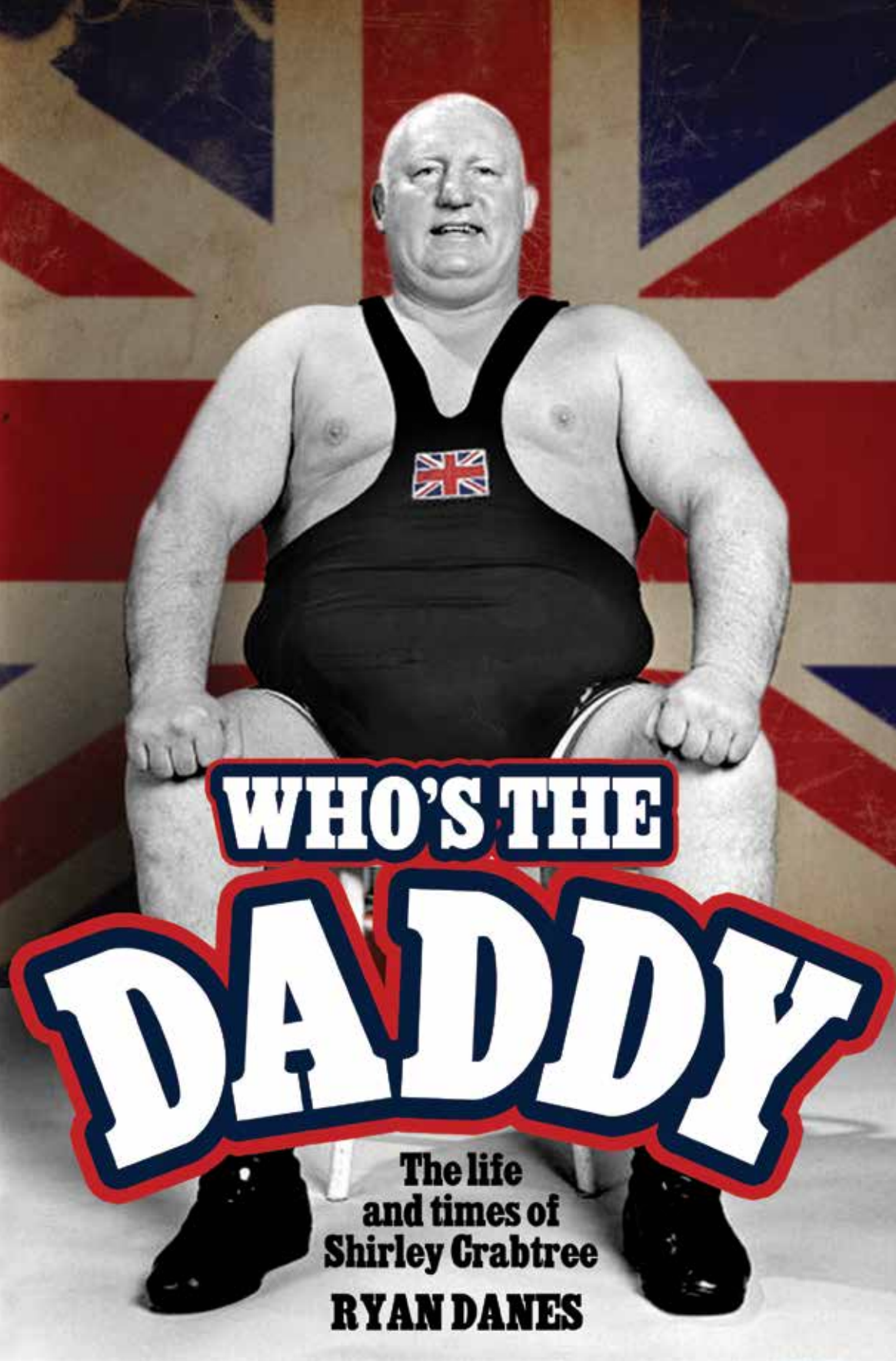
WHO'S THE
DADDY
The life
and times of
Shirley Crabtree
RYAN DANES

Prologue

The New London Theatre, Wednesday 7 March 1979

THE SHOW began with serious trumpeting. A fanfare of some importance and the audience were applauding. It felt like history was being made, although some of the people there that night, figures dotted throughout the whole of Shirley Crabtree's life, would later think differently. Once the limelight faded there would be a divided opinion on the Crabtree clan and their influence on professional wrestling, and we shall come to these matters in due course. For now, we are trying to conjure up a scene, resurrect a bit of telly history so to speak, so we're looking down at the TV cameras, which are themselves trained on the mock-auditorium set up at the front. There is empty raised seating either side of the doors centre-stage, and a backdrop of red, brown, and cream. Every set of eyes is focused on the doors and over all of this, the shows superimposed titles come and go.

Although the audience were familiar with people like Kent Walton and Dickie Davies on *World of Sport* on Saturday afternoons, there was a certain amount of excitement on their faces as they waited for a different kind of show to begin. This was a live recording and their unblinking eyes shining back through the fag smoke could mean only a couple of things. They were either totally transfixed as they clapped like brainwashed seals, or

they'd had a skinful in the Prince of Wales on Drury Lane before the show. How many times they had seen these opening sequences on their televisions at home, and now they were here witnessing it for themselves. And then it all went flat for a couple of seconds as the applause continued. They were waiting for something to happen, anything to happen, which would justify coming out in the dark and missing *Crossroads.*

> *"This is your life; this is Eamonn Andrews and for the next few minutes, I am the hooded monster or words there about, and my intention is to gate-crash a studio-call, a photo-call for grapplers and wrestlers which is taking place in the London room, which is part of this building. So I've got to get there in time to get close to somebody, the sort of Daddy of the grunt and groan business, but to get in and get close to him, I need some camouflage, and my camouflage takes the shape of three sporting gentlemen…"*

Gorgeous George was next to appear. Dressed all in black he looked like Danny La Rue and was camper than a row of pink tents. He wafted on to the stage and waved to the crowd like he was the Queen of Sheba, and maybe that was how he managed the masked wrestler in his charge, the one some called the most controversial in the business. Out-foxing the fox, out-gimmicking the gimmick, may have been the only way he could keep a lid on the "Oriental Master" Kendo Nagasaki whose fury was relentless. Of course, all of this made one hell of a ringside show and George continued to manage Kendo's affairs until he died in 1990.

And what of the self-proclaimed mystic himself? Kendo was the third man through the doors and by then Eamonn was heading off of the stage. Besides this, he probably didn't give a monkeys about the man behind the mask, although he did know the business a bit. Eamonn had been an amateur Irish boxing champion as a kid, so he had more than a passing interest in the

wrestling. He was also the original presenter of *World Of Sport* when it started on TV in 1965, but the chances are he probably didn't have a clue about Kendo's "supernatural powers", and the jovial Dubliner soldiered on until 1987, when he died of heart failure at the relatively young age of 64. Whether Kendo Nagasaki was the most powerful man to come from Stoke-on-Trent remains to be seen as Bruno Brookes and Robbie Williams were also born in the city. He was certainly the best at dressing up and his flair for hypnotism and his ability to see the future put him right up there with people like Russell Grant and Mystic Meg. Real name Peter Thornley; he was born in 1942, and he made his wrestling debut in Walsall at Willenhall baths in November 1964 wearing a mask and tight-fitting pants. The fact that the baths were only 122 miles away from the Orient (who had themselves enjoyed some time in the limelight when they reached the FA Cup semi-finals in 1978) probably had no significance whatsoever, although Kendo can be credited with doing the "Martial Arts" gimmick a good few years before Bruce Lee entered any dragons.

Entering dragons was something the fourth man definitely wasn't scared of. By the time 40-stone Giant Haystacks appeared wearing what looked like the armless remains of his mum's sheepskin coat, Eamonn had given the big man the thumbs-up and was leading George and Kendo into the audience. Off stage the only light came from a blue neon sign above a flight of stairs, which read *This Is Your Life,* and some of those scurrying out of the theatre at the end of the night to catch the last bus really didn't need a reminder. Britain in the late 1970s was pretty bloody bleak if you were skint, and characters from the wrestling provided light relief, whether you were watching them on TV, over a couple of pints down the Legion, or you had paid your £1.50 to go see one of the 4,500 yearly shows.

Haystacks lumbered along behind the others like a stray silverback, his dark eyes glaring out through his fur. Real name Martin Ruane; he had once been part of a successful tag team when Shirley returned to wrestling in the early 1970s. It was

however, the Big Daddy versus Giant Haystacks grudge matches in the latter part of the 1970s and 1980s which topped the bill right across the land. Despite the lack of proper wrestling and their limited technical ability, the audience's enjoyment of their theatrics was not affected. The powerhouse bell-butts and holds they performed showed a good amount of agility for big men, and besides this, they were the ones who put the most "arses on seats". Halls and stadiums everywhere were packed to bursting point as were their leotards and costumes.

Martin was born in Camberwell, London, in October 1946 and was a big lad who started out as a labourer and a doorman at the weekends to earn extra money to feed his family. He worked at some of the less reputable nightclubs in Salford, Manchester, until he nearly became the victim of a drive-by shooting one night while working the door. Originally taking up wrestling in 1967 as Luke McMasters, it was as Giant Haystacks, fighting Big Daddy on TV on Saturday afternoons that left such an impression on people's minds, and through these bouts both men's statuses have been elevated as the years have passed.

Looking back, the young wrestling fan of today would find it difficult to see the entertainment value in two fat blokes bumping into each other in the ring. Over-exposed to the steroid-fuelled 21st-century American brand of wrestling supermen, comparing British wrestling to its Yankee cousin is a bit like comparing Butlins to Disney World. These were care-free days before ram-raiding and PlayStations became popular teenage pastimes, and kids were easier to impress. It was an age of innocence when creatures lived on Wimbledon Common, and the TV wrestlers were kings. Today, it would be as tough to explain how exciting these bouts were as it would be to explain the beauty we once saw in jumpsuits, Crimplene trousers, and the Bay City Rollers. How supercharged the audience became at the sight of a pair of man-boobs, or the outline of a scrotum in the half-light above the canvas, would be hard to explain unless you had experienced it for yourself.

The London room was dark and filled with wrestlers, and Big Daddy stood in the centre of them all in a white leotard. At a little over 6ft 2in, the 26-stone star was well past his fighting prime and was only too aware that the Big Daddy image was what the people wanted; the wrestling came second. The fact that his brother Max had become the biggest promoter in the land, and turned him into an unbeatable champion, infuriated many of the other wrestlers in the business. They felt good wrestlers were kept back because of the Daddy machine but some of those that were good enough did get their break in America when the British scene died. Love him or hate him, wrestling was experiencing a downturn, and Max Crabtree breathed new life into it when he was made the boss of Joint Promotions, and the televised shows ran for nearly 20 more years. Whether he could have been as successful and kept as much control by promoting others like he pushed his brother is unlikely, and this did not become a real problem until Shirley approached 60 years old, and the plug was pulled on British wrestling on television.

Traditional opinions about Max having total control over his brother's successes are unkind to Shirley and a number of people around him who helped create his John Bull-like character. With a mop of blonde hair under a silver or gold sequined top hat, he would come to the ring in his shimmering cape encouraging the audience to chant "easy, easy, easy". With the Seekers' hit 'We Shall Not Be Moved' blaring away you knew, deep down, that he wasn't going to be bloody well moved, but still you watched on until that last Daddy-splashdown.

It is perhaps correct to say that Max put Shirley up on to a pedestal with his efforts as a promoter, but once he was up there; he had to stay there. The success of the Big Daddy character beyond wrestling and into the wider media was more to do with Shirley, his wife Eunice, and a few people close to them. In the wrestling world, Max didn't trust anybody to run his kingdom and not take a bite, so he made his brother unbeatable. People came to watch him in their thousands because they wanted to see

Big Daddy before they watched any wrestling – it was as simple as that.

The London room fell silent, and the photographer motioned for the group to look into the camera. Shirley was stood in the middle of a burly group of wrestlers wearing his white leotard; still unsuspecting. They all shouted out their lines as the scene cuts to Haystacks shuffling along like he had soiled himself and Kendo behind him bringing up the rear. From the right, another cameraman swoops in as Eamonn (still masked) appears from the opposite side with the red book and microphone hidden beneath his cape. Waving it under Shirley's nose the colour drains instantly from his face as Eamonn removes his headgear, and he says: "Star of wrestling, the big daddy of them all, known to millions as Big Daddy, tonight this is your life!"

Chapter One

A Boy Named Shirley

"How many times I'd picked myself up off the ground after getting a pasting in the early days I can't remember. Shirley Temple was the name they teased me with at school, and I can still recall one time, in particular, when a group of lads set upon me. I got shoved around the centre of a circle, and they were pushing with proper hatred. I could see it in their eyes; they loved every minute of it.

"Do you remember the Johnny Cash song? 'A Boy Named Sue'? The father calls his son Sue because he knows he won't be around to protect him as he grows up, and the lad has to learn to fight because he's constantly battling those who want to take the mickey out of his name? Well, that song described me down to a tee now I look to the past and think about it, and after a while I started to get very angry. The desire to defend myself became overwhelming and the bullies' days were numbered because I hit back twice as hard."

By ten years old Shirley was a bit bigger than most lads the same age and the nastiness was starting to become a bit of a permanent fixture, as was the absence of his father. The name he shared with him was a burden in more than one way because nobody had seen

him in two years, and at the time his mother was pregnant with his brother Brian so it hit home hard.

Shirley became a bit of a loner who tried to stay out of the rough and tumble as much as possible. You were more likely to see him with his head buried in a newspaper or a book than giving somebody a knuckle sandwich around the back of the Anderson shelter. The three Crabtree boys were brought up in complete poverty, and Halifax's industry spewed its pollution out onto the grimy streets all the time so fresh air was in short supply. Despite all the hardship, there was still no reason for lowering standards, and their mother wouldn't have any trouble or swearing from any of them. Later, she didn't like to see her boys drinking or smoking, which is something that stayed with them all their lives.

Shirley senior walked out on his family a bit before the start of the Second World War. He had been a rugby player and a wrestler as well as a drayman, and he lived most of his days in Halifax where he was born in 1906. Some people believe the name Shirley came from the Charlotte Bronte novel of the same name, coming from the wild and windy moorland which inspired her to write it in 1849. Before then, the name Shirley was a boys' name but granny Crabtree liked it so much that she gave it to her son, who carried it on. Whatever the truth, it was a cruel name to bestow upon a lad in 1930, and leaves you wondering whether the dray-man had been sampling his own brew the day his wife gave birth to her first child (who weighed in at a couple of pounds under a stone).

In his day, Shirley senior had been a very good professional rugby league player and was part of Halifax's 1931 Challenge Cup-winning side. This would have put the family on a bit of a high with a few quid extra when young Shirley was taking his first steps, but they were never what you would call affluent. He went on to play over 100 matches for the club before winding up his career with York and then Dewsbury. As a wrestler, he experienced a second sporting peak in the 1940s and was described as a "decent amateur" but he was considerably smaller than his son even before

the dramatic weight increase and the beginning of the Big Daddy gimmick.

> *"My roots are not so much in places, as in people… From the time I was seven, my childhood was pretty tough, that's when our old man left us. His differences were all with my mother… He'd had dumbbells made for me and my two younger brothers Max and Brian, had a little mat in front of the fire, and taught us to hand-balance and wrestle… When he went my brothers and me made a little gym of our own excluding him. We had a mat from straw and canvas and had broom handles with flat-irons on them… His whole existence was based on his great strength, he learnt his living by it… He'd go round bars and clubs doing a strongman act, bending bars and lifting people up. We grew up fighting fit and soon had the advantage over other lads. He would encourage us to join in the street fights to bring out our competitive element. He'd get us to go up to big chaps and pull them along the street. It sounds ridiculous, but we had to do it. He thought that being tough and winning was the only thing that mattered in life.*
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> *"He believed in being the hard man and not giving anybody else a break. He undoubtedly left his mark on Max and me.*
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> *"He was unstable [Shirley's father], a bit of a romantic really. If he had a bit of success, he would immediately think he could do absolutely anything and, of course, he'd find that he could not. Typical, I remember the day he went to a local fair, and they had a greasy pole with a side of ham at the top. Everybody had been trying to get up there all day, but it was my father, by practically busting a gut, who reached it. And he immediately thought, as usual, that meant he*

could do anything he set his mind to. It was my mother who had to calm him down.

"When he took off it was our mam who worked in the mill twelve hours to keep a roof over our heads and pay the bills. Suddenly, I was the man of the house; we lived at number five Wilson Street where I was born on the 14th November 1930. The house was your typical mill-worker's two up, two down with no piped water and the Armitage Shanks was down the other end of the yard which caused all sorts of problems when it rained.

"My mam's name was Marion, and she was one hell of a woman I can tell you. She weighed 15 stone; her dad was a blacksmith, and she used to strike the hammer. She had tremendous arms on her; she could carry a hundred weight of coal up six flights of stairs… The way she just carried on when dad left, she had staying power and was as hard as hell and her influence on me and my brothers shouldn't be underestimated. All her working life she was up at five every morning to start her shift at the mill and would sometimes come home very late. Despite all of this, and the fact we had a house-trained rabbit that liked to eat the wallpaper, the house was always spotlessly clean, and we were expected to do our bit."

Wilson Street and the surrounding neighbourhoods were regarded as slum areas, and there were no state benefits then either. If you didn't graft, were bone idle, or a drunk, you went under – it was as easy as that. These were the days of the Great Depression when most people's priority was to put food on the table and avoid stuff like unclean drinking water and tuberculosis. If you couldn't pay your rent at the end of the week, you would find yourself out on the street and your kids would end up in the workhouse more than likely.

It was a complete lack of anything with sub-standard housing this was proper squalor, and it got ten times worse when the Second World War started and rationing began. The only thing good to come out of it all was the fact that a lot of other lads didn't have their fathers at home either, they were off fighting, so Shirley suddenly found people who had the same thing in common as him. And of course, there was always the chance the old man would find his way back home, get kicked out by whoever it was he was shacked up with, or his credit would run out.

There was a feeling of doom and gloom in the air at Christmas 1939 and hardly any of the usual seasonal merriment. It was more a season of caution where people didn't want to let their guard down because careless talk cost lives. The Palace picture house was still open though, and films like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Come on George!* provided an escape from the blackout and bad news which was largely about the battles going on in the Atlantic.

Locally, a chap called Arnold Binns decided the time had come and he strapped himself into a pair of his best roller skates and blew the John o'Groats to Land's End record away. There had been a textile strike in the town around the time of Shirley's birth but when the fighting started a few years later such political and social events ceased as people banded together and focused on surviving. There were still things to do, but it all ended when it got dark and people stayed indoors. The war had been rumbling along for three months when Halifax really started to be affected, the world was suddenly changing at a frightening pace, and the people of Britain wondered what was going to happen to them. It truly hit home in November when a single bomb lit up the night sky with smoke and flame and destroyed the West Hill pub and a row of adjacent houses. Shirley and Max were old enough to pick up on what was going on, and it was a frightening time for young lads growing up among it all. A major producer of cotton and wool, Halifax mobilised itself to play its part in the war effort.

There had been a case of mass hysteria in the town the year before when it was believed the "Halifax Slasher" was on the

prowl. Scotland Yard was called in; businesses were temporarily shut down, and crazed groups of vigilantes roamed the streets beating up suspects. It all turned out to be a tissue of lies, and the people involved were charged with public mischief offences. One of the men who said he was attacked admitted he had inflicted the injuries upon himself, but the damage was done and an uneasy, paranoiac feeling that the "Bogey Man" was out there on the moors watching settled in the psyche for a time. Soon, that paranoia became real fear as bombs rained down from the skies, and Yorkshire got hit really hard.

To make things worse it was freezing outside as the country experienced one of the coldest winters in many years. The Salvation Army were concerned about families living on the breadline, so they went around the town giving out presents and food, and the Crabtrees qualified. Max and toddler Brian were delighted with their gifts of Meccano, a train set, and toy soldiers, but Shirley wasn't so pleased. After the old girl had dropped her collection tin and warmed her legs over the scattering of coal in their grate, she pulled out a lovely dolly for big sister Shirley, and he never lived it down.

Shirley's schooling started at Pellon Lane Junior in the mid-1930s with a lad called Jack Wilkinson, who went on to win the Rugby League World Cup with England, as well as representing Great Britain as a prop. The two men stayed in contact until they were in their 20s but lost touch as they pursued individual careers. They finally caught up on *This Is Your Life* in 1979 where the only story old Jack could recall after all of that time was one about a linen handkerchief Shirley's mum used to pin to his jacket, so he could wipe his chops after lunch.

It was during those formative years at Pellon Lane that the wrestling education began. He had started out practising holds on the rug at home with his dad when he was still around, and now it was on the school timetable which seems rather bizarre looking at it from today's point of view. What you have to remember is before the scripted displays of showmanship overtook the need for

proper wrestling (and the Big Daddy gimmick was a major part of this change) there was a very serious element to it all even though it wasn't quite considered a sport. Put it this way, you would never see a bookie offering odds on a wrestling bout unless he had gone daft, but it was a massive part of the British psyche for most of the 20th century and was on terrestrial TV for 33 years.

> *"Sometimes you look back at it all and you don't know how we managed. It was just me, my brothers and my mam and I remember the beginning of the war very well. I was still having problems in the school yard, and I was getting sick of it. This particular day I got as mad as hell, so I stood up tall and retaliated. I hit the lad squarely on the jaw, and he went down like a sack of taties. I can vaguely remember the schoolmaster bellowing at me to come back but there was no way I was taking any more punishment, and I ran quicker than the day we got caught pinching apples and the farmer's Alsatian had the arse out of my trousers."*

With a keen interest in English literature the library was where Shirley retreated a lot of the time, and it was better than messing about in the street. It was among the sports books and magazines that he first came across a picture of the world-famous strongman Eugene Sandow, and it left quite an impression. Eugene is widely regarded as the father of modern bodybuilding who came from Prussia in 1885 and travelled Europe as a circus athlete. People marvelled at his muscular physique, although the common belief back then was that bodybuilding made a man cumbersome, rather than enhancing his strength and conditioning. Eugene started performing on the London stage in 1889 and was earning big money. Hardly anyone in the professional sports world was training with weights, and Sandow's methods inspired many people, although bodybuilding did not become really popular in Britain until the 1950s.

Eugene started and ran his own fitness magazine as well as creating an institute for physical culture. He was the 19th-century equivalent of Arnold Schwarzenegger making appearances in films by the Lumiere brothers, although they were not quite action-packed thrillers. Back in 1894 audiences still thought cinematography was the work of the devil, and they were freaked out by the trees swaying in the background so they weren't really interested in Eugene flexing his muscles in the foreground.

With the days of bullying behind him and the teenage hormones kicking in, Shirley saw weightlifting as a decent way to get fit as well as impress the girls. Without a father figure, he needed somebody or something to aspire to and the image of Eugene stayed with him as he started to lay the foundations for what lay ahead. It was to be a career of two halves, in the 1950s as a serious wrestler winning British and European belts, and a comeback in the 1970s as the unstoppable showman Big Daddy when he was past his prime. When we look back at those performances now, from the muscular Shirley Crabtree of the 1950s, through several wrestling pseudonyms to the larger-than-life public character, the fights of Daddy and his contemporaries seem so rough, ready and dated they once again enthralled. There were of course those fighters that could sell it and others who were terrible at working the crowd. It was an era of hard-men, hustlers and egomaniacs, all ducking and diving in and out of Victorian music-halls with walls held together by nicotine and spit. Shirley became a star in the places he had first visited as an awestruck boy, and he packed them to the rafters year after year.

Wrestling was experiencing one of its peaks during Shirley's childhood, and the three brothers marvelled at well-known grapplers such as Francis St Clair Gregory, Jack Pye, and Bill Garnon. It was first introduced to the public as a variety act at the beginning of the 19th century to enhance boring strongman attractions. The truth is, once you had seen somebody bend a few nails, lift a couple of bar bells, and hold cannons as they were fired, there wasn't a great deal of action to be had. If you suddenly found

yourself heading out of the freak show on Whitechapel Road on a wet and windy winter's evening, and you didn't fancy Soho, you would be looking for a different kind of action to take your mind off what you had seen.

Poor old Joseph Merrick was one of the attractions at the time, and you would need a stiff drink and a bit of light entertainment after seeing the hideous deformities of the "elephant man". Into this kind of environment wrestling was born, the fairground and carnival booths were where the hardmen, and not-so-hard-men, usually fought until they were covered in blood. Sometimes it was done for money, other times to settle a grudge, but out of these places, wrestling gradually evolved to a professional standard. The strongman and bodybuilder shows grew ever more popular and through such men "grappling" and showing off their strength and physique it is easy to see how wrestling slipped into the public consciousness. It was only natural that people would want to see such colossuses beating ten bells out of each other, so the first proper promotional partnership was formed by Sir Atholl Oakeley and Henry Irslinger to help wrestlers hurt and maim each other in a more civilised manner.

Oakeley and Irslinger built upon the developmental work done by Charles B. Cochran, who encouraged legitimate champion Georg Hackenschmidt to go for showmanship rather than sportsmanship because he was wiping the floor with everyone he fought. Born in Estonia in 1877, Georg was the first freestyle champion of the world and spent most of his life in London where he was nicknamed the "Russian Lion". His invincibility was killing the sport so entertaining the crowd became the number-one priority for Hackenschmidt and other top wrestlers rather than a legitimate sporting victory. This of course sowed the seeds for the variety act which evolved over the next couple of decades, and because of the things these wrestlers did to one another nobody doubted its authenticity.

There was still legitimate wrestling going on. Fighters such as Cornish-American Jack Carkeek challenged people in the

audience at fairgrounds and carnivals to last ten minutes with him in the ring. Francis St Clair Gregory (another Cornishman) travelled to France to represent his county in the Cornu-Breton tournaments in the 1930s and won all seven of the contests. Men like Jack Dale, Bert Assirati, Les Kellett and George de Relwyskow all started out in the 1930s, and all of these men went on to shape the business in various ways.

Before the First World War, a lot of the big names were leaving to wrestle in America and taking their gimmickry with them. It was there that Hackenschmidt lost his three-year-old world heavyweight title to Iowa-born Frank Gotch in a straight contest which lasted two hours. While Britain suffered under war-time constraints, wrestling continued as a legitimate sport until Oakeley and Irslinger came along. They had seen for themselves how popular "showmanship" wrestling was, and they introduced it properly to Britain in the form of vicious contests that they claimed were real. The new style was called "all-in wrestling" and there were up-and-coming stars such as Tommy Mann, Black Butcher Johnson, College Boy and Atholl Oakeley, who won a series of matches and crowned himself the first British heavyweight champion. Many regard these as the halcyon days of British wrestling; little did they know it was all about to be disrupted by a megalomaniac dictator with a passion for genocide and knee-high boots as Shirley recalled:

> *"Halifax was hit hard by the Blitz, maybe not as badly as Sheffield or Bradford with its steel and industry, but it got its fair share, I can tell you. The sound of a bomb going off is something you will never forget, and you lived in fear of this, although I suppose you did become used to it after a while; you had to cope or you would have cracked up. Most of the houses in town are great big stone structures, and ours had a basement. I remember one night when the sirens were going off our mam was in bed, I ran upstairs and shouted 'quick,*

let's get down to the basement', but she wasn't budging. She was so knackered after a long shift at the mill, and she told me to leave her alone, if she was going to die anywhere it would be in her bed – what will be, will be."

The Crabtrees were a pretty normal Roman Catholic family who kept themselves to themselves, which is something else that stayed with Shirley later in life. As Big Daddy, the media interest surrounding him could be intense, and an intrusion for a man who liked his privacy outside the glare of the spotlights. By the early 1940s, he had moved on to Battinson Road School as people just carried on with things. It was difficult because one day you could be chatting to friends in the town, and the next morning they could all be dead and their neat little house with its white picket fence was now a smouldering hole in the ground. The reality of it was that the country was on its knees fighting for its very existence until something happened that would change the course of the war. On the morning of 7 December 1941 the US naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii was attacked by the Japanese and nine ships were destroyed, and almost 2,500 people killed as the United States' hand was forced. Back home, things had been pretty bleak as Britain stood alone against Germany.

With the Americans now involved, there was a new sense of optimism, and soon Hitler's forces would weaken as the tides of fortune began to turn. By the time Shirley's teenage years began in November 1943, the RAF had started their bombing campaign on Berlin, and the Allied advance continued into Italy. Fortunate to be just a couple of years too young for conscription in wartime, some of his friends' older brothers received their papers before hostilities ceased, and they saw the devastation for themselves.

For the Crabtrees, things continued much the same as they had before and Shirley's interest in health and fitness came to the fore. As well as wrestling he started to play rugby league for the school and was quick to notice the similarities between the two. He was good enough to play for Halifax Youth, but he excelled at other

"physical sports" such as shot-put and bench-pressing, and all of this information helps us to build up a picture of an athletic young man. Despite the hardships of war and family life, he came out of childhood relatively unscathed but there were others that weren't quite so lucky. More bombs fell on Bradford, Leeds and Wakefield before the blitz of Sheffield in December 1940 left 660 people dead and 1,500 injured, and there was still more to come.

In 1944, aged 14, Shirley left school, and he immediately helped to take some of the burden off of his mother by getting a job at a spinning mill where he towered over all the ladies like a giant. One of his party tricks was to lift one of them up over the wall to see if the boss was coming, and if he was they would put out their fags and make it look like they were working. Shirley's job was to replace the bobbins on the sewing machines, and he was very happy to be away from school and earning money. Overseas, Operation Overlord was completed in August, and Paris liberated, as the fear of German invasion began to fade. Shirley began to train at the YMCA gym in Halifax where a man called Norman Morrell spotted his potential and encouraged him to wrestle, but he did not think of fighting as a way to make money at that point. With his blonde hair and baby face a very willing Shirley listened to what those around him had to say and his keenness (coupled to the fact that he had a smattering or two of skill and charisma) was enough to get him his big break once he had mastered the trade.

In 1945, Bert Assirati became the British heavyweight champion, and he held on to the title for five years. These were troubled times, the "all-in" style of wrestling was collapsing just like Hitler's empire and Morrell realised that something had to be done. Elsewhere, top wrestler Ted Beresford, who had organised army wrestling contests throughout the war, got involved with Morrell and other prominent men to sort it all out, which left promoters outside the cartel excluded. By agreeing to rotate the talent the new Joint Promotions was soon running 40 shows a week and there was a need for wrestlers who could offer something a bit different. Shirley was still a few years away from

being involved in all of this, but he was happy to be around Morrell and his associates while it was coming together, and Morrell was not the only one who regarded him as one for the future.

He was fortunate to receive some training from the "Russian Lion" himself – Georg Hackenschmidt, who was approaching 70 years old, as well as Norman Walsh, Jack Procter, Bernard Murray and Les Kellett during those early years, and regularly trained morning, afternoon, and at night. Not only did they teach Shirley about wrestling and weight training; he picked up tips on diet and nutrition although his insatiable thirst for milk probably came from Hackenschmidt, who was reported to drink up to 11 pints a day.

Norman Morrell became a top wrestling promoter, but he started out as a very good amateur wrestler who was chosen to represent Britain in the 1936 Olympic Games. He went on to become a professional but by the end of the war, he knew that wrestling was crying out for a major overhaul, people were abandoning it because it had become such a farce. Adapted from the American style, Morrell penned a new set of rules, which formed the basis of wrestling for half a century to follow. He did this by persuading former Antarctic explorer Lord Mount-Evans, Commander Archibald Campbell, and MP Maurice Webb to put their names to the "Admiral Lord Mount-Evans rules" which then gave him enough clout to make them stick and they did many things like set up meetings between members of the House of Lords and the promoters as Shirley remembered:

> *"The days of bloody out of the ring fighting, and mud-bath wrestling were numbered as gimmickry was firmly slapped back into its place. People started calling it a load of old rubbish, and commenting on its authenticity, and the new rules put a stop to all of this. Morrell was ready to do battle but first, in 1948, he became chief architect of Joint Promotions, which divided England up into areas which were controlled by other promoters. The idea of this was to monopolise*

and share around the talent equally, and it worked well for over 40 years."

On 6 August 1945, a Boeing B-29 Super-fortress called the *Enola Gay* dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima in Japan in an attempt to force the Japanese to surrender. The Nazis had caved in three months earlier, but the Japanese were going to fight on until the end, and something had to be done to put an end to six years of fighting. The bomb killed approximately 150,000 people outright, and nobody knew anything of radiation sickness back then so the death toll increased considerably as the years went by. Still not convinced, the Japanese fought on and a second bomb was dropped on the city of Nagasaki three days later and another 60,000 people perished and this finally brought about the end of the bloodiest war in history.

It would take many years for normality to return. In Britain most of its major cities were either destroyed or partially destroyed and there was a lot of reconstruction work to be done. Indeed, many of the wartime sanctions and restrictions would not be rescinded for a good few years and rationing did not finish until 1950. As many as 50 million people lost their lives during the war, and after the fighting ended the grieving began.

"For me and my family, like many others in Britain at the time, we were determined to build a new life. You wouldn't have believed it if you had surveyed the battered cities around Halifax, but people were sick and tired of death and destruction, and the desire for a peace movement like the ones we saw in the 1960s came from folks' feelings after the war. From bad usually comes good, and after all the monuments had been built and memorials attended, people dug deep and carried on because there was no other way. They hadn't gone under during the war, and they were sure as hell not giving in now. Everyone prayed for better

times to come, and after a while new enterprises and opportunities started to spring up, and I wasn't going to be left behind so I continued to work hard and keep my ear to the ground for any kind of chance. Soon I was playing rugby league and loving every minute of it; that's when Bradford Northern became interested in me and what with the wrestling and my work in the mill, I certainly wasn't keeping all of my eggs in one basket."