

The Life and Times of HERBERT FILBEE 1894 - 1964

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Bert Filbee was as strong as an ox. For 46 years he shovelled coal and coke to keep up steam in huge boilers. His hands were as tough as leather; he could pick up red hot coals with his fingers and throw them back into the furnace.

For seven years he 'kept up steam' on some of the most powerful battleships in the British fleet whilst serving in the Royal Navy and, for 39 years, he played a key role in delivering gas to a large area of north London, including throughout World War II when the gas works where he was employed became a time bomb as Luftwaffe bombers nightly dropped their deadly payload, bringing death and destruction to the surrounding streets.

However, life for Herbert John Filbee could have been so different. On leaving Lancasterian School in Tottenham at the age of 14 and after being orphaned at the age of 13, the son of a former Metropolitan Police inspector used his lightness of foot and good singing voice to carve out a career on the stage.

He became a tap dancer and singer with the Dennis Drew & Co. Juvenile Dancing Group, performing in the famous Moss Empires theatre chain in London and the provinces.

He sang and danced in the chorus line and would rub shoulders with such famous stars of the music hall as Marie Lloyd, Rob Wilton, Harry Lauder, Vesta Tilley, Hetty King and George Formby. Indeed, it was the father of the rising young ukulele-playing star George Formby, who presented Bert with a shiny silver sixpence for learning to swim a length of Ardwick Green Baths in Manchester, while the company was performing at the local theatre.

Music Hall was popular with the 'not-so-well-off' as it was cheap, entertaining, and there was plenty to drink. The Moss Empire chain of theatres was very successful with 33 music halls, and by 1905 almost every large town would have an *Empire* or *Coliseum*. However, it was a frantic life of travelling, rehearsing and performing with scant reward for the entertainers. Conditions did improve after a strike in 1907 (known as the Music Hall War), which saw the Variety Artistes' Federation calling its members out on strike.

Gradually Bert began to outgrow the 'juvenile' tag and it was time to look for a new career. He was still too young to join the Metropolitan Police (his father and two brothers had been serving members) and so, after one unsuccessful attempt to join up because he was under age, he finally enlisted in the Royal Navy on 8th July, 1913, although still adding a year to his birth date.

After basic training, he joined HMS St. George as a stoker. He then served on HMS Orion (seen here) and the ship joined the Grand Fleet along with the 2nd battle squadron, later taking part in the Battle of Jutland as the flagship of Rear Admiral A. C. Leveson. This would be the greatest naval battle of the First World War and the



greatest of all time in regards to numbers of gun armed battleships and battlecruisers engaged, and was fought off Jutland in the North Sea

Keeping steam and 'making smoke' as battles waged, was a tough task for stokers who carried out their duties in forbidding temperatures. However, there were some small rewards, which Bert discovered on 11th March, 1918, when, as a member of the crew of HMS Onslow, the ship's company each received seven shillings for sinking the German 'U' Boat no. 7 off the French coast.

Whilst in the Navy, Bert obviously found time to socialise because he met Nellie Sawyer, and the couple was married on 19th May, 1918, in All Hallows Parish Church of Tottenham, with the Banns being published on HMS Apollo.

November that year saw peace declared, but Bert, as a regular, had to continue in the Royal Navy until 1920 when he received a free discharge but remained on the Royal Naval Reserves list.

By now the father of a daughter, Helen Rose, Bert had once again to seek a new career, and as he was old enough, and the son of a former policeman, he tried to join the Metropolitan Police. He thought it would be just a formality as two of his brothers were also serving officers, and he had grown up in a police environment. His father, William, had joined the Metropolitan Police on 30th November, 1874, and rose through the ranks to become an Inspector by the time he resigned in 1899.

William and his wife, Sarah, and their 13 children (Bert was the second youngest) had moved between the police stations in London for many years. In 1878, William was based in Hackney, in 1892, he moved to Wood Green when he had been promoted to Sergeant, and by 1891, the family were at Uxbridge. When Herbert was born on 16th December, 1894, they were back at Wood Green.

After William left the police on 4th December, 1899, with a pension of £103 3s 5d (£4,714.91 in today's value), he took his family to Leverstock Green, near St Albans in Hertfordshire, to become a beerhouse keeper at The Three Horse Shoes public house.

At last a settled life for the family in the countryside but it was to end tragically just a few years later. William's wife, Sarah, died, aged just 47 in 1906, and William himself died just two years later, aged 50. It was thought that the youngest children would have to go into the Metropolitan Police Orphanage as Bert was 13 and his younger sister, Ethel, was just 10, but because William had a Pension, Bert's older sister Lilian, by this time aged 26, was able to claim a compassionate allowance of three shillings per week per child. By this time they were back in London.

But, for Bert, the strong police background counted for nothing, as although he passed the entrance test and medical with flying colours; he was a just a fraction under the regulation height of 5ft 10ins – and, in those days, there were no compromises!

What now? At least his time in the Royal Navy would stand him in good stead. He took a job as a stoker with the Southgate Gas Company at its works in Bounds Green. The work was hard with eight-hour shifts round the clock, 365 days a year, but the money was regular. It meant Bert had to cycle eight miles to work from his Tottenham home in all weathers to his shifts, which alternated between 6am-2pm, 2pm-10pm and 10pm-6am.

Some years Christmas dinner had to be early – and rushed – so that he would arrive for his 2pm Christmas Day shift, and as a lifelong Tottenham Hotspur supporter, he would often race home on his bike to make the 3pm kick-off time at White Hart Lane, if he was on the early shift. It was legendary that after finishing at 10pm on a Friday or Saturday night, he would race home, put his cycle in the back garden, run to his local pub, where two pints would be waiting for him. He'd sink the first straight down before saying "Hello," and then take his time over the second.

Unlike many companies, Southgate Gas gave its employees two weeks paid holiday, but, being a member of the RNVR, Bert had to spend one of these, every September, training at Chatham. This meant that the second week would be set aside for the family holiday when Bert and Nellie, together with children, Rose, and Bert junior, would enjoy a week at Great Yarmouth. Because Bert was already at Chatham, his family would join him in Kent and travel to Norfolk by coastal steamer from Margate pier. Apparently, they are looking a bit glum in this photograph as Rose objected to having to carry the bucket and spade after her brother had dragged them along the pavement.

Bert left the RNVR in 1931, and through the austerity of the 1930s, he continued to work hard at the gas works. It was hard graft with unsocial hours, but, at least, unlike many at the time, he had a regular pay packet coming in. During World War II, he would continue to keep the boilers at the gas works operating at full power, while being as economical as possible with the precious coal supplies.

The post-war Labour Government brought about the nationalisation of the gas industry and Bert found himself no longer employed by the Southgate Gas Company but the new Eastern Gas Board. Conditions improved – although Bert always confessed that he missed the 'personal touch' of his former bosses as management became more remote. This gave rise to one particular incident where, during a night shift, Bert was asked to fire the boilers with some sub-standard coke. As he struggled to keep the boiler going at full tilt, an area manager arrived from head office and demanded: "*Why is pressure falling? Who's slacking?*"

Normally a placid man, Bert threw his shovel at the manager's feet and said: "*You can't keep steam by boiling rubbish* (or a word to that effect!)." He then stormed off, passing his foreman on the way. The foreman then turned to the manager and asked: "*What's up with Bert?*" "*I told him off for not keeping steam and he blamed the coke,*" came the reply. "*You shouldn't have done that,*" said the foreman. "*Why not?*" asked the manager. "*Because Bert has been here 30 years and did seven years as a stoker in the Navy and, if he says he can't keep steam because the coke is bad, then he's right,*" said the foreman. "*Why didn't he tell me all this?*" inquired the manager. "*Because he's not like that. He just gets on with his work.*" replied the foreman.

Bert worked at the gasworks for 37 years, and when asked what he would want when he retired he asked for his favourite Cochran boiler. However, this had already been pensioned off when Bert retired in 1957 and he received instead a wristwatch (which, unfortunately, was stolen when his house in Tottenham was burgled a few years before he died). Unfortunately, working as a stoker brought problems with Bert's health during his retirement. His legs, which had been constantly exposed to the heat of the boilers, were always inflamed, but it was the continuous breathing in of coal dust and fumes that finally resulted in Bert's death from lung disease, at the age of 70, in October, 1964.