

Will Catlin - 'King of Pierrots'

Will Catlin was born William Henry Fox in Leicester, 1871. He was 1 of 13 children and started work as apprentice to a tailor's cutter. Aged 20, he married Ada Elizabeth Freer, with whom he had 5 daughters and 1 son. Will started performing semi-professionally in music hall and as a banjo-playing, black-faced minstrel.

In 1894, he changed his stage name to 'Catlin' to make a more catchy title for his new double act - 'Catlin & Carson' in Scarborough. Here he established his first troupe of pierrots - 'Catlin's Favourite Pierrots' on the South Shore in the Summer season of 1894.

There were rival troupes in Scarborough, such as Tom Carrick's 'Popular Pierrots', but Catlin's was the most popular. In 1906, he bought the sole rights to perform on the beach, but the Council kept raising the price, until in 1908, he bought & converted a wooden building on the seafront called 'The Arcadia' (later rebuilt as 'The Futurist Theatre').

Catlin was a brilliant showman and salesman, known to all as 'The Guvnor': every costume had to be washed and pressed before performance. His troupes would walk in immaculate make-up and costume to the sands each day and every Monday, they would ride around the town in a charabanc or tram to greet the new arrivals and advertise their shows.

Before 1914, Catlin's troupes were all-male and forbidden from being seen in public with a girlfriend or wife. They rehearsed most mornings of the week and then gave three performances daily at 11, 3 & 7, plus an extra 2 shows on Bank Holidays! Every member of the troupe had to collect money ("bottle") during a show and sell merchandise

afterwards, such as songsheets, programmes and signed postcards. Catlin's hard-sell approach was very effective and he toured his pierrot troupes to resorts all over the country, including Withernsea, Whitby, Great Yarmouth, Bournemouth, Aberystwyth, Colwyn Bay & Llandudno.

Will Catlin circa 1894



Catlin as a minstrel



Catlin's 'Favourite Pierrots', Scarborough, 1905

