

Laurel & Hardy's visit to Southend in 1952

For one week in August 1952, a Lancashire lad and his American friend and comedy partner, stayed and performed in Southend-on-Sea. On the surface this sounds insignificant but mention the names of Laurel and Hardy, and we can appreciate just how significant this event is in the town's history.

Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy remain unquestionably cinema's greatest comedy partnership. They made their first appearance together in a 1920 silent film called Lucky Dog. Their comedy team was formed during the silent movie era and when the talkies arrived in the late 1920's, they made a successful transition to sound comedy. Their initial success was in the 'short' films that lasted 20 minutes but they progressed into feature length



films, making 106 films together. Their last film made in Hollywood was in 1945 (they made 1 further film in France in 1951 which was not successful) and by then their popularity in America had waned. They believed their careers to be over. However their popularity had become international as they had made versions of their films speaking Spanish, French and German and also their films had been dubbed in other languages.

SOUTHEND STANDARD, THURSDAY, JULY 31, 1952. 3

ODEON SOUTHEND Telephone 4434		
SUNDAY, AUGUST 3, for 3 Day Only (Doors Open 8.30): June Allyson, Gloria de Haven, Van Johnson, Tom Drake, Two Girls and a Sailor (7) And FULL SUPPORTING PROGRAMME		
AUGUST 4th ONE WEEK ONLY	HERE IN PERSON	TWICE NIGHTLY 8.30 & 1.40 Matinee Mon. and Sat. at 2.30
BERNARD DELFONT presents Hollywood's Greatest Comedy Couple		
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The Famous Comedians in an Uproarious Sketch		
LONSDALE SISTERS MODERN DANCERS	Maestro's SEID & DOROTHY Are Acrobats "Gigolos"	THE GREAT GINGALEE The Silent Man of Mystery in Wonders of the East
LORRAINE Singing Caricatures!	THE SENSATIONAL AERIAL KENWAYS	JIMMIE ELLIOTT B.B.C. ANIMAL MIMICRY
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CIRCLE and STALLS 5/-, 3/6 and 2/- (Inc. 12%). All Seats Bookable Booking Office Now Open (Tel. 44435), 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily (Closed Sunday)		

In 1947, Bernard Delfont wanted to book an American act to tour the UK, initially for 12 weeks. He invited Laurel and Hardy to perform as part of a variety tour. They received a tremendous reception wherever they went and the tour lasted 15 months during which time they appeared in the Royal Variety Show as well as performed several European venues. Stan Laurel, who had started his career on the stage, and Oliver Hardy, were both delighted to return to the UK for extensive tours in 1952 and 1953-4. It was to be the Indian summer of their careers.

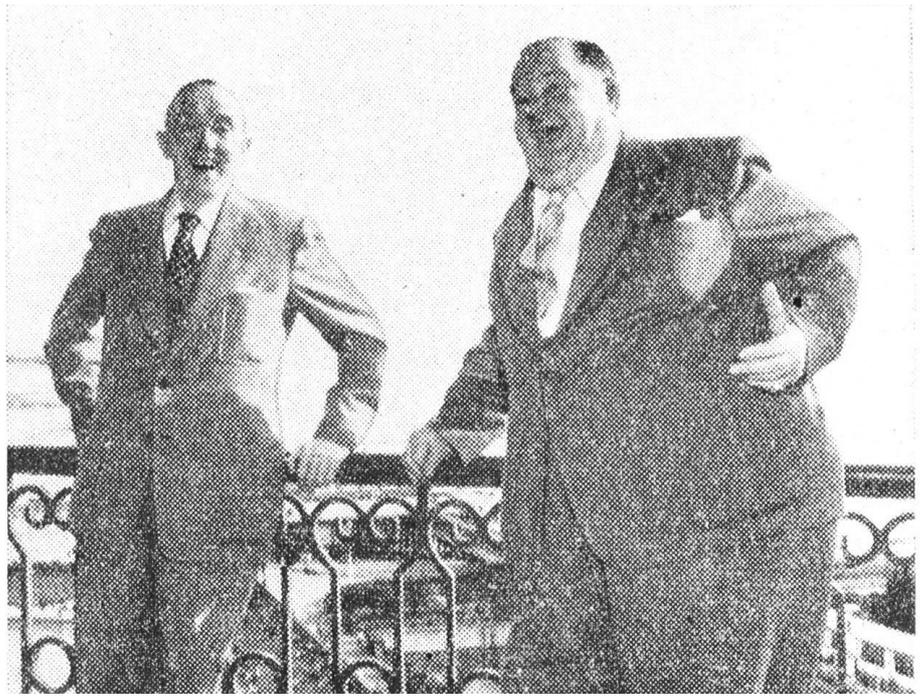
Advance publicity in the local papers, announced the forthcoming appearance of Laurel and Hardy at the Odeon Southend for their week's performance. Stan, Ollie and their respective wives Ida and Lucille travelled by train from London

to Southend Central Station on Sunday 3rd August 1952. They were conveyed from the station by taxi-driver, Ron Stokoe in his 1936 Ford V8 to the Palace Hotel. Ron, who still lives in Southend and is an active member of the Southend Laurel and Hardy fan club remembers this event clearly and with great affection.

During their stay at the Palace Hotel, they were asked to attend a buffet lunch and present lapel badges to managers of local cinemas. The press was on hand and several of the photographs taken appeared in the local papers.



They were also photographed on the balcony outside their rooms with the famous Southend Pier in the background. Although there is no record of their going onto the Pier, it seems likely that they would have done during their stay.



During their stay in Southend, it appears that Laurels and Hardy's saw a little bit of the town. Lucille and Ida went to Patience Cameras in Queens Road where owner Joe Patience remembered that one of them bought an Ensign Selfix 12.20 camera. I wonder if the camera was used to

capture images of their famous husbands in Southend? Stan also met a former friend Ted Desmond alias Ted Leo, who he had worked with on stage in England before going to America to seek his fame and fortune in films. Teddy was then the manager of one of the arcades in Southend. There is also a lovely account of Stan, talking to Harry Day, the drummer in the Palace resident band. Stan was unwinding after the evening's performance at the Odeon and in conversation with Harry learned that he had just become a father. Harry and Stan celebrated by visiting Harry's address in Fairfax Drive and 'wetting the baby's head'. Another person has recalled that Laurel and Hardy visited fortune teller Madame Renee in her booth on Palace Hill. Apparently for a few years after she proudly displayed a poster of Laurel and Hardy with a signed inscription that read "*To Madame Renee, Many thanks for the excellent reading. Next time we will wash our hand*"

Laurel and Hardy loved to meet up with other performers throughout their tours. Whilst Laurel and Hardy were appearing at the Odeon, the Regal Theatre in Tyler's Avenue had a show featuring Burton Lester's Midgets – the biggest novelty in show business. Stan and Ollie had their photograph taken with them in their stage costume. The photograph of this meeting was passed to me by Jack Hall. His parents, Jack and Babs, were part of this troop and both obtained autographs from the comedy duo.



They topped the bill of the variety show at the Odeon, which included ten other acts amongst which were Archie Elray a ventriloquist, the Great Cingalee magician, Lorraine the singing cartoonist and ace accordionists, Mackenzie Reid and Dorothy. But the audience had come to see Stan and Ollie and their 30 minute act called 'A Spot of Trouble' in which they find themselves stranded on a railway station having missed the last train, was well received to packed houses. Laurel and Hardy thoroughly enjoyed their warm welcome in Southend and were happy to sign autographs and have their pictures taken at the Odeon with the staff.

Laurel and Hardy films are still enjoyed today. Their appreciation society, known as Sons of the Desert, started in 1965 and branches or 'tents' exist in many countries each group taking a name of one of their films. The Saps At Sea Tent in Southend, was formed in 1998, and have been meeting every month since then, enjoying the laughter, fun and special magic of Laurel and Hardy



To commemorate the 50th anniversary of their appearance in Southend, the Saps At Sea Tent organised a Laurel and Hardy Convention in 2002 which was attended by 100 devotees from the UK, Europe and America. As part of the celebrations, a blue plaque was unveiled on Southend Pier by Sir John Mills. Other celebrities present were John Inman, Jack Douglas, Vicky Michelle, Bella Emburg and Joe Goodman. The plaque was then on display at the Pier Museum until it could be found a permanent and suitable site.

In January 2010 the plaque was finally placed in the most fitting of locations. The Palace Hotel had undergone extensive renovation in recent years. The Park Inn Palace, as it is now known, has been transformed into a plush modern hotel with wonderful refurbishment to the interior and retaining the distinct character externally. As part of the hotel's commitment to remember the

heritage of the town, the Saps at Sea were contacted to see if we had any suggestions. We certainly did! The result of which is that the blue plaque is now located in the reception area of the hotel, together with a plaque that the Saps At Sea have donated explaining that Laurel and Hardy stayed in the hotel. In addition, the hotel have named 2 adjoining function rooms, the Stan Laurel and The Oliver Hardy Rooms. How very appropriate that these are located which are located in the area where Laurel and Hardy and their wives had adjoining suites.



The blue plaque will be a permanent reminder the visit of the screens most famous comedy team's visit to Southend. The Saps At Sea are proud to perpetuate the memory and enjoy the timeless comedy of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy.



For further details about Laurel and Hardy's visit to Southend or for information about the Saps At Sea Tent contact:-Roger Robinson
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