Ealing Studios: Program #4: 2 comedies from 1935

"NO LIMIT" (Ealing-HTP, 1935) A Basil Dean production, directed by Monty Banks
Story by Walter Greenwood; Camera: Robert G. Martin; Art Director, J. Elder Wills; Scenario supervisor, Gordon Wellesley; 8 reels
With George Formby, Florence Desmond, Jack Robb, Edward Rigby, Peter Gawthorne

It's odd to find the names of Walter Greenwood and J.B. Priestley turning up so regularly as the authors of early Ealing star-vehicle comedies; it's rather like finding Reminiscence of a Wayward Youth by some forgotten poet! Once J.B. Priestley was something of a British amalgamation of Lloyd and Langdon, his basic character resembling the adult-baby of Langdon (like Harry, he was scared of sex and his later films frequently found him fighting off seductive vamps), while the construction of the films themselves paralleled that of Lloyd's, with a stress on speed and action. "No Limit" was Formby's first starring vehicle, and established a formula from which he seldom strayed. Production values are a little crude, and the harsh sound recording, coupled with Formby's Lancashire dialect, doesn't make it easy to follow his dialogue. (US audiences usually miss the outrageously blue innuendos an American slips into his songs!) However, the film has charm and pace, and an astounding climax for British films of that period especially of a rip-roaring T.T. motor cycle race on the Isle of Man. The stunts and thrills are real, and the sight gags smoothly interpolated in the best Lloyd and Sennett tradition. It's good to see Florence Desmond (the "bad girl" in "Sally in our Alley") as the heroine, and Peter Gawthorne (last seen at the Huff as the stuffy butler in "Sunny Side Up") as her boss. Gawthorne was Britain's own Margaret Dumont, and the perennial foil of all English comedians.

INTERMISSION...

LOOK UP AND LAUGH (Ealing-HTP, 1935) Directed by Basil Dean; original story by J.B. Priestley; scenario supervisor, Gordon Wellesley; art director, J. Elder Wills; Camera: Robert G. Martin; Music: Ernest Irving; 8 reels
With Gracie Fields, Vivien Leigh, Douglas Wakefield, Alfred Drayton, Billy Nelson, Harry Tate, Huntley Wright, Robb Wilton, Morris Harvey, Maud Gill, Norman Walker, Tommy Fields, Arthur Hambling

This is our fourth Gracie Fields vehicle in recent months, and since previous program notes have been fairly comprehensive in describing her background and the modus operandi of her films, we assume that by now you know pretty much what to expect! "Look Up and Laugh" could hardly start off more typically -- Gracie driving through the English countryside in a Union-Jack decorated roadster, singing a cheerful little anti-depression ditty! The film fits into a by-now fairly comfortable Fields formula, and contains both some of her best and some of her weakest material. The excessive footage given to popular British radio and music-hall comics gets a little tiresome at times, especially as none of them have really begun with their players include Robb Wilton, Douglas Wakefield (who also had a go at starring 2-reel comedies for Hall Roach over here) and Harry Tate, who were all better served with their own music-hall patter and acts, and don't come off in supporting by-play to Gracie. Some of Gracie's material is poorly conceived too, and an episode in which she sabotages a concert makes her seem both unsympathetic and unfunny. However, other elements are more rewarding. Some of the slapstick -- an episode in which a department store is turned into a shambles by over-aged boy-scouts, overflowing foam and rampaging miniature cars -- is both elaborate and entertaining, and a wild climactic ride in an auroraslip into his songs!) However, the film has charm and pace, and an astounding climax for British films of that period especially of a rip-roaring T.T. motor cycle race on the Isle of Man. The stunts and thrills are real, and the sight gags smoothly interpolated in the best Lloyd and Sennett tradition. It's good to see Florence Desmond (the "bad girl" in "Sally in our Alley") as the heroine, and Peter Gawthorne (last seen at the Huff as the stuffy butler in "Sunny Side Up") as her boss. Gawthorne was Britain's own Margaret Dumont, and the perennial foil of all English comedians.

INTERMISSION...

LOOK UP AND LAUGH (Ealing-HTP, 1935) Directed by Basil Dean; original story by J.B. Priestley; scenario supervisor, Gordon Wellesley; art director, J. Elder Wills; Camera: Robert G. Martin; Music: Ernest Irving; 8 reels
With Gracie Fields, Vivien Leigh, Douglas Wakefield, Alfred Drayton, Billy Nelson, Harry Tate, Huntley Wright, Robb Wilton, Morris Harvey, Maud Gill, Norman Walker, Tommy Fields, Arthur Hambling

This is our fourth Gracie Fields vehicle in recent months, and since previous program notes have been fairly comprehensive in describing her background and the modus operandi of her films, we assume that by now you know pretty much what to expect! "Look Up and Laugh" could hardly start off more typically -- Gracie driving through the English countryside in a Union-Jack decorated roadster, singing a cheerful little anti-depression ditty! The film fits into a by-now fairly comfortable Fields formula, and contains both some of her best and some of her weakest material. The excessive footage given to popular British radio and music-hall comics gets a little tiresome at times, especially as none of them have really begun with their players include Robb Wilton, Douglas Wakefield (who also had a go at starring 2-reel comedies for Hall Roach over here) and Harry Tate, who were all better served with their own music-hall patter and acts, and don't come off in supporting by-play to Gracie. Some of Gracie's material is poorly conceived too, and an episode in which she sabotages a concert makes her seem both unsympathetic and unfunny. However, other elements are more rewarding. Some of the slapstick -- an episode in which a department store is turned into a shambles by over-aged boy-scouts, overflowing foam and rampaging miniature cars -- is both elaborate and entertaining, and a wild climactic ride in an aurora...