

February 2nd 1961 - A Day in the Life of Tony Hancock

By Tristan Brittain-Dissont. Archivist THAS

In the last The Missing Page, we featured a picture of Tony taken from 1961 with a number of other celebrities in Leicester Square. They were seen larking about with The Roadstars, a well-known and, to some, infamous troupe of buskers. The discovery of this picture led to an interesting line of research that has yielded some fascinating insights into a single day in Tony's life and the discovery of a range of material - photographs and film footage - that is completely new to us.

The nature and range of the findings is such that it cannot be featured in the printed version of The Missing Page, hence its appearance here in our new publication, The Bonus Pages. Moving to on-line versions of our publications save the society money and allows us to give members more interesting and detailed information about Tony's life and career. If you are reading this on-line but still have a 'paper' subscription, I urge you to help the society by moving to a purely on-line membership.

The Roadstars



Leicester Square 1961

Albie & Harry Hollis, Tony Hancock, Liz Frazer, Kenneth
More on drums, Brenda de Banzie, Joan Collins, Warren
Beatty

Above is the picture that was printed in the last edition of the magazine. I was alerted to the picture by Chris J. Brady, who found them in an on-line forum discussion about buskers. The site which also provided excellent information on the act in question, for which I am grateful.

The Roadstars comprised Albie and Harry Hollis, who did the dancing, with Charlie Hilliard playing accordion and singing. His brother, George, sometimes joined in with the Hollis brothers for the sand dance. Ronnie Ross also appeared with the group from time to time.

According to Harry's granddaughter, Tammy, 'my grandfather was in the Guinness Book of Records for being the most arrested busker in London'. Nonetheless, they were a much beloved act and the family has stated that Prince Philip used to send for the Roadstars to play at private parties. They were the only buskers to be invited to the World Fair Expo 67 in Canada (footage of them from this event can be found on YouTube); whilst there, they were invited onto the Royal Yacht Britannia to have dinner with the Queen.

George Hilliard's daughter, Mo, has fond memories of his unofficial residency in the heart of London's West End: 'When I was a young teenager I would go to the Leicester Square Cinema with my brother or sister on a Sunday afternoon and when I got off the bus I could hear this beautiful voice, and the accordion. Most of the people in the cinema queue would gather round to see the Roadstars'.

Thanks to these recollections, I was able to determine who Tony and the other celebrities were hanging out with and, to some extent, why. Indeed, there were several photographs taken at the time that I could not include, for reasons of space, in the last magazine. In all of them, sadly, Tony is not facing the camera or is otherwise obscured - but in the interests of being faithful to the historical record and being grateful for any scrap of visual material featuring him - here they are.



Leicester Square 1961

Charlie Hilliard, Tony Hancock (head turned), Kenneth More,
Brenda de Banzie, Joan Collins, Albie & Henry Hollis



Leicester Square 1961
Charlie Hilliard, Kenneth More on drums, Brenda de Banzie,
Warren Beatty, Albie & Harry Hollis



Leicester Square 1961

Charlie Hilliard, Kenneth More on drums, Brenda de Banzie,
Joan Collins, Warren Beatty, Albie & Harry Hollis

Following the publication of the first picture in the last magazine, one of our members, Barry Barnes, wrote in to Tom Dommett, our editor, and provided another picture from the day. And we are very grateful that he did, because it gave us by far the clearest image of Tony we have from this moment in time.



Why Was Tony There?

By this stage, I had established exactly what this act was and why it was in Leicester Square. However, I was still puzzled by Tony's presence and that of the other stars. Why was Tony there with Warren Beatty, Liz Frazer, Kenneth More and the others? Presumably they had not all got on a bus together on a Sunday in the way Mo Hilliard described earlier. By chance, I was looking through an archive of images in the Getty collection some weeks later, and noticed the following photograph.



<http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/line-up-of-film-stars-on-stage-at-the-odeon-leicester-news-photo/113179251>

If you look closely and compare this to the previous photographs, you will note that it features Tony with More, Frazer, Beatty and Collins et al - and they are dressed in identical fashion compared to the earlier pictures. The Getty caption indicated that the picture was taken at the time of the 1961 Royal Film Performance, which I was quickly able to pin down as occurring on February 2nd 1961. The film was *The Facts of Life* with Bob Hope and Lucille Ball (no, me neither).

Whether it was by design or accident, it is poignant to note that Sid James is also in the line up - and that he and Tony are standing at opposite ends of the stage. By this day, it has been 7 months since their last show together. The Rebel has been released and finished its run - during the making of this, Tony refused a proposed cameo for Sid. In about 4 months, 'Hancock' will broadcast. One wonders whether they spoke that day and, if so, what was said between them.

So, at this stage I was able to envisage part of a day in Tony's life. He and the other stars turned up at the Odeon Leicester Square. Outside, the Roadstars were performing and Edith Hollis, Harry's wife, was 'bottling' (collecting money from the onlookers). Tony and the others join in and a number of photographs are taken. At some point, they enter the cinema and a number of press photographs are taken of them, and other arriving stars, on stage. Having

reached this point in the day, my natural inclination was to wonder what happened next - and this led me to a wonderful discovery.

Tony Meets the Queen Mother

Happily for us, British Pathe news was at the Royal Film Performance and a 90 second summation of this can be found on-line at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRgJ_Hwkegw. Although I can hear screams of 'spoiler alert' in my head, as a historian I am bound to state for the record what this recording contains:

At 36 seconds Sid James appears

You can see Tony at the top right of the footage at about 58 seconds

At 1.10 Tony meets the Queen Mother.



For Hancock anoraks (Hancoraks?), note that Adam Faith was part of the reception. In a few months' time, Tony will refer to him in *The Blood Donor* (' You've got Adam Faith earning ten times more than the prime minister. Now, is that right? *Is that right?* ... Then again, it depends whether you like Adam Faith and what your politics are'). And interesting to see that Tony is standing next to Jack Hawkins, who was in *The Elocution Teacher*, one of his early television shows.

What happened after this point is unknown at this time and is very likely to stay that way. But no matter. As things stand, it is quite remarkable that nearly 60 years on, visual material has survived so fully and allows us to piece together a specific day in the Lad's life.

Postscript

Whilst doing the initial work on this topic, I did a little more searching on the Roadstars. I had no expectation that I would find any more pictures of Tony with them - although Barry Barnes' subsequent photograph suggests that there could be more material out there. I came across a lovely colour photograph of Harry Hollis on a Facebook page. The user stated that his mother had taken it during a trip to London in the 1960s. I looked at it for a little while until I noticed something quite incredible in the background. Its stuff like this that gives archivists and historians like me shivers down the spine and makes us go that extra mile.

