

The Trio from Rochdale

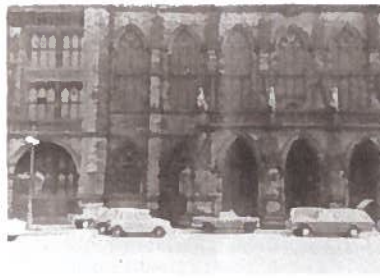
by RANDLE S. CUTTS



GRACIE FIELDS

I recently revisited the site upon which the Rochdale Hippodrome had once stood, and which I wrote about in this magazine in March 1970. Almost to the very day when that edition of "The Call Boy" had been issued the bulldozers razed it to the ground. Although the ground was scheduled to be used for the building of offices it is yet only a car park. The red brick Royal Hippodrome as it was fully called was situated in Newgate, only a couple of streets away from T'owd Lane where the Rochdale Pioneers opened the first Co-operative shop in England. On that day of my last nostalgic visit nothing of the old theatre remained except one bill board that once announced the attractions. Being on a dividing wall between the theatre and the adjoining property, it had got left. Latterly, it used to read:— HIPPODROME BINGO AND SOCIAL CLUB. EVERY NIGHT AT 8.15, DOORS OPEN 7.15. BIG CASH PRIZES AND NUMEROUS FREE GIFTS TO BE WON EVERY NIGHT.

Many an artiste would have been glad in the old days to have been down at the bottom of that bill among the wines and spirits. The wall behind formed part of the covered alley which led to the stage door. I fell to recalling the 730 seat theatre in its hey day. On the outside of the back wall was the word HIPPO-



Gracie Fields received the Freedom of Rochdale from this balcony of the Town Hall. The square was thronged with thousands.

DROME in gold letters upon a maroon background. At another end and high above, was the following information in gold letters upon a dark blue background: HIPPODROME, TWICE NIGHTLY. 6.10 — 8.50 p.m. Picture with me for a brief moment if you will, the inside of the theatre as it was. The front of the stage near the audience is banked on either side by flowers. The gold curtain rises on two acts especially. Here are the DE LACEYS playing comedy King and Queen in pantomime. A funny letter is being read with all the consequent amusing permutations, or here is KITTY McSHANE as the daughter wheeling on stage ARTHUR LUCAN in the guise of Old Mother Riley in an old soapbox with wheels. Just over 20 years ago the Rochdale Corporation held a special week of Civic celebrations and there was a full week of top-line variety at the Hippodrome, headed by famous Rochdale stars. On Monday and Tuesday G. H. ELLIOTT starred. Wednesday and Thursday were headlined by NORMAN EVANS, who brought two new acts with him from Blackpool. GRACIE FIELDS was the top of the bill on the Friday and Saturday. It is interesting to consider these three music hall "greats" with special reference to their home town.

Not many years ago they pulled down the birthplace of "Our Gracie" to make way for a filling station. Born Gracie Stansfield, she first saw the light of day in her mother's fish and chip shop. A plaque was set high on the soot-grimed wall of the old house. It read "Gracie Stansfield, known as Miss Gracie Fields, Freeman of this Borough, was born at 9, Molesworth Street on 9th January, 1898". Thousands of the star's admirers went to see it over the years, and it marked the town's greatest tourist attraction. A similar row of terraced houses to the one where Gracie lived still exists opposite, but the whole area is rapidly being cleared. This is the true Rochdale of "Sally" her most famous number, and of her comedy song 'The Rochdale Hounds'. It's going on for a couple of



NORMAN EVANS

years now since "Our Gracie" came home to this street where she was born, and went up the road to open the new factory which makes high precision machinery. She was cheered by a crowd of 500 who had stood in pouring rain for more than an hour. The band played the strains of her theme song "Sally". Everyone followed her lead in singing the chorus. Gracie was very pleased with the improvements in the district. She said "I used to put on my clogs and walk a mile to work from this very street".

Gracie Fields earned 17s.6d. a week as a cotton winder and made one of her first singing trips on a tram to Oldham. The same Gracie she always has and always will remain. Rochdale Football Club benefited from her generosity in the 1930s, and years later the whole square in front of Rochdale's magnificent town hall was jammed full of thousands of people when she became a freeman of the borough and appeared on the balcony with the various civic dignitaries.

Appropriately enough it was Gracie Fields who recognised the rich talent of NORMAN EVANS and who introduced him to the stage in the 1930s. He was a commercial traveller with "the gift of the gab" and as such met all types of people. This background gave him a wealth of material for his sketches. He had been doing smokers, masonics and Co-op concerts in a semi-professional way. I myself am an old boy of Bury Grammar School.

We call ourselves "Old Clavians", and at the annual reunion dinner they used to have entertainers. The more senior old boys tell of when Norman appeared on what must have been one of his last semi-professional engagements. He showed a telegram he had from SIR OSWALD STOLL asking him to be present for interview at the Coliseum Theatre, London, the following Monday, and he remarked "I'm made". Within three short years he was chosen for a Royal Variety Performance. Fame followed as a radio comedian and eventually T.V. welcomed him. I well recall a snatch or two from his song in a radio series.

"Keep smiling over the garden wall girls,
Don't let the blazing banner fall
Times were never leaner.

So forget the shillings and pence,
And just keep on leaning
Right over the garden fence.
Wear a smile as you're greeting your
next door neighbour,
Makes life worth living after all" etc.

His props were simple. A screen for his famous dentist's sketch so that he could quick-change to appear and reappear as "victim" and "dentist". His first "wall" for his most famous of all "Over the Garden Wall" sketch was the family washing line with the clothes on it, and it is for this minutely observed and mimed portrayal of the garrulous Lancashire "dame" gossiping with her neighbours that he will be most remembered. Lancastrian in his eating and drinking habits, at any theatre where he appeared, there had to be a ready supply of tea and hot pot. His wife Annie provided the good cooking, and he would have a stove installed in his dressing room to enable her to cook for the cast. He proved that Lancashire comedy knew no boundaries by his outstanding successes in America where according to their customs he had to make up from man to woman right in front of the audience's eyes. It was after he was there once that he wanted a bungalow Hollywood style. He said "I think we make too much fuss about privacy here in Britain. When I was in Hollywood I took a real fancy to their bungalows with just a lawn sloping down to the road. Fences, hedges and walls just ruin the look of a street".

GEORGE HENRY ELLIOTT, "the chocolate coloured coon" was born on November 3rd, 1883 in a district of Rochdale, and maintained that his first name came from the fact that he was born in the "George and Dragon" Hotel. The present building is the one concerned and it is about 100 years old, but the original 'George and Dragon' used to be built further back on land at the rear. Recently a flyover on the Lancashire to Yorkshire motorway nearly sliced the hotel in two, but wiser decisions prevailed and this flyover runs about 70 yards away. Gone is the cottage very near the old Hippodrome where he lived as a young star, on his return from starring as a child in American melodrama. Lancashire audiences loved him and would call for encores of their favourite songs, shouting "Good Old George"! He took over 'Lily of Laguna' from Eugene Statton, that other black faced star and which was written by Lancashire's LESLIE STUART, but Leslie's elder brother LESTER BARRATT - Barratt was the family name - wrote the words and HERMAN DAREWSKI the music of G.H. Elliott's songs. George's own favourite was "I used to Sigh for the Silvery Moon" which he first sang at the Hackney Empire in 1908. He owed his black face to burnt cork of which he maintained only champagne corks were



G. H. ELLIOTT

good enough. Some of George's early appearances were at music halls in the nearby town of Oldham, where there were four main variety theatres.

Around the corner from the Rochdale Hippodrome used to stand the Theatre Royal. Many professional pantomimes had been produced there. BUD FLANAGAN appeared there in a pantomime with a man called Harry McKelvie. In conversation lately with the "Dusky Dame" BILLY WELLS, he told me that he first blacked up at the Theatre Royal, Rochdale in "Robinson Crusoe" and used to finish his act with a somersault. In that pantomime were WHEELER and WILSON, father and son, as Captain and Mate. JIMMY WHEELER was in those days the Wilson half of the partnership. Yes, the theatres of Rochdale have gone, but the ghosts of the music hall lurk round every corner.