

Lucan's Life in Lincolnshire

By Kei Bailey

A monologue delivered in the style of Old Mother Riley, a comic 'dame' character created by Arthur Lucan. She is a scatty, excitable and loudmouthed charwoman who is prone to speaking her mind, stumbling over words and using malapropisms. (N.B. Any 'errors' in spelling or grammar are deliberate).

Host - Now would you please put your hands together for the incredible Old Mother Riley!

OMR - Hello there, ladles and jelly-spoons, boys and girls, allow me to introduce myself - my name is Daphne Snowdrop Bluebell Riley, better known to all and sundry as Old Mother Riley. Yes, that's right, it's me, the beautabulous star of stage and screen, famous throughout the country from John's End to the Land of Goats.

I'm here to tell you about a man who is very close to my heart, a man who came from humble beginnings in Lincolnshire but grew to become one of the greatest comic performers of the twentieth century. Arthur Lucan, a man to whom I owe everything and more.

He was born in this lovely little cottage in Sibsey, if you look carefully, you'll see it says so on that big blue plaque up there on the wall. It's not everyone who gets a blue, you know? Only them who is special and well-thought of get a plaque. As you can see, Arthur wasn't born a Lucan he was born a Towle, named after his father and mother as is traditional in most circumferences.

His father's name was Tom and his mother's name was Lucy Ann, so now you know, and they had only moved to Sibsey a few months before Arthur was born. You see, Tom was groom, and a very good one at that, and he got himself a job looking after the horses of the local doctor in Sibsey. So, before you could say, 'Mine's a milk stout', the family had upped sticks and moved to the village into this little cottage.

At the time, or thereabouts, it only had two rooms, there wasn't space to turn over a new leaf in. It only was lit by oil lamps and candles, and they had to fetch water from the communal pump in the yard. But the Towle family didn't care, it was cosy and it was home. And Sibsey . . . well moving to Sibsey and working for a doctor meant they was going up in the world. Not

only did the village have its own windmill, and one of the tallest in England at that, it also had its own railway station at the time. Fancy!

So, Arthur was born in this cottage on the 16th September 1885, but he didn't have the best start in life, poor mite. In the first week of his life, baby Arthur got the scarlet fever, not good in those days before antibiotics. But he was always a fighter, and the little tinker pulled through and was christened a few months later by the vicar, Frank Besant, just over the road at St. Margaret's Church.

In the shake of a lamb's tail, four years had passed, and the Towle family were on the move again, yes! Now with Arthur and his new-born sister in tow. They were heading to the nearby port town of Boston where Tom had found another job – this time as head groom at a right posh and elusive inn called the Peacock and Royal Hotel which over-looked the Market Place.

The family moved into a small terraced house just behind Shodfriars Hall and that's when everything changed for Arthur. He went to school at the local National in the corner of Pump Square but his true education came from his time spent at Shodfriars where he worked, cleaning in the mornings and selling programmes in the evenings. His big break came when he was ten and, thanks to outbreak of measles in the cast, got a small part in the pantomime, Robinson Crusoe.

Who would have thought Arthur Lucan would go on from there to become one of the greatest panto dames of all time? And not only that but also, alongside, his wife and acting partner, Kitty McShane, one of the most familiar faces on the silver screen in the nineteen thirties and forties.

But he never forgot his roots, until the day he died, Arthur Lucan remained a Lincolnshire lad through and through and was always proud to call himself a 'Yellow-belly'. I've said it again, and I'll say it before, Arthur Lucan was a great man and the good folk of Lincolnshire should celebrate his legacy.