall in 1854 as he saw it at the time.

At the previous Christmas it was opened as “Tonks’s Colosseum”, with a circus company . . . the ring was on a stage, and, instead of the usual disagreeable “tan”, it was covered with plaited straw and carpets. In March Mr John Tonks, a Birmingham printer, obtained the consent of the magistrates to perform stage plays. Bingley Hall was partitioned off in the central bay, and a gallery, pit, boxes and proscenium constructed. On Easter Monday, April 17, 1854, was produced “Sardanapolas, or the Fall of Ninevah” . . . at Whitsuntide “Blue Beard” . . . on July 24 the Drury Lane

Company came down . . . [for] four weeks . . . produced [were] Romeo & Juliet, Othello, Hamlet . . . and on the 21st August the Royal Lyceum Company paid a visit. (9)

Two other posters that have survived from the 1850s provide confirmation of “*Playgoer’s*” memoir. The earlier one of these two announces that “*Tonks’s Colosseum, Bingley Hall, opens again on Monday next, March 13th 1854, altered and totally renovated*”. Billed to appear were the “*Emperor of China’s Magicians and Chinese Jugglers*”. A large illustration depicts a Chinaman performing the classic knife-throwing act, knives encircling a woman’s body, described on the poster as “*Impaling the Human Body, a Great Chinese Feat*”. (10)

The second of these two posters, dated 17 May 1854, is headed “*New Theatre, Bingley Hall*”, indicating, not only a change of name, but also a change of purpose for the building. John Tonks had finally succeeded in acquiring a licence to stage plays, despite strong opposition from the proprietors of the Theatre Royal who, at the time, were trying to create a monopoly for themselves in that branch of entertainment. (11) The first half of his programme for that first evening consisted of a two-act play, “*Women’s Love*”, and was “*for the benefit of Miss A Clifton, being her first appearance in her native town*”. This was followed by a romantic drama, “*Curtsey, Curtsey*”. Stalls tickets cost 2/-, pit and promenade 1/- and gallery 6d. (12)

A leading member of the resident caste that season, Gustavus Vaughan Brooke, an actor of considerable renown at the time, had moved to the New Theatre because, he wrote, "*the Royal will not give me my terms*". It has been said, erroneously, that he lost his life at sea in August 1854, shortly after his final appearance in Bingley Hall. (13) Whilst it is true that he met his end aboard "*SS London*" when she was wrecked en route to Australia, this happened, not in the 1850s, but more than twenty years later, on 11 January 1866. (14) As a matter of fact Brooke died a hero's death.

Rather than risk the lives of others by making one more in the already overcrowded boats, he remained on the sinking ship, and with her went down, The "Brooke Memorial Lifeboat" commemorates his noble self-sacrifice. (15)

As indicated by "*Playgoer*", Bingley Hall's stage hosted a series of dramatic performances during the year. Presentations also included a play specially written for the New Theatre entitled "*Aston Hall; or Birmingham in the Days of the Civil War*". Sadly this excursion into local history was a flop at the box office and was withdrawn after only a few performances. (16)

Tonks's venture at the hall came to an abrupt end that autumn. Indications are that his theatrical productions had been failing to attract adequate audiences. Perhaps the venue was not to the liking of the theatre-going public and certainly the acoustics there were quite unsuitable. On 28

October 1854 for his “*Grand Farewell Night*” he chose a circus performance, the type of show for which the hall was better suited. On 7 November all the fittings and the timber – a huge amount had been used for seating, stage, etcetera – were sold by auction, clearing the building in good time for the next cattle show in December. (17) One cannot help wondering how cattle could have been accommodated if Tonks’s Colosseum structures had been still in situ.

Another Bingley Hall poster to have survived, undated, but, judging from its style, probably from the 1860s, offers, in addition to the ordinary circus acts, a most unusual attraction.

This present evening, Feb 12th, in order to enhance the fun for the evening, a FAT PIG will be given away. On Feb 13th another prize night – a large cheese . . . Feb 14th – twenty prizes . . . Friday 15th, the last prize night – Blind Man’s Buff for a fat pig by six men who may think it proper to come forward. The pig will have a bell to its neck and the six men, blindfolded, with a stick in each hand, to enter the ring with the pig, and he who first strikes the pig is entitled to it. (18)

According to Edward Levy, (a performer himself, locally renowned both for his strong man act and for being the British amateur champion weightlifter), “*one of the biggest circuses we ever had was Myers’ Circus at Bingley Hall in the late seventies*”. (22) One of their leaflets has survived

in the Birmingham Reference Library's collection and from that it is clear that Myers' Grand American Circus provided entertainment that would attract a reasonable audience even in today's sophisticated world, offering equestrian performances, elephant acts, tumblers, and, of course, clowns. The leaflet, which is undated, must relate to their shows there in late September 1876, for there is no trace of any other visit. (23)

Entertainment in the hall during Christmas and New Year 1880-81 was provided by Sanger's "Fancy Fair", as the show was entitled. The greatest attraction seems to have been the menagerie and in particular five performing lions. However, in the middle of January there were a couple of nasty episodes that, as the *Birmingham Daily Post* reported, could easily have resulted in loss of life. The first of these was on 12 January.

In the morning it is the duty of the under-keeper . . . to clean out the cage. For this purpose, shortly after midday yesterday, Harris entered the cage . . . To separate the lions from that part of the cage which has to be cleaned, a wooden panel . . . is used . . . about two inches in thickness . . . Unfortunately he does not seem to have absolutely closed the panel as he entered . . . The largest of the lot, a powerful animal named "Wallace", sprang forward towards Harris. The sliding panel gave way . . . and Harris stood unprotected in front of the lion, who with its mouth seized the poor fellow by the shoulder . . . clutching Harris

with one of its paws, dashed him to the ground and commenced gnawing at his body . . . There were about thirty persons standing by . . . some were terrified and ran away . . . others, not so much unnerved, shouted for help. The lion-tamer, Alicamoussa, who was at the other side of the hall, hearing the commotion, ran to the cage . . . entered the den and twice fired his pistol, which was loaded with blank cartridges. The pistol firing had no effect on the animal . . . [so] with his loaded whip he commenced hitting the animal with the butt end of it on the head. He dealt the lion four or five blows, and the last, hitting the animal with terrific force between the eyes, appearing to stun it. The lion loosed Harris, who was instantly dragged out of the cage . . . Mr Wm Sanger . . . sought medical assistance and Mr Morris of Moseley Road . . . gave the injured man prompt attention. (27)

According to the same newspaper report, but almost beyond belief, “*Harris was afterwards returned to his lodgings*”. There was no mention whatsoever of hospital treatment, which seems both remiss and uncaring, especially as Alicamoussa – a West Indian, whose non-professional name was Alascott Humphrey – after being mauled by the same lion less than a fortnight later, was taken to the Queen’s Hospital at once. This second attack, at a matinee on Saturday, 22 January, took place in front of 3,000 spectators, many of them children, just as his performance was coming to an end.

His entertainment consists of rousing them . . . [he] was retiring with his face towards the lions, when "Wallace" sprang . . . With his great fore feet the lion caught Alicamoussa by the two shoulders and dashed him to the floor of the cage . . . the lion-tamer had his whip in his right hand, but at the very moment when he was in the act of striking the lion with it, "Wallace", with his mouth, pinned the poor fellow by the right arm. In his left hand Alicamoussa held the revolver . . . [and] he struck the animal vigorously with the butt end . . . all to no avail. "Wallace" still kept the man down, and with his paws tore the back of his head and both sides of his face . . . one of the under-keepers, Walter Stratford . . . ran to the den. He seized an iron bar . . . thrusting it through the bars of the cage, hit the lion with it . . . Alicamoussa, never losing his self-possession for a moment, instantly regained his feet . . . still keeping his face towards the animal, left the den and carefully closed the door after him. (28)

Fortunately, the lion-tamer's injuries were not serious and after hospital treatment he returned to the hall. Brave but foolhardy, he had to be dissuaded by Mr Sanger from entering the cage again for the evening's show. Shortly afterwards, and, it would seem, not before time, "Wallace" was transferred to the Zoological Gardens at Margate.

On a far less dramatic side of this "*Fancy Fair*" it is heartening to read that the inmates of

Birmingham Workhouse, at the invitation of Mr Sanger, enjoyed a free show at the hall and were provided with a tea afterwards. The men were also given a packet of tobacco before the party returned to the Workhouse. (There is no mention of gifts being offered to the women in the party!) (29)

One particularly ambitious winter entertainment in Bingley Hall was the "*World's Fair*", which opened to the public on Christmas Eve 1884 and carried on into the New Year. It would be a disservice to the reader not to quote in full the *Birmingham Daily Post's* description of the event.

What is somewhat ostentatiously called "The Grandest World's Fair" was opened on Wednesday evening at Bingley Hall, and will no doubt during its continuation prove an attraction to a large class of persons. The manager (Mr. A. Lippett) has brought together, under an extensive roof, all the elements of an ordinary fair on a large scale, the building being filled with entertainments of one kind and another calculated to secure a considerable patronage. A nominal entrance fee to the hall is charged, and several of the performances are free to the visitors. Perhaps the most interesting item in the day's programme is a circus exhibition, in which some very clever gymnasts, acrobats and jugglers appear; while the fun of the fair is supplied by clowns of more than average ability. Mr. E. (or H) Murray calls

for special mention as a lion tamer. His daring acts with two of the kings of the forest creating no little excitement. Under his charge there are also three elephants, two of which are perfect midgets, and who, with their companion, give evidence of clever training. A bull, bearing the name of "Espero" goes through a series of extraordinary tricks; while a number of well-trained horses, ponies, and mules, are introduced during the entertainment. The Boston Riding School Company's new roundabout occupies a prominent position in the hall, no less than seventy-two of the inanimate horses being worked by the same machine at one time. In addition to these forms of amusement there are some theatrical performances, shooting saloons, aunt sallys, a huge bagatelle board, and a hundred and one other inducements to the visitors, so that if Mr. Lippett's venture proves other than a monetary success, it will not be because he has failed at his so-called "Worlds Fair". (32)

The *Birmingham Post* was, and still is, essentially the local businessman's morning newspaper. Middle-class Victorians – and the many who aspired to become of their number – were not encouraged to patronise entertainments that had a whiff of vulgarity, hence the slightly disparaging reference to "*a large class of persons*" – the newspaper's code for the lower orders. Even so, it is evident that the *Post's* reporter was impressed.

The event was very successful indeed, as another commentator acknowledged.

The World's Fair . . . has proved an equally great attraction and source of pleasure to a very large number of holiday makers, and is certainly well worthy of a visit if only for the purpose of seeing others enjoying themselves, which they certainly seem to accomplish if we may judge from the number of "grown-up" boys and girls we saw in a ride on the galloping horses, which are quite a novelty. (33)

October 1888 brought a different kind of performance to Bingley Hall; a Wild West show laid on by "Mexican Joe". His real name was Colonel Shelly and he came with a reputation for bravery as a scout in the service of the United States Army. He had served in the Mexican and Arizona borderland, a lawless frontier in those days, as the *Birmingham Gazette* reported.

Mexican Joe . . . is now at Bingley Hall with his troupe of Indians, Cowboys, &c . . . in various towns his exhibitions have been extremely successful. On Saturday afternoon he gave his first representation of Wild Western life to a moderate attendance . . . Settlers' life, as those who live in the country infested by the Apaches find it, was also illustrated. It is certainly sufficiently exciting to make anyone pause who thinks of seeking his fortune . . . in that part of the States. (37)

Birmingham Daily Mail pointed out the reason for the “*moderate attendance*”, which was Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show at Aston Lower Grounds in the previous November. Intriguingly, long before the term was coined, the paper adopted a politically correct stance, in sharp contrast to the racist attitude of the *Gazette*.

Mexican Joe must be reckoned a little unfortunate in coming after Buffalo Bill . . . his exhibitions, ran so much on the same lines as those of his predecessor . . . are by this time necessarily discounted . . . He has now attached to him about forty scouts, cowboys, hunters, and Indians . . . who are decked out in blankets, feathers, trinkets and war-paint . . . The Indians, as in Buffalo Bill’s exhibition, may gain a temporary triumph . . . but the white men always beat them in the end. If a white man is killed . . . the body is carried out to slow music, but no music is given to the Indians when they carry out their dead. (38)

The most absorbing part of the show seems to have been the horsemanship, “*done at a breakneck pace at which, with the twistings and stoppings, it seems almost ridiculous that the horsemen and women should be able to keep their seats*”. (39)

The winter season 1890-91 was marked in Bingley Hall by “*Arcadia*”, a presentation by John O’Connor. Described in the local press as “*a veritable fairyland*”, the show consisted of variety

entertainment, promenade concerts and military band performances. An advertisement in *The Dart* promised “*a constant succession of amusements from 2 to 10.30*” at the cost of sixpence. (42)

The following season’s entertainment was provided by Wombwell & Bailey’s “*World’s Show (Not a Fair)*”. Their advertisement in *The Dart* promised “*the Greatest Equestrian, Hippodromatic, menagerie and Variety Combination in the World*”. The promoters boasted that there had been “*53,342 visitors on Boxing Day alone*”. Presented twice daily, at 2pm and 7pm, there was also a “*zoological promenade*” each morning. (44)

For five seasons, starting in 1896-97, Walsall’s showman, Pat Collins, provided Christmastide entertainment in the hall. Later to become widely famous for his fairground spectaculars, at that time he was presenting circus acts and menageries, as his 1898-9 advertisement shows.

P Collins’s Third Annual Christmas Carnival. 11am to 11pm. Twelve hours of continuous amusement for 3d. Best circus in Town. Grand Double Menagerie. (50)

Towards the end of the last of that five-season run, 1900-01, together with a complete change of artistes, an ambitious cycling performance was added to the bill. A special track was constructed to accommodate a “*Great Bicycle Pursuit Race*”, as described in the advertisement.

On a circular track at 60 degrees. The Steepest in the World. Width of track 5 feet 3 inches. The Narrowest in the World. When at full speed the cyclists ride horizontally.
(51)

For the following winter season the hall was taken over by the “*Universal Fancy Fair and Exposition of Trades, Inventions and Manufactures*”. Their advertisement promised “*continuous high-class entertainment, promenade concerts and high-class military bands; an entire and complete change from previous exhibitions*”. The first performance was on Boxing Day and the last, a month later, on 25 January 1902. (52) According to a report in one of the local journals, it was quite successful. However, despite the note of disapproval directed at Pat Collins in the advertisement, it is clear that much of that success was owed to his innovations, with identical opening hours, similar circus acts and especially the exciting cycle pursuit racing.

Mr Smith, the manager, is to be complimented upon the variety of entertainment provided, the exposition being arranged in a picturesque manner, illustrating all nations . . . but the variety turns attract the visitors' chief attention. Such as Professor Duncan's wonderful collies, the Four Musical Jees, La Rolo (equilibrist and chair vaulter), cycle pursuit racing, Professor Heaton (champion swimmer), the Hartley Wonders (barrel performers), etc. (53)

Added to the programme towards the end of the run were the “*American Bioscope*” and an “*Electric Theatre*”. The latter attraction seems to have been an early film presentation. (54)

As this indicates film shows of a primitive kind were being presented in the hall occasionally even in the early days of the movies. In their book “*The Dream Palaces of Birmingham*” cinema researchers Chris and Rosemary Clegg mention that this practice had to be legalised a little later. However, even though a licence was acquired there is no evidence that cinema in Bingley Hall was ever anything more than an attractive side-show attached to an exhibition or similar event.

After the passing of the Cinematography Act of 1909, Bingley Hall was one of several places to apply for licensing in April 1910. By holding the correct papers it was able to call itself a cinema. (55)

A notable run of performances in Bingley Hall opened in November 1920, when Fred Wilkins took over the hall for a winter season. He called his show “*Wilkins Royal Great Victory Circus and Fair*”. (60)

Wilkins certainly did promote another season of the Royal Variety Circus and Fair, but this took place at Bingley Hall, Birmingham, in 1920-21. During August, September and October, this was announced through half-page adverts in the “World’s Fair”. Fred Wilkins, the sole

*proprietor this time . . . claimed it would be
“The Greatest and Largest Circus and Fair
in the Kingdom” The programme
[included] . . . Jellicoe the sea lion, U-boat
chaser. (61)*

Today, of course, the name Jellicoe means little or nothing to most people, but in 1920, so soon after the Great War, everyone would have understood the reference to Admiral Jellicoe. He was First Sea Lord for a very brief spell, one of the high-ranking incompetents presiding over that sickening blood-bath, that “war to end all wars.” In reality Jellicoe was “kicked upstairs” because of his abysmal failure to deal with the U-boat problem. (62)

In the following year, by arranging, with the support of the local church, a performance in the hall nominally as part of a charity event, Wilkins, on Sunday 2 January 1921, succeeded in being the first promoter in the country to stage a circus on the Sabbath. (Sunday shows were illegal in Britain until the 1970s). On Boxing Day 1922 Wilkins returned to Bingley Hall once more, but this time with a fun fair, not a circus. (63)

During the 1920s and 30s Walsall’s famous Pat Collins was the most frequent presenter of Christmastide entertainment at the hall. Ned Williams, in his book “*Pat Collins, King of Showmen*”, describes some of the massive fairground rides that, incredible as it may seem, were built up inside the building on those occasions; “*the Chair-o-plane, Cakewalk and Over the Falls, as well as a freak show*”.

The very last circus and zoo to entertain the public in Bingley Hall prior to the Second World War was staged during the winter of 1937-38. The show was organised by Miss Ada Chapman from the drawing room above her bird shop in the Bull Ring. Opening with a late afternoon performance on Monday 20 December, she had 2,000 of the city's poorest children as her guests. Cyril Eugene Cooke, (1874-1956), a descendant of the renowned circus family mentioned earlier, came out of retirement to act as her ringmaster. (70) The showmen's weekly, *World's Fair*, reported the great distance that Miss Chapman had travelled in order to bring a top class show to Birmingham.

When calling on Miss Ada Chapman at her headquarters in High Street, Birmingham, I discovered that she had just returned from a long and exhausting trip to the continent . . . she visited every circus of importance between Paris and Bratislava. The purpose of the tour was to look for talent for the Bingley Hall circus. (71)

Moving on to the decades after World War 11, shortly after the hall had been released from its wartime use as a storage depot, there was the first of a series of five midwinter visits by Stanley Parkin's Circus. The first winter, 1947-8, the acts included trapeze artistes, jugglers on wheels, a Chinese foot juggler, Arab tumblers and "*La Dame Blanche, France's most beautiful woman*" displaying her horsemanship. In addition to "*Aga*

the Burmese elephant” there were lions, tigers, “*Lilliputian ponies*” and Arab horses. (72) Full houses for the twice-daily performances were practically guaranteed after the sparse entertainment of those long years of war.

As can be seen from the advertising material, there was a similar pattern to the shows during the following seasons. (73) In 1951-52 the attractions included animals provided by the famous Bertram Mills. Amongst them was “*Negus, the wire walking lion*”. (74) Other animals were on loan at various times from Robert Fossett and the Swiss National Circus. (67) Parkin always brought along a fun fair too and a zoo, entertainment that could be presented at times of the day outside those of circus performances. (75)

To fill the gap created by the ban on circus performances on the Sabbath, Stanley Parkin arranged for Sunday musical concerts featuring popular bands and soloists of the day to be promoted. Early in January 1950, for example, the famous Squadronaires were on the bill. The band had been formed during the war as the RAF Dance Orchestra, playing to the Forces both at home and overseas. Their concerts were also broadcast regularly by the BBC on domestic schedules. After demobilisation in 1946 the players stayed together, adopting a name that had an association with their acclaimed wartime career. On that same bill in 1950 was Anton Karas, an Austrian zither player. He had shot to fame as the composer and player of the haunting “Harry Lime” theme and other music used so effectively in the hit film “*The Third Man*”. (78)

These popular concerts continued throughout Parkin's winters at the hall, featuring many other famous bands of the period, such as those led by Cyril Stapleton, Edmundo Ros, Geraldo and Harry Roy. (79)

In 1954-55 it was the turn of Billy Smart's Circus to enliven midwinter at Bingley Hall. His advertisements announced, in large print, "*Gigantic Central Heating*", certainly a welcome added attraction at that time of fuel shortage. (82)

After Billy Smart's stints at the hall along came Chipperfield's Circus, beginning, in 1957-8, a long and successful connection with the hall. David Jamieson, circus historian, has recorded the details.

Chipperfield's commenced a series of Christmas shows at Bingley Hall, Birmingham, an established venue for winter circus, with the large population of the West Midlands to draw on. The 1957-58 show featured 23 items. (86)

These items included trapeze artistes and unicyclists, with a wide variety of animals, ranging from Shire horses to racehorses, giraffes to lions and tigers. In their second winter season, 1958-59, a famous comedian of the day, Fred Emney, was guest ringmaster. (87) Chipperfield's fourth season, 1960-61, included a spectacular new act, the *Human Cannon Ball*, featuring a performer shot out of a giant cannon. The show was also featured on television later that winter.

A BBC TV recording of acts from the show was made by Barrie Edgar and transmitted in February 1961, with commentary by Peter West. (88)

The following Christmas the commercial channel ATV took over, with the popular Noele Gordon hosting the programme and in 1962 the whole ITV network included Chipperfield's circus in their Christmas Day programme. Shaw Taylor, another television star of the time, was guest ringmaster on that occasion. In the winter of 1963-64 they came to Bingley Hall for the seventh consecutive year, bringing fresh acts and new animals. (89) This was Chipperfield's last winter season in Birmingham for a few years but, eventually, the show did come back again, for they were always successful in Bingley Hall.

For the 1972-73 winter, Chipperfield's returned to the scene of earlier successful seasons, Bingley Hall in the heart of Birmingham, and enjoyed excellent business, with plenty of packed houses and large parties . . . [and in] the Christmas 1973 season . . . circus goers could see Gordon Howes with five lionesses. (93)

After major reorganisation in the late 1970s, circus provided by Chipperfield's came to Bingley Hall in the winter of 1980, this time as Sally Chipperfield's Circus.

By Christmas 1983, although no one could have known it then, performances at the old venue

were drawing towards a dramatic close. (Full details of the disaster will be given in a later chapter).

During the winter . . . Sally Chipperfield's Circus had another successful season at Bingley Hall, with a complete change of programme, but in the New Year, a few days after the circus had left, the hall was gutted by fire . . . thus ending a long history of winter circus presentations in the heart of Birmingham. (102)