

Seward's Ingenious Exhibition of the Fantoccini at Cheltenham: the talented Seward family – musicians, actors, acrobats, dancers, puppeteers, painters

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THE NAMES THAT COME MOST READILY TO MIND when we think about the early history of Cheltenham theatres are probably those of the actress Sarah Siddons and the Irish theatre manager John Boles Watson. But for a period of at least 40 years, at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, one rather forgotten family played a prominent role in providing entertainment to visitors to the spa: the Swards. Their part in Cheltenham life at this period has been somewhat overlooked. This article attempts to rectify that neglect.¹

The first record we have of Samuel Seward (II)² and his family performing in Cheltenham comes from a handbill, dated July 1788, held by the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C.,³ which advertises two pantomimes – *Enchantment* and *Harlequin's Whim* – which were to be given by 'Seaward's company',⁴ with 'Seward' [sic – probably Samuel himself] in the lead role as Harlequin, and a 'J. Seaward' [sic]⁵ as Pantaloon. These performances were to take place at 'the Theatrical booth in the coachway leading to the Spa' in Cheltenham. Other entertainments offered by the Swards were to include 'Tumbling by Messrs. Sewards, juniors' and a hornpipe played by 'Master Seaward'.⁶

Brief though it may be, this handbill is revealing, and tells us quite a lot about Samuel and his family.

Firstly, it is clear, just from this one advertisement, that this was very much a family enterprise, with older and younger members all playing their part, not just as actors, but as acrobats and musicians too. As we shall see, various members of the family had other talents with which to make their contributions as well.

Secondly, we can also surmise with some justification that Samuel was a canny businessman, with his finger firmly on the nation's pulse, ready to travel wherever there might be a crowd to entertain. This date - July 1788 - was, of course, a highly significant one in Cheltenham's history, for it was in this month that the ailing King George III and his retinue arrived in the town, hoping the spa waters would cure him of his malady. The presence of the royal family 'made Cheltenham for a few short weeks the focus of the fashionable world'⁷, boosting its fortunes and increasing the number of visitors who flocked to the spa. Samuel had spotted an opportunity and lost no time in pursuing it. Whether or not this was the family's first visit to the town, or just the first for which some record has survived, we cannot say, of course. Since Samuel is known to have acted for the theatrical manager John Boles Watson,⁸ it would not be surprising if he brought his family company to Cheltenham as early as the 1772, around which date Watson had taken over the old malt house in Coffee House Yard as a theatre.⁹

In addition, the description of their performance space – ‘the Theatrical booth in the coachway leading to the Spa’ – suggests that they were not yet using a permanent, fixed theatre building at this time, although they may already have been performing in what is now St George’s Place, since ‘The Coach Road’ was one of its former names.¹⁰ The Swards appear to have been travelling showmen of one kind or another for at least a couple of generations by this date, and earned a living by entertaining the public at fairs and events across the south of England. It seems likely they had some kind of mobile stage which travelled with them, and in fact we will later see a description of just such paraphernalia in use by another showman who learnt his trade from the Swards.

Lastly, it is interesting to note the different types of entertainments Seward’s Company had to offer. The playbill mentions two dramatic performances, both seemingly in the style of the *Commedia dell’arte*, and almost certainly with Samuel Seward himself playing the role of Harlequin, for which he was renowned; plus ‘tumbling’ (which we can safely take to mean acrobatic tricks of various kinds); and a ‘hornpipe’ (probably to be interpreted as a dance, accompanied by music played on a brass or wind instrument of some kind). Although the playbill does not mention puppets, it seems unlikely that marionettes would not have featured in some form or another, given that this was the kind of show for which the Swards were probably best known.

It should be no surprise that music is mentioned here, for many of the Swards appear to have thought of themselves first and foremost as musicians - in particular, trumpeters. An Abraham Seward (I), ‘musician’, was admitted as a Burgess of the City of Bristol, by purchase, on 28 November 1745.¹¹ Being a burgess gave Abraham the right to vote in parliamentary elections, and two poll books relating to the 1754 elections in Bristol record,¹² on the one hand, an Abraham *Seward*, ‘musician’, of Temple parish in the city; and, on the other, an Abraham *Seaward*, ‘puppet shew-man’, also of Temple parish. Despite the variation in spelling and profession, these were surely one and the same man, skilled in both arts.

These two skills were not, of course, unconnected. Puppet performances were traditionally announced by means of trumpets and drums,¹³ and no doubt the Swards carried on that custom. But there is reason to believe that the Swards were more than mere fairground players. Like the puppet showman Harry Rowe, who ‘held the post of Trumpeter to the High Sheriff of Yorkshire, and twice every year for forty-five years attended the Assizes in this capacity’,¹⁴ it would seem that two brothers, Abraham (I) and Samuel (I) Seward, served as trumpeters to the High Sheriff of Cornwall, and were employed in a ceremonial capacity at Bodmin and Launceston Assizes in 1745 and 1746.¹⁵ We can probably assume that this was Abraham (I), the Bristol musician and puppeteer, plying his trade across the West Country.

Given their itinerant lifestyle, constructing the family tree of the Swards is no easy matter. Baptisms, marriages and burials can be hard to find, and sometimes crop up in surprising places. Denning¹⁶ states confidently that Samuel (II) ‘was a native of Bristol’, but there is no evidence he was born in that city. He was said to be aged 73 when he died in 1810, which suggests a date of birth around 1737. No baptism of a Samuel Seward in any Bristol church around this date has been found, but there are possible baptisms in London (1734),¹⁷ Somerset (1735),¹⁸ and Cornwall (1742).¹⁹

Wherever he was born, and whoever his parents were, in later years Samuel (II) considered himself both a Bristolian and a musician. Evans²⁰ mentions a letter, dated 22 August 1821, sent from Stapleton, Bristol, by one C.J. Harford²¹ to the editor of *Felix Farley’s Journal*, and which was subsequently reproduced in numerous newspapers.²² It recalled an encounter by Harford in Moscow in 1786 with a Mr. Maddox, a fellow Bristolian to whom he was introduced, and

who enquired: ‘Pray Sir... is the St James Fair still kept up? And is old Seward the trumpeter alive?’. Mr Harford assured Mr Maddox that he ‘had seen old Seward trumpeting before the Sheriffs the March preceding’. It sounds as if this ‘old Seward’ was serving the Sheriffs of Bristol in very much the same capacity as Samuel (I) and Abraham (I) had served the Sheriff of Cornwall 40 years earlier. When he wrote his will in 1799, Samuel (II) described himself, as ‘Samuel Seward, of the City of Bristol, Trumpeter’, probably proud of his role in civic life.²³ In turn, when that Samuel’s son of the same name, Samuel Seward (III) wrote his will in 1828, he referred to himself as ‘Samuel Seward of Cheltenham in the County of Gloucester Musician’.²⁴

By all accounts, Samuel (II) was a fine instrumentalist, and a popular figure in Bristol. Evans praises his skill, calling him a ‘neatly made little showman’ and ‘old Seward, of Fair memory, in whose hands the sound of the trumpet produced its first impression upon the musical hearts of many a wight of the writer’s standing.’²⁵

However, though they thought of themselves primarily as musicians, the Swards had many other talents and were prepared to travel widely to ply their trade. A puppet showman named ‘Seward’ was active in London in the early 1740s, and was described as the ‘Manager of *Punch’s Opera*’ in the capital in 1745.²⁶ This may not have been either of the brothers Abraham (I) or Samuel (I),²⁷ but it is hard to think he would not have been a relation of some kind. A puppeteer named Seward was also recorded as having performed in Bristol in 1743, and, as Harford’s letter suggests, performances by the Swards were a regular feature at Bristol St James Fair, where in 1761 ‘Seward’s Grand Performance’ was one of the attractions, and included ‘Drolls’,²⁸ ‘Wire Dancing,’ and puppets, and, in 1765, tumbling and ‘rope-dancing’ were on offer.²⁹ Exactly which members of the Seward family these various advertisements refer to it is impossible to know for sure, but, in a sense, it does not really matter: this was a family enterprise where everyone was expected to play some part or other, whether as actor, puppeteer, musician, acrobat or dancer, and where as one generation passed, the next would take up the reins.

The Seward family were still itinerant entertainers when they visited Cheltenham in 1788, and it seems likely they did not establish any permanent base in the town for some years afterwards. They certainly had not stopped touring, as the following year they were back in that other fashionable West of England spa resort, Bath, where ‘SEWARD’S EXHIBITION’ could be seen, ‘consisting of the Droll Humours of Mr. PUNCH and his Merry Family; being the richest and best Puppet-Show in the kingdom. With TUMBLING, SINGING, DANCING, &c.’³⁰

We do not know for sure when Samuel Seward (II) established his theatre in the former dwelling houses known later as Nos. 27-28, and eventually as Nos. 67-69, St George’s Place, Cheltenham. Seward gave the buildings the rather pretentious name *Sadler’s Wells House*. A drawing of the theatre by James Winston, first published in 1802,³¹ shows this name painted on the facade with a notice reading ‘Fantoccini Exhibition’ beneath (see image on following page). By the time the buildings were demolished in the early 2000s, this latter sign had disappeared, but the name of the theatre could still be read on what by then was an interior wall (see images at end of article). The Historic England listing description for the building states that Seward converted the property in 1795;³² another source suggests that this occurred around 1799.³³ The truth is, exactly when the buildings first became a theatre is not known, but we can assume it had happened by 1800, when the theatre was listed in Shenton’s *Cheltenham Directory*.³⁴

It is worth spending a moment to consider the meaning of that word ‘*Fantoccini*’ which might not be familiar to the modern reader. It was a word of Italian origin³⁵ used to describe ‘jointed

puppets operated from above by rods and/or strings', and which was largely superseded by the term *marionettes* from the second half of the 19th century onwards.³⁶ Samuel Seward (II) may well have been something of an innovator in their use: one expert in the history of puppetry credits him with being the first man in England to employ *fantoccini* operated purely by means of strings, as opposed to the more cumbersome rods or wires.³⁷

However, despite starting to perform in a fixed venue in Cheltenham sometime in the mid- to late-1790s, the signs are that the Swards did not even then immediately restrict their performances to Cheltenham, or cease touring altogether, if indeed they ever did. A 'Seward' was exhibiting a puppet show at St Bartholomew's Fair in London from 1796 to 1812.³⁸ In the spring of 1799, 'Mr Seward' - probably Samuel (II) - was acting Harlequin and other roles for Watson's Company at the newly opened Cirencester Theatre, and on 13 May 1799, a benefit concert was held on his behalf.³⁹ On 20 May 1801, the *Hereford Journal* advertised that Harlequin would be played there by 'Mr Seward, from Astley's Amphitheatre, who is engaged for Four Nights only'.⁴⁰ Even as late as 1803 we are told that 'Mr. Seward has for several years visited Cheltenham with his Sadler's Wells in miniature',⁴¹ which suggests he was not a permanent resident. It may have been the case that the theatre was usually only open during 'the season', that is, the months between June and September that attracted the vast majority



Drawing by James Winston of Samuel Seward's 'Sadlers Wells House' in St. George's Place, Cheltenham, showing a notice reading 'Fantoccini Exhibition'. No. 13 from his collection 'Watercolour drawings of theatres and other buildings in towns of the south of England: the original drawings for James Winston's Theatric Tourist', 1805, 1802.

Pencil note at the bottom reads 'Seward's Puppet Shew'.

(Courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales, David Scott Mitchell Collection, ref. PXB 13, IE8603225 <https://digital.sl.nsw.gov.au/>)

of visitors to the town.⁴² The rest of the year, the Swards would most likely have continued to tour the country as they had done for at least half a century by this date.

We can get an idea of the kind of entertainment provided at Sadler's Wells House from a number of contemporary descriptions. Dibdin's *Guide* informs the visitor of the delights of Watson's Cheltenham Theatre, but goes on to mention that a different kind of entertainment was also available, appealing particularly, no doubt, to the less high-brow visitors and their children:

*'As a species of dramatic entertainment, we must not forget Mr. Seward's exhibition of the Fantoccini, with all the merriment of pantomimic achievements. ... The whole apparatus is well got up, and affords a pleasing variety to the more serious and just representation of human nature on Mr. Watson's theatre. The scenery is neat, and painted by his sons.'*⁴³

Sadler's Wells House did not just attract the less fashionable visitor, however. *The Globe* of 24 November 1809 noted that: 'On Friday evening, Lady Suffolk, the Hon. Mrs Moore, and a fashionable party, visited Mr Seward's ingenious exhibition of the Fantoccini at Cheltenham, and were very highly gratified.'

The travelling actor, Samuel William Ryley, first published his memoirs in 1808, and describes how he visited Seward's theatre after performing in Cheltenham (precise date unclear):

*'In the evening, by way of frolic, we went to the celebrated puppet shew conducted by old Seward, well known formerly for his agility as an Harlequin, and his ingenuity in managing his company of wood and wire performers. The piece performed that evening was called Whittington and his Cat ... A real, legitimate puppet shew ... here the ancient school appeared in all its original glory and splendour, and Mr. Punch was introduced with great effect.'*⁴⁴

During the 1840s, the social historian Henry Mayhew published a series of newspaper articles documenting the lives of working people in London, later collected under the title *London Labour and the London Poor*. Amongst those he interviewed was an unnamed 'Fantoccini Man', who performed in 'a large roomy show upon wheels, about four times as capacious as those used for the performance of Punch and Judy'. We can reasonably assume that the kind of mobile theatre space described there would have been similar to that used by the Swards, and it seems possible that the wagon depicted outside the theatre in Winston's drawing was the vehicle the Swards used for this purpose.

This 'fantoccini man' explained how he had learnt his trade from one 'Seawood':

'At this time I had been playing in the orchestra with some travelling comedians, and Mr. Seawood,⁴⁵ the master, used among other things to exhibit the dancing figures. He had a proscenium fitted up so that he could open a twenty-foot theatre, almost large enough for living persons. He had the splndidest figures ever introduced into this country. He was an artist as well, splendid scene and transparent painter; indeed, he's worked for some of the first noblemen in Cheltenham, doing up their drawing-rooms. His figures worked their eyes and mouths by mechanism; according to what they had to say, they looked and moved their eyes and mouths according; and females, if they was singing, heaved their bosoms like Christians, the same as life. He had a Turk who did the tightrope without anybody being seen. He always performed different pieces, and had a regular wardrobe with him— beautiful dresses — and he'd dress 'em up to their parts, and then paint their faces up with distemper, which dries in an hour. ... I had helped Mr. Seawood to manage the figures, and I knew something about them ...

*The only figures they told me he had — and it was true — was a sailor, and a Turk, and a clown, and what we calls a Polander, that's a man that tosses the pole.'*⁴⁶

On 21 July 1810, some 15 years or so after establishing his theatre in St George's Place, Samuel Seward (II) died, and was buried at St Mary's, Cheltenham on 23 July 1810.⁴⁷ His death was announced in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* on 26 July 1810: 'On Saturday last died here, Mr Samuel Seward, aged 73 – He has for many years exhibited his Fantoccini, and other performances, at this place. The night preceding his demise he played Harlequin, with his accustomed activity! He has left considerable property in houses, &c.'

The news was repeated widely in other newspapers over the following days, including in the *Gentleman's Magazine*,⁴⁸ the London press,⁴⁹ and even as far afield as Dublin,⁵⁰ though some notices claimed that he was 'nearly 80', probably exaggerating his age for journalistic effect.

When Samuel had written his will back in 1799, he had named his wife Elizabeth as his executrix, and she was duly sworn as such on 27 July 1810, but, in the event, she outlived him by only a few months (the burial of Elizabeth Seward at St Mary's, on 11 January 1811, appears two pages after that of her husband in the same register). Samuel's eldest child, daughter Elizabeth, and her second husband Thomas Tyrrell of Bristol, 'Blue maker',⁵¹ took over administration of his estate. The will does not specifically mention any property in Cheltenham, but simply leaves all his messuages etc. 'in the City of Bristol or elsewhere' to his wife Elizabeth. After her death, his estate was to be divided equally between his eight surviving children and a niece, Mary Seward.⁵²

It was probably because of this latter clause, and the need to distribute the estate, that a notice in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* of 26 September 1811 advertised the sale by auction 'To Comedians and Others' of 'ALL that Freehold brick-built MESSUAGE or TENEMENT, together with the THEATRE adjoining the same, situated in St George's-place, in the Carriage Road leading to the Spa, and for many years last past in the possession of the late Proprietor, Mr. Samuel Seward, deceased, and by him used as a place of Public Amusement.'

Whether this auction actually took place is doubtful. This is the only notice of the sale that has come to light, and, as we shall see, the theatre appears to have remained in the family's possession for nearly another 20 years after this time. Perhaps it was 'disposed of in the mean time by Private Contract', an eventuality the advertisement had anticipated, and purchased from Samuel's estate by one of his sons, probably either Abraham (III) or Samuel (III). So, to continue the history of the theatre building, and of the Seward family of entertainers, we must now proceed to consider the lives of these two men.

Abraham⁵³ had been baptized at Bath Abbey on 31 January 1773.⁵⁴ His father, Samuel Seward (II) had married his mother, Elizabeth Hart, at Temple church in Bristol on 19 November 1761.⁵⁵ Abraham was the sixth of 13 known children. Every member of the Seward family seems to have been expected to act on the stage, operate marionettes, perform acrobatic tricks, provide musical accompaniment, and so on, as required, but Abraham's specialism, for which he gained quite a considerable reputation in his lifetime, was as a scene painter, and as a painter more generally too. He was probably the 'Seaward' who in 1796 was engaged to paint scenery for a performance of *The Magician of the Rocks* at *Astley's Amphitheatre*, Westminster Bridge, and then a few years later in 1800, as 'Seward', appeared on the roster of the Birmingham Company, listed as a scene painter 'from the Circus Royal, London'.⁵⁶ We can follow Abraham's movements to some extent from life events recorded in parish registers, which seem to mirror what Highfill tells us of his career, suggesting that Abraham and his family spent time in London before moving to the Midlands. He may have been the Abraham Seward, 'gentleman', who married Mary Flanningham, by licence, at St Martin's in the Fields, on 10

October 1795.⁵⁷ A son, George, was baptized in Cheltenham on 7 August 1796,⁵⁸ then two children, Sarah and Abraham, at St Margaret's, Westminster on 23 September 1798.⁵⁹ These two children may well have been the Abraham Seward, aged 2, buried at Old Swinford, near Stourbridge, on 1 October 1799,⁶⁰ and the Sarah Seward, daughter of Abraham Seward, buried at St Peter's, Wolverhampton on 29 December 1800.⁶¹ Two further children, sons James and Joseph,⁶² were baptized together in that same church on 1 January 1804.⁶³ By 1799, several Midland theatres that were on John Boles Watson's circuit, including those in Stourbridge and Wolverhampton, had been taken over by the same manager, Robert Hoy, and it seems likely that Abraham had left the capital to paint scenery for them.⁶⁴

On 10 June 1805, the *Gloucester Journal* announced the opening of Watson's Cheltenham New Theatre in Cambray, praising the simple elegance of the new building, but also commenting: 'Nor need the Cheltenham Theatre yield to any other, for beautiful scenery, which is the work of the younger Seward, and allowed to be executed in a most masterly manner.'

The *Cheltenham Chronicle* of 21 June 1810 also praised his work, for the theatre and elsewhere:

'We will not compare small things to great, but we feel a desire to bring into public notice the ingenious exhibitions of Mr Seward, whose Puppets excited applause, many years before our Theatre assumed its present elegant form. Mr. Seward's industrious efforts are deserving of encouragement; and the talents of his son, as a painter, have often been admired in the scenery of our Theatre, while the artist is almost unknown. There are some specimens of Mr. Seward's pencil in Lady Mary Lindsay Crawford's villa, in that of the Hon. Miss Monson, and some others, that evince talents of no mean cast; and the drawing forth of which, would reflect credit on the patronage of any liberal admirer of the Fine Arts.'

Following his father's death, it is possible that it was Abraham who took over the running of the theatre initially. He may also have already been short of money, for the *Cheltenham Chronicle* of 18 October 1810 advertised a series of performances to be held 'For the Benefit of Mr. Abraham Seward, Scene Painter (here and at the Theatre-Royal) and Performer' to include 'A Selection of the most new and popular airs, duetts, trios, & quartets, on the much improved Harmonized Glasses to conclude with Fantoccini Figures and a Comic Pantomine ... with new Scenery – and which has been for several Weeks preparing under the direction of Mr. A. Seward'.

The *Chronicle* also noted:

'We would press on the notice of the Public the performances announced at the Sadlers Wells Theatre, for Wednesday next, for the benefit of Mr. Abraham Seward, of whose talents we have before had occasion to speak, and which the Public at large are not unacquainted with, from the decoration of the Theatre, Sheldon's Hotel, and several private Houses in this neighbourhood.' (See image, back cover)

This was the era of the wild Romantic genius, exemplified by Lord Byron, and there are hints that Abraham conformed to this stereotype. This anecdote, recounted nearly 30 years after Abraham's death, is no doubt embellished, but, as we shall see, there are reasons to think it could contain a kernel of truth:

'There are two very good delineations of the old west gate and bridge in Gloucester. The one is at the dining-room at the Fleece Hotel, the other on the staircase of the Upper George Tavern, both in Westgate-street. They were both painted by an artist named Seward, a remarkably clever fellow, who also executed some very beautiful

*scenery for the old Cheltenham Theatre, now destroyed, when it was at the zenith of its fame, under the patronage of Colonel Berkeley (the late Earl Fitzhardinge) and his brothers. Seward was a most eccentric fellow. On one occasion he was ordered to paint a scene of a wood for a drama in which the Colonel was to make his appearance as a dramatic amateur. But the colours could not be readily procured, and the noble amateur, on the morning before the performance, found nothing but blank canvas, and Seward with equally blank looks. The Colonel was much annoyed, and did not hesitate to express his displeasure in rather strong language. Seward, not daring to retort, in a fit of passion, dashed his brush full of paint at the canvas. The green pigment trickled down in something of the shape of slender tree stems, and Seward immediately caught the idea, and that evening a scene such as the Cheltenham Theatre had never witnessed excited universal applause. Seward also painted many scenes for the old Gloucester Theatre.'*⁶⁵

That Abraham was an unconventional, perhaps troubled man, is also evidenced by two incidents from a few years later which landed him in gaol. On 2 July 1817, Abraham Seward, aged 45, was committed to the House of Correction in Northleach, for want of sureties for his appearance at Trinity Quarter Sessions, 'being charged on the oath of John Cossens, high constable of the town of Cheltenham, with having conducted himself yesterday in a riotous and disorderly manner in the public streets of Cheltenham; and also with having, at the same time and place violently assaulted the said John Cossens in the due execution of his duty'.⁶⁶ Two years later, on 27 May 1819, he was back in Northleach Prison, this time charged with being 'an idle and disorderly person, for that he hath for some time past refused to maintain his wife and children, and hath run away and absented himself from, and left his wife and children chargeable to the parish of Cheltenham'.⁶⁷

What happened to him after this is unknown, as the last 18 years of Abraham's life are a complete mystery. Nothing more is heard of him until his death was briefly noted in the local press in 1837: 'Last week, in Gloucester Infirmary, Mr. Abraham Seward, formerly of Cheltenham, who, as a provincial theatrical scene painter, had, for many years, enjoyed great eminence.'⁶⁸ Curiously, no corresponding death certificate or burial record has so far been located. One wonders if he died in 'reduced circumstances', estranged from his family, perhaps?

Turning now to Abraham's younger brother, Samuel Seward (III), he was his parents' youngest child, baptized at Temple church in Bristol on 15 March 1788. His career is hard to trace with any confidence, but there is reason to believe that it was he who was the prime mover in the family's business affairs after the death of his father, Samuel Seward (II), in 1810 - especially, perhaps, after Abraham (III)'s troubles a few years later. Most, if not all, references after 1810 to 'Seward's Fantoccini' or 'Seward's Exhibition', as the travelling show was known, would probably be to this man, Samuel Seward (III). And there can be no doubt that he became the owner of the theatre premises in St George's Place, Cheltenham at some point after 1811, as it was the main legacy mentioned in his will, though exactly when and how he acquired it, and from whom, is uncertain.

The will of Samuel Seward, musician, of Cheltenham, was proved at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury on 29 April 1834,⁶⁹ but this document had been written nearly six years previously, on 1 May 1828. In it, he left his entire estate, including 'All that my messuage and tenement lands hereditaments and premises and my Theatre adjoining thereto with their respective Appurtenances situate lying and being in St. George's Place Cheltenham', to his mistress, Eliza Jones of Bath, who was also to be his executrix, and after her death to his two illegitimate sons by her, Edward⁷⁰ Seward Jones and George Seward Jones. It seems very likely he was the

Samuel Seward, aged 40, buried at Crewkerne, Somerset on 21 September 1828, less than five months after he wrote this will; the parish register notes that the man in question was ‘A travelling Showman’.⁷¹ Why it took nearly six years for probate to be completed is unknown, but it is not hard to imagine that there could have been some kind of dispute over the will, or at least complications in disposing of the theatre building.

So, it seems probable that it was largely Samuel who kept the family business going, both at Sadler’s Wells House, and on the road, after his father’s death. He appears to have travelled extensively and missed no opportunity to go wherever a crowd was likely to assemble and need entertaining.

On 4 January 1816, the *Cheltenham Chronicle* advertised ‘Seward’s Wonderful Exhibition’, which was to be seen at Sadler’s Wells House, St George’s Place, Cheltenham, and it is worth reproducing the notice here, as it gives an excellent impression of the variety of entertainments on offer. We can reasonably assume that the same puppets formed part of the travelling show, and would have been accompanied by similar musical and acrobatic delights, as well as *tableaux vivants*.

SEWARD’S Wonderful Exhibition

Being an astonishing display of posturing and tumbling by the youngest Performers that ever attempted. Mr. PHILLIPS⁷² will perform feats of agility and manly activity, in his peculiar manner of balancing his pupil; and his pleasing tricks with the CHILD of PROMISE – The Royal English FANTOCCINI of moving figures, being a pleasing recreation, - A laughable figure of Mother Shipton, who will dance a jig, display an attitude curiously expressive of an old woman, whose spirits are roused by music; she will take a candle and light her pipe, and smoke very naturally, without any apparent assistance. – A humorous figure of an Italian Scaramouch, who will exhibit several comic antics. – A curious figure of an enchanted Turk, that dances on the stage, and changes into six different figures; with several other mechanical figures quite different to any ever before exhibited. – To which will be introduced,

Slack Rope Vaulting, by the celebrated Master Gray,

who has had the applause of every spectator. – Between the acts, HORNPIPE DANCING and SINGING. – The whole to conclude with a grand view of the MAIN OCEAN, where varieties of the watery element is introduced in a surprising manner, viz. all kinds of fish and fowl, sporting and playing in and on the surface of the water, as natural as life. Also Neptune, king of the sea, drawn in his chariot by sea horse, with tritons and mermaids attending him. Likewise a representation of a GRAND BATTLE, shewing the engagement between the English and French men of war; with the ships burning, sinking, and taking.

A few years later, again at Sadler’s Wells House, the show advertised in the *Chronicle* on 8 July 1819 was very similar, but this notice highlights another of the family’s talents, namely that of designing and building mechanical automata: ‘The Performance to Commence with the AUTOMATON, or Rope Dancing Figure. This Figure is the sole Invention of Mr. Seward, and is entirely actuated by Machinery contained in the Trunk of the Body, and goes through different evolutions of Vaulting and Tumbling in a manner truly astonishing’. Also on the bill at this time were the figures recalled by the unnamed ‘Fantoccini Man’ interviewed by Mayhew some decades later: ‘BEN, the SAILOR, who shews the true gesture of a British Tar, takes off his Hat, and puts it on again, in a most surprising manner, and dances a Hornpipe as natural as life. The Figure of a POLANDER, who will exhibit various Feats with his Spontoon.’⁷³

The following November, ‘Sewards’s Royal English and Italian Fantoccini Figures’ were to be seen in Bath.⁷⁴ The following April, the same show was on offer at the Black Horse Inn, St Clements, Oxford,⁷⁵ and then, at Christmas 1820, in Bath again, with possibly catastrophic results. On the night of the 22 December 1820, the Kingston (or Lower) Assembly Rooms, Bath were totally destroyed by fire. The *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser* of 25 December 1820, reproducing a report from the *Bath Herald* of 23 December 1820, described how the ‘conflagration must have been increased by a large quantity of oil ... which was deposited in one of the rooms near the spot where it is supposed the fire originated, being a small space used as a dressing-room to the Private Theatre, where Mr. Seward had that evening exhibited his Fantoccini; but this is mere conjecture.’ In June 1821, Seward’s Exhibition was in Cornwall, at Truro Whitsuntide Fair;⁷⁶ a few years later, in 1827, they could be seen at Coventry fair.⁷⁷

Performances did not always go without a hitch. The *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal* 12 March 1819 notes that ‘Two men ... belonging to Seward’s Exhibition, have been admitted to Lynn Gaol on a charge of robbing their employers of money taken at the door to the amount of £40’. And in 1827, Seward’s Exhibition was entertaining the crowds at Tewkesbury Races,⁷⁸ on which occasion some member of the family (probably Samuel) seems to have got involved in an altercation: on 20 September 1827, one ‘Seward a Showman’, was confined to Tewkesbury Gaol, ‘for assaulting Mr John Moore at the Races’. He was released upon payment of a fine of 7s 6d.⁷⁹

The last time we find Seward’s show advertised is in the spring of 1828, at which date he was already in Somerset, where he appears to have died the following autumn. The *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser* of 26 March 1828 mentioned that ‘Seward's Mechanical Exhibition’ had set up on the Castle Green ahead of the assizes and attracted large crowds.

Although Samuel clearly retained ownership of the theatre building until he died, by 1821 it was being referred to as ‘The Minor Theatre (late Sadler’s Wells), Bottom of St George’s-Place, Cheltenham’,⁸⁰ and this change of name could perhaps indicate that somebody else had already taken over the running of the theatre by this date. Ten years later, in 1831, it was known as the New Clarence Theatre, and was briefly and unsuccessfully managed by one Mr. Belmont.⁸¹ After that time, it was occupied by a variety of businesses before becoming a motor garage in the 1920s.⁸²

The family’s days as touring entertainers came to an end with Samuel’s death but the puppets themselves continued in use for some time afterwards, perhaps sold by Samuel’s executrix Eliza Jones: in 1838, Joseph Rebecqui was in Bristol, advertising his ‘Mechanico-Dramatic Theatre of Variety’, comprising ‘the best series now existing in the British Dominions of FANTOCCINI or MARIONETTES, and AUTOMATA or ANDROIDES; including the entire collection once possessed by the celebrated SEWARD, well known in this city’.⁸³

The Seward’s years of entertaining visitors to Cheltenham, and crowds across the south of England, were clearly over. Although the descendants of Samuel (II) continued to live in the town, they were now earning their living, in the main, not as painters of theatrical scenery and decorators of the mansions of the rich and fashionable, but as mundane house painters, plumbers, glaziers etc., and by 1841 many of them were reduced to living in Elm Street and the other slums off the Tewkesbury Road. By 1892, a Seward was appointed by the Cheltenham Board of Guardians as their preferred ‘plumber and painter’ for repairs to the workhouse.⁸⁴ This was probably one of Abraham (III)’s grandsons: his aspirations to being a serious artist, and the glory days of his father’s puppet show a hundred years earlier, were by then, no doubt, just a distant memory.



Top: The former facade of Seward's theatre in St George's Place, by then an internal wall, shortly before demolition

Bottom: We can get an impression of how 'intimate' performances at Seward's theatre must have been from this photograph of the former auditorium, taken shortly before demolition

Analytical Survey by K.A. Rodwell (November 2001) attached to Cheltenham Borough Council planning application 00/01236/LBC (Courtesy of R Ladenburg, ALP Architects)

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¹ Samuel Seward was the author's 5 x great-grandfather.

² Numeric suffixes denoting the generation have been used to distinguish between individuals of the same name.

³ The Folger Library cannot currently locate this item, but Handfill's summary of it is no doubt accurate.

⁴ Highfill (see bibliography above) seems to imply that the playbill (original not seen) uses the spellings *Seward* and *Seaward* inconsistently.

⁵ Identity unknown. Samuel had a son named John, baptized in Bristol in 1775, and another son James was christened there in 1780. But the character of Pantaloon was that of an elderly man - an unlikely role for a 13-year-old, let alone an 8-year-old.

⁶ Highfill, Burnim, & Langhans, 1991, p.270.

⁷ Hart, 1965, p.138.

⁸ Denning & Ranger, 1993, p.42.

⁹ Hembry, 1990, p.184.

¹⁰ Hodsdon, J., *An Historical Gazetteer of Cheltenham* (Bristol and Gloucester Archaeological Society, 2003) <https://www.bgas.org.uk/publications/cheltgaz.html>

¹¹ Bristol & Avon Family History Society CD-ROM *Index to the Bristol Burgess Books Volumes 1 to 21, 1557-1995*.

¹² Ancestry UK, *Poll Books and Electoral Registers 1538-1893*

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/2410/> Original data: London Metropolitan Archives and Guildhall Library.

¹³ Speaight, 1955, p.70.

¹⁴ Speaight, 1955, p.154.

¹⁵ Kresen Kernow (formerly Cornwall Archives) ref. T/1816; T/1825; T/1834; T/1846.

- ¹⁶ Denning & Ranger, 1993, p.48.
- ¹⁷ Samuel son of Samuel & Sarah Seward, St Botolph's, Bishopsgate, 21 May 1734. *Ancestry London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538-1812*
<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/1624/>; Original data: London Metropolitan Archives ref. P69/GIS/A/002/MS06419/015.
- ¹⁸ Samuel, son of Michael Seward, St John's, Yeovil, 22 February 1735. *Ancestry Somerset, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, 1531-1812*;
<https://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=60856>; Original data: Somerset Heritage Centre ref. D\P\yeo.j/2/1/2.
- ¹⁹ Samuel, son of Samuel & Ann Seward, Mevagissey, 30 January 1742. *FindMyPast Cornwall Baptisms*;
<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-Records/cornwall-baptisms>; Original data: Cornwall Family History Society.
- ²⁰ Evans, 1824, p.319.
- ²¹ Charles Joseph Harford (1764-1830) was at one time was a prominent member of the Society of Merchant Venturers.
- ²² e.g. *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 30 August 1821.
- ²³ *Ancestry Gloucestershire, England, Wills and Inventories, 1541-1858*
<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/4294/> Original data: Gloucestershire Archives ref. ref. 1811/45.
- ²⁴ *Ancestry England & Wales, Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, 1384-1858*; Original data: The National Archives, Kew, ref. PROB 11/1830/363.
- ²⁵ Evans, 1824, p.319.
- ²⁶ Highfill, Burnim, & Langhans, 1991
- ²⁷ Rosenfeld (1960, p.73) suggests the Seward in question was named *James*.
- ²⁸ OED: droll, *n* ... 1. A funny or waggish fellow; a merry-andrew, buffoon, jester, humorist. †2. a. A comic or farcical composition or representation; a farce; an enacted piece of buffoonery; a puppet-show. Obsolete.
- ²⁹ Highfill, Burnim, & Langhans, 1991, p.269.
- ³⁰ *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 29 October-26 November 1789.
- ³¹ No. 13 from his collection 'Watercolour drawings of theatres and other buildings in towns of the south of England: the original drawings for James Winston's *Theatric Tourist*', 1805, 1802. State Library of New South Wales, David Scott Mitchell Collection, ref. PXB 13, IE8603225
https://digital.sl.nsw.gov.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=FL8603309
- ³² <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1381134>
- ³³ Elder, 2019, states that the theatre was founded 11 years after George III's visit of 1788.
- ³⁴ Shenton, 1800.
- ³⁵ Italian plural of *fantoccino*, diminutive of *fantoccio* 'puppet'.
- ³⁶ *World Encyclopaedia of Puppetry Arts* <https://wepa.unima.org/en/fantoccini/>
- ³⁷ Speaight, 1983, p.66.
- ³⁸ Speaight, 1955, p.323.
- ³⁹ Denning & Ranger, 1993, p.42.
- ⁴⁰ Highfill (p.270) mentions a "Seaward" who worked as a scene painter for Astley's Amphitheatre (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astley%27s_Amphitheatre) in 1796, but he seems likely to be have been Abraham (III). The man who played Harlequin was probably Samuel (II), though Abraham (II) may also have acted on stage.
- ⁴¹ Dibdin, 1803, p.54.
- ⁴² Davies, 1843, p.13.
- ⁴³ Dibdin, 1803, pp.54-55.
- ⁴⁴ Ryley, 1817, p.184.
- ⁴⁵ Clearly this is a reference to some member of the Seward family, with the name misheard or spelled phonetically.
- ⁴⁶ Mayhew, 1861, pp.60-63.
- ⁴⁷ *Ancestry Gloucestershire, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538-1813*
<https://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=4732>; Original data: Gloucestershire Archives ref. P78/1 IN 1/55.
- ⁴⁸ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LXXX [108] July 1810.
- ⁴⁹ e.g. *London Pilot*, 27 July 1810.
- ⁵⁰ *Saunders's News-Letter*, Dublin, 7 August 1810.
- ⁵¹ i.e. a manufacturer of Bristol blue glass.
- ⁵² Of whom nothing else is known.
- ⁵³ The author's 4 x great-grandfather.

- ⁵⁴ Ancestry *Somerset, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, 1531-1812*; <https://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=60856>; Original data: Somerset Heritage Centre ref. D\P\ba.ab/2/1/2.
- ⁵⁵ Ancestry *Bristol, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1935* <https://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=61686>; Original data: Bristol Archives ref. P/Tem/R/3/a.
- ⁵⁶ Highfill, Burnim, & Langhans, 1991, p.270.
- ⁵⁷ FindMyPast *Westminster Marriages* <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-Records/westminster-marriages>.
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- ⁵⁹ FindMyPast *Westminster Baptisms* <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-Records/westminster-baptisms>.
- ⁶⁰ FindMyPast: *National Burial Index For England & Wales*; <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-records/national-burial-index-for-england-and-wales>.
- ⁶¹ FindMyPast *Staffordshire Burials* <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-Records/staffordshire-burials>
- ⁶² The author's 3 x great-grandfather.
- ⁶³ FindMyPast *Staffordshire Baptisms* <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-Records/staffordshire-baptisms>.
- ⁶⁴ Denning & Ranger, 1993, p.221.
- ⁶⁵ *Gloucester Journal*, 16 August 1862.
- ⁶⁶ Ancestry *Gloucestershire, England, Prison Records, 1728-1914* <https://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=60895>; Original data Gloucestershire Archives; Gloucester Gaol Calendar ref. Q/SG/2.
- ⁶⁷ Ancestry *Gloucestershire, England, Prison Records, 1728-1914* <https://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=60895>; Original data Gloucestershire Archives: Register of prisoners tried at Quarter Sessions ref. Q/Gc/7/2; Gloucester Gaol Calendar ref. Q/SG/2.
- ⁶⁸ Death notices in the *Cheltenham Journal and Gloucestershire Fashionable Weekly Gazette*, 25 September 1837. See also *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 28 September 1837 and *Bristol Mercury*, 30 September 1837.
- ⁶⁹ Ancestry *England & Wales, Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, 1384-1858* <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/5111/>; Original data: The National Archives, Kew ref. PROB 11/1830/363.
- ⁷⁰ Probably an error for *Edmund*. George and Edmund, sons of Samuel and Eliza Seward, baptized at St Paul's, Bristol on 25 November 1827 (Bristol & Avon FHS Baptism Indexes).
- ⁷¹ Ancestry *Somerset, England, Church of England Burials, 1813-1914* <https://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=60859>; Original Data: Somerset Heritage Centre ref. D\P\crew/2/1/14
- ⁷² Perhaps the William Phillips who married Mary Ann Seward (daughter of Samuel (II)) at St Mary's, Cheltenham on 15 April 1811. The entries for their children in the baptisms register of St Mary's describe William as a "Player".
- ⁷³ OED: *spontoon*, n. ... *A species of half-pike or halberd carried by infantry officers in the 18th century.*
- ⁷⁴ *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 18 November 1819.
- ⁷⁵ *Oxford Journal*, 22 April 1820.
- ⁷⁶ *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 16 June 1821.
- ⁷⁷ *Coventry Herald*, 15 June 1827.
- ⁷⁸ *Cheltenham Journal and Gloucestershire Fashionable Weekly Gazette*, 24 September 1827.
- ⁷⁹ Ancestry *Gloucestershire, England, Prison Records, 1728-1914* <https://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=60895>; Original data: Gloucestershire Archives; Tewkesbury Gaol register ref. TBR/A13/1.
- ⁸⁰ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 11 January 1821.
- ⁸¹ Playbill now held by The Wilson, Cheltenham, quoted in the *Cheltenham Examiner*, 17 April 1913.
- ⁸² Rodwell, 2001, p.2.
- ⁸³ *Bristol Mercury & Daily Post*, 7 April 1838
- ⁸⁴ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 6 October 1892.

