

Thomas Lee was a star of London's Astley's Amphitheatre. An equestrian, gymnast and somersault thrower, he was said to have performed 'extraordinary and wonderful leaps' on one or more of his 'fiery steeds', while his 'sinewy and symmetrical form, and untiring activity, drew forth the admiration of the audience'.

Lee was born in Dumfriesshire, Scotland, about 1822. His family boasted a history of circus and fairground performance that spanned more than two hundred years. As a child Tom was connected with Cooke's Circus, and for many years he travelled through the northern provinces of England. In 1844 he married Emma Cooke, the sister of his employer. They were married at Gretna Green, a Scottish border town famous for the runaway marriages performed there.

Lee worked at Astley's in the 1840s, when it was run by William Batty. This famous venue, described by Dickens in his *Sketches by Boz*, featured both a circus ring and a stage for theatrical works. Lee performed with his brothers, Lavater, Henry, and Hercules, and another of his fellow performers was the celebrated clown W.F. Wallett, known as the 'Queen's Jester'.

In 1851 Lee, his wife and their two children were living at Brighton, Sussex. Lee's brothers had already left England for the United States, and in 1854 Lee went with his family to Australia. He performed at Melbourne's own Astley's Amphitheatre alongside Pablo Fanque and others, and George Coppin engaged him to appear as a pantomime artist at his Cremorne Gardens.

Lee's wife, known professionally as Madame Lee, was an accomplished equestrian, dancer and tightrope performer. She directed her children, the 'Petite Troupe', in dancing acts and pantomime performances, including one entitled *The Duchess Fiddle-Faddle and My Lord Dilly-Dally*. The

children (there were at least five of them) belonged to what was advertised as the youngest ballet troupe in the colonies. At least one was performing at two years of age. Madame Lee also taught riding and ran a dancing academy, and for about a year she operated a waxworks in Bourke Street, where the children performed 'drawing room entertainments'. By 1857 Lee himself was no longer prominent as a performer, but he became involved with horse breeding and racing.

The family went through many 'vicissitudes and troubles', and Madame Lee and her children eventually accepted an engagement to go to India, where they worked as pantomime artists and dancers. Thomas was described as too ill to go with them, and he remained in Victoria. His eldest daughter, Jane, died in Calcutta in 1867.

Lee arrived in Dunedin around 1866. In his last years he led what was described as 'chequered life', but quite what this meant is now obscure. He died from lung fibrosis and pneumonia at Dunedin Hospital, on 24 July 1878, aged 56 .

A friend said: 'He was a genial man, and always willing to assist his brother professionals. Now that he has gone to his last home, I trust a few of those who know him in his good days will come forward with their mite to assist in giving a decent burial to one who catered long and well for their amusement in their young days.'

Hayes' and Benhamo's Grand International Circus Company was in Dunedin at the time of Lee's death, and the proprietors sent a cheque to cover the funeral expenses.

David Murray
June 2010

SOURCES:

Frost, Thomas. *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1881.

Phelan, Regina V. *The Gold Chain: A California Family Saga*. Los Angeles: The author, 1987.

Theatrical Times (London), 28 May 1848.

Argus (Melbourne), 15 November 1854; 8 December 1854; 3 January 1856; 26 March 1857; 12 December 1867.

Evening Star (Dunedin), 25 July 1878.

Star (Christchurch), 28 August 1878

UK Census, 1851.

Marriage Notices from the Wigtownshire Free Press,

<http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~leighann/wfp/marriages/3.html>

Alice c.1854
Edwin/Teddy
Emily

1851 CENSUS

Name	Relation	Condition	Sex	Age	Birth Year	Occupation Disability	Where Born	Original census image
BROWN, James	Head	Married	M	46	1805	Engine Driver Deaf	Islington Middlesex	VIEW
BROWN, Elizabeth	Wife		F	36	1815		Fletching Sussex	VIEW
CARD, Sarah	Visitor		F	11	1840		Southover Sussex	VIEW
MORTON, Frederick	Son In Law	Unmarried	M	33	1818	Actor	Isle of Man	VIEW
LEE, Thomas	Head	Married	M	28	1823	Equestrian	Dumfriesshire Scotland	VIEW
LEE, Emma	Wife	Married	F	24	1827	Equestrian	Southampton Hampshire	VIEW
LEE, Jane	Daughter		F	5	1846		Market Deeping Lancashire	VIEW
LEE, Thomas	Son		M	0 (1 MOS)	1851		Brighton Sussex	VIEW

RG number:
HO107

Piece:
1645

Folio:
765

Page:
21

Registration District:
Brighton

Sub District:
Saint Peter?s

Enumeration District:
1HH

Ecclesiastical Parish:

Civil Parish:
Brighton

Municipal Borough:
Brighton

Address:
Kensington Gardens, Brighton

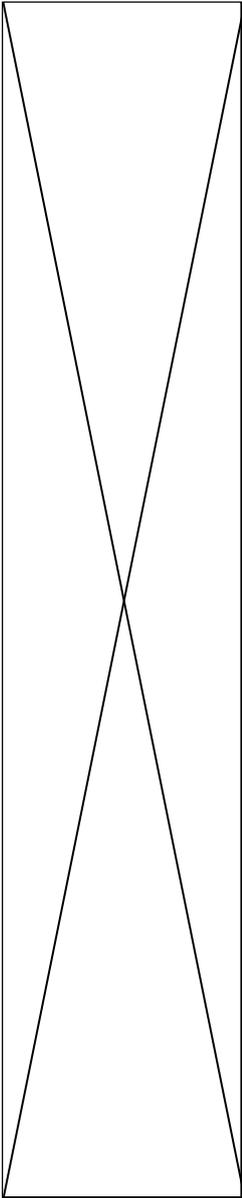
County:
Sussex

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m 17 Oct 1844 Gretna Green