

**Elephants, Moon Rocket and Fire by Les Shannon of Scarborough.****Interviewed by Huw Roberts**

Today, I'm talking to Les Shannon. Born and bred in Scarborough Les spent his career in the fire service in the town. I want to ask him about some of the experiences he had as a fireman but he also has some interesting tales to tell about his childhood in Scarborough which included some unusual stories relating to elephants as well as a very early experience with space travel. I'm particularly grateful to Les for bringing some photographs along to illustrate his stories.

*Let's first deal with your work with the fire service. Will you tell us a little bit about some of the more high profile premises fires that you had to deal with in your time.*

I started in the fire service in 1973 and had to train in Birkinshaw in the West Yorkshire. I started in Scarborough in January 1974. The first major job I had was the Olympia on the on the foreshore overlooking the sea. About midnight we got a call out and two pumps and a turntable ladder went from Scarborough Fire station. As we were going down Eastborough you could actually see the flames going up into the sky. As we turned into the foreshore the officer in charge made the pumps up to wanting four. We got there and we had to get the hose off obviously and start trying to put the fire out. It was the end of July, so there were a lot of people present on the foreshore. At that point the tide was out so they were stood at the edge of the water watching and you could tell as the fire was getting on, because they were getting closer to the railings which, by 6 o'clock in the morning they were all standing along the railings.

It was my first experience in anger on the turntable, I had to go up and use the jets into the fire. One of the problems was that in trying to get this fire out and eventually as we got it out and moved the hose elsewhere it would start up again. It wasn't till afterwards we found out it was the mains gas pipe that had been fractured and obviously we were never going to put it out as it turned out. We eventually had ten pumps which would be from Sherbourne, Snainton, Robin Hoods Bay, Whitby, Bridlington were involved. Filey were involved. All these pumps came to Scarborough, which was the biggest fire that they had since the war period. When Flixton was on fire, they had 20 pumps there.

*So that was quite an event. Was it the biggest fire that you had to deal with?*

I suppose it was the biggest. Castle Hotel was a big one, but I think that was the biggest.

*Let's move on to those tales you have relating to elephant in Scarborough, not a town where one would expect to encounter these animals. Start, if you will, with the experience you had with an elephant based in Northstead Manor Gardens.*

Well, I was very young at the time and I have this vivid memory of being lifted onto the back of an elephant, which sounds very strange, but I was aware this wasn't a real elephant. What it was at the time I had no idea. After that I'd asked a lot of people over a long period of time, but nobody knew anything about it. What it turned out to be was that my grandfather was here from Glasgow on holiday and he'd take me down to the Open Air Theatre where I got put on this elephant at the entrance to the Open Air Theatre. It trundled up to where the railway station is now and that was the ride I'd had. It wasn't until the 1970s, I opened up a Scarborough Evening News and there was an article with a picture of that elephant. As soon as I saw the picture I knew it was that elephant and it turns out that somebody had made two of these elephants. They were mechanical but they had wheels underneath their legs. They looked like they were actually walking, but it was running on wheels.

*I believe that you have evidence of more than one elephant visiting Scarborough and spending time on the beach at South Bay. Now, I think that was a good deal before you were born.*

Well, basically, I don't know that much about them other than on the photograph there were two of them and they're getting cared for on the South Bay beach. Having looked into it a little bit and while I can't confirm it, it turns out that there was an Indian gentleman who had a manor house built for himself. He had worked for Queen Victoria and used that money to set up and one of the things he had were elephants. He used to walk them down to and around the foreshore, which people complained that it wasn't fair on the elephants because of how the road was under their feet. He eventually moved to Whitby and he used to take them down to the beach in Whitby and then walked them back to the Sandsend area. There's a rumour that they're buried at Filey, but I can't confirm that.

*That's very interesting. Did he offer people rides on them?*

Not that I'm aware of. I don't know what he kept them for at all but I have never heard of people getting rides on them. The only other elephants known in Scarborough were obviously the circus elephants that used to come on Falsgrave where the goods yard is and they used to parade the circus through the town and depending on where the circus was, it was often down where Valley Rd coach park is, now the University College or it would be up Burniston Road car park and they would parade through the town and the elephants would be walking through the town.

*And was that an annual event?*

As far as I remember it was annual. I remember going down to Valley Rd Coach Park after the circus finished and watching them dismantling the marquee, which was quite fun. They used to have a separate section which was the menagerie and you could pay separately to walk round the animals.

*Finally, I think you personally experienced some space travel at South Bay. What exactly was this experience?*

Well, in the early 1950s, a new comic had come out called the Eagle and the main star in the Eagle comic was Dan Dare, a spaceman and at the time he had a spaceship called the Anastasia. Well, the council managed to get hold of a giant replica of the Anastasia. It was placed almost on top of the toilets that are next door to the Olympia now. I remember being taken in there. I was probably four or five years old and we were all marched into the centre of this room in the spaceship and there on the wall was a television, which was quite a novelty at that time because we'd never had or seen one. They were just school chairs that you sat in. You sat down and they built up that you're ready for take off and you had a lot of noise and you saw it on the television, you were going into space and you were approaching the moon and as you got close to the moon, before we could land, they announced the fact that There was a problem and we had to return to earth and so it turned round and we came back to Earth and that was the ride. In modern days it would have been very unimpressive but to a young child that had never seen television before it was very impressive.

*So this was effectively telling the story, not quite the same, as a real event that happened 15 years later.*

Yes. I remember that well too, stayed up all night waiting for him to come out the spaceship after that landed.

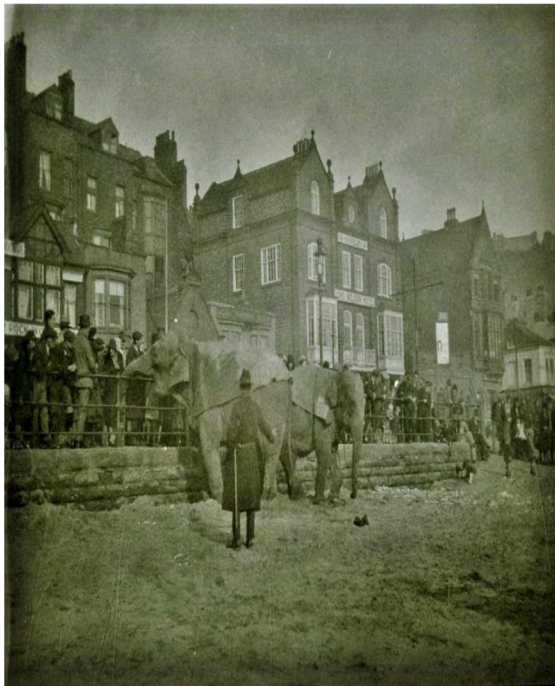
*Les Shannon, thank you for bringing to us these wonderful stories, which have given us an insight into the experiences not only for those people who visited Scarborough in the 1950s and 1960s as part of their holidays, but were also enjoyed by those who lived and grew up in the town. Thank you very much indeed.*

Interview undertaken by Huw Roberts with Les Shannon and transcribed by Huw Roberts

December 2023.



Les Fighting the Fire at the Olympia



Two African Elephants on Scarborough South Bay Beach



Mechanical Elephant Ride at Northstead Manor Gardens



Space Ship Anastasia, South Bay Scarborough