

## A Hat Needing A Home...

A rare Stan Laurel bowler hat is reunited with Blackpool's Critchlow collection as resort bids for a new museum of popular entertainment



Blackpool Council has reunited an iconic Stan Laurel bowler hat with other rare show business artefacts which were all once part of the same private collection.

The town is now hoping that a Heritage Lottery Fund bid for a new museum, the first in the country set to be devoted to the history of popular entertainment in the UK, will give the hat a home worthy of its cultural significance.

The black bowler was originally given to a local Blackpool magician, Cyril Critchlow, in June 1947 when film stars Laurel and Hardy played the town's Palace Theatre as part of their British Tour. As well as being a popular performer, Critchlow was also an avid collector of entertainment memorabilia and was especially interested items connected with Blackpool.

When he discovered Laurel and Hardy were coming to town, Cyril managed to arrange a meeting with both performers backstage.

Stan Laurel and Cyril hit it off, and the internationally famous comic (and fellow Northerner) expressed an interest in Cyril's passion for collecting props, costumes, posters and programmes.

A few days later Laurel presented a stunned Cyril with one of his bowler hats, signed 'Hello Cyril, Stan Laurel' in the lining, to add to his collection. From that day on, and worried about it being stolen, Cyril rarely showed the hat to anyone. It was also never displayed publicly while it was in his possession.

After Cyril's death in 2008, and in accordance with his wishes, the Critchlow family donated to the resort his Blackpool collection totalling over 200 objects and 10,000 printed items.

However, it transpired that in 1989 the signed bowler hat had been sold by Cyril to another collector, and that it remained in private hands.

But late last year Blackpool Council's Museums and Heritage service were given the opportunity to reunite the hat with the rest of the Cyril Critchlow Blackpool archive, and earlier this month the Laurel bowler was officially acquired by the Council.

Curator Emma Heslewood said: "Blackpool is the home of popular entertainment so it's fantastic that a hat from an internationally renowned comedian, originally given to a local performer in the town over seventy years ago, has finally returned home.

"We now hope that Blackpool's plan for Britain's first museum devoted to comedy, circus, magic and variety can be realised, and that everyone coming to the resort will get the chance to see this piece of incredible cultural history in a venue which will celebrate the nation's enduring love of show business."

In addition to a Heritage Lottery Fund bid, Blackpool's entertainment museum project is also in the running for a grant from the Northern Cultural Regeneration Fund (NCRF).

The NCRF is a £15m fund launched by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) earlier this year to create a lasting legacy of cultural regeneration in the North of England. The NCRF is also part of the government's Great Exhibition of the North initiative, being held in Newcastle this year, which saw Blackpool make it through to be one of just four finalists bidding to be host.

As well as displaying Blackpool's nationally significant collections in the new proposed museum, it will also showcase objects from national partners including the Victoria & Albert Museum and the EMI Group Archive Trust.

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A selection of hi-res images of Stan Laurel's hat, taken by the Guzelian picture agency, together with other Blackpool entertainment artefacts, are available for media use.