

The Royal Scandal Magazine

By Tristan Brittain-Dissont

Fans of the Golden Age of comedy, and *The Goon Show* in particular, will be aware that its protagonists were frequently in hot water with the press and the British Establishment – and hence the BBC. There were many reasons for this, but a key one was the Goons' early forays into satire and acerbic reference to contemporary events. An excellent example of this was Peter Sellers' impression of Winston Churchill, which featured in several shows, and most infamously in the late 1954 show *Ye Bandits of Sherwood Forest*. During a time when a tradition of deference to such people was still strong, Sellers would be criticised by both the BBC and the media simply for the act of imitation. However, in this case, the boundaries of good taste were pushed even further. In this show, Sellers' Churchill was crawling under a table looking for a 'blasted telegram'. This was a reference to a topical scandal of the time which involved the Prime Minister and Lord Montgomery of El Alamein. Churchill claimed he had sent the war hero a telegram in 1945 in the wake of deteriorating relations with the Russian allies. At a time when British forces were occupying large parts of Germany, he requested that German arms be carefully stored and, if necessary, reissued to the Germans in the event that a conflict with Russia broke out. This caused great disquiet; Barbara Castle MP was disgusted that Churchill could ever have contemplated using 'Nazi soldiers against our war allies'. Montgomery initially stated that he did indeed receive this telegram, but then claimed it could not be located in his papers. Churchill later retracted his claim and suggested he had confused different telegrams. Later research has suggested that Churchill did indeed make the request to store arms but only verbally.

Following the broadcast of *Ye Bandits*, there was internal uproar at the BBC and it decided that Sellers would be banned from doing further impersonations of Churchill. A decree was issued to this effect and, on Friday 7 1955, the story hit the tabloids. The Daily Mirror had a headline that read '*Stop Your Churchill Act, Comic is Told*'. Although the Goons yielded to this, they made spiky references to it in subsequent broadcasts. Rather ironically, Sellers was to provide his Churchill impersonation two years later for the classic film *The Man Who Never Was*.

As mentioned earlier, this kind of controversy was not unusual for the Goons. Indeed, this was often the least of their troubles given the persistent problems Spike Milligan, the show's key writer, had with his employers, the BBC. For all the glee and laughter that packs each half hour programme, contract disputes, clashes with producers, arguments over editing and myriad other controversies made working on *The Goon Show* an extremely difficult experience. By contrast, very few problems have ever been reported concerning the relationship between the BBC and Ray Galton and Alan Simpson (and *Hancock's Half Hour* more broadly). As such, it was a surprise to come across a report of such a scandal involving the Goons, the BBC and the Royal family.

By 1955, Princess Margaret had been in a relationship with Captain Peter Townsend, a divorced man with two children, for some time. He had proposed marriage in 1953, but this was not a straightforward matter. The Queen's consent was required; the British Cabinet was against the idea; many viewed such a marriage as against Royal and Christian tradition.



This relationship was the cause of persistent comment in the press for many months. The Princess's meetings or appearances in public with Townsend would be commented upon, prompting yet further debate about the rights or wrongs of their liaison. On Friday, October 28th 1955, the *Daily Mirror* published a front page story concerning a 'cruel plan' in relation to this matter. The Mirror claimed that *The Times* newspaper was conspiring with others to give the Princess an ultimatum – abandon Townsend or be banished from the Royal Circle.

Surprisingly, Ray and Alan got caught up in the scandal as the back page of this newspaper shows.



Two days prior, the BBC broadcast the second episode of the third series of *Hancock's Half Hour*, which we now know as *The Jewel Robbery*. At one stage, Bill is reading from a newspaper. This is the relevant extract, copied from Ray's script, published courtesy of the Galton and Simpson Estate.

7. SIDNEY: Now then...did anybody nick a paper off the bookstall when we drove along the platform?
8. BILL: Yes I did.
9. SIDNEY: What does it say on the front page?
10. BILL: Let's see. Britain facing a crisis.
11. SIDNEY: No no. In the Stop Press.
12. BILL: Oh. Er...Britain facing another crisis.
13. SIDNEY: What else?
1. BILL: Let's see....er...."They had tea together again today"...um..."Germany offers Britain big loan"...jewel robbery..."

As the newspaper article shows, the line '*They had tea together again*' was seen as an unambiguous reference to the Princess and Townsend and was greatly appreciated by the audience. Not so the BBC, however, which 'deeply deplored' the joke. I asked Alan Simpson about this incident and whether this had caused any difficulty in what, to date, had been a very close a friendly relationship with the BBC. Interestingly, he stated that he and Ray were not reprimanded over the incident. Instead, the BBC took it upon itself to issue the apology, and the matter was never raised with their writers. It is, thus far, the only example I know of the BBC publically criticising part of a HHH script (unless anyone knows better).

The Jewel Robbery was repeated on October 30th. By that time, we can be certain that the offending line would have been excised. This leads me to a plea to check your recordings of this show. If anyone has a version that contains the line '*They had tea together again*', then this will be a copy of this original broadcast from 26 October 1955. As such, it is likely to have other lines and material that did not survive the subsequent edit for the repeat.

Frustratingly, I was emailed a few months ago by a Hancock fan now living in America who thought he had a copy of *How Hancock Won The War* from 1 February 1956. This show exists only as a very poor audio recording (for this reason it was remade for *The Missing Hancocks*). It transpired that his

show was, in fact, *Hancock's War*, a much later show that has survived in the archives. I pointed out that if this was an original recording, however, it would be of interest because of the lack of edits, and I used *The Jewel Robbery* and the offending line as an example of this. The fan replied to say that the recordings in question had been made by his father in the 1950s – and he thanked me for explaining what the line meant, because he had heard it on his father's copy and had always wondered by the audience found it so funny.

Excited by this, I asked if the THAS could get access to the collection. The fan promised to contact his sister, who still lives in the UK, to arrange this. A few days later, I was informed that the collection had been junked several years ago in a clear out of his father's effects. Sadly, this is a very common experience for archivists such as me and, as such, my point and plea to readers remains firm. If you suspect you have a copy of a show that was made in the 1950s, please get in touch so we can compare its original script and commercially available recording. It might well be that you have a version of a show that has never been heard by others since its first broadcast on the Light Programme.