

JOHN HILL

The Great Blondin

“The use of a safety net is preparation for defeat”

This comical sculpture, located at Ladywood Middleway, of a tightrope walker is misleading. It commemorates the crossing of Edgbaston Reservoir in 1873 by Charles Blondin, but you would be forgiven to believe that it actually depicts Don Quixote. In heavy body armour?

Jean-François Gravelet was born in 1824 in Calais, France. As a promising five year-old, he was sent to a gymnastic school in Lyon. After six months acrobatic training, he made his first public appearance as ‘The Boy Wonder’. He later changed his name to Charles Blondin and went to the United States in 1855 as part of a travelling circus. He soon became known as ‘The Great Blondin’ after making his fortune in 1869 by becoming the first person to cross Niagara Gorge on a tightrope 1,100 feet long and 160 feet above the Falls, charging 25 cents per viewer. On one crossing, Blondin took a photograph of an estimated crowd of 25,000 observers using a Daguerreotype camera that he carried on his back.

This feat was subsequently achieved a total of 16 times, with variations:

Blindfolded

On stilts

In a sack

Carrying his manager on his back

Pushing a wheelbarrow full of potatoes

Sitting midway to cook an omelette

On a chair with only one chair leg in contact with the cable

Pushing his mother across in a wheelbarrow after failing to find an alternative volunteer

The Ladywood statue by Paul Richardson was erected in 1995. It is made from steel plate, zinc & bronze, sprayed and patinated. (Height 300 cm, plinth height 750 cm.)

References

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Blondin

List of public art in Birmingham - wikipedia

YouTube:

30th June 1859: Charles Blondin became the first person to cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope

The Charles Blondin Wheelbarrow Story

Niagara Falls Daredevils: The Great Blondin

Secret Birmingham: The Great Blondin