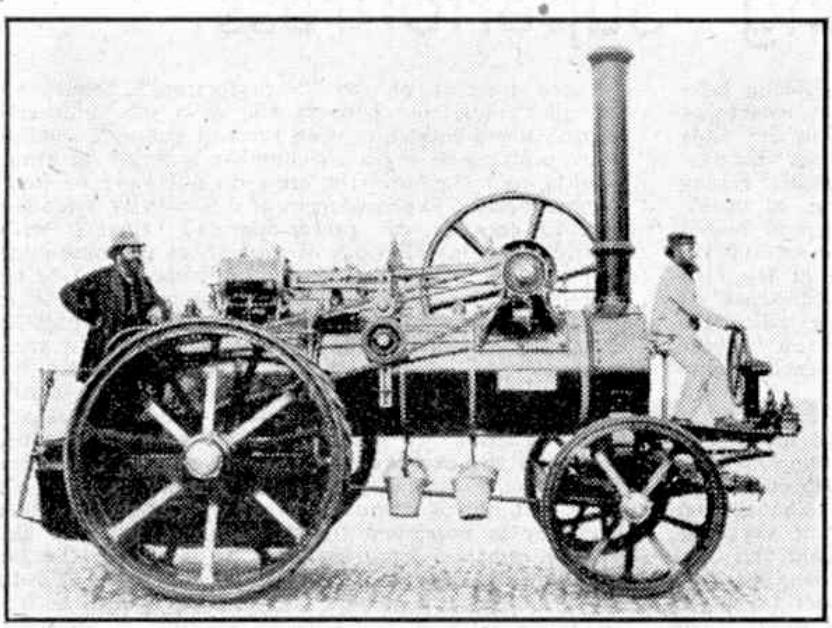
A Genius of the Fair World

The Story of Frederick Savage

By E. R. Yarham

ONCE upon a time country folk did their marketing at the nearest annual fair, and after it was done they abandoned themselves to cudgel playing, throwing at cocks, flying dragons, two-headed monsters, fat boys, soaped pigs and all the rest of the fascinating age-old attractions of the fairground, not forgetting Punch and Judy. These will return, for the English fair is more than an institution; it is part of our national life. These days, however, the fair engines are in many cases engaged in sterner work than whirling roundabouts. *"Norah," "Princess,"* and *"Demolitious,"* and *"Illuminator"* which was serving on the Western Front a quarter of a century ago, know every fairground in England, but they were posted to London to pull down great walls that shook but refused to fall when the capital was assaulted from the air. Savages of King's Lynn, the birthplace of the roundabout in its many guises, and home of some of those engines, whose name is a household one in the amusement world throughout the Empire, have also had more urgent work of late to attend to than "all the fun of the fair." Ships must come first, and at this moment an engine stands forlornly in the yard of the firm waiting for the return to peace.



One of the earlier types of Savage traction engines, with Frederick Savage himself standing on the rear platform.

The story of Savages of Lynn s one of the most interesting, but at the same time most undeservedly forgotten chapters in the history of English engineering. Frederick Savage, 1828–1897, was an untutored mechanical genius who revolutionised the amusements of the mass of the people, and only by a mischance that has never been explained did he miss being the first builder of motor cars in England. Towards the end of his life, when his firm had achieved an international reputation, he was approached by American financiers with plans and patent rights for the manufacture of motor cars. Terms were arranged and a large factory was erected in the grounds of the firm for the production of cars, but for some unknown reason the project came to nothing.

Savage had been interested in mechanical propulsion from a lad. When leaving his village home as a young man he devised a primitive "car." He fixed the body on four wheels, and the axles were revolved by side levers, worked by both hands. He used to come home at week-ends on it, and to visit his sweetheart, who lived in the adjoining village of Sloley. Owing to its method of propulsion his "car" was dubbed "go-cart" by the country people, and thus the expression arose, "Here comes Savage with his go-cart."

His fame does not rest on that, but on his work for that great body of itinerants, the showmen of Great Britain. He was their cleverest engineer and benefactor, and the Showmen's Guild, formerly the United Kingdom Van Dwellers' Protection Society, which has done so much to raise the status of the profession and to protect its rights, owed more in its early years to Frederick Savage than to any other person.

In 1933 the Showmen's Guild paid commemorative honours to Savage during Lynn's Mart, as the town's fair is known, and these included a procession to his monument in the London Road, the only statue to a public man in the borough. It was fitting that such a tribute should be paid to this great engineer, who through his inventive genius applied steam power to the roundabouts and thus created an important industry.

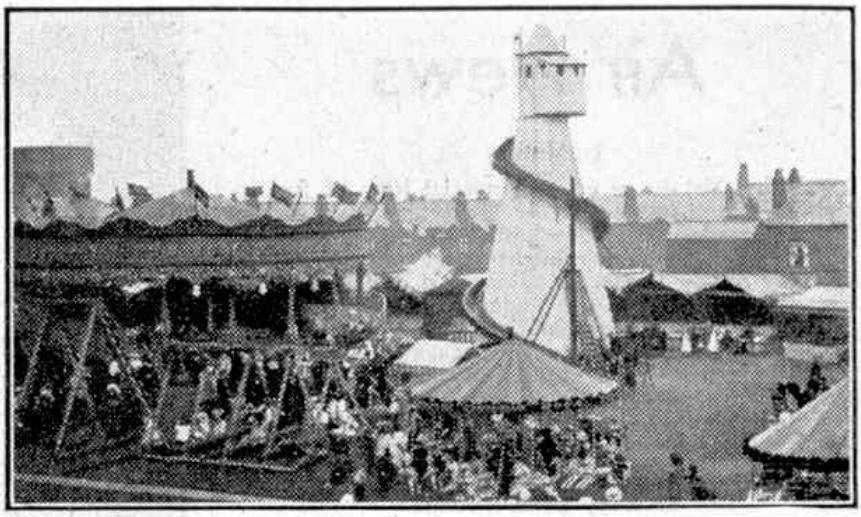
Before the introduction of steam power, pleasure riding devices were very primitive, propelled by a pony or by manual power; and those engaged in the pushing were given a ride in repayment for their energy. Although these devices were not numerous they were well patronised, but because of their antiquated method of propulsion they could not make much of an appeal to the multitude. When Frederick Savage harnessed steam to the roundabout he placed within the travelling showman's reach an invention that effected the most sweeping changes in the fair world since the Middle Ages.

The improvements did not stop at the roundabouts themselves, for decoration, illumination and music all made marked progress. Decoration consisted of highly gilded carved work; the smelly, smoky oil flare gave place to the electric lamp; and the creaking barrel organ was replaced by the powerful mechanical organ. In more recent years the use of electricity had led to further improvements. Such profound changes could not fail to have their effect upon the showmen themselves, and the proprietors of the fairs too. Often tens of thousands of pounds are invested in the elaborate apparatus of a modern fair, and the attendants must be skilled mechanics.

Frederick Savage, the man to whom this revolution is mainly due, was reared in as humble and unpromising circumstances as any of the showmen he so tremendously aided. He was born in a cottage at Hevingham, near Norwich, on 3rd March 1828. Of education he had little, and he was early sent crow-scaring on a neighbouring farm, taking home the princely sum of half a crown as wages for long tiring hours in the fields. He quickly showed his mettle by determining to leave home, which he did with all he possessed tied up in a small bundle on his back, when he was about 16 years old. At

East Dereham he got work at Cooper's, afterwards Gill's foundry, as a rough carpenter, and was able to put a little money by. With this as his capital he moved on to King's Lynn about four years later.

In King's Lynn Savage joined the employ of Charles Willetts as a wheelwright and blacksmith. Willetts had a machine shop in Baker Lane, off High Street, and the young man showed such ingenuity, judgment and industry that when his master retired two years later he was able to set up a forge of his own in the Mermaid and Fountain Yard. He married on the strength of that success, and good fortune continued to follow him, particularly as he proved an unusually skilful mechanic. To begin with he made iron rakes, but soon he turned to something more ambitious. Up till that time farmers had flailed their corn to separate the grain from the husks. Savage devised a winnowing machine that had a hopper to receive the corn, and a fan to blow away the husks, which dropped into refuse bins, while the corn was fed into sacks. Though still hand operated it was the predecessor of the threshing machine.



A Savage roundabout, driven by a steam engine, is shown in this fairground scene.

The young engineer's business expanded so quickly that he required larger premises, and took part of an old workhouse. He stayed there six years and began building threshing machines and portable steam engines. Another move became necessary, and this time he established what became known as the St. Nicholas Iron Works, which stood near the Tuesday Market Place, so that he was in the heart of things. There he continued along the lines that he had begun, and opened up others, such as traction engines. His reputation as an agricultural engineer grew fast, and he gained further renown when he devised the first successful steam roundabout. His firm became the only one in the world making this and similar appliances.

A fine example of a "spinning-top" steam switchback as built by Savage Brothers Ltd. This has been converted to electric drive and the cars are not the original, but it retains its old-world grandeur. Photograph reproduced by courtesy of Mr. P. W. Bradley.

The final move was to newly-established land north of the town, with excellent rail and water facilities. Six acres of land were taken over, and soon 300 to 500 men were employed. In conjunction with an Essex firm Savage patented the steam plough, an invention in which £100,000 was sunk, and the firm built up a great export trade in agricultural implements, steam ploughing tackle, threshing and dressing machines, elevators, etc. and show appliances, so that the names of Savage and King's Lynn became known throughout the world.

Savage took up the fair business as the result of his contact with showmen travelling with primitive hobby-horse machines and swing boats. He showed considerable skill in repairing these, and when one man consulted him about a certain improvement, he replied: "Yes, my boy, and I'll make you one driven by steam-power." He was as good as his word, and this first power roundabout gained such fame and popularity that he was soon asked to build others.

These early contrivances showed signs of being conversions from manual operation, but yet a few lingered on until right after the last war. The small centre-engine was separate from the main pole and was rather like a developed tar-boiler in appearance. Such portability as it possessed was provided by four fixed wheels, more of the order of castors, crudely attached to the boiler, the use of which was confined to manœuvring to the centre from the truck in which the engine was carried. These roundabouts were built in the 70s and were followed by the more developed centre-engine.

The well-known circus proprietors, the Sangers, mentioned a device they had seen in Paris. Savage developed it into what was known as Sea-on-Land, boats being drawn round a circular track by horses, which were soon replaced by a traction engine in the centre of the ring. Later came the circular Switchback, embodying the principle of this ride, and the ingenious Switchback Gallopers, which consisted of horses galloping over a circular track. The Cake Walk was another invention, and the Tunnel Railway was a covered-in circular track forming a tunnel through which a miniature railway engine drew small carriages.

Frederick Savage's inventions marked a new epoch in the history of the show world, and he was honoured by engineering societies both at home and abroad. He found time to take a prominent part in the civic life of Lynn, and the untutored country lad's crowning honour was his mayoralty in 1889–90. His term was an extremely popular one, and at the end of it the statue in London Road was privately erected as an acknowledgment of his distinguished career.