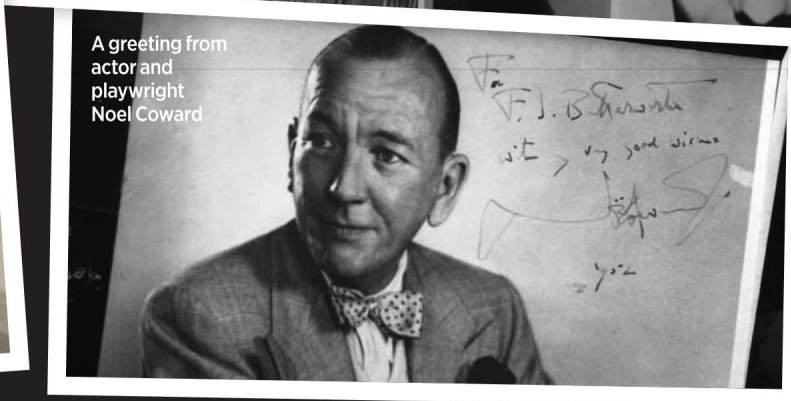




Oliver Hardy holds baby John Butterworth outside the Chine Hotel in Boscombe as Stan Laurel looks on (1947)



Phyllis Dixey whose stripping act was 'banned' by the Lord Chancellor



A greeting from actor and playwright Noel Coward

# THE CHINE HOTEL'S *Star Attraction*

*From Laurel and Hardy clowning around in the hotel kitchen to meeting 'Forces Sweetheart' Vera Lynn, John Butterworth shares some very special memories of his family's hotel with Jeremy Miles*

PICTURES FROM JOHN BUTTERWORTH COLLECTION

DIRECTOR David Glass didn't hesitate when he was offered Bournemouth's Chine Hotel as a location for a recent theatrical reworking of Stephen King's chilling horror story *The Shining*.

The imposing Victorian building overlooking Boscombe Gardens does look uncannily similar to the horror story's Outlook Hotel, particularly as portrayed by Stanley Kubrick in the 1980 film version. "I immediately saw the potential," says Glass, whose interactive production was staged at the Chine in February.

Like its fictional counterpart the hotel was closed for the winter and, better still, like the haunted Overlook, it harbours some

fascinating secrets. Happily the Chine's ghosts are a little more benign than those that wreak havoc in King's terrifying tale but, make no mistake, it certainly has a story tell.

"Let me show you the basement," says owner John Butterworth. And with that I begin a journey that unveils a rich but forgotten show-business history that puts this grand old hotel at the centre of the world of variety theatre.

The Chine was originally bought by John's father Frederick J. Butterworth (FJB), owner of an entertainment empire that included 18 theatres, scattered across the country including the nearby Hippodrome in Boscombe. ▶





Above. Actor Jack Warner soon to become famous as *Dixon of Dock Green* plus (lower left) a very young Morecambe and Wise



Warm wishes from the already famous Noel Coward and comic actor Cardew Robinson



Good wishes from Arthur Lucan whose appearances as Old Mother Riley were firm favourite with the punters



Below. Best wishes from Norman Wisdom and one of the many now forgotten acts who toured the country's many variety venues The Merry Martins

A significant venue in its day, the Hippodrome - now the O2 Academy - was a regular stop for the stars of the 40s, 50s and 60s and not surprisingly many of them stayed at the Chine.

Memories of those glory days are encapsulated in an extraordinary display in the hotel basement. A series of glass-fronted cases contain dozens of photographs signed by the well known performers of the day who appeared at the Hippodrome and other FJ Butterworth theatres.

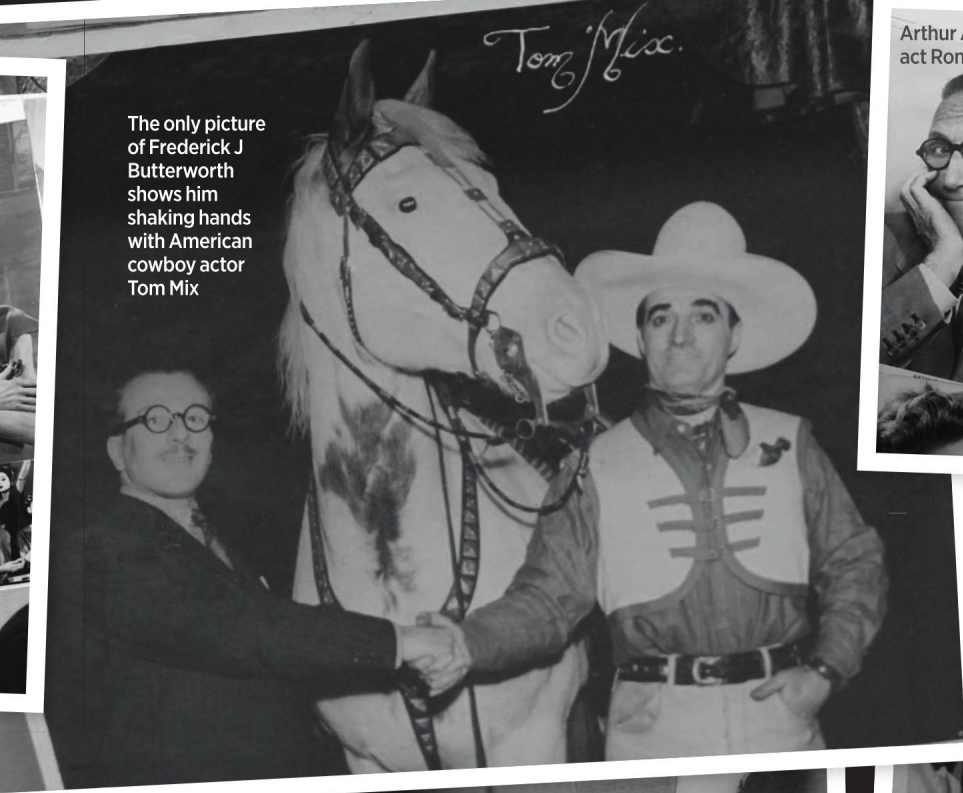
There are contributions from everyone from the pioneering slapstick comedian Fred Karno to Laurel and Hardy. Some, like Arthur Askey, Norman Wisdom, Frankie Howerd and Morecambe and Wise would go on to become TV stars. Others like Arthur Lucan (aka Old Mother Riley) and the quintessential northern comic Rob Wilton were old stagers whose careers could be traced back to the pre-war days of music hall.

The fascinating display offers a link to a long-vanished theatre world that provided a training ground for performers such as Tommy Cooper, Max Bygraves, Tony Hancock, Peter Sellers



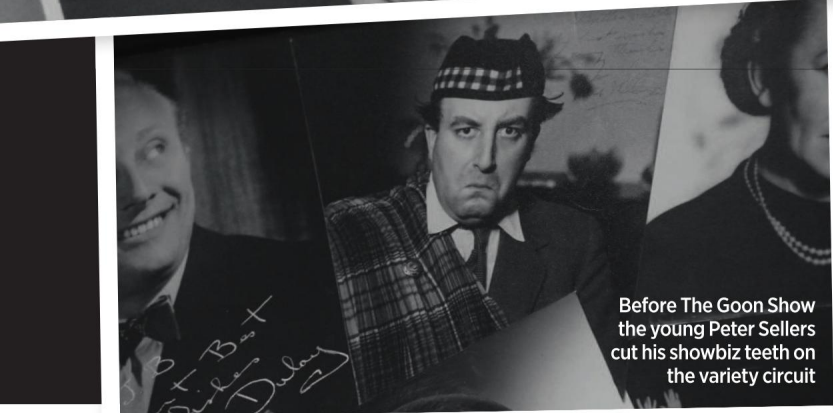
Tom Mix

The only picture of Frederick J Butterworth shows him shaking hands with American cowboy actor Tom Mix

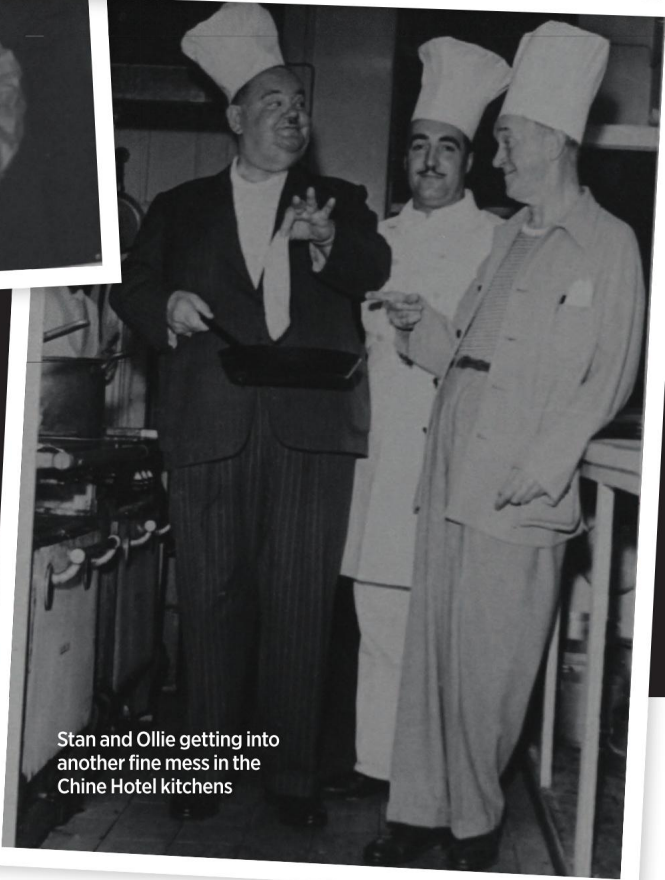


Arthur Askey and whistling act Ronnie Ronalds

CHINE HOTEL



Before The Goon Show the young Peter Sellers cut his showbiz teeth on the variety circuit



Stan and Ollie getting into another fine mess in the Chine Hotel kitchens

and many other household names.

When Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy arrived from America for a UK tour in 1947 their career was fading in the US. But British fans still loved them and they were mobbed by admirers. At Boscombe Hippodrome they had a chance to escape to the Chine Hotel where they goofed around in the kitchens wearing chef's hats for a photograph. They also posed on the hotel steps holding FJB's infant son.

John Butterworth, now 70, describes that picture as: "My moment of glory" but quickly adds: "Of course, I have absolutely no memory of it but I certainly remember meeting some of the stars a few years later. Vera Lynn stayed here and people like Diana Dors would pop in. When you're growing up you just accept these things as normal. Having famous entertainers around the place was just part of my dad's job."

Frederick J. Butterworth was an extraordinary self-made man who hit on the idea of staging live acts between the films. Before long he was acquiring his own venues including the Hippodrome and the iconic Richmond Theatre in south west London. Both these beautiful theatres are still owned by the Butterworth family.

The Hippodrome originally opened as the Grand Theatre in the 1890s outraging a local temperance group who believed that theatricals encouraged loose-living and hard-drinking. Such was their opposition that they sited a Devil gargoyle on the building opposite to stare down at the louche theatre goes below. The horned devil remains there to this day.

Undeterred, the Hippodrome became a popular venue for music hall and circus acts. By the time FJ Butterworth arrived on the scene it was ready to take advantage of the hey-day of variety. During the immediate post war years FJB staged some of the biggest variety acts of the era including risqué stripper Phyllis Dixey.

"It was incredibly tame stuff really," John Butterworth chuckles. "There wasn't actually any nudity at all. But in those days it was considered quite racy."

Such prurience did FJB a big favour, particularly when the Lord Chancellor

*"Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy goofed around in the Chine's kitchens wearing chef's hats for a photograph"*

PICTURES FROM JOHN BUTTERWORTH COLLECTION





John Butterworth with the display cases full of show business memories from his father's hey-day running the Boscombe Hippodrome

censored Miss Dixey's act but then changed his mind on discovering that nothing about it could possibly outrage public decency. Signs went up promising: 'The Act Banned by the Lord Chancellor'. The queues were round the block.

By the late 1950s the rise of television was threatening the world that FJB knew and understood so well. "Everyone wanted to be on television and as a result provincial theatre started running out of steam," says John. "My dad was very fortunate because when the theatres started folding he simply moved into the hotel business."

Frederick Butterworth died in 1984 and John took over as boss of the company. Today FJB Hotels own not only The Chine but Harbour Heights, Sandbanks and Haven Hotels in nearby Poole. There used to be many more.

John's interest in the entertainment business continues but in a very much less hands-on manner. The Boscombe Hippodrome has enjoyed a chequered life as a club and performance venue. Local people will have known it as Tiffany's, The Academy, the Opera House and now the O2 Academy.

In its time it has seen shows by everyone from Sarah Bernhardt and Ellen Terry to David Bowie and Led Zeppelin. In recent years Brian Wilson and Ziggy Marley have played there. For a while John Butterworth tried running the venue himself but says he's far more comfortable with the current arrangement leasing it to Live Nation.

"I loved it but my accountant wasn't so keen. I was losing a fortune." He mentions one disastrous concert by an American rock star making a comeback. "He turned up an hour and half late and played for five minutes before stumbling off stage. All hell broke loose and everyone wanted their money back. I'd

*"I certainly remember meeting some of the stars... Vera Lynn stayed here and people like Diana Dors would pop in"*

paid £25,000 for that act. No one thought to tell me he'd spent the past four years in rehab!"

At the age of 70 John says it'll soon be time to decide what to do next. "The Chine is the last major hotel left in Boscombe. It doesn't make money, it just about breaks even but we can support it with the other successful businesses," For the time being John offsets the drain on his coffers by closing the Chine during the winter. "It's simple economics," he explains. "I've known The Chine all my life. I cannot imagine it being pulled down and replaced with a block of flats. It would break my heart."

John, who had hoped to become a marine biologist, admits that hospitality was the last thing he wanted to do. But looking back, he has few regrets. "The business has given me a great deal, a very good lifestyle and an interesting life," he tells me. "As my dad used to say: 'As long as your successes outweigh your mistakes you're doing all right.' I don't think I've made too much of a mess of things." ♦

Find out more at [fjbhotels.co.uk/chine-hotel](http://fjbhotels.co.uk/chine-hotel)

PICTURE FROM JOHN BUTTERWORTH COLLECTION



The Chine Hotel, from an advertisement in Bright's Guide to Bournemouth 1888 which describes it as "Beautifully situated in grounds of three acres and in the finest position on the East Cliff, facing due South and commanding magnificent view of the Channel and Isle of Wight from nearly all the windows."

**Boscombe Chine Hotel, Bournemouth.**  
(Ten minutes from the East Railway Station.)