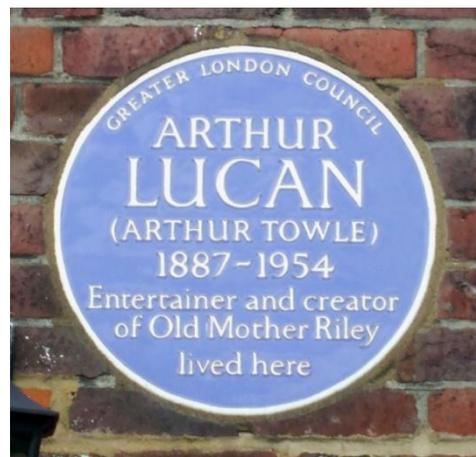


## Arthur Lucan – the man who was “Old Mother Riley”

Brent has very few blue plaques, commemorating famous people who lived in the borough, but one of them can be found on a large house in Forty Lane, Wembley. The plaque, put up by the Greater London Council and unveiled in 1978, is a memorial to Arthur Lucan, but who was he and why is he famous? I hope that this article will answer those questions.

**The blue plaque at 11 Forty Lane, Wembley.**

[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2009]



Arthur Lucan was actually born as Arthur Towle, in the Lincolnshire village of Sibsey on 16 September 1885. His family moved to the nearby town of Boston, and after leaving school aged 13 (which was the usual age in late Victorian times) Arthur worked as a cleaner and programme seller in a local theatre. He was offered a small part on stage in 1899, when some of the cast were unwell during a measles epidemic, and a theatrical career which was to last for 55 years had begun. Two years later, after seeing a Pierrot Show in Skegness, he joined the music and comedy company which had performed it, and spent the next few years travelling around Britain, learning his craft as an entertainer.

By 1910 Arthur Towle was in Ireland, staging a pantomime version of “Little Red Riding Hood”, which he had written, at the Queen’s Theatre, Dublin. He played the grandmother, and a 13-year old local girl, Catherine McShane, took the role of Red Riding Hood. Arthur and “Kitty” soon became good friends, and against her parents’ wishes they married in 1913, as soon as she was 16. At around the same time, Arthur changed his surname to Lucan, which he thought sounded more distinguished than Towle, getting the idea from a sign on a milk cart for “Lucan’s Dairies”.

The couple made their living as a comedy double act, Lucan and McShane, performing



slapstick sketches written by Arthur, and musical numbers which featured Kitty’s good singing voice. Lucan often dressed up as a “dame” character, originally known as Mrs O’Flynn the washerwoman, but which he developed into Old Mother Riley and her daughter, Kitty.

**An autographed publicity postcard for Lucan and McShane.**

[Courtesy of Terry Lomas and the British Music Hall Society]

After years of touring as a minor act in music halls across the country, Lucan and McShane took part in an overseas tour of South Africa, Australia and New Zealand in 1923. They came back with good reviews for this, and they began to get top-billing for some of their music hall

appearances, with “Old Mother Riley” in particular proving a popular character for their sketches. Further years of hard work around the music halls of Britain saw them rewarded with an appearance at the Royal Variety Performance in 1934. Their “Bridget’s Night Out” sketch was a big hit, and brought the couple, and Old Mother Riley, celebrity status.

The fees that they were now able to earn, and a desire to end the constant touring, meant that they could buy a large house, and they chose 11 Forty Lane in Wembley as a permanent home in 1936. That year also marked the start of their cinema career, when “Bridget’s Night Out” appeared in the film “Stars on Parade”, a compilation of top music hall acts which was made at the Stoll Studios in Cricklewood. Its success saw them approached to star in their own film “Old Mother Riley” in 1937, the first of fifteen which Lucan and McShane made in as many years. These were low budget “B” movies, which proved very popular supporting Hollywood film dramas at British cinemas.

An advert for the third “Old Mother Riley” film, from the “Wembley News” in January 1939.

[Source: Brent Archives – local newspaper microfilms]

**WEMBLEY HALL**  
**CINEMA**  
 Phone: Wembley 4694 Lessee: Nora Thomson  
 MONDAY, 23rd JANUARY FOR SIX DAYS  
**CLAUDE RAINS**  
**Fay Bainton**  
 in  
**WHITE BANNERS**  
 with Jackie Cooper : Bonita Granville (A)  
 also ARTHUR LUCAN : KITTY McSHANE  
 in  
**OLD MOTHER RILEY IN PARIS U.**  
 Sunday, 22nd January—  
 William Gargan in Breezing Home U  
 George O'Brian in Hollywood Cowboy U  
 Doors open 1 o'clock daily for continuous performance 1.15 to 10.30  
 Sundays 5 to 10.30

Lucan and McShane continued making comedy films, which helped to boost morale, throughout the Second World War, from “Old Mother Riley Joins Up” in 1939 to “Old Mother Riley at Home” in 1945. They were also regulars on BBC radio comedy programmes. Such

was their popularity that the “Film Fun” comic included an “Old Mother Riley” strip cartoon for many years in the 1940’s.

**FILM FUN**  
 MAY 22nd, 1948  
**Old Mother Riley**  
 Featuring LUCAN & McSHANE

1. Before we tell you of the adventures of Old Mother Riley and Kitty this Whitsun, folks, it is essential we inform you of what took place a year ago. So hop back with us to old 1947 and let us see what is taking place in the O.M.R. abode on Whit Monday. Ma had a good old-fashioned five-pound note and, as a special Whitsun treat she intended to take Kitty to the best restaurant in town. Now as everyone knows who resides in Oldmotherleyville, the Superbio is the best face feedery bar none. Here they certainly do you well and charge you accordingly. Well, to cut a long feed short, our prize pair packed away some splendiferous foodery and then called for the bill, which is the thing to do.

2. The manager tootled up with same, and it was then that the awful truth dawned on our marchioness of mirth. Yes, she had left her fiver reposing on the whatnot at home. She felt very put-out about it, but even more so when the manager, chef and head waiter kicked her out. In the normal way she would have returned to the Superbio and paid for the feed, but after this treatment she decided not to have any business dealings with such rude people. Three hundred and sixty-six days passed!—one more than usual as this is a Leap Year—and Whitsun came round again. Yes, folks, we have hopped back to 1948, and here we see Ma Riley and Kitty in their glad rags about to go out.

Part of an “Old Mother Riley” comic strip from “Film Fun” in May 1948.

[Courtesy of Dilwyn Chambers]

**Lucan and McShane, still smiling in this publicity photograph, signed by Kitty for one of their fans.**

[Courtesy of Terry Lomas and the British Music Hall Society]



Despite their outward success, however, Arthur and Kitty's marriage was falling apart. She was having affairs with other men, while he had an increasing alcohol problem. For the last of their films, "Old Mother Riley's Jungle Treasure" in 1951, their scenes had to be shot separately

and edited together. Their marriage ended in bitterness, after Kitty lost most of their money in an unsuccessful beauty parlour business, and Arthur was made bankrupt as a result.

Arthur Lucan left Forty Lane in 1951, going on the road again to perform in variety theatres, as a way of raising money to pay off his creditors. He did make one more Old Mother Riley film in 1952 (with a young Dora Bryan taking the part of Kitty). This was "Old Mother Riley meets the Vampire", and co-starred the American horror actor Bela Lugosi in an attempt to break into the U.S. film market, but Lucan's very British humour was not a success across the Atlantic. Lucan collapsed and died of a heart attack in the wings of the Tivoli Theatre in Hull on 17 May 1954, just as he was about to go on stage yet again. He was buried in Hull's Eastern Cemetery, and his grave there is still well looked after, with regular floral tributes from fans of Old Mother Riley.

The house at 11 Forty Lane was sold to the Royal National Institute for the Deaf, and was opened as their St Nicholas Hostel by Prince Philip in 1956. It is now used as the Shakti Nursing Home, but the blue plaque on its wall commemorates that for fifteen years,

at the height of his career as one of the country's top entertainers, this was the home in Wembley of the man who was "Old Mother Riley".



**Philip Grant,  
Wembley History Society,  
December 2013.**

**11 Forty Lane, as it is today.**  
[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2013]