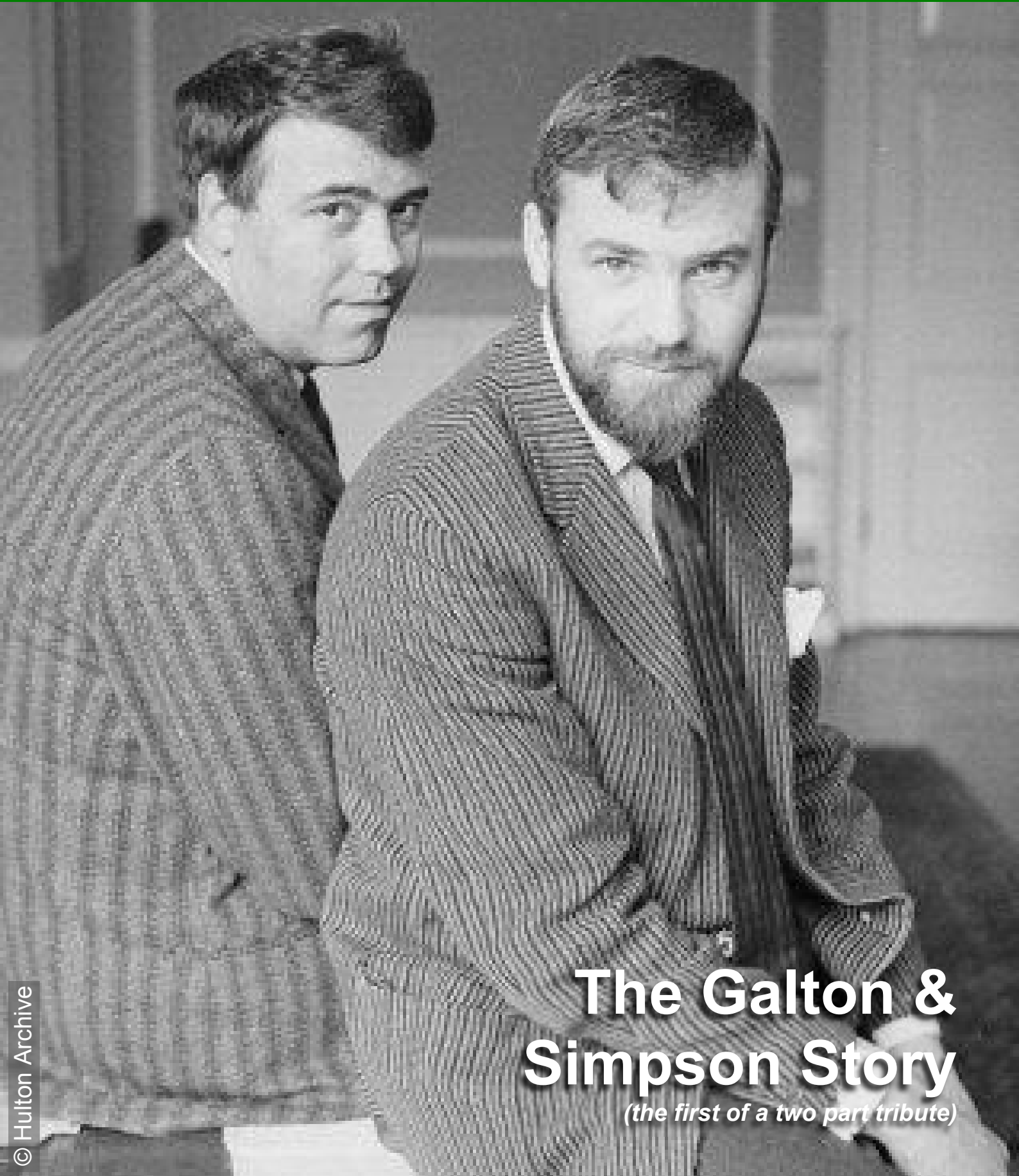


*Tony Hancock*

# Archives Magazine

ISSUE 1  
Feb 2009



## The Galton & Simpson Story

*(the first of a two part tribute)*

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The Online Magazine of the Tony Hancock Archives

## Introduction

At time of writing, just over sixty years have elapsed since Ray Galton and Alan Simpson first met at Milford Sanatorium. And it's some sixty years since Galton and Simpson both started writing comedy together. It seemed only fitting therefore, that this, the first edition of the Tony Hancock Archives on-line magazine, be dedicated to the two writers, two writers who've brought so much laughter and enjoyment to people's lives with their superb scripts and clever and witty observations on life.

As we have been putting this edition together, it soon became apparent that we would have more than enough material to fill two magazines. Hence this first part focuses on Ray and Alan's early lives and careers; with the future edition, due out later this year, to continue the story from the mid 1950s with 'Hancock's Half Hour'; on to the Comedy Playhouses; 'Steptoe and Son'; film scripts and work for many other comedians which readers may perhaps be slightly less familiar with.

Regular visitors to our website will hopefully appreciate its value as a web-based archive resource for Tony Hancock enthusiasts and historians. We continue to build the site, and add new material to it as new facts about Hancock and new items come to light, for example previously unknown theatre dates; or rare releases of his material that had escaped our attention. Running and maintaining a website does not come free however, so we're producing this magazine to help raise a bit of revenue to keep the site going. All funds raised by this venture will be put in to the THA. We're also producing the magazine as a further outlet for our Hancock fandom! We've enjoyed working on the magazine – and we very much hope you enjoy it too!

Thank you for your support.

# THE GALTON & SIMPSON STORY

*Researched & written by Elaine Schollar*

## **PART ONE**

### **TO THE FUN FACTORY - VIA MILFORD**



*Alan Simpson (left) & Ray Galton - 60 years in the comedy business*

### **RAY GALTON - HIS EARLY LIFE**

Ray Galton was born in Paddington in July 1930. When he was six months old, his family moved to Morden, Surrey. Ray left school at the age of fourteen, and initially worked as a plasterer's apprentice in a building firm. He then moved in to general labouring, and spent some time working on bomb-damaged sites in Wimbledon. Shortly after this, he secured a job working behind a desk at the head office of the Transport and General Workers' Union in Smith Square, London.

It was during this time, aged just sixteen, that Ray was struck down with tuberculosis. He had been displaying some of the symptoms of TB – tiredness, weight loss, a bad cough – but hadn't actually been haemorrhaging or coughing up blood, the more obvious signs of the illness. It was only when his brother, paying a visit home on leave from the Merchant Navy, advised Ray to get an X-ray as soon as possible, that the illness – and indeed the full extent of it – first became apparent. Ray was suffering from advanced tuberculosis of the lungs.

TB was rife in post-war Britain, and there was usually a two-year waiting list to get a bed in a sanatorium. Ray's condition was so serious however, that he was admitted within ten days to Milford Sanatorium, Surrey, in January 1947. His chances of survival were considered so low, that at one point he was given no more than a few weeks to live. "Thank God, I didn't find out until I left the sanatorium, but my brother asked for the prognosis and they said, (*pause*) well you remember the old joke about reading any thick books or anything like that. So yes, I was given six weeks to live".

Fortunately Ray proved strong enough to beat the disease, but spent the first year in the sanatorium unable to get out of bed. Weekly tests were carried out on patients to assess progress – which was painfully slow. It was also quite a lonely place for a teenager to be, as most of the other inmates at Ray's time of admission were older, ex-servicemen. In 1948 however, a lot of younger men were admitted to the sanatorium – one of whom turned out to be Alan Simpson.

### ***ALAN SIMPSON - HIS EARLY LIFE***

Alan Simpson was born in Brixton in November 1929, an only child. The family moved to Streatham when Alan was four, and he attended Mitcham County Grammar School, until he was briefly evacuated to Weston-Super-Mare when the War started. It was an experience he didn't enjoy, and when his father was called up in 1940, his mother allowed him home. Alan's father was invalided out of the army prior to the end of the War, and tragically died of Hodgkin's disease at the young age of 43. Alan credits his father with introducing him to show business – weekly trips to the cinema being a regular treat.

Despite a promising start at school, Alan ended up failing his matriculation. He had an early ambition to become a sports' journalist – in the hope that it would entitle him to complimentary tickets to various sporting events – but instead ended up working for a firm of shipping agents in central London. It was on his way to work one morning in 1947 that he cleared his throat only to discover blood in his mouth. He was rushed to hospital, where an X-ray revealed that he too had the killer disease.

### ***GALTON AND SIMPSON'S FIRST MEETING***

Because everywhere was full, Alan spent thirteen weeks lying at home before finally being admitted to Milford Sanatorium in 1948. People admitted to sanatoriums with TB would generally have been thin and weakly. Hence it is little surprise that Alan's first appearance to Ray at Milford, in August 1948, has left an indelible impression on his writing partner.

"Ray always says he was in bed one day in the sanatorium when a big

shadow passed the doors. That was me!"

At 6 foot 4 inches tall, Alan - who Spike Milligan was later to nickname "He Who Blocks Out The Sun" - was the biggest bloke Ray had ever seen.

Patients of a similar age were generally kept together, so it wasn't long before Alan was moved in to the same ward as Ray. They soon hit it off, having similar tastes in music, film and culture, and perhaps most importantly of all, they shared a similar sense of humour. It also wasn't long before they got involved in the hospital's radio station.



*Part of Milford Sanatorium (2006) Photograph © John Thompson*

## **RADIO MILFORD**

The hospital possessed its own radio system, designed to make the patients' mundane lives a little more bearable. Initially, it could only broadcast one channel – but a fellow patient, Tony Wallis, happened to be an electrician and radio buff, and – although strictly against the rules, he was able to adapt the system so additional channels could be received. Ray and Alan would listen to the comedy shows broadcast, including those from the U.S., the formats of which were often quite different to the style of comedy show which the BBC then offered.

Additional money was found for the hospital to set up its own radio station, and a radio line was soon installed throughout the entire sanatorium. 'Radio Milford' was initially broadcast for one hour a day, and with its increasing popularity, a radio committee was established. Ray and Alan got involved, and brought some new ideas to the format of the station.

“The station had become more ambitious; we’d extended the broadcasting hours to two a day, and started introducing new aspects rather than just playing records,” explains Alan. “We tried our own version of BBC panel games, like ‘Twenty Questions’, and a show called ‘A Seat in the Circle’, where once a week, the presenter would go to a cinema and record a half hour programme; if you were listening at home it was like being at the pictures. We thought that was a good idea, so at our film show every Wednesday evening we made our own version of ‘A Seat in the Circle.’”

Ray and Alan were then asked to come up with an idea for a comedy show. They came up with the title ‘Have you ever wondered?’, with a view to writing six fifteen- minute sketches around this theme. The shows were a satire on hospital life, and proved popular with both staff and patients alike. Unfortunately they ran out of ideas after the fourth show – but this signalled the beginning of their comedy writing partnership; and also generated their first fan letter!



LETTER TO THE EDITOR.

Dear Sir,

A bouquet to the team of "HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED".  
 Slick, up-to-the minute and with a dash of satire it  
 was a worthy effort indeed.  
 The next programme will be awaited eagerly after such  
 and encouraging start.

Sincerely, F.W. ROBINS. F.21.

**THE BIG BREAK**

Enthused by the response, they wrote to top scriptwriters of the time, Frank Muir and Denis Norden, for advice on comedy writing. The reply they received suggested they send material in to the BBC’s script editor Gale Pedrick.

It was another year or so before they were to act on this advice. Alan left hospital several months before Ray, and was deemed fit enough to resume work, albeit part-time, at the London shipping office. When Ray finally left the sanatorium, he was still too frail to work, and was required to continue his recuperation. Hence when Alan asked him to help write material for an amateur church concert party, he was happy to oblige. They worked on a number of topical sketches, one of which was a spoof on the popular film ‘The African Queen’. They decided to send a ten minute sketch in to Gale Pedrick; and were delighted with the response they received. Pedrick wrote: “Don’t read more than appears on the surface of this letter but we read your script and were highly

amused. Make an appointment with my secretary and maybe I can point you in the right direction.” Alan recalls racing down the road to Ray’s house with the letter, waving the piece of paper triumphantly, somewhat akin to Chamberlain coming back from Munich! One particular joke they recall Pedrick liking was about ‘Jane Russell pontoon’ - the gag went that it was the same as ordinary pontoon, only you needed 38 to bust!

Pedrick circulated the material they sent in, round the comedy department. Derek Roy, star of the radio show ‘Happy Go Lucky’ liked what he saw, and asked Ray and Alan to write one-liners for him. Alan recalls the scoring system Derek Roy used for his material. “Rona Ricardo [Derek Roy’s wife] used to sit and mark, three ticks for a big laugh, two ticks for a small laugh, one tick for a chuckle!”

For each joke they wrote that he accepted, they were paid five shillings. Galton and Simpson were now professional writers.

### ***FROM ‘HAPPY GO LUCKY’ TO ‘HANCOCK’S HALF HOUR’***

The next break for Ray and Alan came when the main writers of the show ‘Happy Go Lucky’ – always somewhat of a misnomer – were sacked by the new producer, one Dennis Main Wilson, who asked Ray and Alan if they would write the final three episodes of the series. This was 1951. Alan says “If we had said no, that would’ve been it. So we said yes, without having the faintest idea how. Saving grace was they were every fortnight.”



*Dennis Main Wilson*

They were somewhat daunted by the prospect of having to write a complete programme; but an additional consideration was that the show had been so bad, that they couldn’t really do any worse! They received forty guineas for each one they completed. When the first cheque arrived, Alan quit his job at the shipping office and bought a typewriter. Aged just 21, Galton and Simpson were now writing professionally for the BBC.

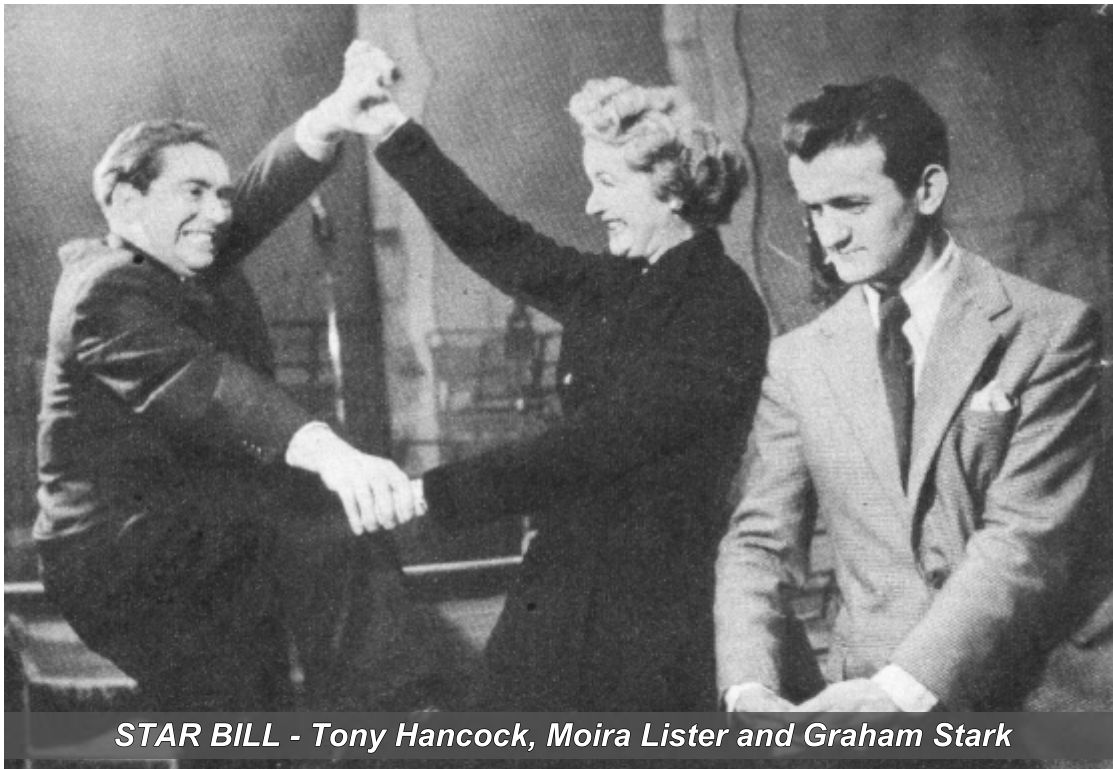
‘Happy Go Lucky’ was an hour long variety show, featuring comedy sketches; singers; and music from the resident orchestra. As the ‘big name’, Derek Roy – who had previously shared top billing with Frankie Howerd in ‘Variety Band-box’, appeared in most of the comedy sketches. Other well known names in the series included Bill Kerr; Graham Stark; Peter Butterworth; Benny Hill; Dick Emery; and Tony Hancock. Hancock appeared in what was called the ‘Eager Beavers’ sketch. He played the scoutmaster, whose troop included the aforementioned Butterworth, Stark and Kerr.

The final ‘Happy Go Lucky’ was recorded at the Playhouse Theatre in Lower

Regent Street, London. There was a particular sketch that Ray and Alan had written, about a children's party, that caught Hancock's attention. "Did you write that sketch?" he asked them. They nodded. "Very funny" he commented. Some time later, he contacted Ray and Alan to ask if they would write sketches for him, generously offering them half his fee.

'Happy Go Lucky' had run its course, and the programme ultimately died a death. But it was given a decent burial, and, perhaps most importantly of all for the future of British comedy, it brought together Ray Galton, Alan Simpson, Tony Hancock, Bill Kerr and Dennis Main Wilson.

In 1952, Ray and Alan were asked to write the last six shows of the highly successful series 'Calling All Forces'. The show starred Charlie Chester, and also featured Tony Hancock. The series evolved firstly into 'Forces All Star Bill'; then 'All Star Bill'; and finally 'Star Bill', still written by Galton and Simpson, but now produced by Dennis Main Wilson. By this time, Tony Hancock was now the star.



*STAR BILL - Tony Hancock, Moira Lister and Graham Stark*

The series also featured other guest comedians, and by the end of the run, Galton and Simpson had written for pretty much every comic in the country, and were getting themselves well known in the business.

### **THE BIRTH OF THE BRITISH SITCOM**

'Calling All Forces' and its successors were all still based on the 'variety' format, but still in their early twenties, Ray and Alan asked the BBC if they could write a new kind of series for Tony Hancock, a show which contained no musical

interludes, and which dispensed with a series of comedy sketches and instead was based on the humour coming out of the situation the characters and stars found themselves in. It took some time and various memos from Dennis Main Wilson before the BBC finally agreed; but in 1954, 'Hancock's Half Hour', starring Tony Hancock, Sid James, Bill Kerr and Moira Lister was born.

The first episode was aired on Tuesday 2 November 1954 at 9.30pm, and ultimately, over 100 episodes were made for radio. In 1956, the series transferred to television, and ran concurrently on TV and radio for three years. The radio series ended in 1959, but continued on the visual medium for a further 2 years.

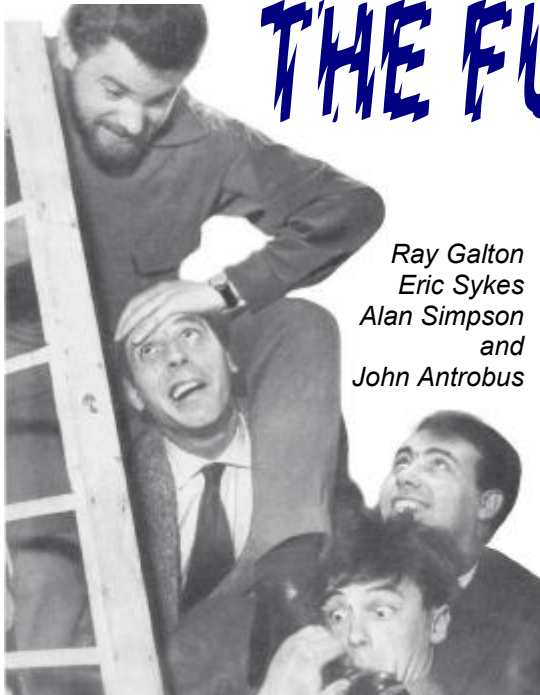
At the time of its transfer to television, Ray and Alan were working over a greengrocer's shop in Shepherd's Bush, sharing offices with, amongst others, Spike Milligan and Eric Sykes. In the mid 1950's, the four writers formed Associated London Scripts. It was in these offices that some of the best ever radio and television comedy scripts were written, including 'The Goons'; 'Sykes'; 'The Frankie Howerd Show'; 'Round the Horne'; 'The Arthur Haynes Show'; 'Til Death Us Do Part'; and of course, 'Hancock's Half Hour'. The following article originally appeared in the TV Mirror of 2 July 1956, and gives a flavour of the atmosphere in the offices at the time.

**ARTICLE BY WILLIAM EVANS, TV MIRROR, 2 JULY 1956**

with photographs by Chris Moore

*In a few rooms above a greengrocer's shop, thirteen men think up the gags and ideas for many of television's top comedy shows.*

*They are the inmates of...*



*Ray Galton  
Eric Sykes  
Alan Simpson  
and  
John Antrobus*

## THE FUN FACTORY

*There are thirteen coats hanging on the wall - or would be, if it wasn't for a shortage of hooks. That accounts for the large pile of clothing stacked on an office chair. And lest the number worries you, there is nothing unlucky about this place, though it may sound odd to have a baker's dozen over a greengrocer's shop.*

*You won't recognise many of the inmates, but you're almost bound to know their work - for we're in the main office of Associated London Scripts, a few hundred yards from Lime Grove, where*

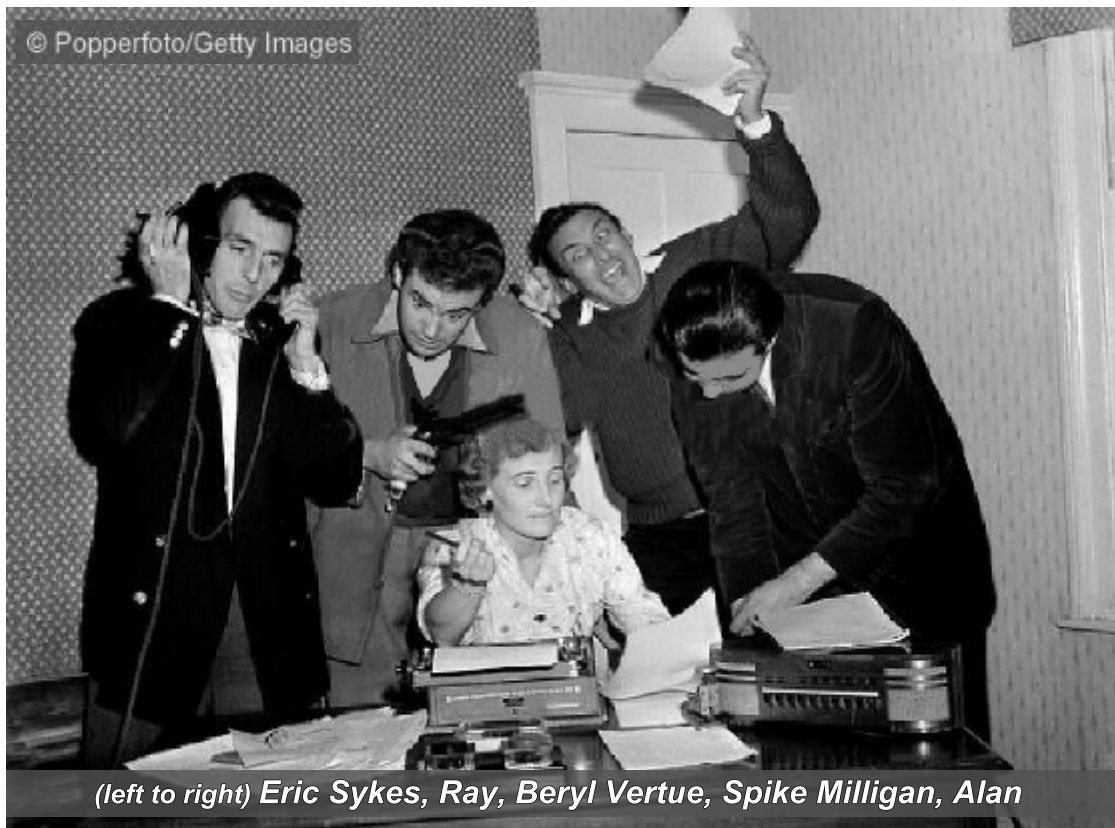
dozens of comedy shows are written for BBC and ITA. Peering round the door, half-hidden by a large cap and a beard, is a "Goon" face we do know - it's Spike Milligan, now writing 'A Show Called Fred' for A-R.

"Want to see my office? Follow me."

"You're upstairs?" I queried.

"No, I'm down here. My office is upstairs."

Up we went, briskly past a framed invitation to the Duke of Wellington's funeral, a motoring summons, a cheque from a newspaper for an item headed "Chiswick Bridge blue flash mystery" . . . slowly past an oil painting of a large nude. A few of the odd items in an unusual staircase museum linking six offices.



(left to right) Eric Sykes, Ray, Beryl Vertue, Spike Milligan, Alan

In his red and cream office, with some Eastern incense clearing the air, thirty-eight year old Spike Milligan explained: "This is a co-operative venture, the profit's about 41/2d, but when we started eighteen months ago there were only four of us ... Eric Sykes, Alan Simpson, Ray Galton and myself. We wanted to encourage new blood ... they put ten per cent of their earnings in the kitty. The day of 'I pay you and keep what you earn for me' has gone for scripts ... the writers put more into it if they are working for themselves."

On his desk lay an old-time pistol, over it a tombstone headed "In Memoriam R I P" - followed by a short list of radio failures that the authors have buried. Nearby is a set of encyclopaedias ... comedy must be founded on fact.

Downstairs I met attractive, twenty-five year old secretary Mrs Beryl Vertue,

until recently the one girl in charge of the gag-men. "Now there's so much work to do, I've got my sister in to help me," she said. "Apart from typing scripts, there's the phone ringing most of the time, letters to write, fan mail to sort and ..." - she pointed to a new file inscribed 'Budding Scriptwriters' - "all those to be answered. But the job the boys rate the most important ... that's the tea. My sister Pam and I make about fifty cups a day when they're all here, and have threatened to start a private plantation opposite on Shepherd's Bush green. We're part of their ten per cent."

"You should see the part I get," muttered Welshman Dick Barry, who with Johnny Speight writes ITA's 'Get Happy' and worked on 'Idiot Weekly'. "Before I came here I had a highly secret job ... I worked in a sausage factory." "They fired him for putting meat in them," said someone in the now crowded room. Standing by was bearded Ray Galton, resembling an artist in his green sweater, teamed with Alan Simpson in writing Tony Hancock's BBC-TV series, starting in July.



Ray and Alan share ideas with Eric Sykes (right)

"While we are doing that, Eric Sykes is in the next office working on Tony's present ITA series. Seems a comic situation to have the big battle between BBC and ITA reduced to a contest in our own corridors, but it just shows this firm is entirely neutral ... it likes to work for both sides."

"We wrote Tony's radio series," said genial, sports-jacketed Alan Simpson. "He's easy to work with. Occasionally he'll phone and say 'I'm coming along tomorrow for an all-day script conference.' He arrives about ten, and by quarter to eleven he's gone."

"Last time he left his duffle coat," added Ray. "We've tried selling it in the market, now we're putting a small ad in TV Mirror. If that doesn't shift it there's only one thing left, Alan ... we'll have to give it back to Tony."

*Above the clatter of teacups and the puckish gossip I heard the Scots accent of Lewis Schwarz, who teams with former advertising man Eric Merriman in scripting 'Great Scott!-It's Maynard.'*

*"I'm a qualified non-graduate of Glasgow University," said Lew.*

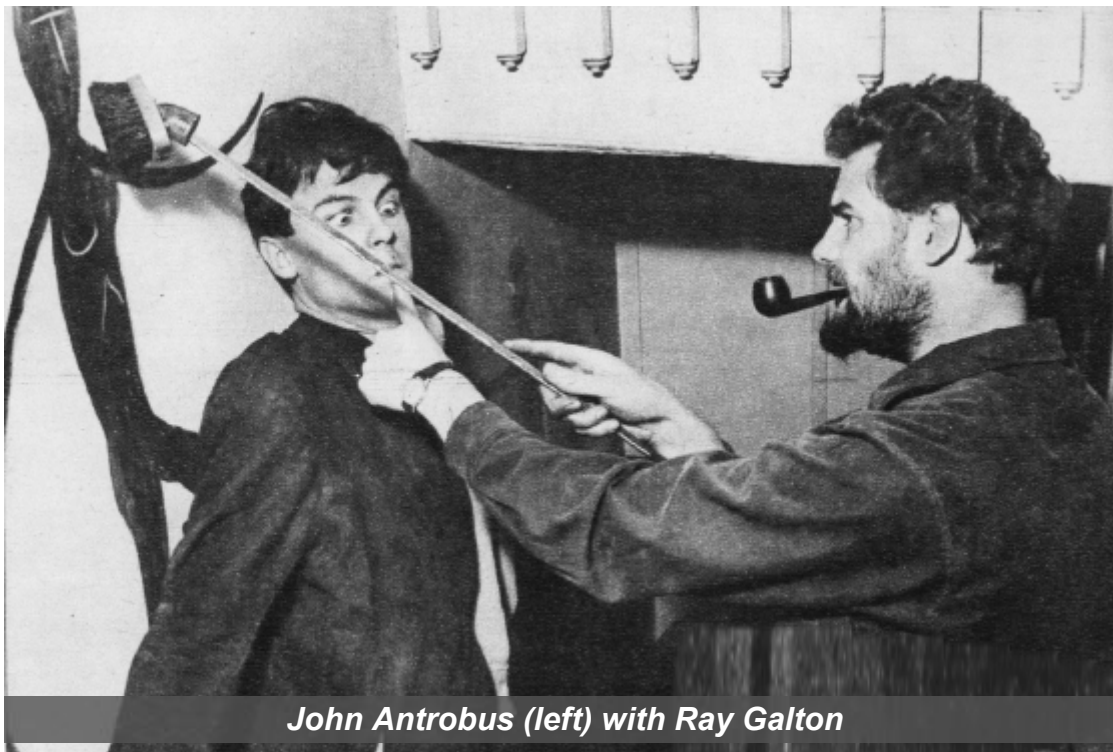
*"But he's got honours degrees in German and Russian," said Eric, "and if ever there's comedy on Moscow Radio ... he's in."*

*"Not everyone knows I'm a well-known chocolate biscuit collector," confided Lew. "I specialise in 1932, it was an excellent year for chocolate biscuits. And I've had a good offer from British Railways."*

*Lew and Eric told me their ambition, "To adapt the Kinsey Report for TV." They've come from all parts to work in this British fun factory. Said Alan Simpson: "Take Spike Milligan. He's supposed to be Irish but was born in India ... which makes him one of the genuine Irish-Hindus. Then there's Eric Sykes, known in the North as Oldham's favourite son, and in Shepherd's Bush as the Lancashire layabout ... Dick Barry, in spite of his name, comes from just outside Barry, Glamorgan."*

*"That's because the people of Barry insisted," put in former insurance agent Johnny Speight. "And Alan, Ray and I are three honest Cockneys." Cries of "Shame" and "Dishonest" from the others.*

*"Meet our youngest writer," said Alan, as twenty-two year old John Antrobus, clad in brown windcheater, breezed in. Lithe, rosy-complexioned, John was at Sandhurst a year ago. "My father's a regimental sergeant-major, and when I left the Merchant Navy to join the Army, he hoped I would stay. He bristled a little when I left," John confessed.*



**John Antrobus (left) with Ray Galton**

*"I had an audition at the Windmill, and they promised to write ... even when I insisted they hadn't got my address." He's now writing some of the sketches for*

*'A Show Called Fred' and for 'Get Happy'. Not much older is Brad Ashton, whose material embraces Tommy Trinder's 'Sunday Night at the Palladium' spot and Alfred Marks' 'Time'.*

*"The boys came from a variety of jobs," Alan told me. "Dave Freeman, who wrote for 'Idiot Weekly', was a detective-constable, and once a 'chucker out' in America. John Junkin was a teacher and Terry Nation is an ex-furniture salesman from Wales."*

*Every so often someone gets an idea for making all these characters look alike.*



*Alan and Beryl Vertue*



*Alan and Ray take a break*

*"Last Christmas," said Beryl, "Spike wanted us to start a beard-growing club. He even wanted me to wear a false beard. The scheme failed when the rest of the boys said they could afford razor blades." Beryl, the girl who has typed nearly five hundred TV and radio scripts, including the 'Goon Show', is also the office guinea-pig. "They regard me as a member of the public and if I don't see the joke at once it's out." So to be the perfect secretary, she has a sense of humour big enough for a life-size TV show with thirteen writers working on two channels and fifty cups of tea. (TV Mirror, 2 July 1956)*

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### The Galton and Simpson Story

*to be continued ...*