

# Betty Hobbs, Billy Cotton and Hitler!

## Geoff Bowden meets Marjorie Richards

It's not every day you meet a Terry's Juvenile and a Betty Hobbs Globe Girl but that was my good fortune when I was invited to spend an afternoon in the company of Marjorie Richards.

Marjorie had always wanted to dance. It was a passion of hers from a very early age so when she was taken to see a performance by the famous Terry's Juveniles it was only natural that she longed to join them. When she was eleven she met 'Aunt' Terry for an audition. This proved successful and Marjorie began touring with the troupe. "We usually performed three shows a day", recalls Marjorie, "but sometimes we could do as many as five when they 'doubled' on dates involving nearby towns, such as Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth. We children received £1 a week and were given school lessons in each town before and between performances. The act featured a midget called Baby Terry and we performed scenes such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*." Marjorie remained with the company for three years and during her time with the Juveniles appeared in the pantomime *Aladdin* at Cardiff in 1936 and at Radio Olympia for an early television broadcast, where the troupe backed the well known pianists Ivor Moreton and Dave Kaye, who played *Tiger Rag* whilst Terry's Juveniles were positioned behind them pretending to play pianos.



*The Betty Hobbs Globe Girls  
Marjorie is 2nd right in the back row*

Not that it was all plain sailing for Marjorie as she encountered problems with her local education committee in Ilford. Her first licence, allowing her to perform 3 shows a day up until 11pm at night for six months, was granted without any fuss. A second licence for a further six months also posed no problems but when her parents applied for a third licence the committee refused, stating that it would affect her health and schooling. Her parents appealed to the Board Of Education, who eventually overruled Ilford's decision. The case attracted the attention of the local press, making young Marjorie a local celebrity!

After three years Marjorie was getting too big to be in the Juveniles, and it was Ernie Lotinga who suggested that she should audition to be a Betty Hobbs Globe Girl. "I remember arriving at a smoky rehearsal room in Brixton", Marjorie recalls, "where one girl was rushing around on roller skates doing back somersaults and another girl was balancing on a giant ball! Most of the other girls had already been practising for five weeks. Rehearsals were very rushed as a booking in Brighton was imminent so I was asked straightaway if I could balance on one of the globes. I was very nervous on the actual night but

managed to get through the performance unscathed!"

There were eight girls in the act and they would begin their performance with a dance routine before collecting and balancing on the famous giant globes. At first it all looked very serious but suddenly the audience were aware that one of the girls was struggling to keep going. "This was the comedienne of the act - Gertie Lacy, niece of George Lacy", remembers Marjorie, "and so while seven of the girls performed the act immaculately, Gertie was the one that managed to get everything wrong." The act proved so popular that during the war there were actually two sets of Betty Hobbs Girls, one troupe in Blackpool whilst the other group performed in Morecambe.

"We often appeared in pantomime", Marjorie pointed out, "where we were involved in the flying ballet as well as doing our usual act which was usually set in the ballroom scene. I remember we appeared with Fay Compton in *Babes In The Wood* at Drury Lane in 1938. We also appeared in a circus at Haringey, where we followed the elephants, who had usually relieved themselves in the ring, making things very difficult for us on our globes!"



*Terry's Juveniles at the Regal Edmonton  
(Marjorie is on the right of picture)*

In variety the act appeared with lots of well-known names. Marjorie recalls working with Tessie O'Shea, Tommy Trinder, Derek Roy, Laurel and Hardy, Tommy Cooper, Elsie and Doris Waters, Evelyn Laye, Gracie Fields and Leslie A Hutchinson. "You could always tell when Hutch was approaching." Marjorie remembers, "You could smell him! He always wore such strong cologne!"

"I particularly remember working with Florrie Forde, on the Isle Of Man, and the dear old Crazy Gang. They were such fun, always fooling around and trying to mess up our act but they kept us in cigarettes when there was a shortage! I remember we were clearing away at the end of the week and one girl went to lift her case and found that the Gang had secured it to the floor!"

"The only act we didn't get on with was Arthur Tracy. He just did not like being on the same bill as the Globe Girls. We usually closed the first half and always went well and I think he was jealous and rather resentful of that."

Marjorie left the act in 1943 when married life beckoned but returned for the occasional show in later years including a charity event for Chesney Allen at the Savoy Hotel.

Marjorie's late husband was Charlie Swinnerton, who for many years was a member of the Billy Cotton Band. Charlie, a saxophonist and clarinettist, was a self-taught musician (with the aid of a Woolworth's tutor) and toured Germany early in his career as a member of the Paul Whiteman's Romance Of Rhythm Band. Charlie then opened a club in Edinburgh with



*Marjorie and Charlie*

Jack Payne as the pianist before returning to Germany as musical director of Odeon Records. He joined Debroy Somers and his Band and appeared with them at The Royal Command Performance in February 1927, in front of King George V and Queen Mary, on a bill that included Flotsam and Jetsam, Lily Morris and Albert Whelan. "I remember Charlie telling me that the band also played a special engagement where the guest of honour was the then Prince Of Wales." Marjorie recalls, "All evening he kept requesting *The Birth Of The Blues*."

In 1937, Charlie had the most intriguing audition of his life when he applied for the post of Germany's proposed answer to Henry Hall. His application had to be sent to Herr Adolph Hitler, Department Of Music, Berlin. Two months later, he was auditioned and the band was

booked but there was a major snag. Due to the dictator's racial prejudices no agent could be found to cover the twenty-nine month tour!

Instead, Charlie decided to form his own nine-piece band for an engagement at the Holborn Restaurant and then he heard of an audition at the Finsbury Park Empire that was to change his life. The audition was for Billy Cotton's Band. Charlie was successful and he stayed with Billy and his band for over twenty-five years appearing with them at three Royal Variety Performances in 1950, 1952 and 1960.

Marjorie and Charlie met when the Betty Hobbs Girls and the Billy Cotton Band were both appearing in variety in Glasgow. Charlie watched her in the wings all week and eventually summoned up the courage to ask her out after the Saturday matinee. They married and had a daughter, Carole, who although not in the business herself, made sure there were still strong links by marrying the pianist and arranger Stan Foster, who was, for many years, accompanist to the singer Alma Cogan.

**(Editor's Note:** I interviewed Marjorie and Carole for this article last year and sadly since then Marjorie has passed away. I have very happy memories of that Saturday afternoon with Carole digging out all sorts of memorabilia, photos, programmes and newspaper cuttings and Marjorie having a ball recalling those years in variety.)



*Florrie Forde with the Betty Hobbs Globe Girls (Marjorie is fourth from the left) on the Isle of Man, 1939*