

## Lewis Davenport – the man

John Davenport



Lewis Davenport

When you look into the background of my grandfather, Lewis Davenport, you don't see anything about rich parents, a good education, or family connections. He was a self-made man.

Lewis was blessed with what we would now call an entrepreneurial flair. Harry Leat would call it a barrow boy mentality, and I don't think I would quibble. It was no doubt this that led to Lewis developing Davenports as a large wholesaler of tricks, jokes, novelties and puzzles, rather than being simply a retail magic business. Lewis was often travelling, doing deals with other suppliers. Once a year he would visit the Leipzig toy fair. Lewis was also a great believer in advertising. Davenports have never been known for the subtlety of their advertising. However, they had their own printing works and made sure that the public was aware of what they had to offer.

Lewis had huge energy, he was a human dynamo. "We burn the candle at both ends" Davenports used to say. And they did. He also had considerable strength. He used to stack up to the ceiling the huge empty wooden crates in which goods came from Germany, so that they could be used for racking for storing stock.

He was single minded about the business and his performing. He loved his family, but had no other hobbies, unlike Gilly (George Davenport) who was very interested in photography. My aunt Wyn told a story about how she and a relative were making Lyle's Hats at home one day. As the evening wore on, they became bored and had the idea of making a miniature hat to fit on one of the ornaments in the room. They thought this was so funny they then made several more, until the room was decorated with miniature hats. In the morning, when Lewis saw this, he was not amused, saying that while they were messing about they could have been making stock.



The family worked hard in the business, but seemed to enjoy it. If you visited the family of an evening, you would be welcomed in and sat down with the family around a table. As you chatted, you would work with the family, perhaps untangling wire puzzles which arrived from Germany in large packing cases. Each had to be carefully separated and then placed in a bag with some instructions. Friends would join in these activities with apparent enjoyment.

Lewis was shrewd, indeed one might say downright crafty. I also sense he didn't give up easily. There is a family story about the time the Davenports wanted to go to the circus to see a magician. When they got there, there was a long queue and waiting at the end of it did not appeal to them. So my father and an uncle went up close to the front of the queue and pretended to pick an argument with one another. The

people in the queue turned round to see what all the fuss was about, and at the same time Lewis nipped in and bought the tickets from the booth.

Lewis was a quiet man. He was not the life and soul of the party sort, craving the spotlight. People have told me that if Lewis was in a group he would seldom speak, but if he did say something it was usually worth listening to. The same low key feeling comes from looking at family photographs. When friends like Dick Cardini, Les Levante and Bill Stickland visited the family home, Lewis could be seen in the photographs in the back row. We are not talking a major ego here.



*The Davenports with friends at the family home in Kent. From left to right: Fay Harrington, Bill McCaa, Wynne Davenport, Swan Cardini, Wyn Davenport, Lewis Davenport, Bill Stickland, Gus Davenport, baby (unknown), Poppy (Gwen) Stickland, Les Levante, Gladys Levante, Richard Cardini.*

How about creativity? There's no doubt in my mind that Lewis was creative in terms of developing the business. He's not known for developing a large number of magical effects. However his notebooks show a lively magical mind, full of ideas for presentations. He would rely on mechanics to turn those ideas into workable tricks, some of which he would then use in his act. He did develop a name for taking a standard trick and improving on the effect. For example, the smoke vase effect. In the standard effect a vase is covered over with a cloth and some smoke is blown towards it. When the cloth is removed the vase is seen to be filled with smoke. In Lewis's version when the cloth was removed, the vase was full of cigarettes which could be poured out.

One other facet of Lewis which is rarely mentioned, but in my opinion very important, was his ability to develop a good team around him. Members of the family were very important, but don't forget the

contribution of others such as Laurie and Patrick Playfair who edited the house magazine the *Demon Telegraph*, and a host of loyal suppliers, such as Len Insull, he of the vent heads.

Probably linked with this was Lewis's own loyalty and generosity. Many stories have been told, but the one which sums it up for me concerns Lewis trying to break into the No. 1 theatres. In the early 1920s Lewis was busy putting together an act which would be suitable for these theatres. His challenge was to get it noticed. Lewis finally gained the agents' attention through a spectacular performance he gave at one of The Magic Circle's Grand Seances. All the agents clamoured for his business, but he would have none of it. He stuck with his agent who had stuck with him while he was on the way up.

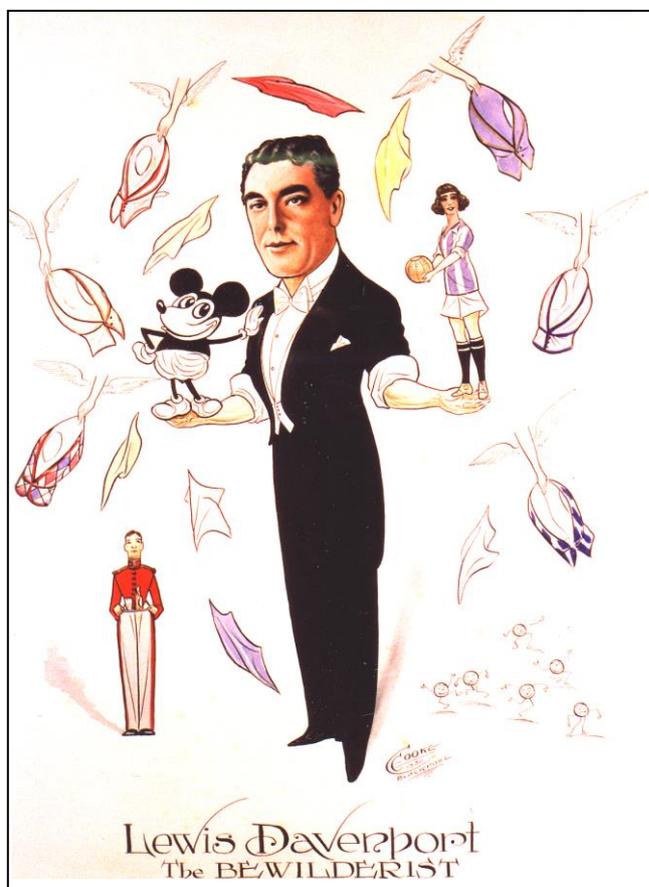
Lewis clearly put a great deal of effort into the 15 minute act which he developed. The first thing his act taught me was the importance of having a 'signature tune'. All the press cuttings mention that Lewis is the man with the colour changing waistcoats.

The second thing is to choose tricks where the climax comes at the end. He worked fast and avoided, and I feel sure intentionally avoided, tricks which ground to a halt. For example, a sword box. Lewis would have been unwilling to waste his time, and that of the audience, while taking out a dozen swords at the end of the trick when everyone knows the assistant is unharmed.

Better still, Lewis liked a double climax. For example, De Kolta's die, on which he finished, has the magical appearance of the large die as the first climax. Then, you lift it up and find a person inside for the second climax.

The other cunning thing about Lewis's use of the die was that he didn't actually produce an ordinary person. He produced a person dressed up as a cartoon character. This was often my father, Gus. This allowed Lewis to finish on a trick that was always topical. He simply changed the cartoon character as the years went by. At different times he used Felix the Cat, John Bull and, in the 1930s, Mickey Mouse.

One insight into Lewis's act was given to me by Billy McComb, who heard it from Bob Harbin. Lewis always finished his act with three curtain calls. The first time he came out with Wynne (his wife who acted as his assistant) he would be wearing, say, a blue waistcoat and Wynne a blue dress. The second time, moments later, it would be a gold waistcoat and a gold dress and finally it would be a diamante waistcoat and a diamante dress. These looked spectacular under the spotlights. Bob Harbin's point was that he knew of no magician who got more applause at the end of the act than did Lewis. This was simply because the magic was still happening right up to the end.



Original artwork for a postcard used by Lewis.