

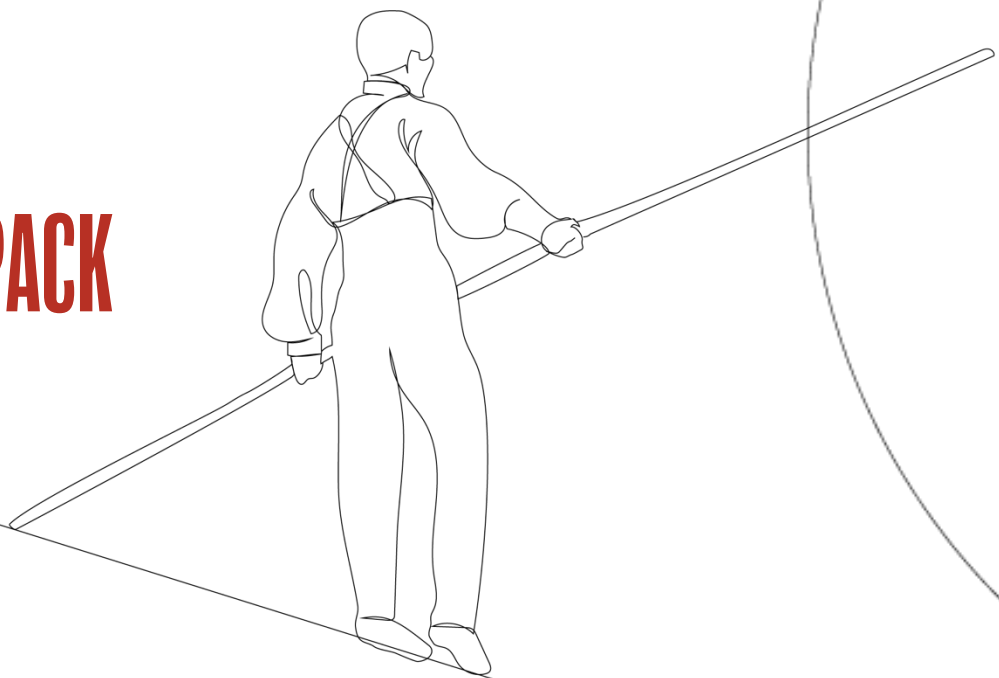


THE PHILIP ASTLEY PROJECT

CELEBRATING THE FATHER OF MODERN CIRCUS

PRESS PACK

V4 FEB 18



THE
**PHILIP
ASTLEY**
PROJECT

THE FATHER OF MODERN DAY CIRCUS

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OVERVIEW

Born in Newcastle-under-Lyme, in 1742, Philip Astley was the son of a cabinetmaker who grew-up to become a master equestrian, entrepreneur, war hero, pioneer and showman. In 1768, Astley opened his riding school, creating performances and then developing the 42ft diameter circus ring, still the standard size used in circus across the world. Despite Astley's status as 'the father of modern day circus', there is limited awareness of Astley in his hometown.

The Philip Astley Project – Celebrating the Father of Modern Circus was formed in 2015 to celebrate Philip Astley within Newcastle-under-Lyme and, as a result, increase residents' pride in their own heritage. 2018 is the 250th anniversary of the modern circus and thanks to money raised by National Lottery players, and sponsorship from businesses based in Newcastle-under-Lyme, local people will be able to get involved in workshops, talks, an exhibition, and performances. Activities will begin in 2017, leading up to AstleyFest - a one day festival to celebrate Astley in August 2018.

The Philip Astley Project, which has been made possible by a National Lottery grant of £167,000 by the Heritage Lottery Fund, will be working closely with local and national partners, including the V&A Museum, members of the national Circus250 network and the New Vic Theatre's *Circus Past, Present and Future* project, supported by Arts Council England.

The Philip Astley Project is managed by Staffordshire University on behalf of a steering group of local arts, heritage, statutory and educational institutions. The project runs from May 2017 to December 2018.

WHO WAS PHILIP ASTLEY?

MAN OR MYTH?

Much has been said and written about Philip Astley's life and legacy. Indeed, Astley's own ability in marketing, promotion and showmanship was undoubtedly one of the key elements in his success as a circus manager and entrepreneur.

Accounts of Astley as a war hero include helping to rescue the Duke of Brunswick from behind enemy lines during the Seven Years War (1755-1764) and defeating five battalions, with their colours and nine pieces of cannon, at Emsdorff (Cannon, R. 1841).

However, the principal reason Astley's name is known to us today is for his enormous contribution to our cultural life. Bringing together acrobats, clowns and trick riders in a 42-foot ring. For over 40 years, Astley entertained both high society and the general public with a series of acts that combined risky and tense displays of skill with comic relief. Astley himself was at the heart of these performances, simultaneously riding up to three horses whilst performing ever more daring tricks (London Gazetteer, 4th April 1768).

EARLY LIFE IN NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME

Little is known about Astley's early life in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire; but we can imagine it was very different from the glamorous life he was to go on to lead. Although there is no official record of his birth, it is generally accepted that he was born in 1742. At this time, Newcastle-under-Lyme was a lively market town – an important staging post on the road to London. From a young age, Philip worked with his father Edward, a cabinet maker and veneer-cutter. Later accounts (DeCastro, 1824) indicate that at that time, his relationship with his 'warm tempered' father was poor.

ASTLEY'S EQUESTRIANISM AND MILITARY CAREER

In 1759, Philip Astley enlisted under Colonel Eliott in the 15th Light Dragoons, the first Light Cavalry Regiment of the British Army (Muster Lists 15th Light Dragoons). A few months later, Astley was chosen by Dominic Angelo, Lord Pembroke's trainer to be instructed in a new method of riding at Lord Pembroke's estate near Salisbury. Astley demonstrated skill in 'trick riding' and 'subduing' and training horses. Astley's military career saw him in active service during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) and French Revolutionary wars.

Astley's fantastic equestrian skills, developed during his military career, were at the heart of his success as a showman and entrepreneur.

FATHER OF THE MODERN CIRCUS

Philip Astley is considered to be the founder of modern circus. Following a time of experimentation, Astley discovered that a 42-foot ring is the ideal diameter for trick riders to make use of centrifugal force to stay on the back of their horses whilst performing for the public. 42 feet remains the standard size of circus ring used around the world.

In 1768, Astley acquired "Ha'Penny Hatch" a small piece of land on the south bank of the Thames between London Bridge and Westminster Bridge. In 1770, Astley established the first

of his 'amphitheatres'. Astley claimed this was funded by the 'discovery' of a diamond ring when crossing Westminster Bridge, but it is more likely due to receiving an inheritance from his Great Uncle, Richard Milligane, Postmaster of Newcastle-under-Lyme [copy of the will held at Brampton Museum archives].

Astley's Amphitheatre (and his promotional skills) captured the public's imagination. Building on his success, Astley toured across Europe and had particular success in Paris, performing for Louis XV at Versailles.

PHILIP ASTLEY'S LEGACY

Philip Astley died in 1814 and was buried in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. However, Astley's original Amphitheatre remained on its site near Westminster Bridge Road for nearly 125 years and is mentioned in the literature of the time including Charles Dickens' Sketches by 'Boz' (1837), The Newcomers by Thackeray (1855) and Jane Austen's Emma (1833). In total, Astley built 19 amphitheatres in locations including London, Dublin, Bristol and Paris (Simms, 1894).

REFERENCES

Cannon, R. Historical Record of the Fifteenth, Or the King's Regiment of Light Dragoons, (1841) London: J.W. Parker

DeCastro, J (1824) The Memoirs of J DeCastro. London: Sherwood Jones & Co.

Muster Lists of 15th Light Dragoons, Public Record Office, Kew

Will of Richard Milligane of Newcastle-under-Lyme, 14th November 1767. Original held at Lichfield Record Office.

Simms, R. (1894) Bibliotheca Staffordiensis. Lichfield: A.C. Lomax.

BACKGROUND TO THE PHILIP ASTLEY PROJECT

In 1981 veteran Illusionist Fred Van Buren instigated and oversaw the first Philip Astley Celebration, held during 1982 in Newcastle-under-Lyme. In 1991 (for the following year's 250th anniversary of Philip Astley's birth), Andrew Van Buren and his father Fred commissioned and funded the building of a life-size statue of Philip Astley. Created by local artist Andrew Edwards, the statue represents Astley at the height of his career as an equestrian and the first ring master. The statue currently stands in the entrance to Newcastle-under-Lyme's Performing Arts Centre, inspiring students keen to follow in Astley's footsteps and develop a career in the performing arts.

Also in 1992, the Brampton Museum curated a successful exhibition on the circus, borrowing items from the V&A Museum's Collection and publishing *Sawdust and Spangles* an exhibition catalogue with information about Philip Astley and the English Circus.

In 2014, Newcastle Town Centre Partnership secured £15,000 from Arts Council England to deliver The Homecoming Festival. This one-day festival brings an array of modern circus performances to Newcastle-under-Lyme town centre. Homecoming has developed into a much anticipated annual event, delivered by the Newcastle-under-Lyme Business Improvement District and Appetite. Arts Council England has continued to support this successful festival, with total funding secured between 2014-17 totaling £95,000.

In 2015, after conversations with Andrew Van Buren, Cllr Wenslie Naylor, Councillor for Keele Ward, formed the Philip Astley Committee with representation from Newcastle-under-Lyme based heritage, arts, statutory and education organisations. With ambitious ideas for celebrating 2018, the committee asked Staffordshire University to coordinate a first stage funding application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The application was successful and development funding of £28,600 was awarded to help the Philip Astley project to progress their plans to apply for a full grant at a later date.

During 2015 and 2016, local people supported the development of the project, giving feedback and suggestions at pilot activities including a Staffordshire Film Archive Film screening and a summer exhibition at the Brampton Museum. This data was analysed by Staffordshire University's Creative Communities Unit and used to develop a successful second stage HLF application, resulting in a confirmed National Lottery grant of £167,000 from HLF. The project aims to engage with over 9,000 local individuals, increasing their knowledge of Astley's legacy, and pride in Newcastle's heritage.

ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

The Philip Astley Project is managed by Staffordshire University on behalf of a steering group of local heritage, arts, education and statutory organisations:

- Brampton Museum
- Friends of the Brampton Museum
- Keele University
- Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council
- Newcastle-under-Lyme Business Improvement District
- Newcastle-under-Lyme Civic Society
- Newcastle-under-Lyme College
- New Vic Theatre and Appetite
- Staffordshire Film Archive

- Staffordshire Libraries and Information Service
- Van Buren Organisation

The project also benefits from sponsorship and support from local businesses including Junction15, Enjoy Staffordshire, the Belong Village, HomeTown Plus and PH Production Services Ltd.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Project activities will begin in September 2017 and continue for 12 months. Activities are led by different organisations represented on the project's steering group. Each strand of project activity has been developed following consultation during the project's development period.

SERIES OF TALKS

'In conversation' with Andrew Van Buren, key figures from the circus industry will share highlights from their careers and the importance of Philip Astley's ongoing legacy. Organised by the Van Buren Organisation and Staffordshire University, talks will take place at venues across Newcastle-under-Lyme between September 2017 and September 2018.

EXHIBITION: PHILIP ASTLEY – HIS LIFE AND HIS LEGACY

In May 2018, visitors to the Brampton Museum can follow in the footsteps of a team of intrepid research volunteers who have used their skills, tenacity and commitment to investigate our most burning questions... what is Astley's connection to Newcastle-under-Lyme? What would his early life have been like? How might this have influenced his later career? The free 12-week exhibition will educate and excite adults and young people alike.

CIRCUS FILM SCREENING

In January and February 2018, Staffordshire Film Archive will present a short circus film season at the Stoke Film Theatre. The season will feature: The Greatest Show on Earth (1952, Director Cecil B De Mille), Sawdust and Tinsel (1953, Director Ingmar Bergman) and Freaks (1932, Director Todd Browning). After the screenings, Ray Johnson MBE will host a discussion, drawing out the themes and issues raised by each of the films.

ROLL UP, ROLL UP

Local people will be invited to work with the New Vic Theatre to develop a brand new performance about Philip Astley, to be performed at AstleyFest, in August 2018. With multiple opportunities to participate from writing to performing to taking part in a community choir, this new performance will be by and for the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme.

ASTLEYFEST

On Saturday 4th August, in Lyme Valley Park, the whole community will gather to celebrate Philip Astley at AstleyFest, a free one-day festival. With performances, exhibitions and activities, everyone will have the chance to be inspired and get involved. Local heritage, arts and community groups will be invited to respond to an Open Call to participate, developing

new work to showcase in themes areas which immerse visitors in Astley's early life, equestrian skills and ongoing legacy.

CHILDREN'S POETRY AND ART COMPETITIONS

School children in Newcastle-under-Lyme will be invited to participate in a poetry and art competition organised by Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council. The work that best captures Astley's amazing achievements will be shared at an award ceremony at Keele Hall.

FULL CIRCLE

Students and staff at Newcastle-under-Lyme College will be developing their circus skills in order to bring Astley's story to life in public performances at the College's state of the art Performing Arts Centre in spring 2018.

TOWN TRAIL

A local artist will be commissioned by the Newcastle-under-Lyme Business Improvement District (BID) to develop a town centre trail that includes both historical sites and brand-new art work, illustrating highlights from Astley's amazing life. Launching in June 2018, visitors and residents can pick up the trail from local businesses, be guided by volunteer storytellers, and revel in the circus atmosphere when town centre businesses decorate their windows, taking inspiration from iconic circus posters.

ASTLEY EVENING EXTRAVAGANZA

No chance for a quiet drink during this fantastic night to remember in June 2018. Newcastle-under-Lyme Business Improvement District (BID) will bring an array of circus performers to town centre bars and pubs for drinkers to enjoy along with an Astley Ale or tightrope tequila...

SHARING ASTLEY'S STORY

Staff at the Newcastle-under-Lyme Library, the Brampton Museum and local Children's Centres will work with the New Vic Theatre's Education Team to develop the storytelling skills and knowledge of Philip Astley's story to be able to share this with children across the borough. Co-produced resources will be made available on the Philip Astley website, creating a lasting legacy for library, children centre and museum staff working in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and beyond.

MEDIA AND MARKETING CAMPAIGN

A media and marketing campaign will raise Astley's profile in Newcastle-under-Lyme and promote the project's events and activities. Newcastle-under-Lyme College, the Van Buren Organisation and Staffordshire University will use traditional and social media to deliver campaign bursts that share key messages about Astley's life and legacy.

WHO WAS PHILIP ASTLEY? RESOURCE PACK

By the end of the project, the *Who was Philip Astley? Resource Pack* will be made available through the project's website, encouraging schools and community groups to continue to celebrate Philip Astley and his link to Newcastle-under-Lyme. The pack, developed by Staffordshire University, will collate a pick-and-mix of Philip Astley facts, infographics and anecdotes.

STORIES

Your viewers, readers and listeners may be interested in these ‘stories with a story’:

THE JOURNEY TO BRING ASTLEY HOME

Andrew Van Buren, who shares his home town with Philip Astley, has campaigned for many years for Astley to be recognised and celebrated within Newcastle-under-Lyme. An internationally acclaimed illusionist, plate spinner and showman who has performed his shows around the world, on television and before royalty Van Buren is delighted that the hard work has paid off and that Astley’s achievements are being talked about by the leading cultural organisations in the borough and celebrated by organisations across the UK as part of the Circus250 network.

“After all the years that our family has worked to gain Philip Astley greater recognition, it is fantastic to now see his achievements and legacy being celebrated, not only in his birthplace of Newcastle-under-Lyme, but also nationwide and hopefully worldwide. Little did we realise back in 1981, the scale that the 2018 celebrations would become. Astley’s innovative thinking, showmanship, adaptability and drive, are an inspiration that not only influences me, but also are the building blocks that so many other performers and shows are built upon today. I hope that our plans for an extended heritage trail with the “king pole” centre piece of a new permanent statue of Astley will take shape, bringing new visitors to the wonderful area of Newcastle-under-Lyme and cementing Astley’s story into the lives of generations to come.”

Andrew Van Buren

BRAMPTON MUSEUM VOLUNTEERS DISCOVER THE SECRET OF ASTLEY’S EARLY LIFE

A small but dedicated team of volunteers based at the Brampton Museum have worked tirelessly on discovering who Philip Astley was, and his connection with the Borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme. Scouring numerous local and national collections, the volunteers have been able to discover more about the man behind the legend. The research team includes Beryl Carter, Ann Watkins, Susan Bradford, Andrew Van Buren, Teresa Mason and Delyth Copp and has been supported by Jim Worgan and Joan Howe from the Civic Society and Friends of the Brampton Museum.

“Without these amazing volunteers we just would not have the wonderful research material on which to base our exhibition.”

Teresa Mason (Culture & Arts Manager, Brampton Museum)

“It’s been an amazing journey. Philip himself tried to find out more about his family background before his death...I don’t know if he was successful but we have now been able to fill that gap.”

Beryl Carter (Museum Volunteer)

RESEARCH

The rationale for delivering *The Philip Astley Project – Celebrating the Father of Modern Day Circus* was articulated following in-depth research carried out by Staffordshire University's Creative Communities Unit, based within the School of Creative Arts and Engineering. During the project's development period (May to December 2017), over 2,800 people were consulted on their current levels of knowledge about Philip Astley, and their interest in taking part in activities to learn more. Whilst only 11% of respondents were aware of Philip Astley's story and his link to Newcastle-under-Lyme, everyone consulted expressed their support for the project. Respondents were keen to access activities through well-respected local institutions and have a central information point. There was interest and enthusiasm for intergenerational activities, that are well promoted and free. Newcastle-under-Lyme businesses were positive about the potential benefits of the project such as increasing town centre footfall and raising the town's profile.

During the project's delivery phase (May 2017 to Dec 2018), Dr Carmel Thomason, Senior Lecturer in Journalism from Staffordshire University's School of Computing and Digital Technologies will be collating research carried out by the research team at the Brampton Museum. This research will support the development of a Resource Pack for community groups and schools to continue learning about Astley beyond 2018.

In addition, Professor Marc Jones, Director of Staffordshire University's Institute for Research and Knowledge Exchange will work with Dr Matthew Slater from the School of Life Sciences and Education to explore why knowledge of a 'local hero' such as Philip Astley can help motivate people in the locality to engage and partake in new activities.

QUOTE SHEET

"Staffordshire University are proud to be working with local and national partners to deliver this important project in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Our consultation to date has shown very high levels of interest in finding out about Philip Astley and celebrating his important legacy. This project will give people of all ages wonderful opportunities to get involved and develop skills, whilst learning about our circus heritage."

Professor Marc Jones, Director of Research at Staffordshire University's Institute for Research and Knowledge Exchange

"We are thrilled to be supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, thanks to National Lottery players. This will help us to achieve our objectives which are to ultimately raise awareness of Philip Astley in his birth town of Newcastle-under-Lyme. We have lots of activities planned in the near future, where anybody and everybody is welcome to get involved to find out more about Astley's legacy."

Cllr Wensile Naylor, Councillor for Keele Ward and Chair of the steering group for the Philip Astley Project

“When you consider what William Shakespeare has done for Stratford-upon-Avon, then what can Philip Astley do for Newcastle-under-Lyme. He is our Shakespeare. The influence and legacy of Philip Astley is massive and worldwide, from circus shows, to art, literature, circus theme children’s toys, films... the list goes on and on. He is a man for the residents of his hometown to be proud of.”

Andrew Van Buren, Director of Van Buren Organisation and a member of the project’s steering group

IMAGE BANK

Follow this link to find images to be used with credits and titles in the filename:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/7snettqzydoefdv/AACdMLL1siVlvy01OMBnh5ea?dl=0>

In addition, the V&A Museum have a range of images on their website:

- <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-first-circus/>
- <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1256198/silhouette-of-philip-astley-1742-print-smith-john/>

FAQS

How can the public get involved?

Our brand new website is being developed right now! This will contain a listing of activities and details of how to get involved.

How can businesses support the project?

We have benefited from the support of many local businesses and are always keen to bring new sponsors on board. Contact Kat Evans on Katherine.evans@staffs.ac.uk to receive details.

Who is funding the Philip Astley Project?

The project is supported by National Lottery players through the Heritage Lottery Fund and generously sponsored by local businesses who recognise the benefits of the project for Newcastle-under-Lyme.

What is the Heritage Lottery Fund?

Thanks to National Lottery players, we invest money to help people across the UK explore, enjoy and protect the heritage they care about – from the archaeology under our feet to the historic parks and buildings we love, from precious memories and collections to rare wildlife. www.hlf.org.uk. Follow us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram and use #HLFsupported.

Is the *Philip Astley Project* part of Circus250?

The Philip Astley Project is part of the national network of organisations committed to marking the 250th anniversary of circus in 2018. The network is headed up by Circus250 a not-for-profit organisation led by Dea Birkett.

What's the relationship between the *Philip Astley Project* and *Circus Past, Present and Future*? The New Vic Theatre are leading the *Circus Past, Present and Future* project, funded by Arts Council England. The New Vic Theatre is a member of the *Philip Astley Project* steering group and the two projects have been carefully planned to deliver a complementary programme of heritage and performance activities in Newcastle-under-Lyme during 2018.

What will happen after 2018?

The organisations represented on the Philip Astley Project steering group are currently developing further plans from 2018-2023. Proposals include an annual event to celebrate Astley and a permanent statue to Philip Astley in Newcastle-under-Lyme's town centre.

PREVIOUS COVERAGE AND PRESS RELEASES

May 2017 *Project Celebrates 'Father of Modern Circus'* <http://www.staffs.ac.uk/news/project-celebrates-father-of-modern-circus-tcm4293806.jsp>

Jan 2017 *Philip Astley, father of the modern circus, could be 'Newcastle's Shakespeare'* <http://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/philip-astley-father-of-the-modern-circus-could-be-newcastle-s-shakespeare/story-29907149-detail/story.html>

CONTACT

For more information about the project, contact Project Manager Kat Evans, katherine.evans@staffs.ac.uk

For media enquiries or interviews, contact Andrew Van Buren, avanburen@aol.com