

# ARCHIE'S NEW VOICE

## The *Call Boy* meets up with Steve Hewlett



Steve with Pongo

The traditional seaside summer show, so popular in earlier decades, is almost extinct these days, but there is one production on the Norfolk coast that has been bucking the trend for years. *Seaside Special* at the Pavilion Theatre on Cromer Pier has proved to be a tremendous success story, drawing the crowds day after day during the season. This year the star of that show was a young ventriloquist who has been making a big name for himself in the profession in recent times - Steve Hewlett.

Although Steve is now based in Eastbourne, he was born and brought up in Basingstoke. His family were not involved in show business at all but Steve always had a fascination with ventriloquism. Three events brought this fascination to a head. The first was that the ventriloquist Jimmy Tarmey appeared on the talent show *New Faces*. "Jimmy lived in Basingstoke, so the whole family watched the programme and voted for him," remembered Steve. "He eventually won the Grand Final in 1987 when Joe Pasquale came second." The second event was that Ray Alan brought out a book called *Gottle O' Geer* and young Steve received a copy for Christmas, and the final factor was that Steve's sister came home one day with a ventriloquist's dummy. "Being my sister, she didn't give the figure to me, but she did sell it to me for £5", recalls

Steve, "so I bought it on hire purchase at a £1 a week as I was doing a paper round at the time."

With the fearlessness of youth, Steve then found out where Jimmy Tarmey lived in Basingstoke and went round and knocked on his door asking if he would teach him how to be a vent. Jimmy agreed to train him and Steve later became a 'roadie' for Tarmey and, most valuable of all, watched him at work for eight years.

When Steve was seventeen he went on holiday to Barry Island, taking his dummy with him. John Oliver, the Entertainments Officer, was obviously impressed as he offered Steve a job. Two weeks later Hewlett found himself back at the camp in Barry but this time as a Bluecoat.

Steve was now determined to be a full time entertainer but to make ends meet he worked in a factory during the winter months and then, answering an ad in *The Stage*, he found work the following summer at a holiday camp on the Isle Of Wight.

In 1994 he got a job as an usher at the London Palladium when the hit revival of *Oliver!* was playing there. He loved being there and got to know all the front-of house and backstage crew, which paid dividends when a member of the backstage crew suggested Steve for a



Steve with Arthur Lager at Cromer

charity show at that theatre in 1996. Steve ended up playing three charity dates there. Not a bad record for such a young performer!

1997 was an important landmark for Steve as that was the year he finally turned fully professional with his engagement diary boasting 50 bookings in the Great Yarmouth area. The agent Brian Lane then offered him another 100 dates in 1998 and 1999 for Haven camps and with pantomimes booked at Peterborough in 1998 and Maidstone in 1999 life was looking promising.

In 2000 Steve appeared in the first of his three summer seasons at the Royal Hippodrome Theatre in Eastbourne and it was here that he met his future wife, Nina, who was one of the dancers in that production. When Steve played Babbacombe the following summer he insisted that Nina went as well. "I remember one eventful day during that summer at Babbacombe when Bruce Forsyth was filming at the theatre for a television documentary," recalls Steve. "Nina and I got engaged in the morning and then Bruce Forsyth appeared on stage with us in the evening." Bruce figured again in the Hewlett story as, in 2007, Steve was involved in a pilot of a TV show called *Saturday Night Showdown* with Forsyth and Vernon Kay. After watching Steve's performance Bruce stated, "What a wonderful act. I wish I was your agent."

Mind you, Steve is not short of celebrity admirers. Sir John Major and his wife Norma visited the Cromer show last summer and congratulated Steve on an 'excellent performance', the comic Ross Noble has declared him 'hilarious' and Jethro confessed that Steve was 'probably the best vent he had ever seen.' Thursford's *Christmas Spectacular* in Norfolk has been drawing the crowds for several years and Steve has appeared in three consecutive productions there, his last being in 2010 when Prince William and Kate Middleton attended a performance and congratulated Steve afterwards with William saying "Brilliant! Very funny. I love Elmo (one of Steve's figures)". As Steve commented, "I feel I have done my Royal Variety performance now!"

Cruise ships, from Fred Olsen to P&O and Cunard, offered this young vent plenty of employment over the years, the most memorable trip being on the Queen Elizabeth II when she made her last voyage to New York in 2008. However, in 2005 Steve managed to stay on dry land long enough to marry Nina in a 'castle' in Las Vegas and last October the Hewlett household increased to three with the arrival of their daughter, Lola-Mae. In recent years Steve has also been in demand for corporate



Steve with Archie Andrews

events, old time music hall shows at Leeds City Varieties and tours with the one and only Ken Dodd. "I opened the second half so I went on about 10.15pm!" laughed Steve.

In 1992 a teenage Steve wrote to Peter Brough and received a signed letter in return wishing him luck as a vent. Fast forwarding to 2006, Brough's famous figure Archie Andrews was bought at auction for £34,000 and Archie's new owners appeared on BBC television's *Newsnight* saying that they were looking for a new ventriloquist for him. For Steve this was too good an opportunity to miss. He knew all about Brough's career so he went along with several other vents to audition for the role. The new owners of Archie were suitably impressed with the way Steve worked with Archie and he got the job. Archie was featured in the Cromer summer show this year and also appeared with Steve in the Max Miller Appreciation Society's Variety Show at the Komedia in Brighton in November.

Steve uses a varied selection of figures in his shows, including well-loved characters like Arthur Lager, Elmo, Pongo, Tiny Tina, and Baby. He writes all his own material and is always planning new characters and ideas for the act. "The traditional wooden dummy can be scary for kids", says Steve, "so I have tended to use softer figures in my act but I am planning to get a wooden dummy from the Selberg Studios in the near future. I also have ideas for a computer nerd character and a figure that dances and plays the guitar."

I confessed to Steve that I have always loved ventriloquists but they seemed to go 'off the radar' for a while. Now it appears that vents are back in fashion and certainly have a higher visibility on the current showbiz scene. Steve agreed: "I feel that ventriloquism is cool

again thanks to excellent vents such as Nina Conti, Paul Zerdin and especially, the American entertainer Jeff Dunham. Then there is Terry Fator, the singing ventriloquist who won *America's Got Talent*. He's earning \$20 million a year in Vegas."

Hewlett is only too pleased to pay tribute to ventriloquists of the past. "I have the greatest admiration for people like Dennis Spicer, Arthur Worsley and Shari Lewis", says Steve, "and Ronn Lucas is another hero of mine". Having thoroughly researched his chosen profession it is not surprising to learn that Steve's future plans include writing a book on ventriloquists and he also hopes to lecture on the subject. Not that he is forsaking live performances as he has plenty of bookings in the diary with working cruises scheduled for Cunard and P&O as well as appearances at Cromer, Felixstowe (where he is presenting his one man show *Voices Of Variety*) and the gala show at Great Yarmouth's Magic Convention.

The future certainly looks bright for this talented young man.

### Geoff Bowden



*Steve and Ken Dodd*