

FAIRFIELD FOLK

Frances Brown

Since its first publication in 1986, Frances Brown's *Fairfield Folk* has been acknowledged as a fairground classic. This latest edition with its new information and many more photographs brings the story of the Matthews family up-to-date.

The history of the travellers is handed down through the traditional method of a 'Say', every important, amusing or significant event being turned into a story and faithfully repeated from generation to generation. Frances Brown, having been born into the world of travelling showpeople, was able to record the 'Says' of the Matthews family going back to the early 1800s. Although some of these stories seemed to beggar belief, she has checked them against newspapers, court records, and available documentation and found them to be true, in the course of her research unearthing a wealth of original photographs.

This book not only traces the way of life of a travelling family, but charts the changes and developments of the British fairground. It should have wide appeal as it provides many personal insights into the travelling community, and records the development of their early rides such as the famous steam-driven roundabout filmed in *Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang* and *Half-a-Sixpence*. The book then brings the story up to date by introducing some present-day members of the Matthews family and depicting the background to the design and construction of their modern rides.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

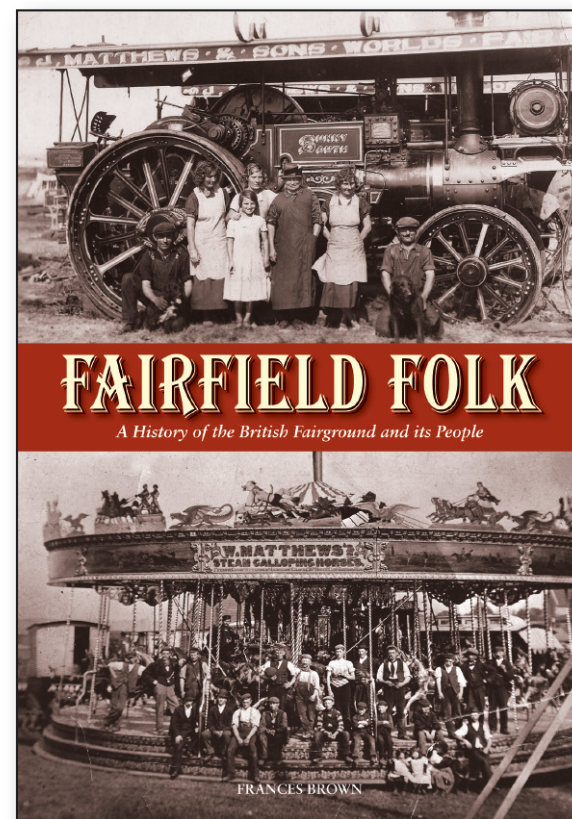
Frances Brown was born in Emsworth, Hampshire, at a time when her parents were beginning to 'settle down' from their lives as travelling showpeople. As a child she spent happy holidays with her grandmother and aunts travelling to fairs in Sussex, Hampshire and Dorset. After completing a postgraduate teacher-training degree at Sussex University, she taught at the Rudolf Steiner school in Sussex, but has now begun a new career and is writing full time. Besides being the author of books and articles on traditional fairs, she has written a much-acclaimed series of novels based on the lives of some of the characters whose histories are detailed in *Fairfield Folk*.

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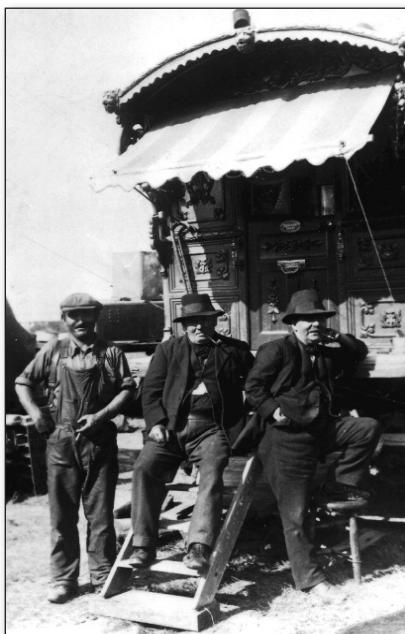
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Amy's mother, One-eye Betsy, and father, Tom Rowland.

Left: Henry, Bill and Joe Matthews after the death of their brother John.



Right: Chris Odam and his coconut shy.



Redshirt's steam gallopers at Basingstoke with members of his family and Chaps. Among those sitting on the platform are 'Chicken' Matthews in striped jersey, and Richard and John Wall, the two young boys.

Chapter Nine
BATTLE FOR PITCHES

*Chichester County Bench
Rival Showmen at Seley Club*

Matthews, senior, took off his jacket and waitcoat and wanted Smith to fight, but Smith declined. There has been previous conduct of this kind, and the defendants had avowed the intention of frightening complainants from the district. (West Sussex Gazette, 19 June 1902)

Ownership of a steam roundabout had elevated Redshirt in the fairground hierarchy. Not only was he doing well for himself, he was flash with it. Nothing galled Harleip more than to see his brother leading a over other showmen when they met up at annual fairs such as Perworth.

Matthews' Merry-go-round, evidently the attraction of the fair, was started at eleven o'clock in the morning and kept going till nearly midnight. During nearly all this time it was well patronised and the proprietor must have done very good business, commented a local news reporter in 1888, clearly impressed.¹ Harleip, waiting to help people to mount, two at a time, into his swing-boats, stared stonily at Redshirt's crowded machine.

Other showmen were soon stealing a march on Harleip, too. Ria's father, Jack Harris, had invested in his smart set of steam gallopers manufactured by Walkers of Evesham and although it took six men two and a half hours to pull them down, pack them up and have them ready for the road – and at the other end the next build-up – there were certain rewards. For, picked out in gold scroll on the roundabout, revelling as the horses rose and fell, the proprietor's name would proclaim his achievement. By definition the proprietor of a steam-roundabout was a man of substance. Ria was very conscious of such things.

All Perworth was on fire in July 1890 for the coming of age of Lord Leonfield's heir. House-dwellers hung

BATTLE FOR PITCHES

Chinese lanterns in the streets, one lady placing at intervals round every window in front of her house scores of lights in small coloured glasses. In Perworth Park more than three thousand cottagers and their families sat down in huge marquees to enjoy a neat tea whilst regaled by the band of the British Orchestra.

"Then there was Harris's Royal Steam Riding Circus, which was kept going till 8 p.m. to the amusement of the hundreds of young folk, and we may say elderly ones too, while near the roundabout were swing boats and slyling for cocoons, and the variety entertainment which took place on the stage from half-past four till eight." Harris's 'Steam Riding Circus' – the name was casually chosen. Jack knew that proprietors of travelling 'circuses' could take advantage of concessionary railway rates not available to ordinary fairground travellers.

Ria was impressed by her father's machine and started to copy Harleip. Their fourth surviving son, Moses, was born in 1891. The future was with them. They pulled the bag of sovereigns from under the bed and made their decision. They had enough for a down-payment on a steam-roundabout, one that would be possibly – no, definitely – bigger and grander than Harris's and Redshirt's.



Off Harleip set for King's Lynn, where the following entry soon appeared in *Savage's Order Book*:

DATE:	1892
NO:	551
DESCRIPTION:	Make 1 double cylinder engine
SOLD TO:	No 55 Matthews

DATE:	1892
NO:	550
DESCRIPTION:	Make 1 No. 3 organ engine
SOLD TO:	Matthews

Ria seized the opportunity to buy a new outfit – a long-skirted costume with matching hat and parasol in her favourite colour, heliotrope, and on 13 January 1894 their marriage was solemnised at St Francis Church, Chichester, with Fred and Bessy Harris standing as witnesses.

They had achieved their ambition by entering the select circle of steam roundabout proprietors – but other travellers still found fault, sniggered at them to climb a further step towards conventional respectability. After all, Ria had borne nine children during the twenty years they had been together. Time surely to regularise the situation.



Jerry Russett and group including some Matthews chavies waiting to 'pull on' to Southampton Common.