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Stuntmen on the Pier



The Great Omani performed on the Pier in 1950s (HPC095.002)



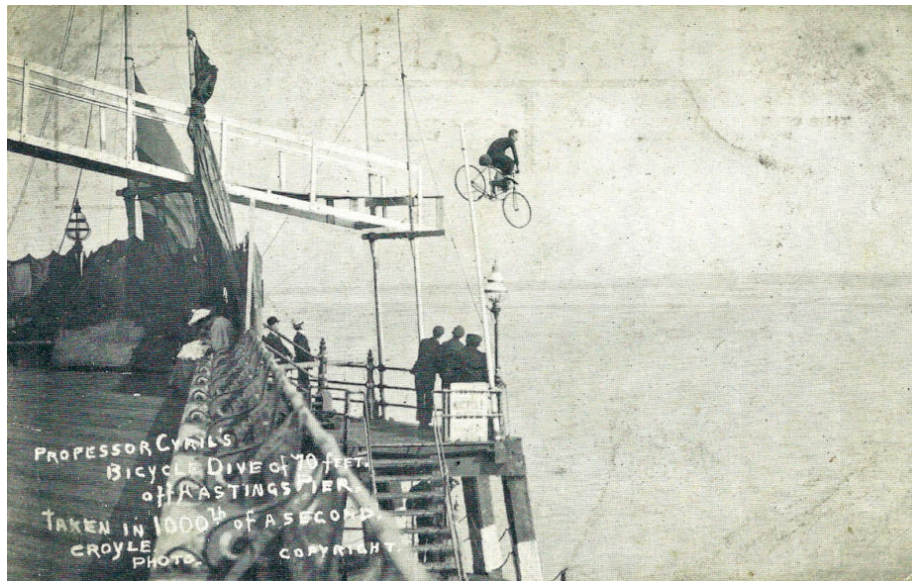
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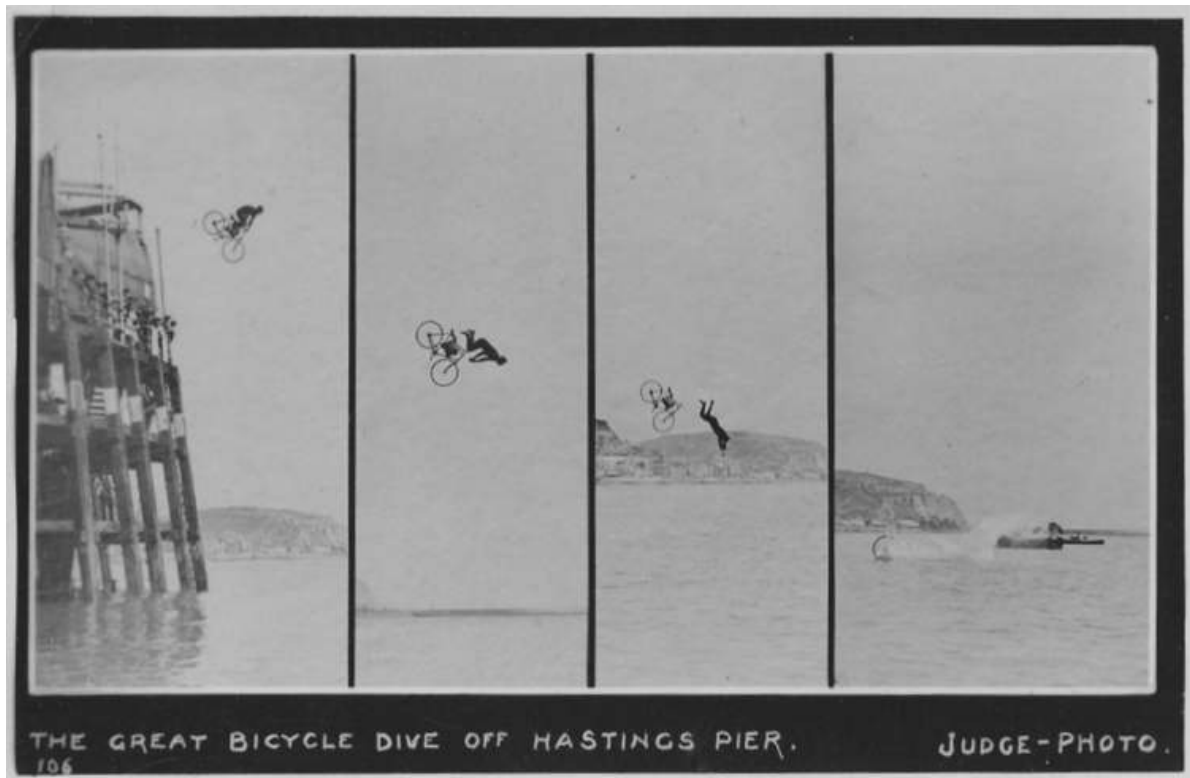
Stunt Divers on Hastings Pier



Professor Cyril (HPC006.134)

Stunt divers were very popular on British piers during the Edwardian era. Professor Gautier performed on the Pier in 1904, and in 1905 Professor Cyril, aka Albert Huggins Heppell, who specialised in pedalling a bicycle out to sea from a high platform, until he was killed when he slipped and fractured his skull. Professor Merlon Austin was a high diver on the pier when it burnt down in 1917, and there was still a high diver on the Pier in the 1930s called Professor Jack Hirst.

But the most renowned was perhaps Professor Davenport, an adventurous young man who had spent several years at sea after running away from home. He then turned his attention to the stage where he performed in plays and learnt ornamental swimming feats. This became the foundation of his diving career, and he went to South America with the Ross Family Troupe of Swimmers. There he became a brilliant high diver and won several competitions before returning to England as a professional diver and developing a repertoire of twenty different dives. His most thrilling feat was to dive when inside a sack that had been covered with paraffin and set on fire before he entered the water.



Professor Davenport's great bicycle dive, 1904–1914 (HPC006.132)

From the Hastings and St Leonards Observer, Saturday 25 May 1907

CHAMPION DIVER. STORY OF AN INTERESTING CAREER.

Visitors to the Hastings Pier should not miss witnessing the wonderful diving feats presented twice daily by Professor Davenport, the accomplished and champion high diver of South America, who in his life has had a more chequered career than that which usually falls to the lot of an ordinary individual. Of good family, his father, Dr. Augustus Davenport (now dead), was a London physician, whilst his mother, a talented authoress, has contributed many stories for the works of leading publishers. Born in the neighbourhood of Regent's Park, he was educated at Cowfold Grammar School, Sussex, until sixteen years of age.

At that period of his life, being of an adventurous disposition, and with a strong hankering after the sea, he ran away from home, and joined the crew of a little coasting vessel, "Amanda," of Newhaven, and served for

three years on the coast. Afterwards he took up deep water sailing and steam, making voyages on trading ships between the North-West Coast of Africa, the Baltic, and many other ports with cargoes of coal, copper, etc. On one of these voyages he was unfortunate enough whilst at Mogador, in Morocco, to get mixed up in a street affray, when he was unluckily shot in the leg when being set upon by the Berbers and half-castes, afterwards being imprisoned in a Moorish prison, situated on a little rocky island, Mogador. Through the exertions of the acting British Consul he was liberated after twenty-four hours' detention. His cell, Professor Davenport states, was a rough sort of dungeon. Moorish prison regulations are, or were at that time, decidedly different to English methods. The Government not feeding their captives, the necessary food was brought to them by their friends.

In his globe trotings Professor Davenport was at New Orleans when the Spanish-American War was declared. He volunteered for active service, but being an Englishman his offer was not accepted. It is interesting to note that when peace was proclaimed he was on Spanish soil at Huelva, 30 miles from Cadiz. Professor Davenport on one occasion, after arriving in England from New Orleans, was instrumental in saving a boy from drowning. This lad, the son of a well-to-do tradesman, fell into the river at Newport, Monmouthshire. He and his rescuer were taken on board the "Glen Rosa," the well-known pleasure steamer, which makes excursions from Hastings. For saving the youth's life Professor Davenport was rewarded by the big amount of two shillings.

Professor Davenport, after some seven years at sea, now turned his attention to the stage. He first went on tour with "A Cigarette Maker's Romance," followed by "Pygmalion and Galatea," "His Excellency the Governor," "Quasimodo," "Trilby", and "The Scarlet Clue," touring with Miss Emma and Mr Percy Hutchison, Miss Grace Warner, Messrs. Roy Jackson, and Henry Herne's Companies. He was at the Hastings Pier with Mr. John D. Hunter's pantomime, "Robinson Crusoe" (1901-02). Professor Davenport has trodden the boards both at Hastings Gaiety Theatre and also at the St. Leonards Pier. At the latter place of amusement, he played "The Laird" to Mr. Roy Jackson's Svengali in "Trilby." While fulfilling a theatrical engagement at Brighton Mr. Davenport did some ornamental swimming feats under the direction of Professor Reddish.



Professor Davenport advertising his next stunt dive (HPC006.130)

This was the foundation of his diving and natatory life. He straightway threw up the histrionic art, and accepted an engagement to go out with the "Ross Family Troupe of Swimmers" to South America. Here from this date (1904), for his rapid advancement as a brilliant high diver, he won in the years 1905–06 the championship of South America, these respective results coming off at the Coleisco Argentino, Buenos Ayres. Returning to England in April of last year, he started his high diving performances at Dover. When exhibiting his sensational and daring feats of skill at Folkestone he met with a serious accident, which necessitated an enforced rest of six weeks and two days at the Royal Victoria Hospital, and which rest was supplemented by an operation.

The many competitors for the Channel Swim last autumn encouraged him, nothing daunted by his recent accident, to try his hand at a Channel swim. This display of physical endurance took place on September 9th, when he swam and drifted some thirteen miles – of which he swam six – in about three hours and a half.

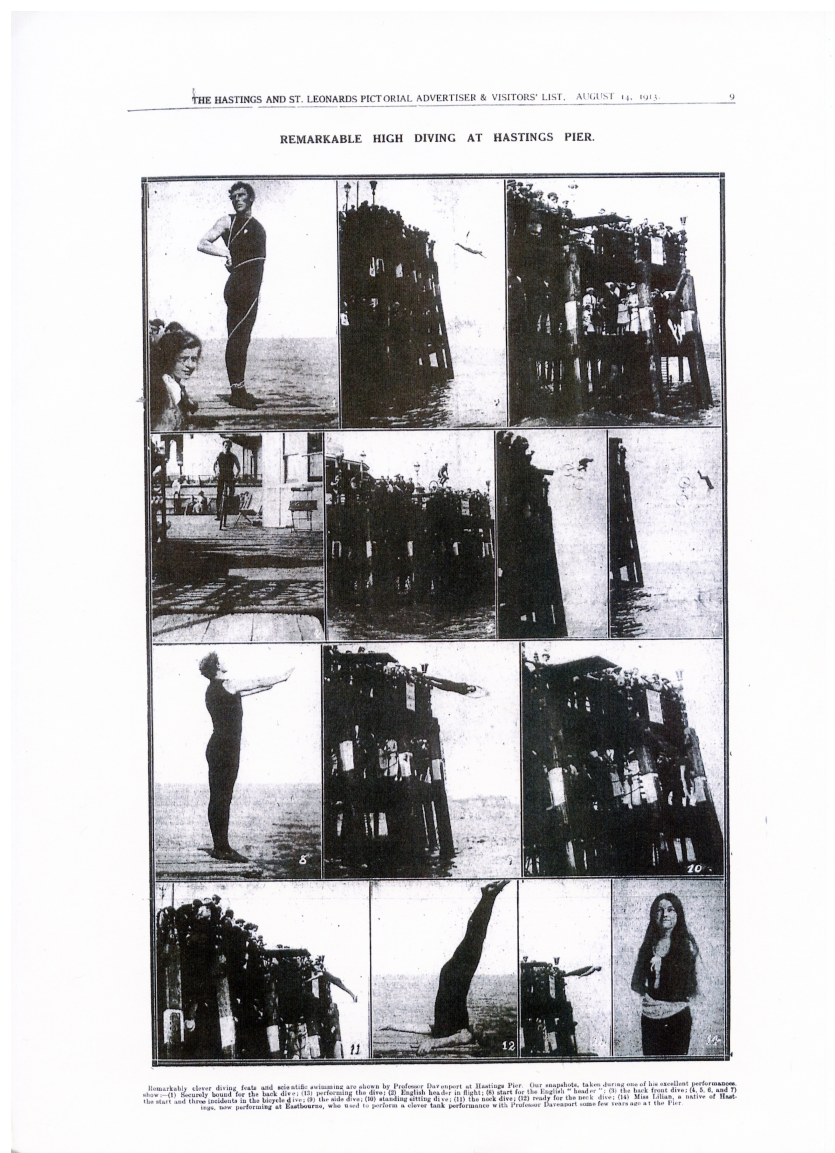
At this time the Professor, who had made excellent progress, swimming with a powerful stroke, was seen to turn blue, and no time was lost in taking him on board the launch, "San Toy," which was accompanying the swimmer. This mishap was not due to the cold of the water but to the after results of his accident in conjunction with the strain from his racing stroke, which affected his heart. He was brought into Dover, and afterwards taken to the Shakespeare Hotel, where he fortunately recovered. It might be mentioned that both the Professor and Mr. H. C. Douglas, who also attempted a Channel swim at the same time, were previous to their immersion anointed with a special preparation, the invention of a Mr. Fred Stratford, and especially made to prevent the sea from percolating the pores of the skin. Mr. Douglas, who took matters much easier than Professor Davenport, had, when he left the water, swum three miles out and drifted four miles eastward. The temperature of the water was about 61 to 62 degrees.

Professor Davenport, on April 15th of this year, made his first appearance as a professional diver at Hastings Pier, after performing at various fashionable watering-places on the South Coast. He has a brilliant repertoire of twenty different modes of dives, including the cigar dive, where he dives smoking a cigar, and which he brings up again alight. He can also dive from a bicycle from a flying trapeze. His most thrilling feat is to dive when enveloped in a common sack, cased over with cotton wool, which, after being saturated with paraffin, is set on fire before he enters the water. He was the first to introduce the fire dive into South America, where it proved to be an immense draw with Spanish and Creole audiences.

The latest achievement in the athletic world accomplished by Professor Davenport is Ju-Jitsu, the Japanese art of self-defence, when on two occasions during the recent visit of Raku (Professor S. K. Uyenishi), the finest living exponent of Ju-Jitsu, to Hastings, he wrestled with that wonderful Japanese Professor. His time out of the fifteen minutes allowed was seven minutes and fifty-eight seconds and seven minutes

and a half respectively. So pleased was Raku with his prowess that, besides complimenting him on his skilful evading of his deadly locks, he presented him with an autograph copy of his own work on that useful science.

A most pleasing trait in Professor Davenport's character, bringing out his true manliness, is his great devotion to and his care of his mother, which, from the writer's personal acquaintance with both mother and son, it need hardly be mentioned, is mutual.



Newspaper coverage of Professor Davenport's diving stunts (HPC014.031)

THE GREAT OMANI



Ron Cunningham, The Great Omani, escapologist, 1915–2007.
(HPC095.003)

The Great Omani was born in Windsor as Ron Cunningham, the son of a wine importer, and was educated at the Dorset public school Sherborne. After leaving school he went into the family business until it went bankrupt before the war. Penniless, he wandered one day into a second-hand bookstore on the Charing Cross Road where a book flew off a shelf and landed on his foot. It was *The Secrets of Houdini* by J.C.Cannell, a professional magician and friend of Houdini, and it explained how the master escaped bank vaults, walked through brick walls, floated women in mid-air, read minds, and much more. "It was a paranormal happening. From that moment my life altered completely. I felt a chemical change, and I never looked back." Ron Cunningham became The Great Omani, and after experimental trials with underwater stunts he was ready for public appearance in 1950.

At this period in his life he was living in Hastings, and could be seen tied to the pier pilings in a straitjacket as the tide rose, or performing the Houdini 'death dive', jumping into the sea from the end of the Pier, hooded, bound and padlocked. Another feat was the 'fire dive' where an

assistant threw half a bucket of petrol onto the sea, set it alight and then the Great Omani, wrapped in chains, jumped through the flames.

One winter highlight was a coffin ride from Hastings Pier to London, lying on a bed of broken glass on top of the van of his palmist friend Professor Cullen, “a human reservoir for alcoholic beverage”. The journey took in many watering places. Another was travelling from Hastings to London embedded in a block of concrete.



The Great Omani prepares to go to London lying in a coffin on a bed of glass.
(HPC095.011)

Later, Ron Cunningham moved along the coast to Brighton, but many years later he is still remembered in Hastings, where he began his career. “It’s a very hard profession to leave,” he once explained. “I tell you why: I’m an exhibitionist.”

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