

A Forgotten Isle of Man Song

by Maurice Powell

In addition to the 'Kelly' songs and *Flanagan* popularised by Florrie Forde before the first world war, there are an astonishing number of popular songs from the music hall era, and from the 1920s and 30s, that promote holidays on the Isle of Man, and extoll the virtues of Douglas and the Island in their lyrics. I have a provisional list of over forty such songs, and I hope to produce a short piece about them in due course.¹ Just a few weeks ago in the library of the Manx Museum details of a hitherto overlooked and little-known unknown song: *Sticky Backs*, with words and music by J.W Knowles, and published by B. Feldman & Co., Ltd., in 1900, were passed to me, and here are the results of some further research into it.

The song was sung at the Derby Castle in August 1903 along with other 'new songs specially written for Douglas, which are sure to be popular'² by the great music hall comedian Wilkie Bard, of *She Sells Sea Shells on the Sea Shore* fame, making his third summer season appearance in Douglas. Bard's 'quiet absurdity' in the ballroom every evening at 9.30 pm went down very well, and his engagement that season was extended. Another song by J. W. Knowles that Wilkie Bard introduced that year: *O! O! Capital O!* was not an 'Isle of Man' song, unless he substituted 'Castle' for 'Empire' in the second line of the first verse, a common device used by popular singers of the period to lend their songs a local flavour. It proved to be immensely popular because of its easy-to-remember chorus which, according to the *Isle of Man Times*, was 'trolled by the urchins in the streets, carolled by the tripper in the char-a-banc, and hummed by the girl of all work'.³

Wilkie Bard transferred to another Palace & Derby Castle Company resort, the Palace Opera House, before the end of the month, and among other things, was the judge at a Cake Walk Competition, which attracted an audience of some 6,000 people.⁴

Sticky Backs was equally popular and was recalled by one visitor from London who despatched the following anecdote to the *Isle of Man Times* concerning a gathering of '21 newly-made friends, fresh from Mona's Isle' at a restaurant in Wardour Street, London, during which a number of dishes with inventive Manx titles, including 'Vol au vent a la Groudle', were served: 'After dinner an impromptu concert was arranged . . . and one of our newly-made friends struck up the old familiar tune of "For they've all got sticky backs", the chorus being distinctly audible for some considerable distance from the precincts of the dinning-room'.⁵

Another visitor contributed 'His Notes and Compliments' to the *Isle of Man Times* after his return home⁶ and recalled that Wilkie Bard 'gave a number of comic contributions, one of which is "Sticky Backs", which has caught on splendidly'.

Sticky Backs?

The unlikely subject of Wilkie Bard's seasonal show-stopper was the small, slightly larger than postage stamp sized gummed photograph known as a Sticky Back or Stickyback. Approximately 2" x 1½" in size, these could be stuck into a small album or onto a letter or post card, were priced at the cheapest end of the photographic trade – they were often sold

in strips of six identical pictures on a roll of photographic paper for as little as 6d or twenty-five a 'bob' as Bard's song says – and, from around 1900 to 1920, were especially popular with working class families who would not normally have their photographs taken.

The Liverpool photographic printer, photographer, designer and inventor of photographic equipment Spiridione Nicolo Grossi (1877-1921), was closely associated with the development and popularisation of sticky backs and had business premises in Liverpool, and on the Isle of Man known as Grossi's American Card and Photo Company at 10, Castle Mona Shops, and a seasonal studio on Douglas Head.⁷ He apparently employed a 'tout' to pass amongst the crowds shouting out advertisements for the sticky back photographs: 'They've all got sticky backs' and 'Have you got a sticky back?' to which the answer was 'We've all got sticky backs'. The name 'stickyback' soon caught on with the holiday makers and became the popular catchword of the season in Douglas.

A reminiscence in the autobiography of 'Dal' Williamson,⁸ may record the first visits to Douglas of Spiridione Grossi probably in the late 1890s. Williamson was apprenticed to W. A. Brearey & Son, pharmaceutical chemists, of Prospect Hill, Douglas, and recalled that 'a young man, very much down at heel' came into the shop to order 'a quantity of 12 x 10 plates and many 50-foot rolls of paper, which would be 12 inches wide', on account, as 'the young fellow had not the money to pay for all this'. The young man's business 'which established the stamp photograph' quickly blossomed and he returned to Douglas the following year wearing a frock coat and tall hat and accompanied by a large uniformed staff, a commissionaire and a boy in buttons. 'He began to do a roaring business right from the start . . . and so the sticky back photograph came into being'.

An advertisement headed Stamp Photographs!!! Stamp Photographs!!! Stamp Photographs!!! from 1900, offered to produce sticky back photographs from any sized original:

'THOUSANDS PRINTED DAILY, best finished and cheapest in the world. THE ISLE OF MAN VISITORS SAY:- "THEY'VE ALL GOT STICKY BACKS"'.

Another brief reference to stickybacks came in a report from the Douglas Petty Sessions Court in 1902 recorded in the *Mona's Herald*,⁹ where one Thomas T. Barwick, the plaintiff in a case of assault whilst conducting a Gospel Temperance Mission on Douglas beach, attempted to establish his good name during cross examination by denying that he was employed in selling stickybacks when he first arrived on the Island three years earlier.

Thus, it is quite likely that the establishing of the name 'stickyback' as a brand name for these inexpensive miniature photographs, soon to be adopted widely by photographers, originated in the Isle of Man due to the popularisation of the catch phrase 'stickyback' and Wilkie Bard's catchy song.

As for the song itself, it is no better or worse than dozens of other music hall songs, hastily written and published to reflect a new invention or fashion, mildly amusing, but destined for a short life on the stage. The name 'stickyback' long outlived the song in the public

imagination, but the references to 'Douglas' and the 'Palace Gate' in the first verse, and pretty Manx girls thereafter, invest it with a quaint, nostalgic local charm for us today.

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Notes

1. See also Powell, Maurice: *Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?* and *The Origins of Hi! Kelly*, Culture Vannin, *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu* (KMJ) and manxmusic.com.
2. *Mona's Herald*, 19.08.1903 and *Isle of Man Times*, 15.08.1903.
3. See 'The Lyrics', Wilkie Bard - monologues.co.uk. *O! O! Capital O!*
4. The Cake Walk was originally a grotesque parody of the their 'masters' walk danced by negro slaves, but soon became associated with minstrel shows and eventually developed into a kind of two-step with prancing movements and a syncopated rhythm. Away from the dance floor, Debussy's *Golliwogg's Cake Walk* is the best-known example.
5. 'A Happy Little Incident', *The Isle of Man Times*, 19.09.1903.
6. 'Enthusiastic Visitor to Manxland', *Isle of Man Times*, 5.09.1903.
7. See *A Manx Note Book*, photographers, 1902 trade directory. The business was founded by Austrian-born John (Giovanni) Baptista (Baptiste) Grossi (1832-95), then taken over by his eldest son 'Spiro'. According to two advertisements from 1900 the Grossigraph Copying Company occupied two premises in Liverpool, in Lime Street, and later at 77, Paradise Street, the family home. Spiridione Grossi opened a photographic studio in Brighton around 1910.
8. *From Behind the Drug Counter*, reproduced in the *Chemist and Druggist* magazine, June 10th, 1933, and cited in www.FadingImages.uk.
9. *The Mona's Herald*, 23rd July 1902.