

Professor Bert Powsey

Pier Diver



Edith Pridmore (b 1892) was the daughter of Thomas Pridmore and Charlotte Hartley. Thomas had moved to Sheffield from his native Bourne and had gained employment with Reuben Thompson, a well established undertaker and horse drawn cab company, as Sadler and Harness Maker.

Edith grew up in Sheffield and lived at 18 Forster Road, Heeley, Sheffield before at some stage meeting and falling in love with Archibald Powsey who came from Dartford in Kent but was then living in Southport and running The Ship Inn.

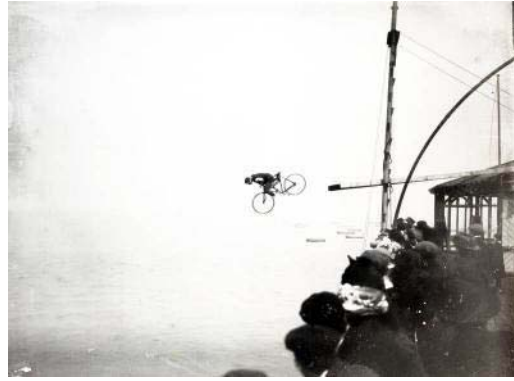
They had four children, Gwen, John, Ron and Albert.



Archie Powsey and Edith Pridmore

Archibald's father was Albert Edward Powsey, from Sheerness, who in his early days had been a sheet metal worker but who turned to the world of entertaining for his living.

Pier Diving was a phenomenon that kept the crowds entertained in seaside resorts around the British Isles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A number of gentlemen, usually taking the “title” of Professor would mount a pedal cycle at the dry end of the pier and pedal furiously to gain as much speed as possible before hurtling themselves off the opposite end and into the sea.



This carried considerable danger from failing to enter the water correctly to being blown off course and colliding with the pier structure as Professor Cyril, real name Albert Huggins Heppell, did at Brighton, fracturing his skull and dying on the West Pier.



THE PIERHEAD, c. 1908

A closer view of Thoms Tea House shows the scaffolding to its left and Professor Osbourne about to dive from the roof of the Tea House. The right-hand inset view has a portrait of the Professor whilst the left-hand one clearly shows the height of his scaffolding. Professor Osbourne, “The Terrific High Diver”, performed at the Pierhead daily, at 12 noon, 3.30 and 7.30 p.m. - “Frequent Dives From High Scaffold”. This postcard dates from 1908, but he was diving by 1903. A Professor Powsey used to “dive” with a bicycle. All the spectators would have paid 2d. admission to get on to the pier.

Pier Diving was not Professor Bert's only activity. Presumably to make ends meet, he also attended fairs around the country where his speciality was diving from a high tower into an extremely small tank of water. Bloxwich Wakes was one such event described as follows

“The inter war years also featured a number of artistes who came to Bloxwich year after year, such as Professor Cadman, and his Punch & Judy show, and Professor Bert Powsey who specialised in making a high dive into a small tank of water four feet deep.”

“What the Butler Saw and All That” is the work of Harold Brough, formerly Chief Features Writer with the Daily Post, Liverpool, and tells the fascinating history of the pier from its building in the mid 19th century through the years of decline to its restoration and a place among the top five most visited attractions on Merseyside. Senior residents of Southport tell of their memories. Harold says: “Some recalled the “What the Butler saw” slot machine,” - hence the book title - with the image of a young lady on a chaise lounge, seen as quite naughty at the time. Others tell of “Prof” Powsey, the famous pier diver.

“Powsey’s great performances included putting on a cotton-wool vest which was then set on fire before he dived into the sea and also riding his bicycle off the pier into the sea.”

Professor Bert taking the plunge in Margate. Southport statue commemorating pier diving



Bert was not always alone in his performances as daughter Gladys took after her father and was known for her skills diving from the high tower.

Gladys Powsey



Gladys was known to have worked from Brighton's West pier in the summer months (of the early 1920's I think) where she provided high diving and swimming demonstrations. Outside of peak season Gladys performed on the stage as a dancer and contortionist. Gladys worked as an aquatic entertainer with a Zoe Brigden.

There's a nice [Powsey family history](#) site that suggests Gladys may have traveled with her act, at one time being injured while attempting a very high dive into the River Thames. The same site also mentions a family tale of Gladys having dreams of being the first woman to swim the English Channel but of failing after some 20 miles in her attempt..