RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Eric Morecambe Life's Not Hollywood, It's Cricklewood

Eric Morecambe

contents

About the Book

Eric Morecambe is perhaps the best-loved and most fondly remembered of all British comedy greats. Bringing joy and laughter into the homes of millions for an amazing 22 years, he and Ernie Wise were a true comedy double act and to this day they remain the undisputed kings of British comedy.

Yet Eric's personal life was not always filled with sunshine, and in this fascinating book his son, Gary Morecambe, paints a vivid picture of the stresses and strains that success can bring, both to the stars in the limelight and to their families back home. Using photos from the Morecambe family archive and previously unseen extracts from his father's personal diaries, Gary takes on a touching and personal journey through the highs and lows of a comedy legend.

Frank and outspoken, this book provides a compelling insight into the man behind the laughter, a man who was constantly worried that one day he would be 'found out', who never lost his love of Long John Silver impressions, and who continued to work until heart disease finally killed him at only 58 years of age.

ERIC MORECAMBE

BY GARY MORECAMBE

Life's not Hollywood, it's Cricklewood

BBC BOOKS

Dedication

For my children, Jack, Henry, Arthur and Dereka. For making my life complete.

And thanks to David, Ken, Sean, Hamish, Toby and, of course, Eddie for bringing back the sunshine.

And Jo O’Callaghan for coming into my life and making me laugh again.

I should allow only my heart to have imagination, and for the rest rely on memory, that long-drawn sunset of one's personal truth.

Vladimir Nabokov

Fathers should neither be seen nor heard; that is the only proper basis for family life.

Oscar Wilde

chapter 1

I HADN'T BEEN born when Morecambe and Wise first surfaced as a double act at the Liverpool Empire in 1941, but I was walking and talking before they were stars. I was born in 1956; by the time I was five, Morecambe and Wise were on national television, and I began to realize that I had a famous father. I can dimly remember my sister Gail, who is two and a half years older than me, questioning EM about his fame one night when he'd come upstairs to kiss us goodnight. It was the moment when he went from being just my Dad to being someone special – when I became aware that there was something that marked our family out from ordinary people.

That was the beginning of a lifelong involvement with Morecambe and Wise, and since that moment I've never been able to divorce my life from theirs. Whether it's healthy to spend your life in the shadow of a famous parent is a matter of debate; I have never known any different, so I've come to accept the shadow as a friend. I have never known the total, blissful obscurity in which most children grow up. I've never fought against the fame, but that doesn't mean I've always embraced it. During my teen years the whole notion of belonging to a famous comedian's family rested uneasily on me – but we change, and times change, and by the time my father died in 1984 I'd come to enjoy the connection in a way, although it was many years

before I felt able to talk openly about it, to let my secret slip during conversation.

The children of famous people have no choice in their destiny: the fame that they live with isn't theirs, it's just something they're born into. Reflected fame isn't real fame, and there are no rewards to balance the discomfort that it brings. The constant demands that were made on EM's time irritated me, but I soon realized that was always going to be part of our family life. Fortunately, my sister and brother and I grew up largely insulated from the world of show business; we were wheeled on for the occasional photo-shoot, but we were never obliged to do anything we didn't want to do. We lived as normal a life as my father's status would permit – and that was pretty normal, for the most part. EM wasn't one of those people who dwell on fame; he needed it, but he didn't let it consume him or his family. His genuine innocence about so many aspects of his career protected us from the more corrosive effects of fame.

I'm not famous, and I don't wish to be. My job is to promote the uniqueness of Morecambe and Wise at every suitable opportunity, and if, in doing so, that puts a focus on me as a writer, then that's a by-product I'm happy to accept. I enjoy promoting the work, but I'm not trying to score points off Morecambe and Wise. The attention I get is nice, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it, but it's not something I actively seek. That's the difference between me and my father. Also, he was a perfectionist. Living with one is not easy. I know that I found myself becoming the opposite of that, resentful of what striving for perfection both requires of and does to you.

Fame was a different thing in EM's time than it is today. For a start you had to possess a real talent and work very hard at proving how good you were. There was little chance of becoming the instant celebrity you now see emerging from programmes like *Big Brother*. It was also a

time when people in the business trod the boards for many a long year honing their skills: programmes in which the public entertain the public just didn't exist.

I was an introverted child, shy and inhibited. Unlike EM I had no urge to perform; thank God he wasn't the sort of father who was determined to push his children out into the limelight. I was once given the lead role in the school play – which was in French, to make matters worse. Fortunately, which might sound an odd word to use, I developed glandular fever just in time to lose the part. The burden that was lifted from me was too immense to describe. I couldn't understand why anyone would want to learn lines, to dress up as someone else; all that EM embraced in his life, I rejected.

In private, though, I put on my own little performances, pretending to be Morecambe and Wise as I'd seen them on stage and television. My earliest memory of seeing them on TV is from 1961, when they'd just started their own series for ATV; I can't recall seeing any of their frequent guest appearances before that, but I have clear memories of their first ATV shows. I didn't understand any of the comedy, but I had a vivid and overwhelming fear that my father would walk off stage at the end of the show and disappear down a toilet. It was a real concern that genuinely troubled me, so much so that EM had to reassure me that nothing of the sort would happen, that the door that he went through at the end of every show just led to another part of the studio. It also worried me that my father was the funny, stupid one, who seemed endlessly to suffer; I found it hard to understand that he was playing a part.

I started to put on my own little versions of these shows on a sheet of wooden planking that lay in a field behind our house where the bulldozers had not yet moved in. For about three months it remained untouched, and I had a makeshift stage all to myself. I would do the crosstalk for both Eric and Ernie; I could envisage the footlights and the

audience beyond. It was very real to me, especially when I stood there at the end of each performance, belting out their then theme song, ‘Two of a Kind’.

I came out of my shell a bit at nursery school, probably because I was the only boy in the class, which gave me a sort of novelty value. I rather enjoyed showing off to the girls, and word would get back to EM that his son had made all the other kids laugh. On the rare occasions when he was free to collect me, he would quiz me all the way home about what I’d said that amused everyone so much. Perhaps he hoped that there was another little comedian in the family. The truth, however, was disappointing: I was the only boy, and so they thought I was inherently funny. When other little boys arrived, my comedy value plummeted, and I lost my audience.

My very early childhood was spent in a ground-floor flat in North Finchley, an outer suburb of London, near my maternal grandmother Alice’s house in Whetstone; Mum’s brother Alan ran a pub just down the road, the Torrington Arms, with his wife Pam. This flat was my parents’ first proper home together, and we lived there till 1961, when EM’s rising fortunes enabled them to buy their own house. In 1995 the entire Morecambe clan descended on the old North Finchley address, which has now been converted into a nursing home, to witness Comic Heritage attaching a blue plaque to the house to commemorate the fact that Eric Morecambe had lived there. It was a bittersweet experience for my mother, Joan, who smiled and said very little. It must have brought back so many memories of when she and EM had youth on their side, the war years comfortably behind them, an exciting future stretching ahead, and a young family to bring up. And now it was all over apart from the memories – and EM wasn’t there to share them with her.

In 1961, when I was five, we moved to a brand-new house in Harpenden, Hertfordshire, some 20 miles north of

London. It was a classy patch of suburbia, with endless developments in all styles and sizes being constructed around an increasingly complicated maze of streets, eating up the green fields that were fast disappearing beneath the crescents and avenues and drives of the prosperous, early sixties boom. I think my parents paid £5,000 to build their house, another £2,000 to furnish it. You couldn't buy the front door for that now; houses in that area are worth a king's ransom.

We could walk from our shiny new house through a lush green field of dwindling farmland and then discover, literally the next day, that the field had been turned over ready for the foundations of the next phase of building. Gail and I were excited by the diggers, and by the sense of newness and progress. The dourness of the post-war years was giving way to the growth of the sixties and, to paraphrase Mr Macmillan, we really had never had it so good. A rash of expensive homes sprouting across the countryside seemed much better than the countryside *au naturel*, and if that meant a few hundred hedgehogs becoming homeless, or a few thousand rabbits, or a few million insects, it didn't matter much. This was progress.

EM complained only once, when we lost a source of delicious wild mushrooms that grew in a field at the end of a concrete lane leading from our house. For two years we'd enjoyed the harvest – and there was a tragic air in the house on the day when the diggers moved in to rip up the field. I remember EM sighing, 'We'll have to buy our mushrooms from now on…' I think he missed the fields for less tangible reasons as well. Walking out there with my sister and me, he could feel that he was a thousand miles away from the TV studio; he forgot his work and enjoyed the countryside. EM found it hard to switch off from work; often when we were on holiday he'd disappear for most of the day to write new material and think about sketches. But out there, in the dwindling fields of Harpenden, he found it

easy to relax, and he missed it when it was taken away from him.

Thinking of the year 1961 brings memories of sunny days in summer, running through the garden sprinkler with Gail while our dog, Chips, looked glumly on, and icy days in winter, with snowdrifts round the house and giant shark's teeth of icicles cracking in the watery afternoon sunlight. I recall EM's long absences and happy returns; when he was at home, he was really at home – it was like having a young unemployed man in the house, with nothing to do but give the children his full attention.

But as the sixties wore on EM was at home less and less. After struggling to break into television in the fifties, when they'd made one disastrous series for the BBC, *Running Wild*, Morecambe and Wise returned to the stage for a while before mustering all their energies for one last make-or-break assault on the small screen. They took every guest spot they could get, notably with Winifred Atwell and on *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, and even managed to put together another short series of their own, *Double Six*. All of this hard work paid off when, in 1961, Lew Grade gave them their own show on ATV.

Morecambe and Wise remained his star performers until 1967, when they said their final, somewhat terse goodbyes and moved over to the BBC. ATV's *The Morecambe and Wise Show* was an instant hit, and before long they were making movies – *The Intelligence Men* (1965), *That Riviera Touch* (1966), *The Magnificent Two* (1967) – to capitalize on their TV fame. And they hadn't yet given up their stage work, so there were summer seasons and pantomimes to fit in between studio commitments. Hard graft was nothing new to Morecambe and Wise: they'd both been working, separately and together, since their teens, scratching a living on the variety circuit, getting radio slots when they could persuade a friendly producer, honing their act for fourteen years before they became TV stars. But now the

stakes were higher, and for EM in particular the pressure was on. He was a workaholic who found it very difficult to switch off. Ernie was the more relaxed of the two, much more able to distinguish his working life from his home life. EM, as the funny man, rightly or wrongly felt much greater responsibility to carry the act, and it would be a lifelong source of stress that ultimately undermined his health.

By the time I started school *The Morecambe and Wise Show* – black and white, thirty minutes, scripts by Sid Green and Dick Hills – was fast becoming one of the biggest hits on TV. After their shaky start in television, they pulled it all together: their comic personae had begun to crystallize, and the classic bits of business – EM's glasses, the face-slapping, the strangling hand from behind the curtain – were all in place. Gail remembers seeing Eric and Ernie's faces beaming down from giant billboards along the roadside, and being aware that suddenly all her friends knew who our Dad was.

Gail, being a couple of years older than me, recalls a time before all of this, when Dad was just Dad, someone who worked hard, was away a lot, but was really no different from any other father. For me, EM's sudden transformation into a household name is tied up with my earliest memories. I never knew him any other way.

chapter 2

IN MANY WAYS EM was a remote father figure to me – not just because, for most of my childhood, he was public property, but more to the point because he just wasn't around for a lot of the time. Right up until 1967 he and Ernie were working constantly, doing stage work when they weren't on TV, TV when they weren't on stage. If it was tough on me as a child, it was just as tough on EM as a father. When he was doing summer season, he'd install the family at whatever resort he was working in for as many weeks as possible, but as soon as the school holidays were over we'd go back to Harpenden and he'd be left on his own. It was easier for Ernie; he and his wife, Doreen, had chosen not to have children, and so she could be with him wherever he went. EM must have felt lonely; I know I would have done. He had all the highs that went with a big, responsive theatre audience, then he returned to the quiet of an empty room.

For a time in the sixties, EM kept a diary during his absences from home – just as a way of sharing some of his thoughts and feelings, I suppose, as he didn't have his wife and children with him. Mostly the diaries are chat about what he was doing, how the shows went, who he'd played golf with, plus occasional complaints about the weather or the food or the state of the nation. They're not profound diaries, and they offer no real insight into the way that Morecambe and Wise worked; they're merely the record of

a very busy man working far from home, who half-wishes that he could be with his loved ones. Here's a typical extract from Yarmouth, August 1967:

> Both houses tonight are full, but the weather at the moment is good theatre weather. Friday and Saturday first houses could let us down and stop us from doing a burster – £9,900 – I think we might do around £9,500 this week. As for Yarmouth itself, although I'm making a lot of money here, I think it's the most terrible place. If cleanliness is next to Godliness, in Yarmouth it's next to impossible! Just outside the ABC stage door is a market, and at the end of the day there is so much newspaper and old fish and chips, as there are about six fish, chip and peas stalls belching out terrible smells eighteen hours a day. But the public put up with all this dirt and smells. I've been reading papers lately about how dirty the British are – it seems to be true in Yarmouth.

No real reflection on Yarmouth – just a tired, lonely man letting off steam about the things that annoyed him. EM kept a diary for only one other year in his life, as far as I'm aware, and that was 1969, when he was recovering from his first heart attack, and once again was feeling bored, lonely and out of sorts with the world.

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Family trips to see EM were always fun, and I remember the 1967 summer season in Yarmouth rather well. I was eleven by now, and quite used to having a famous father and lots of famous friends. Towards the end of August EM took us all to lunch at Petersfield House Hotel at Horning, with Arthur Askey, Val Doonican and his wife Lynn, and Michael Grade, who at that time was working for EM's agent, Billy Marsh. It was a glorious day, the meal was

excellent, and we finished up with tea and champagne on the lawn. EM noted in his diary that ‘Gail and Gary were extra-well-behaved’, which would have given him great pleasure: like his own parents, he set great store by good behaviour in children. We were on pain of death if we misbehaved.

Lunch was a slow, formal, adult affair, which was very boring for a child, but once the meal was out of the way we did have some fun. I remember fooling around with Arthur Askey, who was pleasingly no taller than I was, and being taken out in a motor boat. EM was very attached to Askey, who had been a star when he and Ernie were working their way up in the business; Ernie, of course, had worked as a child star with Askey back in the early forties. I could never see anything funny about what Arthur Askey did, but EM always had huge respect for him, partly because he was someone who’d been around even longer than he had. I’d meet Arthur again many times during my working life, and he was always very kind to me because of who my father was.

EM loved this kind of event, when he was surrounded by his peers and his family, when he could perform to an audience with whom he felt completely at home. But there was never any doubt that he was performing. EM was always performing, on stage, at social functions, at home. He never stopped. My father was a comedian – all the time. He could never switch off. During my early childhood, I accepted this as a fact of life, but as time went on it began to strike me as strange and irritating. It got to the point where I would constantly be looking over my shoulder, expecting EM to make a surprise entrance, or do a funny gag. That was much later, though; for now it all seemed like innocent fun.

Much as EM enjoyed a party, our home life was fairly quiet. EM and Joan were invited to functions galore, and they had hundreds of acquaintances in their show-business

circle, but their intimate social life was on a very small scale. Our house was never the centre of party life. They weren't great entertainers; I've often thought that this provided a balance for EM's professional life, in which he was permanently entertaining. They would have people round for lunch, and occasionally for drinks, but beyond that they kept a low profile. My showbiz memories from the sixties all take place outside the home; back in Harpenden it was just Mum, Dad, Gail and me – and Chips the dog. Chips was the family's first pet, a small terrier who had a love-hate relationship with EM. To be more exact, it was a hate-hate relationship. EM tried to be nice to the dog, but he was also very wary of him, and Chips had a tendency to snap at him without warning. In the end EM gave up trying, and would just wander into the kitchen where Chips was lying in his basket, point a finger and say, 'Die, Chips! Die!' – which he eventually did, although not to oblige EM. Chips was succeeded by Barney, a rather energetic golden retriever, of whom EM was far fonder. But overall, he just wasn't a pet person. The only animals he got any real pleasure from were the tropical fish he kept in a tank in his study during the later years of his life.

Gail liked horses, and he seemed to tolerate them enough to buy her one. He would occasionally be spotted feeding it a sugar lump, but generally he kept his distance, certain that, as writer Ian Fleming put it, 'They're dangerous at both ends and uncomfortable in the middle.' His fears were borne out when Gail had an appalling fall from her horse, losing her front teeth and breaking her nose and jaw. The accident occurred only hours after EM had returned from working in the States, and totally disorientated him. Gail spent the afternoon at the hospital, and when she went to bed that night EM went to look in on her. Thinking she was asleep, he sat on the bed and sobbed and sobbed. Gail says she can remember the bed gently vibrating as he cried.

Sometimes I'd put on little shows for my parents with my prized Chad Valley projector, which shone still images of Yogi Bear and Huckleberry Hound on to my bedroom walls. Mum and Dad would dutifully climb the stairs and sit in the dark watching these for twenty minutes, while I played the usherette and handed out snacks consisting of a digestive biscuit with a fruit gum on top. They would both eat their biscuits, but I was always pleased when EM said, 'I think I'll leave the sweet till later' – because then he'd 'forget' it and I could eat it instead.

During their ATV years Morecambe and Wise released a record called 'We're the Guys', with which I became totally obsessed. EM had bought me a little Dansette record player, and I'd sit in my room playing the song over and over until even EM would stick his head round the door and say, 'You must be fed up with it by now…' His expression was a mixture of pain from the endless repetition and pride that he'd achieved such a hit with his son. Other records that used to sound through that house included Bert Weedon's 'High Steppin' and 'Tokyo Melody', Buddy Greco's 'They Can't Take That Away From Me', and the early Beatles.

Football played a big part in our lives at that time. This was before EM had fallen in love with Luton Town FC; in those days he talked about Preston North End and Manchester United, of the grounds he visited in his youth, full of cloth caps and trenchcoats, of clouds of Woodbine smoke and throaty coughs. In 1966 we watched the World Cup final together, and I seem to have a vivid memory of the bright red shirts of the England team, the yellow, flailing hair of Bobby Charlton, the deep gold of the cup held aloft by a suntanned Bobby Moore – all of this from a black-and-white TV set in the corner of our living room.

Football was one of our great garden sports, with jumpers as goalposts and EM unable to resist hogging the ball. He'd keep up a running commentary: he was either

Eusebio of Portugal or Bobby Charlton. Either way he always seemed to have possession. Being in goal wasn't much fun – EM had a vicious left foot and sometimes he'd have a rush of blood to the head and let rip with its full power. He always fancied himself as a footballer, and, like his father before him, had intended going for trials. Injury put an end to his father's footballing career; comedy put an end to EM's.

On summer afternoons we'd play cricket in the garden, and I can still smell the linseed oil on my bat with the disintegrating string handle. And there was the compound ball that EM would gleefully toss down the garden towards me with plenty of deliberate spin. I was always asking him, 'Why can't we use a real cricket ball, Dad?' and he'd say, 'Because it might hurt if it hits you, and you haven't got pads.' Compound or not, it still bloody well hurt when it missed the bat and struck the shin. EM, in the excitement of appealing for LBW, wasn't especially bothered about that.

Sometimes my friends would come round to play cricket with us, and that was always a relief; having others on the team lessened the intensity of those one-on-one games with EM. An injured shin from an LBW could be treated at the time, without interrupting the flow of EM's game. He was less impatient and restless when we had a 'real' game, as he called it, on our hands. He even allowed us to pause for a glass of orange squash without his usual frustrated sighs.

There was a strange streak of cruelty in my father, which I find hard to reconcile with his generally sunny disposition. He was highly competitive, even with his own children. Gail recalls how she was practising the piano one morning, working really hard on a Chopin prelude that she'd been studying, and EM came downstairs and said, 'That was really good, Gail. I thought I was listening to the radio.' Then he sat down next to her at the piano and said, 'But can't you play something like this?' And he proceeded

to play a wonderful jazz improvisation on the prelude, something that Gail would never have been able to do in a thousand years. She had to practise hard with the music in front of her in order to play anything; EM could just toss it off without any effort. He was impatient with anything that didn't come naturally. I am sure that one of the reasons he gave up playing golf is that he didn't have a gift for it, and he wasn't willing to put in the practice.

EM took pleasure in asking Gail and me, 'Who do you love more, me or your Mum?' He saw it as a bit of lightheartedness, I suppose, and we would invariably conclude that we loved them both equally, but at the time – particularly the first time he asked us – it really troubled us. Michael Sellers, Peter Sellers's son, has told me that his father used to ask the same thing. Perhaps it was a result of insecurity, of craving approval, or perhaps it was just leg-pulling, but either way there's an element of cruelty in subjecting a child to that sort of question. EM was oblivious to any pain inflicted by words; in his own mind he was just pulling our legs, and so the pain couldn't be real. I remember being angry with him for the first time.

Our upbringing was quite strict. I've said how important good behaviour was, and this extended to our appearance as well. Gail and I were always well scrubbed and well turned out. I would be wearing a pair of shiny grey shorts, white stocking socks, a crisp white shirt and an elasticated bow tie. I've had a horror of bow ties ever since; my mother has lots of photographs of me in this uniform, and they never fail to make me shudder. Gail had to wear bonnets and lacy white gloves, which looked smart but were not very practical. We must have made a striking picture: Mum always looked incredible – she had been a model and she always looked like one. Nobody would have guessed that she didn't have a nanny, a domestic and an au pair to help her keep everything so spick and span, but in truth it was all her own work; there wasn't a lot of money around in

those days, and my parents would never have dreamed of borrowing any.

We learned fast that looking good and behaving well was a sure way of getting praise from EM. On the way home from a garden party or a fête, Dad would glow with pride. ‘Well, kids, you were really good today. People told me what wonderfully behaved children I have.’ We wanted his approval, and we didn’t want to let him down. I don’t think we ever rebelled.

In retrospect, it strikes me that EM was a shallow and selfish person in his expectations of his children. Even allowing for the era – we’re talking forty years ago – it still somehow grates with me. There’s something so lacking when the winning formula is down to behaviour and the smartness of one’s clothes.

EM instilled very strong morals into us as children. He taught by parables, and the story of the lion was a special favourite. A man is walking in the wild and he meets a lion that’s in pain. Instead of running away, the man takes pity on the lion and removes a thorn from its paw. Years later the man is captured by the Romans and thrown into the arena to fight for his life. The lion sent in to fight him recognizes the man and won’t kill him. ‘Do someone a good turn,’ EM would say, ‘and one day they’ll be good to you in return.’ He also used to tell us about the man who was sad because he had no shoes, ‘until one day,’ said EM, ‘he met a man who had no feet.’

Every so often EM would get up to real mischief. In the days before traffic jams and seat belts he would let me sit on his lap in the car and steer us home down back roads. On one occasion we passed the milkman, who stopped dead in his tracks when he saw this five-year-old ‘driving’ a car; he couldn’t see the adult hiding beneath.

And ten years later, on that very same stretch of road, EM suggested that I should buy a razor, as the first shadow

of downy hair was appearing on my face. Ten years; it felt like ten minutes.

chapter 3

IN 1964 I started going to prep school. I can still taste the dryness in the throat that accompanied a thousand breakfasts, as another day of fighting for survival at school began. Those were the hurt, sad, worried times of my childhood – but the pain was short-lived, and I don't think any lasting damage was done. So was school that tough? No, probably not. Just the standard all-boys preparatory school of the sixties, which was tough enough for a nervous, inhibited lad with a father whom everyone recognized.

Having a famous father set me apart from the other children; not in a physical sense, because we were all chucked in together, but in the sense that I was easily labelled. Later in life it seemed quite cool to have a famous Dad, but back then it was definitely uncool, and I was duly embarrassed about having a 'clown' for a father. That was the word they used, with comments to the effect that it was a shame my father couldn't get a real job. It crossed my mind that my father was probably making a lot more money than their fathers, and having a more interesting life to boot, but I said nothing and responded with a plaintive nod of the head. I learned quickly that you go along with your peers even if they're wrong – unless you want a black eye or a sharp punch in the stomach. I got both, but that was more to do with the politics of the playground than my famous father. In fact I was really proud of what EM was