

TAKE IT FROM HERE

Eric Midwinter remembers a classic radio show

During the golden age of radio, there was normally a flagship comedy show sailing the airwaves. Earlier there had been *Bandwagon* and the incomparable *ITMA*. Later there would be *The Goon Show* and *Hancock's Half Hour*. The overlapping arch between older and younger was built by *Take It From Here*, which, after an uneasy six weeks series start in March 1948, blossomed into a fast-moving show that ran skittishly for annual series until March 1960. Twelve or so years is a long time to sustain so slick and bright a programme, but, benefiting at first from the untimely death of Tommy Handley in 1949, it replaced *ITMA* in the hearts and minds of the nation.



Jimmy Edwards - Joy Nicholls - Dick Bentley

Navy Mixture, a revived wartime show, had done rather well. It starred Jimmy Edwards, his bluff approach – ‘wake up at the back there’ – honed on eighteen months toil at the Windmill theatre, plus the Australian singer, Joy Nichols, while the favoured guest star had been the more experienced Australian comic, Dick Bentley, who, in the wake of Vic Oliver, Jimmy Wheeler and others, had told tales and played the violin in his stage act. Charles Maxwell, the far-seeing producer, visualised a new programme incorporating the threesome and invited the *Navy Mixture* writer, Frank Muir, and the writer of Dick Bentley’s guest spots, Denis Norden, to pair up as co-authors. In spite of other commitments, they decided to do so, working evenings on *TIFH*, until the other daytime responsibilities had vanished, after which they relaxed into a merely ‘full-time’ job.

From the second and seminal series, the well-remembered three-part structure was developed. First, the three exchanged personalised banter on some topic of the hour, with Wallas Eaton – ‘come ‘ome, Jim Edwards’ – also recruited to do a brilliant range of voices. Next came what the writers called the ‘gimmick’, an ideas sketch, such as the weather forecast done operatically – ‘the mercury’s sunk to the figure 0, Figaro, Figaro.’ Last came the film or allied genre spoof, wherein the cinematic clichés took a battering. In the courtroom drama, when the accused Dick Bentley wept copiously over his ‘not guilty’ plea, Judge Jimmy Edwards described him as ‘you miserable pleader’. Sentenced to life imprisonment, the tearful

Dick Bentley sobbed, “I’ll never do it”, at which the learned judge complacently advised, “do as much as you can, my boy.” The *Quo Vadis*-style Roman skit was something of a favourite. It included the famed phonetic numbering off from the right by the Roman platoon – ‘aye; aye aye; aye, aye, aye; aye vee; vee; vee aye’. John Watt, Head of the BBC Variety Department said that was the first new joke he had heard on air since the war.

As was the magazine style of the day, two musical spots divided the three comical offerings, one provided by the close-harmony group, the Keynotes, and the other a song from Joy Nichols, sometimes from Dick Bentley, or occasionally a duet. They were both very capable all-round entertainers. Frank Muir and Denis Norden worked backwards, beginning with the parody sketch on the Monday, leaving the opening spot, to obtain maximum topicality, until Friday, having Saturday free, and recording the show on Sunday.

The major change in the format came with Joy Nichols’ marriage to the American ‘cowboy’ baritone, Wally Peterson, and her move to the United States. Sadly, her career ‘never looked forward’, she drifted back to England and her final job found her behind a *Mothercare* counter. She left two gaps in *TIFH*. The singing one was admirably filled by Alma Cogan, for her cheery style aptly fitted the *TIFH* bill. Prunella Scales almost obtained the acting part, but was pipped at the post by the very versatile June Whitfield, then in the musical *Love From Judy*.

In 1950 one of the ‘gimmick’ spots was a ‘repugnant’ family. BBC radio doted on warm-hearted tales of benign families, such as *Meet the Huggetts*, starring Jack Warner, Kathleen Harrison and Petula Clark. Muir and Norden caught them in their sights and invented the Glums. Such was its success, with Alma Cogan as grumpy Ma Glum in the original, that this dysfunctional family became a standard section of the show and really evolved a life-form all its own. ‘Oh, Ron’... ‘Yes, Eth’ became engrained in the national psyche, as the plaintive, plain Jane ‘Eth’ of June Whitfield tried simultaneously to activate Dick Bentley’s brainless ‘Ron’ into getting married and/or work, even as she sought to thwart his animal passions. The boorish Mr Glum of Jimmy Edwards, a male Chauvinist pig well before the term itself, let alone Andy Capp, had been thought of, was ever at the door, his mind full of lewd notions, with Alma Cogan’s Ma Glum relegated to excellent groans and screams from afar.

Other aspects live on. With the writers’ encouragement, Talbot Rothwell raided *TIFH*’s early literary and filmic parodies for outlandish material for his popular *Carry*

On films. For instance, a much-cited *Carry On* line, as Julius Caesar is assassinated, 'Oh, infamy! Infamy! They've all got it in for me', was first quoth by Dick Bentley. (Another *TIFH* 'Roman' exchange was "Where's me army? Where's me army"; came the response "just off the coast of Florida.") Another survival comes from their burlesque of films and books about the grime of industrial life. Its title was, and remains, *Trouble At T'mill*. A snippet of that sketch was: "T'men are complainin', feyther; they've got to cross three fields to get to work"
 "What's wrong wi' that?"
 "They're Sheffield, Wakefield and 'Uddersfield."

The writers and the performers were young and fresh; the material was refreshingly bright and sophisticated. It was like university revue stuff without the blasé superficiality, and like music hall humour, with an extra dose of modish toughness. 'Take it from here', rang out the perky opening chorus, 'why go away when you can take it from here?' It was unpretentiously lively but not over-demanding, being just as ephemeral as the signing-off tune indicated: *It Was Just One Of Those Things* – 'a trip to the moon on gossamer wings; just one of those things.'

However, like all art forms that attract both critical and popular acclaim, the award-winning *TIFH* also suited the immediate mood perfectly. For all its cruel horror, World War II had widened the horizons of the British people. Just as one small instance, and apart from military movements, there were, unbelievably, 60 million changes of civilian addresses during the war, whilst there was also a vast incoming of foreign influences, notably, the huge incidence of American troops all over the country. Eyes were being opened and people took opportunities to seek meaningful leisure and educational opportunities, with 'current affairs' adult classes, the classical music lectures, many of them broadcast, of Dobson and Young, or the 'British Way



Dick Bentley, June Whitfield, Jimmy Edwards and Alma Cogan

and Purpose' schemes for the British services as just two or three examples. Post-1945, many turned, wiser and more mature, to what they hoped would be a fruitful future. They did so with some decent optimism, but with a restrained anticipation of what 'Reconstruction' could deliver. There were neither the heroic broken promises nor the excited doomed hopes of 1918. *TIFH* deftly touched the pulse of the confident, intelligent but genially sceptical victors of 'the People's War'.

Frank Muir was very conscious of this refusal not to talk down to audiences, for he recognised that, perhaps compared with the pre-war listenership, they had a much wider frame of reference. He wrote, particularly of the film and book parody, that it was 'a small breakthrough in radio comedy because as far as we knew it was the first time in a prime-time series that the listener was credited with being at school, taken a newspaper and read a few books.' He might have added, in that context, and seeing a few movies, for cinema ticket sales in the 1940s were at an all-time peak of a weekly 30 million, with two-fifths of the population visiting one of the UK's 5000 cinemas at least once a week and a third of the populace twice a week.

As a sixth-former when *TIFH* hit the airways in the late 1940s, I relished the treat of leaving my academic labours for that sublime thirty minutes each week, and reliving its smart phrases with compatriots at school the following morning. All these years on, and the lines of Muir and Norden have lingered as long as those of Chaucer and Sheridan, and have proved, justly, to have been as potent an influence.

Spare a moment, at a time when politics is not too pleasingly regarded, to a final *TIFH* exchange:

Jimmy Edwards: "I am considering entering politics and becoming the Grand Old Man of the Conservative Party."

Dick Bentley: "Watch it, Jimmy. Politics is a dirty business."

Jimmy Edwards: "Then I'll be the Dirty Old Man of the Conservative Party."

