

In 2000, as part of Sherborne School's 450<sup>th</sup> Anniversary a series of lectures were given in a Millennium Lecture programme by Old Shirburnians who had made their mark in many different fields. On 3 May 2000, Lance Percival (a 1947-1951) visited the School and gave a lecture. Afterwards, Lance wrote to the Headmaster saying *'it was a pleasure to at last do something in return for the school.'*

On the day of the lecture Nick Cramp (a 1996-2001) interviewed Lance Percival. The interview was published in *The Shirburnian* (2000):

NC: What did you do after you had left Sherborne?

LP: Under a cloud (laughter) – No, I just left in Christmas 1951. It's so long back, ages ago.

NC: What were your ambitions?

LP: That was something I was going to talk about tonight because I didn't know what I wanted to do at all and I am sure that a lot of boys don't – it is very well that they give you all these career lists but how can you know at 15 exactly what you want to do unless you have a particular desire to be a lawyer or accountant or doctor? Sometimes you get people who want to be doctors and I can understand that, but most people don't really know and I was one of them. I went straight into the Army because in those days you had to do two years in the Army as National Service – and that was no use at all as far as progress was concerned but quite useful when you have been in a public school like Sherborne, or any other public school. You live a protected life as the boys all come from a similar background. The Army teaches you that there is another world altogether and you meet every kind of guy, which actually was quite good because you learnt how to work out which were useful people and which were pains in the neck, and which were criminals – you learn how to spot them quite quickly. They don't teach you anything about women unfortunately, but a lot about men. So I had two years in the Army.

NC: How do you think Sherborne prepared you for this – did you enjoy yourself in the Army?

LP: Yes I did, but I don't believe that school days are the happiest days of your life. For me there were many happier times, which doesn't mean to say that I didn't enjoy Sherborne, just that it is one of those false beliefs that affect you at school, generally spread by masters who spent all their time around school. Best days of your life are when you have made a bit of money and are having a good time – don't worry about it, it will come.

NC: I hope so.

LP: I then clobbered around trying to find out what I wanted to do and I actually went to live in Canada for a while and was selling encyclopaedias and all sorts of useless things. But I learnt how to play the guitar at Sherborne. I taught myself, nothing to do with school, and I still can't play it properly, I just twiddle with it but that's OK – and people think, oh he is doing well, but actually he is just playing only four chords, and no one knows except the real musicians. Then I used to have a group, a calypso group. I was very keen on calypsos and this group was an amateur group and then eventually we got into a night club – when we started off we were doing a lounge act which means we started at 10.00pm and went on for half an hour. Then a pianist would come on and play for half



an hour – it was sort of a lounge act – half an hour on, half an hour off – there’s a lot of that in America though we don’t do that here. We think of night clubs in terms of either discos or cabarets in terms of somebody doing a star spot. They have in America a lot of lounge acts where people sit around having drinks and we entertained them. We hoped to keep them there for a while so that they would spend a lot of money – that’s the idea. Anyway we got started then and then the calypso was suddenly a craze – we went off to Miami, Florida, and went all round the States – Las Vegas, Los Angeles, New York. We were probably the worst group on tour but we had one gimmick which was that I could make up songs about people in the audience – and I can still do it any time.

NC: Can you do it now?

LP: If you think of ‘Cramp, lamp, vamp’, you can think of words that rhyme right away.

NC: Are you going to do that tonight?

LP: No, I probably won’t unless somebody asks me. If you are wearing a drama tie, calypso singers make up some songs about the fact that you are wearing a drama tie, whereas the rest of the audience have no idea what tie you are wearing. So I decided that a new idea was to get people to shout out things – job or anything and then everyone in the room know what I had to start with - so someone would say ‘farmer’ and this guy over here would say ‘sex maniac’ and then I would make a calypso like that – that is how it works. So we went around America doing that and then we came back to England and I started telling jokes. I was pretty useless at it, but you have to learn how to tell jokes like everything else. I think I am better at it now and then I got into a review with Kenneth Williams and from that went on into *Carry On* films and did about five of those films. Then I went into satire – which was political satire at that time. David Frost was with us at the start of the show – Ned Sherrin directed it, and Roy Kinnear and Willy Rushton, who have since died, but Millicent Martin, the girl in it, lives in America now. We were a storm at the time, a real storm.

NC: Did you see the programme the BBC did on the *Carry On* films?

LP: I didn’t see it, but the damn things turn up all the time. I just did two or three of them, two or three shows and about five films for Peter Rogers, only one of which was actually a *Carry On*. I was much more into adult humour, whereas the *Carry On* was end-of-the-pier sort of seaside humour, which is fine – it still works.

NC: Yes, they still put them on again and again.

LP: That the thing about satire – you can’t repeat it, as it is generally a topical subject – I could make great jokes about Tony Blair now but show then in twenty years’ time and they would wonder what the hell it was about. They wouldn’t know who he was – waiting to find out who is to be the Mayor of London tomorrow.

NC: When you were at Sherborne were you intent on becoming an actor?

LP: No, I had no ambitions about that at all, I used to carry the spear in the School Play – I was more interested in girls. I was in the Choir, but I realised there wasn’t a great future in singing. You didn’t last very long unless you were very good as the crooner or pop singer, but I wasn’t very good at that, and I was singing calypsos. I did get one in the hit parade – called *Shame and Scandal in the Family* – just shows what rubbish they put out in those days.

NC: What piece of advice would you give to a Shirburnian in the year 2000?

LP: Don't worry if you have an inclination towards the humour business. The difficulty with the humour business, which I have been in for so many years, is that there are obviously ups and downs because you are completely self-employed. So there will be times when you are not employed, quite like an actor who often has long periods of being unemployed. In fact they always say that 90% of actors are not in work all the time. Jeremy Irons is a superstar but there aren't many of those and therefore if you feel like doing something like this, but all means give it a go. You don't have to rush it because you will have to do as I did and go through all sorts of other jobs to keep yourself going while you have a look at it and try as an amateur, and then try as a professional and see if you enjoy it. My niece is an actress and she has given it up for a while but she will come back to it. If you are on the side that I am, which is writing as well as performing, when you are not doing one you are doing the other. The way in is radio, in the sense that radio doesn't pay much money but we are the only country in the world that I know of which will have a lot of humour on radio. So if you want to become a performer or a writer, you can get something on the radio. The other day somebody sent me a funny script, so I gave them the names of several producers of BBC radio to send it to. Now that could be a way in for somebody because once you get noticed on radio it leads to television.

NC: Have there been any hard times in your career?

LP: There have been depressing moments like the car crash, but not work-wise. Like anything else you have failures and successes, but I have never really been strung out of work – I think the answer is to do a bit of several things. I was recording a commercial yesterday about St. Ivel trifle and that makes a lot of money. In other words, there are all sorts of ways of doing this business. You have to be determined. When I started off we were fiddling about just making peanuts, but I was very lucky because, living in Canada as I mentioned, you are so far away from home no one can actually put you off – there are no parents to breathe down your neck. They all think you have gone mad, but if you can come back quite successful and making a bit of money, they accept it. My father actually said to me, before he died quite a few years ago "Aren't you going to give it up now?" I said "No, until I stop making about six times as much as you do I think I'll keep going..."