

The Mystery of The Shrieking Woman

By Tristan Brittain-Dissont

When I first started my research for this brief article, I gave it a working title that reminded me of a Sherlock Holmes story. To my amazement, this proved to be an incredible prescient name.

I first started listening to Hancock's Half Hour in the early 1980s. As such, the range of shows available to me was rather limited, and tended to focus on later shows from Series 4 onwards. Consequently, on repeated listening, I slowly memorized not just each line from the programmes but also the audience reactions. One aspect of this always stood out to me. In many of the shows from Series 4, there was a woman whose high-pitched laughter often pierced many of the performances, to the extent that Tony commented upon it. There are numerous examples of this. Time has prevented me from cataloguing the entire list, but you can find evidence of this in 'The Thirteenth of the Series'. Shortly after the credits, you can detect this laughter in the background once Tony has finished saying 'H-H-H-Hancock's Half Hour'. A little later, after about 5 minutes, when Bill says he is paying his instalments on the instalments plan, it is heard again. And again, at around 6 minutes 30 seconds, when Bill says that Arthur Askey (the 'Little People') has discovered Tony has been pinching his gags, the laughter is heard once more.

Years on, listening to these shows again in my new role as Archivist, I began to wonder about the identity of this hysterical laughter. Two things stood out as I listened to the relevant shows once more. The first was that she, the laughter, was a repeat offender. This struck me as unusual, since if she was a regular member of the public, it was difficult to imagine she could have attended so many recordings. Indeed, excessive laughter was often cited by BBC radio producers of the time as a problem in live recordings, to the extent that printed guidance and warnings on such matters were often provided to audiences as they entered the theatre. This suggested, therefore, that it was someone close to the cast and the production who could bypass such regulations.

The second thing of note was that whilst Tony acknowledged the laughter, he was clearly not overly perturbed by it. For example, in 'The Thirteenth of the Series', his response to the laughter in response to the Arthur Askey gag is to simply say 'Madam!'. This again indicated that the laughter came from someone he knew.

In his biography of Tony, John Fisher also mentioned this matter. He suggested that it was Kenneth Williams's mother, Louisa (or 'Lou'). This made no sense to me, since the energetic laughter was clearly that of a young woman, and Lou Williams was well into her 50s when the relevant shows were recorded. Ultimately, I contacted Tessa le Bars, Ray and Alan's business manager, to see if she could help. It was such a bizarre and anal inquiry that I fully expected to hear nothing of any note. To my astonishment, she quickly replied as follows: 'The lady would be Beryl Vertue, their [Ray, Alan and Tony] agent at that time. You probably know she is now a top TV producer with her company Hartswood Films and still a close friend of us all'.



To those of you unfamiliar with Beryl's career, you should consult https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beryl_Vertue . Her early life and career were intertwined with that of not only Tony, Ray and Alan, but also with the Goons and many other radio and television stars of the 1950s and onwards. She was a school friend of Alan and got her first break into show business as a secretary at Associated London Scripts, the writers' agency created by Spike Milligan, Eric Sykes and the Boys (pictured left). Following this, she has had a storied career as an agent and producer, achieving television immortality with her most famous creation – the Sherlock series featuring

Benedict Cumberbatch.

Although I have yet to verify Tessa's statement with Beryl, all the pieces fit. She was known to the cast, hence her ability to attend multiple recordings and her inability to throw them off track when she laughed. And he was a little guy as well, so that explains the shoes. Sorry, getting carried away there.



So, dear readers, The Mystery of the Shrieking Woman have been solved. As Holmes himself might have said: *'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth'*.

Pictured left, Beryl Vertue CBE. Legendary agent, producer, media executive and crazy shrieking laugher.