

## Dad's Army entry in Mark Lewisohn's *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy*

### CREDITS

Writers Jimmy Perry/David Croft

Directors Harold Snoad (to series 8), Bob Spiers (series 9)

Producer David Croft

The unmistakable voice of Bud Flanagan singing 'Who Do You Think You Are Kidding, Mr Hitler?', a cod-Second World War propaganda singalong written especially for the series (by Jimmy Perry), introduced Dad's Army, the zenith of the British broad-comedy ensemble sitcom. Consistently good writing and a wonderful cast of old timers and newer talents combined to produce a whimsical period-piece that continues, justifiably, to be savoured.

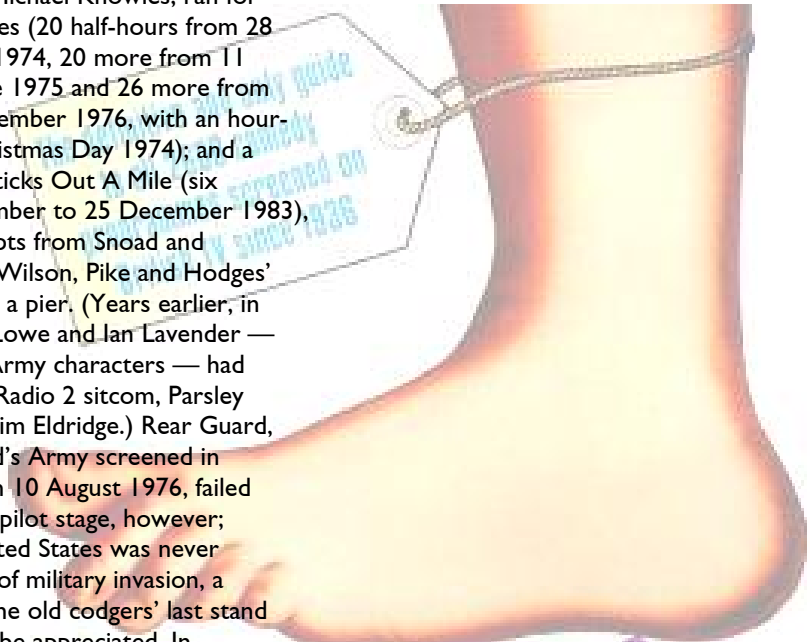
Walmington-on-Sea, an imaginary south-coast town not far from Eastbourne, was the setting for the Second World War adventures of a disparate group of men who, prevented by age or some other disability from enlisting in the services, enrolled as Local Defence Volunteers (LDV), forming part of Britain's 'last line of defence', a force which became known colloquially as 'Dad's Army'. Creator/writer Jimmy Perry had been in one such LDV group when he was 16 and based the idea upon his own experiences; it was his first sitcom. He and co-writer David Croft populated the show with a host of memorable characters, each with a recognisably different trait: the Captain, Mainwaring (pronounced Mannering), was pompous and suffered from delusions of grandeur that regularly led to his downfall; his Sergeant, Wilson, was vague and — to the perpetual annoyance of Mainwaring — cultured and public-school educated; Jones was dotty; Pike was precious; Walker was wily; Frazer was pessimistic; and Godfrey was frail. Often in opposition to them were the effete vicar, the oleaginous verger, the bullish ARP warden and the officious Colonel, Mainwaring's rival from a nearby town. All of the men had day jobs: Mainwaring was the local bank manager, Wilson his chief clerk and Pike the clerk; Jones was the local butcher; Frazer was the undertaker. The comedy arose from the bickering interplay between all these characters and the sometimes desperate attempts to solve the unlikely problems encountered by the accident-prone but determined and well-meaning platoon. A huge cache of catchphrases from the show clicked with viewers, notably Mainwaring's 'Stupid boy', aimed, with

a withering look, at Pike; Wilson's effete dispensing of military orders, such as 'Would you mind awfully falling into three lovely lines?'; Fraser's exaggeratedly Scots-accented 'We're doomed'; Hodges' heartfelt, 'Ruddy hooligans!'; Godfrey's 'Would you mind if I was excused?' as his ageing bladder necessitated yet another trip to the loo; and Jones's four gems, 'They don't like it up them', 'Handy-hock!' (German for 'Hands up!'), 'Permission to speak, sir!', and the perversely alarming 'Don't panic!'.

Dad's Army benefited from inspired casting, featuring many veterans of the business, some of whom had worked together in the past and formed professional friendships. Arthur Lowe (best known at the time as Leonard Swindley from *Coronation Street* and its sitcom spin-off *Pardon The Expression*) was originally invited to play the role of Wilson, with John Le Mesurier as Mainwaring, but they found themselves more comfortable in each other's roles. No spring chicken, Lowe was 52 when the series began and 62 when it finished, but he was a mere junior compared to some of the others — their ages at the beginning were: Le Mesurier 56, Laurie 71 and the daddy of them all, Arnold Ridley (the actor and playwright, best known beforehand as author of the stage and film favourite *The Ghost Train*), 72 at the start and 81 at the finish. Clive Dunn, who had carved a reputation by playing characters much older than himself, was merely a youthful 46 when the series began. Ironically, it was one of the youngest actors, James Beck — only 35 when the first episode aired — who died during the run of the series, shockingly young, in 1973. The subsequent series without him failed to match the brilliance of the earlier episodes, perhaps indicating how integral his slightly dodgy spiv character was to the mix.

At its height, Dad's Army was a staggering success, spawning a feature film version in 1971 (director Norman Cohen) starring the main TV cast but with Liz Fraser in the role of Mrs Pike; and a musical stage-play in 1975 at the Shaftesbury Theatre, London, in which John Bardon took the Walker role and Hamish Roughton appeared as Fraser. (A musical number from the show was performed by the cast at the 1975 Royal Variety Show, televised on 16 November 1975 by ITV.) Six members of the cast (Lowe, Le Mesurier, Laurie, Beck, Ridley and Lavender) turned up as guests in the 22 April 1971 edition of *The Morecambe And Wise Show* on BBC2. A BBC Radio 4 version of Dad's Army, adapted from the TV scripts by

Harold Snoad and Michael Knowles, ran for a total of 67 episodes (20 half-hours from 28 January to 10 June 1974, 20 more from 11 February to 24 June 1975 and 26 more from 16 March to 7 September 1976, with an hour-long special on Christmas Day 1974); and a Radio 2 sequel, *It Sticks Out A Mile* (six episodes, 20 November to 25 December 1983), again with new scripts from Snoad and Knowles, followed Wilson, Pike and Hodges' post-war pranks on a pier. (Years earlier, in 1971—72, Arthur Lowe and Ian Lavender — not in their *Dad's Army* characters — had teamed in another Radio 2 sitcom, *Parsley Sidings*, written by Jim Eldridge.) *Rear Guard*, a US version of *Dad's Army* screened in America by ABC on 10 August 1976, failed to make it past the pilot stage, however; perhaps, as the United States was never seriously in danger of military invasion, a premise depicting the old codgers' last stand was never going to be appreciated. In Britain, few series have garnered such deeply entrenched and deserved love and affection.



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