

HARRY H CORBETT



Many actors start well but then accept a particular role on television and so get typecast. Harry H Corbett was one of them. After a rather indifferent start in life he trained as an actor, using the Method approach, and up to the early sixties was regarded as one of the most impressive up-and-coming classical actors. Then in 1961 he appeared on television in a forerunner comedy to a series, playing Harold Steptoe. It developed into *Steptoe and Son*, one of the biggest comedy serials in BBC history. He lived the last ten years of his life at Penhurst, where he is buried in the churchyard.



Harry Corbett (1925-82) was born in Rangoon, Burma, the youngest of seven children of a Quartermaster Sergeant in the South Staffordshire Regiment, a professional soldier who had survived two wounds and a gassing in the First World War. His mother died (of dysentery, common enough in Burma) when he was only 18 months old, and he was sent to live with an aunt in Manchester, living in a poor area in Ardwick. (His father, having retired to Staffordshire, died there in 1943.) He

went to secondary school because although he passed the tests for entry to the local grammar school, his aunt could not afford the expense. Leaving school at 14, he had various jobs: greengrocer's errand boy, plumber's mate, plastics moulder, male nurse and car sprayer.

When he attained the right age, in 1942, he joined the Royal Marines, serving first at Scapa Flow and in the Atlantic, and was part of the crew delivering the exiled Norwegian royal family back to Oslo in May 1945. From that year he was in the Far East where he saw active service in New Guinea. He was at Tonga when he deserted and went to Australia but later gave himself up.

On return to civilian life he first trained as a radiographer but then decided to become an actor, at first in repertory in Manchester but then joining the Theatre Workshop at Stratford East, which was a nursery of promising actors under Joan Littlewood and which swiftly became known for its politically progressive approach.

He made slow but steady progress, at first very much based on the theatre but then adding television. He had to make sure that he was not to be confused with the then very well-known children's television entertainer Harry Corbett (with his puppet Sooty), so he added the middle H, which of course stood for nothing.

Corbett made his West End debut in 1956 and by the end of that decade he was being hailed as a new prospect in classical acting – the English Marlon Brando, it is said that at least one newspaper called him, presumably partly in respect of his Method training, and he had started a film career. At his death *The Times* said:

... he was an accomplished and versatile with long experience before television brought him wider experience.... In 1951 he began a ten-year association with Theatre Workshop under Joan Littlewood at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, where he played classical parts, in Shakespeare, Jonson and Ibsen, as well as contemporary drama. He also appeared at the Royal Court Theatre and in the West End, including productions of *Hamlet*, *The Power and the Glory* and *The Way of the World*.

Not knowing the very different future that lay before him, while he was appearing as Macbeth at the Bristol Old Vic in 1961 he accepted a part in a BBC comedy television play *The offer*. It centred on two London rag-and-bone men. The other main part was played by Wilfred Brambell. The script was by the incomparable Galton and Simpson, fresh from years of *Hancock's Half-hour*. They later pointed to the fact that Corbett and Brambell were trained actors – not comics, who had previously led every comedy series – as crucial to the show's success. On Corbett's death Simpson said "He was the most inventive actor I have ever known – always looking at a line, word or an inflection to bring out a better meaning in it".

Seeing that they were on to a good thing, the BBC commissioned the *Steptoe and Son* series that ran from 1962 to 1974 and has been frequently repeated. Unlike most comedy series, which usually take a little time to catch on, it was an immediate hit,

Much has been made of the real-life relationship of the two men. It has often been asserted that they hated each other, but this has been authoritatively denied by Corbett's daughter and others. Certainly Brambell could be difficult, mainly because he drank to excess, and this must have led to problems at the studio, but it appears that the two did get on well.

Corbett was a devoted supporter of the Labour Party, which may have been a factor in his being appointed OBE in 1976.

During his *Steptoe and Son* period Corbett continued acting elsewhere, but he was stuck in light comedy mode. Rarely in the best of health, he had a heart attack in 1979 and another, fatally, in 1982.

Corbett's local relationship began in 1972, when he bought a cottage at Penhurst, to which the family – he, his wife Maureen and two children – moved five years later. He died at St Helen's Hospital at Hastings, for which he had raised funds since they had successfully treated his first heart attack. (As in so many towns this hospital was the old workhouse, in Frederick Road, Ore; it closed in 1994.) A memorial service was held for him at St Paul's Church, Covent Garden.

His daughter Susannah is herself a well-known actor and the author of an immensely readable biography of her father.

His films were:

Passing stranger (1954)
Nowhere to do (1958)
The shakedown (1959)
Cover girl killer (1959)
Floods of fear (1959)
Shake hands with the Devil (1959)
In the wake of a stranger (1959)
The unstoppable man (1960)
The big day (1960)
*Wings of death**
Some people (1962)
Sammy going south (1963)
Sparrows can't sing (1963)
What a crazy world (1963)
Ladies who do (1963)
The bargee (1964)

Rattle of a simple man (1964)
Joey boy (1965)
The sandwich man (1966)
Carry on screaming! (1966)
Crooks and coronets (1969)
The magnificent seven deadly sins (1971)
Steptoe and son (1972)
Steptoe and son ride again (1973)
Percy's progress (1974)
Hardcore (1977)
Jabberwocky (1977)
Adventures of a private eye (1977)
What's up superdoc! (1978)
The plank (1979)
Silver

* final episode (39) of Scotland Yard series (1961)

Sources

The Times, 23 March 1982

Daily Mail, 23 March 1982

The Daily Telegraph, 23 March 1982

Susannah Corbett: *Harry H Corbett: The front legs of the cow* The History Press)

List from Wikipedia, edited

George Kiloh

© BDHS March 2017