

Frederick Kempster
(1889 – 1918)
by
Mary de Vere Taylor

In 1916 an exhausted and emaciated ex-prisoner-of-war staggered home to Seend Cleeve near Melksham. Two years previously Fred Kempster, officially “Britain’s Tallest Man” at a lofty height of over eight feet, had been arrested by the German army as a security risk while he toured Europe with a travelling circus.

Gentle, unassuming and unmistakable, Fred never intended to pose a risk to anything, including German security. His short but eventful life began in London in 1889. One of five children, he was below average height for most of his early childhood. When he was eight, his father died on Christmas Day. Mrs Kempster found work as a servant but couldn’t afford to keep her family. Barnardo’s intervened and took the young Kempsters to a children’s home in Stepney. In 1899 Fred set sail for the new life which had been arranged for him in Canada. Grieving, lost and bewildered, he lived in two households in five years.

When Fred was 12 he lost his balance while leaning from a window. Toppling out, he cracked his head violently on the pavement. It was thought he had damaged the area of his brain regulating growth, as shortly afterwards he developed excruciating headaches and grew with alarming speed.

Fred’s physical and emotional suffering increased with every inch of his prematurely lengthening bones. At 15, he was pronounced unfit to work and sent back to England. After an operation at a Barnardo’s hospital, Fred resolved to make the best of his circumstances. He began to plan his future.

But his choice of occupations was limited. By the time he was 20, he stood seven feet, eight and a half inches tall, his feet were 16 inches long and he weighed 22 stone. His clothes were custom-made by a tailor in Scotland and it was alleged his shirt would cover a bed. He became a basket-maker but the tools were too small to handle comfortably. He then tried gardening, street lamp-lighting and walnut-picking.

Fred had always found it difficult to deal with people's reactions to his appearance but then realised this could be the key to a successful career. In 1910 - when he was 21 and still growing – he became the star attraction of travelling fairs with his one-man show. Crowds flocked from far and wide to see “Frederick the Great, the English Giant” and gasped in awe at the enormous vest billowing outside his booth.

Despite childhood traumas and the pressures of international celebrity, Fred remained close to his family. He often visited his mother and a sister in Essex, where he slept in a building partly constructed from an upturned boat. While searching for his injured brother in a London hospital, he terrified the other patients by peering through the glass above the ward doors. He was particularly fond of another sister, Ruth. At six feet tall, Ruth shared a deep bond with Fred, who stayed at her Weston house when he performed at the Lansdown Fair in Bath.

By 1911 Fred was with a circus in France. When it came to Wiltshire he decided to take a short sabbatical and lived with Ruth and her husband James at their new home in Worton, near Devizes.

However, The Lodge (now Grange Lodge) had not been designed to accommodate someone of Fred's stature. He had to enter on all fours and sleep in a gigantic iron bed forged by the village blacksmith, Mr Hunt.

Fred soon became a much-loved and respected member of the community. He enjoyed amusing his neighbours by shaking hands as they leant from first-floor windows and was frequently seen lighting cigarettes from gas lamp-posts during his strolls to Devizes and Melksham. He spent many happy hours at the "Rose & Crown", chatting about his experiences and kneeling on the floor to play darts. The pub still has a photograph of Fred. It was taken in 1910, on his first European circus tour. Canny Mr Hunt sold copies at 4d each.

Fred then joined Astley's American Circus. As the clouds of war rumbled ominously across Europe, he toured Germany. Now known as "Teddy Bobs", he appeared with his female counterpart; a statuesque beauty called Brunhilde, who stood four inches taller than Fred in her stockinged feet. For the first time in his life, Fred had met his match in a woman. There were rumours of a love affair.

He caused such a stir in Germany that when war broke out in 1914 he was arrested and sent to an internment camp. Devastated by the loss of its main attraction, the circus pulled influential American strings to launch a rescue mission.

On 16th April 1914, *The New York Times* announced: "The United States Diplomatic and Consular Service now has added to its multifarious other duties that of finding the British giant who is at large somewhere in Germany. A circus agency, which booked the giant for a German tour, informed Consul General Skinner it should be easy to locate Teddy Bobs, as the giant is known professionally, because "he is a rather conspicuous figure, being eight feet tall and having a lame left leg." Teddy Bobs, whose real name is Frederick Kempsted [sic], was last heard of in Essen. He has an enormous appetite and is expected to aid his country by reducing Germany's food supply."

In Berlin, the American ambassador swung into action. But two years elapsed before Fred was finally released. The conditions under which he had been detained took a terrible toll on his health. Already weakened by osteoporosis, he never fully recovered.

While Fred was battling in Germany, Ruth and James had moved to Seend Cleeve. They ran "The Barge Inn" on the Kennet and Avon Canal, where Fred lived when he returned to England. He convalesced in a large armchair in the pub, where fascinated people paid 6d for the privilege of hearing his stories.

As he grew stronger, he was driven around in a Ford by a friend who removed the hood so he could sit comfortably in the back. Mr Perry, the canal-keeper, took Fred out in a punt and was shown his famous trick of passing a half-crown coin through the gold ring he wore on his little finger. Once children overcame their initial fear of "The Seend Giant", they discovered he was a kind, funny man who loved talking about football, cricket, horses and the circus.

Fred soon grew restless again. The lure of the fairground proved irresistible and within a year he left Wiltshire to join another travelling show. This time, however, he was frail and ill-equipped to cope with a nomadic existence. He collapsed with pneumonia at a Lancashire fair and died in hospital on 15th April 1918. He was 29 years old; eight feet, four and a half inches tall; had size 22 feet and weighed 27 stone. His coffin was nine feet long and had to be passed through a window to the 10 pallbearers.

Fred's funeral at Blackburn Cemetery was packed with mourners. Fourteen men then lowered his coffin into a grave from which over 10 tons of earth had been excavated.

His life may have been short, but his courage and spirit were immeasurable.

