

**Once famous for farces, Brian Rix, G2DQU, is now better known for his work with mentally handicapped people. This year he was made a Life Peer**

# From the boards to the Lords

**L**ORD RIX of Whitehall in Westminster and Hornsea in Yorkshire is, as the advert goes, a very, very nice man and plainly much loved and respected by his colleagues at Mencap. His is an interesting, sometimes sad and ultimately heartwarming story.

As his long title indicates, he hails from Hornsea in Yorkshire - he doesn't approve of 'North Humberside'. Brian's brother Malcolm, 12 years his senior, was G5GX and this kindled a life-long interest in amateur radio.

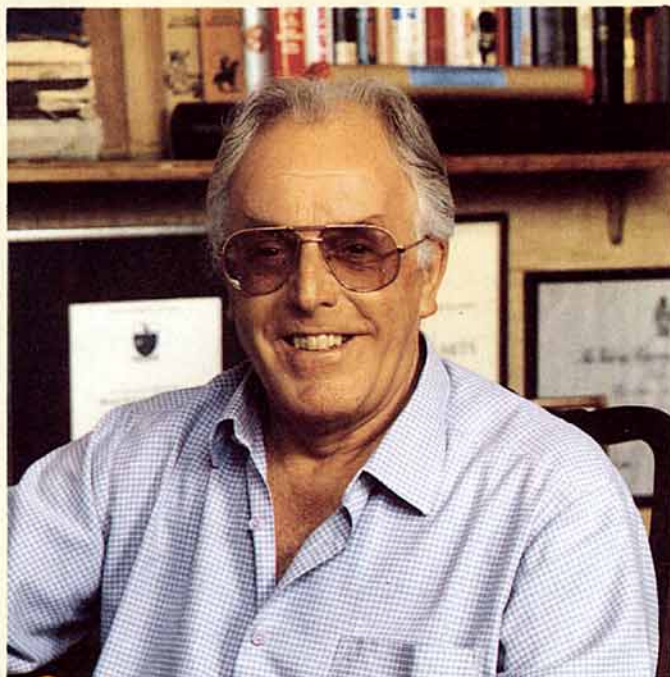
"I was first licensed at 13 - in 1937 - it wasn't a full licence of course; it was an artificial aerial licence." The callsign 2DQU permitted experiments not requiring the use of a radiating aerial.

"I got my full licence after the war when I was still in the Air Force and I got permission to use it from my bunk - my room. My first rig was a ZC 1, some New Zealand so-called portable gear which I converted. It's still in the loft at home. It was called 'portable' but you get a hernia every time you lift it - it's unbelievable how far things have progressed."

Many people will be thankful that Brian did not operate radios during the War: "If you were a wireless operator up in an aircraft you were dead."

Older brother Malcolm Rix's story is as fascinating as Brian's: "Of course I worshipped my brother, being older. The interesting thing is he started amateur radio in Hornsea. He enthused another five people and Hornsea then became quite a strong place after the war, they had quite a good club going and Malcolm was the lynch-pin there."

"Three or four of them all did frightfully well in the war because they were all sent for by the Territorial Army in Beverley three weeks before the war broke out and were sworn to secrecy. They all came back Lance Bombardiers in the TA. When Hitler invaded Poland they went straight into the Royal Artillery and they were made Staff Sergeants almost immediately. They all went



Just prior to his presentation to the House of Lords in February, Brian Rix, G2DQU, had "a working lunch" talking to *RadCom*.

down to Richmond Park where Sir Robert Watson-Watt who invented RADAR taught the courses. They went straight on to become officers within minutes - and that was all through amateur radio. They were the original RADAR officers and they were all radio amateurs. They'd been picked because they were in their twenties and they were asked if they would 'volunteer', all because they had amateur licences. Of course I thought he was very glamorous really. Malcolm is still on the air a lot but he's partially sighted now and of course he finds it a tremendous benefit to him."

Many RSGB members will know Brian Rix best for his hugely successful acting career, specialising in farces at the Whitehall Theatre. Use of the microphone from an early age helped when later he worked in television.

The callsign G2DQU was heard on the air until quite recently, though the FT75 and 2m rig now gather dust. "To me it was so boring saying the same thing - about what your rig was - and all the rest of it. You might just as

well go and clean your teeth. But in the 70s, before I retired, it kept me in touch with people whilst I was on tour; I had some very good local contacts. There were even quite a few with America whilst I was driving to Wolverhampton or Birmingham or wherever. In those days everybody knew who I was. They recognized my voice because it is very distinctive. I made a good friend in Eastbourne, whilst I was playing a Summer season in Eastbourne and when I drove home to Barnes every night he kept me going. I was chattering to him every night for twelve weeks."

## RSGB Vice-President

ALTHOUGH NOT a radio club member, "My lifestyle has been very odd. Don't forget I went to the theatre every night for 40-odd years", Brian has been a lifelong supporter of the RSGB. In 1960 he opened the RSGB Exhibition at the Royal Horticultural Hall in London, and in 1979 he was invited to front a television programme about amateur radio.

This was part of a series called *Open Door* which allowed special interest groups to make their own programme with the help of a BBC TV crew. He also explained the hobby on Joan Bakewell's TV show. Then there was his regular TV series *Let's Go* "I presented all 40 programmes, teaching mentally handicapped people social skills like going to a football match, paying the bill in a cafe or going to a Post Office. And hobbies was one of them. So I've done three programmes on the telly about the hobby - and that's why they made me a Vice-President." Actually, the accolade reads 'in recognition of the assistance given in the publicity sphere for amateur radio'.

As an actor and radio amateur, how does he view Tony Hancock's famous *Radio Ham* comedy? "Well, it's just nonsense to resent Hancock. I always thought it was rather pompous of people to say it conveyed the wrong image. I don't think the image of amateur radio is all that bad. It seems a good clean hobby and keeps you off the streets. It encourages a lot of young people. I think it's great that they can cut their teeth on it and then probably go into engineering or telecommunications, or whatever, as a career."

"I think it's a fantastic hobby to actually interest a kid. I know that from my own personal experience. You had a bread board and a soldering iron and made up a one-valve this and a two-valve that. It was fantastic. And your Christmas present - just imagine the joy - your parents sent off to Premier Radio, and it would be stuff that you could put together. That was fantastic and I can see why young people go for the Novice Licence. So I don't think people look on it as a joke. I think that the joke area comes when people are infinitely boring about it."

"I still read *RadCom* to try and keep myself vaguely up to date though it gets more and more technical. I'm inclined to read the gossip and the editorial and the adverts. I love the adverts, I still



drool over them. If ever I become bed-ridden, God willing I don't, I think I should take up radio again in a serious way."

## Enter Shelley

ON 3 DECEMBER 1951, an event happened which was to change the lives of Brian and his family for ever. His first daughter, Shelley, was born mentally handicapped. When talking about her, Brian turns away a little, revealing the powerful emotions which this still involves.

"When Shelley was five she moved into Normansfield which had been run since 1868 by the family of the man who gave his name to Down's Syndrome. She lived there until last June. She had a good life there - I mean as good as you can expect. Then we formed the Friends of Normansfield and my wife [actress Elspet Gray - *Ed*] and I were the principal fund raisers."

"We affiliated to what was then known as the National Society for Mentally Handicapped Children, later to become The Royal Society for Mentally Handicapped Children and Adults and now MENCAP. We were very successful as fund raisers and made a lot of money and were able to do a lot of things. We built a school and kept it going for our kids, when there was nothing else for them. We ran a holiday place down at Selsey Bill, and built a toy library, a club house, a boutique . . ."

## An actor's life for MENCAP

"I WAS THEN approached by MENCAP and became the first Chairman of their fund-raising committee in 1961. I used to chair the meetings in my dressing gown between performances of *One for the Pot* on Thursday afternoons. Our first ever fund raising

event was a Spring Ball (the first of many) at the Savoy Hotel, and we made £4000 - that's worth over £50,000 by today's standards, a lot of money. And then I went on and raised more money. Then in about 1965 I resigned because by then they'd got a proper Appeals Department and were doing it professionally and they just got on with it."

"I then made a speech where I told two-thousand people in Central Hall, Westminster, that I was the father of a mentally handicapped daughter. This was terribly traumatic - it was the first time I'd talked about Shelley. It was very worrying as to whether I'd done the right thing or not, but anyway it seemed right to let the people know that all sorts of people have mentally handicapped children. It made every Sunday paper. The headlines were: 'Brian Rix admits . . .', 'Brian Rix confesses . . .'. That's the way it was then." Over twenty years after the event, the wounds caused by this insensitive Press coverage have not healed.

"I was getting uneasy after 27 years of doing farce as an actor-manager and I felt that I could do something more. I thought that what I had been as an actor and the profile it created for me would stand me in good stead in some public service. I wanted to come to MENCAP and it just so happened that my predecessor was retiring, I put in for the job of Secretary General and at first they didn't believe me; there was this guy who drops his trousers for a living . . . But of course what they didn't realise was that being an actor-manager is probably one of the toughest ways of earning your living because you are responsible entirely, every penny you earn, every play that goes on, every cast - everything. I had no agent, ever - I did every single bit of negotiation throughout my entire theatrical life. So I was



"Yes this is the sort of thing we were doing in our day", said Lord Rix on examining a copy of *The Bright Sparks of Wireless*, presented to him by the RSGB.

quite bright really in business in a funny sort of way. And I've never been afraid or ashamed to ask, so I applied for the job and eventually I got it, serving as Secretary General from 1980-87 when I retired."

## The Lords

"I WAS ELECTED Chairman in 1988 and I'm Chairman still. I presume I'll go on for another two, three, four years, and then hopefully they will then kick me upstairs to be President. When

I'm introduced to the House of Lords next Wednesday my sponsors are Lord Allen of Abbeydale who is the current President and Lord Renton who is the Immediate Past President, so there will be three Chairmen of MENCAP actually in the Chamber together, which must be great."

"I intend doing as much as I can in the House of Lords for mentally handicapped people as well as for the Arts. The great thing about the House of Lords which being a Sir doesn't give you [Brian Rix was knighted in 1986 - *Ed*] is it gives you a forum. It gives you a right to speak, to ask questions and demand answers, which is frightfully useful."

Would he go back to the stage?: "I don't need an evening's applause all the time. Your priorities change. I'm Chairman of eleven voluntary associations including MENCAP and now I'm going to the House of Lords, so I reckon my time's earmarked."

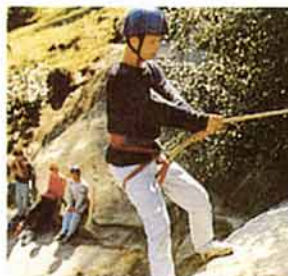
In an extraordinary way, Brian Rix's 30-year success as an actor-manager seems to have been merely the first act of a life now devoted to the needs of people with a mental handicap. Long may he continue his work in his latest role as Lord Rix.



Lord Rix was presented to the House of Lords on 12 February by his sponsors, Lord Renton and Lord Allen of Abbeydale.

# MENCAP

## The Royal Society for Mentally Handicapped Children and Adults



Young people enjoying a MENCAP Holiday Service trip.

MENCAP aims to make sure that the needs and aspirations of people with a mental handicap and their families are properly met.

MENCAP has over 3,000 staff, and 50,000 parent members working through 500 local MENCAP Societies. These support over 150,000 friends with a mental handicap or learning disability. Many volunteers support projects all over the country through:

- Such projects as the Profound Retardation and Multiple Handicap (PRMH) Project which trains family members to care for their severely handicapped relations.
- The Gateway clubs run weekly to provide leisure activities to 150,000 members in the UK.
- The MENCAP Homes Foundation to help those with a learning disability to live relatively independent lives in homes of their own.
- The Pathway Employment Service, training people with a learning disability to take ordinary jobs, in ordinary workplaces, for ordinary wages.

For further information contact:

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