Intermittently on the halls

presented by

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Lewis Davenport had a career on the music halls which lasted 30 years on and off, from about 1900 to about 1930. He also had a magic business, and that’s one reason why he was “intermittently on the halls”.

The other reason was that music halls weren’t the only places where performers could find work. Even when Lewis was performing magic, as distinct from selling it, he wasn’t necessarily working on the halls. He spent a lot of time at St George’s Hall, the Maskelyne theatre in London, and he also did private work and concert work. He worked at cinemas in cine-variety, and he made brief incursions into concert party and revue. And he spent a fair amount of time working abroad.

These two photographs date from 1925, when Lewis’s music hall career was at its peak. The lady is his second wife, Winifred, who was his principal assistant in the 1920s. Lewis was in his forties when these photographs were taken, but Winifred was ten years younger.

Winifred was the grandmother of my husband John. She lived to the age of ninety and I got to know her quite well. She was proud of the part she played in Lewis's stage act, and she taught me to understand the contribution that a good assistant can make to a magician's act. I often think of her when I see an illusionist working with a glamorous assistant.
This is the young Lewis Davenport. He was born into a family of coopers and if he hadn’t gone on the stage he might have spent his working life making barrels. Some of his relatives were wealthy, but his immediate family was quite poor - so I’d like to know where the money came from to buy the dress suit and magical apparatus that you see in this photograph. It’s possible that Lewis earned the money himself by doing shows - or perhaps one of his wealthy relatives helped him out.

The photograph is said to have been taken in 1898, the year when Davenport's magic business is said to have been founded. In 1898 Lewis Davenport was sixteen years old. Nowadays that sounds absurdly young to be starting your own business, but Lewis could have left school at 13, maybe even earlier. At 16 he’d have far more experience of the world than a 16-year-old of today.
I don’t believe the 1898 date for the photograph. I think 1903 is more likely – five years later.

Davenport’s magic business started in a small way and built up slowly. By 1906 Lewis was running a mail order operation from his home in East London. It wasn’t until 1908 that he opened his first magic shop at 426 Mile End Road.

Our first record of Lewis Davenport as a performer is in the summer of 1902, at a concert in Stepney which was part of the coronation festivities – that’s the coronation of Edward VII. This is a page from one of Lewis’s notebooks, with two press cuttings about the show pasted in.

Lewis was 20 years old at the time of this show, and my guess is that he was already an experienced amateur performer. In those days there were all sorts of opportunities for a budding entertainer to perform in front of an audience - though he wouldn’t be paid for these shows.
This is a weekly magazine that the young Lewis Davenport would have been familiar with. The title is *The Showman - An Illustrated Journal for Showmen and all Entertainers*, and it tells us that the magazine was aimed principally at fairground showmen. But the editor was a magician named P T Selbit, and there was a lot in it about magic and magicians. Lewis might have been interested in one of the articles in this issue, which is dated 1 February 1901.

Here’s the beginning of the article.

**Practical Tips**

*To Conjurers, Ventriloquists, Shadowists, and Speciality Entertainers.*

Much that is useful and interesting has already been written, telling entertainers how to begin and what to do when before an audience. We intend carrying the matter a little further, by informing our readers of the best and most profitable method of securing paid engagements.

The purpose of the article was to advise readers on how to get paid for their performances. The place to start, the article suggested, was the clubs - working men’s clubs.

In those days there were many working men's clubs in Britain. Nowadays the ones that still exist tend to be drinking clubs, but in the early 1900s some London clubs put on a show several nights a week. Not only that, they paid their performers - from 3/6 (17½p) to half a guinea (52½p) per show, according to this article. 3/6 doesn’t sound very much, but it was a worthwhile sum of money for the young Lewis Davenport.

For the very young performer, the problem with the working men's clubs was that he had to be 21 to become a member. Lewis's 21st birthday was at the end of 1902 and he spent 1903 and part of 1904 doing club shows. It was a good way for him to broaden his experience as an entertainer without giving up his day job.
Once he’d established himself in the working men's clubs, the next step was to look for work on the music halls or as a society entertainer doing private shows. Lewis was an East Ender, probably with an accent to match, and it made sense for him to try the music halls rather than society work.

This is one of his early music hall bookings, at the Sebright music hall on Hackney Road, London. The date is August 1903. He's on the bill in smallish type as Silent Devonport. The East End music halls could be rough and at the bottom of this handbill it says "Strict order will be maintained". This may have been difficult. There’s a team of lady wrestlers at the top of the bill, and it must have been rowdy when they were on.
This is the earliest poster that we have with Lewis Davenport on it. It’s for a concert on 30 May 1903 at the Tee To Tum Club in Stamford Hill. I don’t think the Tee To Tum was a working men’s club - it seems to have been primarily a sports club, and quite a big one at that. Lewis appeared in this show twice: as Lewis Davenport, silent magician, and Theosopho, thought reader. He was paid 12/- for the two turns.

He got the booking because he’d entered a talent competition at the Tee To Tum and won a prize. The competition was reported in the *Encore* and Lewis was described as “a neat conjurer with a budget of clean tricks”. In subsequent years he quoted that on his notepaper.
In August 1904 Lewis married Julia Dwyer. Round about that time he and Julia devised a stage act which was suitable for the music halls and not long after their marriage they turned professional. This is a poster for their act. It's actually a black and white reproduction of a colour lithograph (reproduced in The Magician's Road to Fame by Laurance Glen.)

The Davenports were what was known as a silent act - in other words, they performed to music instead of using patter. Unlike many husband and wife acts it was an equal partnership, which means that Julia did some of the magic.

In those days most music halls offered twice nightly variety: typically seven or eight acts in a show, two identical shows each evening from Monday to Saturday, and a complete change of programme every Monday. That meant that all the acts had to travel to a new theatre every Sunday, so if they were fully booked they never had a day off. It wasn’t an easy life, even for the acts that were earning good money.

In spite of the hard work, Lewis and Julia may have found the life appealing. At home they lived in a small house with Lewis’s mother and stepfather and their six children. On tour they lived in digs, probably in better conditions than they were used to at home, and certainly with less overcrowding.
Lewis and Julia did quite well on the music halls. Here we find them topping the bill at the Palace Theatre, Dover for a week in June 1908.

Music halls varied enormously in status. I don’t fully understand the pecking order, but the Dover Palace certainly wasn’t a number one date. But to be top of the bill, even at a minor music hall like this one, was something Lewis and Julia could be proud of.

It says on the poster that the Davenports were "direct from the Palace, London". That’s a lie. The week before their appearance at Dover they were at the Sandgate Alhambra and the week before that they were at the Sheerness Hippodrome.
Lewis and Julia were also booked for some of the music halls belonging to the MacNaghten circuit. The MacNaghten halls probably counted as number twos.

This poster is for the Palace, Warrington in January 1908. The Davenports are at the bottom of the bill. In those days bottom of the bill was the second best spot and the trade terms were "topping the bill" and "bottoming the bill". I imagine Lewis and Julia saying to their friends, "We're bottoming at the MacNaghtens" and their friends saying "Gosh, you are doing well" - as indeed they were.

It was during Lewis’s time with Julia that he worked in concert party.
W F Frame, the Man U Know, was a Scottish comedian who took concert parties on tour in Scotland and northern England. Lewis and Julia worked with him for two seasons: a 13-week Lowland tour in 1907 and a 3-week Highland tour in 1908. Concert party artists had to be versatile and Lewis and Julia did two acts for W F Frame: a magic act as the Davenport and a juggling act as Doo & Dare.

This handbill is for the 1907 Lowland tour and it features a photograph of the Man U Know. It’s clear that W F Frame was the name that attracted audiences to his shows.

The performers are listed on the left hand side of the handbill. It was a varied show. Andrew Brown and Lena Wylie were singers. Jack Chambers was a black-face singer and dancer. The St Johns and the Handbell Ringers were musical acts. Then there was a comedy sketch by Clarke and Cambridge, and Lewis and Julia Davenport as jugglers and magicians. And three turns by W F Frame himself.
This poster is from the 1908 Highland tour. It’s a show at the Public Hall in Grantown on 28 April. Again we have the Davenport, magicians and illusionists, and Doo and Dare, comedy jugglers.

These tours round the sparsely populated north were very different from the music hall work that Lewis and Julia were used to. For one thing, it was unusual for Frame's company to spend more than one night in each place. There was only one show each evening, which was just as well given the travelling and setting up that had to be done each day.

The Frame tours took Lewis and Julia to parts of the United Kingdom that they’d never have visited if they’d confined themselves to the music halls. Most music halls were in cities and large towns, whereas the Frame tours visited small towns and villages in the rural north. Lewis and Julia were city folk, and life in the northern countryside must have been hard for them - cold and wet very often.
The 1907 tour in particular will have played havoc with Julia’s health. Her second son Wally was born on 26 May 1907, only two months before W F Frame’s Lowland tour set out. Julia did not need a 13-week tour with a fit-up company so soon after the birth of her baby. She developed tuberculosis and died at the end of 1909, at the age of 27. Her death must have been a terrible blow to Lewis and his two little sons.

Julia’s death was a turning point in Lewis’s career. Up until then it looked as if his stage act would be the main source of income, with his magic business as a sideline. But when Julia became too ill to work, that was the end of the act. His magic business suddenly became important.

Lewis opened his first magic shop on Mile End Road in the summer of 1908, not long after he and Julia came home from the second Frame tour. After Julia’s death he started the process of moving the shop to the West End of London - but then, for reasons that we don't fully understand, he went back to the music halls. He teamed up with Julia’s brother Dave, who was a comedian, and the two of them went on tour with a comedy conjuring act.

No doubt you’re asking who looked after Lewis’s two sons and the magic business when he was away on tour. His mother and stepsister will have done the childcare. It’s quite likely that his mother looked after the business as well, perhaps with help from her children.
This is the letterhead for Lewis’s new act. It was a silent comedy act, with Lewis on your left as the straight man and Dave on your right as the clown. This photograph of Dave is the only one that we have of him. Unfortunately he’s wearing heavy makeup, so it doesn’t show us what he looked like.

Les Davenports were booked at music halls up and down the country. In September 1910 they had a week at Barnard’s Theatre of Varieties in Chatham, and there Lewis met a young lady named Winifred Ford.

Winifred was half of Forde and Forde, a novelty musical act which was also in the show at Barnard’s. The other half of the act was her brother Sid. Winifred is wearing stage costume in this photograph. In 1910 the music hall stage was one of the few places where a respectable woman could show her legs in public.

Winifred came from a large, talented family. Her father had a clerical job, but he could do carpentry and he built the novelty musical instruments that were used in the Forde and Forde act.

Winifred and Sid were 16 and 18 when they went on the stage, which explains why they look so young in this photograph. They started at the bottom of the entertainment business, and they were working their way up the music halls when they met Lewis and Dave in Chatham.

Winifred’s marriage to Lewis meant the end of the Forde and Forde act. She told me that her father wouldn’t let her get married until Sid had found another job.
We don’t know what Sid did immediately after Winifred got married, but at one time he had a solo novelty musical act under the name of Max Prinzen. I made this slide from a photocopy of a rather battered postcard.

The instrument that Sid is playing is a one-stringed fiddle. In the Forde and Forde act he and Winifred had a one-stringed fiddle each, and they used just the one horn for amplification. They’d sit with the horn between them. Sid would be where he is in the photograph and the right-hand table would be moved over to make room for Winifred.

Sid was performing as Max Prinzen when the first world war broke out. All of a sudden the German-sounding name became very bad news indeed, and the act fizzled out. Eventually Sid settled in Clacton where he had a photography business under the name of Maxwell Ford. But apparently he kept on performing.

We’re told that Sid is the older man with the banjo here. It’s possible that Max Ford’s Melody Makers worked at Butlin’s in Clacton, but I haven’t seen any evidence for that.
Winifred and Lewis were married in London on Christmas Day 1910. They didn’t have a honeymoon because Lewis and Dave had a booking in Sunderland, starting on Boxing Day – the day after the wedding.

We don't know whether Winifred appeared in Lewis's act in Sunderland, but it certainly wasn't long before she did. She didn't do any magic, but she knew enough stagecraft to make a professional job of acting as Lewis's assistant. The act was renamed the Davenport Duo and Wynne, and new notepaper was printed.

It's like Lewis and Dave’s “Les Davenports” letterhead, but they’ve added a photograph of Winifred in her costume for the Forde and Forde act. Winifred hated this photograph - she said it made her look short, which she wasn’t.

This act didn't last very long. We don't know exactly why, but I think you can see that an act which consisted of a magician, his second wife, and his first wife's brother might have a few problems.

There was also the fact that Winifred became pregnant less than a year after her marriage. Lewis had lost one wife to the rigours of touring, and I can imagine that he didn’t want to take risks with Winifred.
At Easter 1911, three months after the wedding, the Davenport Duo and Wynne appeared in the annual Magic Circle show at St George’s Hall. The Magic Circle didn’t pay the performers at these shows, but it was an opportunity to get the act seen in London.

This cartoon was published in a specialist magic magazine and it illustrates the act rather well: Lewis trying to do magic properly, Dave causing mayhem, and Winifred looking tall and elegant.

We don’t know what happened to Dave. I asked Winifred once and she said, “He came to a bad end”. Other relatives have told us that Dave died of drink, which makes this cartoon rather appropriate in a grisly sort of way.
For the next ten years or so Lewis concentrated his efforts on the magic business. Any magic dealer will tell you that it’s hard to make a living by selling magic to magicians. Lewis solved that problem by branching out into jokes, puzzles and novelties. This is a jokes catalogue which was issued from 13 New Oxford Street, where Lewis had a shop from 1913 to 1915.

Lewis and Winifred didn’t give up performing but they stayed close to home, doing private shows and concert work in London. Winifred was a competent pianist and if necessary she could play the piano to accompany Lewis’s solo act. If she wasn’t needed as pianist, she could act as his assistant on stage.

In August 1914 the first world war broke out, and this is how *The Times* brought the news to its readers. It’s a sensational headline by the standards of 1914.

The war lasted for four long years, and it turned everything upside down. Large numbers of young men went off to fight in the armed forces and a horrifying proportion of them didn’t come back - or, worse still, came back crippled. The jobs that they left behind still had to be done, and their place in civilian life was taken by women and older men.

Lewis Davenport was 32 years old when war broke out. He had a pregnant wife and three children, so he couldn’t be expected to go rushing off into the army. When conscription was introduced two years later, he was given a very low medical grading. He wasn’t called up until the very end of the war and he was demobilised after only three months in the army.

He served as a special constable before he was called up but, by and large, he was able to carry on a normal life for most of the war.
In 1915 Lewis found a permanent West End home for the business. Davenports was at this shop, 15 New Oxford Street, for 22 years. In addition to the retail trade at the shop, Davenports had a flourishing mail order business. It also developed a very large wholesale trade. It sold magic tricks, jokes, puzzles and novelties to shops all over the country, including the big London department stores. So the business was much larger than this small shop suggests.

In 1916 Lewis had his first booking at Maskelyne's theatre, St George's Hall, which was conveniently close to his shop. This is the view from the balcony at St George's Hall. It was a small theatre compared with the music halls of the time.

The Maskelynes had been presenting magic shows in the West End of London since 1873, and they kept going for sixty years. When Lewis Davenport first went to work at St George’s Hall, it was still in the hands of J N Maskelyne, the founding father of the Maskelyne magical dynasty. On the whole J N didn't like to take chances with new acts, but in 1916 his usual magicians were leaving to join the army. That gave Lewis Davenport his chance. J N initially offered him a week's booking, but he proved good enough to be booked again and again.
Over the next eight years Lewis developed a new act, with bigger tricks and illusions than he’d used before.

In April 1924 an advertisement in the *Encore* invited managers and agents to see Lewis Davenport’s new act at Maskelyne’s Theatre, St George’s Hall. The Maskelynes couldn’t afford to pay top salaries, but their theatre was an excellent showcase for artists who hoped to be booked on the number one music halls.

Lewis’s *Encore* advertisement achieved all that he hoped. Initially he was booked by the Stoll circuit for the Alhambra and the Coliseum. Other bookings followed, both in London and in the provinces.

![Image of Lewis and his family]

You might ask how Lewis managed to go on tour when he had a thriving magic shop in London. The answer is in this photograph. These are Lewis’s four children: from left to right Wally, Gus, Wyn and Gilly. In 1924 Gilly and Wally were young men of 19 and 17. Gilly stayed at home and worked in the business, and we think Wally did the same. Gus and Wyn were 12 and 9, and they went on tour with Lewis and Winifred.

It’s fair to say that 1924 and 1925 were the best years of Lewis’s stage career. All his bookings in those two years were in Britain, except for a month at the Wintergarten, Berlin in July 1924.
This poster is for one of the big music halls in the West End of London: the Alhambra, Leicester Square, week beginning 23 March 1925. Jack Hylton and his band are top of the bill and the other acts include Harry Tate with his *Selling a Car* sketch. There were three shows each day at the Alhambra, at 2.30, 6.10 and 8.45 - hard work for performers who were used to two shows a day.

Lewis Davenport is on the left in rather small type. He never did top the bill at a number one music hall, but he was top at lesser theatres.
In the summer of 1925 he appeared at some of the halls in the MacNaghten circuit. You’ll recall that they were number twos. This poster is for the Palace, Carlisle and Lewis Davenport is top of the bill. The MacNaghten circuit paid him £30 a week, which was less than he’d asked for but still a good salary.

To put that figure in context, Harry Tate was paid £75 when he topped the bill at the Leicester Palace in 1912. He was probably earning a similar sort of salary in 1925, when he appeared at the Alhambra at the same time as Lewis Davenport.
Earlier on I showed you the poster on the left. It’s for the Palace, Warrington in 1908, with the Davenports at the bottom of the bill - second best spot. So here we have Lewis and Julia at the bottom of the bill in 1908 and Lewis and Winifred at the top of the bill in 1925.
This is a postcard for the Wintergarten, Berlin, where Lewis appeared for the month of July 1924. The Wintergarten was a showcase for artists who wanted to tour on the continent, and Lewis must have hoped that more bookings at continental theatres would follow. As it turned out, that didn’t happen until 1928.

Lewis’s appearance at the Wintergarten must have tried his ingenuity. It was an old theatre, and the lighting and stage equipment were old-fashioned. But Lewis’s main concern will have been the layout of the theatre. I think you can see from this photograph that the auditorium was roughly rectangular, with the stage recessed into one wall. The consequence was that large sections of the audience couldn’t see the back of the stage. Part of Lewis’s act relied on a special backcloth and had to be worked upstage - so he had a problem.

I don’t know how he got round it. Clearly he did, because he was booked for the Wintergarten three times, in 1924, 1928 and 1931 - a total of three months’ work.
This letterhead dates from about 1930, when Lewis Davenport was nearing the end of his performing career. It lists some of the places where he’d worked: Maskelyne’s Mysteries, St George’s Hall (where he claimed over 3,000 performances); London Coliseum; Alhambra, Leicester Square; Victoria Palace, London; Stoll circuit; Moss circuit; South American tour; South African tour; Wintergarten. The Stoll and Moss circuits included many of the top British music halls.

In the 1920s Lewis was still “intermittently on the halls”, not least because he worked abroad so much. In Britain he did some work in cinevariety and revue, and he appeared from time to time at St George’s Hall. And then there was the magic business in London. He had a good income from the business, and he could afford to be picky about the bookings he took. So his date book tended to have gaps in it.

We’ll look now at one of his cinevariety appearances.
Cinevariety

This poster is from the Regent Theatre, Norwich, week beginning 27 October 1924. The Regent was actually a cinema, but it had two variety acts in addition to the film - which is what cinevariety was all about. It’s an interesting poster, so let’s look at some of the details.

There were three distinct performances each day, at 3 o’clock, 6.15 and 8.30 - which meant a great deal of hanging around in dressing rooms for the artists.

The film was Lights Out, “the greatest mystery drama ever screened”.

The two variety acts were “Lewis Davenport, supported by Winifred Wynn & Co”, and “Ednar’s Maids of Harlech, Welsh female vocal quartet”.

Films were silent in 1924, and cinemas had to provide some sort of musical accompaniment. Often it was just a piano. At the Regent there was an orchestra.

Not only was there an orchestra, there was a cafe: “Arrange to meet your friends at the Regent Tea Lounge, the rendezvous of the elite.”

And there was one thing you certainly don’t get nowadays: “Free garage for all patrons - apply for ticket at the pay box.”

Cinemas varied in standard, from flea pits to high class establishments like this one, and Lewis Davenport would have sampled all types over the years. When he toured in South Africa and South America he often found himself working in cinemas, and the more remote ones could be basic - to put it politely.

Revue

Among the treasures in the British Music Hall Society Archive is a salaries book from the Leicester Palace. The salaries book covers 13 years, up to the middle of 1924. Frustratingly, it ends a few months before Lewis Davenport made his only appearance at the Leicester Palace - but that’s by the way.

The Leicester Palace was a number one music hall. Most of the shows in the salaries book were variety, with 7 or 8 acts plus the bioscope. During the first world war, though, and again in the 1920s, there was often a revue in the show, with a running time of an hour or more. These revues were of the kind known as spectacular revue. They gave
plenty of work to singers, dancers and comedians, but they didn’t employ many speciality acts. So the fashion for spectacular revue meant less work for people like Lewis Davenport.

Here’s an example of a spectacular revue. It’s a touring revue called *The Honeymoon Express* which was at the Leicester Palace for a week in September 1914. I found this photograph in Mander & Mitchenson’s book on revue - it’s nothing to do with Lewis Davenport.

*The Honeymoon Express* was a fast-moving show, in eight short scenes. As you see in the photograph, it had lavish scenery and a chorus of pretty women, all beautifully dressed. There wasn’t much of a plot - the emphasis was on singing and dancing, comedy, and, above all, spectacle. It was reviewed in the *Leicester Daily Mercury* on Tuesday 15 September 1914:

A musical joy-ride on new lines, entitled *The Honeymoon Express* ... provided a very pleasing entertainment [last night]. It is full of good humour and is certainly not without its spectacular features. Included in the eight scenes are bedroom, bathroom and bathing scenes ... The story ... practically amounts to nothing ... The comedy "business" is very refreshing, and the ladies are vivacious, and dance with ease and elegance. The short scenes, descriptive of the "Honeymoon Express" en route and the honeymoon dip, in which the bioscope plays not a small part, were highly appreciated. ... According to the programme, no fewer than 50 artistes assist in providing the entertainment ... In the 1910s most of the revues at the Leicester Palace were half-evening shows, so you might have four variety acts in the first half of the programme and the revue in the second half. In the 1920s the revues tended to be full-evening shows.
Full-evening revue was very convenient for music hall managements. All they had to do was book the revue, and that was the show for the week - much less trouble than putting together a balanced variety programme of seven or eight separate acts. The revue company carried its own scenery, and in effect it took over the theatre for the week.

As I’ve said, spectacular revue didn’t employ many speciality acts. For that reason, I was intrigued to find this advert in the Performer of 28 August 1924.

![Image of an advert for Lewis Davenport](image)

The story is told in a letter which Lewis wrote eight years later. Apparently he and his assistants went to the rehearsals for the revue, only to find that the producer wanted him to do the act in three parts. Lewis said this was impossible because he needed his own backcloth.

So he resigned from the revue, and he was unexpectedly out of work for three months. Which, for most acts, would be a disaster. I feel sure that the young Lewis Davenport would have found a way of altering his act to suit the revue, because he needed the money to support his family. But in 1924 things were different. He had a successful business behind him and he could afford to be inflexible.

In the event he managed to fill most of the vacant dates, but the experience was not a happy one.

Lewis did actually appear in a revue, in 1927, but it wasn’t a touring revue. It was the cabaret at the Trocadero Grill Room in Leicester Square, and Lewis Davenport was in the show for five weeks. Years later his son Wally remembered how posh it was there. Apparently a portion of chips cost five shillings.

The Trocadero revue was a C B Cochran production entitled Champagne Time. The programme for it is a folded card with this jazz age design on the outside.
This is the inside of the programme. The revue was a half-hour show starting at 11.30 in the evening. There was dancing before and after the show on Tuesdays and Fridays, but you had to be wearing evening dress to go on the dance floor.

There were eight scenes in the show and Lewis Davenport came on fifth. He started his act by doing a billiard ball routine in front of the curtains, then the curtains opened to reveal his stage setting. We know about this because we have a notebook which records Lewis’s bookings around this time.
This is the page for the *Champagne Time* revue. It’s interesting to see that Lewis’s act was eight minutes long, so the other seven scenes in the revue averaged three minutes each.

Lewis usually gave a 15-minute act and he really didn’t like to do any less than that. But in a 30-minute show he could hardly expect to be given 15 minutes. He did well to get eight.
Most of Lewis’s bookings were at music halls. A week at Blackpool Palace in October 1930 was typical. The Palace was owned by the Blackpool Tower Company and for the price of 3d you could buy this souvenir programme.

The Blackpool Palace was run on the twice-nightly system, and in this case there were shows at 6.30 and 8.40. The consequence was that the timing of the first house was very tight. In the two hours and ten minutes between 6.30 and 8.40 they had to run through the show, and then get the audience for the first house out of the theatre and the audience for the second house in. So the show could only be two hours long at the very most.

Another implication of the twice-nightly system was that crowd control had to be thought out very carefully. I’d guess that the Blackpool Palace seated 2,000 people or more. So if the first house and the second house were both full, there’d be 4,000 people moving around the theatre between shows - 2,000 people coming out and 2,000 people going in.
This is the bill for the Palace that week. Lewis Davenport was the last variety act in the show. There are two things about this show that look odd to modern eyes.

One is that there doesn’t appear to be an interval. Nowadays anyone who has anything to do with running a theatre will tell you that there has to be an interval because it’s the bar that keeps the theatre going. Things were very different under the twice nightly system. With a big theatre and two performances each evening, I think you can see that there might not be time for an interval. Halfway through this show there’s a selection by the orchestra, and that gave the die-hards time to go out to the bar. But they’d have to be quick if they didn’t want to miss part of the show.

The other thing that looks odd is that the star act didn’t close the show. That’s the twice nightly system again. If the star act closed the show, there was the danger that the audience would clap and cheer and demand an encore. That was the last thing the theatre management wanted.

In this show the Houston Sisters were top of the bill. They were 8th in the programme. After them came Lewis Davenport, and after him there was a newsreel. The hope was that the audience would start to trickle out of the theatre before the performance was over. It was tough on the act that closed the show, but people like Lewis Davenport were used to it.

I’ll finish now with two photographs.
This publicity photo illustrates that photographers in the 1920s could produce a striking image without the aid of modern computer technology.

There’s a story about the fan which involves the Houston Sisters. At some point during Lewis’s act, Winifred would walk on stage with the fan and hand it to Lewis. Once, when they were appearing on the same bill as the Houston Sisters – it might have been at Blackpool – Winifred was standing in the wings, waiting to go on with the fan, and Renee Houston was standing next to her. At the critical moment Renee took the fan off her, walked on stage, and presented it to Lewis. Apparently his face was a picture.
This is an action shot taken from the side of the stage, perhaps during a performance. It isn’t an especially good photograph, but it gives us an impression of Lewis Davenport as a performer. A fan of his wrote this about him:

A tallish man, dark, with a slight stoop, he used all that the theatre provided in the way of music and lighting. In addition to his skill, he provided a smile. [Arthur Hambling, Abra 1037, 11 Dec 1965, p364-366.]

He was one of the many accomplished performers who were the backbone of British music hall.