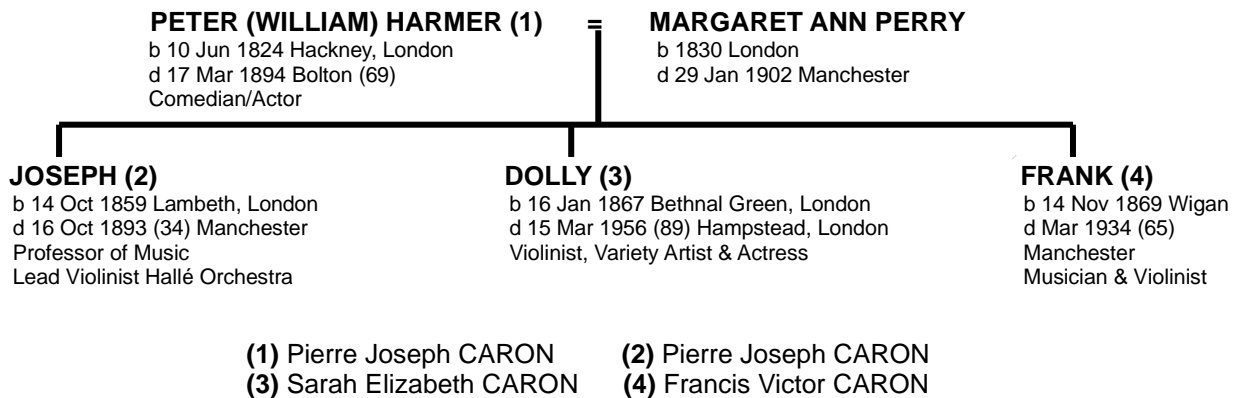


**THE TALENTED FAMILY OF DOLLY HARMER**  
**ACTRESS, MUSIC HALL ARTISTE**  
 By Gill Price

This article is the result of interesting communications I have had with a gentleman called Frank Rutherford. He contacted me to enquire about Joseph Harmer who was lead violinist with Charles Hallé's Orchestra, in Manchester, in the late 1800s. Frank's interest stems from his own musical ancestors, as one of them took violin lessons from no less than Joseph Harmer. I was able to share HFA information on Joseph with Frank and benefit from his painstaking research into the many newspaper references to Joseph, his father Peter and younger brother Frank.

This is a complicated family whose true surname was CARON, but they all used **HARMER** as a stage name and often in their private lives too. To set the scene I have put together the HARMER tree below, with a footnote giving the individuals' true given name for the surname CARON. This might be familiar to some readers as there have been three newsletter articles in the past on the most famous member of this family, DOLLY HARMER, variety artist and actress. These articles are listed at the end of this piece in case anyone wishes to re-read the information previously shared on the family.



Starting with Peter Harmer, (who to make things even more complicated, at times was also known as William Harmer), comedian and actor, Frank Rutherford found 1873 newspaper extracts covering his leasing of the Theatre Royal, Stockport. He seems to have got himself into some difficulty with the authorities and we are not sure whether this situation was resolved, but it does throw light on his career as, not only was he performing, but he was also putting on productions.

**North Cheshire Herald – 5 July 1873** – “Fined for having an unlicensed theatre. **William Harmer**, lease of the Theatre Royal, Stockport, was before the Stockport magistrates on Tuesday, on charges of performing stage plays in the theatre, the same not being licensed, and for playing “The Jewish Maiden” without a licence. He was ordered to pay 10s. 6d. for the first offence and costs for the second. Leave was subsequently given to keep the building open for three weeks, in order to afford the company an opportunity of getting away.”

**North Cheshire Herald 13 September 1873** – “Mr. J W. Johnston applied on behalf of Mr. **William Harmer** for a license (being the special sessions for theatrical licences) for the Theatre Royal. The bench desired Mr. Superintendent Moores to make a report of this establishment along with the other.”

Peter Harmer died on 17 March 1894 in Bolton, age 68. His daughter Sarah Elizabeth (Dolly) registered his death as William HARMER – no mention of the true surname ‘CARON’, here. His cause of death is given as acute bronchitis and exhaustion, which was probably caused by heart disease. Following next are two extracts from theatrical newspapers of the time reporting Peter Harmer’s death:-

**The Era - 24 March 1894 - "HARMER.** – On March 17<sup>th</sup>, at Bolton, from heart disease,

*Peter Harmer aged sixty-eight, the dearly beloved father of Dolly Harmer. The body to earth, the soul to Heaven."*

**The Stage 29 March 1891** - "Mr Allan Laidlaw sends us an interesting communication relative to the death of Mr Peter Harmer:- 'Mr Harmer,' he says, "was a rare old veteran; he played with Phelps and Macready. The list of parts he assumed would fill a column of *The Stage*. To the last he was cheerful and full of that fine enthusiasm for his art which characterises nearly all the actors of the old school, but which is so infrequent among the younger people of today. His intelligence was remarkable, and his fund of anecdote and reminiscence seemed to be inexhaustible. Like the late David Fisher, he dearly loved the violin. This talent was inherited by his son, the late Joseph Harmer who was a member of Sir Charles Hallé's Manchester orchestra, and one of the best violin players of the day. The loss of this son a few months since was a blow from which Mr. Harmer never entirely recovered. It was my privilege to be acting with him for some 150 nights during his last engagement as Abel Hayball in Wynn Miller's drama, *False Evidence*. Like most of the old actors he had the power of 'filling the stage' the moment he made his entrance. No pain, no grief could make him falter in his business. On the night when he received the news of his son's death the audience applauded him as vigorously as ever on his exit from his big scene, little knowing that, before they had finished clapping and stamping, a bereaved father was lying prone in his dressing room, sobbing as only the old can sob when the deepest corner of a human heart is pierced. But his was the indomitable pluck and courage of the born artist. An example of this was that on one occasion he met with an accident, falling down a flight of stone steps only an hour before the rising of the curtain. Terribly cut and bruised and aching all over, he yet went on for his part, and played as if nothing had happened. In private life he won not only the respect but the love of all who knew him. It is too much the fashion among the young actors of today to treat the old with disrespect. It jars terribly upon me to hear experienced alluded to as 'old fossils.' The over-educated actor of today should remember the fact that in an 'old fossil' is embalmed much priceless knowledge, and that the art of acting will prove much harder to learn when all the old artists who can teach us by word of mouth are gone to their last long rest."

Peter Harmer's eldest son Joseph was born in London in 1859. At some time between 1867 and 1869 the family took up residence in the Manchester area, as Peter was performing across the north west. Joseph became a gifted violinist who studied under Joseph Ludwig, the head of the violin department at the London Academy of Music. Ludwig was also a noted chamber musician and owned a Stradivarius violin which has only recently been sold for £6 million!!

Joseph Harmer joined the Halle Orchestra in 1880 and became principal second violin in 1890. In 1888-1889 he was also leader (principal first violin) in De Jong's Orchestra. The Hallé pay wasn't great but Joseph would have been better paid as principal second violin. The Hallé only gave two or three concerts a week so it allowed him to do work on the other days including small group chamber music – mostly string quartets and teaching the violin. In those days violin teachers called themselves professors but it didn't mean that they had any special qualifications. A lesson would have cost a few shillings. Joseph taught Frank Rutherford's ancestor, John Bridge, who went on to have a long and successful career. The following advertisement appeared in the Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser – 23 Sept 1892:-



Frank Rutherford has found press reports in a variety of publications reviewing concerts in which Joseph performed. A selection are included here which give a flavour of his prestigious talent:-

**Manchester Courier & Manchester General Advertiser 3 Mar 1888 Mr De Jong's Concert**

*"....she had the advantage of the obligato being beautifully played by Mr. Harmer, the leader of Mr Halle's orchestra".*

**Herald and Lakes News 14 Dec 1888 Concert at Ambleside** – *"Mr J Harmer, a member of Sir Charles Halle's orchestra and leader of Mr De Jong's Band, brings sufficient testimonial that he is a violinist of no mean order".*

**Manchester Courier & Lancashire General Advertiser 13 May 1890 – Gentlemen's Concert**

*.....Mr Harmer, who had become so favourably known during the last two years as a violinist, and lately been appointed by Sir Charles Hallé as Leader of the Second Violins in his Orchestra for the coming season, played several solos with much success. In B. Molique's "Fandango" Mr Harmer's mastery of the technicalities of the instrument were apparent, and Sainton's "Un Hain" and "Valse Caprise" also served to further display his ability. He produces an excellent tone, plays perfectly in tune and moreover interprets the music with great intelligence.*

From **June 1889 to September 1891** Joseph was leader of the A. E Bartle's Orchestra for a series of summer "Spa Concerts" which were reviewed by the **Harrogate Advertiser** newspaper. His performances are variously described as *"the performer produced a remarkably fine tone, and undoubtedly possesses many other accomplishments, amongst which may be mentioned facile double-stopping, and very superior "harmonic" playing."* *"Mr J. Harmer manifested great resource in his violin solo".*

**Manchester Courier & Lancashire General Advertiser – 21 Jul 1890 - Royal Botanical Gardens** *The solo violinist Mr Joseph Harmer played with exquisite skill a fantasia "Gary Owen" (Papini), quite eclipsing the efforts of one or two of those modern baby wonders that we have heard so much about on paper of late. Mr Harmer received a well-deserved encore. Later he played a Romance and Rondo by Wieniawski.*

The **Freemason's Chronicle of 1892** reports that a meeting took place at the Old Boar's Head Hotel in Manchester of the Arthur Sullivan Masonic Lodge. Nearly all the members of this Lodge were professional vocalists and instrumentalists, several being members of Sir Charles Hallé's Orchestra. The usual Masonic business was followed by a musical evening and any Brother wishing to take part was asked to bring their instrument. Joseph Harmer must have been a Mason as it was reported that he played a nocturne on the violin magnificently and also a played a duet with another Brother who played the cello.

**The South London Journal – 9 September 1893** – *Devonshire Park, Eastbourne – The best piece of the evening was perhaps the concerto in E Minor (Mendelsohn) for violin and orchestra. Mr Joseph Harmer was the solo violinist, and he played with such great delicacy and expression that a regular ovation was accorded to him at the close.*

Tragically Joseph died at only 34 years of age, leaving a wife and 4 young children. He was buried at the Southern Cemetery, Manchester, which is 3 miles south of the City Centre. It opened in 1879 and is the largest municipal cemetery in UK and second largest in Europe. Joseph's death was reported in the press as follows:-

**"The Manchester Courier & Lancashire Advertiser – Saturday 21 October 1893**

**THE LATE MR. JOSEPH HARMER** – *The funeral of Mr. Joseph Harmer, the late*

leader of the second violins in Sir Charles Hallé's orchestra, and well known in all musical circles in Manchester, took place yesterday afternoon at the Southern Cemetery, and was marked by a touching display of feeling from members of Sir Charles Hallé's choir, as well as from deceased's colleagues in the band. The number present was considerable, and would have been greater but for the fact that many of the orchestra were engaged in the Hanley Festival. Among other gentlemen who attended the funeral independently of the band and the choir were Signor Risegari, who was with the family, Mr. C. H. Fogg (organist to Sir Charles Hallé's concerts, Mr. W. Goldthorpe, Mr. Fred Vetter, Mr. W. Dumville, Mr. A. S. Kinnell, Mr. Oliver Gaggs, Mr. Haynes (conductor of the Prince's Theatre), Mr John Hulme, and Mr Michael Cummings. The Coffin was completely covered with floral tokens of affection and sympathy sent by loving friends. The service was read by the Rev. G. A. Fry, Rector of All Souls', Manchester and at the grave side the hymn "My God, my Father, while I stray," was sung by the friends with affecting impressiveness. Mr Harmer, who was a most accomplished executant with quite an enthusiasm for his art, was a typically genial and warm-hearted man, and his death-at the early age of 34 years – which by its apparent unexpectedness will shock many of his musical comrades, will be a source of sincere grief to them all, so much was he beloved."

Joseph had married his wife Martha Bentley on 15 January 1883 at Blackpool Parish Church. Their first daughter Eleanor was born at the end of that year whilst they were still in Blackpool. She was followed by three children born in Manchester - Pattie born in 1885, Joseph in 1887 and Dorothy May in May 1893, just 5 months before Joseph died. So, it is not surprising that musical fraternity came together to raise money for the family. The first notice of a fund appeared in 'The Violin Times' of 15 December 1893. Who knew that there was such a publication called 'The Violin Times', I certainly didn't. It was a monthly journal for professional and amateur violinists and quartet players.

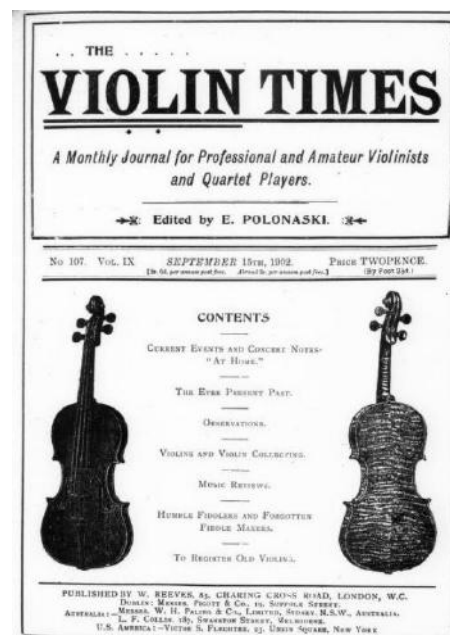
**THE VIOLIN TIMES 15 DECEMBER 1893  
PRICE: TWOPENCE. JOSEPH HARMER**

"By the early and sudden death on the 10<sup>th</sup> October of Mr. Joseph Harmer, a worthy English violinist, a young widow and four children are left unprovided for. He would be remembered by many London amateurs and players, as a few years ago he was studying here under Mr. Ludwig, and playing in some of the leading orchestras. He showed much promise as a violinist, but the earnings of even the best orchestral players, as is well known, constitute but a very limited income. In appealing therefore to violinists for some contribution in money (however small) towards raising the sum of £250 to start Mr. Harmer's widow in a business to enable her to provide for herself and children, we think we are placing a most deserving case before them. The following list will give some idea of the interest and sympathy that has been enlisted in this case, and Mr. H. Smith, of 12, Cecil Street, Greenheys, Manchester, will gratefully acknowledge any contributions :

-The Duke of Westminster (per Dr. Bridge, of Chester), £5; Sir Charles Hallé, £5 ; C. Santley, Esq. , £5; Gustav Behrens, Esq, £5; G. F. Cobb, Esq., Cambridge, £5 ; Mrs. Parkinson, £5; W. N. Galloway, Esq. , £5.5s; T. J. Edmondson, Esq., £5; Dr. Bridge, Chester, £2.2s.; Willie Hess, Esq. £2 ; W. Mayer Esq., £5 ; Messrs . W. E. Hill & Sons, £5; Sir Charles Hallé's Orchestra, £45; C. H. Fogg, Esq, £5; Total £104.7s."

**Eastbourne Chronicle – Saturday December 16 1893**

**THE HARMER BENEFIT FUND** – The death of Mr. Joseph Harmer, late of the Devonshire Park Grand Orchestra, has occurred under exceptionally pathetic circumstances, leaving a widow and four young children unprovided for, and an



appeal in their behalf is being made by Mr. A. Standen Triggs. In a circular which has been issued this week, Mr Triggs says:-

Mr Joseph Harmer was for three years the leader of the Devonshire Park Grand Orchestra – one season under the baton of Mr. Kettanus and two under that of Mr. Norfolk Megone. A brilliant and accomplished violinist and a model “chef d’attaque” his good work in the Floral Hall will be readily recalled by the many frequenters of the Park during past seasons. His appearances as a soloist were also always warmly welcomed, and as recently at Sept. 4<sup>th</sup> after a splendid rendering of the celebrated Mendelsohn Concerto, he was recalled to the platform again and again to receive the plaudits of a delighted audience. Within a few weeks only of that evening Mr. Harmer passed away within the walls of the Manchester Infirmary, unable to rally from an extensive operation to which he had to submit for the removal of a cancerous growth from the face, which, with a terribly rapid rate of progress, was advancing to attack the brain, its fatal character being already known to him even while performing his good work here last season. He was but 34 years of age and leaves behind a widow in delicate health and four children, the youngest under a year old. Mr Harmer’s opportunities had been but limited for deriving that substantial benefit from his profession which would surely seem to have been awaiting him had he been longer spared and his family accordingly find themselves suddenly deprived of the bread winner and left with the slenderest of resources. It is for these bereaved ones that an appeal is being made, and with confidence, that all the many hundreds of sympathetic lovers of the Divine art of who have so recently listened with delight to the strains of the artist now laide to rest, will spare a subscription, small or great to soften the affliction this Christmastide to this sadly and suddenly distressed family. ~The announcement of subscriptions will be made on a list exhibited daily in the Floral Hall and within the columns of this journal.

Following Joseph’s death .....

**1 February 1894 Stockport Press – Vocal Union Concert** – Those present at this concert on Tuesday, and the room was well filled, experienced a rare treat – Mr D Ffrangoon-Davies being the chief vocalist and Mr Willy Hess (leader of Sir Charles Hallé’s Orchestra) the solo violinist. Mr Joseph Harmer whose death created so much sorrow in the local musical world, was to have appeared instead of Mr Hess at this concert. Mr Harmer had some connection with Stockport, a reference to which may be interesting. His father, who is we believe yet living, was connected with the old theatre in High Street, and as a youth his son Joseph led the band there. Years later, he acquired such proficiency as a violinist as to fill the position of leader of the second violins at Halle’s concerts, a post he retained until his death.

**Francis Victor Caron** – also known as **Frank Harmer** was the youngest in the musically talented family. He was born in Wigan in 1869. He married a 19-year-old Welsh musician, Elizabeth Meredith in Liverpool in 1889. In the last quarter of that year, they had their first daughter, Margaret but she didn’t survive long after her birth. They went on to have a further seven children, none of whom appear to have become performers. The 1921 census

**GRAND PAVILION,**  
RHYL.

Sunday Evening Next, July 21st,

SPECIAL

**Sacred Concert**

Under the direction of Mr. TOM WOOD, who has engaged the following Artistes:—

**MADAME MARIE NOTT,**  
Soprano (pupil of F. H. Dale, Esq., Manchester).  
**MISS EMILY G. BURTON,**  
Soprano.  
**MISS KATE McLENNON,**  
Contralto, and  
**MISS EMMIE ROSELLE,**  
Mandoline Soloist,  
(By kind permission of Gustave Roselle, Esq.)  
THE NEW WELSH BARITONE,  
**MR. T. AMOS JONES,**  
Bronze and Silver Medallist of the Royal Academy of Music.  
**MR. FRED J. BUXTON,**  
Tenor (of the Crystal Palace and Royal Aquarium Concerts).  
**MR. HERBERT BARRINGTON,**  
Baritone (of St. James’ Hall Concerts, London).  
**MR. FRANK HARMER,**  
Violinist (of Sir Charles Halle’s Concerts).  
**MR. H. WATERS,** Harpist.  
**MR. E. LONGFIELD,** Flautist.  
Accompanist:—Mr. RICHARDSON, Organist of Macclesfield.

Concert to commence at 8-15.  
Admission to Pier after 5 p.m., 6d.

shows that two sons were employed by Her Majesty's Stationary Office in Manchester and two daughters were cashiers at the YMCA. Frank himself was recorded as a violinist at The Palace Theatre, Manchester. He died on 26 February 1934 aged 65 and, like his father and older brother, was also buried at The Southern Cemetery. Frank was outlived by his sister Dolly, who was still very much performing into the mid-1950s.

Frank Rutherford located a variety of newspaper extracts on Frank Harmer's career. The first from 1885 is from the Winter Gardens at Blackpool. There is a review of a concert by the Grand Orchestra and some noteworthy singers. Frank is listed as one of the four second violins. A programme from 1895 from the Hallé Orchestra reveals that he was in the second violins at that time. Also, in 1895 from The Rhyl Record & Advertiser there is an advert (see page 8) for a "Special Sacred Concert" being held on 21 July at The Grand Pavilion in which Frank is performing. The Music Hall and Theatre Review 6 January 1899 has a brief write up on concerts at the People's Palace, St Helens, where Frank Harmer is listed as Musical Director. The Catholic News of 22 March 1913, reported on a reunion concert for St Patrick's Old Boys held at the Albion Hotel. Frank Harmer, violinist, is listed as one of the performers.

I will conclude with some new bits and pieces about Dolly Harmer which Frank Rutherford and I have found recently online. In the British Newspaper Archive there are now literally thousands of mentions of Dolly in show reviews during her very long lifetime, needless to say I haven't read them all! The following extracts give a good indication that Dolly, like her father and brothers, was a very talented violin player before she became an actress. She also played the banjo. Her entry in the 1906 Green Room book says that she played lead violin in most of the ladies' orchestras of the 1880's and 1890's including Lyla Clays and Madam Hunts.

***The Sporting Life 9 September 1891      Last week at Sadlers Wells Theatre :***

*Prince Hal found a bright and pretty representative in Miss Dolly Harmer, who gained much applause by the clever way in which she played on the violin 'The Blue Bells of Scotland' with variations.*

Dolly's husband, Willie Scott, an actor and comedian is also mentioned in this report for his portrayal of the bibulous old John Falstaff and being the spirit of the piece.

***The Swansea & Glamorgan Herald 14 April 1894 – Crusoe the Cruiser***

*Of the lady who appears in the title role – Miss Dolly Harmer – we can only speak in the most laudatory terms. She is an artiste of the very foremost rank, and her singing and acting brought down the house. Miss Harmer has limitless resource, which she displays to the best advantage, and her rendering of the descriptive song 'Masks and Faces' is alone worth the admission fee.      Also*

*Miss Dolly Harmer, the popular burlesque actress, who appears as Crusoe in the charming burlesque at the New Theatre, Swansea this week was born in London in 1868. She is a charming actress, a good songstress and possessed with a striking stage appearance. Miss Harmer is a capital banjoist. And her brother, Mr Joseph Harmer, is principal second violinist for Sir Chas. Halle, and in 1884 Miss Harmer was principal second violinist in the ladies' orchestra at the London Trocadero.*

***The Forgotten Heroes of Comedy by Robert Ross***

*Dolly Harmer was already a seasoned veteran of both variety and legitimate theatre. Born on 16th January in Bethnal Green, London, by the age of 13 she was a virtuoso violinist in the music halls.*

As we know, Dolly moved away from playing the violin becoming an actress, best known for her comedy appearances, she must have inherited the comedy gene from her father. We were already aware that she travelled widely overseas later in life with Wee Georgie Wood, entertaining the troops

during WWII, but the early press reviews of her shows illustrate how much she travelled to far flung places even as a younger woman. For example, in 1906 she was in New York, USA and in 1909, 1914 and 1922 she was in Melbourne, Australia appearing in pantomime. An interesting calculation that 109 years ago this Christmas, Dolly was performing in Cinderella at Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne.

At the age of 63 and Dolly appeared in a full-length British Comedy film called "Black Hand Gang" where she reprised her long held role as the mother of Wee Georgie Wood. The black and white film is on The Forgotten Channel and Frank Rutherford has discovered that this film is also available on Youtube at:-

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=wee+georgie+wood+1930+movie](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=wee+georgie+wood+1930+movie)



Online there are numerous cigarette cards showing images of Dolly from the earlier days of her career and above is a signed photograph of her from later times which I hadn't seen before. Both come from the New York Public Library Digital Collection.

Detailed articles about Dolly Harmer appear in the September 1997, September and December 2005 Newsletters available in the members only section of our website [www.harmer.org](http://www.harmer.org) .

