

# GOOD HEAVENS, IT'S PAT LANCASTER

Geoff Bowden looks at the career of this noted Principal Boy

To those of us of a certain age, the above phrase immediately conjures up memories of the BBC Radio comedy show *Beyond Our Ken*, when Kenneth Horne would invariably use it to introduce the show's resident singer. Pat was a regular on the programme for three years from 1958-1960 but her radio appearances were just one strand of a multi-faceted career encompassing musicals, revues, plays, summer seasons, old time music hall and of course pantomime, where she shone as one of the genre's leading principal boys of the latter half of the 20th century.



Pat Lancaster

Pat was born in Coventry but the family soon moved to Birmingham where her father was in the cinema business. Her one ambition was to 'go on the stage' so she attended the local dance school and was soon involved in her first professional pantomime in Birmingham as one of six babes in *Cinderella*, where her main task was to help pull on the ponies! This production starred Jack Buchanan, Adele Dixon and Beryl Reid. Beryl was unhappy with her digs so Pat's mother offered her accommodation and Beryl became a friend of the family. From then on whenever Beryl played Birmingham she stayed with 'Mummy Lancaster' (as she put it). She vowed that she would tell them the moment her fee reached £100 per week and she was true to her word for a telegram arrived at the Lancaster household as soon as that great day came. After that Beryl stayed in a hotel.

During the war Pat was evacuated to Henley-on-Thames to stay with an aunt. Whilst there she attended Dorothy Greenhill's Dance School, which was often contacted by agents to supply dancers and actors for various productions. This led to fifteen year old Pat joining Donald Wolfitt on one of his Shakespearean tours in 1942. Most of her duties were mundane, acting as dresser and packing and unpacking props and costumes but she did manage to play *Moth* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The following year found Pat in the West End with Richard Tauber in *Old Chelsea* before appearing as one of Wendy Toye's ballet girls in the musical *The Lisbon Story* at the London Hippodrome. She remained at that theatre for *Jenny Jones*, an unsuccessful musical starring Carol Lynne and the great comic Jimmy James.

Pat's first summer show was in 1949 at Eastbourne's Winter Gardens Pavilion when she appeared in Cecil Johnson's *By The Way*, where Antonia Palmer was a fellow artiste, better known later as Toni Palmer of Theatre Royal, Stratford East fame. Pat followed it up with a season at Cromer in *Out Of The Blue* and then branched out into cabaret, being the youngest artiste ever to appear at Quaglino's. She also appeared on the *Queen Mary*, so that she could get to New York! She later had the honour of starring in cabaret on the liner's last voyage.



Pat Lancaster, Les Dawson & Jack Tripp  
in *Robinson Crusoe*

The small scale summer concert parties had given Pat a taste for revue and it was that form of entertainment that occupied her next, appearing in



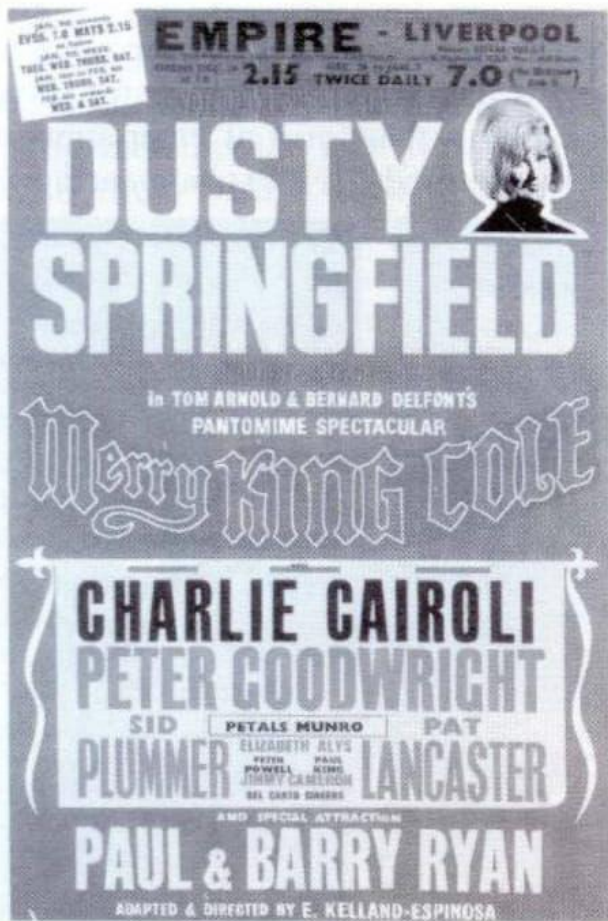
Pat Lancaster as Dick Whittington

*Airs On A Shoestring*, *Fresh Airs*, *For Amusement Only* and *For Adults Only* with such artists as Max Adrian, Ron Moody and Hugh Paddick. In fact, it was in a revue at Brighton that Pat met her future husband, the composer John Pritchett, and they married in 1956.

It was in 1959 when Pat first tackled the role of principal boy when John Counsell invited her to appear in *Jack And The Beanstalk* at Windsor. So enjoyable was the experience to Pat and so admirable were the qualities that she brought to the role, fine figure, vivacious personality and strong singing voice that she soon became one of the country's leading exponents playing in productions for Tom Arnold, Derek Salberg and Howard and Wyndham.

Her first pantomime for Arnold found her playing *Dandini*, the main principal boy in this production of *Cinderella* with Lonnie Donegan, Danny La Rue and Alan Haynes. She still likes to remind Danny that her billing was above his! Two pantomimes with Harry Worth followed and Pat has many fond memories of working with Harry. Because of his TV series, Harry could not go anywhere without people imitating his arm and leg shop window routine so he and Pat would go window

shopping at night after the show when he could wander in peace! Pat remembers that in the production of *Turn Again Whittington* at Nottingham with Harry were no less than three sets of identical twins: The Munks Twins, The Miles Twins and The Cox Twins. Of the latter Pat commented: "I still don't know one from the other!"



In *Merry King Cole* at Liverpool in 1966 Dusty Springfield was the star, although Pat saw very little of her as Dusty only made one appearance whilst all the cast were changing for the walk-down.

Four pantomimes for Derek Salberg followed, two each at Bournemouth and Birmingham working alongside such great comics as Les Dawson, Jack Tripp and Ken Roberts.

Pat Lancaster in *Merry King Cole* with Dusty Springfield as guest star

The Howard and Wyndham shows were great favourites of Pat, being big lavish quality productions with very strong books, and mostly Scottish casts with Denny Willis and Stuart Gillies joining

her in *Aladdin* and Rikki Fulton and Una McLean in *Robinson Crusoe*, both at Glasgow.

It was Denis Martin who introduced Pat to the Players Theatre and as well as appearing on their music hall bills it was there she played her last four pantomimes before retiring

as principal boy. As Pat said: "I didn't want to be another Dorothy Ward going on and on!"



Pat Lancaster, Lonnie Donegan and Betty Emery in *Cinderella*

In recent years Pat has appeared in London in musicals such as *Follies*, *The Pirates Of Penzance*, *Bless The Bride* and a revival of her husband's show *A Girl Called Jo*. Her love of music hall remains strong and only this April Pat appeared with the New Players Company at the Cochrane Theatre.

(With grateful thanks to Pat Lancaster for all her help.)