

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Ronald Freeman – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Nicholas Birchil**

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Theatre manager. Audiences; John Logie Baird; Ken Dodd; EABF (Entertainment Artists' Benevolent Fund); ENSA; Jerry Fisher; Grand Order of Water Rats; Mimi Law; organ playing; pantomime; Ryde Pavilion Theatre; Jimmy Tarbuck; Variety; Billy Whitaker; Tommy Whitaker aka The Great Coram.

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and thus differs in places from the recording.

NB: So, just to get us started, can you remember what got you into theatre originally?

RF: Well, originally I used to do licensed restaurants and things. I've always been interested in the theatre and I really come from a musical background. My grandfather on my mother's side was a church organist and, at nine years of age, I became a church organist at Crofton Parish Church in West Yorkshire; one of the youngest organists they'd ever had there, and it's quite strange to look back now and think that I used to teach men to sing parts at nine years of age. But I've worked everything back, and it was definitely nine years of age. I then joined a brass band who taught me how to read music properly. Before that I taught myself everything. We used to have three services every Sunday, and I used to have to go for the ten o'clock service at something like eight o'clock in the morning and learn hymns off by heart.

NB: How old were you at this time?

RF: I was nine at this time. But in those days of course, children were allowed out on their own, and I certainly was because I used to be a lad and we always used to play in the woods [making] fires and [doing] everything like that. My father bless him, he was a coal miner, he was very easy with me and he used to let me do as I liked a lot, and it would be nothing for me to be at that Church until one or two o'clock in the morning practicing the organ.

NB: Is this in Wakefield then?

RF: This is in Crofton which is a suburb of Wakefield, yes. As I say we had three services every Sunday and it became quite difficult, but I used to be able to play these

hymns off by just looking at them. I then taught myself to do things like the psalms and everything else which was no mean feat. That's quite difficult without a tutor. [This] was purely because my father was very poor; we were quite poor, my mum died when I was nine -at that same age [as starting to play the organ]- and I had three sisters and, of course, things were very difficult. It was quite amusing really that, by the time I was thirteen, the diocese of Wakefield -which Crofton came under- came up with this wonderful scheme whereby the Church would pay half of an organist's lessons, and the Cathedral and the Wakefield diocese, as a bursary would pay the other half. This was marvellous. I couldn't believe this -strange isn't it, going back to this time when I couldn't believe it was going to happen. [These] lessons were to be taken by Dr Saunders who was the Cathedral organist at that time. Now Dr Saunders, to organists, was God. He actually wrote books on pedal technique on organs, and I can remember going down there with my little case that was plastic and it was such a cheap thing and I'd got music in it and he asked you just to bring music that you'd like to learn. And I'd got these two books of music, and I was going down there, and I thought it was absolutely wonderful. And I had a lesson with Dr Saunders, and they were only half an hour but it was marvellous, and the next week he died. [Laughs] So that was that! No more lessons. So, I could tell you that I'd never had a lesson on the organ in my life but I'd be lying, I did have one. It was such a shame.

So that was that, and I carried then teaching myself to play the organ and I then thought to myself "I really need to know more about the actual notation of music and the timing of intervals, and how to actually play musical intervals so that it [sounded] nice and easy". So what I did was, I joined a brass band called Nostell Colliery Band and I played euphonium in that band, and they -bless them- taught me how to read music. I actually -during my time there up until the age of 17 or 18- managed to be in the finals in London at that time, and the other one was at Bellevue in Manchester. This was the national brass band championships. But then unfortunately I became a Civil Engineer and I had to work away from home so I had to give up the organ in Crofton. But I then stopped being a Civil Engineer because my father was so ill. I left them on the Friday because they wouldn't allow me to come home regularly to see him, and there was only me to look after him. So I left there on Friday and I became a petrol pump attendant on the Saturday and my father went ballistic.

NB: How old were you then?

RF: I was 19 or 20 at this time. But within a year and a half I managed to make my way up to wholesale manager for the garage. But then I bought a fish and chip shop in 1973.

NB: Did you still manage to keep playing?

RF: Yes, I carried on playing in the cathedral. I was at the cathedral for a while, and I also was prison organist at Wakefield prison for a time which was quite funny because it was wonderful to get in but it took me nearly an hour to get out because there were four sets of doors because [as] Wakefield prison is a maximum security prison and of course a lot of the IRA people were in there in those days and to get out was the devil's own job. We used to have to go through four sets of doors and at each part of those

doors I was searched which was quite daunting for a young man to do this. Then I carried on and went to play at my old church.

NB: What was the audience like at a prison?

RF: It was good. I had in my choir a guy called Poulson who at that time was an ex MP I believe and he was quite notorious. I had about 25 in the choir. I don't suppose they had anything else to do. But of course at all times I had a prison officer with me, and we used to do Christmas concerts in there with [the] Bishop and all sorts of stuff because it was the prison.

NB: [Laughs] A grateful audience then?

RF: Yes, it was great. But as I say, I got the fish and chip shop in 1973 whilst I was still wholesale manager for Westgate Motors, but I soon gave that up because the fish and chip shop was making so much money and in 1979 I came down to Bournemouth to look for a fish and chip shop down here and to be honest I found the fish and chip shops down here were filthy. They were dirty, encrusted with filth- and it's not like it is now, in those days they really were dirty- and after looking at three or four I decided I would get a licensed restaurant, and that's where I started in the licensed industry. I still have a personal drinks license. In 1980 I then went over to the Isle of Wight and I already knew a guy called David Cook and he was an impresario from Scarborough and he'd taken over, for that year, the Ryde Pavilion. Now the Ryde Pavilion was a seaside theatre and it was known as a coral theatre- a coral theatre is a theatre that is [virtually] on the beach - and I went to work for him for a year and he was reasonably successful in it, and he put shows on that weren't the most expensive shows but then again the Isle of Wight didn't attract a huge crowd of people.

NB: Did you get a lot of tourists coming to the theatre though?

RF: Yes, we used to have quite a lot of tourists in the summer. I mean it was so busy that, despite very wide pavements, you used to have to go and walk in the road.

NB: Really?

RF: Yes. You used to have to walk in the road. I used to have a hotel at that time, an eight bedroom hotel on the strand in Ryde called the Arundel Hotel, and I was running that as well as being the bar manager at the theatre. Soon after that, David Cook finished and I took it on for the winter. Now the next summer, a guy called Steven Gold took it on, and I believe years later, he went on to be the entertainments manager at Thorpe Park. I did a year for him and during that year I met Billy Whitaker, a water rat of the grand order of water rats. Billy was one of the four principle pantomime dames at that time. There was him and Jack Tripp, probably Terry Scott, and a young John Inman. They were the four principle dames, but since Billy taught Jack Tripp everything he knew, Jack unfortunately a year or two ago died. I went to his funeral in Brighton

which was such a shame... But these were old fashioned dames, these were the real dames of pantomime. These people would be caricatures of women. They weren't dressed up as women as you would see maybe in a drag act. They were actually caricatures, and ridiculous caricatures. They were clowns almost, but they had the ability to dance really well... usually, and they had the ability to deliver a comic line in comic situations, and do comic banter; to be able to do possibly a school room scene, which was Jack Tripp's forte, and possibly a kitchen scene where they'd throw all the pastry around, all [very entertaining].

NB: Lots of improvisation.

RF: Lots of improvisation and lots of flour going everywhere and tennis rackets that appeared knocking dough into the audience. With Billy Whitaker, [I] then took the theatre on, which was in the early eighties. We were there ten years in total, and what we'd do is, in the summer, for the summer season, we did three different shows for the week. I can remember two of them but I can't remember the third. The first was A Night at the Naffy which was based on the Second World War, and entertainment that we would see in those days. The second one was The Show of Shows and I'm nearly positive the third one was called There'll Always be an England. It was a show of old fashioned songs [and comedy situation], but remember the kind of people who went to the Isle of Wight were not young, trendy people. We did these three shows two days each with a small company. Some of that small company were local amateur people from the local amateur dramatic societies or pantomime societies. We'd then have the last night, which was the Sunday night, as a cabaret night where we'd get a cabaret entertainer that would run the night and also would do children's discos and [audience participation]. Very family orientated; lots of giveaways with free things from Tesco up the road and things like that, and it did really, really well. It was packed, and I shouldn't really say this but we actually went over our numbers very often, which of course now is very badly frowned upon because of fire regulations and things like that, but the Pavilion had huge barn-like doors on all four sides but that's not an excuse, you're not allowed to go over your numbers. We had the theatre decked inside as a cabaret venue. We served food to tables and you [could] sit at the tables in a cabaret style attitude. It wasn't in rows of seats. We could change it all to be in rows of seats for amateur dramatic plays. There was a play group called the Bellevue Players which in the winter used to come and they'd do two plays in the winter. One of them [which] they'd chosen themselves and the other one used an Agatha Christie type thing, a whodunit.

NB: So, did you have much competition with other theatres in the area?

RF: No. We had Sandown Theatre and we once played their entertainment staff (one of them was Jimmy Tarbuck) at golf, and we won and we got the trophy and I've still got that trophy in my loft upstairs because we won them at golf. You know I'm just not a golfer. I used to play pitch and putt when I was a kid but that was about it. There [also] used to be Shanklin Theatre as well, which was a tiny one, [but] it used to do a lot in the season. Sandown Theatre of course became a slot machine paradise. It's such a shame because the Isle of Wight had an independent theatre called the Margaret Passmore Theatre which was at the far end of Shanklin. That's now gone.

NB: Do you think that over the years perhaps theatres are becoming sparser?

RF: They are becoming sparse. Billy and Mimi of course told me quite a lot about the theatres around Britain. There isn't a theatre that they didn't play.

NB: Really?

RF: For you to go back and research about Billy and Mimi, I'll send you lots of gear. Billy Whitaker's father was The Great Coram who was a ventriloquist. I'll send you all about him as well. I've found out lots of things about him. He used to have an act which was absolutely spectacular and he devised this act over many, many years. He was a great guy for electronic things and anything that was new. He was so far in front with all that, and he had a dummy called Jerry. Now, this dummy called Jerry is one of the first things that was ever on television because when he was in London at his agent's, he used to know a guy around the corner called John Logie Baird -who's the guy of course who invented television- and John Logie Baird was a great friend of Tommy Whitaker's who was The Great Coram, Billy's dad. One day John Logie Baird said to Tommy, "Would Billy come down and dance for me in front of my equipment because I'm going to try a test transmission" and Billy said "Yes 'course I would". Now, Billy used to be a clog dancer in a group called the Lancashire Cloggies and these were in the days long before our time, and they were [very] famous. You know, the Lancashire Cloggies were a dancing group. Imagine Stomp now, well they used to make all that noise with clogs. It was all syncopated and all sorts of stuff. Very cleverly done. But, he danced in his clogs in front of this machine. Now, I only found this out years and years ago, and it shows how reticent Billy Whitaker was at talking about himself. What he would do was... you had to ring information out of him, you had to poke him with a stick [almost] to get it. One day his wife Mimi and myself and Gloria Minghella... She was the mayor (at that time) of Medina on the Isle of Wight, and she's the mother of Anthony Minghella the director who got the Oscar for The English Patient if you remember.

NB: Yes, of course.

RF: It's all tied in together. Everything's tied in together. Now, Gloria, Mimi and I were judging the Miss Isle of Wight competition and Billy, of course, was there, and during the interval we sat down and we were all having a drink and I said to Gloria, "What do you like to do in your spare time Gloria?" and she said, "Oh, I love to go round museums, and if they're scientific museums or they're anything to do with the arts" she said, "I absolutely love it, because of my sons" who, of course are great in the entertainment world. [I'd] met Anthony on quite a few occasions but he was never this magnificent guy [he turned out to be] in those days. He recently died of course, tragically. And Gloria said, "I like to go around museums" and I said, "Have you ever been around the Bradford museum". It's called the Museum of the Moving Image, and you can go in there... I'm sorry to digress, I keep digressing.

NB: Oh no, It's absolutely fine. Go ahead.

RF: But you can go in there and sit down and you can be a newsreader and then they play it back to you and you can see how you would look as a newsreader. It's quite fun. And I was telling her all about this, and I was telling her about how John Logie Baird's original machine is in there and I said, "It's fantastic. It's fascinating looking at this stuff" -because of course anything scientific interests me as well- and Billy said, "Oh, I was probably the first person ever on television" and I looked across, and you know Billy was getting quite aged by this time, and I'm ashamed to say that I didn't fully believe him... He then said to me all this business about the Lancashire Cloggies and the first test transmission of this thing across London. This was before the Alexandra Palace. This was using a local aerial just across streets to transmit this television picture, and Billy said, "when you were dancing just in front of this machine, there were loads and loads of mirrors, and they were going around at great speed, and you felt as if you were dancing about a foot off the floor." And I'm saying, "My God Billy! All of this equipment is up there. I've seen it all." and I said, "There's a head. A dummy's head." And he said, "Oh that's Jerry" and I said, "What are you talking about?". He said, "That's Jerry. That's my father's dummy called Jerry". And he gave this to John Logie Baird so that he could send this image, and so he then said to me, "My father was in the Royal Variety Performance in the thirties once or twice; in front of royalty doing his dummy" and I said, "Oh" because I'm not really a fan of ventriloquists, but Billy explained to me that he wasn't just a ventriloquist. What he would do with a dummy - which was called Jerry- he would sit the dummy on his knee and he'd do the normal thing, and during the act he'd pull the head off. All part of the comedy act to show that it was a dummy. He would then sit this dummy down on a chair and he would continue to talk to it across the stage and the dummy would continue to talk back. So he was throwing his voice to the dummy, but everything in the dummy was electronic or electro-pneumatic as it was in those days, you know with the little air pockets opening and closing in his face. This is how the act would go and, to finish the act off, the dummy got up and walked off.

NB: Wow. That would have been... That would be spectacular nowadays I would have thought. When was this?

RF: I've got all of this for you and I've got it all on my computer. I'll try and send you all about it. There's even one bit where it says about one of the heads that went over to someone in America and they were very unhappy because it got damaged in the post, but this guy sold it him years and years ago from Ireland. A guy who'd acquired one of these dummies' heads, because the Great Coram in ventriloquist circles throughout the world is still thought of in awe because he was the first guy to do this. But it's purely his love of electronics and everything else where the tie-up was, and of course this is Billy that was in ENSA in the war entertaining the troops with his wife. He went over to Malaya and Borneo and Singapore and all the way over there entertaining. And this guy and his wife, Mimi, knew the business. They knew the business left to right. They knew what the customers wanted and everything that was good in theatre. So I decided, in the very early eighties, to join with Billy and we were co-directors of the Pavilion in Ryde, in the Isle of Wight. We used to do these shows as I say in the summer, and in the winter we used to do a huge amount of things: We used to have the Isle of Wight Music and Dancing Festival there; the round the island bicycle race used to start from there; the round the island marathon used to start from there; we had folk festivals; we did rock concerts. One of the rock concerts... now it's a cult band, you probably don't

know them. The Waltons? It's on the internet and I'll send you it. The Waltons from 1983. One of their first gigs was at the Ryde Pavilion. 1964, the Rolling Stones as I said. They played two sell out concerts there.

NB: So, your theatre was much more than a theatre...

RF: Yes. We did theatre things though. We did pantomime. We did the Christmas pantomime. There was a local pantomime group, which I'm ashamed to say I can't remember the name of, and I joined this group to do a pantomime and Billy saw me - I was the king I think in Sleeping Beauty- and he said, "You could be really good". And of course I'd never done anything like this before, but for Billy to say this... Billy never said anything that wasn't true, and I said, "No, no, I'm not very good" and to be honest with you, I don't like dressing up. You will never get me to go to a fancy dress party, unless I go as this big fat ginger person that I am. I'll go as that. But I'm not a dresser-upper. I don't like doing it, but Billy persuaded me and I then got an equity card and we then used to do one or two professional pantomimes with his wife Mimi.

NB: This is while you were still running the theatre?

RF: Yes. I did one at the Medina Theatre and one at a theatre near Portsmouth, one at the theatre opposite Ryde. I did one at Shanklin Theatre. A few pantomimes. But it really wasn't me. I was a lot more interested in the running of the show, the running of the catering, the running of the bars and everything else. In the winter we did lots of things there. We did two sets of plays of course from the Bellevue Players, but I've got a list of everything that we did because it used to form part of my CV. Amazing things that we used to do. Any thing we could do. We used to do the Ryde amateur boxing. We'd set up a ring in the centre of the theatre and until four o'clock in the morning we'd be doing drinks and all this lot making a fortune, bless us, and that was so used that theatre, and its such a shame that the council in their infinite wisdom decided to turn it into a bowling alley. They decided that the theatre for Ryde was going to be upstairs in the town hall. Now, the town hall at Ryde, you're probably not aware, has one of the finest town hall organs in the world. It's a magnificent instrument and, as a senior officer at Ryde Borough Council, I used to be able to play it free of charge and it was an amazing instrument. A Victorian organ that was a wonderful cross between a cinema organ and a church organ, and this organ had had I believe, £600,000 spent on it bringing it back to be brand new. All the bellows were repaired on it and everything. Everything was repaired on it, the wind chest and the lot, and everything was cleaned, repaired and back to as it was when it was new. The council then, in their infinite wisdom, decided to turn the hall that the organ was in, into a theatre. And they carpeted it, and they put a theatre in there, and all the dust ruined the organ. The money came, I believe, from the Organ Preservation Society, the National Heritage Fund and everything like this to produce all this money to bring this organ back together again. Whilst I was on the Isle of Wight by the way, I used to be organist at Yaverland Parish Church.

NB: So you've always managed to keep your organ-playing going...

RF: Yes, I've always managed to keep that. When I came to Bournemouth, for seven years I was organist down at Holy Epiphany Church down in Castle Lane West. And it's quite funny really because when I went down there to be organist, the church warden (Wendy) met me and she said, "Would you like to have a look at the organ?" and this, that and the other, and I did. She was a lovely, lovely woman. It was like joining a family, which church used to be in those days, and she asked me to play for her and I did, and she said, "You've no idea; we were so worried about not having an organist, and then your letter arrived asking if we'd got a position". She said it was heaven had sent this letter, and it was quite funny, she said, "unfortunately, you can't see the vicar at the moment because he's on a weeks holiday" and she said, "I'm sure he's from near where you are" and I said, "In Wakefield?". She said, "Yes, I'm sure he was from Wakefield". Well, I listened to his name, and his name was Roger Cossins and Roger Cossins taught me for divinity in Crofton school when I was a kid. How about that then? [Laughs]

NB: Wow, that's...

RF: We used to call it divinity anyway. I was only at this school, Crofton Secondary Modern, for one year because I failed my 11 plus and they then decided I should go to Normanton Grammar School in Wakefield which was a school endowed in 1594 by Henry VIII, I believe, through Oxford University. That's now gone. It's been demolished. But isn't that strange? Isn't that a coincidence that that should happen?

NB: Certainly. Do you still manage to play the organ much?

RF: No, not very much. I've got an organ in the other room. I've got a digital piano but I don't really do a lot with it now. I went for a job around the corner to a local church, St Mark's, in Wallisdown and that's one of the old fashioned churches, bless it, I loved it. I went down when their organist was finishing, and it's quite funny you know... Coincidences. Life's full of coincidences... because the organist who was retiring, his granddaughter worked for me in Ryde Pier, because I ran Ryde Pier, you know, the bar and the café on Ryde Pier for ten years and she used to work for me there. Everything seems to be joined doesn't it?

NB: Definitely.

RF: ...And I went and got the job there, but I was so busy that I couldn't do it.

NB: I've got a friend who's a church organist actually. She says that organs are few and far between in churches nowadays.

RF: Yes, a lot of them are changing because they can't afford to keep them going because they're pipe organs and they need attention, because they're breathing, living things. They're made of wood. They're made of metal. They've got a wind chest like lungs. They've got bellows that's like putting food in when you shove the electric in one

end and air comes out the other, and they are breathing things. You play a note on an organ and you can hear the pipes speak to you. It's called "chiff" in organ terms, and it's the "Ffff..." before the pipe sounds its note, and it's just as if someone's breathing at you. It is air of course. So, organs are all living breathing things. They're made of wood some of the pipes, the softer pipes like flutes...

NB: Did you ever play at Ryde for any of the performances? Did you ever have any live music playing during shows?

RF: Yes we did. I used to play for tea dances. I'd got a big organ called a Technics U-90, and I had this in my home for a while and it was so big I couldn't fit it in. It was really huge and so I dismantled it; it was an electronic organ. I then took it into the theatre, and during the winter we'd do tea dances. It was quite successful. We used to them twice a week and all the staff were dressed as "nippies", you know the sort of art deco look with the black apron and the black top and the little black skirts, and with little yellow aprons with lace around, and little hats. We used to do really well in tea dances. It's quite funny now to see dancing coming back. I can't dance; I'm a crap dancer.

NB: Me too.

RF: I adore music, adore rhythm. Rhythm's my thing. I love Latin music, things like that. But I used to play in the theatre at that time, for tea dances. I then got a pub in Sandown called the Sandown Tap, all at the same time, and it was like two pubs; one was a disco side and one was a jazz side. Separate toilets, separate bars, separate everything in this huge pub. They also asked me, did Whitbread, at that time if I'd take another pub on and I took one on at the seafront at Ryde called the Marine Hotel and I changed it into Trotter's Café-Bar, and this Trotter's Café-Bar was a proper café-bar; the first one on the Isle of Wight, and we used to do Karaoke there; first place on the Isle of Wight for karaoke. I bought my own CD juke boxes, and these were a Sony one from a lady called Arbiter in London, and her father- Dickie Arbiter- was the press secretary for royalty.

NB: What year was this?

RF: This was in the eighties. It was in the late eighties and I took this place on, and I completely redid the bottom floor. It was very brass and dark green and it was very, very expensive to do, and then above that I had a restaurant that had 150 seats and above that were letting bedrooms. I also bought another fish and chip shop café called The Busy Bee. So I was running the hotel, the Busy Bee Café, Trotters, the theatre and my pub in Sandown; and I, like the idiot I am, was trying to do all these things together; all by myself, doing it all with partners in one or two places. Too much. I ended up just having two hours of sleep a night and I got to a state whereby the telephone rang or the letterbox went; I would start shaking, because that was more work coming in and I couldn't cope with what I'd got. And so I ended up having a nervous breakdown nearly.

NB: Hard work...

RF: Yes, overworked. Stupid, stupid, stupid. But then, I quite enjoyed it, and of course I then sold everything. Sold absolutely everything, but the theatre [had already gone before that] in the early nineties. But I sold everything else that was mine, and I then got a motor home and toured Europe and Britain for a year and a half, and came back to the land of the living. I then got a job on Bournemouth seafront in the Dirley Inn, and I used to run the Durley Inn, the Durley Kiosk, Middle Chine Kiosk, Joseph Step's kiosk, Alum Chine Kiosk. I ran all these together for a group called Shorline, who was the council's preferred contractor on the seafront. That finished in '94 I believe, and I then became manger of the show-bar in Bournemouth and the pier, and I ran these various things at different times for the next ten years.

It's quite funny that when we're young we think -and especially a miner's lad don't forget; we were very poor as I said earlier- I always thought that the thing to go after was money. To get things of value, things like that. And I ended up with a Mercedes sports car and the Bentley, and everything else; the big five bedroom house that overlooked the sea at Bembridge and I thought this was what I wanted, but I realised that I didn't. This is not the person I am. I am not a materialistic person, and I suddenly realised- by nearly having this nervous breakdown- that it was all false, and it's something I didn't ever really want. That's why I came back I think, and I came back to Bournemouth. I started only wanting to be a supervisor in the pier bar and a guy who was running it all called Malcom Farr -who's still a friend, bless him, to this day- he started me in the pier bar and he gave me more to do, more to do, more to do until I was running the thing. It was funny.

NB: Anyway -going back a few years- you still had a passion for theatre, and performing and putting things on, so I was just going to ask if you had any favourite plays or playwrights at the time?

RF: I used to like Pinter quite a lot and I've always liked Shakespeare because I like the characterisations. I think I've always liked Dickens and all his characters. I mean, Little Dorrit, people analyse things down to the enth degree and then people will say that Little Dorrit, that's on the television at the moment, is not a good dramatisation because its only in half an hour splurges, but in that half an hour, you can still get a feeling for all these characters and how they interact. I think its good with dickens to put yourself into these characters and think "how will they feel about what's happening?", and I think this is what Dickens must have done, he must have been a very complicated character. Billy gave me the full series of dickens that he'd had since he was a lad. They're leather bound volumes and they're hiding in my loft, and I daren't have them down in case they go dry.

NB: Are they the kind of books where the pages are folded together and you have to cut them open with a special knife the first time they are read?

RF: Yes, they really are very old; but Billy was a Dickens person. They were very, very clever people; Billy Whitaker and Mimi Law, and I think in the theatre at that time, the theatre was a living being. It wasn't dry as it is now. Everybody wants things to be,

what I call, "shiny wood and shiny metal", but you go into an old theatre, and you go through that door and you can feel it. It's a feeling like sometimes when you go into a house and you can tell whether it's a happy house or if it's had some bad things happen. You can in the theatre; everybody that's ever laughed.

Billy, in one of the last years of his life, was with Ken Dodd because he used to do opposite years; one year with Ken Dodd, one year with Norman Wisdom, in pantomime. And this year he was with Ken Dodd at the Theatre Royal in Hanley and I went up there and surprised him because he didn't know I was going to be there; and it's quite funny because that afternoon I was in my hotel room and the first episode of Neighbours was on the television, and I thought, "Goodness me, this is rubbish" but later of course, what do I know, they're doing wonderfully aren't they! But I went down into the theatre and I watched him, and I managed to get a seat on the front row and I was looking up at him and he suddenly saw me, and that's the first time I have ever seen Billy Whitaker dry. He couldn't speak the line. He gulped. Then he got it back together again and everything was okay, but I only looked at him, I didn't try and put him off or anything, and then Ken Dodd; I talked comedy with Ken for about an hour and Mimi, bless her, -who wasn't a jealous person- she came in and said, "Have you come to see Ken Dodd or have you come to see us. We're ready now to go to the bar!" [laughs]. Now, Ken Dodd told me a few things about Jimmy Tarbuck at that time, which I won't say because it's hearsay and it's naughty but he wasn't a fan, definitely not.

Billy Whitaker of course was a member of the Grand Order of Water Rats and I started then to do lots and lots of things with the Grand Order of Water Rats. I became a life member of the EABF; the Entertainment Artists' Benevolent Fund. It really was a wonderful thing, as I say, through that fund it used to endow the home in Twickenham, Brinsworth House. That was a home in Twickenham where Mimi, bless her, spent the last two years of her life. I managed to get her in there because she was lonely. She'd lost Billy five years ago and she was lonely, but the Water Rats, bless them they're such wonderful people, they took her in and she was with her own theatre people and of course it's not like a [care] home; it's got a bar and everything, they go and see shows in London. In fact, the afternoon when she died, she'd been to Brighton for the day on the trip from there and unfortunately that night, she had a wonderful day but she had a massive brain haemorrhage and died the next morning.

NB: Was Mimi a performer too?

RF: Oh, Mimi was the ultimate performer. The things she used to do in our theatre! She used to, of course, be in the shows with us and I used to say to her, quite rudely, "Remember you're only an employee Mimi." but of course Billy and I always did what Mimi said. You know what women are like; it's a lot easier just to do as they say. She used to do things like... She had characters, she had Daisy Stinks. Now Mimi was a quite a pretty lady, very good looking lady even in her later years; always fit, brilliant dancer, knew how to deliver a line, knew how to do the patter, knew how to dance, knew how to put herself on stage. She knew which part of the stage she was on, she knew where her audience was and she knew how to perform to that audience. You can't say that about a lot of people because they perform on a box. It's a television. It's a different art form and it's not a bad art form, it's a very good art form and some people are really good at it if you analyse it; but Mimi knew her audience. I'm pleased

to say that I've actually performed one of the sketches with Mimi in the Medina Theatre on the Isle of Wight and I've got the video of it. Mimi would do something like... She'd do this character that was dressed in chiffon; this sort of dress that was awful, and she had a parasol and a floppy hat. It was sort of a throwback to eighty years ago. Billy would be doing his thing on the stage and there would be banter and patter going on, and people killing themselves laughing, when all of a sudden of course, the woman would come in from the back, and at the top of her voice she'd shout "Has anyone see the 'arbour?!" she'd say, and people would look around and start laughing. Of course, I was front of house and the things she used to do... I can't explain how she was. She's go round the tables saying, "Have you seen the 'arbour?" and she'd put the funny voices on and everything like that and she wanted to know where the harbour was because she said she wanted to throw herself in there because she was a frustrated singer. She wanted to commit "susan-side" she used to say. And of course Billy would say, "Come up here, come on the stage. What do you want?" because it was just as if this woman was interrupting the whole show but it was hilarious. I've had grown men come out the front of that theatre through those doors and say, "I'm sorry but I'm going to have to go out for ten minutes because I want to wee myself" and things like that. [Laughs] Funny, funny people.

NB: So there was a lot of audience interaction...

RF: Oh yes, tons of it. They used to go round the tables and do things. You see it sometimes when you go to the theatre in pantomime. You see it in things like Mamma Mia where they get them up dancing and you see all this stuff.

NB: But this wasn't necessarily pantomime that Billy and Mimi were doing?

RF: No, it wasn't but it was a characterisation that they'd come up with. Billy, in the Naffy show -which as I said was one of the three shows of the week- for part of it he was Winston Churchill, and he was a better Winston Churchill than Winston Churchill was. He really was. The show started with the siren going off and everything like this.

Ryde Pavilion actually had a wonderful glass roof, a magnificent glass roof, which was all painted out white for the war years and it was never taken off. It had the most wonderful balconies that were never used. The council, they didn't have a lot of money, I can understand that. But it was shameful really that they allowed that theatre to start rotting.

NB: When was it built?

RF: It was built, I believe, in the twenties and these theatres were kit form. You could buy a theatre that was in kit form and it was all cast iron and, as I say, the one up at the Isle of Bute up at Rothsay, the sister pavilion to this one, that had the dome; that was a more expensive one obviously, but you could say to the foundry in Glasgow, "We want a theatre this size, this size and this size". I will send you the plans. You could order a theatre. "Can I have a theatre 250ft by 650ft and can I have it so and so" and they'd send you all this kit and come and build your theatre for you, this foundry. Amazing

isn't it? And of course their sort of hallmark are these corners which have like a pagoda type top. I've got lots of photographs of Ryde Pavilion which I'll send you as well. There's lots and lots of stuff there for you. I've got some of the original things from Ryde Pavilion which are in my loft from the original days of the thing.

NB: Do you know much about its history?

RF: It was a twenties one as I say and it was very, very busy and popular. They built a bandstand round the back of it, and each summer they would put these blue shutters all the way around and up to the back of the actual bandstand that they'd built in the back, and it was all grass, and we'd fill it up with deck chairs. We used to serve [meals in the theatre whilst] they had brass band concerts in there. On the Sunday we used to do brass band concerts there. We would pay for it and we would do it for them and we'd then go round and collect the money out of the deck chairs and we would even deliver trays of teas and things, and pastries and things, to the people watching the band. It was very, very good. There were tables under the back veranda where people could sit and drink tea and have meals and all sorts of things. It was a wonderful experience. Remember, this is a landlocked guy, me, that in Wakefield had very rarely seen the sea when I was a kid. We used to have one day at the seaside on the local club trip to maybe Cleethorpes or Bridlington and that was it.

NB: So it was like one big holiday?

RF: Well, it was like a huge holiday for me and it was so exciting and everything happening. It was wonderful. We had the most wonderful staff, but we did the most diverse things as I say, whether it was a rock concert or a folk festival. We had jazz festivals there, we had tea dances. I mean, rock concerts and tea dances; I think you could say they're probably at opposite ends of the spectrum couldn't you?

NB: And through the winter you still managed to pull in the audiences?

RF: Yes, we kept going. We kept bringing in money. The council used to charge me a rent which was quite low but they would expect me, of course, to pay the utility bills and everything else. There was a small concession on the electrical bill but they would expect me to run that building for the whole year, with Billy's help of course, as an amenity; and it was an amenity not only for the town, but the borough of Ryde. It was also an amenity for holiday makers in the summer, and we were trusted with it, and we were kept on for a long time doing it. You know, I think they were very pleased with what we'd done.

It was so sad to see the building die, and I felt bad in a way because I saw the end of it as a theatre and you always think it's a bit your fault, you know, when anything happens. It's always your fault a bit; but gorgeous thing, it really was and the diversity of people that we had there. We even had a Grand Order of Water Rats luncheon. People like Arthur English, Jimmy Tarbuck -again I keep talking about him-, John Inman; all these people came down, Danny La Rue. All of these people came down, Gordon

Kay from 'Allo 'Allo!; lots of people, and of course people from the Lady Ratlings like Barbara Windsor and Carmen Silvera that was also in 'Allo 'Allo!. Lots of people like this. We once did a Grand Order of Water Rats luncheon in the Magpie Pub at Sunbury and we all got dressed up in Victorian costume -I don't like getting dressed up- but it was a coloured blazer looking like a deck chair and a straw hat, and we all went in there, and I sat on a table and Carmen Silvera was on one side of me and on the other side was the musical director from the London Palladium, and I'm ashamed to say I can't remember his name. He died the following year, and he used to tell me all about the days when he used to the music for the Bob Hope and Bing Crosby films.

NB: Oh really?

RF: And he was telling me all about them. Fascinating, fascinating people.

NB: So, the Grand Order of Water Rats. Sorry, I'm unfamiliar with this name?

RF: Oh, they're a charity organisation and they raise money for many, many people. They've got royal patronage of course and they organise and run, with the EABF, the Royal Variety Performance every year. They bring in the stars from everywhere and it's all done together; usually in the London Palladium. It has been in the dominion Theatre I believe once or twice, but usually in the London Palladium. They just are a very good bunch of guys that get together. It seems to me that, going to meetings and things, it's based loosely on a lodge meeting that you would probably find in the lodges, you know where you used to have people... What do they call them? The...

NB: Freemasons?

RF: The Freemasons; that's what I'm thinking of. I was asked to be a Freemason a few years ago.

NB: My Grandad's one himself actually.

RF: [Laughs] I don't like anything that's secret.

NB: [Laughs] Yes, a lot of people say that.

RF: I know it's a society with secrets and it's not a secret society but I don't know, it seems a bit too clandestine to me. Yorkshire people are a bit up and, you know, gobby. We like to know everything that's going on really. But, it's based loosely on the Freemasons and they have officers of it, and they're a group of guys that get together; they're devoted to each other as brothers, but they make lots and lots of money for charity. They are so generous. They do lots of work that you never hear about because that's the kind of work they do. In their lodge meetings- I used to take Billy to his Lodge

meetings down in Kings Cross in London- they discuss who is a deserving cause, and of course they look after people who have been in the business but are now on hard times. You probably won't know Jimmy Jewel and Ben Warriss? You see that's just from when I was a kid. I just remember them, so I'm sure you won't. Ben Warriss ended up in there and he was a lovely guy, and we used to go down and talk to all the people in Twickenham and go to one or two lunches and talk to everybody. The problem with them of course, like everything else, they want to talk about theatre all the time and where they used to play, and where they used to be.

NB: So they used theatre as a way to raise money for charity and look after each other?

RF: Yes. Anything that you could come up with them really that would be a charitable thing, but they do things like the Bristol Balloon Festival which I did with Roy Hudd and we were there on our table, and it was a competition between me and Roy Hudd, and don't forget there's me, that nobody knows, and Roy Hudd that everybody knows, and we were competing about who could sell the most pound tickets, and he did beat me, like he would. But a generous guy, beautiful guy, magnificent man, wonderful wife, fantastic children. He is just such a nice guy.

You see people used to be a bit cutthroat in the theatre, with each other, because they didn't want you taking any of their material, they didn't want you stealing anything. You know, they'd worked on this material all their lives, they didn't want you nicking it but yet they were very generous if you were finding things difficult they would look after you a bit; and that's really what the Grand Order of Water Rats is all about, looking after fellow human beings... A good thing, yes.

NB: So, once again, going back to Ryde; what kind of audiences did you manage to attract?

RF: We used to fill it in the winter, for all different kinds of things. If I tell you that in the eighties, on the catering bar for one day, we would take four and a half thousand pounds. This is in the eighties, think how much money that would be today, and that was for a music and dancing festival that went on for two weeks. In the winter of course, I'd do things like Christmas lunches for various people. The Conservative association and things like that, and we do five course lunches out of a little, tiny kitchen for two or three hundred people, fascinating. But we used to do folk festivals; it was full of folk people. We'd do the round the island bicycle race as I told you; we'd do burgers to all that lot. We did thousands of Mars bars and Marathons, as they were in those days, not Snickers, to people like that. Every audience had a different want. You'd get bikers, we used to have a bikers concert every now and again; we used to have the Hell's Angels and all sorts of stuff. It was quite weird on the Isle of Wight that every August bank holiday they would get the mods down there on the scooters and it was a big venue for them to go to, and my theatre would be full of scooters. You would wake up in the morning over that bank holiday and you would hear this constant drone of these Vespas, these little scooters, and then all of a sudden on the Tuesday it was quite eerie. It was as if the bomb had dropped, it was very funny. But in September, at the theatre, it was just as if someone had put a knife down it on about the 5th to the 10th of September and everything was quiet; not tourists, no families, no old people, and we'd then move into the winter and do all these different things. But you ask about the

audiences. Every audience was different, but the audiences were there. We didn't have a bad run because there were all these different things, and we thought that by diversifying so much, it kept the theatre not only as a theatre, and stopped it being dark, but it kept this theatre as a living part of the community. They try and recreate that now, but they're not diversifying enough. I don't want to pick anyone out in particular, but you go up to places like The Hub, the one up at the north of Bournemouth...

NB: I don't think I've seen that actually.

RF: No, it's out of Bournemouth, just on the other side of Ringwood. It's too insular; it's not pulling people in from various different parts of society.

NB: It's not part of the community.

RF: Exactly, if someone had come to me in that theatre and said, "Can I rent your theatre on a Thursday night, to do a brass band practice?" I would let them do it because I thought that the theatre was still warm, the theatre was still light. We may have only brought £20-£25 in from them for the night's practice but it's worth it because it's another service, another amenity that you're being to the community.

NB: Did you put on many charity events then?

RF: Oh, we did lots and lots of them. I'll tell you one of the best ones we ever did was the Hunt Ball. Now imagine all the very high powered farmers and celebrities from the whole of the Isle of Wight being at this Hunt Ball, and all they wanted was mashed potato and baked beans. Now in the eighties they charged £75 a ticket for mashed potato and baked beans, and we ran it throughout the night and at five o' clock in the morning, we gave them breakfast, and we gave them that as a theatre. But they raised thousands and thousands of pounds for charity; for a named charity, it could have been anything at the time. It was often charities that were things that were happening at the time whether it was cancer charities and things like that, and often local ones, people would do things for local charities. We'd go and do promo sometimes on Isle of Wight radio to plug these things, but you only get back out of a theatre what you put in. If you're not willing to go out and drag people in, people will not come in, and I've seen the council in Bournemouth try and run Pier Theatre all these years, all these years to no avail because they will not do the legwork. They won't have someone that's enthusiastic really, more than anything else- as well as dedicated and all the other words that you can think of, but enthusiasm is the one- and you go round the hotels and you drag them in. If they've promised to come down to your show that Thursday and no one shows up, you're there on Friday morning asking them where they were, and this is how you do it: you pester, you cajole, you constantly get people to do things and eventually they will come and do it. But you can't do it without the legwork; you've got to constantly do it, and people expect theatres to fill themselves. They will fill themselves if, I don't know, Alan Carr, Little Britain; Little Britain by the way came up and did their promotions on the end of Bournemouth Pier as the ladies on the bicycle. They were doing a promo for American Vogue, now this don't forget is four or five years ago; they were doing the legwork, the spadework for the Little Britain in America that's

just happened this last year. But you've got to sow the seeds, you've got to do the work, you've got to do it. It doesn't just happen where somebody in America turns round to Matt Lucas and David Walliams and says, "Oh, that's a nice show. Can you bring it over here?" It's not that simple in life, but I will say that Matt Lucas is one of my heroes. That guy can change his appearance the tiniest amount and be a completely different character. He is the one now, who is the best. There is nobody better than him at changing characters. You think of all the characters he does in Little Britain, everyone of those is different. Whereas David Walliams- brilliant guy; the feed often for Matt Lucas- always seems to be a very similar character.

NB: It sounds very similar to the pantomime dames that you were talking about earlier. It's almost as though Matt Lucas is harking back to that era in British comedy.

RF: He is in a way, yes. I think it is a different audience to play to though. I did actually have the privilege when they paid for me to go and see their show in the B.I.C. [Bournemouth International Centre] when that came out a few years ago. The way that they staged that was amazing. You couldn't see the join between things and, you know, these characters need a lot of putting together, but you couldn't say that him being the guy in the wheelchair is pantomime, but yet it is: It's someone doing something behind someone's back that makes it funny, but it is pantomime. It's a little bit burlesque in a way, going even further back, because of course pantomime comes from, not the Victorian times- people think it does but it doesn't-, it comes back from the 1700's, the same type of thing as caricatures, you know when Hogarth and people used to do the caricatures. It comes from these times, and people even say it goes further back than that to medieval times. Men have always dressed up as women because women were never in the theatre, you know, ladies didn't do theatre and that's why, in Shakespeare's time, all the men played the lady's characters.

NB: Okay, well I think we can end it there. Thank you very much for your time this afternoon.

RF: You're welcome.