

## Joseph Peacock and The Eight Lancashire Lads

### Joseph Peacock, clog dancer (1884 – 1916)

Joseph Peacock was born in 1884 in Middlesbrough - the oldest son of William and Mary Peacock. As a young boy he was a successful clog dancer and was clearly involved in several competitions, as figure 1 indicates. He is seen here, aged about 10, posing in his dancing clogs and costume with his medals and latest trophy. He is accompanied by his uncle, Reuben Peacock, who was his coach and who lived next door. Members of Peacock's family still have access to the costume (see figure 2) and it is hoped that the details on the trophy will reveal more information on his early dancing activities.

By November 1899, Joseph Peacock, aged 16 was performing in London as a clog dancer with *The Eight Lancashire Lads* and the contract in Figure 3 confirms this. *The Eight Lancashire Lads* was a successful juvenile stage act which originated in Golborne, near Wigan in about 1896 and was managed by William Jackson and his wife. By all accounts the original troupe consisted of the couples' five children plus three from the Cawley family who were also from Golborne. As a music hall act it achieved international fame, lasted for nearly 30 years, and nurtured many famous names.

It is not known whether this was Peacock's first booking with *The Eight Lancashire Lads* or how the contact came about but it may have been when the troupe was performing in Middlesbrough. A second contract (figure 4) dated October 1900 indicates that he was again employed with the troupe in London. His name appears in a 1901 census return for a London address along with the names of eight other 'Music Hall Artistes' and these are probably all members of *The Eight Lancashire Lads*. Details are as follows:

John W Jackson (17) born Golborne Lancashire

Rose Jackson (12) born Golborne Lancashire

Stephen Jackson (8) born Golborne Lancashire

Joseph Peacock (17) born Middlesbrough

Arther Williams (14) born Manchester

Maurice Williams (12) born Manchester

Daniel Murphy (16) born Glasgow

James Cawley (13) born Golborne

Charles Chaplin (12) born London

It is an acknowledged fact that in March 1899, Charlie Chaplin's first professional booking was with *The Eight Lancashire Lads*. Since 1897 the troupe had toured extensively throughout Britain and this punishing schedule would obviously take its toll on these young dancers. As a consequence of this it is likely that the troupe's manager, William Jackson needed to be on the look-out for future members and the census return certainly indicates that by 1901 there were already several new

names in the act. Chaplin's future celebrity status has resulted in much research into his involvement with *The Eight Lancashire Lads* and the following account describes how he was recruited.

In January 1899, Chaplin's father, a music-hall artiste, was performing at the Tivoli in Manchester at the same time as *The Eight Lancashire Lads* who were at the Theatre Royal. Chaplin Snr. made it his business to watch their act and then sought out their manager, William Jackson. In learning that one of the troupe was leaving, Chaplin immediately volunteered his 9-year-old son Charlie, who was living in London. Accompanied by his mother, Charlie was transported to Manchester to learn how to clog dance and be part of the act. His first performance was a week at the Portsmouth Empire in March and this was followed by seven weeks at the prestigious Oxford Music-Hall in London<sup>1</sup>. Figure 5 is a photo of *The Eight Lancashire Lads* from 1899 with Charlie Chaplin probably 4<sup>th</sup> from left<sup>2</sup>.

By May of 1899 the troupe was touring the provinces; the first stop being the Oxford Palace in Middlesbrough<sup>3</sup>. This could have been when the contact with Joseph Peacock was made, for at this time the clog dance world would have been closely connected with the music-hall circuits and the success of *The Eight Lancashire Lads* would have attracted much attention. The contract shows that Peacock was performing with the troupe in December 1900, as was Chaplin. The pair were also listed as music-hall artistes in the census of March 1901. Peacock's family have passed down an intriguing story concerning both Peacock and Chaplin. In February 1900 they were both performing with the troupe in Middlesbrough, Newcastle and South Shields<sup>4</sup>. Peacock's mother had lent Chaplin the train fare to get home to London but not surprisingly he never managed to pay her back. Apparently, she always held this against him and once Chaplin was famous, she refused to watch any of his films!

It is not known at this stage how long Peacock stayed with *The Eight Lancashire Lads*, but his family have confirmed that by 1911 he was back in Middlesbrough working as an engineer's labourer. Sadly, he was killed in action during WW1 in 1916 leaving no dependants. Chaplin left the act sometime in 1901 and went on to become a household name on stage and screen<sup>5</sup>.

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1 "A.J." Marriot, CHAPLIN – *Stage by Stage* (Marriot Publishing, Hitchin Herts, 2005) pp 4-5

2 Marriot (2005) p12

3 Marriot (2005) p 7

4 Marriot (2005) p 19

5 Marriot (2005) pp 38-40