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Billy Bunter

UK live TV sitcom : 1952-62 : dir. : BBC : ? x ? min
prod: Joy Harington : scr: Frank Richards : dir.ph.:
*Brian Smith; Harry Searle; Barry MacGregor; Michael Danvers-Walker; Ronald Moody;
Michael Crawford; David Hemmings; Melvyn Hayes*
Gerald Campion; Kynaston Reeves (50s); Frank Melford (60s)

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ € Z ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Gerald Campion endeavours to persuade sceptics he is not a slender married man of 29 Source: BBC TV Presents

Halliwell's Television Companion review:

"Gerald Campion became famous (though not lastingly so) playing the fat boy of the old Greyfriars school stories in intermittent BBC series fudged up around this character. Originally they went out live, twice over, every Friday - at 5.25 for children, at 7.25 for adults."

"Billy Bunter, the famous fat boy of the Greyfriars Remove, had his most popular incarnation when he was played by Gerald Campion."

BBC TV Presents - a 50th Anniversary Celebration caption to above still:

"The author of the "Billy Bunter" stories, Frank Richards, wrote special versions for the television series which started in 1952. With Billy Bunter, centre, played by Gerald Campion, were (l to r) Brian Smith (Bob Cherry); Harry Searle (Harry Wharton); Barry MacGregor (John Bull); Michael Danvers-Walker (Frank Nugent); Ronald Moody (Hurree Singh)."



Source: Halliwell's Television Companion

Background note:

"For the most part, [these] early programmes were still broadcast live since there was no adequate means of recording them. This proved to be a great drawback since there could be no repeats unless a performance was done a second time. Tests, though, were carried out with telerecordings, made by pointing a 35mm camera at a television screen. The coronation was recorded in this way. But there were difficulties because the shutters of standard cameras and the scanning action of television were not entirely compatible. To solve the problem, a number of telerecording systems was devised, none of them ideal. The great advance came with videorecording."

The Golden Age of Children's Television notes:

"At twenty-nine, married with two children, and weighing a modest 11stone 12lbs, Gerald Campion was an unlikely choice to play Frank Richards' hero of the tuckshop, **"Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School"**. In fact, casting the famous "Fat Owl of the Remove" was a weighty problem for producer Joy Harington, who said at the time: "Every fat boy in England came for the part, but none was right. Then a friend suggested Gerald Campion. Of course, he isn't fat enough in the tummy - we'll have to arrange that. But he's got the face for it." Besides,

Campion had been a devotee of "The Magnet" comic in which the Bunter stories appeared and he was confident he could put on weight. "They called me Fatty at school," he explained in 1952, "but I've since been dieting to keep my weight down. I shan't bother any more. And I love jam tarts - I even make them myself."

Campion adapted so successfully that he made the part his own and over the next ten years the playgrounds of Britain echoed to cries of "Yaroooh!", "Beast!", "Blimey!", "Crikey!" and "I say, you fellows". But the use of "Crikey!" landed Bunter in hot water when an Enfield vicar, counting thirteen "Crikey"s in one episode, pointed out that the dictionary defined the word as "vulgar". Notwithstanding such disgraceful blasphemy, Bunter proved a favourite with children and adults alike, to the extent that at one stage his adventures went out live twice every Friday - at 5.25pm for children and two hours later for their parents. Campion found that public reaction to him had both its good and bad points. "People would send me cakes in the post, but they also used to playfully kick me around if they saw me because that was what always happened to Bunter."

Other than a worldwide doughnut shortage, the great bane of Bunter's life was the form master of the Remove, Mr Quelch, played in the fifties by Kynaston Reeves and in the sixties by Frank Melford. Bunter's chums included Bob Cherry, Harry Wharton and



Source: *The Golden Age of Children's Television*

Frank Nugent, the latter played by a young Michael Crawford. David Hemmings and Melvyn Hayes also appeared as boys. Fittingly, these days Campion is a successful restaurateur. It's a long haul from the tuck shop to *haute cuisine*."

History of Television note:

"School comedies are not new in British entertainment. In the early days of television, the best-selling **"Billy Bunter"** stories, written by Frank Richards, were adapted for British television, Gerald Campion playing the part of the "fat boy of the Remove". According to reports of the time, city gentlemen left work early in order to reach home in time for transmissions on the Children's Output on BBC (then the only channel)¹."



"Oo-er!" and "Crikey!" - Bunter careens into Quelch

¹ Those "city gentlemen" weren't aware it was being broadcast again later in the evening?

[no listing in "History of Television", "How Sweet It Was", "Into the Box of Delights - a History of Children's Television", "Television's Greatest Hits" or "25 Years of ITV - 1955-1980"]

(Kynaston Reeves) Source: *History of Television*

Only one of the above sources identifies the series as "**Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School**", so we stay with the consensus. Whereas Jimmy Edwards' "**Whack-O!**" from 1956 was located almost agoraphobically in the Headmaster's office, and viewed the battle lines from that direction, the Bunter stories presented public school life from the other side of the stick, as it were. The oafish Bunter could never quite be described as the "hero" of his stories, being by definition the butt of all plots and double-dealing by his classmates, and principal whipping boy of the form-master, Quelch. Rather he served as a kind of lightning rod, averting the ubiquitous cane from the backsides of good eggs and decent sorts. Notwithstanding the loud "Yaroo!"s, he was never much the worse for these incessant beatings, nature having equipped him with copious padding in the area afflicted.

One curious element of Billy Bunter's longevity in British boys' comics was that, whereas the books had clearly been written for middle-class boys who would themselves be attending grammar schools, if not indeed prep and public ones, the comics reached a broader constituency, and were read by working class boys to whom the language, manners and social referents were all quite alien. Working class boys might conceivably identify with the (equally middle class) Just William, since his adventures took place outside of school hours, but the world of mortar boards, gowns and tuckshops was all a million miles from their personal experience, and perhaps it is merely that the publishers of boys' comics made no concessions to the demographics of their readership, until the "Dennis the Menace"s and "Beryl the Peril"s finally drove out their more upmarket cousins.

Despite the technical limitations of tiny cramped sets and primitive cameras, these early live TV shows must have had a theatrical spontaneity and freshness which is altogether missing from today's ready-canned sitcoms. They certainly predated the woeful innovation of canned laughter, or overwrought studio audiences whooping like monkeys at every halfway humorous line. Not all progress is for the better.

I've given all those named as pupils the benefit of the doubt and added them to the juvenile cast list, although on the still shown at the start of this entry only Ronald Moody as Hurree Singh appears strictly to belong in that category. I've no other information about him.

Michael Crawford (born 1942) would have been only 20 when the series ended, and 10 when it began. His films as a child included **"SOAP BOX DERBY"** (50) and **"BLOW YOUR OWN TRUMPET"** (54). He did considerable film work in the early sixties before definitively establishing himself as a television clown with **"Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em"** (74-79) after which he moved into theatre and cabaret, principally in the States. Diminutive Melvyn Hayes (also best known now for another lowbrow seventies sitcom) was 21 in the first film title given for him – **"THE CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN"** in 1956 – but this did prevent his playing teenagers later still in **"NO TREES IN THE STREET"** (58), **"THE YOUNG ONES"** (61), **"SUMMER HOLIDAY"** (62) etc. He would have been 17 when the series opened. David Hemmings was born in 1941, and appeared with Hayes in **"NO TREES IN THE STREET"**. Michael Danvers-Walker was doubtless son of BBC presenter Bob Danvers-Walker.

See also **"Whack-O!"** and subject index under **BOARDING SCHOOL / PUBLIC SCHOOL** and **SITCOMS & SOAPS**.