

# **The British *Lion Queens***

## **A History**

**by**

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*The tenant of this little grave,  
our hope and joy and pride,  
was snatched away from our embrace  
in early youth she died.*

***Memorial to Ellen Blight***

Thomas Frost, in one of his texts *The Old Showmen and the Old London Fairs*, remarks that in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, although the metropolis was bringing in increasing numbers to travelling menageries, there was now a distinct absence of middle class interest. Such decline led to some showmen, even the entrepreneurs, lowering their entrance fees to counter this move towards a less discerning audience. However, as in all economies, rising costs were still putting pressure on the incomes of showmen and their attractions. New ideas and innovations had to be found to bring back the wealthier client to avoid ruin.

Frost also suggests that around 1839 men performing with lions and tigers had been beneficial to the treasuries of Sanger's, Batty and Howes and Cushing<sup>1</sup>. Howes and Cushing arrived from America in 1857 so Frost's time scale is suspicious as far as Howes and Cushing is concerned<sup>2</sup>. The early history of Sanger's and Batty is not so easy to establish, but as far as Sanger is concerned, Frost is most likely referring to a lion trainer, possibly *a musician in the band named Crockett, chiefly on account of his imposing appearance, he being a tall, handsome man, with a full beard...* as Frost describes him in his second volume: *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities*<sup>3</sup>.

A report suggesting the first accolade of female wild beast performer, appeared in a newspaper during 1872 in the *Daily News* (London), had gone to Kitty, daughter of Joe Hilton[Hylton] the circus owner, who had appeared under the title *Madame Pauline de Vere, The Lady of Lions*<sup>4</sup>. The article appeared within a biographical account of lion trainers in Britain dictated by an ex-*Lion King*, so the article suggests. Whoever the author, they must have had extensive inside knowledge of travelling shows and the training of wild beasts. There is little else to substantiate the claim of the first *Lion Queen* other than the fact that Hylton advertised a *Lion Queen* during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century(see below).

The first time the actual term *Lion Queen* appeared in the newspapers, was a very short report (Column sub-headed *Multum in Parvo*) placed in the *The Newcastle Courant* in August 1845:

*A Mrs King, who takes the title of the Lion Queen,  
has been exhibiting her daring at Glasgow,  
by going into the dens of the lions and tigers at Wombwell's Menagerie,  
and compelling them to obey her like so many tame animals.*<sup>5</sup>

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1 Thomas Frost, *The Old Showmen and the Old London Fairs*(Tinsley Brothers, London 1874) p336

2 Maria Ward Brown, *The Life of Dan Rice* (Brown 1901) p184. Frost had suggested the date was around 1839 but Howes and Cushing, an American Circus, did not arrive in England till 1857 and stayed through 1858.

3 Thomas Frost, *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881) Chapter VII. Online version available via <http://www.circushistory.org/Frost/Frost7.htm#Top>

4 *Daily News* (London, England) Saturday, January 6, 1872; Issue 8016

5 *The Newcastle Courant etc* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England) Friday, August 1, 1845; Issue 8904

It is not clear just who *Mrs King* was, but it is a closer fit to Frost's claim of women being lion trainers from around 1839 and she may indeed be the original *British Lion Queen*<sup>6</sup>. This reference to Mrs King does not appear again for more than a year when in September 1846 the following newspaper report appears:

*the wonderful feats displayed by that extraordinary and dauntless female, Mrs KING, the Lion Queen, with her groups of performing Lions, Hyenas &c., have excited the wonder of Great Britain, surpassing the efforts of all others in the practice of Animal intuition and affording a proof of the power of women*<sup>7</sup>.

...under the title of the *Royal National Menagerie*, George Wombwell which was then exhibiting in Mr. Classon's Yard, Lower Abbey Street, Dublin, Ireland, this apparently *after a lapse of 11 years since Wombwell's Menagerie had visited Dublin*, the report claims.<sup>8</sup>

Although the *Lion Queen* is further reported appearing during 1846, no mention of a Mrs King is forthcoming in the newspapers.<sup>91011</sup>

During 1847, the *Lion Queen* was reported twice to have been bitten by lions. The first event recorded appeared in *The Liverpool Mercury*:

*On Friday afternoon, the woman who plays "Lion Queen" at Wombwell's menagerie, was attacked by the lion whilst exhibiting at Lynn, bitten twice and, with a keeper who rushed to her assistance, had a very narrow escape. The foolish women entered the den again in the evening.*<sup>12</sup>

This was further reported in *The Era* on the 4<sup>th</sup> April with more details than the previous report:

#### *ACCIDENT AT WOMBWELL'S MENAGERIE, STAMFORD*

*On Friday afternoon, directly the "intrepid female" or "Lion Queen" made her appearance in the den, the lion sprang at her and bit her face, but not severely. She screamed loudly and the scene which ensued is difficult to describe. The arena was nearly full of respectable persons of both sexes. The keepers did all they possibly could to beat off the infuriating beast, but were some time in accomplishing their object: the lion, the keeper and the lady were all down and struggling together on the bottom of the den and again the animal seized the female and bit her at the lower part of the back. To make the occurrence appear more dreadful, the whole of the beasts and birds assisted in the uproar. Ultimately, the keeper rescued the daring woman and the assistance of a surgeon was immediately called in. She was induced in the evening again to enter the den. Nothing however, occurred this time to injure her. - Lynn Advertiser*<sup>13</sup>

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6 Thomas Frost p336

7 There is no found evidence that Mrs King was Kitty Hylton the first female wild beast performer.

8 *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin, Ireland) Thursday, September 3, 1846; Issue NA

9 *Liverpool Mercury etc* (Liverpool, England) Friday, April 2, 1847

10 *Liverpool Mercury etc* (Liverpool, England) Friday, January 15, 1847; Issue 1863

11 *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin, Ireland) Friday, October 8, 1847

12 *Liverpool Mercury etc* (Liverpool, England) Friday, April 2, 1847

13 *The Era* (London, England) Sunday, April 4, 1847; Issue 445

Both reports should be taken with some reservation given that showmen were often inventing accidents and producing reports on broadsheets, especially as the former report claims it to have happened in Lynn (King's Lynn?) and the second report claims it occurred in Stamford.

By November 1847, reports were appearing giving the title of Wombwell's *Lion Queen* to a Miss Chapman appearing in Oxford on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> November.

*The most striking feature in the exhibition has been the appearance in the lions den of Miss Chapman, who is called " the Lion Queen," a title which she well deserves, for we certainly never saw one of the softer sex display such absolute power over animals as she does. The majestic lion, the fierce tiger and the leopard, are all as obedient to her look or command as a dog would be and she may fairly be said to rival Van Amburgh or Carter.<sup>14</sup>*

Some time during the earlier part of 1847 Ellen Chapman (known to her fellow performers as Nellie) had become the Wombwell's *Lion Queen*. She became an almost overnight celebrity after the Menagerie appeared by command for Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle, thought to have been on Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> October 1847. This timescale certainly fits with Wombwell being in Oxford on the 19<sup>th</sup> October that year as already described above. Several provincial newspapers gave extensive coverage to the event together with the highly regarded article in *The Era* newspaper, dedicated to all things performing arts.<sup>151617</sup>

The *Era* coverage is reproduced two consecutive reports (authors unknown) below:

#### *WOMBWELL'S MENAGEIRE AT WINDSOR CASTLE -*

*On Thursday afternoon the collection of wild animals which forms the well-known exhibition at country fairs was, by command, arranged in the quadrangle of Windsor Castle, that the Queen and the Royal children might see the lions, tigers, elephants and other strange creatures which have so long been popular with her Majesty's subjects. The Queen walked twice around the exhibition, entering into familiar conversation, with reference to the animals and birds, with the proprietor, Mr. Wombwell and Mr Edmonds<sup>18</sup>. The attention of her Majesty and especially that of the junior branches of the Royal family, was peculiarly attracted by a couple of lion-tiger cubs, a cross-breed between the Bengal tiger and a Caffrarian lioness, which were whelped about two months since at Appledore in Kent. Miss Chapman, known as the "British Lion Queen", was anxious to enter the den with the lions, tigers and panthers and go through her usual perilous performances. This display, however, by her Majesty's express command, was not permitted to take place while the Queen was present. The Queen wishing to see the large elephant, Jemoonah, fully caparisoned, with the "Lion Queen" seated on its back in the howdah, Miss Chapman rode round the quadrangle, the elephant exhibiting some curious gambols, highly to the amusement of the Court. After her Majesty had retired, not only the domestics of the establishment, but the whole of the gardeners, labourers and others engaged about the grounds, were permitted by command of the Queen, to view the exhibition. One of the equerries in waiting was also despatched by*

14 *Jackson's Oxford Journal* (Oxford, England) Saturday, November 27, 1847; Issue 4935

15 *Glasgow Herald* (Glasgow, Scotland) Monday, November 1, 1847; Issue 4670

16 *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle etc* (Portsmouth, England) Saturday, October 30, 1847; Issue 2508

17 *The Era* (London, England) Sunday, October 31, 1847; Issue 475

18 Edmonds was manager of one of the Menageries and was married to the daughter of Anne Wombwell.

*her Majesty to Dr Hawtrey at Eton, inviting the whole of the masters and the boys at college, to the number of between six and seven hundred, to view the collection.<sup>19</sup> Shortly afterwards the head-master, accompanied by several other of the masters and followed by the boys, arrived in the quadrangle. Her Majesty, who was at this moment seen, with Prince Consort and the Royal family, standing at the centre window of the corridor, was greeted by the Etonians with three times three hearty cheers. The "Lion Queen" went through her performances in the dens, with the nine lions, tigers, panthers and leopards several times, immediately after her Majesty had retired. At six o'clock in the evening, just as preparations were made for the caravans to leave the Castle, Mr. Wombwell received commands to light up the whole of the interior, the Queen being desirous to view the animals at night.*

#### EXHIBITION OF THE "LION QUEEN" BEFORE HER MAJESTY

*At Windsor, on Thursday evening, at the conclusion of the exhibition of Mr. Wombwell's menagerie in the Quadrangle of the Castle, her Majesty commanded that the animals should remain during the evening, in order that the Queen might witness by lamplight the extraordinary performances of Miss Chapman, the "Lion Queen", in the dens with the lions, tigers and leopards. The two caravans containing the performing wild animals having been detached from the rest and drawn up to the eastern side of the Quadrangle, just beneath the windows of the Corridor, a platform was erected in front, on which were placed twenty-four brilliantly lighted oil lamps, supplied from the Castle. Shortly after seven o'clock, Her Majesty, the Prince Consort with the Prince of Wales and the Royal Family, the Duchess of Kent, the visitors at the Castle and the gentlemen and ladies of the Court, appeared at the windows, which were thrown open, of the Corridor; Mr. Wombwell's band performing the National Anthem. Miss Chapman then commenced her performances, showing her astonishing command over the wild animals, highly to the gratification of her illustrious spectators. At the conclusion of this extraordinary exhibition, which lasted for nearly half an hour, her Majesty was graciously pleased to command that a very handsome acknowledgement be conveyed to the "Lion Queen! for the gratification she had afforded to the Sovereign and the Royal Family.*

These published reports can be seen to conflict as to whether Her Majesty had actually witnessed the *Lion Queen* performances.

In a further newspaper report Queen Victoria and Albert were said to have *expressed their approbation of the whole affair* including a performance by the *Lion Queen*<sup>20</sup>.

A further report also suggests that the Queen forbade Chapman's performance during the afternoon in Her Majesty's presence, the performance having been given *after her Majesty retired*<sup>21</sup>. The reason for Victoria's possible sensitivity is not known, but it could have been either the treatment of the animals or the fact that a woman was commanding the whole affair.

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<sup>19</sup> Edward Craven *Hawtrey*, Headmaster at Eton, 1834-53

<sup>20</sup> *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* etc (Portsmouth, England) Saturday, October 30, 1847; Issue 2508

<sup>21</sup> *Glasgow Herald* (Glasgow, Scotland) Monday, November 1, 1847; Issue 4670

Two reports had appeared in April 1847 concerning Wombwell's *Lion Queen* reporting that she had been bitten by a lion during a performance at Lynn.

*bitten twice and, with a keeper who rushed to her assistance, had a very narrow escape. The foolish women entered the den again in the evening.*<sup>2223</sup>

On the 10<sup>th</sup> April 1847 the *Preston Guardian* had published this report:

*RAISING FALSE HOPES - It would seem to be a standing trick with the proprietors of a parcel of wild beasts, dignified with the title "Wombwell's Menagerie" to palm a paragraph upon the provincial newspapers, describing an onslaught made upon Mrs King, the "Lion Queen", by some one or other of the imprisoned brutes. All over the country paragraphs appear to this effect. One of them, published by the Lynn Advertiser, has made its way into the Times. It records an encounter between the lady and a lion at Stamford, in which a keeper interfered as peacemaker: "All three were down and struggling together on the bottom of the den;" and "to make the occurrence appear more dreadful, the whole of the beasts and birds assisted in the uproar". Happily, the "intrepid female" escaped with a scratch on her face and a bite (as the Lynn journalist delicately phrases it) "at the bottom of her back!" Such stories, of course, whet the public appetite. People rush to the menagerie, in the amicable hope of seeing the woman worried. Hitherto, however, they have been cruelly defrauded of the promised enjoyment.*<sup>24</sup>

This somewhat sceptical report (repeated elsewhere in September 1848) suggests Wombwell using the spectacle of danger to enlist new audiences to his shows as they travelled throughout the country. There are broadsheets that support this claim too<sup>2526</sup>. In a report published in May the same year, an Ipswich reporter commented that the performance of the *Lion Queen*, especially the celebrated act of putting her head into the mouth of a lion, was somewhat deprecated after knowing that three week earlier she had been attacked by a lion during a performance in Stamford. The report shows how such performances had now been utilised to boost the audiences given the comment: *The peddling, like the cattle fair, was crowded by holiday folk, to an extent scarcely ever before seen.* It would appear that by the middle of 1848 Wombwell had reversed the decline of audiences with much credit to Nellie Chapman the *British Lion Queen*<sup>27</sup>.

By the time August came around yet another accident had been reported, this time in Folkstone, Kent. *The Morning Chronicle*, (London, England) reproduced a report from the *Dover Chronicle*:

*It appears that (from some cause unexplained) one of the waggons, containing several fine leopards, &c., overturned in passing down the steep declivity leading into the town. The shock occasioned by it was so great in itself, as to displace a considerable portion of the iron work of the dens, leaving a sufficient vacancy (as the carriage was raised) for the ferocious animals to escape from their lair. In this precarious position of affairs, Miss Chapman (the lady who has created so much excitement as the Lion Queen) arrived, and notwithstanding the extremely infuriated state of the animals, occasioned by their rough*

22 *Liverpool Mercury* etc (Liverpool, England) Friday, April 2, 1847

23 *The Newcastle Courant* etc (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England) Friday, April 2, 1847; Issue 8991

24 *The Preston Guardian* etc (Preston, England) Saturday, April 10, 1847; Issue 1806

25 *The Northern Star and National Trades' Journal* (Leeds, England) Saturday, September 30, 1848; Issue 571

26 See elsewhere on the website for instances of broadsheets

27 *The Ipswich Journal* (Ipswich, England) Saturday, May 8, 1847; Issue 5635

*upsetting, she immediately entered the waggon and being provided with proper materials, secured them in such a manner as to effectually baffle any attempt to escape. Two of the leopards are remarkably large and fierce, having but very recently been imported from Africa by Mr. Wombwell and had just commenced a course of training, under the tuition of Miss Chapman, previously to being placed in her extraordinary performing group. - Dover Chronicle<sup>28</sup>*

A further report, this time on the 13<sup>th</sup> August in the *Newcastle Courant*, pointed out that Sanger's circus had visited Folkstone and that

*an unfortunate accident befel Madame Pauline de Vere the "Lady of Lions", who was attacked and bitten on the leg while going through a performance in the lion's cage<sup>29</sup>.*

It appears that Chapman, under the performing name of *Madame Pauline de Vere*, had changed allegiance during this visit to Folkstone arriving with Wombwell's menagerie and then going on to perform with George Sanger.

Because we know that Chapman appeared for George Wombwell later in the year (see below), the arrangement must have been temporary, although we also know that Chapman eventually married George Sanger in 1850 and settled into a life of circus performances. Ellen Sanger (nee Chapman) died in 1899. It is possible that this meeting in Folkstone in May 1847, was a first romantic encounter as well as a commercial one for both Sanger and Chapman.

A further description of Chapman's prowess with beasts was given in a local newspaper report concerning Wombwell's visit to Oxford on the 19<sup>th</sup> November 1847. In it the *Lion Queen* is described thus

*one of the softer sex display such absolute power over animals as she does. The majestic lion, the fierce tiger and the leopard, are all as obedient to her look or command as a dog would be and she may fairly be said to rival Van Amburgh or Carter<sup>30</sup>.*

Ellen Chapman as *Madame Pauline de Vere* was clearly at the height of fame. Even Dickens wrote of her in two letters. Paul Schlicke, in his text *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* writes that Dickens, whilst on holiday in Broadstairs, Kent during 1847, comment that *seriously she beats Van Amburgh. And I think the Duke of Wellington must have her painted by Landseer<sup>31</sup>.*

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28 *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England) Wednesday, August 11, 1847; Issue 24274

29 *The Newcastle Courant etc* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England) Friday, August 13, 1847; Issue 9010

30 *Jackson's Oxford Journal* (Oxford, England) Saturday, November 27, 1847; Issue 4935

31 Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (Unwin Hyman, London 1988) p145



Figure One: George Horner, *Ellen Chapman The Wild Beast Tamer*, Oil on Canvas, 62 cm x 74.5 cm, Wherabouts unknown.

Chapman became the subject of two artistic representations sometime during the nineteenth century. The pair of paintings by George Christopher Horner (1829 – 1891) (Figure One) were last known at auction in 2001. The pendant pair romanticise animal training. Although this was not Landseer, the foremost animal painter in Britain at the time, Horner's representations answer Dicken's plea for her to become immortalised on canvas.

In addition, a Staffordshire ceramic figurine was mass produced to celebrate Chapman's success at Windsor. Now quite a rare piece and in various different figurative arrangements, it can easily fetch around £1500 in mint condition. Many of the figurines have been titled *Death of the Lion Queen*, however that is incorrect. Both Ellen Chapman and Ellen Blight (see below) have been confused and hence the incorrect titles.



Figure Two: Staffordshire Pottery Figurine of Ellen Chapman circa 1848

Meanwhile another *Lion Queen* surfaced during October 1847 by the name of McPherson travelling with Hylton's (sometimes Hilton's) menagerie. A report appeared in the *Freeman's Journal* during October 1847 concerning an attack on a child in the menagerie.

*The aunt of the child, Miss McPherson, the lion queen, was in the act of walking in front of the den of the animal, carrying her niece, when the lion sent forth his paws through an opening at the lower part of the caravan and seizing the child's head tore it most frightfully both behind and on its forehead and face and before it could be liberated, which was done by main force, one of its arms was dreadfully lacerated and its right ear literally torn off, as it only hung by a little skin. A cry was raised that the lion had got at liberty and the women shrieked and ran over each other towards the doer for safety. At length the keepers succeeded in calming all apprehension on this head and the real cause of the alarm became understood. The child was conveyed to its mother, in the caravan and surgical aid was obtained. While in London Mr. Hylton removed the lion from his own caravan and there were no locking bars on the den in which Nero was exhibited, which was in fact the cause of this mischief. The lion queen and a man who assisted her to drag the child from the lion's claws, both had wounds inflicted upon their hands by the animal, as he struck at everything within his reach. The child lies with little hope of recovery<sup>32</sup>.*

32 *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin, Ireland) Friday, October 8, 1847



During 1848 reports are scarce until July when Hylton's arrived in Bangor, North Wales. The *Lion Queen* was noted to have arrived on the back of an elephant<sup>33</sup>. She is unnamed in the report, but it is assumed it is the same McPherson as appeared a year earlier.

The next time a *Lion Queen* is mentioned is quite a strange affair at Cremorne Gardens which was in Chelsea, London alongside the River Thames.

*CREMORNE GARDENS - A novel and daring serial feat was attempted on Monday, at Cremorne Gardens, in the shape of an ascent of Mrs George Batty, the "Lion Queen". with a noble lion, in the Royal Cremorne Balloon, piloted by that daring aeronaut Lieut. Gale, R.N. The announcement attracted a large concourse of spectators, who, during the process of inflation, evinced the most lively impatience. This operation having been completed, a den, constructed expressly for the occasion and formed of oak, braced and barred with iron, was brought on to the ground and which was attached to the balloon in lieu of the car, by strong lashings and cords, the lieutenant standing on the top within the hoop at the neck of the balloon, surrounded with ballast bags, grapnel and other instruments, for a descent, while the lady was to occupy a seat on the back of her compaignant du voyage, attired in all the panoply of a glittering helmet, with flowing ostrich feathers, a shining suit of mail armour and silk fleshings. The lion shortly arrived from the Amphitheatre in the Westminster Road, attended by Mr. William Batty and Mr George Batty, of whose splendid menagerie he is a prominent member. At about a quarter to six o'clock, Lieutenant Gale called for the lion, for the purpose of weighing him with the den and the noble animal having been introduced from the one cage into the other, the lieutenant gave the signal and the balloon made a partial rise, ascending with some difficulty while the lion appeared perfectly indifferent. On descending, the lieutenant threw away the greater proportion of his ballast and Mrs batty entered the den and caressed her favourite and all being in readiness, Lieut. Gale pulled the "liberating iron", but the ascent was slow. The balloon had scarcely cleared the trees when the lieutenant found that he had not sufficient power: he threw out ballast, but it was of no avail; and it was perceptible to everyone, that the machine could not rise with the enormous weight affixed to it, about 900lbs. The lieutenant then addressed the spectators stating these facts, and declared his intention to go up with the lion alone. Mrs Batty then quitted the den and curtsying to the spectators left the ground amidst the plaudits of the company. The lion now saluted the company with a few roars and away sailed the balloon, taking a south-westerly direction, the wind blowing from the north-east. At half past eleven o'clock intelligence was received at the gardens that the lieutenant had descended in perfect safety at Mortlake in Surrey<sup>3435</sup>.*

Mrs Batty must have been with Batty and Howes Circus. No other information is known to date on this particular *Lion Queen*, but the performance was definitely a change from placing heads between lion's jaws!

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33 *North Wales Chronicle* (Bangor, Wales) Tuesday, July 11, 1848; Issue 1113

34 *The Ipswich Journal* (Ipswich, England) Saturday, September 30, 1848; Issue 5708

35 *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England) Monday, September 25, 1848; Issue 24626

During 1849 newspaper reports of the *Lion Queen* were quite sparse, just a few instances of advertisements rather than reports. Even so, the *Lion Queen* now Miss Ellen Blight (sometimes Bright) was not mentioned by name. Given that Chapman had now migrated to Sanger's, Wombwell was left with no option than to find a replacement performer choosing a teenage niece. This lull in news however, was to prove brief given the tragedy that was shortly to unfold in late 1949.

Whilst Wombwell was exhibiting at Chatham in Kent in November 1849, there occurred a tragic accident to the then current *Lion Queen*, Ellen Blight. The newspaper reports did not cover the story till early in 1850. The most prestigious coverage appearing in the *Daily New(London)* on January 14<sup>th</sup>. Just the headline alone spoke for itself:

***Frightful Scene at Wombwell's menagerie  
at Chatham - death of the "Lion Queen"***

*On Saturday evening an inquest was held at the Golden Lion Inn, Chatham, before J Hinde Esq., coroner for West Kent, touching the death of Ellen Bright[actually Blight], a young girl of 17 years, who was killed on the previous evening by a tiger in the establishment of Mr George Wombwell, which had arrived in that town for exhibition on the previous day.*

*Stephen King, the first witness examined, said he had been in the employ of Mr Wombwell as keeper for the last six years. The deceased was a niece of Mr Wombwell's and daughter of John Bright[Blight], a bugle player in the band. It was the business of the deceased to go into the dens and perform with the beasts, which she had been in the habit of doing several times daily for the last twelve months<sup>36</sup>. On Friday evening, shortly after nine o'clock, she went into the den in which a lion and tiger were kept, for the purpose of performing, as usual; the tricks played by her being principally with the former animal. She had only been in two or three minutes, but had gone through the main part of the performance, excepting that of making the lion sit down in a particular part of the cage, when the tiger being in her way, the deceased struck it slightly with a small whip which she carried in her hand. The beast growled as if in anger and crouching close to the bottom of the den stretched out its paw, as if at her leg or dress causing the deceased to fall sideways against the cage, the animal at the same moment springing at her and seizing her furiously by the neck, inserting the teeth of the upper jaw in her chin and in closing his mouth, inflicting frightful injury in the throat by his fangs. He then appeared to change his position, making a second grip across the throat of his victim. A keeper who was standing on the step of the den armed with a whip, immediately rushed to her assistance, but the animal did not loose its hold until struck over the nose violently with an iron bar and whilst King held the animal, the unfortunate female was removed from the cage bleeding profusely and life all but extinct. She was taken into one of the caravans where she was immediately attended by two medical gentlemen who happened to be present at the time of the occurrence.*

*By the Jury - The animal had never exhibited symptoms of animosity before. All the animals appeared very fond of deceased and she of them. Witness had frequently heard Mr Wombwell say he wished there was no lion queen<sup>37</sup>. Witness thought if she had kept the whip*

<sup>36</sup> Wombwell had lost little time in replacing Ellen Chapman when she left to join Sanger's circus.

<sup>37</sup> George Wombwell must have been very concerned about his niece's safety, given his long understanding of wild beasts. He would have known about previous accidents to male *Lion Kings*, etc. Blight may have been a headstrong girl attempting to emanate her predecessor's success with wild beasts. This comment re:wishing there were no *Lion*

*from the animal it would not have attacked her. Deceased had never exhibited any symptoms of fear and had frequently gone into the den to the animals when there had been no company present, for practice and pastime. It had not been fed and it was a few minutes past their time. In answer to that, witness could only say he frequently seen her go amongst the animals on Mondays and they had not been fed on their previous day.*

*Richard Cooper Todd, surgeon, attached to the Royal Artillery, stationed in Brompton Barracks, said he was witnessing the exhibition at the time of the occurrence and was standing quite close to the rope in front of the den. He saw the deceased enter and going in the tiger did not appear to be very friendly with her; she struck him on going in and he laid down. She then proceeded to her performance with the lion and afterwards turned round and again struck the tiger. It appeared angry and immediately seemed to turn upon the deceased; rearing upon his hind legs and seizing her by the neck, she fell on her back and the tiger crouching over her, he[the surgeon] saw no more of her until removed from the den, when he hastened to her assistance. She was perfectly insensible and had lost a great deal of blood and her face and lips were very pale. She was still alive, the heart was beating, but she was perfectly unconscious. Witness placed his hand on the wound in the neck to stop the bleeding and administered some brandy to deceased, but she was unable to swallow it and in a very few minutes her heart ceased to beat. There were four wounds on the left side of the neck, a slight wound on the right leg and another on the chin, caused by the teeth of the tiger; the under jaw of the animal having caused a very large wound under the chin, which aided by the shock her system had sustained, produced death.*

*The jury returned a verdict to the effect that deceased was killed by a male tiger whilst exhibiting in its den and expressed a strong opinion against the practice of allowing persons to perform in a den with animals.*

*It will be remembered that, when, about two years since, Mr Wombwell exhibited his menagerie to the royal family at Windsor, the "Lion Queen" was especially anxious to exhibit the extraordinary command which she had acquired over the fierce animals, but her Majesty expressly forbade the performance. Since then the unfortunate deceased had been the great attraction of the exhibition in all the principal towns of the United Kingdom. It is to be hoped that this horrible termination to her career may have the effect of preventing such performances for the future<sup>38</sup>.*

The same report was repeated almost word for word, in the *Derby Mercury* and the *Bristol Mercury* of the same week.

*Lion Queen* references did not appear again in the British press during the rest of 1850. The death must have been quite devastating for the Wombwell family and to all show people. Here was a young and probably frail, but enthusiastic girl of 17, who had grown up in the showman's world of beasts and was eager to get established as a *Lion Queen*. Yet at such a tender age life had been taken from her.

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38 *Daily News* (London, England) Monday, January 14, 1850; Issue 1135

This tragedy came at a time when another young Wombwell had died at a menagerie. On 12<sup>th</sup> June 1849 Wombwell's nephew William, aged 25 was attacked by an elephant at the travelling menagerie in Coventry. William had been stabbed by tusks from one of the elephants. He is buried in London Road Cemetery, Coventry and Ellen Blight, his cousin was also later buried in the same grave.

The inscription on the grave's headstone reads:

*To the memory of William Wombwell, nephew of Mr George Wombwell (Wild Beast Proprietor), he died on the 12th June 1849 aged 25. Sincerely respected by all who knew him. Also in remembrance of Ellen Elizabeth Blight, cousin of the above, who died at Chatham in Kent on the 11th of January 1850 in the 17th year of her age. The tenant of this little grave, our hope and joy and pride, was snatched away from our embrace in early youth she died.*

Madame Pauline De Vere is mentioned again in an 1894 report. It was reported that she had been bitten on the leg by a lion during a performance in Folkstone at Sanger's circus and again at Aston where:

*Madame Pauline De Vere dances a serpentine dance in the lions' den*<sup>3940</sup>

The former report is remarkably similar to the earlier report above of *De Vere* being bitten on the leg at Folkstone and should be treated with some suspicion.

The final report during the century was an advertisement placed by Sanger's circus during a forthcoming tour of East Anglia.

*FIRST VISIT FOR FIVE YEARS  
LORD GEORGE (THE IMPERIAL) SANGER  
GREAT HIPPODRAMATIC AND SPECTACULAR  
EXHIBITION*

*The first time out of London after 56 years. The  
leading Public Caterer at the Royal Agricultural Hall  
and the Grand National Amphitheatre, London.*

*STOWMARKET TUESDAY Oct 30th*

*IPSWICH WEDNESDAY Oct 31st*

*HADLEIGH THURSDAY Nov 1st*

*SUDBURY FRIDAY Nov 2nd*

*COLCHESTER SATURDAY Nov 3rd*

*The combined Companies embracing all the HORSES, ELEPHANTS, CAMELS, DROMEDARIES, the MENAGERIE, and the whole of the CIRCUS ARTISTES. The Dramatic and the Hippodramatic Companies, embracing the living and organised body of 1,500, 66 carriages, the field artillery, the ambulance wagons and the whole plant necessary for this gigantic military spectacular drama. The magnitude of the above-named military spectacle baffles all description. Suffice it to say 250 horse, 500 people, the battery of elephants, the battery of camels, with their huge cannon firing*

39 *The Era* (London, England) Saturday, August 18, 1894; Issue 2917

40 *The Era* (London, England) Saturday, October 20, 1894; Issue 2926

*from the backs, the field artillery, etc., will appear in the tent at one time.*

*In addition to this vast production, which is quite new,  
the finest*

*Circus Company*

*that has ever appeared under one Management has  
been specially engaged*

***Engagement extraordinary at an enormous salary of  
Madame PAULINE DE VERE, the Lady of Lions,  
(The most beautiful woman in the world), in her elegant,  
chaste and Classical Serpentine dance in the Den of  
African Lions.***

*For the first time in Great Britain, the wonderful  
Clairvoyant Educated and  
TALKING HORSE,*

*(Grandson of the celebrated Racing Horse, "ROBERT  
THE DEVIL") surnamed the "TIPSTER" Will foretell  
the winner of every race through the year*

*1894*

*Two Performances daily at 2.30 and 7.30.*

*Prices of Admission - Grand Balcony Seats 10s 6d.*

*Second Circle 5s; Boxes 3s; Second Boxes 2s;*

*Carpeted and Upper Seats 1s. And to avoid disappointment to the working classes there will be  
accommodation for 7000 people at 6d.*

*The greatest of all processions each day at one o'clock  
Box Office open daily from 10 to 4<sup>41</sup>.*

The idea of advertising *at an enormous salary* and the *most beautiful woman in the world* must have been a private joke between husband and wife, both now in their later lives, and is a fitting end to the history of Lion Queens of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Britain. In any event Ellen Chapman would be dead two years hence.

Whether *Lion Queens* just faded out of fashion or the shocking death of Ellen Blight had caused an abrupt decline in female performances, is difficult to establish. It may even have been by directive from the Lord Chamberlain, given the possibility of Victoria's sensibility having been upset, although I have not found any hard evidence to substantiate it to date. It might just have been the steady decline in the need for travelling menageries that had continued through the turn of the century. It is though, a fascinating period of female exposure to what was hitherto considered a man's world: the world of wild beast training and performance.

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41 *The Ipswich Journal* (Ipswich, England) Saturday, October 20, 1894; Issue 9467

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