

Dr Katterfelto

In the early months of 1792 an unusual series of advertisements began to appear in the West Midlands newspapers. "Dr Katterfelto, the noted Prussian philosopher," remarked the Birmingham Gazette, "suspends his black cat and five kittens in the air." A month later, the same Dr Katterfelto had seemingly applied his powers of levitation to four pigs and four cats.

Later in February, the same newspaper was applauding an even more remarkable act, the projection of 90,000 live insects in a drop of water, no bigger than a pin-head. By means of the good doctor's "newly invented solar microscope", they wriggled in the air as large as eels.

At a time of very depressing news, both political and economic, Dr Katterfelto appeared to be cheering up the nation no end.

I have no doubt as to the Prussian doctor's ability to deploy a projecting microscope or, in the earlier examples, a powerful magnet. The only doubt is to whether this constituted news. The tales of wonder were undoubtedly supplied directly to the Gazette by Dr Katterfelto himself.

Currently occupying the stage at the Old Bell Inn in Wolverhampton, Katterfelto was preparing to hit Birmingham, and a little advance publicity would do no harm at all. It was no wonder that one of his contemporaries called the Prussian 'prince of puff'. And, while we're at it, he was not a doctor either.

So who exactly was this magician, showman and philosopher? Born in Germany in the 1740s, Christian Ketterfelto (more likely Katterfelt by birth) arrived in England in 1776, together with a wife and daughter. Many of the previous years had been spent wandering Europe, a continent torn asunder by the Seven Years' War. The man himself claimed to be son of a colonel in the Prussian regiment of Death's Head Hussars, but one has to be wary of anything Professor or Doctor or Mr Ketterfelto says.

Once in England, the refugee lived by his undoubted wits and salesmanship. At one moment he was selling patent medicines, at another flying high in a balloon, and at another demonstrating the wonders of science, at a point when science was beginning to be taken seriously.

I findly thought, a year or so ago, that I had the remarkable Dr Katterfelto to myself. Then I found that David Paton-Williams had beaten me to it, publishing a biography of him in 2008. Exhaustively combing through the local press, Paton-Williams has charted the great magician's chequered and colourful career.

To begin with there was a long residency in London, but in August 1784 the Katterfelts loaded up a cart and set forth on the tour that never ends. Each month or so there was a new assembly hall or hotel or pub in which to reveal his magic. The journey began in East Anglia, then took in the East Midlands, Yorkshire and Scotland. After that it was back south to the Lakes and to Liverpool.

Six years after they set out, the Katterfelts were in the West Midlands, first at Stafford, then at Wolverhampton and the Black Country towns, and finally (in April 1792) Dr Katterfelto arrived in Birmingham, where he remained for an unprecedented twelve months.

After that the journey took them westward to Shropshire and Wales, and only came to an end with Katterfelto's death at Bedale in Yorkshire in 1799. The family had been on the road for fifteen years.

It was not difficult to find out that Katterfelto was in town. There were, as we have seen, the numerous "puffs" in the local paper, composed by Katterfelto himself and often in verse.

"His lectures and surprising experiments are philosophical, mathematical, optical, magnetical, electrical, physical, chemical, pneumatic, hydraulic, perotic, hydrostatic, stenographic, pollengestic and caprimandic arts."

Then there were the extras. The black cat was one, an ever-present ingredient of the shows. And if the cat brought with her a hint of the black arts, then Katterfelto was willing to court the publicity if it delivered him an audience. The doctor's contemporaries in the Lunar Society were also willing to tread this dotted line between science and magic.

Then there were Katterfelto's two black servants. Quite how Katterfelto acquired two black servants we do not know, though there were Africans living in 19th-century England, even if their numbers were not high.

But the boys would have been unusual enough to attract attention, which is exactly what they were there for. Off they would go in the streets of the town, togged up in whatever uniform the doctor could find, and blowing trumpets to announce their master's presence.

Working for Katterfelto was doubtless gruelling and poorly paid, and more than once his apprentices deserted him, obliging Katterfelto to advertise for their safe return.

So, in April 1792 Dr Katterfelto, family, cats and servants descended on the West Midlands. It was to be an eventful visit, but more of that next week.