

= Tom Norman =

Tom Norman , born Thomas Noakes , ( 7 May 1860 ? 24 August 1930 ) , was an English businessman , showman and the last exhibitor of Joseph Merrick who was otherwise known as the " Elephant Man " . Among his later exhibits were a troupe of midgets , a " Man in a Trance " , " John Chambers the armless Carpenter " , and the " World 's Ugliest Woman " .

Norman started his working life as a butcher in Sussex before moving to London at the age of 14 where he sought a career on the music hall stage . There , he became interested in freak shows which he attended in his spare time . After viewing an exhibition called " Electric Lady " next door to his place of work , he went into business with the exhibition 's manager and began his career as a showman of human oddities . He quickly became successful , for his patter as much as his exhibits , and was called the ' Silver King ' by the American showman P. T. Barnum .

In 1884 , Norman took over the management of Joseph Merrick , otherwise known as the " Elephant Man " , and exhibited him for a few weeks until police closed down the show . Merrick later went to live at the London Hospital under the care of Sir Frederick Treves . In his 1923 memoirs , Treves portrayed Norman as a cruel drunk who ruthlessly exploited his acts . Norman refuted this characterisation and said that he provided Merrick ( and his other " freaks " ) with a means of making money independently . Norman continued a successful career as a showman and later became an auctioneer of novelty shows and circuses .

Norman died in 1930 and was survived by his wife and 10 children , five of whom followed him into the entertainment business .

= = Biography = =

= = = Early life = = =

Norman was born Thomas Noakes on 7 May 1860 in Dallington , Sussex . He was the eldest of 17 children to Thomas Noakes , a butcher and a farmer , and his wife Eliza ( née Haiselden ) .

Norman was introduced to his father 's trade at an early age and left school to work with him when he was 12 . He decided to go travelling two years later to seek a career as a performer . He was unsuccessful and after a short while , he moved to London where he worked as a butcher 's assistant . A keen gambler , Norman moved to Berkshire where he took up professional gambling at Ascot Racecourse . He wound up penniless and resumed his butchery trade in London where he gained a new interest in freak show entertainment .

= = = Novelties = = =

After his unsuccessful venture in Berkshire , Norman returned to being a butcher , and , one day , viewed the " novelties " at a penny gaff next to his place of employment in Islington . There , Mlle Electra , " The Only Electric Lady ? A Lady Born Full of Electricity " gave audience members an electrical shock via her handshake . Norman was impressed with the exhibition , realised its lucrative potential , and left his job to enter into business with Mlle Electra 's manager . He quickly discovered Electra was a fake connected to a supply of electricity .

When Mlle Electra was exhibited at Kingston Fair , Norman realised he would be better off working alone , and successfully staged his own " Electric Lady " in Hammersmith . He learned that his skills as an entertainer were as important to his success as the novelties he exhibited . At some point , he changed his birth name to Tom Norman , and renounced his inheritance . According to Joseph Merrick 's biographers Michael Howell and Peter Ford , Norman may have changed his name to avoid shaming his family by his " distasteful " connections to circuses and fairgrounds .

Over the next few years , Norman 's travelling exhibitions featured Eliza Jenkins , the " Skeleton Woman " , a " Balloon Headed Baby " and a woman who bit off the heads of live rats ? the " most gruesome " act Norman claimed to have seen . Other acts included fleas , fat ladies , giants ,

dwarves and retired white seamen , painted black and speaking in an invented language , billed " savage Zulus " . He displayed a " family of midgets " which in reality was composed of two men and a borrowed baby . He operated a number of shops in London and Nottingham , and exhibited travelling shows throughout the country . In 1882 , Norman gave a show at Islington 's Royal Agricultural Hall . Unknown to Norman , the show was attended by American showman P. T. Barnum . Norman falsely claimed to his audience , as he had often done in the past , that his show had been booked to appear at Barnum 's ' Greatest Show on Earth ' . Barnum was much amused and afterwards , seeing Norman 's silver necklace and noting his gift for oratory , dubbed him the ' Silver King ' . With 13 shops in London alone , Norman ran into a shortage of curiosities and travelled the country looking for new acts . He enticed human novelties into his employ with promises of generous salaries .

= = = Elephant Man = = =

In 1884 , Norman came into contact with Joseph Merrick , a young man from Leicester who had extreme deformities . Unable to find work due to his physical appearance , Merrick ended up in the Leicester workhouse for four years . In 1884 he left the workhouse and put himself in the charge of the music hall proprietors Sam Torr and J. Ellis , and the travelling showman ' Little George ' Hitchcock . Collectively , they presented Merrick as " The Elephant Man , Half @-@ a @-@ Man and Half @-@ an @-@ Elephant " . They quickly realised that they would not be able to show Merrick for too long in one place , for fear of the novelty wearing off , and towards the end of 1884 , Hitchcock contacted Norman , an acquaintance of his , and transferred management of the Elephant Man to him .

Merrick arrived in London and into Norman 's care . Norman , initially shocked by Merrick 's appearance and reluctant to display him , nonetheless exhibited him at his penny gaff shop at 123 Whitechapel Road , directly across the road from the London Hospital . Because of its proximity to the hospital , the shop received medical students and doctors as visitors . One of these was the surgeon Frederick Treves who arranged to have Merrick brought into the hospital to be examined . According to Norman 's autobiography , Merrick went to the hospital " two or three " times , but then refused to go any more , as the examinations made him feel " like an animal in a cattle market " .

The exhibition of the Elephant Man was reasonably successful , particularly with the added income from a printed pamphlet about Merrick 's life and condition . At this time , however , public opinion about freak shows was starting to change and the display of human novelties was beginning to be viewed as distasteful . After only a few weeks with Norman , the Elephant Man exhibition was shut down by the police , and Norman and Merrick parted ways . Treves later arranged for Merrick to live at the London Hospital until Merrick 's death in 1890 . In Treves 's 1923 memoir , *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences* Norman was portrayed as a drunk who cruelly exploited Merrick . Norman counteracted these claims in a letter in the *World 's Fair* newspaper that year , as well as his own autobiography . Norman 's opinion was that he provided Merrick ( and his other exhibits ) a way of making a living and remaining independent , but that on entering the London Hospital , Merrick remained a freak on display , only with no control over how or when he was viewed . The character Bytes , respectively portrayed by Freddie Jones in the 1980 film *The Elephant Man* , is based on Norman .

= = = Later life = = =

Norman remained a travelling showman for another 10 years following his encounter with Joseph Merrick , and exhibited , among others , a troupe of midgets , a ' Man in a Trance ' , John Chambers the armless Carpenter and the ' World 's Ugliest Woman ' . In 1893 , he announced that he was leaving for Chicago and advertised his goods for sale , but in the end , he never went . He became involved with the temperance movement and was the vice @-@ president of the Van Dwellers Protection Association ( which later became the Showmen 's Guild of Great Britain ) . He became a showman 's auctioneer , auctioning novelty shows and circuses and according to the *World 's Fair* ,

presided over more such sales than any other auctioneer in the country at that time . Norman married the theatre performer Amy Rayner in 1896 , and they had six sons and four daughters . The family moved to Croydon , and Norman went into semi @-@ retirement , selling off some of his shops . In 1905 he sold showman " Lord " George Sanger 's zoo , and then all of Sanger 's circus effects , an achievement Norman called " the crowning point in my life as regards the auctioneering business " . He made his comeback in 1919 with the exhibition of ' Phoebe the Strange Girl ' in Birmingham and Margate .

= = = Final years and death = = =

Norman died of throat cancer on 24 August 1930 at Croydon Hospital , aged 70 . Five of his children followed him into circus careers : George and Arthur Norman became circus clowns while Tom and Jim Norman worked in fairgrounds . Ralph Van Norman ( known professionally as Hal Denver ) became a travelling Wild West performer , appearing throughout Europe and the United States .