

Ronnie Barker: Blue Plaque

How many local historians get to celebrate the life of a comedy legend? Not many, I'd guess, but the Blue Plaque we're unveiling today is not only a tribute to Ronnie Barker's glittering career but also a reminder of his strong links with Oxford and Oxfordshire.

Described in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* as 'the country's foremost comedy actor', Ronnie Barker was admired and loved by millions of people. He was born in Bedford in 1929 and his professional stage career began in Aylesbury in 1948, but his formative years were spent in Oxford – and particularly here at 23 Church Cowley Road, the Barkers' family home between 1935 and 1949. Later, between 1951 and 1955, Ronnie developed his career in repertory at the Oxford Playhouse before going on to achieve wider fame on the London stage and on radio and television.

Ronnie – Ronald William George – Barker was the only son of Leonard Barker, a clerk working for Shell-Mex, and his wife Edith. The couple also had two daughters, Vera and Eileen. Leonard's work brought him to Oxford in 1934 and the family lived initially in Cowley Road, moving to this new house on the Florence Park estate in 1935. Ronnie went to school at the then newly-built (and now vanished) Donnington Junior School in Cornwallis Road and won a scholarship to the City of Oxford High School for Boys in George Street in 1940.

At school, Ronnie was remembered as 'a round boy and very funny, even then', and his nickname was Bumsy on account of his big bottom! He didn't envisage an acting career – and there were few school productions in wartime – but he and a school friend, Mike Ford, staged one act plays for parents in local back gardens, demonstrating an interest in the theatre which was fuelled by visits to the New Theatre and the Oxford Playhouse. Wartime radio comedies such as ITMA encouraged his talent for mimicry. Is it too fanciful to imagine him imitating characters such as Colonel Chinstrap, Mona Lott or Mrs Mopp in the back garden of this house when air raid sirens forced the family to take refuge in their Anderson shelter?

Ronnie gained his School Certificate in 1945, but soon abandoned work on the Higher School Certificate and left school. It was perhaps at around this time that his physics teacher, 'Pongo' Brodie, warned him to get his act together or he wouldn't make anything of himself! Ronnie enrolled on a five year architecture course at the Oxford School of Architecture, then based in the old Milham Ford School building in Cowley Place. He soon gave that up and, in 1946, he took his elder sister, Vera's, place as a clerk at the Westminster Bank in Cowley Road. He didn't find the job at all congenial but, while working there, he bumped into a friend Geoffrey Broadis who encouraged him to join a local amateur dramatic society, the Theatre Players, which rehearsed above a Cowley Road shop and performed regularly in SS Mary & John Parish Hall. A major incentive was the opportunity to meet lots of girls!

Acting – and scenery-painting – for the Theatre Players provided Ronnie with the perfect grounding. The director, Keith Andrews, insisted on quality work and Ronnie soon became a valuable member of the group, excelling in comedy roles. He decided to become a full-time actor and, in 1948, he successfully auditioned for the post of assistant stage manager with the

Manchester Repertory Company, based then at the County Theatre in Aylesbury. It was a fantastic apprenticeship in weekly repertory, offering the chance to play a host of characters from all walks of life. At the same time, it was a huge challenge. Ronnie estimated that he had to learn 40 minutes of script every night for the six months he was there and in his subsequent stint with Frank Fortescue's Famous Players at Bramhall in Cheshire between 1950 and 1951. He had digs in Bramhall, but had to sleep in the theatre when he couldn't afford the rent.

Ronnie regarded the Oxford Playhouse as 'the mecca of all theatres' – he'd taken his first date there at the age of 16 – and he perhaps needed little encouragement in 1951 to write to Frank Shelley, director of the Oxford Playhouse Company, asking for a job. He only secured a part-time post in the publicity department with no guarantee of an acting role, but he took the risk of returning to Oxford and started work in September 1951. Within weeks, he had his first speaking part and he was soon regarded as 'the company's primary character actor.' A fellow actor, Francis Matthews recalled: 'He was fabulous at learning lines and one knew he was going to make it big – he was too good not to.'

Frank Shelley had established a theatre school at the Playhouse. Ronnie Barker and other more experienced actors were asked to help train new recruits, one of whom was an Oxford girl, Maggie Smith. He advised her to give up acting, but she fortunately took no notice. She is now of course Dame Maggie Smith with an Emmy earlier this week to add to her many awards!

Peter Hall later became resident director at the Oxford Playhouse, and Ronnie Barker impressed him as 'a wonderful straight actor [who] also had the ability to make people laugh by doing almost nothing.' When Hall left Oxford for London to become director of the Arts Theatre, he invited Ronnie to move to the West End stage in 1955.

The rest, I guess, we all know – Ronnie's first radio and television work followed in 1956. He became a radio personality through the Navy Lark and then, in 1966, joined Ronnie Corbett and John Cleese in the satirical TV show, the Frost Report. Many will recall their famous representation of the British class structure, with middle class Ronnie standing between the tall Cleese and the diminutive Corbett! Later shows included Porridge, so popular in our household that my daughter bought me the complete scripts, Open All Hours and, of course, The Two Ronnies.

There is an Oxfordshire postscript to the Ronnie Barker story because he and his wife Joy bought a holiday home in Dean, near Chadlington, in 1981, and they lived there after his formal retirement from show business at the end of 1987. He opened an antiques shop in Chipping Norton, The Emporium, as a part-time retirement occupation, remarking in 2003: 'I lose money every week, but it's a hobby.'

After Ronnie Barker's death in 2005, a memorial service was held in Westminster Abbey. Four choirboys holding four candles led the procession of clergy at the beginning of the service, a subtle allusion to one of The Two Ronnies' most famous jokes! Until today, the Four Candles pub in George Street, just down the road from the former City of Oxford High

School for Boys, has been the only reminder of Ronnie Barker's Oxford connections. This blue plaque on the house where he spent his early years is a welcome civic tribute to a local man who, as Richard Briers has remarked, 'gave millions genuine enjoyment and laughter. He lifted the spirits of millions of people.'

Malcolm Graham

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