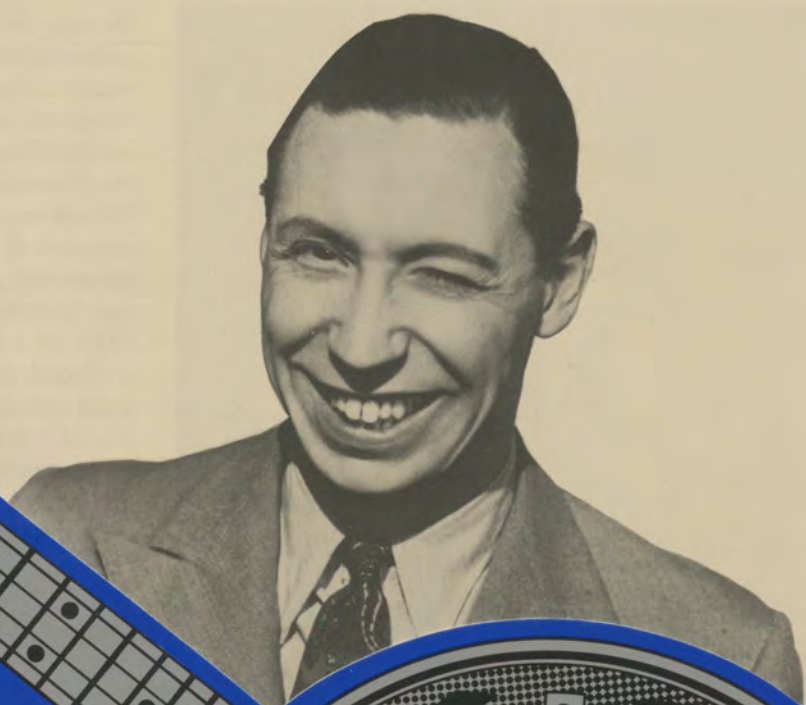


THE GEORGE FORMBY STORY



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THE GEORGE FORMBY STORY

A LITTLE SNAPSHOT ALBUM

GEORGE FORMBY



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'A LITTLE SNAPSHOT ALBUM' – a photographic memento to accompany the exhibition at Warrington Museum and Art Gallery from 26 April – 27 July 1991.

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GEORGE FORMBY



George Formby died thirty years ago, but even today is still a legend. His career spanned forty years during which time he made twenty two hit films, cut hundreds of records and went serenely forward from the Music Hall to the Theatre, from the Theatre to the Screen and from the Screen to Television. Above all, he became inseparably associated with that odd and previously ignored instrument, the ukulele. His film career, especially, was breathtakingly successful and from 1938 to 1944 he was Britain's biggest star at the box office, a record still unequalled. His screen persona was quite splendid – the gormless Lancashire lad who was not really as daft as he looked. The public, quite simply, loved him. He was the lad next door, shy, lacking in sex-appeal. He was the favourite comedian of the late Queen Mary and the then Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret, who were among his staunchest admirers.

During the war he was undoubtedly Britain's hardest working entertainer, playing to over three million allied troops. He and his wife, Beryl, were the first to leave for Normandy in 1939 and the last home when the war ended in 1945. A grateful King George VI awarded him the OBE for his war effort.

His career was managed by his wife, Beryl, a formidable lady with a business acumen second to none. She never let George out of her sight for one minute. Rather than have an argument with anyone, George would get the "old woman" to sort it out. Consequently, she often made herself very unpopular. Beryl could also switch on the charm whenever she liked. One moment she could present the chorus girls with bunches of flowers and on other occasions she would get them the sack. She signed his contracts and polished his act and saw that her husband was never underestimated, never under paid, and never alone. For over thirty years, George and Beryl reigned supreme.

Many people are surprised to learn that he wasn't really George Formby at all. His real name, which he never legally changed, and which was there on his passport to confuse the men at the barriers, was George Hoy Booth. George's father, the famous Musical Hall star of the Edwardian era had seen the name Formby painted on a railway truck standing in the sidings at Wigan station and decided it was a name with greater star potential than 'Booth'. Formby senior, with his famous catchphrase "I'm coughing better tonight", was at the height of his fame when George was born in Wigan, Lancashire on 26 May 1904. He was born blind, his sight being restored at the age of three

after a violent coughing fit while he and his mother were travelling on the Merseyside ferry to Ireland to visit his father's racing stables.

Formby senior, who had always suffered from appalling health, collapsed and died aged forty five, in February 1921, whilst appearing in pantomime in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. At the time, young George was an apprentice jockey, but soon decided to follow in his father's footsteps. He made his stage debut at the Hippodrome, Earlestown, in 1921, under the name 'George Hoy' and Managements continued to give him work out of sympathy for his father. For the next few years he took all sorts of low paid work in the smaller Music Halls of the North, but following his marriage to Beryl, a professional dancer, in 1925, his luck changed and when he introduced the ukulele into his act he developed a style completely different from that of his famous father.

Throughout the thirties and forties, George was the hottest property in British show-business and when his film career ended in 1946, he and Beryl embarked on several world tours.

In 1951 he took the West end of London by storm when he starred in the musical extravaganza 'Zip Goes A Million' at the Palace Theatre, but six months later he had a heart attack and was forced to withdraw from the cast. He turned to a relatively new medium, Television, culminating in his famous one man show in 1960 in which he told the story of his life. When he felt well enough he played in summer season and pantomime breaking all box-office records. Beryl, at this time, was dying from cancer and the end eventually came on Christmas Day 1960. Imagine the surprise, a few weeks later, when George announced that he was getting engaged to a young school teacher, Patricia Howson, and planned to marry her in the spring of 1961. George felt called upon to say that his later years with Beryl had been a nightmare, mainly because of her drinking, and that he was a sick man and needed looking after. Suddenly, the British public became sentimental over him and wished him happiness. But six weeks before the wedding date, on 6 March 1961, George Formby died. He was fifty-six years old.



A LANCASHIRE LAD

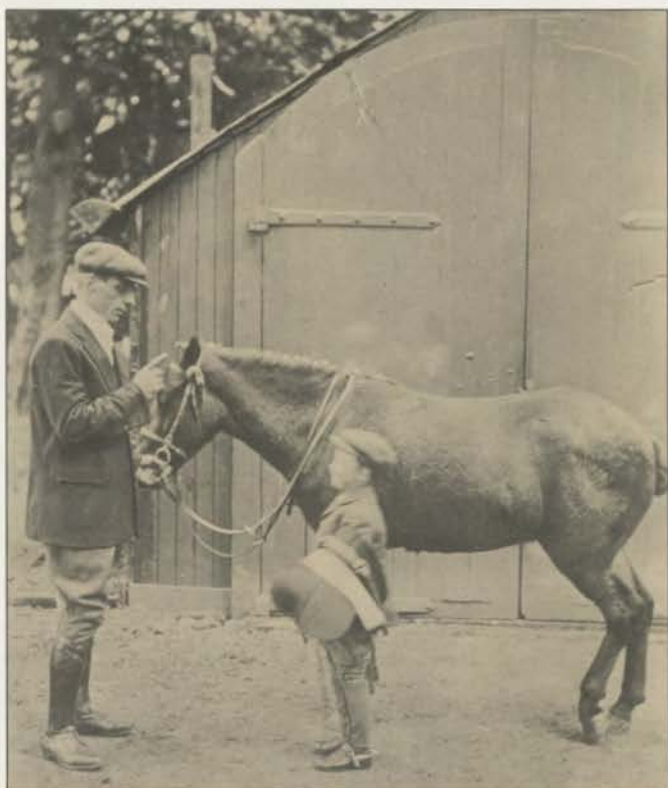
GEORGE FORMBY SENIOR



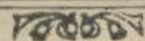
George Formby Senior was a prominent figure in the Lancashire community, known for his contributions to the local economy and social welfare. He was a member of several prestigious clubs and societies, and his leadership was highly respected. His work in the textile industry was particularly noteworthy, and he was often called upon to represent his community in various capacities. His dedication to his work and his community is a testament to his character and values.



The Formby children minus George who missed out on such group portraits when he was sent to train as a jockey. From left, Louisa, Ella, Frank, Edward, Mary and Ethel.



Geo. Formby's 6-year-old Son Jockey.



CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK



THE UKULELE MAN

The Ukulele, in the shape of a small guitar, dates from the year 1870. It was introduced by Portuguese settlers, who brought the instrument to the Hawaiian Islands. In the early days the instrument had five strings. The word ukulele is derived from two Hawaiian words – 'uku', an insect, and 'lele', meaning to dance.

The Keech Brothers (Alvin and Kel) developed the ukulele-banjo, calling it a 'Banjulele', and it is this instrument with which one associates George Formby.

We believe that during his career George had eighteen ukuleles and ukulele-banjos, and he couldn't read a note of music! He had several ukes tuned differently, and because his songs were written in different keys, he used a different uke for each song during his act. His right hand strumming technique has never been equalled. This, coupled with a good ear and a terrific sense of rhythm, is the reason he is still the 'tops'. He also used the very best instruments. The American instruments made by 'Ludwig' and

'Gibson' were particular favourites but probably the best was a pre-war uke hand made by J.G. Abbott and Company in London, which is still the rarest of instruments and much coveted by collectors.



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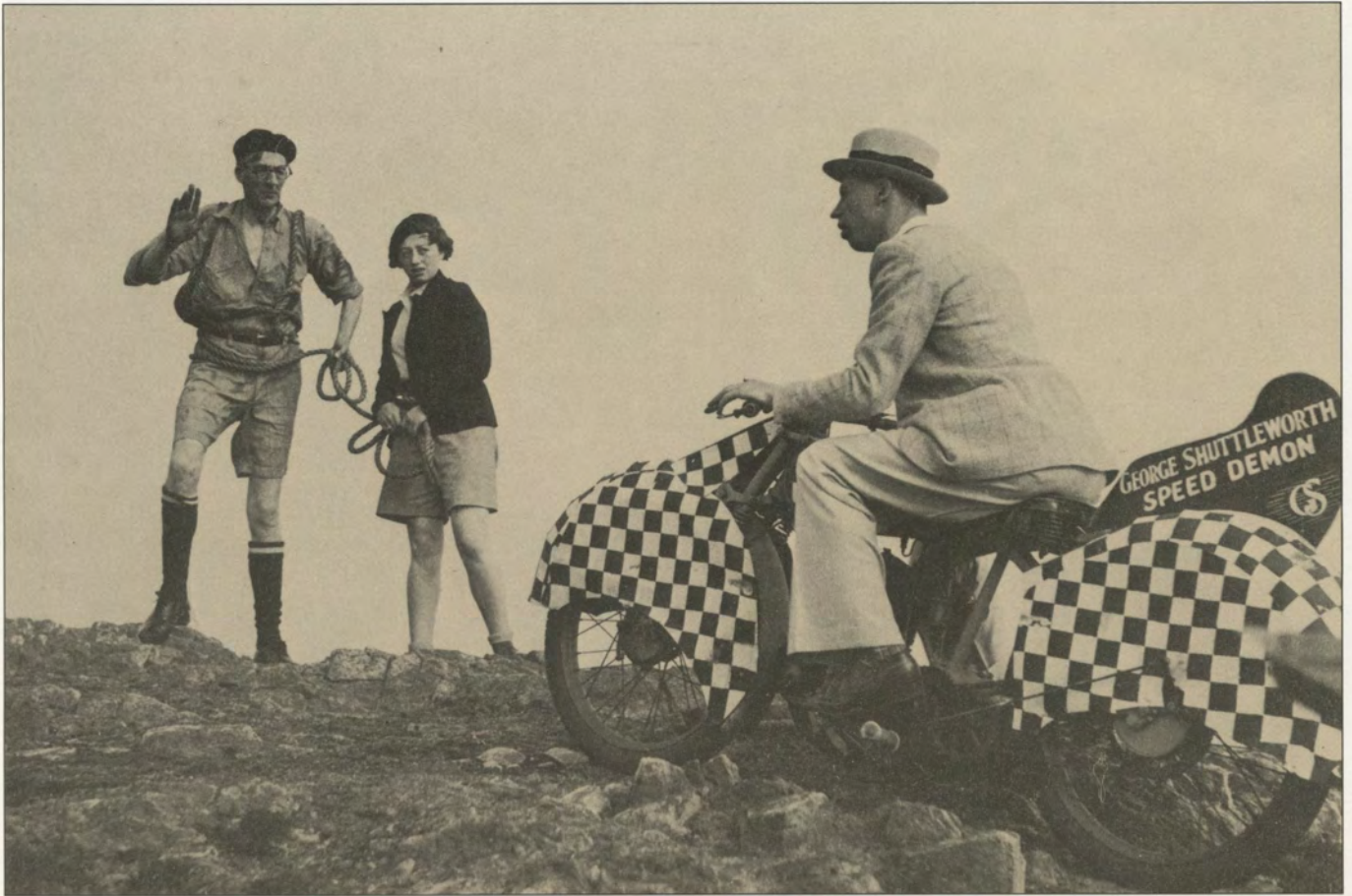
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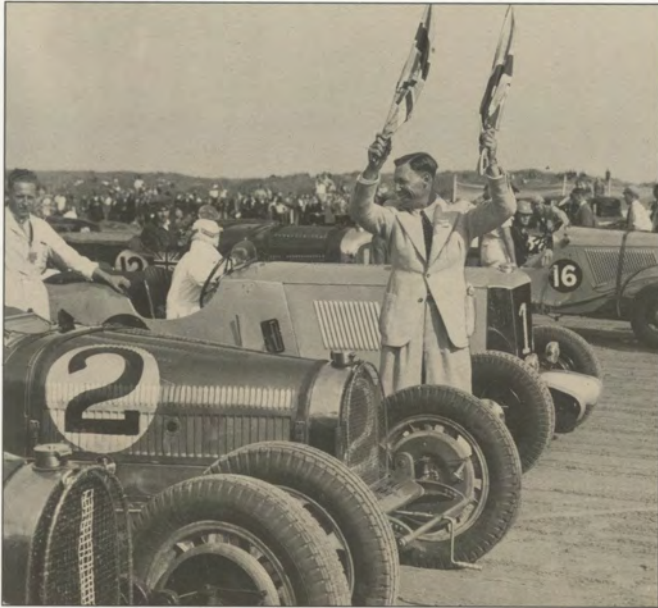
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BERYL FORBAY



Top. George at the funeral of his father in February 1921, at Warrington Cemetery.

Left. Louisa de Hailes (George's sister) who still lives in Warrington.

Above. George and Beryl at the home of Fred Bailey, a close friend, who they visited in Warrington.

COUNT DOWN TO THE SMILE

IF I HAD A GIRL LIKE YOU

BERYL FORMBY



