

New book reveals comedian's 'forgotten' Shields childhood



ZOE BURN



THEY SAID

"I hope that the highest bidder knows that if he's into handbagging, he's got a weapon with quite a track record" - Carol Thatcher after one of her mother's famous handbags was sold at auction for £25,000.

"It has become fashionable to apologise for a good education" - Former Tory MP Ann Widdecombe.

ON THIS DAY

1801: The first census in Britain was carried out showing a population totalling 8,872,000.

1956: Actress Marilyn Monroe married playwright Arthur Miller.

1960: BBC Television Centre opened in London.

1966: Barclays Bank introduced Barclaycard, the first British credit card.

1986: Richard Branson's boat Virgin Atlantic Challenger II completed the fastest Atlantic crossing in three days, eight hours and 31 minutes.

IN NUMBERS

13 Percentage of British adults with no savings.

426

New world record for hula hoop dancing set on last Blue Peter before move to Salford.

4,000

Number of jobs at risk at troubled TJ Hughes.

IN THE NEWS

Jeremy Paxman has revealed that he tried out for University Challenge as a student - but failed to get into the team. The famously abrasive presenter, 61, who has hosted University Challenge for 17 years, was not picked to join his fellow students because he was unable to answer the questions.



BIRTHDAYS

Charlotte Bingham, novelist, 69; Mark Radcliffe, DJ, 53; Amanda Donohoe, actress, 49; Paul Zenon, TV magician, 47.

As a boy, Danny Lawrence would close his eyes and imagine he could see him walking down his street.

It wasn't a sight he had ever seen, or would ever see, but it was vivid in the youngster's imagination, fuelled by the tales he'd been told of a famous man called Stan Laurel who, like him, had spent his informative childhood years on North Tyneside.

"I have a lovely image of him walking from his father's theatre at the other end of Saville Street, past the bottom of the street where I used to live," smiles Danny. "He lived just a couple of hundred yards from where I did, and it was something I used to think about a lot as a child."

Now, some 60 years on, he has penned a book detailing the importance of those formative years that the iconic comedy actor - probably best known as half of the duo Laurel and Hardy - spent here on Tyneside.

"The time that Stan Laurel spent in North Shields tends to be completely overlooked by historians, and even the town itself," he reveals.

"You read things about him and it mentions he was born in Cumbria and went to school in Bishop Auckland, yet very few of them mention North Shields.

"But I firmly believe that the years he spent here were very important in moulding him into the man he eventually became. My whole motivation behind this book was to make people aware of the crucial importance of his time here."

Danny, 70, and a retired lecturer in sociology, lives in Nottingham with his wife Helen, who was born and raised in Cullercoats. Danny grew up in Norfolk Street, North Shields, just a few hundred yards from Stan's home in Dockwray Square.

He says: "He was here for about 10 years and precious little has ever been done to capitalise on the town's association with such an influential man.

"Walk into North Shields and, apart from Bob Olley's wonderful statue of him in Dockwray Square, and a plaque on the house where he lived, there is nothing to show for his time here.

"I've read so many biographies about him and it seems a whole chapter of his life is missing. I was even more shocked when I read in one such book that North Shields was a mill town!"

Since taking early retirement from the University of Nottingham, Danny has spent years researching his subject, and believes the evidence that Laurel's time here was what formed his career, is quite startling.

Laurel was born Arthur Stanley Jefferson in Ulverston, Cumbria on June 16, 1890 and, shortly after, his parents moved to North Shields, where his father leased and ran a



REGIONAL ROOTS Stan Laurel, left, with his long-time comedy partner Oliver Hardy



QUAY EVENTS Danny Lawrence explores Stan Laurel's roots in his book

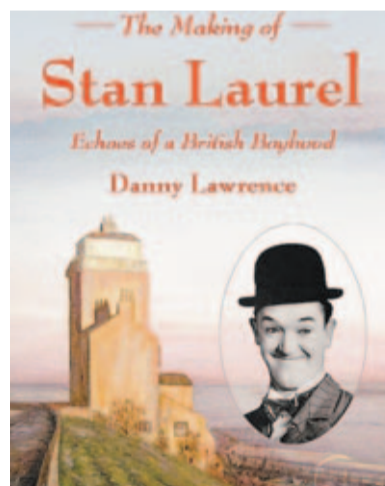
number of local theatres, including one in the town centre.

This influence quickly rubbed off on the young Stan, who dreamed of working in the business like his dad.

"As a youngster, he would be out in the backyard putting on shows and, when the family moved to a bigger house, he persuaded his father to build him a little theatre in the attic," said Danny.

"He would write, produce and star in his own plays, until one day when he and a friend were doing a staged fight and knocked over one of the paraffin lamps which served as footlights. His little theatre caught fire and was damaged beyond repair. Stan lost some of his eyebrows for a while, but was more upset about losing his theatre!"

Shortly afterwards, he went off to



boarding school and, a few years later, the family moved up to Glasgow where, at 16, Stan made his first public appearance.

At the age of 20, he joined a troupe of actors and toured America, which is where he came to eventually meet Oliver Hardy. The rest, as they say, is history.

However, his Northern roots were always apparent. "Stan never forgot his association with Tyneside," explains Danny. "Even late in life he would lapse into the Geordie dialect, and once said to an old friend that Oliver couldn't cope as well with the North East weather 'because he's not a Geordie like us'.

"His return visits to the area were obviously limited given that he went to live in the USA in his early twenties, but he remained a British

citizen and still managed to visit Tyneside and what he called 'the old town' of North Shields when circumstances allowed."

And, as Danny discovered, there are many things which appeared in his films which reflect his time in North Tyneside.

"Sailors and fish crop up a lot, clearly inspired by the Fish Quay, but the most obvious is the striking similarity between the Los Angeles stairs used in the making of the Oscar-winning film The Music Box and the many similar stairs which lined the bankside just below his Dockwray Square home.

"The stairs in North Shields, which are still there now, used to have houses at the sides, just like in the film, and it seems clear this is where the idea came from."

While the Laurel and Hardy films may be several decades old, Danny says they still appeal to youngsters now.

"I've got four grandchildren, Jack, 10, Katie, eight, Anna four and Finn, three, and recently I sat the older two down and showed them what my book was about.

"I let them see a few scenes after prising them off their PlayStations and computers, and they howled with laughter.

"It shows what a great comedy genius Stan was, and I think the region should be proud to call him one of their own."

● Danny Lawrence will give a talk to launch his book at 7pm tomorrow at North Shields library. Entry is £3. Book on 0191 643 5270.