

= George Formby =

George Formby , OBE ( born George Hoy Booth ; 26 May 1904 ? 6 March 1961 ) , was an English actor , singer @-@ songwriter and comedian who became known to a worldwide audience through his films of the 1930s and 1940s . On stage , screen and record he sang light , comical songs , usually playing the ukulele or banjolele , and became the UK 's highest @-@ paid entertainer .

Born in Wigan , Lancashire , he was the son of George Formby Sr , from whom he later took his stage name . After an early career as a stable boy and jockey , Formby took to the music hall stage after the early death of his father in 1921 . His early performances were taken exclusively from his father 's act , including the same songs , jokes and characters . In 1923 he made two career @-@ changing decisions ? he purchased a ukulele , and married Beryl Ingham , a fellow performer who became his manager and transformed his act . She insisted that he appear on stage formally dressed , and introduced the ukulele to his performance . He started his recording career in 1926 and , from 1934 , he increasingly worked in film to develop into a major star by the late 1930s and 1940s , and became the UK 's most popular entertainer during those decades . The media historian Brian McFarlane writes that on film , Formby portrayed gormless Lancastrian innocents who would win through against some form of villainy , gaining the affection of an attractive middle @-@ class girl in the process .

During the Second World War Formby worked extensively for the Entertainments National Service Association ( ENSA ) , and entertained civilians and troops , and by 1946 it was estimated that he had performed in front of three million service personnel . After the war his career declined , although he toured the Commonwealth , and continued to appear in variety and pantomime . His last television appearance was in December 1960 , two weeks before the death of Beryl . He surprised people by announcing his engagement to a school teacher seven weeks after Beryl 's funeral , but died in Preston three weeks later , at the age of 56 ; he was buried in Warrington , alongside his father .

Formby 's biographer , Jeffrey Richards , considers that the actor " had been able to embody simultaneously Lancashire , the working classes , the people , and the nation " . Formby was considered Britain 's first properly home @-@ grown screen comedian . He was an influence on future comedians ? particularly Charlie Drake and Norman Wisdom ? and , culturally , on entertainers such as the Beatles , who referred to him in their music . Since his death Formby has been the subject of five biographies , two television specials and two works of public sculpture .

= = Biography = =

= = = Early life : 1904 ? 21 = = =

George Formby was born George Hoy Booth at 3 Westminster Street , Wigan , Lancashire , on 26 May 1904 . He was the eldest of seven surviving children born to James Lawler Booth and his wife Eliza , née Hoy , although this marriage was bigamous because Formby Sr was still married to his first wife , Martha Maria Salter , a twenty @-@ year @-@ old music hall performer . Booth was a successful music hall comedian and singer who performed under the name George Formby ( he is now known as George Formby Sr ) . Formby Sr suffered from a chest ailment , identified variously as bronchitis , asthma or tuberculosis , and would use the cough as part of the humour in his act , saying to the audience , " Bronchitis , I 'm a bit tight tonight " , or " coughing better tonight " . One of his main characters was that of John Willie , an " archetypal Lancashire lad " . In 1906 Formby Sr was earning £ 35 a week at the music halls , which rose to £ 325 a week by 1920 , and Formby grew up in an affluent home . Formby Sr was so popular that Marie Lloyd , the influential music hall singer and actress , would only watch two acts : his and that of Dan Leno .

Formby was born blind owing to an obstructive caul , although his sight was restored during a violent coughing fit or sneeze when he was a few months old . After briefly attending school ? at which he did not prosper , and did not learn to read or write ? Formby was removed from formal

education at the age of seven and sent to become a stable boy , briefly in Wiltshire and then in Middleham , Yorkshire . Formby Sr sent his son away to work as he was worried Formby would watch him on stage ; he was against Formby following in his footsteps , saying " one fool in the family is enough " . After a year working at Middleham , he was apprenticed to Thomas Scourfield at Epsom , where he ran his first professional races at the age of 10 , when he weighed less than 4 stone ( 56 lb ; 25 kg ) .

In 1915 Formby Sr allowed his son to appear on screen , taking the lead in *By the Shortest of Heads* , a thriller directed by Bert Haldane in which Formby played a stable boy who outwits a gang of villains and wins a £ 10 @,@ 000 prize when he comes first in a horse race . The film is now considered lost , with the last @-@ known copy having been destroyed in 1940 . Later in 1915 , and with the closure of the English racing season because of the First World War , Formby moved to Ireland where he continued as a jockey until November 1918 . Later that month he returned to England and raced for Lord Derby at his Newmarket stables . Formby continued as a jockey until 1921 , although he never won a race .

= = = Beginning a stage career : 1921 ? 34 = = =

On 8 February 1921 Formby Sr succumbed to his bronchial condition and died , at the age of 45 ; he was buried in the Catholic section of Warrington Cemetery . After his father 's funeral Eliza took the young Formby to London to help him cope with his grief . While there , they visited the Victoria Palace Theatre ? where Formby Sr had previously been so successful ? and saw a performance by the Tyneside comedian Tommy Dixon . Dixon was performing a copy of Formby Sr 's act , using the same songs , jokes , costumes and mannerisms , and billed himself as " The New George Formby " , a name which angered Eliza and Formby even more . The performance prompted Formby to follow in his father 's profession , a decision which was supported by Eliza . As he had never seen his father perform live , Formby found the imitation difficult and had to learn his father 's songs from records , and the rest of his act and jokes from his mother .

On 21 March 1921 Formby gave his first professional appearance in a two @-@ week run at the Hippodrome in Earlestown , Lancashire , where he received a fee of £ 5 a week . In the show he was billed as George Hoy , using his mother 's maiden name ? he explained later that he did not want the Formby name to appear in small print . His father 's name was used in the posters and advertising , George Hoy being described as " Comedian . ( son of George Formby ) " . While still appearing in Earlestown Formby was hired to appear at the Moss Empire chain of theatres for £ 17 10s a week . His first night was unsuccessful and he later said of it , " I was the first turn , three minutes , died the death of a dog " . He toured around venues in Northern England , although he was not well received , and was booed and hissed while performing in Blyth , Northumberland . As a result he experienced frequent periods of unemployment ? up to three months at one point . Formby spent two years as a support act touring round the northern halls , and although he was poorly paid , his mother supported him financially .

In 1923 Formby started to play the ukulele , although the exact circumstances of how he came to play the instrument are unknown , and he introduced it into his act during a run at the Alhambra Theatre in Barnsley . When the songs ? still his father 's material ? were well received , he changed his stage name to George Formby , and stopped using the John Willie character . Another significant event was his appearance in Castleford , West Yorkshire , where appearing on the same bill was Beryl Ingham , an Accrington @-@ born champion clogdancer and actress who had won the All England Step Dancing title at the age of 11 . Beryl , who had formed a dancing act with her sister , May , called " The Two Violets " , had a low opinion of Formby 's act , and later said that " if I 'd had a bag of rotten tomatoes with me I 'd have thrown them at him " . Formby and Beryl entered into a relationship and married two years later , on 13 September 1924 , at a register office in Wigan , with Formby 's aunt and uncle as witnesses . Upon hearing the news , Eliza insisted on the couple having a church wedding , which followed two months later .

Beryl took over as George 's manager , and changed aspects of his act , including the songs and jokes . She instructed him on how to use his hands , and how to work his audience . She also

persuaded him to change his stage dress to black tie ? although he appeared in a range of other costumes too ? and to take lessons in how to play the ukulele properly . By June 1926 he was proficient enough to earn a one @-@ off record deal ? negotiated by Beryl ? to sing six of his father 's songs for the Edison Bell / Winner label . Formby spent the next few years touring , largely in the north , but also appearing at the Shepherd 's Bush Empire , his official London debut . Although he had a further recording session in October 1929 , performing two songs for Dominion Records , " Beryl 's avaricious demands would prevent any serious contract from coming George 's way " , according to David Bret , Formby 's biographer . That changed in 1932 , when Formby signed a three @-@ year deal with Decca Records . One of the songs he recorded in July was " Chinese Laundry Blues " , telling the story of Mr Wu , which became one of his standard songs , and part of a long @-@ running series of songs about the character . Over the course of his career Formby went on to record over 200 songs , around 90 of which were written by Fred Cliffe and Harry Gifford . In the 1932 winter season Formby appeared in his first pantomime , *Babes in the Wood* , in Bolton , after which he toured with the George Formby Road Show around the north of England , with Beryl acting as the commère ; the show also toured in 1934 .

= = = Burgeoning film career : 1934 ? 40 = = =

With Formby 's growing success on stage , Beryl decided it was time for him to move into films . In 1934 she approached the producer Basil Dean , the head of Associated Talking Pictures ( ATP ) . Although he expressed an interest in Formby , he did not like the associated demands from Beryl . She also met the representative of Warner Bros. in the UK , Irving Asher , who was dismissive , saying that Formby was " too stupid to play the bad guy and too ugly to play the hero " . Three weeks later Formby was approached by John E. Blakeley of Blakeley 's Productions , who offered him a one @-@ film deal .

The film , *Boots ! Boots !* , was shot on a budget of £ 3 @,@ 000 in a one @-@ room studio in Albany Street , London . Formby played the John Willie character , while Beryl also appeared , and the couple were paid £ 100 for the two weeks ' work , plus 10 per cent of the profits . The film followed a revue format , and Jo Botting , writing for the British Film Institute , describes it as having a " wafer @-@ thin plot " that is " almost incidental " . Botting also considers the film has " poor sound quality , static scene set @-@ ups and [ a ] lack of sets " , and while it did not impress the critics , audience figures were high . Formby followed this up with *Off the Dole* in 1935 , again for Blakeley , who had re @-@ named his company Mancunian Films . The film cost £ 3 @,@ 000 to make , and earned £ 80 @,@ 000 at the box office . As with *Boots ! Boots !* , the film was in a revue format , and Formby again played John Willie , with Beryl as his co @-@ star . According to Formby 's biographer , Jeffrey Richards , the two films for Blakeley " are an invaluable record of the pre @-@ cinematic Formby at work " .

The success of the pictures led Dean to offer Formby a seven @-@ year contract with ATP , which resulted in the production of 11 films , although Dean 's fellow producer , Michael Balcon , considered Formby to be " an odd and not particularly loveable character " . The first film from the deal was released in 1935 . *No Limit* features Formby as an entrant in the Isle of Man annual Tourist Trophy ( TT ) motorcycle race . Monty Banks directed , and Florence Desmond took the female lead . According to Richards , Dean did not try " to play down Formby 's Lancashire character " for the film , and employed Walter Greenwood , the Salford @-@ born author of the 1933 novel *Love on the Dole* , as the scriptwriter . Filming was troubled , with Beryl being difficult to everyone present . The writer Matthew Sweet describes the set as " a battleground " because of her actions , and Banks unsuccessfully requested that Dean bar Beryl from the studio . The Observer thought that parts of *No Limit* were " pretty dull stuff " , but the race footage was " shot and cut to a maximum of excitement " . Regarding the star of the film , the reviewer thought that " our Lancashire George is a grand lad ; he can gag and clown , play the banjo and sing with authority ... Still and all , he doesn 't do too bad . " The film was so popular it was reissued in 1938 , 1946 and 1957 .

The formula used for *No Limit* was repeated in his following works : Formby played " the urban ' little man ' defeated ? but refusing to admit it " . He portrayed a good @-@ natured , but accident

@-@ prone and incompetent Lancastrian , who was often in a skilled trade , or the services . The plots were geared to Formby trying to achieve success in a field unfamiliar to him ( in horse racing , the TT Races , as a spy or a policeman ) , and by winning the affections of a middle @-@ class girl in the process . Interspersed throughout each film is a series of songs by Formby , in which he plays the banjo , banjolele or ukulele . The songs are , in the words of the academic Brian McFarlane , " unpretentiously skilful in their balance between broad comedy and action , laced with ... [ Formby 's ] shy ordinariness " .

No Limit was followed by Keep Your Seats , Please in 1936 , which was again directed by Banks with Desmond returning as the co @-@ star . Tensions arose in pre @-@ production with Banks and some of the cast requesting to Dean that Beryl be banned from the set . Tempers had also become strained between Formby and Desmond , who were not on speaking terms except to film scenes . The situation became so bad that Dean avoided visiting his studios for the month of filming . The film contained the song " The Window Cleaner " ( popularly known as " When I 'm Cleaning Windows " ) , which was soon banned by the BBC . The corporation 's director John Reith stated that " if the public wants to listen to Formby singing his disgusting little ditty , they 'll have to be content to hear it in the cinemas , not over the nation 's airwaves " ; Formby and Beryl were furious with the block on the song . In May 1941 Beryl informed the BBC that the song was a favourite of the royal family , particularly Queen Mary , while a statement by Formby pointed out that " I sang it before the King and Queen at the Royal Variety Performance " . The BBC relented and started to broadcast the song .

When production finished on Keep Your Seats , Please , Beryl insisted that for the next film there should be " no Eye @-@ Ties [ sic ] and stuck @-@ up little trollops involved " , referring to Banks and Desmond , respectively . Dean had tired of the on @-@ set squabbles , and for the third ATP film , Feather Your Nest , he appointed William Beaudine as the director , and Polly Ward , the niece of the music hall star Marie Lloyd , as the female lead . Bret describes the songs in the film as " comparatively bland " , but " with the exception of the one which would become immortal " : " Leaning on a Lamp @-@ post " .

By the time of the next production , Keep Fit in 1937 , Dean had begun to assemble a special team at Ealing Studios to help develop and produce the Formby films ; key among the members were the director Anthony Kimmins , who went on to direct five of Formby 's films . Kay Walsh was cast as the leading lady and , in the absences of Beryl from the set , Formby and Walsh had an affair , after she fell for his " flirtatious behaviour off @-@ camera " . Although Beryl was furious with Walsh , and tried to have her removed from the film , a showdown with Dean proved fruitless . Dean informed her that Walsh was to remain the lead in both Keep Fit , and in Formby 's next film ( I See Ice , 1938 ) ; to mollify her Dean raised Formby 's fee for the latter film to £ 25 @,@ 000 .

When filming concluded on I See Ice , Formby spent the 1937 summer season performing in the revue King Cheer at the Opera House Theatre , Blackpool , before appearing in a 12 @-@ minute slot in the Royal Variety Performance at the London Palladium that November . The popularity of his performances meant that in 1937 he was the top British male star in box office takings , a position he held every subsequent year until 1943 . Additionally , between 1938 and 1942 he was also the highest @-@ paid entertainer in Britain , and by the end of the 1930s was earning £ 100 @,@ 000 a year . In early 1938 Dean informed the Formbys that in the next film , It 's in the Air , Banks would return to direct and Walsh would again be the leading lady . Beryl objected strongly , and Kimmins continued his directorial duties , while Ward was brought in for the female lead . Beryl , as she did with all Formby 's female co @-@ stars , " read the ' keep @-@ your @-@ hands @-@ off @-@ my @-@ husband ' riot act " to the actress . In May , while filming It 's in the Air , Formby purchased a Rolls @-@ Royce , with the personalised number plate GF 1 . Every year afterwards he would purchase either a new Rolls Royce or Bentley , buying 26 over the course of his life .

In the autumn of 1938 Formby began work on Trouble Brewing , released the following year with 19 @-@ year @-@ old Googie Withers as the female lead ; Kimmins again directed . Withers later recounted that Formby did not speak to her until , during a break in filming when Beryl was not present , he whispered out of the corner of his mouth " I 'm sorry , love , but you know , I 'm not allowed to speak to you " , something she thought was " very sweet " . His second release of 1939 ?

shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War ? was Come On George ! , which cast Pat Kirkwood in the female lead ; the pair disliked each other intensely , and neither of the Formbys liked several of the other senior cast members . Come On George ! was screened for troops serving in France before being released in Britain .

= = = Second World War : service with ENSA = = =

At the outbreak of the Second World War Dean left ATP and became the head of the Entertainments National Service Association ( ENSA ) , the organisation that provided entertainment to the British Armed Forces . Over the course of five months Formby requested to sign up for ENSA , but was denied ; Dean relented in February 1940 , and Formby was signed on a fixed salary of £ 10 per week , although he still remained under contract to ATP . He undertook his first tour in France in March , where he performed for members of the British Expeditionary Force .

The social research organisation Mass @-@ Observation recorded that Formby 's first film of 1940 , Let George Do It ! , gave a particularly strong boost to early @-@ war British civilian morale . In a dream sequence after being drugged , Formby 's character parachutes into a Nuremberg Rally and punches Hitler . According to Richards , the scene provided " the visual encapsulation of the people 's war with the English Everyman flooring the Nazi Superman " . The scene was so striking that the film became Formby 's first international release , in the US , under the title To Hell With Hitler , and in Moscow ? where it was released in 1943 under the title Dinky Doo ? it was shown to packed houses and received record box @-@ office takings for over ten months . The critics also praised the film , and the Kinematograph Weekly called it Formby 's " best performance to date " , and the film , " a box office certainty " .

Formby 's ENSA commitments were heavy , touring factories , theatres and concert halls around Britain . He also gave free concerts for charities and worthy causes , and raised £ 10 @,@ 000 for the Fleetwood Fund on behalf of the families of missing trawlermen . He and Beryl also set up their own charities , such as the OK Club for Kids , whose aim was to provide cigarettes for Yorkshire soldiers , and the Jump Fund , to provide home @-@ knitted balaclavas , scarves and socks to servicemen . Formby also joined the Home Guard as a dispatch rider , where he took his duties seriously , and fitted them around his other work whenever he could .

Formby continued filming with ATP , and his second film of 1940 , Spare a Copper , was again focused on an aspect of the war , this time combating fifth columnists and saboteurs in a Merseyside dockyard . Cinema @-@ goers had begun to tire of war films , and his next venture , Turned Out Nice Again returned to less contentious issues , with Formby 's character caught in a domestic battle between his new wife and mother . Early in the filming schedule , he took time to perform in an ENSA show that was broadcast on the BBC from Aldwych tube station as Let the People Sing ; he sang four songs , and told the audience , " Don 't forget , it 's wonderful to be British ! " Towards the end of 1940 Formby tried to enlist for active military service , despite Beryl informing him that by being a member of ENSA he was already signed up . The examining board rejected him as being unfit , because he had sinusitis and arthritic toes . He spent the winter season in pantomime at the Opera House Theatre , Blackpool , portraying Idle Jack in Dick Whittington . When the season came to an end the Formbys moved to London and , in May 1941 , performed for the royal family at Windsor Castle . He had commissioned a new set of inoffensive lyrics for " When I 'm Cleaning Windows " , but was informed that he should sing the original , uncensored version , which was enjoyed by the royal party , particularly Queen Mary , who asked for a repeat of the song . King George VI presented Formby with a set of gold cuff links , and advised him to " wear them , not put them away " .

With the ATP contract at an end , Formby decided not to renew or push for an extension . Robert Murphy , in his study of wartime British cinema , points out that Balcon , Formby 's producer at the time , " seems to have made little effort to persuade him not to transfer his allegiance " , despite the box office success enjoyed by Let George Do It and Spare a Copper . Numerous offers came in , and Formby selected the American company Columbia Pictures , in a deal worth in excess of £ 500 @,@ 000 to make a minimum of six films ? seven were eventually made . Formby set up his own

company , Hillcrest Productions , to distribute the films , and had the final decision on the choice of director , scriptwriter and theme , while Columbia would have the choice of leading lady . Part of Formby 's reasoning behind the decision was a desire for parts with more character , something that would not have happened at ATP .

At the end of August 1941 production began on Formby 's first film for Columbia , South American George , which took six weeks to complete . Formby 's move to an American company was controversial , and although his popular appeal seemed unaffected , his " films were treated with increasing critical hostility " , according to John Mundy in his 2007 examination of British musical film . The reviewer for The Times wrote that the story was " confused " and considered that " there is not sufficient comic invention in the telling " of it . Murphy writes that the criticism " had more to do with the inadequate vehicles which he subsequently appeared in than in any diminution of his personal popularity . "

In early 1942 Formby undertook a three @-@ week , 72 @-@ show tour of Northern Ireland , largely playing to troops but also undertaking fund @-@ raising shows for charity ? one at the Belfast Hippodrome raised £ 500 . He described his time in Ulster as " the pleasantest tour I 've ever undertaken " . He returned to the mainland by way of the Isle of Man , where he entertained the troops guarding the internment camps . After further charity shows ? raising £ 8 @,@ 000 for a tank fund ? Formby was the associate producer for the Vera Lynn film We 'll Meet Again ( 1943 ) . In March he also filmed Much Too Shy which was released in October that year . Although the film was poorly received by the critics , the public still attended in large numbers , and the film was profitable .

In the summer of 1942 Formby was involved in a controversy with the Lord 's Day Observance Society , who had filed law suits against the BBC for playing secular music on Sunday . The society began a campaign against the entertainment industry , claiming all theatrical activity on a Sunday were unethical , and cited a 1667 law which made it illegal . With 60 leading entertainers already avoiding Sunday working , Dean informed Formby that his stance would be crucial in avoiding a spread of the problem . Formby issued a statement , " I 'll hang up my uke on Sundays only when our lads stop fighting and getting killed on Sundays ... as far as the Lord 's Day Observance Society are concerned , they can mind their own bloody business . And in any case , what have they done for the war effort except get on everyone 's nerves ? " The following day it was announced that the pressure from the society was to be lifted .

At the end of the year Formby started filming Get Cracking , a story about the Home Guard , which was completed in under a month , the tight schedule brought about by an impending ENSA tour of the Mediterranean . Between the end of filming Get Cracking and the release of the film in May 1943 , Formby undertook a tour of Northern Scotland and the Orkney Islands , and had nearly completed shooting on his next film , Bell @-@ Bottom George . The reviewer for The Times opined that " Get Cracking , although a distinct improvement on other films in which Mr Formby has appeared , is cut too closely to fit the demands of an individual technique to achieve any real life of its own " .

Bell @-@ Bottom George was described 60 years later by the academic Baz Kershaw as being " unashamedly gay and ... peppered with homoerotic scenes " ; Bret concurs , and notes that " the majority of the cast and almost every one of the male extras was unashamedly gay " , The film was a hit with what Bret describes as Formby 's " surprisingly large , closeted gay following " . The reviewer for The Manchester Guardian was impressed with the film , and wrote that " there is a new neatness of execution and lightness of touch about this production ... while George himself can no longer be accused of trailing clouds of vaudevillian glory " . The reviewer also considered Formby " our first authentic and strictly indigenous film comedian " . After completing filming , the Formbys undertook a further ENSA tour . Although Dean personally disliked the Formbys , he greatly admired the tireless work they did for the organisation . In August Formby undertook a 53 @-@ day tour in a significant portion of the Mediterranean , including Italy , Sicily , Malta , Gibraltar , Libya , Tunisia , Egypt , Lebanon and Palestine ; visiting 750 @,@ 000 troops in thirteen countries , touring 25 @,@ 000 miles ( 40 @,@ 000 km ) in the process and returning to England in October . The couple travelled around the countryside in a Ford Mercury that Formby had purchased from the racing driver Sir Malcolm Campbell , which had been converted to sleep two in the back .

In January 1944 Formby described his experiences touring for ENSA in Europe and the Middle East in a BBC radio broadcast . He said that the troops " were worrying quite a lot about you folks at home , but we soon put them right about that . We told them that after four and a half years , Britain was still the best country to live in " . Shortly after he began filming *He Snoops to Conquer* ? his fifth picture for Columbia ? he was visited on set by the Dance Music Policy Committee ( DMPC ) , an organisation responsible for vetting music for broadcast , which had also been given responsibility for checking if music was sympathetic towards the enemy during the war . The DMPC interviewed Formby about three songs that had been included in *Bell @-@ Bottom George* : " Swim Little Fish " , " If I Had a Girl Like You " and " Bell @-@ Bottom George " . Formby was summoned to the BBC 's offices to perform his three songs in front of the committee , with his song checked against the available sheet music . A week later , on 1 February , the committee met and decided the songs were innocuous , although Formby was told that he would have to get further clearance if the lyrics were changed . Bret opines that he had been the victim of a plot by a member of the Variety Artists ' Federation , following Formby 's scathing comments on entertainers who were too scared to leave London to entertain the troops . The comments , which appeared in the forces magazine *Union Jack* , were then widely reported in the press in Britain . The Variety Artists ' Federation demanded that Formby release names , and threatened him with action if he did not do so , but he refused to give in to their pressure .

Formby went to Normandy in July 1944 in the vanguard of a wave of ENSA performers . He and Beryl travelled over on a rough crossing to Arromanches giving a series of impromptu concerts to troops in improvised conditions , including on the backs of farm carts and army lorries , or in bomb @-@ cratered fields . In one location the German front line was too close for him to perform , so he crawled into the trenches and told jokes with the troops there . He then boarded HMS *Ambitious* for his first scheduled concert before returning to France to continue his tour . During dinner with General Bernard Montgomery , whom he had met in North Africa , Formby was invited to visit the glider crews of 6th Airborne Division , who had been holding a series of bridges without relief for 56 days . He did so on 17 August in a one @-@ day visit to the front line bridges , where he gave nine shows , all standing beside a sandbag wall , ready to jump into a slit trench in case of problems ; much of the time his audience were in foxholes . After the four @-@ week tour of France , Formby returned home to start work on *I Didn 't Do It* ( released in 1945 ) , although he continued to work on ENSA concerts and tours in Britain . Between January and March 1945 , shortly after the release of *He Snoops to Conquer* , he left on an ENSA tour that took in Burma , India and Ceylon ( the latter is now Sri Lanka ) . The concerts in the Far East were his last for ENSA , and by the end of the war it was estimated that he had performed in front of three million service personnel .

= = = Post @-@ war career : 1946 ? 52 = = =

In 1946 " *With My Little Stick of Blackpool Rock* " , which Formby had recorded in 1937 , began to cause problems at the BBC for broadcasts of Formby or his music . The producer of one of Formby 's live television programmes received a letter from a BBC manager that stated " We have no record that " *With My Little Stick of Blackpool Rock* " is banned . We do however know and so does Formby , that certain lines in the lyric must not be broadcast " . Other sources , including the BBC , state that the song was banned from being broadcast . Between July and October 1946 Formby filmed *George in Civvy Street* , which would be his final film . The story concerns the rivalry between two pubs : the Unicorn , bequeathed to Formby 's character , and the Lion , which was owned by his childhood sweetheart ? played by Rosalyn Boulter ? but run by an unscrupulous manager . Richards considers the film to have " symbolic significance " ; at the end , with the marriage between the two pub owners , Formby " bowed out of films unifying the nation mythically , communally and matrimonially " .

The film was less successful at the box office than his previous works , as audience tastes had changed in the post @-@ war world . Fisher opines that because of his tireless war work , Formby had become too synonymous with the war , causing the public to turn away from him , much as they had from the wartime British Prime Minister , Winston Churchill . Bret believes that post @-@ war

audiences wanted intrigue , suspense and romance , through the films of James Mason , Stewart Granger , David Niven and Laurence Olivier . Bret also indicates that Formby 's cinematic decline was shared by similar performers , including Gracie Fields , Tommy Trinder and Will Hay . Formby 's biographers , Alan Randall and Ray Seaton , opine that in his late 40s , Formby " was greying and thickening out " , and was too old to play the innocent young Lancashire lad . The slump in his screen popularity hit Formby hard , and he became depressed . In early 1946 Beryl checked him into a psychiatric hospital under her maiden name , Ingham . He came out after five weeks , in time for a tour of Scandinavia in May .

On his return from Scandinavia Formby went into pantomime in Blackpool ; while there , he learned of his appointment as Officer of the Order of the British Empire ( OBE ) in the 1946 King 's Birthday Honours . Although delighted , he was upset that Beryl went without official recognition , and said " if somethin ' was comin ' our way , ah 'd like it to be somethin ' Beryl could have shared " . Later that year the Formbys toured South Africa shortly before formal racial apartheid was introduced . While there they refused to play racially @-@ segregated venues . When Formby was cheered by a black audience after embracing a small black girl who had presented his wife with a box of chocolates , National Party leader Daniel François Malan ( who later introduced apartheid ) phoned to complain . Beryl replied " Why don 't you piss off , you horrible little man ? "

Formby returned to Britain at Christmas and appeared in Dick Whittington at the Grand Theatre , Leeds for nine weeks , and then , in February 1947 , he appeared in variety for two weeks at the London Palladium . Reviewing the show , The Times thought Formby was " more than ever the mechanized perfection of naive jollity . His smile , though fixed , is winning , and his songs ... are catchy " . In September that year he went on a 12 @-@ week tour of Australia and New Zealand . On his return he was offered more film roles , but turned them down , saying " when I look back on some of the films I 've done in the past it makes me want to cringe . I 'm afraid the days of being a clown are gone . From now on I 'm only going to do variety " . He began suffering increasing health problems including a gastric ulcer , and was treated for breathing problems from his heavy smoking . He finished the year in pantomime , appearing as Buttons in Cinderella at the Liverpool Empire Theatre , with Beryl playing Dandini .

In September 1949 Formby went on a 19 city coast @-@ to @-@ coast Canadian tour , from which he returned unwell . While subsequently appearing in Cinderella in Leeds , he collapsed in his dressing room . The attending doctor administered morphine , to which Formby briefly became addicted . Further poor health plagued him into 1950 , with a bout of dysentery , followed by appendicitis , after which he recuperated in Norfolk , before giving another royal command performance that April . He undertook two further international tours that year : one to Scandinavia , and a second to Canada . His earnings of Ca \$ 200 @,@ 000 were heavily taxed : Canadian taxes took up \$ 68 @,@ 000 , and UK taxes took 90 % of the balance . Formby complained to reporters about the level of taxation , saying " That 's it . So long as the government keeps bleeding me dry , I shan 't be in much of a hurry to work again ! " ; he and Beryl spent the rest of the year resting in Norfolk , in temporary retirement .

Formby was tempted back to work by the theatrical impresario Emile Littler , who offered him the lead role of Percy Piggott in Zip Goes a Million , a play based on the 1902 novel Brewster 's Millions by G. B. McCutcheon ; Formby was offered £ 1 @,@ 500 , plus a share of the box @-@ office takings . The show premiered at the Coventry Hippodrome in September 1951 before opening at the Palace Theatre , London on 20 October . The Times commented unfavourably , saying that although the audience were appreciative of the play , they " could not conceivably have detected a spark of wit in either the lyrics or the dialogue " ; the paper was equally dismissive of Formby , writing that " he has a deft way with a song or a banjo , but little or no finesse in his handling of a comic situation " .

A month after the play opened in London , Formby was the guest star on Desert Island Discs , where one of his choices was his father 's " Standing on the Corner of the Street " . In early 1952 Formby 's health began to decline and , on 28 April , he decided to withdraw from Zip Goes a Million . On the way to the theatre to inform Littler , Formby suffered a heart attack , although it took the doctors five days to diagnose the coronary and admit him to hospital . He was treated for both the



attack , and his morphine addiction . He stayed in hospital for nine weeks before returning home to Lytham St Annes , Lancashire , where he announced his retirement .

= = = Health problems and intermittent work : 1952 ? 60 = = =

During his recuperation Formby contracted gastroenteritis and had a suspected blood clot on his lung , after which he underwent an operation to clear a fishbone that was stuck in his throat . He had recovered sufficiently by April 1953 to undertake a 17 @-@ show tour of Southern Rhodesia ( now Zimbabwe ) , before a special appearance at the Southport Garrick Theatre . That September he turned on the Blackpool Illuminations .

From October to December 1953 Formby appeared at the London Palladium in 138 performances of the revue Fun and the Fair , with Terry @-@ Thomas and the Billy Cotton band ; Formby appeared in the penultimate act of the evening , with Terry @-@ Thomas closing the show . Although Formby 's act was well @-@ received , the show was not as successful as had been hoped , and Terry @-@ Thomas later wrote that " Formby put the audience in a certain mood which made them non @-@ receptive to whoever followed ... Even though my act was the star spot , I felt on this occasion that my being there was an anti @-@ climax " . He requested that the order be changed to have Formby close the show , but this was turned down . Formby suffered from stage fright during the show 's run ? the first time he had suffered from the condition since his earliest days on stage ? and his bouts of depression returned , along with stomach problems .

Formby took a break from work until mid @-@ 1954 , when he starred in the revue Turned Out Nice Again , in Blackpool . Although the show was initially scheduled to run for 13 weeks , it was cut short after six when Formby suffered again from dysentery and depression . He again announced his retirement , but continued to work . After some television appearances on Ask Pickles and Top of the Town , in late 1954 and early 1955 respectively , Formby travelled to South Africa for a tour , where Beryl negotiated an agreement with the South African premier Johannes Strijdom to play in venues of Formby 's choice , and then sailed to Canada for a ten @-@ day series of performances . On the return voyage he contracted bronchial pneumonia , but still joined the cast of the non @-@ musical play Too Young to Marry on his arrival in Britain .

In August 1955 Beryl felt unwell and went for tests : she was diagnosed with cancer of the uterus and was given two years to live . The couple reacted to the news in different ways , and while Beryl began to drink heavily ? up to a bottle of whisky a day to dull the pain ? George began to work harder , and began a close friendship with a school teacher , Pat Howson .

Too Young to Marry toured between September 1955 and November 1956 , but still allowed Formby time to appear in the Christmas pantomime Babes in the Wood at the Liverpool Empire Theatre . The touring production was well received everywhere except in Scotland , where Formby 's attempted Scottish accent is thought to have put people off . For Christmas 1956 he appeared in his first London pantomime , playing Idle Jack in Dick Whittington and His Cat at the Palace Theatre , although he withdrew from the run in early February after suffering from laryngitis . According to Bret , Formby spent the remainder of 1957 " doing virtually nothing " , although he appeared in two television programmes , Val Parnell 's Saturday Spectacular in July and Top of the Bill in October .

From March 1958 Formby appeared in the musical comedy Beside the Seaside , a Holiday Romp in Hull , Blackpool , Birmingham and Brighton . By the time it reached Brighton the play was playing to increasingly small audiences , and the run was cut short as a result . The play may not have been to southern audiences ' tastes ? the plot centres on a northern family 's holiday in Blackpool ? and the Brighton audiences may have been too small , but those in the north , particularly Blackpool , thought highly of it and the show was a nightly sell @-@ out . When the show closed Formby was disappointed , and vowed never to appear in another stage musical . The year 1958 was professionally quiet for him ; in addition to Beside the Seaside , he also worked in one @-@ off appearances in three television shows . He began 1959 by appearing in Val Parnell 's Spectacular : The Atlantic Showboat in January , and in April hosted his own show , Steppin ' Out With Formby . During the summer season he appeared at the Windmill Theatre , Great Yarmouth , although he missed two weeks of performances when he was involved in a car crash on the August Bank

Holiday . When doctors examined him , they were concerned with his overall health , partly as a result of his forty cigarettes @-@ a @-@ day smoking habit . He also had high blood pressure , was overweight and had heart problems .

Formby 's final year of work was 1960 . That May he recorded his last session of songs , " Happy Go Lucky Me " and " Banjo Boy " , the latter of which peaked at number 40 in the UK Singles Chart . He then spent the summer season at the Queen 's Theatre in Blackpool in The Time of Your Life ? a performance which was also broadcast by the BBC . One of the acts in the show was the singer Yana , with whom Formby had an affair , made easier because of Beryl 's absence from the theatre through illness . His final televised performance , a 35 @-@ minute BBC programme , The Friday Show : George Formby , was aired on 16 December . Bret considers the programme to be Formby 's " greatest performance ? it was certainly his most sincere " , although reviewing for The Guardian , Mary Crozier thought it " too slow " . She went on to say " George Formby is really a music @-@ hall star , and it needs the warmth and sociability of the theatre to bring out his full appeal " . Beryl 's illness was worsening . Worn down by the strain , and feeling the need to escape , Formby took the part of Mr Wu in Aladdin in Bristol , having turned down a more lucrative part in Blackpool .

= = = Final months : a new romance , death and family dispute = = =

Two hours before the premiere of Aladdin ? on Christmas Eve ? Formby received a phone call from Beryl 's doctor , saying that she was in a coma and was not expected to survive the night ; Formby went through with the performance , and was told early the next morning that Beryl had died . Her cremation took place on 27 December , and an hour after the service Formby returned to Bristol to appear in that day 's matinee performance of Aladdin . He continued in the show until 14 January when a cold forced him to rest , on doctors ' advice . He returned to Lytham St Annes and communicated with Pat Howson ; she contacted his doctor and Formby was instructed to go to hospital , where he remained for the next two weeks .

On Valentine 's Day 1961 , seven weeks after Beryl 's death , Formby and Howson announced their engagement . Eight days later he suffered a further heart attack which was so severe that he was given the last rites of the Catholic Church on his arrival at hospital . He was revived and , from his hospital bed , he and Howson planned their wedding , which was due to take place in May . He was still there when , on 6 March , he had a further heart attack and died at the age of 56 . The obituarist for The Times wrote that " he was the amateur of the old smoking concert platform turned into a music @-@ hall professional of genius " , while Donald Zec , writing in The Daily Mirror , called him " as great an entertainer as any of the giants of the music @-@ hall " . The Guardian considered that " with his ukulele , his songs , and his grinning patter , the sum was greater than any of those parts : a Lancashire character " , while in the eyes of the public , Formby 's " passing was genuinely and widely mourned " .

Formby was buried alongside his father in Warrington Cemetery with over 150 @,@ 000 mourners lining the route . The undertaker was Bruce Williams who , as Eddie Latta , had written songs for Formby . An hour after the ceremony the family read the will , which had been drawn up two weeks previously . Harry Scott ? Formby 's valet and factotum ? was to receive £ 5 @,@ 000 , while the rest was to go to Howson ; at probate Formby 's estate was valued at £ 135 @,@ 000 . Formby 's mother and siblings were angered by the will , and contested it . In the words of Bret " mourning ... [ Formby ] was marred by a greedy family squabbling over his not inconsiderable fortune " .

Because the will was contested , Formby 's solicitor insisted that a public auction was held for the contents of Formby 's house , which took place over three days in June . Howson offered to honour an earlier will by providing £ 5 @,@ 000 for Eliza and £ 2 @,@ 000 each for Formby 's sisters , but the offer was rejected , and the matter went to the High Court in London . The case was heard in May 1963 before Mr Justice Ormrod . At the end , Eliza was granted £ 5 @,@ 000 , and the sisters received £ 2 @,@ 000 each . Formby 's solicitor , John Crowther , acted for Howson , and explained that the bequest to Formby 's sisters from the older will was made " with reluctance " by Formby , who had described his family as " a set of scroungers " . The family appealed the decision and the matter lasted until September 1965 , when it was finally dismissed in Howson 's favour .

= = Screen persona and technique = =

Richards considers that Formby " had been able to embody simultaneously Lancashire , the working classes , the people , and the nation " ; Geoff King , in his examination of film comedy , also sees Formby as an icon , and writes that " [ Gracie ] Fields and Formby gained the status of national as well as regional figures , without sacrificing their distinctive regional personality traits " . While the national aspect was important for success outside the north , " the Lancashire accent remained to enhance his homely comic appeal " . The media historian Brian McFarlane writes that , on film , Formby portrayed " essentially gormless incompetents , aspiring to various kinds of professional success ... and even more improbably to a middle @-@ class girlfriend , usually in the clutches of some caddish type with a moustache . Invariably he scored on both counts " .

On an edition of ITV 's The South Bank Show in November 1992 , Richards commented that Formby " embodied qualities that people admired and found reassuring in the depression ... and you thought that here 's a man whom whatever is thrown at him , will come through and come out smiling ? and people wanted that " . H.J. Igoe , writing in The Catholic Herald , thinks that " Formby has a common English touch . We warm to the kindly turnip face , the revolving eyes , the mouth like a slashed coconut , the silly little songs ... the melodiously tinny voice and twanging banjo . The comedian is the universal works ? platoon and bar @-@ room simpleton ? mother 's boy ? the beloved henpeck ? the father who cannot hang a picture and underlying his everyday folly there is the sublime wisdom of the ordinary fool who loves and trusts the world . His comedy is earthy , but never lascivious " .

Richards identifies in Formby " an innocence that was essentially childlike ... which explains why George was as popular with children as he was with adults " ; Igoe agrees , and writes that " we know he loves children , because himself he is a child " . Formby 's screen and stage persona of innocence and simplicity was not seen as ignorance or stupidity , although Basil Dean disagreed and thought that Formby " didn 't act gormless as many successful Lancashire comedians have done , he was gormless " . Much of the innocence in Formby 's performance is connected to sex , and the use of double entendres within his songs . John Caughie and Kevin Rockett , in their examination of British film , and Richards , see a connection between Formby 's approach to sex and the saucy seaside postcards of Donald McGill . Richards sees the function of Formby 's humour as being the same as McGill 's : " the harmless diffusion of a major source of tension in a deeply repressed and conventional society " . Formby 's delivery of the sexual content ? what McFarlane identifies as being " sung with such a toothy grin and air of innocence " ? negated any possible indignation , and this contrasts with the more overtly sexual delivery of other performers of the time , such as Max Miller and Frank Randle .

The ukulele expert Steven Sproat considers that Formby " was incredible ... There hasn 't really been a uke player since Formby ? or even before Formby ? who played quite like him " . Much of Formby 's virtuosity came from his right @-@ hand technique , the split stroke , and he developed his own fast and complicated syncopated musical style with a very fast right @-@ hand strum . Joe Cooper , writing in New Society , considered that " Nobody has ever reproduced the casual devastating right hand syncopation , which so delicately synchronised with deft left hand chord fingering " .

= = Legacy = =

Formby 's screen persona influenced Norman Wisdom in the 1950s and Charlie Drake in the following decade , although both these performers used pathos , which Formby avoided .

Shortly after Formby 's death a small group of fans formed the George Formby Society , which had its inaugural meeting at the Imperial Hotel Blackpool . George Harrison was a fan of Formby , a member of the Society and an advocate of the ukulele . The rest of the Beatles were also fans ? they improvised with ukuleles during the recording breaks on Let It Be ? and Formby 's influence can be heard in the song " Her Majesty " . The Beatles ' penultimate song , " Free as a Bird " , ends

with a slight coda including a strummed ukulele by Harrison and the voice of John Lennon played backwards , saying " Turned out nice again " .

As of 2014 there are two public statues of Formby . The first , by the Manx artist Amanda Barton , is in Douglas , Isle of Man , and shows him leaning on a lamp @-@ post and dressed in the motorcycle leathers of a TT racer . Barton was also commissioned to provide a second statue for the Lancashire town of Wigan , which was unveiled in September 2007 in the town 's Grand Arcade shopping centre .

Formby has been the subject of five biographies as of 2014 . In the late 1960s Harry Scott published his reminiscences of Formby , *The Fabulous Formby* , in 14 issues of *The Vellum* , the magazine of the George Formby Society ; John Fisher published *George Formby* in 1975 before Alan Randall and Ray Seaton published their book in 1974 and David Bret produced *George Formby : A Troubled Genius* in 1999 . The last of the five to be published was by Sue Smart and Richard Bothway Howard in 2011 , *It 's Turned Out Nice Again !* . There have also been two documentaries on British television , an edition of *The South Bank Show* in 1992 , and Frank Skinner on George Formby in 2011 .

In 2004 Formby was inducted into the Ukulele Hall of Fame , a non @-@ profit organisation for the preservation of ukulele history . His citation reads , in part : " He won such love and respect for his charismatic stage presence , technical skill and playful lyrics that he remains popular forty years after his death . " In June 2012 a Blackpool Boat Car tram , number 604 , was repainted and returned to service with sponsorship from the George Formby Society . The tram was named " George Formby OBE " and images of him are affixed within the trolley .