

# The life and work of Arnold Ridley



**19th November 2009 - 30th April 2010**  
Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm,  
Theatre Collection foyer, 21 Park Row, Bristol.

Arnold Ridley, OBE (1896-1984), the British playwright and actor, is probably best remembered as author of the play *The Ghost Train*, and for his roles of Private Godfrey in *Dad's Army* and Doughy Hood in the radio soap *The Archers*.

This exhibition seeks to celebrate Arnold Ridley's prodigious life and work by showcasing a small amount of the material from his archive, which is held in the Theatre Collection.

## ***ON WALL***

### **Playbill for *The Ghost Train***

Theatre Royal, Brighton

22 June 1925

*The Ghost Train* opened at the Brighton Theatre Royal in 1925, marking the beginning of its first provincial tour, before transferring to St. Martin's Theatre, London.

### **Playbill for *The Ghost Train***

St. Martin's Theatre, London

23 Nov 1925

St. Martin's Theatre was the London home of *The Ghost Train* for two years. After two rather average provincial tours it was at this time that the play became the great success it is known as today.

### **Playbill for *The Flying Fool***

Princes Theatre, London

14 September 1929

*The Flying Fool* was written by Arnold Ridley and Bernard Merivale who collaborated on many scripts. It ran at the Princes Theatre, London from 14 September until 2 November, 1929.

**Playbill for *The Wrecker***

New Theatre, London

December 1927

The follow-up train mystery to *The Ghost Train* was *The Wrecker*, which also opened at the Theatre Royal, Brighton in 1927 before transferring to the New Theatre, London.

**Playbill for *Peril at End House***

Richmond Theatre, London

1 April 1940

*Peril at End House* was Arnold Ridley's adaptation of Agatha Christie's novel of the same name. It opened in London in 1940. It was made into a television drama in 1990.

***IN CASE***

**1.**

**Arnold Ridley *This is Your Life* Book**

Red book given to Arnold Ridley on the occasion of his appearance on *This is Your Life*, BBC TV

5<sup>th</sup> March 1976

**The red book is synonymous with the TV show *This is Your Life* which first appeared on British television screens in 1955, having been shown in the US since 1952.**

The book was used to surprise celebrities, and occasionally ordinary people who had lived extraordinary lives. Over the course of the evening, the presenter, Eamonn Andrews would read the 'victim's' life story from it, introducing friends and family on to the stage throughout the programme to talk about the celebrity. Following the show, the red book would be rebound (as here) to hold stills from the show as a memento for the celebrity of the night.

## **2.**

### **Portrait photographs**

Two portrait photographs of Arnold Ridley  
c.1948, c.1970s

a) Photograph of Ridley believed to be 1948, when he was still writing plays, and the year *Murder Happens* was written, and in total over 300 of his plays were produced in the West End.

b) Photograph of Ridley in his late 70s/early 80s, shortly before he was cast in the role of Private Godfrey in *Dad's Army*.

These are official portrait photographs which may well have been taken for the purposes of updating Arnold Ridley's professional portfolio and therefore will have been used by his agent in getting acting roles. This is why the images look so staged.

## **3.**

### **Volume of Press Cuttings**

Relating to Ridley's time with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Plymouth Repertory Theatre, Bath Playgoers Society & the proposed Bath Repertory Theatre  
1918-1921

**Arnold Ridley began his acting career by performing on stage at the Bristol Old Vic in 1913/4 season whilst a student at Bristol University.**

He used the stage name, John Robinson, to prevent the university authorities from discovering this fact. Towards the end of the war, Ridley joined Birmingham Repertory Theatre in August 1918, where he performed small parts in productions such as *Abraham Lincoln*, *Love's Labours Lost* and *Milestones*. However, as the stage director A.E. Filmer appeared to take an instant dislike to Ridley, his acting did not progress much there and he left in 1920. Before long, he joined the Plymouth Repertory Company for the rest of the 1920/1 season.

The proposed Bath Repertory Company never really got started and it was at this time when Arnold Ridley was obliged to work as the manager of his father's boot shop in Bath, having failed to find work as an actor. He spent his evenings writing plays – still being attracted to the theatre, and this was to be the turning point, with the script of *The Ghost Train*.

#### **4.**

**Lance Corporal Arnold Ridley, 6<sup>th</sup> Somerset Light Infantry**  
Photograph showing Arnold Ridley in the uniform of the  
Somerset Light Infantry during WW1  
1915

Arnold Ridley served in Prince Albert's Somerset Light Infantry (13<sup>th</sup> Foot) in the First World War. He volunteered on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1914, the day after war was declared, but was rejected on medical grounds. Later he volunteered again in the summer of 1915 when it had become obvious that the war was going to be longer than first thought and this time he was accepted as a Private No. 20481 in the Somerset Light Infantry but was promoted to Lance Corporal during the conflict.

He suffered a number of injuries to left arm and hand, and had been wounded 3 times by the autumn of 1916. He was eventually discharged wounded from the army in 1917.

[The archives of the Somerset Light Infantry can be found at the Somerset Record Office, Taunton]

## **5.**

### **Order of Service and Dedication**

For the funeral service of Arnold Ridley  
29<sup>th</sup> March 1984

**“One of the ironies of Arnold's life is that...many people will only remember him for his role in ‘Dad's Army’ but I wonder, how many will recall that he was the author of over 30 West End stage successes.”**

Arnold Ridley died on 12<sup>th</sup> March 1984, in hospital in London. He had spent the last years of his life, at Denville Hall, Northwood, a home for ‘retired theatricals’, supported by the profession.

The funeral service was held at St. Anne's Parish Church, Highgate, to which these items refer.

He was cremated at Golder's Green Cemetery and his ashes buried at his parents' grave in Bath, with his inscription being added to the headstone. Later Althea's, Arnold's wife, ashes were also buried there, with her own tablet at the foot of the grave.

## **6.**

### **Programme for *Peril at End House***

1 May 1940

### **Playbill for *Peril at End House***

22 April 1940

### **Agreement between Agatha Mallowan and Arnold Ridley**

Regarding permission to adapt *Peril at End House*

18 July 1938

**“The play is adapted by Arnold (“Ghost Train”) Ridley from an Agatha Christie novel. He has preserved, with some reverence, all details of the delicate weave of the novelist’s conversational clue and counter clue. There is more of the jig-saw than the penny dreadful here.”**

Arnold Ridley adapted Agatha Christie’s novel, *Peril at End House* for the stage following being invalided out of the army in WW2.

The story features Hercule Poirot, the 7<sup>th</sup> novel to do so, with the usual twists and turns and puzzles to be expected from an Agatha Christie novel and with a surprising turn of events at the end – it received favourable reviews when the book was first published, as did the play, with critics agreed that the adaptation was faithful to the original novel.

The formal agreement, shown here, between Arnold Ridley and Agatha Mallowan (Agatha Christie) is for the adaptation of the novel into the play. This wasn't the first adaptation that Ridley had undertaken but it was perhaps the one where the original was best known.

## **7.**

### **Programmes for *The Archers***

Bob Kennedy and Maurice Kennedy present *The Archers*  
September 1953

### **Photograph for *The Archers***

Arnold Ridley as Doughy Hood  
4 February 1967

For a short time Arnold Ridley appeared in the long-running BBC4 radio show *The Archers*, where he played the character Doughy Hood, the baker, in the late 1950s-early 1960s.

A spin-off from the popular radio show was this stage show with a number of the well known characters appearing. In this version, Ridley played Walter Gabriel.

It was not particularly well received by the critics, although Ridley himself was considered to be worthy of praise.

The radio show began in 1951, originally described as “an everyday story about country folk”, and is still on air today. With audiences in excess of one million it is the most listened to non-news programme on the radio and is the longest running soap opera in the world, in any medium.

## **8.**

## **Daily Mirror Medal**

Presented to Arnold Ridley 'for services to Television Entertainment'

c.1977

## ***Dad's Army* arm band**

Prop from the television show

c.1970s

This medal was awarded to Arnold Ridley around 1977, when *Dad's Army* was coming to an end, for his services to 'Television Entertainment'.

Private Charles Godfrey was portrayed in *Dad's Army* as an amiable but vague old man, constantly asking to 'be excused' on account of his weak bladder.

There are some interesting parallels with Ridley's own life. Godfrey was awarded the Military Medal (MM) in WW1 for saving lives on the battlefield as a conscientiously-objecting Medical Orderly; ironically, Ridley was recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) in WW1 but did not receive it. He was recommended after making his way back to British lines with a number of other men after being stranded in no man's land for three days with the lines changing daily. The other men were recommended for, and received, the MM, but Ridley, as a Lance-Corporal, and therefore an officer had to be recommended for the DCM and was turned down.

In 1982 Arnold Ridley was awarded an OBE in the New Year's Honours List 'for services to the theatre', so he was recognised at last, although for his peace-time exploits and not those of the war.

## **Photographs**

Arnold Ridley as Private Godfrey in *Dad's Army*  
c.1970s

**The television show *Dad's Army* first aired in July 1968 and ran for 9 series, with the last episode on 13 November 1977.**

The programme followed a group of Local Defence Volunteers (men who for various reasons could not enlist to fight in the regular army) – later the Home Guard – attempting to ‘do their bit’ for the war effort without having real enemies to fight.

The show was written by, and based on the experiences of, Jimmy Perry who, together with producer David Croft brought to life this improbable comedy. A hit from the start, the show spawned a film, 1971, a stage show (revue), 1975-1976 and 3 series on radio, 1974-1975.

The main characters, who appeared in all 80 episodes, were played by Arthur Lowe (Captain Mainwaring), John Le Mesurier (Sergeant Wilson), Clive Dunn (Corporal Jones), John Laurie (Private Frazer), Ian Lavender (Private Pike) and Arnold Ridley (Private Godfrey), with a host of other characters to support the cast.

## **10.**

### **Programme**

*Dad's Army* stage show, Alhambra Theatre, Bradford  
3-15 May 1976

Following the success of the television programme, Bernard Delfont commissioned its writers Jim Perry and David Croft a revue of *Dad's Army* for the stage in 1975.

It appeared as *Dad's Army: A Nostalgic Music and Laughter Show of Britain's Finest Hour*. It included musical numbers, famous scenes from the show and individual turns for each of the cast members, including Private Godfrey (Arnold Ridley).

The show opening in Billingham, County Durham in 1975, before transferring to the West End, to Shaftesbury Theatre in October of that year. This programme is from the UK tour of the show in 1976.

The show was revived in 2004-2005, starring Jon English, and toured Australia and New Zealand.

## **11.**

### **Typescript of *The Ghost Train***

Author's final version, with handwritten annotations  
c.1924

### **Handwritten scripts of *The Ghost Train***

Original script written by Arnold Ridley, in several notebooks  
c.1920s

*The Ghost Train* was Ridley's biggest hit on the stage. It is said that somewhere in the world the play is being performed every night.

The plot of the play revolves around a group of passengers stranded at an isolated station where the ghost of a train is said to have been heard and the appearance of which portends death. Later it is discovered that the train is actually smuggling arms (by whom changes regularly to keep up with modern events) and that the story of the ghost train had been invented to keep people away from the station at night.

Arnold Ridley had the inspiration for the play when he used to regularly have to wait for hours at the rural Mangotsfield train

station (just outside Bristol) in the early hours of the morning waiting for a connection to Bath, having caught the night train from Birmingham.

Ridley often wrote his plays out in long hand in series of notebooks before typing them up to send to his agent. The notebooks seen here are the original version of the script of *The Ghost Train*.

## 12.

### **Author's notes**

Detail on how *The Ghost Train* should be produced  
c.1924

After seeing various productions of *The Ghost Train*, Arnold Ridley made these notes on how the play should be produced. He felt that it was essential to play it straight in order to make it funny, stating:

“Sincerity is all important. Play The Train as nearly as possible as it was produced in 1925 and it will be as big a success as it then was. An attempt to ‘send it up’ will spell failure”.

He also believed that it was necessary to use live effects and make it a period production, as “It has been proved over and over again that records – however good they are – don’t come off.”

The show opened at Brighton’s Theatre Royal in 1925, at the beginning of a provincial tour where it did well and was received enthusiastically by those who saw it.

Ridley sat in the same box at the Theatre Royal, Brighton, with Althea, his wife, alongside him this time, in a revival of the play in June, 1971. Interestingly, this time starring his future *Dad’s Army* co-star Ian Lavender.

## 13.

## **Production photographs from *The Ghost Train***

Photographs from productions at St. Martin's Theatre (?) and Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford (?)

c.1920s, c.1971

*The Ghost Train* had a long run at St. Martin's Theatre, London at the beginning of its life, following its initial provincial tours. The first of these production photographs shows a scene from an early production, believed to be at St. Martin's Theatre.

The second image is from a much later production, indicating the enduring nature of this play. This photograph is believed to be of a production in Guildford, in the early 1970s with Arnold Ridley playing the part of the station master.

Ridley actually played all the male roles in the play at various points in his career and in numerous productions. He joked once that when he first played the station master he had to be made up to look older, then later in his career he had to be made up to look younger!

Ridley met his wife, the actress Althea Parker, on an ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association, est. 1939) tour of *The Ghost Train* in which they were both starring.

## **14.**

### **Novels of *The Ghost Train***

2 novels, one in English and one in Italian, adapted from the play by Ruth Alexander

1927

Such was the popularity of the play, that it was turned into a novel published just 4 years later. The novel was written by Ruth Alexander, although Ridley's name also appeared on the front of the book. *The Ghost Train* the novel appeared in many different

languages and in different countries, as shown by the Italian version seen here.

The play was also made into a film in 1931, starring Jack Hulbert, and re-made in 1941, starring Arthur Askey. In addition the BBC have made both a television (broadcast in 1937) and radio version of the play.

## **15.**

### **Programmes for *The Ghost Train***

A selection of programmes from the numerous productions of *The Ghost Train*  
1925-1992

*The Ghost Train* was a very successful play in its time and has enjoyed continued revivals in this country and around the world, during the author's lifetime and beyond. It is especially a favourite of amateur groups.

The programmes here are just a selection of the 24 held in the Arnold Ridley Archive, at the Theatre Collection, and give a taste of the variety of places and companies which have produced this play on the stage.

## **16.**

### **Script for *The Wrecker***

Written by Arnold Ridley  
c.1927

**“The authors cleverly defer the answer to this latest of stage riddles – who was the wrecker?”**

Arnold Ridley wrote *The Wrecker* as a follow-up to *The Ghost Train*, and it again featured a train, this time believed to be self-aware and malevolent by its driver. It also featured the wonderful sound effects, made famous in the latter, to simulate the tumultuous crashing of the train at the end of *The Wrecker*.

This play was never as successful as *The Ghost Train* but it did fairly well, playing at St. Martin's Theatre, London for 165 performances.

The playbills for *The Wrecker* always carried the quote "Twice as good as the Ghost Train" – Daily Mail 25<sup>th</sup> October 1927. The story behind this quote is a good one. The critic from the Daily Mail, William Pollock, had travelled from London to Brighton to report on the opening of the show. Knowing that the rehearsals had been poor, Bernard Merival, Ridley's agent and friend, took Pollock to the circle bar and kept him there all evening, so that when he offered to phone in Pollock's report on his behalf, the offer was accepted – Merivale's opening line was "Let me put on record that *The Wrecker* is twice as good as *The Ghost Train*"!

## **17.**

### **Programmes**

Two programmes for Arnold Ridley's *The Wrecker*

24 Oct 1927, Theatre Royal, Brighton

6 Dec 1927, New Theatre, London

### **Novel of *The Wrecker***

Adapted by Ruth Alexander from the play by Arnold Ridley

April 1928

The first production of *The Wrecker* was staged at the Theatre Royal, Brighton, and opened in Oct 1927, venue for the first production of *The Ghost Train* three years earlier.

This play, the second of Ridley's to feature trains with a criminal sub-plot, was also transformed into a novel, again by Ruth Alexander who had undertaken the work on *The Ghost Train*.

*The Wrecker* was made into a silent film, released in 1929, starring Carlyle Blackwell, Joseph Striker and Benita Hume and directed by Géza von Bolváry. The crash scene at the end of the story was filmed at Herriard, Hampshire, on the Basingstoke and Alton Light Railway where a railway carriage was run down an incline to collide with a lorry.

## **18.**

### **Tour Takings, *The Wrecker***

Volume showing takings for the tour covering the UK and Ireland

1927-1928

This book gives financial information for two of the provincial tours undertaken by *The Wrecker*. The first tour took place from the opening on 24 October 1927 to 2 April 1928 visited Brighton, Liverpool, Portsmouth, and Cardiff. The second was known as *The Red Tour*, and visited Westcliff, Cambridge, Woolwich, Blackpool, Ayr, York, Liverpool, Dublin, Cork, Preston and Birmingham between 16 Jan and 2 April 1928. Following this, the play transferred to London.

During this period, it was common for plays to be tried in the provinces before being transferred to the West End with any

necessary changes, as provincial audiences were thought to be more open to new theatre.

## 19.

### **Article entitled ‘Stage Effects and Noises Off’**

Written by Arnold Ridley, detailing sound effects of *The Ghost Train* and *The Wrecker*, in ‘Theatre and Stage’ journal  
21 October 1933

**“Yet to produce those is simple if salient rule is kept in mind. It is merely this: illusion on the stage and suggestion off.”**

The spectacular sound effects used in *The Ghost Train* were repeated and built upon in *The Wrecker*. Arnold Ridley believed that these effects were important, indeed integral to the success of the story and the suspension of disbelief of the audience – in this article he explains what he means by stating that what is happening on- and off-stage must match. For example, if there is a storm, then the noises occurring off-stage must be matched by the characters appearing on-stage wet and wind-swept in order for the full effect to be made.

“What is meant by stage effects? Obviously one of three things, or, better still, *all* of three things: noises off, stage lighting and stage dressing.”