CARRY ON REGARDLESS

Getting to the Bottom of Britain's Favourite Comedy Films

Caroline Frost

Carry On Regardless

Front cover images:
Barbara Windsor, Jim Dale and Hattie Jacques in *Carry On Again Doctor* 1969 Credit: Alamy
Kenneth Williams in *Carry On Cleo* 1964 Credit: Carry On Films Limited
Sid James and Joan Sims in C*arry On Up the Jungle* 1970 Credit: Peter Rogers Archive

Spine image:
Sid James Credit: Peter Rogers Archive

Back cover image:
Seven Carry On stars during a break from filming *Carry On Again Doctor* 1969 Credit: Alamy

Carry On Regardless

Getting to the Bottom of Britain's Favourite Comedy Films

Caroline Frost

WHITE OWL
AN IMPRINT OF PEN & SWORD BOOKS LTD.
YORKSHIRE - PHILADELPHIA

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by
White Owl
An imprint of
Pen & Sword Books Ltd
Yorkshire – Philadelphia

ISBN 978 1 52677 478 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY.

Pen & Sword Books Limited incorporates the imprints of Atlas, Archaeology, Aviation, Discovery, Family History, Fiction, History, Maritime, Military, Military Classics, Politics, Select, Transport, True Crime, Air World, Frontline Publishing, Leo Cooper, Remember When, Seaforth Publishing, The Praetorian Press, Wharncliffe Local History, Wharncliffe Transport, Wharncliffe True Crime and White Owl.

For a complete list of Pen & Sword titles please contact

PEN & SWORD BOOKS LIMITED
47 Church Street, Barnsley, South Yorkshire, S70 2AS, England
E-mail: enquiries@pen-and-sword.co.uk
Website: www.pen-and-sword.co.uk

Or

PEN AND SWORD BOOKS
1950 Lawrence Rd, Havertown, PA 19083, USA
E-mail: Uspen-and-sword@casematepublishers.com
Website: www.penandswordbooks.com

Contents

Introduction

The sight of a handsome young man inexplicably attached to a rogue trolley careering down a hospital staircase and out through the swinging doors, the sound of a scantily-clad young lady's squeals as she bolts into the bushes to spare her blushes, the glint of Charles Hawtrey's round glasses always the same style whatever the era, Kenneth Williams's indignant, crisp tones and of course, the conspiratorial chuckle of Sid James…

These are just a few of the elements that instantly identify one of the British public's great viewing pleasures – escaping for ninety light-hearted minutes into a world of very British nonsense, deceptively straightforward storylines, familiar faces, mayhem-inducing misfits, vanquished snobberies, rescued romances, a myriad of misunderstandings and frequently foiled capers – in short, the world of Carry On. For many, it's a world that's never lost its comfort, charm and appeal, whatever more modern critics might have to say. And it's a world that, four decades after the gates at Pinewood Studios closed for the final time on cast and crew (let's draw a veil over the 1992 reboot, for a while at least), deserves a fresh look – if only because, however easy they all made it appear, the team's extraordinary success has in all those years never been repeated.

This isn't a book of facts and figures, nor any attempt at a film-by-film compendium, although, to be sure, the franchise statistics remain impressive. To this day, there still haven't yet been as many Bond films as Carry Ons, and 007 does not enjoy anything like the same profit-per-pound ratio. Nor will this attempt to cover the wealth of extra-curricular material, whether that be TV compilations, Christmas specials, plays, novels or even cartoons, that have all kept the flame burning in the many years since the film cameras stopped rolling. Nor am I even going to delve into the mechanics of *That's Carry On!* with its Greatest Hits-style compendium of all the other titles up to that point. There are already plenty of those fact-filled tomes, thanks to the tireless efforts of Robert Ross, Morris Bright and co, containing more than enough to keep a firm

fan quiet on a rainy Sunday afternoon, plus a whole bunch of devoted aficionados competing for the title of ultimate expert in the field.

Instead, what this offers is a celebration of a big screen phenomenon, a golden moment in cinema when cast and crew, stars and writers, came together at the right time and place, to create something unique – not just in the history of British film, but across our broader culture.

I'll be asking, what was it about the Carry On films that captured the hearts of their audiences, and held onto them across thirty films and two decades? Was it the scripts, that effortlessly moved between the muddy earthiness of a camping site in post-war Britain to the wobbly grandeur of ancient Egypt, from a suburban London police station to a frankly unconvincing Revolutionary-era France, all these locations united by the potential on every page for our collective sense of the ridiculous? Or was it the cast, whose deceptively easy chemistry belied the professionalism of a versatile troupe honed by years of treading the boards and the disciplinary demands of repertory theatre, radio and blossoming TV?

Or were audiences just hungry for something on screen that held a magnifying glass up to some of our most revered institutions and figures – the NHS, James Bond, the military, Henry VIII, the police, Cleopatra – and then warmly tipped a wink and cocked a snook, wringing gags, giggles and groans from the unlikeliest of places?

If the series' golden age in the late 1960s saw its list of locations broaden, from the Khyber to the Kasbah, the Sahara desert to the high seas, its humour remained entirely British in both sensibility and silliness, bridging two distinctive eras of homegrown comedy. The first Carry On film in 1958 hoped to entertain audiences brought up on highly visual gags, slapstick and farce. By the time it finished two decades later, the series was known for its more risqué elements, with its constant use of double entendre and general leaning on far saucier seaside-postcard ribaldry.

That increasing ripeness through the years is one of the reasons these films – often grouped as one entity, despite the nuances of this gradual evolution – fall down in the eyes of many modern critics. They cite their lack of political correctness, and worse, abundance of cliché and implicit laziness of everyone involved.

Another complaint is the lack of representation on screen. The hospital titles throughout the series enjoyed many jokes at the expense of the blossoming NHS, while overlooking the huge contribution made

by nurses from all over the Commonwealth. It wasn't until 1970 that popular entertainer Kenny Lynch appeared, and then only fleetingly, as a bus conductor in *Carry On Loving*. A full three years later, stunning actress Pauline Peart's role in *Carry On Girls* was even smaller.

The Carry Ons were as limited in this respect as almost every other British film of the era. When the central premise of much mainstream comedy was the belief that anybody deemed 'foreign' was somehow worthy of mockery, the series was a product of its time. Like so many other titles of the period, these films would no doubt be cast very differently were they to be made today. Audiences and attitudes rightly change, and so do filmmakers.

But some of the criticisms of outrageous sexism, unacceptable racism and other casual bigotries directed specifically at the Carry On series don't stand up to proper inspection. As we will discover, many of the films' storylines see displays of sexism, racism, class snobbery and other old-fashioned prejudices utterly undone in the telling. While the films are tireless champions of mayhem and innocent mischief, any really serious campaigns of ill intent, whether romantic, criminal or just mean-spirited, are invariably foiled. And no one ever, ever gets the better of Hattie Jacques.

As for cliché, it's easy to see why a modern viewer might think that. We've seen variations of the Carry On gags and set-ups a million times since, but what we have to remember is that Carry On did them first. These people were pioneers, breaking the mould of comedy, influencing their contemporaries as well as all who followed. But if they've been much imitated, when it comes to timing, delivery and memorable punchlines, they've never been bettered. Their legacy is secure.

If you still need persuading, well, I'll have fun in the trying. So with thirty films to get through, we'd better begin to carry on…

Chapter 1

How It All Began

'The Bull Boys'

It's a chilly but sunny Friday morning in August 2020, and I'm driving to Pinewood Studios, which means turning off the A40 just before it becomes a motorway. I'm coming from Ealing, and as I enjoy the trees and fields on either side of me, I revel in the fact that I'm retracing the route Sid James must have taken to work so many times when he lived in a house two streets away from mine, his front wall marked these days with a blue historic plaque.

The site of Pinewood Studios is enormous; a military-like compound with tight security and precise instructions as to where to park and who to meet. I look around and see huge buildings, fleets of service vehicles and teams of people milling about, all there to play their unique role in the British film industry. I've been given a map and realise that, quite without knowing it, I'm already standing on Peter Rogers Way.

A couple of turns and I'm standing in front of the main doors of Heatherden Hall. Although this Victorian country house is dwarfed by so many of the buildings around it, it's clear that it remains the beating heart of Pinewood Studios, and it's gratifying to see that the plaques lining its huge porch belong to Gerald Thomas, his brother Ralph, Peter Rogers and his wife Betty, and that this talented quartet has never been forgotten.

On the other side of the road is a long hallway leading to more buildings instantly familiar to Carry On fans, whether as a hospital corridor, a school hall or whatever use the always canny Peter could find for it.

It is in this hallway that the Carry On stars are celebrated – Sid's plaque sits above Hattie's, Kenneth is naturally paired with Charles, Kenneth Connor is with Peter Butterworth, while Terry Scott shares a wall with Bernard Bresslaw. Joan Sims is there too, for the moment by herself. Although the films are remembered elsewhere in one of Heatherden Hall's many galleries, this is a light, airy space, with lots of sunlight

pouring through the windows, and it delights me to see these names, as familiar as cousins, sitting so prominently in one of Pinewood's central thoroughfares.

They stay with me while I wander through the mansion's back garden, its immaculate lawn recognisable from dozens of Carry On films, as well as James Bond, *Doctor in the House*, even the more recent Elton John biopic *Rocketman*, and then through some of the enormous sound stages that have ensured the studios' enduring reputation as the place where every director in the world wants to work. I make my way as far as the space where the grass was painted green for *Carry On Camping* over half a century ago and wonder, not for the first time: how would the series and its stars fare in the Pinewood of today?

'The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there' – at least according to anybody who reaches for LP Hartley's words to describe an era of British life and its collective way of thinking and behaving, now seemingly forever lost.

Well, to this, I throw down the gauntlet and say, do they really? Because it seems to me that for every facet or foible that seems unique to its era, there is an equally timeless counterpoint, capacity or sensibility that would appear to defy restrictions to this or any age.

Specifically, was 1958, the year of the first ever Carry On film, really so different from today? For sure, we may no longer have the stomach to poke fun at our national institutions – many would argue we no longer need fictional filmmakers to point out their many absurdities, they're doing a fine job of that all by themselves – but to this day, and I hope evermore, we retain the capacity, social duty even, to laugh at each other, with each other and, most importantly, at ourselves.

Carry On, more than any other series in history, took on the task of providing a big screen framework for Britain's official national pastime, namely taking the mickey. The longer the series ran, the bigger the task became of tweaking the creative funny bone in accordance with real life's social revolutions and evolutions. To see how far the series had to travel, we have to go back to discover just how foreign was that country when the Carry On films made their arrival more than six decades ago.

Universally, the Space Race was on, as the start of the year saw Explorer 1, America's first successful satellite, launched into orbit, less than a month after its Soviet rival Sputnik 1 fell to Earth.

Down on our planet, Nikita Kruschev became Premier of the Soviet Union, while his US counterpart, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, became the first American elected official to be broadcast on colour television.

The European Economic Community was properly formed, but the British would find their membership blocked by French president Charles de Gaulle, who won his national election the same year with 78 per cent of the vote.

In America, a prodigious 14-year-old schoolboy named Bobby Fischer won the US Chess Championship; Pizza Hut opened its doors for the first time in Wichita, Kansas; Muppet Man Jim Henson created his own entertainment company; and Elvis Presley joined the Army.

The winners of that year's football world cup were Brazil, and Pope Pius XII declared Saint Clare the patron saint of television.

Back at home, football fans everywhere grieved for Manchester United after the Munich Air Disaster killed eight of the team and injured their manager Matt Busby.

The Queen gave her eldest son Charles the title of Prince of Wales, while her husband the Duke of Edinburgh opened the London Planetarium. The last debutantes were presented to royalty, before the ceremony was abolished. Far away from court, Bertrand Russell launched the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

The Prime Minister Harold McMillan opened Britain's first motorway, the Preston Bypass – later to become part of the M6 and M55 – and the first parking meters were also installed in the UK.

The BBC created the Radiophonic Workshop and in October, two long-running TV shows made their broadcast debut, *Grandstand* for sports fans and *Blue Peter* for the rest of us.

Cliff Richard's debut single 'Move It' reached number two in the charts, while a a little-known Liverpool band called The Quarrymen paid 17 shillings and six pence to record their first tracks – a cover of Buddy Holly's 'That'll Be The Day', as well as 'In Spite of All the Danger', an original song written by two of their line-up, Paul and George.

For us Brits, there was a lot to sing about. Economic growth was steady throughout the decade, although not as speedy as on the Continent. The long-time Conservative government continued the welfare state policies set out by Clement Attlee's Labour government of the late 1940s, which

saw the number of private and council housing estates increasing and slum dwellings diminishing.

The average British weekly wage for manual jobs was £12 13s 6d, and unemployment was relatively low, at around 2 per cent over the course of the 1950s.

For most, the standard of living remained consistently on the up as prosperity slowly returned. In 1958, four years after the end of wartime rationing and with hire-purchase controls relaxed at the same time, holidays and hobbies became accessible to many for the first time.

Increasing numbers of us jumped into new cars for family adventures, often spent in newly popular holiday camps, while at home we saved up for life-enhancing inventions like washing machines, vacuum cleaners and electric fires. The Queen's Coronation in 1953 inspired millions to splash out on a television set for the first time, and most homes already had the wireless and the gramophone to spin our burgeoning collections of 78rpm records.

Only a year before, Harold McMillan had told his 50 million citizens, 'You've never had it so good,' and with the brand new invention of fish fingers on our plates, it would be difficult to disagree with him.

For the young and fancy-free, there were plenty of ways to spend their new-found spare cash. It was the era of jive, skiffle and rock and roll, which meant that dance halls and other stomping venues were bustling wall to wall with the decade's other great invention, the teenager. And, if you couldn't squeeze in there, well, there was always a trip to the pictures.

The two most popular types of film at the time were the British military epic championing the valour of our wartime homegrown heroes, and the comedy revelling in more attainable but eccentric daydreams.

1950s audiences had already watched the triumphant stories of Guy Gibson and Douglas Bader, told in the unashamedly patriotic *The Dam Busters* and *Reach for the Sky*.

In 1957, David Lean's *The Bridge on the River Kwai* became UK cinema's biggest international success of the decade, proving the appetite for a nostalgic wallow in British former greatness wasn't limited to our shores.

Greatness of a much less heroic type was on offer by our comedic stars of the same period, including Norman Wisdom, Peter Sellers and Alec Guinness. With enduring titles including *The Lavender Hill Mob*, *The Ladykillers* and *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, Ealing Studios carried the baton

for the nation's funniest films, at least until 1955 when the BBC moved in. Three years later, British comedy would carry on(!) in its new, more enduring home, thirteen miles up the Western Avenue at Pinewood.

Admittedly, we lost some of our biggest names to the American studios during this era, both in front of the camera and behind. Directors including Carol Reed, Alberto Cavalcanti and Robert Hamer all decamped to make their fortunes in Hollywood, while the faces of some of our finest stars such as James Mason, Deborah Kerr, Stewart Granger and Jean Simmons soon graced the billboards above Sunset Boulevard.

But we kept many more. Big names like Michael Redgrave, Laurence Olivier and Dirk Bogarde joined those of Jack Hawkins, Richard Todd and Kenneth More above the bill, while Diana Dors proved America didn't have a monopoly on the blonde femme fatale.

Most significantly for this book, huge audiences during the 1950s ensured successful return business for both romantic comedies like *Doctor in the House*, and for the thrills provided by Peter Cushing, Christopher Lee and their fellow residents of the Hammer House of Horror. Whether we were laughing loudly along in the cinema, or pinned to our seats with fear, it seems we couldn't resist the return to the screen of increasingly famous, familiar faces – fangs optional.

It was against this background that the acorn of an idea was first sown, one that nobody could have any idea would grow and blossom into Britain's largest ever film franchise, and run with barely a blip for the next two decades. Twenty-five years later, in 1983, William Goldman brought every aspiring filmmaker some kind of bleak reassurance when he wrote in his industry bible *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, 'Nobody knows anything… Not one person in the entire motion picture field knows for a certainty what's going to work. Every time out it's a guess and, if you're lucky, an educated one.'

Despite this almost certainly true maxim, if anybody could claim to know exactly what he was doing, it must be Peter Rogers, the man who brought the first Carry On film into being and ruled over his ensuing franchise like a benevolent dictator. He always said that no one person was above the bill, 'Carry On itself is the star,' but if it is anybody's theoretical baby, it is surely his. What on earth inspired him to do it, how did he manage it, and what was unique about him that meant he succeeded in pulling off something almost unimaginable?

An initial dip into Peter Rogers's background, with his comfortable, conventional childhood in Rochester, Kent, would appear to give little to indicate what a colossus of the British film industry he would become, although his first show of professional rebellion might give us a clue.

Having grown up with two brothers who followed their father Claude into his licensing business, Peter was expected to do the same. At first, he did try to toe the family line but his more creative passions soon trumped the wishes of his father, who reluctantly agreed to support him while he turned his hand to writing plays. His mother Alice was far more encouraging, despite Peter receiving constant rejection letters for his efforts, but she died in 1944 and he found himself ejected from the family home when his father remarried.

Perhaps this lack of family support early on explains Peter's tireless creative drive in the years that followed, but the time he spent desperately unwell in his mid-twenties surely had even more to do with it. He had expected to follow his brothers into wartime service, but instead, aged just 26, he was struck down by cerebral spinal meningitis, a debilitating illness which he was extremely lucky to survive. As it was, he was confined to a hospital bed for nearly a year. When he finally recovered, his biographers report, 'Peter, who was not a religious man, blessed whoever had looked down on him and saved him. He was determined more than ever now to make a success of his life.'

And succeed he did. Post-war, his resumed playwriting found an audience, on BBC radio at least. Having previously worked as a journalist, he was given the job of scriptwriter at the religious film company of J. Arthur Rank, a man as devout a Christian as he was pioneering in the British film industry. As Peter later reflected, 'There was Methodism in his madness!' This unit was soon closed, but this was an era when fortune favoured a young man prepared to work hard in London, and Peter was clearly no slouch. He got a new job with the *World Press News*, where his assignments included editing the film page. This meant attending screenings and other functions in the West End, which is where he met his future wife, Betty Box.

If there is one element of luck to counter all of the ambition, effort and talent in Peter Rogers's story, it must be his first encounter with Betty and the social circle that he happily joined as a result, and at such a formative moment in his career. Betty was already an established name in

the British film industry, along with her older brother Sydney, who had a scriptwriting Oscar to his name for *The Seventh Veil*. By the time Peter met the talented pair, Sydney had been drafted by J. Arthur Rank to run Gainsborough Studios. By virtue of his quickly blossoming relationship with Betty, Peter became one of the Box inner ring, alongside Betty, plus Sydney and his wife Muriel, a group united by their great love of film. Peter became quick to offer Sydney script ideas, and before long Sydney offered him a full-time scriptwriting contract at his new Studio. After all those years hopelessly sending off script after script from his home in Kent, Peter was finally in the room with people who could bring his ideas to life, and it wasn't an opportunity he would squander.

For financial reasons, Gainsborough was soon forced to shut its doors. By the early 1950s, the team were based instead at Pinewood Studios, a semi-rural retreat deep in Buckinghamshire's bosom of Iver Heath, a leafy location whose surroundings would become deeply familiar to Carry On audiences in the decades that followed.

For now, Peter was hard at work trying to make commercial successes out of his catalogue of ideas, and making the transition from scriptwriter to producer. In this he was advised and inspired by the success of his wife Betty – the couple had married in 1948 – who operated out of an office next to his. She spent her time making box office triumphs for the Rank Organisation, including *The Clouded Yellow*, starring Trevor Howard. Significantly for us, this was her first time collaborating with director Ralph Thomas (remember that name!), who had previously worked for her brother Sydney. Betty and Ralph would go on to enjoy a working partnership that lasted more than thirty years and included such big screen hits as *Appointment with Venus* (1951), *A Day to Remember* (1953) and the incredibly successful *Doctor in the House* (1954) and all its sequels.

Meanwhile, Peter battled with various projects such as *You Know What Sailors Are!* and *To Dorothy a Son*, stars including a delightful Kenneth More and a slightly more demanding Shelley Winters, and other industry executives. Prior to Carry On, his biggest success was the TV series *Ivanhoe*, which starred Roger Moore and whose most memorable element is probably its catchy theme tune.

If the ambitious producer was struggling, being part of a supportive creative circle meant he knew where to look for help. Inspired by his

wife's success with her director Ralph Thomas, he asked her if he could create the same kind of partnership with her then editor, Ralph's younger brother Gerald.

In the story of Carry On, the only person who could argue for equal top billing with Peter Rogers is Gerald Thomas, the cool-as-a-cucumber director of every single one of the titles in the series.

Originally from Hull, in the then East Riding of Yorkshire, Gerald had originally set his heart on a career in medicine, before his studies and aspirations were interrupted by wartime duties. Following service for the Royal Sussex Regiment in Germany, France and the Middle East, he returned home and changed direction to film, initially working in the post-production rooms at Denham Studios.

He was quickly able to build up an impressive CV as an assistant editor, cutting Laurence Olivier in *Hamlet*, John Mills in *The October Man* and Margaret Lockwood in *Madness of the Heart*. He was even courted by Disney to edit *The Sword and the Rose*. By the time he returned to Pinewood to work on his brother's romantic comedy *Doctor in the House*, he was regarded as one of the country's finest editors.

He was unproven as a director, however, until Peter Rogers gave him his break. Peter and Gerald made their collaborative debut with a children's film called *Circus Friends*, and then with an adaptation of Arthur Hailey's *Time Lock*. Given only a tiny budget to play with, Peter brought all his creative skills to bear in making the production look more luxurious than it was, while Gerald succeeded in bringing the film in on time and on budget, a feat he would repeat with astonishing consistency in the decades to follow. *Time Lock* was a hit, and the pair's combined efforts would serve as the rock-solid template for all their future work together, not least the Carry Ons.

Peter had also written the script for *Time Lock*, but what he really wanted was a full-time contracted writer to complete his line-up for future projects. Norman Hudis was his man.

Born in Stepney, East London, Norman always credited a film for his first ideas to be a writer, or at least a journalist. The film was *This Man is News*, a comedy mystery about a reporter who has to solve a crime for which he himself is suspected. It was one of Britain's box office hits of 1938 and starred Barry K. Barnes and Valerie Hobson. Thus inspired,

Norman began his career aged 16 as a newspaperman on his local title, the *Hampstead and Highgate Express*.

Like Gerald, Norman found his first professional ideas thwarted by the war. He joined the RAF on his 18th birthday and spent most of the next five years as a telephone operator in England and the Middle East. In Egypt, he began writing for the *Air Force News* from their main office in Cairo, and also started coming across real-life personalities that would later turn up in his Carry On scripts. It was in the RAF that Norman encountered buffoonish characters of authority, men he called 'gruff grandpas' – figures we would see springing up frequently in his later work.

Back in Britain after the war, Norman joined the publicity department of J. Arthur Rank. His job – championing British films across the world by getting their pictures in magazines – took him from Rank's London office to studios in Islington, Denham and finally, Pinewood.

By Norman's admission, he stayed in this role for 'too long', seven years in fact, before he felt inclined to pen his own work. His play *Here is the News*, all about a press room operating in a country under dictatorship, was finally performed in repertory and enjoyed enough critical acclaim to bring him to the attention of Rank's executive producer Earl St John, who had funnily enough produced *This Man is News*, Norman's original professional inspiration.

Earl St John was sufficiently impressed to offer Norman a job as a trainee scriptwriter, but not sufficiently impressed to put any of his words into production. After two years of throwing ideas up in the air, Norman went freelance where he became a prolific writer of 'B' features.

This was an efficient production business model whereby American producers paid for cast and script, and got the rights to the whole Western Hemisphere. British companies made the film in three weeks or less and cleared a tidy profit. Before television came along, this was a lucrative, efficient exercise. Once television arrived, it all but disappeared.

Fortunately, before that happened, Norman found he had a proper hit on his hands, *The Tommy Steele Story*, made at Beaconsfield Studios in 1957. Once this low-budget no-brainer became a multi-million pound box office success, Peter Rogers, long convinced of Norman's talent, took a much safer bet on his screenwriting power and offered him a full-time seven-year contract. Norman's first task? To write another film

for Tommy Steele, this time a musical called *The Duke Wore Jeans*. In better news, this would be Norman's first film to be directed by Gerald Thomas. The pair worked well together, and the great success of the film augured well for future projects.

There they were then, the complete creative trio, suited, booted and ready for work. All they needed was a project, and that presented itself in 1957, when an unsolicited script arrived on Peter's desk.

The title was *The Bull Boys*, the story of a couple of ballet dancers conscripted into army service. In writer R.F. Delderfield's hands, it was a straight romantic drama with little to distinguish it from hundreds of other scripts, and nobody seemed to want a bar of it. Even when French film star Leslie Caron's name was waved around in relation to possible casting for the lead, Sydney Box who had owned the rights originally, couldn't raise anybody's interest, which is why he passed it Peter's way.

Peter thought it might work better as a comedy, but he had equally bad luck trying to get the big writers of the time to look at it, with Ray Galton, Alan Simpson, Eric Sykes and Spike Milligan all turning him down. The producer turned to another funnyman, John Antrobus, who accordingly came up with some jaunty enough separate scenes, but Peter was after a more logical complete narrative. He told his biographers, 'Rightly or wrongly, I have always felt that audiences like to believe in their comedy.'

Instead, he turned to somebody already on his books, Norman Hudis, with one simple instruction: make it into a proper comedy.

Norman sat down with Peter and Gerald Thomas and between them they sketched out something that sounds so obvious in hindsight, so simple and yet universally appealing, it seems strange it took anyone so long to come up with what would become a magic formula for not just this initial effort, but the first few Carry On titles.

It was Norman who devised a whole new landscape for that first film, to include an irascible but secretly warm-hearted person of authority, tasked with supervising a bunch of well-intentioned but cheeky, often clumsy incompetents, who test everybody's patience, initially set out on a course of disaster before somehow coming good just in time for the credits.

To think, in a parallel universe where the meeting of these three talented men didn't take place, there might have been produced a long-forgotten drama about two ballet dancers dealing with conscription, possibly (but

probably not) starring Leslie Caron, now tucked away somewhere on a high, dusty shelf in the archives of the British Film Institute.

But that meeting did happen and all three set to work for the newly shaped film, under the aegis of Anglo-Amalgamated Pictures and its executives, Nat Cohen and Stuart Levy. It was Stuart Levy whom Peter Rogers credited for originally coming up with the new title, *Carry On Sergeant*.

Looking back, could anyone else have pulled off what was to become such a unique jewel in British entertainment's crown? Could anyone else have offered anything to match Gerald Thomas's capacity for swift, slapstick direction and his unique comedic eye, Norman Hudis's talent for painting a humorous but humane landscape with his words, and Peter Roger's knack for overcoming all obstacles in bringing his vision to the screen?

Of course, we'll never know, but it is abundantly clear that each of them had distinctive and complementary skills that were to give the project its best possible fair wind from the very first day of production. And just like that, they were off.

Chapter 2

Reporting For Duty

'I'll tell you, mate – two of everything that you should have two of, and you're in!'

Kenneth Connor in *Carry On Sergeant*

Despite his great talent, Norman Hudis was always a humble man. In his memoir, he took the liberty of sharing some advice for other screenwriters, but even here he played down his own great gift, suggesting, 'You should find out how to do it reasonably right by doing it dead wrong first and hacking your own path through the jungle of art, technique and commerce.'

There was clearly more to Norman's skill than this, but the phrase that jumps out for me here is 'hacking your own path'. Because what Norman, and other great writers of his era had that today's writers far more often have to do without, is a wealth of personal life experience, relatively speaking. After years of wartime service, facing a deadly enemy, finding comradeship in peril, setting up home and office overseas, missing loved ones back home, returning to Britain and building another life, Norman and his peers had a treasure chest of memories, stories, personalities, anecdotes into which to delve – a personal hinterland on which to draw creative inspiration. For his very first Carry On script, despite being placed in the most English of settings, Norman looked to his experiences of RAF service in the Middle East during the war, and his realisation that 'as every fair-minded serviceman, of whatever rank knows, it is the Army and RAF sergeants, and their Royal Naval and Royal Marine counterparts, who really, day to day, run the armed forces'.

His memoir fondly recounts the actions of his Unit, RAF's no.55 Repair and Salvage Unit, who remained, in his words, 'delayed and deprived but, because of the innate, gruff spirit of the time, not demoralised'. That affection and respect for his own group of challenged but ultimately triumphant fellows shines through on the page of not just *Sergeant*, but

his entire canon of Carry On titles and is key, I believe, to the fondness in which they are held.

From the barest bones of *The Bull Boys* script, Norman fashioned a story of unlikely triumph, threaded through with sentiment and romance.

> '*Out of 24 men, I'm lumbered with one hypochondriac, one natural-born candidate for the glass house, a rock and roller, a shadow of a man haunted by lord knows what, a poppy-chasing layabout and some lethal idiot who gets himself locked in you know where.*'

His central narrative concerns a deceptively blustering sergeant set to retire, who makes a bet on his final conscripts becoming his very first star platoon. The bunch of hapless misfits he encounters does not make this a likely prospect, until they overcome their own inadequacies to make his dream come true.

Meanwhile, a newly married couple find their plans for their wedding day – and night – disrupted when the groom receives his conscription papers only minutes after leaving the church. Determined that love will conquer all, his bride follows him to his barracks where they conspire to be together.

Finally, another hypochondriac, angst-riddled recruit does his best to sabotage himself, professionally and romantically, before being saved by a kindly medical officer and the love of a good woman.

And that was it. While not exactly the most demanding, complicated or epic tale, Norman's script contained enough comic caper, slapstick humour, banana-skin mishaps and shiny-eyed sentiment to appeal to audiences, and Peter Rogers knew it.

As soon as the script was polished enough, the producer approached the film company Anglo-Amalgamated, the same people who had just financed his two Tommy Steele hits. It was run by Nat Cohen and Stuart Levy, and it was they who requested the title become *Carry On Sergeant*. Later, Peter always credited Stuart Levy in particular for this impactful idea.

Despite their enthusiasm for the project, these bean counters made it clear that no meat would be allowed on this experimental bone for Peter and Gerald, but producer and director somehow made it work, preparing a backbreaking schedule that would achieve three minutes of film going

in the can per day. To avoid spending extra money on locations and props, Peter enlisted the cooperation of the military's top brass, making such an outlandish list of 'essential requirements' that eventually his liaison, Major Michael Forbes, suggested he might like to continue his correspondence with theatrical agencies instead, but somehow all came good. In answer to my question earlier of just what was unique about Peter Rogers that meant he was able to create Carry On, every story about him hints at ingenuity and, above all, tirelessness when it came to overcoming obstacles.

The only luxury he permitted himself when it came to filming was his choice of studio, and what a luxury it was.

When Barbara Windsor made her first trip to Pinewood, she remembered, 'It's how I imagined Hollywood to be.'

Sure enough, this 90-acre site, tucked into a quiet leafy corner of Buckinghamshire, twenty miles from London and surrounded by fields and trees, was, even then, the jewel in the crown of the British film industry.

Heatherden Hall, the large Victorian country house at the centre of the estate, was previously a country retreat and discreet meeting place for politicians and diplomats to relax and confer. It was transformed in 1935 when building tycoon Charles Boot and millionaire industrialist J. Arthur Rank teamed up to turn it into a film studio. In his rich history of the place, Morris Bright explains how they wanted it to have an American studio feel, with a name to match. One day, Charles Boot looked out at the garden, covered in pine trees, and came up with Pinewood. The initial days of construction included five separate stages and a water tank that could hold 300,000 litres of water. At the centre of the estate remained the stately pile, and at the studios' opening, one toff was reportedly overheard complaining, 'It's as if a millionaire with a beautiful house has allowed movie making to go on in the back garden.'

That's exactly what it was, and Heatherden Hall has gone on to become one of the most filmed country houses in the UK, with every bit of its corridors and cornices appearing on screen over the last seventy-five years. Before the Carry Ons moved in, its beautiful manicured lawn was where Norman Wisdom came a cropper with a lawn mower, and later Odd Job's hat smoothly beheaded a statue in *Goldfinger*. Fans of films from *Bugsy Malone* to *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and *The Prime of Miss Jean*

Brodie, plus TV shows from *One Foot in the Grave* to *Midsomer Murders*, will all recognise its elegant façade, and of course the producers of both Carry On and James Bond have long taken copious advantage of such a telegenic landscape on their doorstep.

By the time Peter Rogers was scouting for space, Pinewood had long laid claim to being our country's answer to Hollywood. Screen idols to have passed through its doors included a young Richard Attenborough, Anna Neagle, John Mills, Moira Shearer, Deborah Kerr, Jean Simmons and Dirk Bogarde. Aspiring starlets also crossed its threshold, through J. Arthur Rank's own Charm School, or Company of Youth, to give it its official name. Future Carry On star Shirley Eaton was one of the glittering alumni, alongside Joan Collins, Claire Bloom, Diana Dors and Petula Clark. Pete Murray, Donald Sinden and Patrick McGoohan all added to the mix, and it was even where Christopher Lee learned his winning ways.

This heady cocktail of visiting superstars and local British folk is captured nowhere more romantically than in the 2011 film *My Week with Marilyn*, depicting the unlikely but true tale of the friendship between Ms Monroe and a young production assistant, Colin Clark, when she arrived at Pinewood to appear in *The Prince and the Showgirl*. Eddie Redmayne played the star-struck Clark, and I was lucky enough to interview him before he became, well, Eddie Redmayne. I was moved to hear that they had filmed on the very same set previously graced by Marilyn herself, and just how entranced Eddie was to be gazing in Clark-like devotion at his co-stars Michelle Williams and Dame Judi Dench. It seems the power of Pinewood endures.

Back in 1958, this glittering roll-call and the peerless production values and technical expertise on offer meant that the price for filming in these hallowed studios was upgraded accordingly. But for Peter, who'd previously worked at Pinewood alongside his wife and knew lots of familiar faces, there was nowhere else he wanted to be, much to the chagrin of his coin-counting bosses at Anglo-Amalgamated.

His distributors were very keen on him going instead to Elstree, where they had a business partnership with ABC Studios, but Peter had never worked there before. He was familiar with Beaconsfield Studios, having made the TV series *Ivanhoe*, but this meant he was able to make the strong argument that Beaconsfield's sets were all full up – presumably with great piles of swords, shields and brigandines!

Still, how to keep the prices down at Pinewood to figures that he could get past his people at Anglo-Amalgamated? Well, anybody who's ever visited a film set will know that, to the uneducated eye, it seems like an awful lot of people are standing around, waiting for an hour to move a cable. While these are actually all highly-skilled technicians with a specific job to do, during this particular era, studios did also fill the decks with salaried staff who, if they were honest, they could have done without. Peter knew exactly who he needed and whittled the crew sheet down to a much smaller workforce. Of course, persuading their bosses of the rightness of this exercise was a different matter, and here Peter's familiarity with the studio helped him out once again.

For everyone in the film industry, the end of production 'wrap party' had become one of the set-in-stone traditions, where the entire cast and crew had the chance to unwind with a drink and let loose, often after weeks of backbreaking work. So it was with huge groans that the crews of Pinewood received the news that the Rank Organisation were pulling the plug on such hedonistic jamborees, because of J. Arthur Rank's strong religious beliefs. Because Peter was coming in as an independent producer, he was able to steer his own ship when it came to such events, and he swiftly promised to reinstate the much-missed ritual. Needless to say, the staff of Pinewood were equally swiftly reconciled to his plans for a reduced workforce and demanding shooting schedule. Looked like the crew were going to earn their knees-up!

To put into context just how much meat Peter had carved off the bone with his budget for *Sergeant*, five years earlier his wife Betty Box had made *Doctor in the House* for £125,000, and now here was her husband, presenting a bottom line of less than £80,000. Nobody except Peter believed it could be done. Years later, he marvelled at how straightforward the negotiations were considering how much money he was looking to save, remembering, 'It was the most expensive studio in the country and there was I trying to come in with a modest budget. I said, "This is all I have to spend." It happened to be a time when Rank had banned end-of-picture parties, so they said, "If you give us a party, we'll meet your figure." So that's how we got in.' This budgetary background helps explain why he needed all the help he could get with props and locations from the Army, and why his list of requests was so surprisingly long when it reached Major Forbes. The cast of Carry On has long complained about