

The jumper with pop-star fame - Joseph Darby

Many years ago, when I came to work in the Midlands, I shared a design office with another designer who one day told me that he could make a standing jump vertically alongside a 4 drawer filing cabinet and alight on the top. It was to me an impressive boast and I had never heard of such a feat so stood back to watch. To my amazement, he did it almost immediately. I was very impressed and wondered if this achievement was exceptional. We have all seen the long jump, triple jump and the high jump in athletic competitions, but I had never heard let alone seen a standing jump like this one.

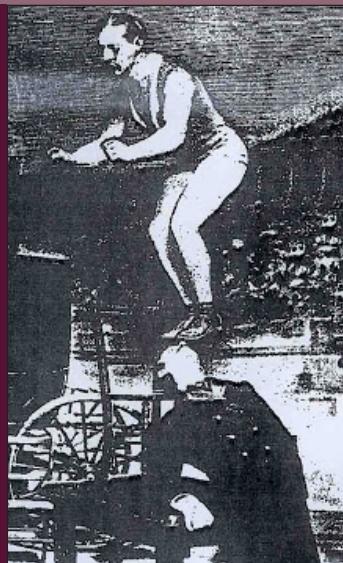
My co-designer told me that there was a history of making standing jumps and that the Black Country had once had a World Champion. I had to find out more and my investigation revealed the name of Joseph Darby.

Joseph Darby was born in Windmill End, Netherton on August 6, 1861. His parents were Abraham Darby, a maker of nails for shoeing horses, and Martha Darby (née Foley).

He admitted to not having a great deal of schooling. When interviewed in 1889 he said that he had only received ten months' schooling at the most "and only half-time at that." Joseph like his father, became a horse shoe nail maker from the age of 7. As he grew up he also worked in a local colliery and then on the canal side, unloading boats.

He had always been able to out-jump his friends as they competed in games to entertain themselves growing up.

"Spring jumping" (jumping starting from a stationary position) often using hand held weights to aid propulsion was a



Darby jumping chairs and seems, in mid flight to touch the face of a stand-in.

competitive sport and entertainment and Joseph started to make a name for himself by taking part in competitions in the Midlands and North East of England in his early 20's. He would entertain crowds by performing trick jumps and earned money in wagers with competitors.

JUMPS

Joseph Darby performed his jumps at a number of venues including sports grounds, circuses and concert halls. He received money for performing, often from betting on the outcome of competitions with other jumpers. The jumps themselves involved forwards and backwards spring jumps (often multiple jumps) and high jumps, in addition to competitive jumping. To achieve jumps of greater distances or heights, Darby would sometimes

employ dumb-bell shaped weights held in both hands. These could be used to provide extra momentum. It was reported in 1893 that he was using weights of 9lb each. It was also reported that he made his jumps wearing steel-tipped clogs, albeit "very thin and beautifully made" ones. However it was reported that when jumping in a backwards direction he wore pumps.

Darby's single forward spring-jump of 12ft 2 ½ in, achieved without weights on October 24, 1889, stands comparison with the best achieved since then. The world (amateur) record for this event when it was still an Olympic sport in the early 20th century was 3.47m (about 11ft 4 ½ in) achieved on 3 September 1904 by Ray Ewrey.

Long and High jumps

Joseph Darby's jumping record can be found in a number of sporting annuals from his era. In the Sporting Annual for 1897, Joseph Darby is listed as holding the following professional jumping records.

Seven Standing Jumps (with weights) – 96ft 4 in, achieved on July 2, 1887.

Longest Flying Jump (third of three stands) – 16ft 4 in, achieved on November 8, 1888.

Ten Standing Jumps (with weights) – 137ft 7 in, achieved on August 10, 1889.

Five Forward Jumps (with weights) – 76ft 3 in, achieved on August 19, 1889.

Four Forward Spring Jumps (with weights) – 56ft 2 in, achieved on August 19, 1889.

Standing Wide Jump (without weights) 12ft 2 ½ in, achieved on October 24, 1889.

Five Forward Jumps (without weights) 61ft 5 ½ in, achieved on May 28, 1890.

Standing Wide Jump (with weights) – 14ft 9 in, achieved on September 19, 1890.

Stand, Two Hops and Jump (with weights) – 36ft 7 in, achieved on March 14, 1891.

Standing Back Jump – 12ft 11 in, achieved on September 14, 1891.

Two Standing Jumps (with 19lb weights) – 28ft, achieved on November 6, 1891.

Three Standing Jumps (without weights), 35ft 11 in, achieved on November 6, 1891.

Standing High Jump with weights – 6ft 3 in, at the third stand jump, achieved on November 6, 1891.

Running High Jump – 6ft 5 ½ in, achieved on February 5, 1892

Three Standing Jumps with weights – 42ft 6 in, achieved on March 4, 1892.

Stand, Five Hops and Jump – 71ft 3 ½ in, achieved on June 11, 1892.

Standing High Jump – 6ft, with ankles firmly bound together, achieved on June 13, 1892.

Six Back Spring Jumps (with weights) – 58ft, achieved on June 13, 1892.

Three Backward Jumps – 30ft 9 in, achieved on October 26, 1894.

TRICK JUMPS

Darby developed a repertoire of "trick jumps" for entertainment purposes. Some of these jumps were over obstacles such as chairs at regularly spaced apart. Others required dexterity such as taking off or landing on a brick. He also developed the ability to briefly touch down his feet before his actual landing, which made possible some of his more famous "trick jumps". For one such trick jump, a volunteer would lie on the ground in the path of the jump and Joseph Darby would put chalk on the bottom of his shoes. During the jump he appear to land on and jump off the person's face leaving a chalk mark to prove it. The volunteer appeared not to feel anything. Another such trick jump would involve jumping over a tank of water and briefly touching the surface of the water with his shoes. He also performed a similar jump over an egg and touching but not breaking it.

- *Jumps over twenty chairs placed ten feet apart.*
- *Jumps over six chairs in one jump.*
- *Clears two chairs 18ft apart.*
- *Jumps off one brick, end up, over a chair, lands on another brick end up, and backwards without knocking the bricks down.*
- *Jumps 36 ft in three successive jumps and in the third jump lands on a man's back, whilst he is lying across the edge of two chairs, and off again without hurting him.*
- *Jumps off one brick, end up, over a horse 15 hands high.*

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WORLD CHAMPION

Between December 1887 and March 1888, he defeated George W. Hamilton, then the World Champion spring-jumper in three competitive matches. Hamilton, born in Frederica, New York on 28 October 1856, had jumped 14ft 5½in with weights at Rome, Michigan, USA on 3 October 1879. The American had come to England with , in which he performed under the guise of "Mustang Jack".The first meeting was at the Moorfield Grounds, Manchester on 24 December 1887. The match was for £100 a-side stake money and involved ten forward spring jumps with the use of weights. Darby won the match comfortably in front of around 600 spectators, leaping over 4ft. 5in. beyond the American's mark. The second of their meetings took place at the Leabrook Grounds, on 21 January 1888. At this match, the jumpers competed for £100 a side, each jumper alternately performing two stand spring forward jumps. Darby won this competition easily, out jumping the American by a distance of 2ft 6in. For the third meeting, which took place on 10 March 1888 at the Moorfield Grounds, Manchester, the American was given a 6-inch start for the contest which involved two stand spring forward jumps but he failed three times to match Darby's distance. Darby's feats led to him being presented with championship belts including one

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proclaiming him to be champion of the world, which was awarded at the Dudley Fêtes in 1889.

GUINNESS BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS

Darby's leap over a full sized billiard table lengthwise in Wolverhampton was mentioned in several editions of the above book . For this jump he took a running start and leapt from a 4inch wooden block, clearing the 12ft long, 2ft 10 in high table in one bound. This was achieved on 5 February 1892.

His fame spread and he went on to perform at theatres in London, Paris and North America. Highlights in his career included defeating the American World Champion spring-jumper in 1887 and appearing before King Edward VII in Covent Garden, London.

STAGE PERFORMANCES

On 6 February 1888, Joseph Darby appeared at , Birmingham as part of a testimonial benefit evening given in honour of the boxer .

On 10 September 1888, Darby appeared in his home village at the Friendly Societies Gala on Netherton Cricket Ground in front of 4,000 people including the local MP, . After performing a number of trick jumps, Darby then broke the record for 20 successive spring jumps that had stood at 79yards 6in, although he only required 17 jumps to pass this distance, leaping 81 yards, 1ft 6in in the process.

According to an interview he gave in a French newspaper, Darby's first stage appearance before a paying public took place in October 1888, when he jumped at the in London again as part of a

formance given for the benefit of the boxer, Jem Carney. For the performance, which took place on 18 October 1888, in front of over 3,700 spectators, Darby took the stage after several boxing bouts had been completed and reportedly "gave the most marvellous display of jumping feats ever seen on a Metropolitan stage". On 29 October 1888, Darby appeared at the Grand Circus, adjoining the Molineux Grounds, Wolverhampton. Despite losing his jumping clogs on the way to perthe venue, it was reported that he still "succeeded in astonishing those present".

From 5 November 1888 to 12 January 1889, Joseph Darby performed at the Royal Aquarium , a place of entertainment in London. On his debut, he took to the stage clad in a white singlet and scarlet trousers before starting with a jump over a chair from a brick placed on end without knocking over the brick. As part of his show at the Royal Aquarium, he challenged all-comers to compete with him for a bet, in value between £50 to £1000. In the newspaper advertisement for his performance, 17 separate trick jumps were listed, including forwards, backwards and sideways jumps over chairs; jumping off and onto bricks placed on end without knocking them down; jumping onto and off a man's face without hurting him; jumping onto and off a seated man's head without hurting him; jumping onto a man's hat and off again without doing any damage and jumping over a horse. In addition he stated that he would break jumping records set by anyone in the world. It was reported that during his performances at the Royal Aquarium, Darby suffered a serious injury whilst jumping over tables, snapping ligaments above and below the knee.

Championship belt

On the 11 and 12 June 1889, Joseph Darby performed at the Dudley Castle Fêtes. After his display, Darby was awarded a belt by Alderman Walker of Dudley Council. The belt, made of silver was decorated with enamelled pictures of Dudley Castle, crossed dumb-bells on ivy leaves, representations of Darby as a jumper, red cornelians mounted on gilded bosses, and the jumper's monogram. It was manufactured by Messrs. Elkington and Co. Limited of Birmingham. The money for the belt (£70.00) was raised by subscription.

In 1889, he wrote to the editor of the Sporting Life newspaper, challenging the jumper Jose Parker to a contest for stakes between £50 and £200, with the gate money to be used for the benefit of the Guest Hospital, Dudley. The two jumpers competed in May 1890 at Dudley Castle Grounds before a crowd estimated at over 20,000. Darby won all of the events.

In November 1889, it was reported that he had broken three jumping records at the Ashton-Under-Lyne Skating Rink towards the end of October. In the single stand jump without weights, he achieved 11 ft. 8½in., beating the record by 7½in. He also broke the record for two stand jumps and for the high jump by clearing 5ft. 6in.

On 30 November 1889, an newspaper advertisement stated that he was playing to packed houses and that he had only one available open date for the rest of the year. His sole agent was stated to be John Taylor of Windmill End, Dudley.

In December 1889, Darby was being billed as the "Champion Jumper of the

World", the "Ninth Wonder of the World" and as the "Flying Man".

In 1890 it was reported that: "Darby goes through no exceptional training unless for a special contest. He keeps himself trim by a little boxing, careful dietary, and keeping clear of alcohol almost to the extent of teetotalism."

Performs in England, Ireland and Scotland

In early May 1890, Darby was performing at in Dublin. Darby's shoes were kept on display at the theatre bar in order to show they contained no springs.

In the middle of May 1890, Darby performed at the Bradford and West Riding Gala held at Peel Park, Bradford.

On 28 May 1890, at a competition held in conjunction with the Dudley Castle Fêtes, Darby jumped 14ft 2in in a single jump with weights, beating the English record.

In June 1890, Darby performed at the annual sports meeting held at the ground.

In late December of the same year he performed at Mr. Moss' Xmas and New Year Carnival held at Waverley Market, Edinburgh.

On 14 June 1891, Darby defeated Temple Jones of Bolton at the Belle Vue Gardens, Stockton.

In February 1892, Darby was performing at Rowland's Circus, Wolverhampton, where his act included jumping 36 feet in three jumps ending with a jump over a chair placed on a table; jumping

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over a tank of water, lowering his feet to touch the surface of the water as he passed over the tank and springing over eight chairs placed back to back. It was at this venue where Darby performed one of his most famous trick jumps: that of clearing a full sized billiard table (minus cushions). In fact, an authentic billiard table was not available at the occasion, so a dummy table was erected. Darby was hampered in his attempt by lack of space and could only take two stand spring jumps prior to leaping the table, which he succeeded in doing on his fifth attempt.

In 1892, Joseph Darby appeared at the Empire Theatre, Leicester Square on the same bill as the celebrated musical-hall performer Marie Lloyd

attended one of the performances and wrote: "Now is it not odd that at a music-hall to which, perhaps, half the audience have come to hear Marie Lloyd sing or to see Mr Darby jump a ten-barred gate, you get real stage art".

According to an American newspaper: "English athletes are just now flocking to the Empire theatre, London, to witness the high and broad jumping feats of Joseph Darby, the champion jumper and holder of the championship belt." The same source reported: "one of his favourite tricks is to place six chairs in a row and spring from a brick at one end of the line to a corresponding brick at the other. His flying feats include a leap over a chair placed on a table and over eight chairs in a row, a length of eighteen feet. He goes over a horse seventeen hands high with his ankles tied. Among his phenomenal performances are a backward spring over three chairs and a leap over a tank of water ten feet long, during which he lightly skims the water with his foot. His most unique feat is a

jump over a chair, alighting on a man's face and jumping back again without injuring his assistant. As the latter is generally a choice specimen of the London tough the escape of his cheek is not to be wondered at. Darby concludes his sensational performance with a leap over a six-foot hurdle lined at the top with a bristling row of spikes."

In November 1892, a newspaper reported that he had won over £30,000 in jumping matches.

In January 1893, an Australian newspaper acclaimed Darby with the words: "no athlete can boast of such a brilliant record of achievements in his own particular department as Mr Darby, who for the last eleven years can show an unbroken series of triumphs gained with the utmost ease from those pseudo-champion jumpers of all countries who have considered themselves foemen worthy of his steel." The same source stated: "Mr Darby is a married man, thirty-one years of age, and is living at a small village about two miles from Dudley, in Worcestershire, in the same house in which he was born and brought up."

On 22 July 1893, Darby took on another remarkable jumper of the age, John (Jack) Higgins of . The competition was held at the Moorfield Ground, and involved both athletes performing a "hop, two strides and a jump" for a stake of £100. On the day, Higgins broke the world record for this event and Darby was defeated.

Performs in France, Germany and North America

In October 1893, Joseph Darby performed at the Cirque d'Hiver in Paris

On 23 September 1893, it was reported that Darby was in his fifth week at an engagement at the "Winter Gardens" in Berlin:

Later in the same month, he was described as the 'greatest phenomenon in the jumping line in the world' by the Montreal Daily Witness as he set out on a tour of the USA.

The same source described him as being 5ft 8½ in tall with a 40 in chest, weighing 175 lb.

In addition, it was stated that 'the muscle of his arm measures 15½ in, and the thick of the leg 28 inches, but the calf is remarkable for its iron quality rather than anything else.'

He reportedly set out for the USA on 21 October 1893, arriving aboard the *Atalanta* at New York on October 30. In November 1893, he issued a challenge to "jump any man either backward or forward with or without weights for from \$5,000 to \$10,000 a side".

In October and November 1893, Darby was performing with a troupe in the play "The Country Circus" at the Grand Opera House, Brooklyn. The opening night was on 30 October 1893.

Later the troupe performed the play at other venues: on 26 December 1893, Darby performed at the Olympic, [St Louis](#) and in January 1894, the troupe had moved on to Washington, where they performed at Albaugh's.

Darby returned to England in February 1894, again taking the steamer *Umbria* for the crossing. After his arrival at Liverpool with his manager, Jack Jones, on 17 February 1894, Darby went on to Dudley where he received an "enthusiastic reception".

In April 1894, whilst performing at Ohmy's Grand Circus, Longton, Darby issued a challenge for all comers to compete for between £500 and £1000 a-side with a choice of between 1 and 20 jumps. Darby offered competitors a 5ft start over 10 jumps and 10ft start over 20 jumps.

In May 1894, Darby was performing at Hengler's Grand Cirque,

In June and July 1894, Darby was performing in Paris again, this time at the Cirque d'Ét.

Second championship belt and sporting retirement

Darby announced his retirement from competitive jumping (although not from exhibitions) on 23 July 1894 after winning a competition held at Dudley Castle Grounds. He had held the World Championship for 17 years. The Manchester Sporting Chronicle awarded Darby a Championship belt as a result of winning this contest. The belt was presented at the conclusion of the two day sports fête by the Earl of Dudley .

Further performances

In March 1895, he interrupted a tour of France to appear at the Empire Theatre, Coventry, the stage having been specially strengthened for his act.

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In a newspaper interview given in May 1895, Darby stated that he had performed in "France, Germany, Holland, many other countries". He also stated that he had performed in front of royalty in many nations, including the Prince of Wales. According to an obituary article, written much later, a special command performance had been arranged before the Prince of Wales by at Evans' Rooms, Covent Garden.

In August 1895, Darby gave performances at Tudor's Circus in Cambridge.

In December 1897, Darby had a benefit performance at Walsall, taking on local jumper Arthur Boyce. For this match, it was decided that Boyce would jump in a forward direction without weights against Darby jumping backwards with weights. Before the match started, Darby entertained the crowds by leaping over a horse-drawn carriage. A newspaper reported on the event : "on Darby entering the arena he met with a magnificent reception. A covered brougham was brought from the nearest cab stand, and at the second attempt, amid deafening cheers, Darby was over like a bird." Darby went on to win the match.

In 1898, he featured in a short film made by Riley Brothers entitled 'Joe Darby in his Various Jumps'. The film showed Darby "leaping the horse - Jumping over a man and just touching his face - Jumping over water and just skimming the surface - Jumping over a large number of chairs.

On 30 August 1898, Darby suffered an injury whilst attempting to jump over a brougham at Scarborough, catching the top of the carriage as he passed over and falling forward onto his head.

In September 1898, Darby was back in Paris, performing at the Casino de Paris on a bill including boxers, dancers and cyclists.

Brief return to competitive jumping and final performance

On 12 November 1898, Darby briefly returned to competitive jumping when he took on Thomas Colquitt of St Helens at the Wellington Grounds, , in front of 2000 spectators. The competition involved a sequence of 10 forward spring jumps without weights. Colquitt won the event and the £100 stake.

It is recorded that on 19 November 1898 he was summoned for a 'Royal Command Performance' at Covent Garden where he performed in front of the Prince of Wales, the future .

In March 1899, Darby was again performing at the Cirque d'Hiver in Paris, where his performance included leaping over a horse-drawn carriage.

In August 1899, Darby was reported as appearing at the "Milford Flower Show and Sports", where his performance included jumping over a cab and over 14 chairs.

In July 1900, Darby performed again at the Milford Flower Show, when it was reported that he was unable to do one of his most popular jumps, leaping over a cab, because the vehicle did not arrive in time.



CAREER AFTER JUMPING

Despite Darby's fame, he never lived far from his birthplace in Netherton. In 1900 he was listed by a local trade directory with the profession of "Champion Jumper", living at 23 High Street, Netherton.

In later life he became the landlord of the Albion Inn, Stone Street. He advertised on 9 June 1900 that he had taken over this pub and he was listed as being a "Licensed Victualler" there from 1901 onwards. In September 1900 it was reported that he had entered a lion's cage set up on Dudley Market Place in order to settle a bet of £10.

In 1934, Darby attended the civic reception given to the Dudley-born Wimbledon tennis champion, .

He died in Dudley on the 22 December 1937.

Commemoration

In 1893, a Canadian newspaper reported that: "he has thirty-nine feats in his performance or act, the most sensational of which is his great water jump, representing a jump from England to America. In accomplishing this feat he will alight on the water and off again without wetting the upper leather of his boots. This marvellous feat has never been accomplished by any artist in this world." More detail of this jump was given in an Australian publication: "a tank is set in the middle of the stage, and is filled to the brim with water. Mr Darby takes a flying leap, and as he passes over the water he descends slightly. By this downward motion he, as it were, alights on the top of the water, and flies off

Dudley Man Who Jump on Eggs Not Break One

Amazing Feats of a "Man Bird"

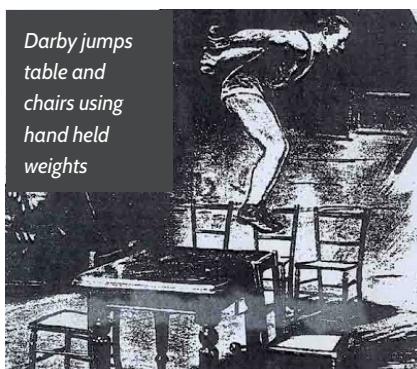
*Photo: Express and Star
Mr. Joseph Darby*

THERE is nothing about the jolly jester with the Pickwickian punch whom I saw pulling bear in the comparative obscurity of Stone street, Dudley, to indicate that he was once a world famous fighter.

Mr. Joe Darby is an example of what one man can do if he only tries.

Mr. Darby is a Dudley man born at Bromsgrove but at Dudley now, 1868, and during his residence here especially in the early days he was a noted exhibitionist both with a book presented to him on behalf of the town in 1893.

Mr. Darby was married to Emma Hartwell with Mr. He was always known as the "Jester" even in his early years when he was a member of the circus performing in the United States, Canada, and Australia, and in many other countries, and of his many performances he is particularly noted for his "water jump" from England to America.



again without wetting the upper leather of his boots." When asked how he managed this feat, he replied: "I really don't know, it comes naturally to me, though when I think of it myself it seems almost an impossibility."

There is an exhibition of Joe Darby memorabilia in Dudley Museum at the Archives, including his championship belts. Joseph Darby is also commemorated in a bronze plaque set into the pavement of Dudley's marketplace as part of the "Dudley Time Trail" designed by Dudley borough artist, Steve Field.