



IF ONE COMES UPON A GENERAL AVIATION HISTORY BOOK, there exists a tendency to flick through it to see how much, or how little (usually the latter) First World War material it contains. I recall once finding a book on RAF slang and so I picked it up to give it the WW1 test. Naturally enough, it started with the 'A's and straight away the book let me down – there was no mention of *Archie*, one of the classic aviation slang words of the 1914-18 war. Most people are familiar with the meaning of AA or its phonetic equivalent, *Ack-Ack*, as well as *Flak* and the modern jet pilots' phrase *Triple A*: but what of the original term, *Archie*? Where did it come from, how did it spread and, indeed, where did it go?

The term came about, so it is generally reported, quite early in the war, when the Royal Flying Corps crews were persistently shelled by a German anti-aircraft gun. The RFC airmen were scornful of the shellbursts that seldom came close enough to worry them and so began to sing lines from the song *Archibald! Certainly Not!* after every puff of smoke appeared behind them. Before too long, the enemy shellfire became *Archibald* and then simply *Archie* within the squadrons.

Research into the song reveals a few interesting facts. It was made famous by one of the top music hall stars of all time; George Robey, the self-styled Prime Minister of Mirth, famed for his comedy routines, comic songs and catch phrases. Of the latter, his most enduring seems to have been 'Kindly temper you hilarity with a modicum of reserve' and when the audience went on laughing he would shout 'Desist'.

As well as his sketch *The Prehistoric Man* and the review *The Bing Boys are Here*, a big wartime hit, his most popular songs included *In Other Words*, *Another Little Drink*, *Oh! How Rude*, *Bang Went the Chance of a Lifetime* and, a true classic, *If You Were the Only Girl in the World*. Another of his novelty songs was *Archibald! Certainly Not!*

According to *Sing: Use One of the Old Songs – A Guide to Popular Music 1860–1920* by Michael Kilgariff, the ditty was first published in 1909, having been co-written by Robey, John L. St John and Alfred Glover.

Robey wrote few songs himself; Kilgariff's comprehensive listings show only seven other titles by him, while his co-writers only have *Archibald* to their credit. Glover penned

the tune while the other two came up with the words. However, *The Oxford Companion to Popular Music* reports the writer to be Jimmy Glover, who wrote several tunes while Director of Music at Drury Lane. There is an evident confusion between the Glovers, but Alfred seems to be the more likely candidate.

The song proved popular when performed on stage and so Robey recorded it as a 12in gramophone disc. It was first issued in July 1911, as *His Master's Voice 02328*. A re-issue, or re-recording, came out during the war, again on the HMV label, as *C546* and priced at five shillings and sixpence. Interestingly, it was what later would be known as a double A side, with *Archibald* on one side, to be played at 81rpm, while on the other was *And Very Nice Too*, set at the more familiar speed of 78rpm.

Another source maintains that the writers were St John and Alfred Glover, with Robey not credited, and that was released on the Columbia label, as catalogue number 2985. Possibly Robey made several recordings as recording technology improved rapidly over a relatively short period of time.

One writer describes *Archibald! Certainly Not* as one of Robey's 'audacious' songs; a statement that could not be tested unless one saw a songsheet or, indeed, heard the record. For years, neither seemed possible but now, thanks to the internet, the near mythical status of the song in RFC history can be assessed. First of all, the actual words:

*It's no use me denying facts, I'm henpecked, you can see!
'Twas on our wedding day my wife commenced to peck at me
The wedding breakfast over, I said, "We'll start off today
Upon our honeymoon." Then she yelled "What! Waste time that way?"
"Archibald, certainly not!
Get back to work at once, sir, like a shot.
When single you could waste time spooning
But lose work now for honeymooning!
Archibald, certainly not!"*

*I once strolled through a field, and there a mad bull came across.
It gamboll'd with me playfully and quickly won the toss!
Of course I sued the owner, and the day the case was fought,
The judge exclaimed when I said, "Sir, let's have the bull in court!"*