

## Harry H Corbett – An actor whose career was ruined by one role

Written by Andy Owen



It might surprise you to know, that at one point, Harry was considered to be the British equivalent of Marlon Brando.

Yes, he was THAT good.

But a character called Harold Steptoe got in the way...

Harry's story is a very interesting one.

He was born on 28th February 1925, in Rangoon, Burma, the son of a British Army officer. Tragedy hit him early when his mother died of dysentery, aged only 42.

Harry was only eighteen months old.

He was sent back to England to be raised by an aunt in Wythenshawe, Manchester. His interest in the theatre started early, when as a child, he was taken to the Manchester Opera House and the local Coronation Cinema.

Interviewed in 1967, he recalled that time:

*"I used to spend many a glorious hour in the dear old lovable Coronation Cinema in Wythenshawe. It was a dream palace. I was reared on those marvellous films of the thirties.*

*I idolised all and everything - and that's where the spark first flew off the forge, I suppose."*

He was a pretty smart boy and passed all his scholarship exams at primary school for entry to Chorlton Grammar. However, he was not able to take up his place there - and instead, attended Sharston Secondary School.

Pretty much straight out of school, Harry enlisted in the Royal Marines during the Second World War, and served in the Home Fleet on the heavy cruiser *HMS Devonshire*.

After VJ Day in 1945, still only 21, he was posted to the Far East, where he was involved in quelling unrest in New Guinea.



He reportedly killed two Japanese soldiers there, whilst engaged in hand-to-hand fighting.

He was then posted to Tonga, which he hated.

So much so in fact, that he deserted and remained in Australia before handing himself in to the Military Police.

His military service left him with a damaged bladder following an infection and a red mark on his eye caused by a thorn, which was not treated until later in his life

Clearly, he was not as comfortable with army life, as his father had been.

*"I thought the entire set-up was wonderful. But it was just that I was completely miscast. I couldn't really believe it was all happening. I could march perfectly well with a rifle and all, but when the band started to play, I felt it was all so idiotic, I'd curl up with laughter and this did not seem to be appreciated.*

*I was as keen as most to get out of uniform after the war.*

*Me as an armed force was a bit comical anyway. I think this was mutually appreciated and eventually the day dawned when it was all over. They pressed 60 "nicker" into my grubby hand and pushed me gently out into the real world."*

Following his discharge, Corbett trained as a radiographer, but he gave it up, because he simply couldn't afford the training.

*"I wanted to be a doctor at one time. Fancied myself very strongly as a do-gooding type healer of the sick. But, of course, it's a long and expensive business and I didn't have the money - or the brains to compensate for not having the money.*

*I also wanted to be an actor. So there I was, out in civvy street again. Out of one mob and into another mob and the only difference was the shape of the uniform.*

*But although there was nothing about me that was important, I felt great personal happiness. I owned nothing yet the world belonged to me. Great days..."*



He was drifting and couldn't find his road. He was a grocer's delivery boy, a plumber, a male nurse and a car sprayer.

*"I would take job after job as the mood struck me. I built prefabs, stacked timber, made electric switches. I changed with the weather. When the sun came out, I burst out with it. When it got cold, I pulled a roof in over me somewhere and eventually I became a partner in a two-man car spraying business.*

*"I worked hard at this, because I was the half-boss.*

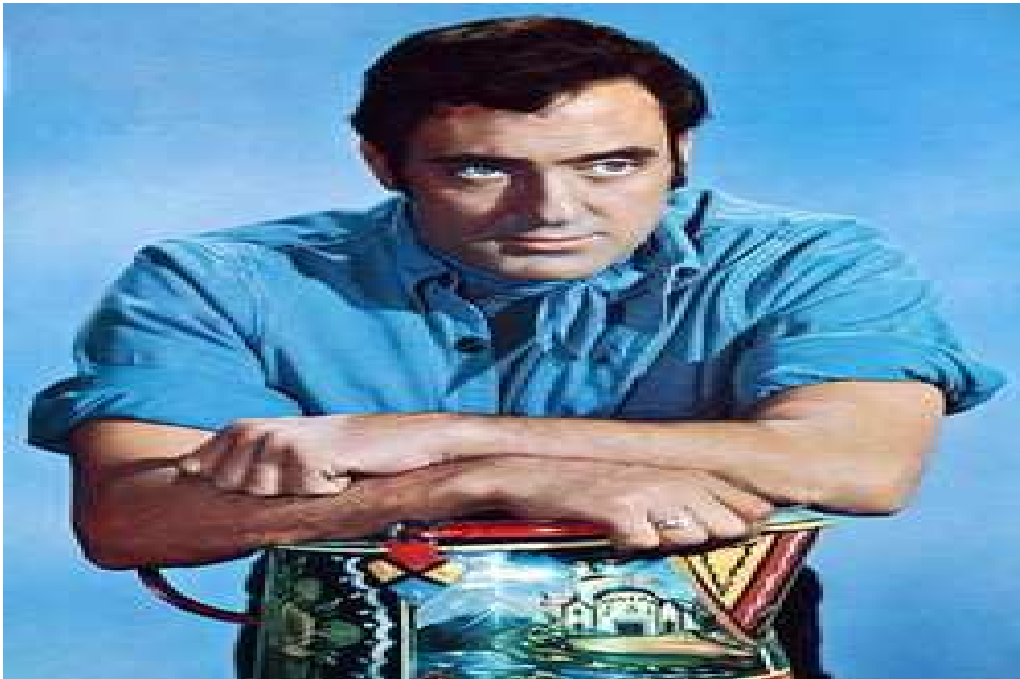
*There was only me and this other fellow and there was money in it. I sprayed and sprayed and sprayed. I sprayed when the dawn came up, when night fell-and when there wasn't a single car around-I still sprayed. From this developed my colourful language, or at least my colourful language developed when the lease ran out. We were making a lot of money at the time. However, to wash away the spray I would occasionally toddle off to a pub or two. And there I met some of the real characters of the world. Pub musicians. And they were extremely valuable to me when my highly lucrative half-business folded because one of them suggested I had a go at the local drama company. They knew I was mad keen on acting. I just needed the right shove at the right time."*

The advice he acted on, was to change his life.

He joined the Chorlton Repertory Company and his first job was playing the front legs of a cow in a pantomime.

His first 'real' role was as a detective, and he was paid two pounds, ten shillings a week. But, as his talent became recognised, he graduated to Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop at London's Stratford East.

Whilst there, he started performing classical works from Shakespeare to Ibsen, and his performances were getting noticed. He soon enjoyed a reputation as a rising star.



Around this time, he added the 'H' to his name to avoid confusion with the child entertainer and Sooty creator Harry Corbett.

When asked what the 'H' stood for, he would always say - "hennyfink", a Cockney pronunciation of "anything".

In 1956, he appeared on stage in *The Family Reunion* at the Phoenix Theatre in London. After that, he appeared regularly in films and TV dramas, including *Armchair Theatre* and *Robin Hood*, coming to public attention as a serious, intense performer, with great versatility and talent.

In 1962, scriptwriters Galton and Simpson, who had been successful with Hancock's Half Hour, invited Corbett to appear in "The Offer", an episode of BBC Comedy Playhouse.

He played Harold Steptoe, a rag-and-bone man who lived with his widower father Albert, in a dilapidated house attached to their junkyard and stable for their cart horse, Hercules.

At the time he was offered the role, Corbett was playing Macbeth at the Bristol Old Vic.

*"I never envisaged in a thousand years going into light entertainment," said Corbett. "I looked at what was on television and the only thing making any, I don't know, social comment was the Hancocks, the Eric Sykes, this kind of half hour comedy programme, you see.*

*And ooh, I did envy them. Anyway, ...this thing about the rag and bone men thumped through the door. I read it, and immediately wired back - 'delicious, delighted, can't wait to work on it.'*

During rehearsals for 'The Offer' Tom Sloan, the Head of Light Entertainment at the BBC, saw the enormous potential and felt it had the making of a full-blown hit comedy series.

But the writers themselves didn't want to commit to another series at that time.



They had just come out of the end of a ten-year stint on Hancock and the last thing they wanted, was to get tied down to another situation comedy.

In spite of the fact that the boys declined the offer, Tom Sloan was convinced they would change their minds.

He kept on at them throughout the rest of the Comedy Playhouse series.

Eventually they said they'd only do it, if Wilfrid Brambell and Harry H Corbett agreed to do it, too. Ray Galton said many years later, that he thought they never would -but when it was offered to the two actors, they both jumped at the chance to make another five episodes.

Steptoe and Son established itself in the nation's heart and consciousness and was enjoyed in the nation's living rooms every week.

The programme became a national institution and a huge success, with weekly viewing figures of well over 20 million.

Programme makers would give their right arm for half of those numbers these days.



When the series went to colour, Steptoe and Son produced some of its most classic episodes. And, in 1972 Steptoe and Son hit the big screen.

The film was moderately successful - enough for a sequel to be made the following year, called Steptoe and Son Ride Again.

The last episode of Steptoe and Son was the 1974 Christmas special.

Following that, Harry's career nosedived. There were hardly any offers of work and he was rarely seen on television for 3 years.

These were desperate times for Harry.

He struggled to cope with the massive contrast of being a favourite of the nation, to someone no one wanted.

There was a brief respite in 1976, when his contribution to drama was recognised by the Queen with an OBE.



In 1977, desperate for work and against his better judgement, he agreed to a theatre tour of Australia to do a stage version of *Steptoe and Son*.

This proved to be an unhappy affair, in part due to Wilfrid Brambell's continuing battle with alcoholism which also caused him to frequently forget his lines.

His run of bad luck continued...

He had been a heavy smoker all his life - smoking 60 cigarettes a day, according to his daughter. He suffered his first heart attack in September 1979.

Within two days of leaving hospital, he appeared in pantomime at The Churchill Theatre, Bromley.

He was then badly hurt in a car accident.

A few TV roles followed, notably *Shoestring* and *Grundy* and he appeared in the film *Silver Dream Racer* with David Essex.



His final acting role was in a 1982 episode of the Anglia Television anthology drama series *'Tales of the Unexpected'*.

On 21st March 1982, he suffered a second, and this time fatal, heart attack.



Harry H Corbett was only 57 when he died.

He is buried in the graveyard at St Michael the Archangel church at Penhurst, East Sussex.

His wife Maureen was buried alongside him in 1999.

Harry H. Corbett once said of Harold Steptoe;

*"I like the part because the man I'm playing is a failure - and failures are often of more interest in life than successes.*

*I think there's a bit of everyone in Harold. Most of us try to put on an act, often behave in a way that's foreign to us.*

*Harold makes fumbling attempts to 'get culture' by reading or listening to highbrow records, by dragging his father to exclusive restaurants and foreign films. He doesn't really succeed in kidding anyone, and somehow his failure is complete and pathetic.*

*"He has his dreams all day, and so do we.*

*It's in all of us and we never lose it. And he's a man in the grip of that terrible dilemma - how long do you stand by your duties and let life slip away from you?"*







Many people still class Harry H Corbett as one of the greatest British actors ever.

His range was immense and the pathos he displayed as Harold Steptoe was magnificent.

Try and locate "The Bargee" and watch it. His performance is immense.