

Maurice Chevalier was the father that I never had

LES WALTON on how he grappled with languages

FROM September 2014, it has been necessary for all maintained primary schools across England to teach a modern or ancient foreign language to children aged 7-11 years old.

The DfE argued that teaching primary pupils also provides the opportunity to explore creative and playful ways to open minds to the concept of foreign languages.

Without doubt my experience of learning a foreign language at school was not creative and certainly not playful.

The thing I have in common with TVs Miranda Hart and John Lennon is that I also studied Latin at school. Our experience was one of learning to say, off by heart, the different forms of Latin verbs, according to tense, mood, person and number.

Miranda, in one episode, when asking Hans about languages she learned in school, triumphantly rattled off "amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant!" Latin grammar was so drummed into our minds that, like Miranda, even today I can still remember how to say in Latin I love, you love, he, she or it loves, we love, you (plural) love and they love.

In 1964 during the filming of their first feature film *A Hard Day's Night*, the Beatles recorded a couple of fun interviews. The interviews were recorded and conducted by George Harrison. During the interview John Lennon, who attended Quarry Bank Grammar School between 1952 and 1957, reads the poem 'Alec Speaking' which includes the lines.....

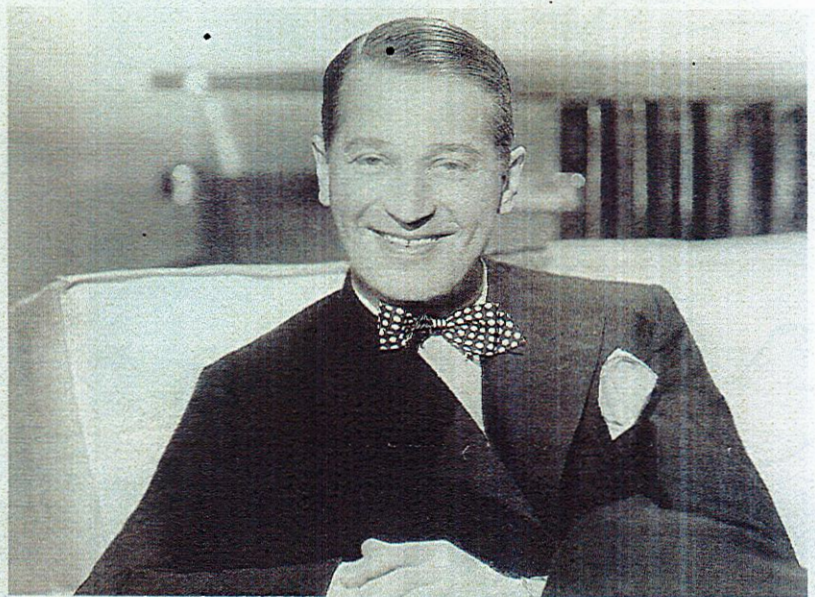
*Amo amat amass
Amonk, amink, a minibus
Amarmylaidie Moon
Amikky mendip multiplus
Amighty midgey spoon*

Even the writer of *Imagine* could not rid himself of the desire to conjugate Latin verbs.

Our school motto was also indelibly imprinted on my mind: "Non sine pulvere palma" - no prize without effort. The best English equivalent I can think of is "no pain, no gain!" Without doubt this sentiment was the basis for our learning of Latin.

The Latin saying is derived from the writings of Horace, the Roman poet, who asks the rhetorical question of whether the prize of the palm of victory without any effort would be worth having - sit condicio dulcis sine pulvere palmae? - the answer being that it would not be worth having at all!

Horace suggests the proverb actually cuts both ways: you can read it to mean that you cannot hope to get the palm of victory without making some



➤ Maurice Chevalier was fond of a trip to Whickham

kind of effort and, conversely, that if you were somehow to get the palm of victory without having made any real effort, it would be a meaningless, hollow victory.

The other language I studied was French. French has always been a foreign language to me. The three worst French pupils in the class were Geoff and Doreen (my good friends) and yours truly!

Geoff spoke with a broad Geordie French accent. Not one person in the whole of France would have been able to understand him. However, I understood every word. He sounded perfect to me.

Doreen, who was in love with James Dean and other assorted American film stars, spoke with a nasal American accent, with a breathy Marilyn Monroe intonation. Whilst the teacher announced that Doreen would not be able to communicate with a normal Parisian I reckoned she would go down a bomb in Quebec. She was also very sexy. I could listen to her for days.

Whilst studying towards my French O-levels I actually met Maurice Chevalier, the incredibly popular and charming French film actor and singer.

In 1960 my mother and I went to the Victoria Palace Theatre in London to see the *Crazy Gang* in their show *Young at Heart*. Sitting next to my mother was Maurice Chevalier! When I heard him speak with her I realised that I sounded more like him than he did.

From then on in my French classes I spoke like Maurice Chevalier. For that lesson (Stars in Your Eyes please note) I WAS Maurice Chevalier. My accent was VERY French. I even introduced the odd Gallic shrug and raised eyebrow.

Maurice Chevalier was a good friend of Ron Kennedy, the head-

master of Whickham County School, Front Street, Whickham. There were also rumours that Maurice went to Whickham, where my mother lived, in order to meet a secret lover.

Years later I mentioned this rumour to the staff at Tyne Metropolitan College and afterwards a colleague told me his mother had also talked about Maurice Chevalier visiting Whickham.

Too many coincidences! I was born in 1945 at the end of the war. My mother sat with Maurice Chevalier in the theatre. He visited Whickham to meet his secret lover and I spoke with a Maurice Chevalier accent. Nothing more to say ...

The only problem with my theory of me being the love child of Maurice Chevalier is that in 1944, a year before my birth, when the allies freed France, Chevalier was accused of collaborationism. Even though he was acquitted by a French court he was refused a visa throughout the 1940s.

In the late 1960s my friend Tony and I decided to hitch-hike to the south of France. This was the first time I had the opportunity to try out my French on the French. Tony had A-level French. I had scraped O-level.

Surprisingly I communicated better than Tony. I had the self-confidence borne out of ignorance. I made up words, waved my arms and raised my eyebrows. Tony was anxious to 'speak properly' and spoke very little to avoid making mistakes.

Let us hope that pupils today are given the self-confidence to enjoy learning a foreign language whilst also accepting there is no gain without pain - no learn without burn.

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