



Issue 1: The life and times of Pablo Fanque

Welcome to the first episode of the Powerful Histories newsletter! As you will see, this is a newsletter like no other. In the first instance, everything that you will read here will be useful. This is not a blog, musing, or trail of thought. This is real, academic, history. It's history that you can share – in classrooms, assemblies, in conversation or simply at home with your family and friends. Each month, I will share with you an interesting case study. Each case study will also be accompanied with **free** resources, taken from my own primary research.

This episode is about the great Pablo Fanque, skilled equestrian, showman, and Britain's first black circus owner. His story is an interesting one; not because his talent, philanthropic endeavours and entrepreneurial talents emerged into public knowledge by chance, but because his presence serves as a poignant case study for black agency in mid-Victorian Britain. Pablo brought entertainment and excitement to an audience seeking escapism from the harsh realities of urban life. His place at the head of his own circus troupe, Fanque cultivated a nostalgia for the simplicities of a pre-industrial past. He must be seen, then, not simply as the first black circus proprietor, but an architect of dreams; a product of Victorian social and economic change whose own fate and (lost) fortune revealed the precarious nature of life for self-made men from working class backgrounds.



*“For the benefit of Mr. Kite
There will be a show tonight on trampoline
The Hendersons will all be there
Late of Pablo Fanques Fair-what a scene”*

These famous lyrics are from a song written by John Lennon in 1974 called ‘For the Benefit of Mr Kite’. They were inspired by an old circus poster found by John Lennon and Paul McCartney in an antique shop in Kent. Until then, little had been known about Britain’s first black circus performer and owner, Pablo Fanque.



Pablo Fanque was born William Darby to John Darby and Mary Stamp in 1810 (some sources say that he was born in 1796) in Norwich. John was second-generation African British. William’s family suffered financial hardship throughout his life, and it was probably for this reason that at some time between 1810 and 1831 William was apprenticed by arrangement to William Batty, the equestrian, circus performer and operator of Astley’s Amphitheatre, London.

To be a circus performer was a risky profession, and so it was either through the need for the Darby family to provide a source of income or through desperation that William found himself learning a trade for which he would later become known throughout the country.

His First Performances

Having been trained in a ‘good through severe school’ in London, William Darby, who took the stage name Pablo Fanque, soon built a reputation as an impressive acrobatic performer, even performing for the Royal family with his circus troupe



on 3 January 1834. Before a performance in Southampton one month later, *The Hampshire Advertiser* billed him as:

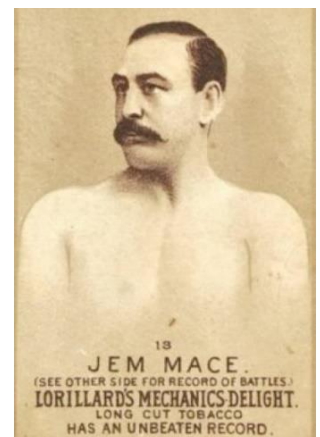
PABLO FANQUE, *The American Voltigeur and Flying Mercury*, will make his first appearance here,
And exhibit his Performances on the
CORDE VOLANTE,

Throughout the 1830s, and already a talented acrobat, Pablo Fanque trained under the tutelage of William Batty to become a skilled equestrian – a draw for crowds in the Victorian circus. Inspired by Andrew Ducrow, a renowned horse trainer, Pablo soon became known as ‘the loftiest jumper in England’. During the 1840s, he was known nationwide as a ‘man that could make horses dance’, and even purchased and trained a horse from Queen Victoria’s stables!

Going His Own Way

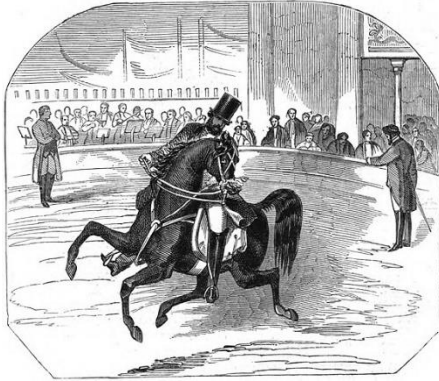
In 1841, Pablo Fanque set up his own circus. His first recorded performance as an independent circus owner took place in Newton Street, Warrington in January 1842. Fanque excited his audiences, performing as part of a programme which included acrobats, clowns and tightrope walkers. *The Manchester Courier* reported that Pablo’s circus ‘left no room’ for visitors to regret their visit to Warrington.

The line-up of performers in Fanque’s circus varied endlessly. In 1843, he was joined by acrobat William Kite, subject of the poster which inspired The Beatles, and John Henderson, well-known as a rider, wire-walker and tumbler. At one point, Pablo also travelled with Jem Mace, a bare-knuckle boxing champion, who put on an exhibition of fisticuffs. He later employed a “Master General Tom Thumb” and Elizabeth Sylvester, Britain’s first female clown. Toward the end of his career, Fanque





switched to an entirely family-oriented show, enabling him to attract a more middle-class audience and charge a higher price for a ticket.



In 1847 Fanque made his London debut, which was a highly successful engagement. The *London Illustrated News* reported that "Mr. Pablo Fanque is an artiste of colour, and his steed...we have not only never seen surpassed, but never equalled...Mr. Pablo Fanque was the hit of the evening".

The steed in question was Beda, the black mare that Fanque had bought from Batty. That the horse attracted so much attention was testament to Fanque's extraordinary horse training skills. By the middle of the century, Pablo's circus had become a fixture many locations throughout the country.

One reason for Fanque's success was his use of advertising. He hired Edward Sheldon at the age of just 17 to advertise the arrival of the circus as it moved from town to town. The grandest entrance had been planned of Pablo's homecoming performance. The *Norfolk News* reported that on 23rd December 1848 Pablo entered the city of Norwich with a procession of 'fine stud of horses, preceded by an excellent brass band'. Pablo's talent for self-promotion set him apart from his rivals. He even organised a competition prior to the arrival of his troupe in Dublin in 1851, offering a 'pony and car' as reward for the best riddle!



Pablo's Hardships

The circus was a harsh mistress and members of the profession lived on the cusp of financial disaster. Fanque was forced on at least one occasion to close down his circus and sell most of his horses. Short of resources, Pablo was also reported to have returned to performing as an acrobat. On another occasion, Pablo found



his troupe sold from under him when a creditor transferred Fanque's debts to his old master, William Batty, who in turn sold Pablo's assets to cover the debt.

Personal tragedy struck Pablo in March 1848 when wooden amphitheatre in which his troupe was performing in Leeds collapsed. Many spectators were injured, including his wife, Susannah, who later died from her injuries. To make matters worse, week before the accident, Pablo's son, William Darby Banham, a child he shared with Maria Banham of Norwich, had run-away from his position as his father's apprentice.

The success experienced by Fanque was not to last beyond the 1860's. Pablo was reported to have died '*insolvent*', living in a room at the Britannia Inn, Stockport, with his second wife and two sons – George and Ted Pablo. He succumbed to bronchitis on 4 May 1871.

There is little evidence that Fanque suffered racial discrimination during his long career. The colour of his skin was mentioned infrequently in newspapers and Pablo became well known for his talent and his charity work.

