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**KAIROS PRESS**

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# CHAMPIONS OF YOUR CENTURY 1900-1999

by Alan Forrest

As chosen by readers of the  
**Leicester Mercury**



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in association with

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Top row: Elvis Presley – photo courtesy BMG Ent.; Celine Dion – photo courtesy of David Pomona, Pomona Music; Laurel and Hardy; Morecambe and Wise – photo courtesy BBC; John Cleese as Basil Fawlty – photo courtesy BBC.  
Second Row: Shawdaddywaddy; Dalmation; Joanna Lumley as Patsy in Absolutely Fabulous – photo courtesy BBC; Great Dane puppies – photo from Leicester Mercury.  
Third Row: Orson Welles in Citizen Kane, RKO Radio Pictures; Paul Merton in The Lift – photo courtesy Carlton International Media Ltd; Whitney Houston – photo courtesy BMG Arista; Queen Elizabeth II – photo from Leicester Mercury; Michael Jackson – photo courtesy EMI.  
Fourth Row: Marilyn Monroe in River Of No Return – photo courtesy BBC; Tommy Cooper; Winston Churchill, photo from Northcliffe Newspapers; Judy Garland and Fred Astaire.

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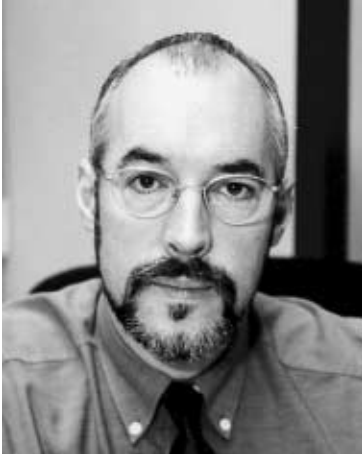
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## ***Foreword***

People have always loved those conversations (arguments?) that revolve around trying to identify who was the best actor, singer, politician - or whatever - of the century.

As the millennium approached it was impossible for us to resist the temptation to invite every Leicester Mercury reader to join in the debate – and that was the start of our popular Your Century columns.



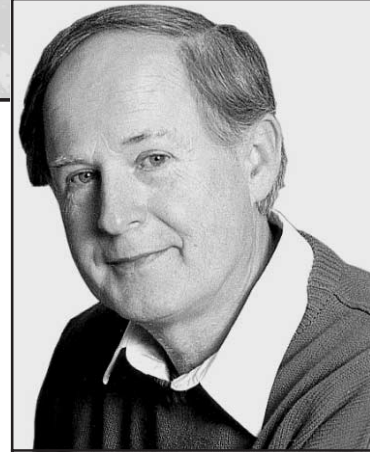
**Nick Carter, Editor-in-chief of the Leicester Mercury**

In fact they were so popular that we decided to bring together these highlights, featuring the best of the pages. Whatever your opinion on comedians, film stars, pop singers, novelists, rock bands or breeds of dogs - you will find something to please (or displease) you in this volume.

Whether you sit and read it by yourself or start one of those arguments with family and friends, we hope you enjoy the book.

And rest assured that the Leicester Mercury will continue to keep you at the heart of everything as we enter the new millennium.

## A Letter from the Author



Alan Forrest

The Century is best summed up by its cinema stars and the things they said. In 1939 in *Gone With The Wind*, Scarlett O'Hara asked Rhett Butler: "But if you go, what will I do, what will become of me?"

Clark Gable replied, "Frankly, my dear...." And it became the top cinema Catch Phrase of our Century - until Sean Connery arrived as James Bond and a new Catch Phrase champion was declared. For many years I longed to see them together in one film. Sean Connery would burst in and declare: "My name's Bond, James Bond." And Clark Gable would reply: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn!"

It's amazing how a Catch Phrase can make your fortune. For example, in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* Hugh Grant became an instant star simply by saying, "excellent....excellent", along, of course, with whatever he muttered each time he overslept on the morning of a wedding.

The real Catch Phrase of the Century would have been "Play it again, Sam," except that nobody actually said it in *Casablanca*. Ingrid Bergman said: "Play it, Sam, play *As Time Goes By*." It's a beautiful film and I wouldn't change a word of it but all this could have been avoided if he had simply replied: "I'm sorry but if I play it for you now, pretty soon you'll say 'play it **again**, Sam' and then everyone will be saying it."

The great Catch Phrase from David Lean's masterpiece, *Lawrence of Arabia*, comes when Peter O'Toole and Bedouin leader Omar Sharif are riding across the desert to capture Akaba. After many hours on a camel in scorching heat, O'Toole begins to fall asleep and is in danger of falling out of the saddle. Omar Sharif wakes him with a flick of his whip and warns: "You were drifting, English."

Very handy if you take your husband to the opera and he nods off and starts to fall forward over the lady in front of him. Hit him on the shoulder and give him the stern warning, "you were drifting, English!"

A proposed Catch Phrase that misfired was in *Working Girl* in which Melanie Griffith is fed up with her pushy boyfriend and yells: "I am not steak. You cannot order me!" I've never heard anyone say that. By contrast, in the film her boyfriend replies: "I've got priorities, too. When you get yourself together, maybe we can talk. Right now we're history!" Almost by accident this has become a major Catch Phrase of our time.

A woman told me her young daughter was phoned for what would be her first date. The girl was very excited until the lad told her the cinema film he had chosen. After a brief argument she hung up on him. She told her mother: "Perhaps he'll call back and see it my way but right now we're history!"

Clearly the films have had a major impact on our lives over the past 100 years. In any event, may the force be with you in the new Century.

alan

# ***Introduction***

If you always read the last page of a novel first, to see how it comes out, well then by all means check out the final eight chapters for the election results.

However, why spoil the fun? We hope you will start at the beginning and follow along, step by step, to see what your friends and neighbours had to say about the various candidates as we progressed from lists of possible contenders to the selection of the top ten finalists in each category.

## **WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT**

The search for the sixteen Champions of Your Century featured in this book took four stages to achieve.

First, we listed some obvious candidates and asked your opinion of them.

Second, we asked you to suggest other contenders for the title.

Third, based upon your letters and Internet messages, we were able to determine the finalists. Many of these letters are included in the book.

All three of these stages are outlined in the first thirteen chapters.

Then we held an election by telephone and ballot.

When all the votes were counted, we announced the results, which are printed in full in the final eight chapters. There are two champions revealed in each of these chapters for a total of 16 which explains the format of the end of the book.

Some day you will be at a party and someone will cleverly name all the seven dwarfs from Snow White. However, once you've finished reading this book you will be able to top that performance and amaze your friends by naming all 16 Champions of Your Century. This may lead to fame and fortune or at least a well-deserved round of applause.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author would like to thank Robin Stevenson for the imaginative design of all the pages, Geoff Sanders for the attractive cover, Steve England for his invaluable advice and assistance, particularly in the search through many files for photographs, Eileen Bray for her excellent secretarial skills, and Leicester Mercury Editor Nick Carter for believing in the Your Century column and this book.

Other notes of appreciation go to Brian Court, EMI Music Publishing and the Gracie Fields Rochdale Museum for assisting in the search for and location of a Gracie Fields song, to Aeron Thomas for helping with the Dylan Thomas photograph, and to the British Phonographic Industry Ltd for their invaluable assistance.

Almost all the photographs used in this book are either publicity pictures issued to promote films and television programmes or the Leicester Mercury's own news photographs. Full credit to the copyright owner has been included with each picture wherever copyright could be determined. We gratefully offer full acknowledgement to them all, with apologies for any errors or omissions.

*I am pleased to dedicate this book to MAUREEN MILGRAM  
who first suggested the idea and then helped to  
make it happen at every step along the way.*

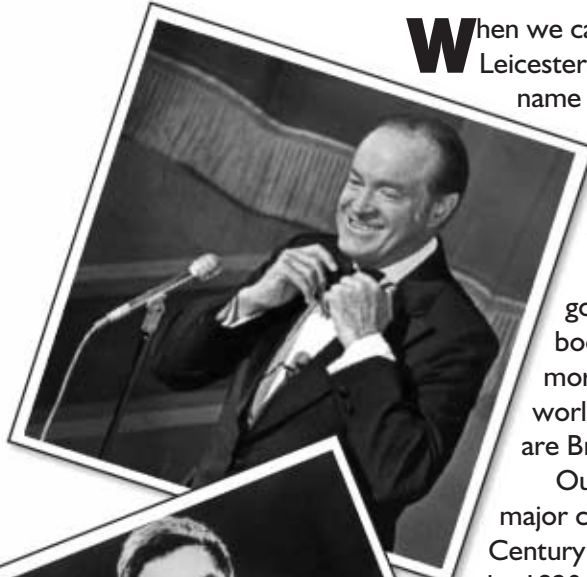
**Alan Forrest**

# PART ONE: THE CONTENDERS

## Chapter One

*Champions of Your Century : 1900 – 1999*

### MALE COMEDIANS



**W**hen we called an election in Leicestershire and Rutland to name the greatest comedian of the Century, we knew from the beginning it was going to be close.

But it was also going to be a great boost for national morale. Almost all of the world's top comedians are British.

Our search for the major comedians of the Century begins in America in the 1920s where Charlie Chaplin, born and raised in England, was the most famous comedy star of his time, thanks to his great success in cinema films. He was best-known for his wild chases and, in the Gold Rush, for his charming little tabletop dance with two forks and rolls, for legs and feet.



The other towering comedian of the early years in America was Bob Hope. He was born in England but his family emigrated when he

was a young lad.

As he tells the story: "I left England as soon as I realised I could never become King."

In his own way, he always remained profoundly British. He enjoyed surprising Americans every now and then with a crisp upperclass "thank you" which he pronounced "then kyou", and was a hit in the film *Fancy Pants* in which he played an English butler hired to add a bit of tone to a wild west cattle ranch.

Another British comedy genius was Stan Laurel who teamed up with the American Oliver Hardy as Laurel and Hardy.

All these Brits Abroad rose to fame because of the power of the American films.

Here in Britain there were many other early comedians as good or better who were legends in their own land but not widely known around the world.

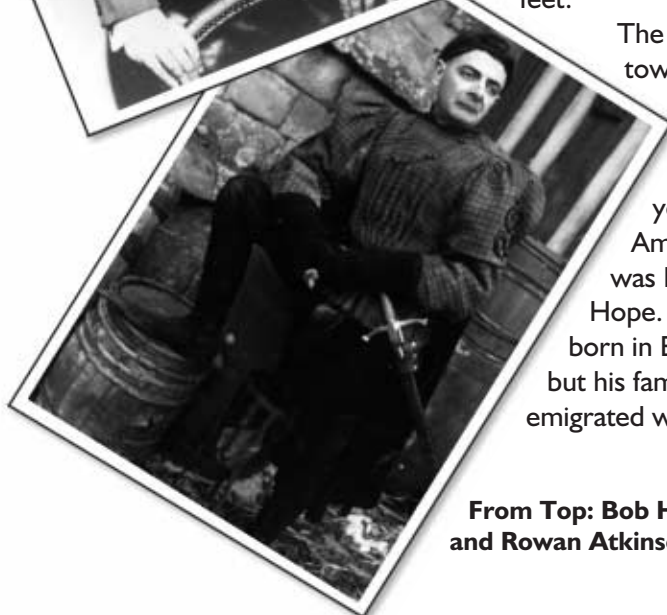
The chief of these is Max Miller, undoubtedly the king of stand-up comedy.

He often performed in Leicester and many people here remember him fondly.

He impressed almost everyone, including Eric Morecambe who said: "He's the greatest, he's my favourite."

Victoria Wood said, "There will never be another one like him."

Another fan was Frankie Howerd who in 1991 was using a



**From Top: Bob Hope in 1977; Peter Sellers** (photo courtesy Channel 4); **and Rowan Atkinson as 'The Black Adder'** (photo courtesy BBC).

## Chapter Four

### Champions of Your Century : 1900 – 1999

# BREEDS OF DOG



**Above: Labrador puppies**

**Below: Clockwise from top left – a King Charles Spaniel; Rodders the Great Dane with tiny pal, Sunny, from Sharnford; Cocker Spaniel, Colinwood Silver Lariat; and Xolochi, the Mexican Hairless, from Barlestone.** (Photos from Leicester Mercury)

**W**hen your troubles almost overwhelm you, it's nice to know you have a friend with a cold nose and a waggily tail. You will always be greeted with a smile.

One of our most delightful categories was the search for the people's favourite breed of dog of the Century.

Dogs are the centre of so many wonderful anecdotes.

For example, I will always remember the newspaper account of Sam, a Border Collie, walking in the park with his elderly master. The man placed a blanket on the grass so they could sit down and rest.

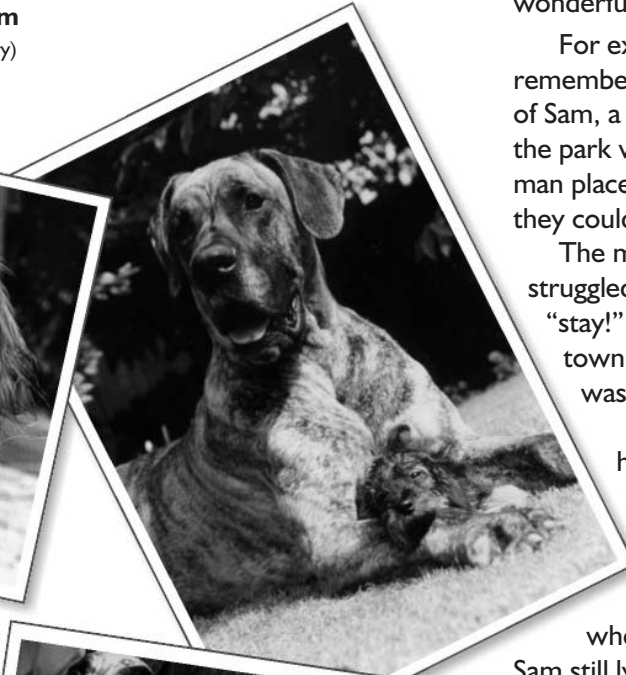
The man suddenly took ill. He struggled to his feet, told his dog "stay!" and then staggered into town where he collapsed and was rushed to hospital.

Three days later, when he came to, he asked his family to make sure his dog was all right. It took a full day of searching before they discovered where he was. They found Sam still lying on the blanket in the park.

They tried to get the dog to come home but he wouldn't move except, every ten minutes, he would stand up, gaze into the distance and then lie down again, whining.

He refused to leave the blanket, even when offered food.

Hearing about this, the old man insisted upon being released from hospital, and, with the help of his





## Chapter Ten

*Champions of Your Century : 1900 – 1999*

# POP SINGERS

**O**ur search for the greatest pop singers of the Century began in May, 1998, at the Leicester Mercury's Transport Pageant at Abbey Park.

A total of 1,348 people came to our election booth to nominate their favourite performers.

It was a very happy afternoon.

Two women of uncertain age were all smiles. One of them said, "I'm always delighted to have the chance to vote for Elvis Presley. I hope he wins."

Her friend gave her a good-natured push. "Don't you dare! I want Cliff Richard to win."

There was more pushing, shoving and laughing as they put their ballots in the box. They confided they had reached a happy compromise. Elvis and Cliff were first and second on one ballot and second and first on the other.

A few minutes later, three lads, about ten years old, came to the booth.

One of them announced: "I want to vote for the Spice Girls."

Hearing that the vote was for individual singers, not

groups, he replied: "But I'm in love with all of them."



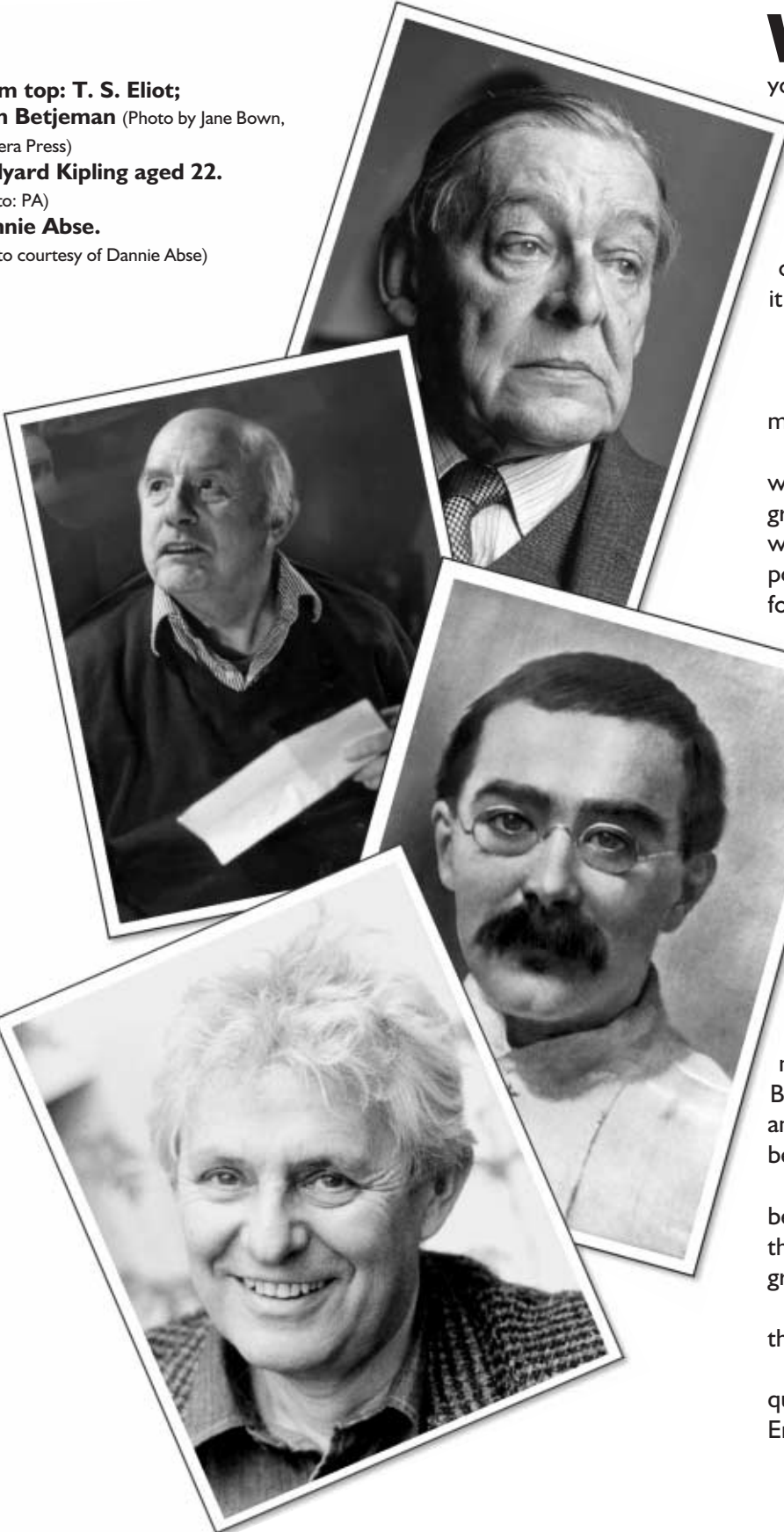
**From top: Freddie Mercury** (Queen Productions Limited, photo by Neal Preston); **Elton John at the Empire Theatre, Liverpool, in 1976; Tom Jones; Phil Collins in concert with Genesis in 1980** (photo from Leicester Mercury); **Michael Jackson in 1987.** (Photo courtesy of EMI).

## Chapter Eleven

### Champions of Your Century : 1900 – 1999

# POETS

**From top: T. S. Eliot;**  
**John Betjeman** (Photo by Jane Bown,  
 Camera Press)  
**Rudyard Kipling aged 22.**  
 (photo: PA)  
**Dannie Abse.**  
 (Photo courtesy of Dannie Abse)



**W**hen you enter the dining car of the London to Leicester train you never know who your travelling companion will turn out to be. I located the only vacant seat and found I was sitting opposite a prosperous executive who was engrossed in reading the back page of his newspaper. Angrily he tossed it aside.

"It's all very depressing," he said.

"Is it?"

"Yes, the sports results, the markets, and look at the weather."

I tried to cheer him up. "The weather's not perfect but Britain is a great place to live. Everyone agrees we have the world's best novelists, poets, cricket players and footballers."

He thought about it for a moment and then laughed. "Well, I suppose two out of four is not bad."

He preferred not to talk about sports at the moment. But as for literature, ah, that was something quite encouraging.

"You take Dylan Thomas, for example. Our family have enjoyed listening to his records for years. And we have read aloud many poems by Eliot, Auden, Betjeman, Larkin, Spender, Kipling and Rupert Brooke. Yes, it's great to be British."

I then asked the question I have been asking all my life. "Among all these poets, who do you think is the greatest?"

He shrugged. "I like so many. I think you should ask an expert."

Taking his advice I later put the question to Nicholas Everett of the English Department, University of

## Chapter Thirteen

### Champions of Your Century : 1900 – 1999

# CINEMA STARS



I met an American at a party who was going on and on about Elizabeth Taylor.

“England isn’t the only country with a royal family, you know. We have our own royalty. In every sense of the word Elizabeth Taylor is like a queen to us.”

I countered with, “Yes, but...”

There was no stopping him. “For a time Richard Burton was like a king in America. And then there’s Cary Grant. I’ve always thought of him as a prince. It’s the same thing. We have our own royal family.”

I finally got a chance. “There’s just one small problem. Your American royal family is all British. Elizabeth Taylor and Cary Grant were born and raised in England and, of course, Richard Burton was from Wales.”

He nodded. “Yes, that’s true. But, then, everyone knows we import many of our best things from Britain.”

It was a handsome admission. I responded in the same spirit.

“However, your main point is absolutely right. For most of this Century, your top cinema stars have been very much like a royal family for America.”

He was all smiles. It was clear the special relationship between Britain and America had been preserved. He even offered to buy me a drink.

#### From Top:

**Ingrid Bergman** plays **Gladys Aylwood** in *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* (20th Century Fox) (photo courtesy BBC);

**Meryl Streep** in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1981, United Artists);

**Vivien Leigh** as **Scarlett O’Hara** in *Gone With The Wind* (1939, Selznick Int’l Pictures);

**Marilyn Monroe**, in her unfinished film *Something’s Got to Give* (20th Century Fox);

**Greta Garbo** in *Grand Hotel* (Picture from Granada Television).

***PART TWO:***

**THE CHAMPIONS  
OF YOUR CENTURY  
1900-1999**

***“And here are the results. . .”***

***But of course you will have to buy the  
book to find out what they are. . .***

