

Keith Leggett



Keith Leggett was born in Wandsworth in South West London but grew up in Surrey. His father Bob was a storeman and later opened a shop in their front room at *Tudor Park Estate* in Handworth, Middlesex. That grew into a dairy and later he opened a driver's cafe in Chertsey. Bob played drums in a local band. Keith's mum Dora, known to all as Dorrie, migrated to New Zealand a few months after Keith. His brother Terry settled in Canada.

'My father got a concert party together made up of kids from the estate where we lived. We did a show to celebrate the end of WW2 and I never looked back from there. When I was leaving school the headmaster asked what I would like to do. I said 'I'm going on the stage, sir'. His sarcastic response was, 'When you get to the *London Palladium*, make sure you send me a ticket'. I always regret that when I got there, with the *Black and White Minstrels* in 1968, I didn't track him down and send him one.'

At the age of 15 Keith went around all the agents in Charing Cross Road and told them he'd played the local village hall and cinema. They suggested he come back when he'd had some real experience. Gracie Field's agent suggested he tried *Casey's Court*, a variety show run by Will Murray. A lot of top talent, including Charlie Chaplin, had got a start in that show. The agent got him an audition at the *Grand Theatre* in Clapham Junction.



'I did my comic song and they put me in front of an audience that Friday night. I did well enough to stay on and toured around Britain. It was tremendous experience. You had to do everything yourself including sewing your costumes and it was full of talented youngsters and old show business professionals who you could learn a lot from. I studied tap dancing from Jack Buckland. The show finished a year later but by then I was on the circuit and knew a lot of people.'

He got the chance to work in the *Richmond Repertory Theatre* as an assistant stage manager. 'It was a long day, from rehearsals and prompting the actors, setting up props, getting coffee and occasionally you would get to go on stage in a minor role. In one show I played a dead body. In the year I was there, I learned a lot about drama.' After that he worked in musicals, mainly tap dancing. 1952 saw him in a professional *Gang Show* produced by Ralph Reader.

He went into the army at 18 to do two years National Service, mostly in Malaya. He did a few shows at training camps in the UK and also in Malaya. Back home he got parts in a few touring shows including pantomimes and one called *Turn on the Heat*. He also started singing and was in a duo called *Roberts and Lee*.



Meanwhile he did odd jobs to make a living, working for a greengrocer, selling Bibles and whatever it took to stay alive. Back in London in 1958 he auditioned for George Mitchell who was the man behind the Black & White Minstrel Show. Prior to that George was best known for managing choirs. Keith performed at the *Opera House* in Blackpool then did more shows for George, including pantomimes. In 1959 he joined the *Black and White Minstrel Show* which began as a live TV and stage show. He stayed on as a Minstrel until 1975. The TV show ran for 26 weeks a year and in the theatre it was on twice every night for six nights a week. Sundays were usually spent at charity cricket or football matches for aid organisations such as the *Cystic Fibrosis Association*. The show became controversial later on. Around 15 million people watched it on TV every week, but it had to be taken off in 1978 as Britain became more multi-racial and new immigrants found it offensive



' In order to bring the *Black and White Minstrels* theatre show to Australia and NZ, George asked me to help train some locals, which brought me down under in 1962. I ended up staying more than two years, as the show was very long running, particularly in Melbourne and NZ.'

He married Nicky from the Minstrels in 1975 and had a son, Scott. The family emigrated to NZ and Keith got work with *South Pacific Television* as a floor manager. He acted as a liaison between local performers, agents, producers, publishers and event managers. He helped raise gigantic sums for charity through helping out at eight *Telethons*.

After breaking up with Nicky, Keith married a Kiwi girl, Shona, who he met during a *Telethon* in Hawkes Bay. They have twins, Daniel and Samantha.

Keith did a season as a music hall chairman and appeared in the 1980 *Diamond Lil* show, *Good Olde Days* at Phil Warrens *Ace Of Clubs*. In 1981 he stage-managed the Royal Variety Show in Auckland and returned to the *Ace of Clubs* in May 1982.

In 1984 Keith set up the *LEO Entertainment Agency* (named after his star sign), managing Derek Metzger, Suzanne Lee and the *Northern Ballet Co*. This was liquidated in 1999 when he received a



tax bill for all of the acts that he had found work for. The Tax Department maintained that it was Keith's responsibility to take the PAYE. Of course the artists refused to pay what was owing.

He is very proud of the workshops that he held in the early 80's supporting up and coming young entertainers such as Alan Watson, Tina Cross, Suzanne Donaldson and John McGough. His motto is, 'Learn everything you can!' And the key to his teachings is, 'Always remember that although you may have other work, you are first and foremost an

Entertainer!'

With Karen Kay he helped establish the New Zealand tent of the *Variety Kids Charity*, then known as the *Variety Club* and he ended up running their office. John Walker, the runner, was Chief Barker. From its origins in the world of show business *Variety* used carnival and circus terminology. For instance, the main board of trustees and others of a particular tent is called the 'Crew', named after those who erected the old circus tents. The chairman of the board is called the 'Chief Barker' after the man who drummed up customers at the fairground.



He supervised arrangements for the *1992 Cricket World Cup* and stage-managed the *1995 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting* chaired by Jim Bolger. He announced wrestling matches and produced a Christmas pantomime. In 1990 he helped organise the *New Zealand Commonwealth Games* opening and closing ceremonies. One of his tasks was cueing the start of a low-level aircraft fly-by.

'They were to come over the moment the Queen had finished her speech. I had a copy of the speech so that I could get the timing right but was warned that sometimes she added a few words off the cuff. So I just had to hope she didn't rabbit on too long afterwards because if she was still talking and no one could hear because of those screaming

jets, she wouldn't have been amused.'

After that he became an event organiser for *Auckland City Council*, putting on the *Teddy Bear's Picnic*, *Pacifica* and the *Chinese Lantern Festival*. In 2005 he retired and formed a Variety group with Chic Littlewood, Pat Aldersley and Elaine Bracey. He moved to Stanmore Bay after living in Beachhaven and Glenfield before that.

Keith's health has not been good lately. He suffered a burst blood vessel in his head in 2006 and has had 2 heart attacks since. Recently he was back in hospital with a bout of pneumonia. A few months after leaving hospital he was back with a pianist performing a 15-minute show in his old ward. He shared this ward with Peter Evans, another Benny recipient.

Keith joined the VAC committee in 1978; became Vice President in 1979, President from 1980-82 and again in 83 when Don Linden resigned as President to work overseas. He became Vice President again from 1995 to 1997 then President from 1997 to 1999. He received a *Scroll of Honour* in 1986, *The Benny* in 1996 and a *Certificate Of Achievement* in 2012.

He is on the committee of the *Broadcast Club*, originally called the *15 Year Club* because you had to be in broadcasting for 15 years. Les Andrews is also on the committee.