

JOHN WARDLEY LOOKS BACK

AIR



NEMESIS



Earlier this year, John Wardley decided to semi-retire from the theme park industry, after more than 35 years in the business, and 25 years as a consultant to the Tussaud's Group. Here he exclusively looks back on his career.

STAMPIDA



OBLIVION



Photos: First Drop

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The removal of the old *Scenic Railway* at Barry Island (the twin brother of the Great Yarmouth ride) left a very big hole in the park. And I was asked to help fill that hole; so what was my background, and how did I get involved in all this?

I started off in the theatre because my mother's family was in the popular entertainment industry. My great uncle and aunt were illusionists, and when all the other kids in our neighbourhood were playing around with little magic sets and doing card tricks, I was building small-scale versions of the big illusions (out of cardboard) and sawing little girls in half! But my father's family was in the printing business, and I was destined to take over the firm. So when I was a teenager, my father sent me to Great Yarmouth to work for an old family friend who ran a chain of bingo halls, theatres and cinemas up and down the East Anglian coast, and his plan was knocking this show business nonsense out of my head, once and for all! The scheme completely backfired – I loved show business! So I went to drama school to train as a stage manager and got a job at the Theatre Royal in Windsor, which was roughly half way between Pinewood Studios (where they were producing James Bond films at a rate of about one every 18 months) and Bray Studios (where they churned out a new Hammer Horror film every six months). Because of my meagre stage manager's pay, I used to do a bit of moonlighting, and I worked on the special effects at the studios, eventually moving into film special effects full time.

It was a great career, but I missed the live audience, where I really got a buzz. I thought it was such a shame that producing a film involved filming, dubbing and editing, and then projecting it on a flat screen to the audience. Whenever we had any visitors on our film sets, their seeing the special effects live would completely blow their minds. I then began to wonder if there was a way in which I could bring our audiences to the film studios and allow them to experience the spectacles we were creating first hand. After some thought, I realised that was exactly what the Los Angeles attractions were doing at Disneyland (Anaheim, California), Universal Studios Tours (Hollywood, California), and Knott's Berry Farm (Buena Park, California); they were utilising skills and talents developed in the Hollywood film studios, whilst entertaining a live audience.

Working as a film special effects technician is a bit of an up-and-down career; one minute I'm working flat out seven days a week on a

big picture, then I'm twiddling my thumbs for a month or more waiting for the next big picture to go into production. So I developed a nice little line in skeletons. If anyone needed a realistic human skeleton for a film or stage production at the time, people only had two options: either they bought an anatomical replica (which was expensive), or they robbed a grave (which is illegal). So I made a set of moulds from a real skeleton and started casting replicas. Not surprisingly, owners of ghost trains and haunted houses at fairgrounds and amusement parks were my main customers, and I started not only to deliver my skeletons but also install them as effects in their attractions. (Ed: John says that some of his home-made rubber skeletons may still be around. Originals have the name "John Wardley" stamped onto the sole of the foot. Perhaps we should keep an eye out for them!)

There had been a number of grand American-inspired schemes to bring a theme park to Britain, but none had come to fruition. Whereas the American way is to "think big," we British like to take a slightly softer approach. I realised that if the theme park industry were to get off the ground in Britain, we had to be clever and start off small by converting or upgrading an existing attraction. We have four people to thank for the birth of the British theme park industry: Geoffrey Thompson, John Collins, John Broome, and Ray Barratt.

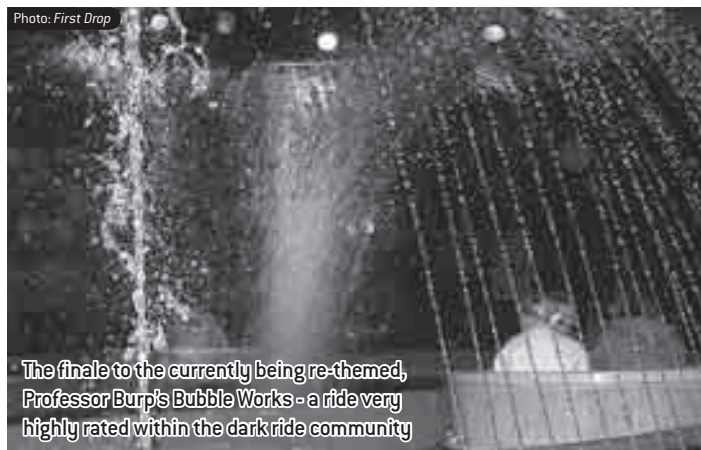
Geoffrey Thompson had the foresight to develop custom-built rides and attractions at the Pleasure Beach (Blackpool, England). Whereas other amusement parks relied on standard portable fairground rides for their attractions, the Thompson family built permanent rides: log flumes, roller coasters, dark rides, etc. on a scale as large as anywhere else in the world. They proved that this type of investment made money, and the public loved them.

Although John Collins had his roots in the traditional fairground business, he believed that in order to ensure the success of his amusement park at Barry Island (Barry, Wales), something different, special, and innovative was needed in order to pull in the crowds. The removal of the *Scenic Railway* had created the perfect opportunity to experiment with a new type of attraction, and as soon as we both met, we realised we shared the same vision. He is a man with tremendous generosity of spirit, and he showed total faith in my ability to help him develop attractions that would be cost effective, safe, reliable and appealing to the public. The result was Uncle Frankenstein's Scream Machine, The Wacky Goldmine, and the Log Flume. All this gave me the experience I needed to move forward when the time was right.



One of the original concept drawings for Professor Burp's Bubble Works

Photo: First Drop



The finale to the currently being re-themed, Professor Burp's Bubble Works - a ride very highly rated within the dark ride community

The Mega Park



Shown here for the first time are John's designs for a wood and steel coaster for what we called at the time - the Mega Park. This was a proposal to turn the Tussauds owned Woburn Abbey into a fully fledged theme park. John had a lot of the park designed before Tussauds purchased Alton Towers. John was working with Curtis Summers on the wooden coaster (top drawing), and with Arrow on the steel coaster.

John Broome was the concessionaire who ran the miniature railway and chairlift at Alton Towers (Staffordshire, England). Through sheer determination, dynamism and charisma, he added some large semi-demountable continental fairground equipment, including the *Corkscrew*, implemented a pay-one-price admission policy, and called the place a "theme park." More permanent attractions were subsequently added, and the British public believed that they needn't travel to America any longer to experience mega theme park rides and attractions.

Thanks to these three men preparing the groundwork, the time was right for me to venture forth into the theme park industry. I went to the United States and learned all I could about who makes and builds roller coasters, log flumes, dark rides, etc. I realised that I could get virtually everything I needed to create this exciting "live" experience except for one vital ingredient – animated figures. So I experimented and developed an animation system of my own. The result was a life-sized country-and-western singer called Charlie Plucket who appeared on the UK TV programme *Tomorrow's World*. Madame Tussaud's approached me after seeing the show and asked me to work with them to refine and develop animations for their wax exhibitions around the world. I became a consultant to the Tussaud's Group and worked with them to create Britain's first audio-animatronic show at Tussaud's Royalty and Empire Exhibition in Windsor.

It was during this time that I was manufacturing illusions for magicians, including sideshow illusions for amusement parks. Such extraordinarily baffling spectacles as "The Spider Girl," "The Girl in the Goldfish Bowl," and "The Headless Lady" are no longer seen in Britain, but if resurrected, I'm sure they would blow people's minds. I was having lunch with Geoffrey Thompson one day, and the subject of his long-running Viva shows in the Horseshoe Bar at the Pleasure Beach arose. Bemoaning the fact that the format was beginning to wear a bit



John and Charlie Dinn at the opening of Megafobia in 1996



The Haunted House (above) and Runaway Mine Train (below) were John's first new rides at Alton Towers.



thin, he wanted some new ideas. I suggested a magic and illusion show, which rather appealed to him. Together with the show's producer, Gloria Gee, the three of us worked on a format, put together a list of illusions, auditioned the principal performers, and the rest is history. More than 16 years later and *Mystique* is still running.

Tussaud's also owned Chessington Zoo (Surrey, England), and that park wasn't doing too well. This is where the fourth aforementioned person comes in. Ray Barratt, the executive director of Tussaud's, had responsibility for Chessington Zoo. He knew that I had worked with John Collins at Barry Island to build rides, and he asked me if I would put forward a masterplan to "sort out the funfair and circus." I told him I thought Chessington's future success depended upon a far more radical approach, so he asked me to think radically and come up with a scheme. Little did I realise that the scheme I put forward would become, almost without alteration, the first two phases of Chessington World of Adventures. (The only change that was made was the theme for the log flume, which, in my original scheme, was to be Egyptian and was fortunately changed to Oriental!).

The park was a big success, and I was made a non-executive director of three of the Tussaud's companies. I designed the *Vampire* suspended roller coaster and Professor Burp's Bubbleworks dark ride, and attendance continued to increase. But Chessington never had the potential to become Britain's major theme park, mainly because of planning restrictions and site limitations, and that's what Pearson's (Tussaud's owners at that time) wanted. So we had to look around for another site to develop a second park.



The much missed Thunder Loooper. It was apparent when Tussauds took over that the ride had a temporary planning application. This meant that a replacement was needed...

Photo: First Drop



John with Claude Mabillard during the testing of Dragon Khan

Photo: First Drop



Tomahawk

We wanted somewhere that had (a) a nice, mature landscape, (b) good access to large conurbations of people, and (c) potential planning consents to enable us to build rides, shows and attractions. But every site we looked at, only two of the three requirements could be met. I heard through the grapevine that Alton Towers might be coming on the market and told Ray Barratt. Here was a ready-made park, with all the boxes ticked, just waiting for us to get our teeth into it.

We bought Alton Towers and looked at what we could do quickly in the initial phase to stamp our mark on the place. One ride, which had enormous potential was the Rapids ride. The trough encircled a huge area of undeveloped land, and most of the ride was only seen by those riding it. Everyone who knows my work is aware that one of my trademarks is to design attractions in such a way as to make them fun and appealing to non-riders as well as riders. I suggested turning the whole ride inside out, creating a new themed area inside the trough circuit, weaving a Mack powered coaster around the ride, and creating a new through-route to the Schwarzkopf shuttle coaster *Thunder Looper* in the process. Beyond this new themed area was a site ideally suited to a large dark-ride building (next to the monorail depot); this became the Haunted House.

Photo: First Drop



Dragon Khan

All the plans were linking together very nicely – Rapids, Runaway Mine Train, Haunted House, *Thunder Looper*, but then the bombshell dropped – *Thunder Looper* was going to have to go. We'd created a pathway to nowhere, unless we could find something to replace *Thunder Looper*, and that's where ideas started to get exciting!

If we were to obtain planning consent for a replacement for the shuttle loop, we had to design a ride that would stay below treetop height. In keeping with our tradition of themed rides, we would need something unique that could lend itself to innovative theming and decoration. We considered the Arrow Pipeline coaster, and bearing

in mind the high-tech industrial look of the vehicles, I came up with the idea of theming the ride and its surrounding area as some sort of sinister secret military facility that was developing and testing a secret weapon. The code name for the project was therefore called "The Secret Weapon," and the first track layout of the ride was labelled SW1. I went to Utah to ride the prototype, but it was very slow (and rather boring), looked cumbersome, and was very energy inefficient. So it was back to the drawing board. What followed has been very accurately documented by Justin Garvanovic in issue 67, so I won't repeat the story again, but *Nemesis* was born.

Tussaud's then took over the development of Port Aventura (Salou, Spain), and I was involved in the conception of *Dragon Khan*, *Stampida*, and *Tomahawk* amongst other rides. Back at Alton, after *Nemesis* came *Oblivion* and then *Air*. What next? I then went on to design the ultimate woodie for Alton Towers, but this was never to leave the drawing board. What had started off very much as a one-man design team (me!) had by now been augmented by a whole hoard of talented people at Tussaud's Studios, and the time had come for me to step aside and let others do the work. They had their own ideas, and I felt honoured that they still wanted to occasionally consult me about my opinions. I still work very closely with Paddy McNamara at Oakwood (Pembrokeshire, Wales) and consult on projects for a few close associates in the industry.

My latest project? Having worked with Chris Sawyer on the initial game of *Roller Coaster Tycoon (RCT)*, I subsequently spent quite a bit of time in Cambridge with Frontier Developments on *RCT3*. It is incredible what the latest developments in computer gaming technology can produce when freed from the low-power limitations of small home-scale Xbox or PlayStation2 hardware. When this software is run on commercial computers, boy, is it amazing! Combine this with ride technology as used in Universal's *Spiderman* ride, and the result is an interactive dark ride the like of which has never been seen before. And that is what I'm working on now, not for any particular park operator, just Frontier and myself experimenting with ideas and playing around. A number of park operators are already showing interest, but time will tell when or where such a ride will appear.

So I'll never fully retire. And of course, when you are a coaster enthusiast, you're always a coaster enthusiast. You never retire from that!

The Alton Woodie



Photo: First Drop

John's last design at Tussauds was that of a huge wooden coaster that would span the far end of the valley at Alton Towers. Alas the design never left the drawing board. The station would have been behind the *Corkscrew* (on the left of the drawing), and it would run all the way over to the area behind *Air*. It included two drops of over 200ft (61m).

