

# Simply *Eric* and *Ernie*



returned to the stage. Refining the act helped heal the wounds, but they knew that the success they wanted lay in the very thing that was threatening the variety circuit and their livelihood: television. They had to give it another try.

Regular guest appearances on the piano-bashing *Winifred Atwell Show* eased them back

How Britain's most popular comedy duo brought sunshine and laughter into so many lives

**D**o you know what you were doing on Christmas Day 1977 around 8.55pm? There's a fifty percent chance that you were one of the estimated 28 million people – over half of the UK population – who watched the *Morecambe and Wise Christmas Show* on BBC1.

Never before, or since, has a light entertainment show commanded such a huge television audience. Even the Royal Family delayed their Christmas dinner to watch Britain's most loved double act. The show that featured a chorus of newsreaders doing *South Pacific*, Penelope Keith clambering down scaffolding and a lost Elton John, was the pinnacle of Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise's career – a career initiated by Eric's mother, Sadie, in 1941, when she suggested that Bartholomew and Wise took to the stage of the Liverpool Empire as part of the show *Youth Takes A Bow*.



**Song and dance and good old fashioned, harmless fun was a winning formula for Eric and Ernie.**

The act was warmly received, but not the name. 'Barlow and Wise' and 'Bartlett and Wise' were suggested before Sadie put it to Eric to change his surname from Bartholomew to that of his birthplace, Morecambe. He agreed and Ernie thought about doing the same, but felt 'Morecambe and Leeds' sounded like a return train ticket, so he kept the shortened version of Wiseman and 'Morecambe and Wise' was born.

The name changed a couple of times when, in 1942, they were joined for a short period by Jean Bamforth and became 'Morecambe, Bamforth and Wise'. In 1948, they chose 'Morecambe and Wisdom' to avoid confusion with another act called 'Wise and Lane' and, in 1964, when on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in America, the host introduced them as 'Morey, Camby and Wise'. Now we know them as simply 'Eric and Ernie'.

In 1943, the developing act was disrupted by National Service, but two years later, Eric and Ernie reformed and joined the circus. Lord John Sanger's Circus and Variety Tour was part circus, part variety, staged in a touring circus tent. It was a disaster. People expecting to see lions and tigers were not impressed with the old donkey and couple of overfed hamsters that made up the 'circus', nor the acts that made up the variety show, including Morecambe and Wise. The big top

was packed away for good in 1947, and Eric and Ernie moved on.

Lean times followed and though Sadie worked hard for 'the boys', they needed to attract an agent. They played anywhere that they might get noticed, even at the Windmill Theatre, where being noticed over the nudes was a task in itself. They didn't last the week and were replaced by another double act that included a young Tony Hancock, but not before Gordon Novel saw them and became their first agent.

They weren't playing the big theatres, but they were working and attracted the interest of another agent. Frank Pope supplied acts to the Moss Empires circuits, owners of 24 large theatres, including the prestigious London Palladium and the infamous Glasgow Empire. Pope saw the boys in 1950, and took them on to busier times with appearances on variety shows, summer seasons, pantomimes and radio.

By 1954, both Eric and Ernie had found time to get married and star in their first television show called *Running Wild*. It was a dismal failure, prompting TV critic Kenneth Bailey of *The People* to write 'Definition of the week: TV set – the box in which they buried Morecambe and Wise'.

Crushed and frustrated, they



**The strength of true friendship and a genuine affection for each other shone through in Eric and Ernie's performances.**

onto the screen, but they were determined to have their own show. One casualty of this determination was Pope. His nine years of dedication was much appreciated, but he just didn't have the contacts and wherewithal to progress the boys' television career. Their next agent, Billy Marsh did.

In 1960, their first year with Marsh, they totalled 22 successful television appearances, including 12 times on *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*. It appeared that television had forgiven them for past misdemeanours.

By 1961, they had their own show again. *Two of a Kind* for ATV teamed Eric and Ernie with Dick Hills and Sid Green, two talented writers who, along with the boys, began fashioning Morecambe and Wise into something more than just a British version of Abbot and Costello. The template for future programmes – the opening patter, the sketches, the guest stars – all began on this successful programme that by the second series became *The Morecambe and Wise Show*.

Further series followed, as did theatre and club appearances, overseas tours and three films. Morecambe and Wise had never been so busy. It was what they wanted, but there was a price to pay.

A falling out with the legendary head of ATV, Lew Grade, the offer of more money and a series in colour on BBC2, saw Eric and Ernie, and their writers, change channels in 1968 and embark on a climb to the peak of their popularity. With producer John Ammonds at the helm, it appeared to be success all the way, but that November, Eric had his first heart attack.

All appearances were shelved while Eric recovered, no one really knowing if he would ever return to work. Ernie remained optimistic, whereas Hill and Green were pessimistic. With no show to



**Two famous sets of legs dancing together – Angela Rippons' released from behind the news desk, and Ernie's lovingly referred to as 'short, fat and hairy'.**

write for they had to look elsewhere and with ATV offering them their own show, they left.

Eric duly recovered and in August, 1969, at the Winter Garden Theatre in Bournemouth, Morecambe and Wise returned to the stage and then television aided by Eddie Braben, a Liverpoolian writer who was to help transform Morecambe and Wise into a national institution. One of Braben's many contributions was the development of Ernie the 'straight' man into a more rounded character with his own foibles and plays 'wot he wrote'. No longer was it a funny man and feed, but a funny man with an even funnier friend.

Accolades, awards and OBEs followed and the shows went from strength to strength. Guest stars of a calibre never seen before on a light entertainment show clamoured to be part of the fun and the *Morecambe and Wise Christmas Show* became an integral part of the festive season.

In 1974, John Ammonds stepped down as producer and made way for song and dance man Ernest Maxim and when people thought the shows couldn't get any better, they did. Angela Rippon showed her legs, Ernie did *Singing in the Rain*, the boys made breakfast to the tune of *The Stripper* and on that Christmas night in 1977, Morecambe and Wise had reached the very top of their profession.

The following year, after a decade with the BBC, they moved to Thames Television and although remaining immensely popular, their shows never had the same impact and originality as those BBC shows. It wasn't as much a sad decline as a slowing




### Entertaining on the theatre circuit in 1971.

down, although at times it was difficult to watch these comedy greats struggle with weak scripts, lazy rehashes of old ideas and, in Eric's case, failing health after his second heart attack in 1979.

The move to Thames was prompted by the offer to make another film, something both Eric and Ernie yearned to do. The three films they made in the Sixties – *The Intelligence Men*, *That Riviera Touch* and *The Magnificent Two* – weren't roaring successes, but were better than most television comedians' big screen attempts.

Their dreams of an international 'buddy' movie directed by the likes of Billy Wilder never materialised and it was five years before the very disappointing *Night Train to Murder* slunk onto TV. Poorly produced and surprisingly unfunny; it was as far from the cinematic aspirations of Eric and Ernie as was creatively possible and was such a shame that it was to be the swansong of Morecambe and Wise.

Transmitted on ITV on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1985 – six months after Eric had had his third heart attack and died on stage at The Roses Theatre in Tewkesbury – it was a sorry epitaph for a partnership of 45 years.

Ernie passed away in 1999, but with many of their series and films now available on DVD, clips on the internet, and books about the boys still being published, the legacy of Morecambe and Wise remains. They are a testament to the popularity of a comedy duo that remains as admired and loved today as they did back on that Christmas night in 1977. 

Terry Adlam



A young Ernie Wise and Eric Morecambe.

# Such Is Life



On April 15<sup>th</sup>, this year, as people across the country remembered the 96 football fans who lost their lives twenty years previously at Sheffield's Hillsborough Stadium, I couldn't help but think of the events of that day.

My husband and I were driving to South Wales to introduce our month-old baby daughter to my grandparents. As we tuned in to the radio commentary of the Liverpool vs Nottingham Forest match, the devastating tragedy unfolded. With no mobile phones in those days, we were unaware that my three teenage cousins were experiencing the distressing situation first-hand.

My aunt and uncle were beside themselves with worry. Even though the boys had their usual tickets for the seated stands, they sometimes sold them outside the ground before buying cheaper tickets for the terraces. Fortunately, on this day they hadn't, but there was no way of knowing this. It wasn't until the early evening that there was a call to my grandparents' house confirming my cousins were safe, although they had been unable to catch a train home or even find an available public telephone to call their parents until around 6pm.

Watching the evening TV news bulletins, we could actually pick out my cousins leaning over the stand barriers and pulling people up from the crush below – a sight that brought home to us just how lucky we were not to have been amongst those grieving for lost or injured relatives.

On a far more trivial note, it's official – Britain has got talent. Was there ever any doubt?


I don't spend much time watching the multitude of Saturday night TV programmes that parade non professional 'entertainers' in front of a panel of so-called experts, but I did happen to catch a clip of latest singing sensation Susan Boyle, giving a wonderful rendition of *I Dreamed a Dream*, from *Les Miserables* (coincidentally, my favourite stage musical).

Susan's voice is remarkable, but the 48-year-old has spent most of her life honing her skill through study and singing in choirs and musical events. Yes, there is more to a performance than the ability to hit the high notes, but it is refreshing to see that you don't necessarily need to be considered young and attractive to be appreciated.

I suspect, however, that someone will give Susan a bit of a makeover, sign her up for a couple of CDs and then drop her like a hot potato as soon as the novelty wears off. Good luck to Susan. I hope she enjoys her singing for many years to come, whether or not she achieves lasting fame and fortune.

If ever there was a man who has worked hard for his dream, it is Willie Harcourt-Cooze, who spent 11 years growing cacao on his Venezuelan plantation before setting up a chocolate factory in Devon. His mission is to produce the best ever quality chocolate, being responsible for the whole process, from bean to bar.

I am yet to taste Willie's new eating bar, which has been flying off stockists' shelves since the TV screening of his latest effort to bring the most delectable chocolate to the British public. If he is to achieve his aim of weaning us off our addiction for an over sweetened confectionery with too little cocoa content that the EU refuses to recognise as 'chocolate', he'd better up his production, fast.

I could never give up my beloved Dairy Milk, but I am prepared to make room in my life for more chocolate. Shame I missed Willie's advert for volunteer tasters, but if he needs me, I'll be there at the drop of a hat. 

Linne Matthews, Editor