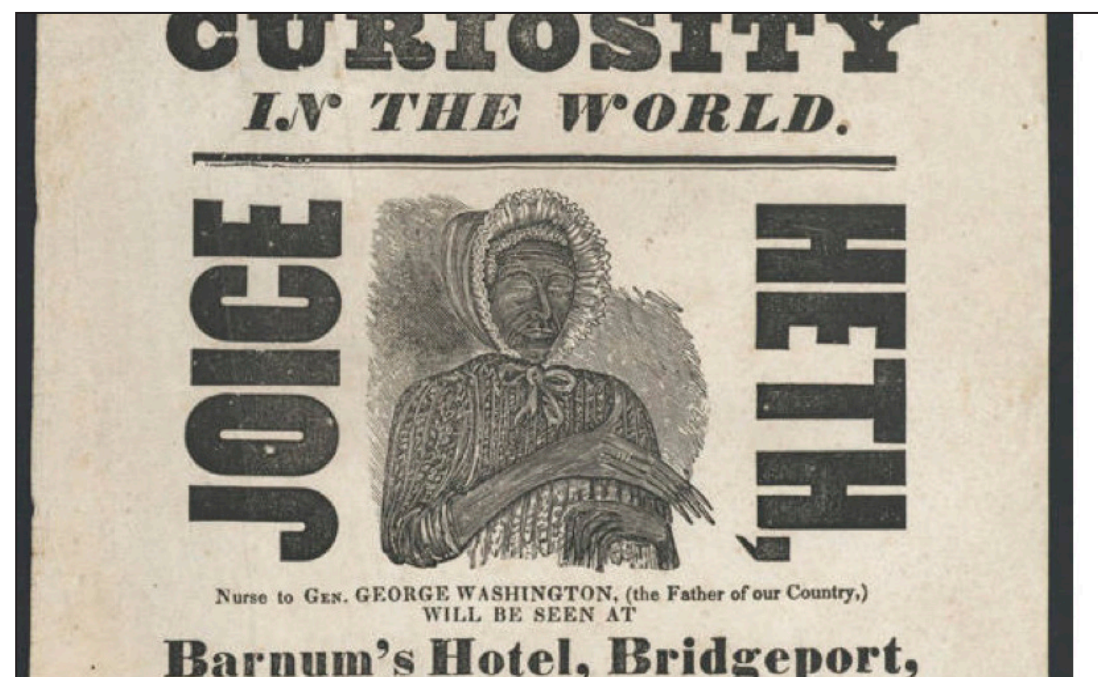


'Tom Thumb' with Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and Duke of Wellington. Pictorial Times 1844



PT Barnum and Tom Thumb in 1845. Image: Library of Congress



Joice Heth exhibition poster, 1836. Pic: Library of Congress.



The Feeje Mermaid, which Barnum billed as a 'must see'



Advertising flyer for 'General Tom Thumb' (Charles S Stratton), 1846

ROLLING UP FOR BARNUM'S MONEY-SPINNING UK TOUR

STEVE WARD looks back at a fascinating UK tour by circus showman PT Barnum

ON a cold February day in 1844, a small group of travellers disembarked their ship at the port of Liverpool. There was no welcoming party; no bands and banners and the visitors slipped silently away to their hotel.

Amongst them was the American showman PT Barnum and his protégé Charles S Stratton, known as General Tom Thumb. This would mark the beginning of a three-year long tour of the United Kingdom and continental Europe. Fêted by crowned heads, Queen Victoria included, the tour would bring both Barnum and Stratton international fame and fortune.

Phineas Taylor Barnum was born in July 1810 in the small American town of Bethel, Connecticut. Always interested in money making schemes, by the age of 20 he was married and had become a successful entrepreneur. With a good income and property, his dream was to be a showman with his own exhibition space.

He began in 1835 when he 'acquired' an aged black woman by the name of Joice Heth who was being exhibited as the 161-year-old nursemaid of George Washington, the 'father of the country'. It was later proved that she could have been no more than 80-years-old. By 1841, Barnum had acquired Scudder's American Museum, which he opened as Barnum's American Museum in 1842. Here he exhibited his next hoax - the 'Feejee Mermaid'. With clever publicity Barnum created a 'must see' event - even if the actual exhibit little resembled a mermaid. In fact it was, as Barnum described,

an ugly dried-up, diminutive specimen, about three feet long. Its mouth was open, its tail turned over, and its arms thrown up, giving it the appearance of having died in great agony

Perhaps his biggest ruse came with the dwarf child Charles S Stratton. In November 1842, Barnum exhibited this five-year-old boy at his museum. Stratton was billed as 'General Tom Thumb, a dwarf of 11 years of age, just arrived from England!' There were three deceptions in this one sentence. Barnum had upped Stratton's age to emphasise that he was an Englishman, thereby tapping into the concept of the 'exotic'; and he had given him the name of 'Tom Thumb, a well-known character in English folklore. 'General Tom Thumb' became a great attraction and Barnum schooled the child in singing, dancing, and recitation. But he had greater ideas for his protégé. He planned to take him to England and Europe, in the hope that such a tour might produce a great financial return and establish himself as a great showman.

Briefly performing in Liverpool, Barnum then took Stratton to London. Public performances were held at the Egyptian Hall, a suite of exhibition rooms on the Strand, but Barnum also held private



Hugh Jackman in The Greatest Showman, a fictionalised depiction of the life of P T Barnum. Image: Alamy/PA

soirées at their residence on Grafton Street. To these he invited newspaper editors, wealthy influential people, and the nobility knowing that their endorsements would give respectability to his exhibitions. At these events Stratton would sing and dance, impersonate Napoleon Bonaparte as well as present a pose plastique of classical figures. Valuable gifts were showered upon them, which Barnum then exhibited at the Egyptian Hall. To supplement entry takings at the exhibitions, pamphlets and prints of Tom Thumb were sold at a shilling each and in receipt he offered to kiss the lips of any lady who so wished. In his time, Stratton claimed to have kissed the lips of many thousands of ladies!

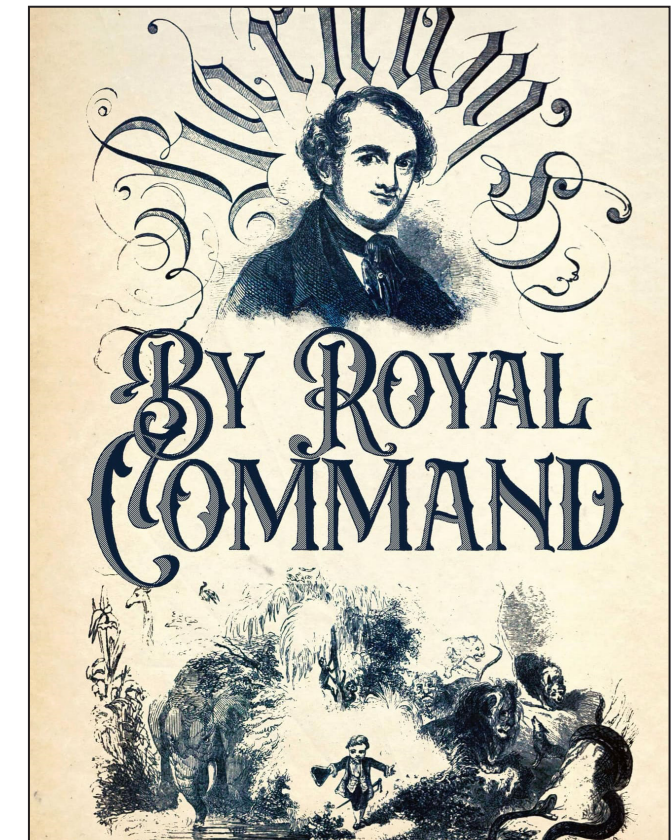
Before long Barnum had engineered an invitation to Buckingham Palace. On March 23, 1844, Barnum and Stratton had an audience with Queen Victoria, which she recorded in her diary: 'After dinner we saw the greatest curiosity, I, or indeed anybody ever saw, viz: a little dwarf, only 25 inches high & 15 lb in weight. No description can give an idea of this little creature, whose real name was Charles Stratton, born they say in 32 [1832], which makes him 12 years old. He is American, & gave us his card, with Gen: Tom Thumb, written on it.

'He made the funniest little bow, putting out his hand & saying: 'much obliged Mama'. One cannot help feeling very sorry for the poor little thing & wishing he could be properly cared for, for the people who show him off tease him a good deal. I should think. He was made to imitate Napoleon & do all parts of tricks, finally, backing out the

whole way out of the Gallery'. This was to be the first of three unprecedented such audiences. With such a royal seal of approval Barnum's visit to Britain was assured of success. For the remainder of 1844 he exhibited Tom Thumb throughout the UK, including visits to Leeds, Sheffield, Doncaster, Selby, Hull and York, spending the following year touring France and other parts of Europe. In this leg of the tour, he was received by the king of the Belgians in Brussels, the French royal family (twice) in Paris and he even managed to meet with the Queen of Spain on a brief visit to Pamplona. December 1845 saw them back in London and then a further tour of the UK for 1846, returning triumphant to America in early 1847. Their departure was unlike their arrival, bands played, notable worthies were there to wave them off and thousands of people thronged the dockside to cheer them on their way.

Barnum's three-year tour had been a huge success. Both he and Stratton had amassed a small fortune but perhaps, more importantly, it had gained them an international recognition that would further both their careers.

* Steve Ward is a researcher, author, and public speaker. He has a PhD for his research and writing on the social and cultural history of the circus. A list of his books is at steve-ward.weebly.com. His latest book, *By Royal Command*; Barnum in Europe is released on January 31 by the Modern Vaudeville Press at modernvaudevillepress.com/barnum from bookshops and the publisher.



Steve's book looks at the life of Barnum