JOHN NEVIL MASKELYNE’S
QUEEN VICTORIA’S DIAMOND JUBILEE
SPECULATION

By Edwin A Dawes

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JOHN NEVIL MASKELYNE’S QUEEN VICTORIA’S DIAMOND JUBILEE SPECULATION

John Nevil Maskelyne was well-known for his readiness, even eagerness, to embark upon litigation. There has always been the tacit assumption that, irrespective of the outcome, the ensuing publicity was considered good for business at the Egyptian Hall, and in later years at St. George’s Hall. In December 1897, however, Maskelyne was openly cited as an example of exploitation of the law of libel when a leader writer in *The Times* thundered “It was high time that some check should be put upon the recent developments of the law of libel as applied to public comment in the Press”. The paper’s criticism arose from three cases heard in the Queen’s Bench Division of the High Court of Justice on 16th December. One of these appeared under the heading of “MASKELYNE v. DIBBLEE AND OTHERS when Maskelyne sought to recover damages from the publisher and proprietors of the *Manchester Guardian* for alleged libel contained in an article which had appeared in their issue of 6th April, 1897. It is an interesting story, for which Queen Victoria’s long reign must be held responsible!

The year 1897 marked the 60th anniversary of Queen Victoria’s accession, an occasion to be celebrated with full pomp and circumstance on 22nd June with a service of thanksgiving at St. Paul’s Cathedral and attendant State procession. Owners of property overlooking the route the procession would take from Buckingham Palace to the Cathedral were not slow to appreciate the financial blessings which might also flow from the Queen’s longevity. Offers of vantage points were soon appearing in the advertisement columns of newspapers. Entrepreneurs who did not have the advantage of prime geographical location had to devise means of sharing in the anticipated bonanza. One of them was J. N. Maskelyne, who hit upon an ingenious scheme to secure a prime site at St. Paul’s Churchyard itself.

Maskelyne chose to unveil his plans in a letter to the editor of *The Times* on 5th April:

“Sir, — It may interest your readers to learn that I have devised a rather bold scheme for increasing the seating accommodation in St. Paul’s-churchyard on Queen’s Day. I have arranged with Messrs. J. Spence and Co. to take down their premises and erect a ‘grand stand’ upon the site, capable of seating at least 1,500 persons. The stand will have a frontage of 64 feet, and every seat will command a splendid view of the procession and grand ceremony.

“I have offered this stand to the Government upon reasonable terms, but in the event of their not accepting the seats will be offered to the public from 15 guineas upwards.

“Messrs. Spence will get a handsome stone-fronted building free of cost and a large sum to boot, and of course I hope to make a good profit by the transaction.

“Yours truly,

J. N. MASKELYNE

Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly,
London W
2nd April”
While this appears to be a very good free advertisement, presumably anticipation of the future advertising that would come *The Times'* way tipped the scales in Maskelyne’s favour. The letter attracted the attention of a *Manchester Guardian* journalist who penned what he thought was a humorous comment upon the scheme and which was printed in the issue of 6th April. The latter part of it ran as follows:

“It is a valuable hint for all city improvement committees in the future, and it is pleasing to note that Mr. Maskelyne has determined to give the Government the first offer of seats in his Aladdin’s palace. But it is unfortunate that the architect should be Mr. Maskelyne who had so often seriously deceived the public. If the Trojans feared the Greeks when they made presents, the public will suspect Mr. Maskelyne even when he writes to *The Times*.”

These observations were seemingly not accepted by J.N. in the spirit in which they had been offered by the writer, and, as becomes clear from the report of the libel action, were the subject of letters from Maskelyne’s solicitors to the *Manchester Guardian*. However, before dealing with the legal action, let us examine further the grandstand venture, which the Government, in its wisdom, meanness or inertia, declined to entertain and refused the proffered seats.

The grandiose nature of Maskelyne’s project becomes apparent from the details given in his advertisements on 17th April which also served as the most convenient and economical way to reply to the avalanche of inquiries that his letter had induced. As these have never, to my knowledge, been cited in the magical literature they are reproduced in full here to afford an interesting insight to Maskelyne’s scale of operation.

THE QUEEN’S COMMEMORATIVE CEREMONY
A GRAND PAVILION WILL BE ERECTED IN ST. PAUL’S CHURCHYARD on the site of the premises of James Spence & Co., Silk Mercers, which will be taken down for the purpose. This imposing structure will enable 2,000 persons to take part in the most magnificent and impressive ceremony that has ever taken place in the world’s history, affording a privilege which the Government had to deny to all the Peers and Peeresses as well as to the House of Commons.

THE GRAND PAVILION IN ST. PAUL’S CHURCHYARD
Mr. Maskelyne finding it impossible to reply individually to the enormous number of inquiries respecting the above enterprise, begs correspondents to accept the following EXPLANATIONS as a response to their COMMUNICATIONS:- The structure will occupy 64 ft. of frontage on the north side of the steps of the Cathedral. It will be erected with four tiers with 12 rows of seats in each. Every seat will command a splendid view from the Cathedral
to the top of Ludgate-hill. The top tier will be about the same level as the upper storeys of the adjoining buildings, and will be protected from the Queen’s weather by an awning. Access to the Pavilion can be obtained at all times from Paternoster-row without crossing the route of the procession, and the tiers will be reached by spacious gradual slopes, not steps. Smoking will be strictly prohibited upon the Pavilion, but a smoking room, refreshment room and lavatories will be constructed in the basement. There will be a ladies’ room with attendant on each tier. Consulting Architect - Banister Fletcher, Esq., Professor of Architecture and Building Construction, King’s College. Architect - J. G. Buckle, Esq., A.R.I.B.A. The structure will also be erected under the supervision of the city authorities, and it will be of most unquestionable solidarity and strength.

THE GRAND PAVILION IN ST. PAUL’S CHURCHYARD

The canopy beneath which the great organ will be erected on the steps of the Cathedral, and which is being woven in Spitalfields in pure silk and of magnificent design, will extend only as far as the front step, and it will be placed at a great height, so that all seat holders in the Pavilion will view the space beneath.

Applications for SEATS must be made upon printed forms, to be obtained at the Egyptian-hall, Piccadilly, and will be considered according to priority. Special positions desired for parties will be arranged as far as possible, but immediate application is advisable. Where seats cannot be allocated deposits will be returned. A sketch plan of the proposed arrangement of the seats may be seen at the Egyptian-hall. Seats in the first and second tiers, 25 guineas each; third tier 20 gns.; fourth tier 15 gns. No reduction can be made by taking a large number, as Mr. Maskelyne has guaranteed to agents, who have secured some hundreds of seats, that he will not sell to the public for less than the above price.

The most revealing “inside story” of the grandstand venture is provided by Douglas Beaufort (1864-1939) in his autobiography Nothing Up My Sleeve. Unfortunately Beaufort’s book is short on dates, sometimes inaccurate in detail and, in places, anachronistic. Thus although Beaufort gives the impression that he first met J. N. Maskelyne in the early part of the Diamond Jubilee year, when J.N. invited him to enrol under the Maskelyne banner (he declined because his forte was drawing-room entertaining not stagecraft), he had, in fact, previously appeared at the Egyptian Hall during the period October-December 1892! Beaufort, a society magician who accompanied a British diplomatic mission to Morocco and became known as “The Devil Man”, had accepted Maskelyne’s 1892 invitation to appear at the Egyptian Hall with a magical musical interlude titled “My Journey To Fez”. He tells how, in 1897, Maskelyne then revealed his plans to him for the Jubilee and the filming of the event for projection on the cinematograph (animatographe) they had purchased from inventor Robert W. Paul and which was first exhibited at the Egyptian Hall on 19th March,
1896. “Animated photographs” were now a regular feature of Maskelyne’s programmes and the Jubilee would be an important subject for filming. J.N. told Beaufort he would like him to take charge of the entire Jubilee arrangements, namely the sale of seats, the advertising and the filming of the processions. For this, it would be necessary for Beaufort to invest in the scheme; but (so Beaufort tells us) if it were a financial success, Maskelyne would make him his partner and together they would branch out and buy or build a theatre of their own in London’s West End. While the accuracy of the later part of this statement must remain unverified, Beaufort says he came away from his meeting with J.N. and son Nevil bearing outlines of a draft contract. He undertook the assignment but: “‘something went wrong with the works!’ We had overreached ourselves, I suppose; anyway, though ours was one of the best sites in London, and we paid a vast deal for it, we could not sell those seats.”

Beaufort records that only about a hundred seats were disposed of at 25 guineas and the balance remained obstinately on their hands. Redoubled advertising had no effect. “I was faced with ruin, and Maskelyne felt only slightly less affected. We were brought to desperate measures. Secretly, we began selling the 25-guinea seats at 20 guineas, but only a few score went that way. Then our prices came down to 15, 10, 5 and finally 2 guineas. But even at 2 guineas they could not sell all the seats. Beaufort had to exercise great care that he did not seat a 2-guinea seat holder next to a 25-guinea one, for obvious reasons.

Interestingly, the periodical *Punch* had a prophetically satirical piece on “The Spec in Seats” in its issue of 8th May, citing imaginary correspondence between a seat speculator and a...
recent arrival from New York. The price starts at £1,500 and is sequentially reduced to £1,000, £500, £50 and £5; on 21st June, “Window still unoccupied. Price 5 shillings. No reasonable offer refused.”

David Devant, in his autobiography, My Magic Life, discloses that Maskelyne asked him to buy some seats in the Grand Pavilion on condition that he (J.N.M.) rebought them at the same price on a certain day unless in the interim Devant had sold the seats at a profit; he got together £2,283 15s. for this purpose. Devant opines that this transaction cemented his friendship with J.N.M. and was, in fact, the real beginning of the partnership of Maskelyne and Devant. Certainly on this arrangement, Devant did not lose any money.

A handout explaining that Devant has bought a large number of seats on the Grand Pavilion. Courtesy the Davenport Collection.
Independent confirmation of Maskelyne’s square-dealing comes from Beaufort, who relates that J.N. had induced a considerable number of his employees to put their life savings into the venture, and when it failed they looked like losing everything they had. But without any bond Maskelyne returned their losses out of his own pocket, an action that was “typical of the man”.

It seems probable that Maskelyne had sold seats to R. W. Paul, inventor of the animatographe, too, for that worthy was advertising in The Times that he had some of the best seats available in the Grand Stand. Starting on 7th May, Henry Gaze & Son (Ltd.), tourist agents at 142 Strand, advertised “having secured a large number of seats in all tiers of Mr. Maskelyne’s Grand Pavilion can now offer them to the public”.

The saga related by Beaufort is partially mirrored by The Times’ advertisements. Seats were additionally offered for the Grand Rehearsal at £1. 1s. and 10/6 and (by 15th June) for the Day, “Excellent seats at 5 guineas”. On Saturday, 19th June, offers were invited for the remaining seats which could be booked at the Pavilion from 10 to 8 daily or at the Egyptian Hall from 10 to 6.

The occasion itself, on 22nd June, went well and the following day in a detailed report in The Times we read “The stand in four tiers erected by Mr. Maskelyne on the north side was a perfect flower bed owing to the brightness of the ladies’ costumes, and generally the
spectacle of the public crowding everywhere in holiday garb atoned for the poverty of the artificial decorations”.

In summary, the Diamond Jubilee was over sold, the public did not respond in the manner anticipated by the speculators, Maskelyne included, most of whom suffered financial loss. Perhaps the firm of De la Rue did better with their souvenir Diamond Jubilee Playing Cards at 3/6 and 1/- per pack.

J. N. MASKELYNE, SIR EDWARD CLARKE AND A TANGLED WEB OF LIBEL
The MASKELYNE libel case unfolded on 16th December 1897 in the Queen’s Bench Division of the High Court of Justice before the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Russell, and a special jury. It was cited as “Maskelyne v. Dibblee and Others” and John Nevil Maskelyne, of the Egyptian Hall, sought to recover damages from the defendants, the publisher and proprietors of the Manchester Guardian, for alleged libel in an article which appeared in their issue of 6th April 1897. The defendants denied that the words complained of were capable of bearing any defamatory meaning whatever but had reference to the plaintiff’s skill as a conjurer.

Mr. Carson, Q.C. and Mr. Stroud appeared for Maskelyne while the defendants had briefed Sir Edward Clarke, Q.C. and Mr. H. Tindal Atkinson. Clarke (1841-1931) was an eminent barrister who had been Solicitor-General from 1886 to 1892 and served as Conservative Member of Parliament for Plymouth from 1880 to 1900. Among his many famous trials was the Baccarat Scandal at Tranby Croft when he defended Sir William Gordon-Cumming against the charge of cheating at cards in a game at which the Prince of Wales participated.
In opening Maskelyne’s case Mr. Carson presented a synopsis of the grandstand project for Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, Maskelyne’s letter to The Times of 5th April and the offending article in the Manchester Guardian of the following day.

The Lord Chief Justice interposed “Deceived the public? Is not that true? Surely it has been Mr. Maskelyne’s business. I know he has often deceived me. (Laughter). Where is the libel, Mr. Carson? Is it anything more than a chaffing article? Really, for a man of Mr. Maskelyne’s reputation to think that this article involves any imputation on his character seems to me ridiculous”.

Mr. Carson replied, “I do think, my Lord, that the article does suggest that Mr. Maskelyne has defrauded the public. This would lead them to infer that Mr. Maskelyne would not carry out this particular scheme he had undertaken, and such inference would seriously interfere with the letting of the seats he had arranged to erect.”

Continuing his opening address, Mr. Carson said that Maskelyne’s solicitors wrote to the defendants to complain, and on 24th April the defendants replied to the effect that no intelligent reader of the article could deduce any meaning to the discredit of Mr. Maskelyne, and he was referred to their solicitors. Carson maintained that Maskelyne, instead of having been engaged in deceiving the public had, on the other hand, been exposing the deceits foisted on other people.

At the close of Mr. Carson’s speech the Foreman of the Jury, addressing his Lordship, said that they were of the opinion there was no libel, and they did not think the case should proceed.

The Lord Chief Justice intimated that he quite agreed with the jury. He thought, however, that for the satisfaction of the plaintiff, the defendants should give expression in Court to the fact that they did not intend to make any imputation on his character, and that they should not ask for costs.

Sir Edward Clarke said the defendants were perfectly ready to say that they did not intend to impute anything dishonourable to
Mr. Maskelyne. The article was merely a comment on his letter to The Times. The defendants would not ask for costs. Judgement was then duly given for the defendant without costs.

As previously noted, The Times in a leader on 17th December commented rather acidly on the case, observing that “Mr. Maskelyne, with less sense of humour than we should have credited to an experienced entertainer, complained through his solicitors of this libel and refused to be content with the explanation of the proprietors of the newspaper that no intelligent readers of the article would deduce any meaning from it to the discredit of the plaintiff”.

Maskelyne, clearly stung by The Times observation and without consulting his solicitors, dashed into print with a Letter to the Editor, published on Monday, 20th December. This letter, in turn, sparked letters from C. P. Scott (Editor of the Manchester Guardian), Maskelyne’s solicitors and Sir Edward Clarke, which revealed a number of genuine misunderstandings about what had actually happened on the evening preceding the trial. Maskelyne admonished The Times, convinced that had they been in possession of the facts of the case their comments thereon would never have appeared. “Therefore I feel certain that, with your usual fairness, you will permit me to publish these few lines in your columns.”

“The imputation of having instituted frivolous and vexatious proceedings is one that does not sit lightly upon me. I entertain the utmost contempt for such actions.” Maskelyne continued that action was only resorted to after he had repeated proof that the words complained of had done and were doing him “great injury”; further, it was not until after the defendants had been courteously asked to remove the false impression created and they had refused to do so. But, Maskelyne stressed, it was taken “long before the Jubilee ‘slump’ had set in. So that had no influence upon me, as some appear to imagine it had.”

J. N. went on to claim that, the evening before the case came on, “the defendants sent an offer to pay me a substantial sum down to make a public apology in Court... All this they would offer if I would only withdraw the action... The case was to have been settled on the above-mentioned basis; but just as the leading counsel for the defence hurried to Court, the remarks were being made which led to the case being quashed.”

Battlelines were now redrawn and C. P. Scott (1846-1932), the famous editor of the Manchester Guardian, opened with “The statements contained in Mr. Maskelyne’s letter published in your issue of today are so extraordinary that I am obliged to give them an immediate and unqualified contradiction”. In essence, the only letter received (dated 23rd April 1897) from Maskelyne’s solicitors, Messrs. Reed and Reed, was one seeking reparation and there was no courteous request to remove a false impression. Scott went on to say that Maskelyne’s second statement, about the proposed settlement, was even more unaccountable as they never entertained the thought of compromise. They had ascertained from their solicitors, both in Manchester and in London, that nothing had been said or done which could give colour to Maskelyne’s statement.
“We, from the first, regarded the charge brought against us as a frivolous one, in regard to which it would not be consistent either with our own self respect or with the public interest that we should admit liability.” (The Times, 21st December.)

On 22nd December there were independent letters from both Maskelyne and his solicitors in The Times. J. N.‘s opening salvo was “To the development of surprises in connection with this action there appears to be no end”, and he accused C. P. Scott of deliberate falsehood, categorically stating that on the evening of 15th December Sir Edward Clarke, leading counsel for the defence, called upon his leading counsel, Mr. Carson, with a view to ascertaining the possibility of preventing the action from being tried. As a result of this interview, a messenger was sent to his solicitors, Reed and Reed, who, in turn, arranged a meeting at 9.00 p.m. when Mr Baron Reed called at the Egyptian Hall. J. N. agreed to the terms in all essential particulars. The letter continued “And once again let me say had not Sir E. Clarke, fortunately for the defendants, arrived at the Court about three minutes too late to prevent the case being called on, the matter would have been settled between the respective parties to the action”.

Reed and Reed in their letter state they were unaware that Maskelyne intended communicating with the Press and they had no intention of doing so themselves; but as the editor of the Manchester Guardian had accused their client of falsehood they were compelled to do so. They confirmed that on the evening before the case their leading counsel (Mr. Carson) sent specially for them and, at interview, communicated the suggestion which had come from the Defendant’s counsel that the action should be settled by payment of a substantial sum for damages, with the costs and an apology in open Court. On the same evening they had a meeting with Maskelyne to obtain his instructions upon the suggestion.

The ball had now passed into Sir Edward Clarke’s court with respect to both the alleged settlement and to his punctuality in Court! He duly responded with a letter published on 23rd December. “There must have been, as Mr. Maskelyne says, some serious misunderstandings with reference to this case. It is not the fact that I called at any time on Mr. Carson ‘with a view to ascertaining the possibility of preventing the case from being tried’. I did not make any offer of terms of settlement on behalf of my client, never having received any authority to do so”.

Ent’acte cartoonist
Alfred Bryan’s view of J. N.
Maskelyne’s endeavour to make thousands of sovereigns out of one with his Grandstand venture.
Clarke then proceeded to reveal the background practice which had obviously set in train the series of misconceptions revealed by the correspondence:

“It is the usual and very useful practice for the leading counsel in cases of this character to communicate with each other, with a view of ascertaining the terms on which the parties would be able to come to a settlement, if they desired so to do, and, meeting my friend Mr. Carson in Court soon after the brief was delivered, I had some conversation with him on the subject.

“As soon, however, as I saw my Clients in consultation I found that they were determined to resist the action, and that they would not entertain any suggestion of settlement.

“I came into Court while the junior counsel for the plaintiff was opening the pleadings, and then my junior communicated to me that the plaintiff was willing to accept certain terms, which differed widely from any which had been mentioned in my conversation with Mr. Carson.

“As I had definite instructions that the case was not to be settled, the proposal was, of course, refused without discussion: and it is therefore not the fact that through my not being in Court at the moment the case was called on a settlement was prevented.”

Maskelyne brought The Times exchanges to a close with a final letter on 24th December:

“Sir, — I, of course, unhesitatingly accept Sir Edward Clarke’s explanation of the misunderstanding in reference to the suggested settlement of this case. I do so without comment, as I am quite sure that, on reading Sir Edward Clarke’s letter together with the previous letter from my solicitor, the public will fully acquit me of having brought a frivolous action. Thus, my object in troubling you with this correspondence has been attained.

I am, Sir, yours very truly,

J. N. MASKELYNE
So Maskelyne had the last word in *The Times*, just as Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee year was drawing to its close.

*Punch* had been following the correspondence with interest as evidenced by the following piece which appeared in the issue of 25th December.

**PROFESSIONAL DECEPTION**

Sir, — I do not know if your legal adviser as Mr. BRIEFFLESS of Pump-handle Court, or whether you, *Mr Punch*, are willing to give me your opinion as to the moral to be derived from the recent case of MASKELYN v. DIBBLEE, and Others, where the plaintiff brought an action for libel in a newspaper in which it had been said that MASKELYN was “accustomed to deceiving the public”, or words to that effect. “But”, quoth my Lord Chief of Killowen, “Mr. MASKELYN always is deceiving the public”. Well, that’s true, of course, but the public knows it is being deceived. So the action failed. Now, Sir, in consequence of the dictum of my Lord Chief, may any one write anything he likes about Mr. MASKELYN being “a gay deceiver”? May it be said that “Men were deceivers ever, but at the Egyptian Hall,” &c, &c. In fact, is a professional conjurer, henceforth, “a chartered libertine”, with permission to “take anyone in and do for him” at the victim’s expense?

Yours

A PUZZLED CONJURER

The libel action and its attendant publicity would render immediately intelligible to contemporary readers the reason for a new advertisement appended to the customary listing of Maskelyne’s Egyptian Hall attractions. It first appeared on 27th December, 1897 and read:

**TO THE PUBLIC**

Just as an honest tradesman sells his goods for what they really are, no matter how cleverly they may be fashioned to deceive the eyes, so do I present my mysteries to you, as problems for natural solution to interest and amuse not to deceive you. To intelligent persons this statement will seem superfluous, but I am constrained to make it in my astonishment at finding many apparently intelligent persons quite incapable of discerning the obvious truism, that, if the eyes are deceived and the reason undeceived there can be no deception.

Yours faithfully

J. N. MASKELYN
When writing my original articles in 1992 on John Nevil Maskelyne’s grandstand speculation at Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, I was aware that The Magic Circle Museum possessed one of the ornate tickets for the stand but unaware of its provenance. It was a delightful surprise, therefore, to receive a letter from the donor, member Michael C. Paine, A.I.M.C. of Chipping Norton, who provided some interesting information which augments the earlier articles.

Michael’s father, then aged eighteen, and his grand-father actually had seats on Maskelyne’s grandstand and they were satisfied customers, although Michael does not know whether they benefited from the slashed prices as the great day approached with seats unsold. As noted, he presented the impressive ticket in his possession to The Magic Circle Museum.

However, Michael has eighteen interesting stereo photographs which his father took from the stand, together with viewer. These are in sepia and are mounted on cards bearing the name of Mrs. Haynes, The Studio, Kingsbridge. One of them is shown here and depicts the view from the stand looking across to the sloping stand seen on the left of the photograph reproduced on page 8. Most of the others are of the steps of St. Paul’s where the ceremony took place.

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