

# Remembering Hedley Claxton by Max Tyler

Who's Hedley Claxton? You ask. Indeed he is now only remembered by a few, yet in his day he was one of the most successful of summer show proprietors. He had a happy knack of recognising star potential in young up and coming performers. Under his guidance many people were able to learn the art of concert party and gain experience before moving on. Bruce Forsyth did four seasons for Hedley before taking over as compere on *Beat The Clock* in *Sunday Night at The London Palladium*.

Bruce tells a nice little story of how he went to do cabaret at one of the most expensive night club venues in Las Vegas. The diners were happy to pay fistfuls of dollars to see him do exactly the same act as he had done a few months before at the tiny concert hall in Babbacombe where the most expensive seats cost three shillings and sixpence.

Hedley Claxton grew up at the Bay Horse Hotel at Otley. After attending Ilkley Grammar School he joined the Merchant Navy. However he had always had a love of the stage and on leaving the Navy in 1922 he joined Jack Schofield's *Frivolities* concert party. In 1931 he went into partnership with Harry Neil and they jointly presented *Revelry* for a number of seasons on the Central Pier at Morecambe.

Claxton really came into his own after the war when in 1948 he was asked by Isle of Thanet Estates to present the summer show at the Lido Theatre,

Cliftonville. Leslie Fuller had presented his concert party *The Ped'lers* there for decades up to his death in April 1948. Claxton took a lucky gamble and asked an unknown comic, Reg Varney, to lead the company in his show *Gaytime*. Reg made a tremendous impact and soon agents and theatrical impresarios were buzzing around the Lido waving cheque books. It was not only the local press that gave him a good write up. He was highly praised by many of the national newspapers. Little or no mention was made of the other young man in the company who acted as Varney's feed, one Benny Hill. Next year Benny joined another of Claxton's companies at Newquay and at the Lido, Jack Desmonde brother of Jerry acted as Reg's feed.

*Gaytime* was well established at Newquay where it was the town's main attraction for more than a dozen years. In 1950 the cast was headed by comedian Ron Clark, a conjuring David Nixon, and a young dancer called Billy Dainty. Claxton soon realised that our Billy was more than just a dancer and by 1952 he was leading the Babbacombe company as principal comedian.

It is noticeable how *Gaytime* companies returned to the same venue year after year, 21 seasons at Morecambe, and how many performers remained for a long stay once they had joined the Claxton management. A good example is that splendid summer show comedian Ken Roberts, now sadly no longer with us. Ken had done a number of seasons for Hedley when, in 1956, he was invited by Greatrex Newman to head the Scarborough company of *The Fol De Rols*. However he only stayed under that management for one season. Next year he was back with *Gaytime* and indeed stayed with Hedley for a further ten years. Claxton built his shows around his comic and usually the programmes were jointly produced by both of them. With as many as six summer productions around the coast it was not possible for him to give as much personal supervision as he would have liked. And in some ways it showed. To me, his productions never had the charm and elegance of *The Fol de Rols*, the refinement of John Berryman's *Evening Stars*, or the wit and exuberance of *Brandon & Pounds Out of the Blue*.

When Bruce Forsyth left for T.V. Claxton had to find a new comedian to go to Eastbourne and he selected Ted Rogers to head the bill. Two other comics who left *Gaytime* for T.V. were Felix Bownes and Don Arrol. There were a number of excellent entertainers working for Claxton who were happy to stay in the congenial atmosphere of the summer show. Stalwarts like, Leslie Glenroy, Clifford Hensley, Rex Rashley, Jimmy Paige, Stanley Massey, Jack Bradley, Gate Eastley, Peter Dulay, Tony (Silly thing) Scott, Colin Robins,

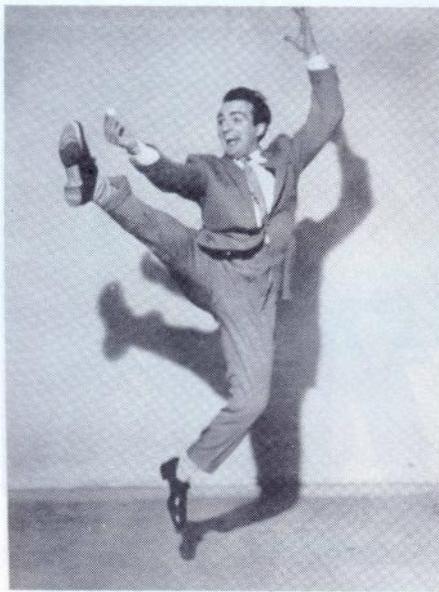


Frankie Desmond, Jack Anton, Syd Marx and a host of others.

Of the ladies, pride of place must go to Rowena Vincent who did a number of highly successful seasons with *Gaytime*. Patrons of *The Players Theatre* who visited the Newquay company in 1959 would have recognised Stella Moray having a summer break from music hall. In 1963, Ann Emery joined Bryan Burdon to provide holiday entertainment at Paignton. In 1965, a programme for *Gaytime* at Bognor tells us that Ruth Llewellyn would amuse us. 'with a smile and a song'. You don't recognise the name? Well Miss Llewellyn married and became Mrs. Madoc and will for ever be remembered as Gladys in T.V.s *Hi-de-hi*. By the middle of the 1960's it became obvious that the kind of show that proprietors like Hedley Claxton provided was on the way out. He carried on for a few more years but a serious fall that he sustained in the early 1970's lead him into retirement. He died on 8 February, 1980 aged 81.

Thousands of holiday makers had enjoyed his end of the pier shows when concert party was an essential part of the annual fortnight by the sea.

Top line performers who have appeared on T.V. in *This Is Your Life* have, on a number of occasions, given mention of Hedley Claxton as being the man who put them on the first rung of the ladder to success.



Billy Dainty