

Aberdeen Magic!



As Aberdeen Magical Society prepares to celebrate its 90th

year, member **Jeff Burns**, of Fifth Dimension, looks back on the North-east's long-standing enchantment with tantalising tricks, astonishing stunts and incredible illusions.

Magic is experiencing a wonderful renaissance, as new ways of performing breathtaking illusions are captivating the hearts and minds of new audiences. In the UK, for example, the runner-up to *Britain's Got Talent* was illusionist Jamie Raven, who narrowly lost out on that precious first place to a dog, while in America last year, magician Mat Franco won the US version of the talent show.

From the 1800s to mid-1940s, magic was performed to create wonder and mystery and share exotic experiences of faraway lands. Many magicians presented their shows under the theme of Ancient Egypt or the Far East.

Aberdeen has a long association with magic and illusion, and indeed many famous magicians have visited the city over the years, including Geoffrey Durham (aka The Great Soprendo), Houdini, Paul Daniels, Derren Brown, Dynamo, and Piff the Magic Dragon (recent finalist in *America's Got Talent*). Many of these magicians have been brought in for private corporate events. Some, however, such as Daniels and Houdini, did public shows.

Houdini visited in 1909 and made a sensational underwater escape at Aberdeen Harbour. A master publicist (remember the days before Facebook?), he used death-defying stunts to gain valuable free advertising for his shows. Thousands of

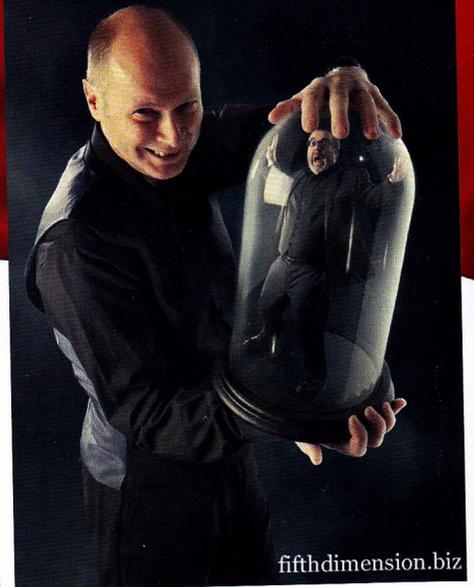
local people turned up to see his harbour stunt and then flocked to see his shows at the Palace Theatre.

While in Aberdeen, Houdini visited the grave of John Henry Anderson (below). Known professionally as The Wizard of the North, Anderson was a huge inspiration to Houdini, although they never met, as he died the same year Houdini was born. Anderson, who was born in the Mearns and buried in St Nicholas Kirkyard, was credited with bringing magic from the street into theatres and raising the standard and interest of magic as a performance art. Hugely famous in his time, he even performed for Queen Victoria.

Since those days, and still unknown to many living in the North-east, Aberdeen has had a thriving magical community, many members of which belong



to Aberdeen Magical Society (AMS). The society was founded on 17 December 1926, its first meeting being held in the Scout Headquarters at 25 Belmont Street, in the city centre. There were 15 founder members, including such names as: WG Craigen; Victor Peacock (Magic Circle vice president); renowned architect T Scott Sutherland; accountant and cricketer Alan



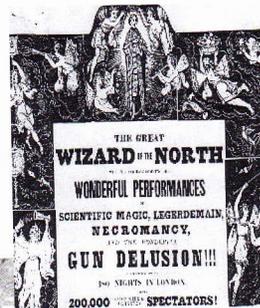
McBain; master baker George Strathdee; accountant Andrew Shivas; John Carroll; Alexander McGregor; John Elrick; William Bremner, confectioner and children's entertainer (the original Willie Wonka?);

John (JW) Warrender ('The Gay Deceiver'), and optician JA Jenson.

During the war years, AMS met fewer times than usual, although they concentrated on having meetings whenever a visiting magician was performing at the Tivoli. One such memorable visitor was

The Great Lyle, who, during the 1940s, toured the world with his full evening show, including such tricks as the Flying Golf Club and the Large Chocolate Box illusion.

Aberdeen magic in the 50s and 60s tended to take place in public shows; then, in the 1970s, it became more popular at children's parties and clubs. By the 1990s, magic was entertaining guests at corporate events, such as dinners, and at weddings. With the advent of television, it had become more comedic in nature - almost a fusion of standup comedy and magic. This changed again in the 1990s and 2000s, as magic went back to the streets with David Blaine and, more recently, with Dynamo. Sadly, many magicians did not keep up with the times and just as some comics from the 1970s are now regarded with disdain, magic also suffered by not keeping up-to-date. As Houdini so ably demonstrated, it is a live performance art and therefore it must stay relevant to the times and the cultures of the



society in which it exists. Any performance art has to captivate people's attention, engage them and leave them feeling richer from the experience, and magic is no different, in that to be relevant, it has to be exciting and create wonder. For me, comedy is an important part of that, too, and I always strive to create a fun, engaging, magical experience for my audiences.

The best-known trick to lay audiences ('muggles') is the Rabbit from a Hat and even today people ask me: "Can you pull a rabbit from a hat?" The magician credited with inventing this trick is none other than our own local magician, John Henry Anderson. Of course, back when he performed it, in the early 1840s, all the gentlemen wore top hats and so top hats, rabbits and magicians became linked forever!

A famous trick that I like to perform involves three different lengths of ropes which change to becoming the same length. I can't reveal the name of the trick in this article, but I can say it was invented in 1957 and I am using it to successfully fool my audiences nearly 60 years later. Most magicians will have learned it during their career and I have probably performed it thousands of times.

A memorable trick for Fifth Dimension was the world exclusive Homocide illusion. It can still be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-IVeGiwcsW, although we have since retired the actual illusion. Most magicians place their 'glamorous assistant' in a box and then do a variety of magical effects. Our illusion was the only one in the world where a man (our own Bill Duncan - see sidebar) went in, while Ivor and I did the magical routine. Not only did this routine wow audiences, it also fooled many magicians who kept saying things like: "I know where a girl can disappear to, but how on earth did you manage to do that to Bill?!"

Costumes have also changed for magicians over the years. Very few wear top hats and tails anymore and, indeed, the recent TV magic of Dynamo sees him performing in jeans and t-shirts, bringing magic to a hip, younger audience.

Whatever they choose to wear, with Christmas just around the corner, magicians all over the world will be gearing up for a busy season, and Aberdeen is no different. Most schools, play groups, companies, charities and various other organisations have Christmas parties and many of them

Magic Moments

Some recent standout members of Aberdeen Magical Society include:

Bill Duncan

Local magician, celebrity and all-round entertainer, Bill Duncan is a force to be reckoned with. Entertaining North-east audiences for decades, he made magic fun and accessible to all and performed



with energy and passion when entertaining children at birthday parties and other events. Recently, Bill was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, but he has used his fame and magic skills to bring much-needed

understanding to the condition. He recently opened Aberdeen's first Dementia Resource Centre, run by Alzheimer Scotland, having been supported by the organisation in recent years.

In his heyday, Bill was a consummate professional, his enthusiasm enhanced by his kindness and generosity in sharing techniques with younger magicians, including myself. During 1992, Bill recorded his TV series *Bill's Magic Box*. I had recently joined AMS and managed to persuade him to allow me to come and watch a taping of the show at the Grampian TV studios. After ending up helping the floor manager to get the children seated, I became the warmup man for the series! I would not be where I am in magic today if it hadn't been for Bill.

call upon a magician to entertain their audiences. In fact, I will be entertaining as usual at the Marcliffe Hotel on Christmas Day. I have done this for a number of years and it's always great fun!

The Aberdeen Magical Society plans to celebrate its 90th with a large dinner/cabaret in late 2016. The society is always keen to welcome new members with an interest in magic. For more details, please email Jeff at: jeff@fifthdimension.biz.

Throughout the years, many of the AMS magicians have won awards at national or international competitions. The most recent discretionary award (the Murray Wand for Showmanship) to be presented by the Scottish Association of Magical Societies to someone in Aberdeen, was given to Fifth Dimension - at the time comprising Bill, Ivor Smith and myself - in 2002. This was also the first time the award had been presented to a group, rather than to an individual.

Barry and Stuart

Aberdeen Magical Society generally only allows members from the age of 18 upwards. However, back in the early 1990s, AMS made an exception to talented youngsters Stuart McLeod and Barry Jones - and rightly so! Barry and Stuart have gone on

to perform and deliver a number of television specials, including *Magick* (2004), *Dirty Tricks*



(2005), *Tricks from the Bible* (2006), *The Happenings* (2013), and many others.

One of their routines was voted one of the 50 greatest magic tricks of all time and now has nearly 10 million views on YouTube! Their irreverent, edgy comedic style has earned them a legion of fans, old and young, across the world.

In 2009, Barry and Stuart were awarded the Best Comedy Illusionist Award at the famous World Magic Awards, and they continue to push the boundaries of contemporary magic to this day.

A qualified chartered accountant, Jeff Burns initially worked in the oil industry, latterly specialising in taxation. In 1999, he became co-founder of Fifth Dimension and five years later started working full-time in magic. Today, he and Ivor Smith engage a wide variety of international audiences with entertainment and themed presentations. They are the only North-east magicians invited to perform twice at the world-famous Magic Castle, in Hollywood, and they have also topped the bill at a magic show in Las Vegas. Jeff wishes to thank AMS historian Dave Goulding for his assistance with the article.