



Geography Lessons: comedy around Britain





Cult comedy club Up The Creek
in Greenwich, southeast London

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Comedy just wouldn't be comedy without local roots. And that is why, in this chapter, we take you on a tour of British comedy from Cornwall to the Scottish Highlands, visiting local comedic landmarks, clubs and festivals.

Comedy is prey to the same homogenizing forces that have made Starbucks globally ubiquitous but humour doesn't travel so easily or predictably as cappuccino. In the past, slang, regional vocabulary, accents and local knowledge have often limited a comic's appeal, explaining why such acts as George Formby and Tommy Trinder never quite transcended the north/south divide. Yet a character as localized as Alf Garnett, the charismatic Cockney bigot in the sitcom *Till Death Us*

Do Part, was successfully re-created in America, Germany and Israel, suggesting that comedy that touches, however lightly, on universal truths can be exported around the world.

A comic's roots, cherished or spurned, are crucial to their humour. The small screen has made it easier for contemporary acts – notably Johnny Vegas, Peter Kay and Ben Elton – to achieve national recognition while retaining a regional identity. Since the 1980s, a more

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adventurous approach to sitcoms has meant that shows such as *The Royle Family* have had a much more authentic local flavour than most of their predecessors. Yet TV has smoothed the path for other acts – Frank Skinner, once thought of as a Brummie comic, being a good example – to achieve fame and fortune in London and, if you like, become “capitalized”.

Every few years, a report will surface in the media – often as a prelude to the launch of a comedy festival – suggesting that a certain place (often London or Lancashire) is the funniest in the UK. In November 2005, *The Guardian*'s Charles Nevin disproved his own theory that certain parts of the country were inherently funnier than others. If there was a geographical

theme to British comedy, it was that, as Linda Smith told him: “A lot of comics come from the edge of nowhere.” Smith often argued with other comics over whose home town was the most boring. How comics react to that boredom may be a profound early influence. Some, notably Vic and Bob, took refuge in surrealist flights of fancy. Others, like Victoria Wood, created their own cast of local characters. And some, like Mark Lamarr, just left.

What follows is a gazetteer of British comedy, dawdling occasionally to mention local heroes and iconic locations while detailing the main comedy clubs, a few more offbeat venues and the best comedy festivals – not all of which are in Edinburgh.

East Anglia

In comedic terms, East Anglia seems to exist entirely as a butt for tractor jokes. It doesn't help that one of the region's most enduring comic images is that of Alan Partridge failing to maintain an ounce of dignity in the hinterland between London and Norwich.

Stephen Fry is the biggest figure heading up East Anglia's comic heritage, having been brought up in Booton, Norfolk, but Charlie Higson runs him a very close second. Higson studied at Norwich's University of East Anglia (he met Paul Whitehouse there) and was involved with the successful post-punk band The Higsons who, between 1980 and 1986, recorded several Radio 1 sessions for John Peel. Yet the region's most durable comic icon is probably Walmington-on-Sea: *Dad's Army*'s fictional town was actually Thetford in Norfolk.

When *The Guardian* was “investigating” comedy's local roots, comedian Helen Lederer did say: “East Anglia? My hardest gig ever (no one laughed) was just outside Cambridge. Could it be due to the large areas of flat land? Are they funny in Holland?” The Dutch have produced at least one internationally acclaimed comedy act, so maybe Lederer was just unlucky.

The Red Card Comedy Club

21 Doman Road, Norwich NR1 3AW. Tickets 01603 219034 www.redcardcomedyclub.com

Ever popular, The Red Card is Norwich's biggest comedy club, and puts on shows roughly once a month at Norwich City Football Club.

The Forum

2 Millennium Plain, Bethel Street, Norwich NR2 1TF. Tickets 01603 727950 www.theforumnorwich.co.uk/

The Comedy Store circuit pays monthly visits to Norwich's Forum Building.

The Fat Cat Comedy Club

The Corn Exchange, Bury St Edmunds. Tickets 01284 754252 www.fatcatcomedyclub.com

The Fat Cat in Bury St Edmunds flourishes with monthly comedy nights.

London

In 1909, the writer G.K. Chesterton insisted: “It is surely sufficiently obvious that all the best humour that exists in our language is Cockney humour.” London has inspired the humour of Chaucer, Dryden and Dickens ... and, later, Jim Davidson, Ben Elton and Lee Hurst.

The Cockney stereotype – as smooth-talking wideboys whose heart is usually in the right place even if their ethics don't always stand close scrutiny – has been celebrated and satirized in such sitcoms as *Only Fools And Horses* and *Till Death Us Do Part* and casts a long shadow over London's humour.

The city's tradition of motor-mouthed comics – represented today by Ben Elton and Lee Hurst – goes back to music hall days and was personified by Max Miller (even though the self-styled “Cheeky Chappie” was from Brighton). But there's more to London's comedy than fast-talking, soft-hearted, diamond geezers. It was, after all, at The Comedy Store in Soho in May 1979 that the alternative comedy revolution got seriously underway.

The city's comedy scene has been enriched by a myriad of races and beliefs. The Jewish sense of humour hasn't marked London's comedy as decisively as, say, it has New York's. Still, the success of Matt Lucas, Sacha Baron Cohen and David Baddiel suggests Britons might be laughing less frequently without the Jewish influence.

The comedy of Lucas and Julian Clary, who spent his early years on the city's southwestern fringes, is a reminder that London has a strong camp comic heritage. The king of camp – though Frankie Howerd might have contested the title – was Kenneth Williams, who was born near Euston station and lived alone in a small, obsessively tidy flat in Marylebone, next door to his mother Lou. Lucas has admitted: “I loved all the camp comics of my childhood – John Inman, Frankie Howerd and Kenneth Williams.”

In London, the theatres, broadcasting studios, TV companies and drama schools have helped make the city almost as central to British comedy

The London comedy A to Z

Balham

John Sullivan grew up here.

Belsize Park

Graham Chapman lived here, in a block where Frank Skinner now lives. Michael Palin is a neighbour.

Bermondsey

Arthur Smith was born here in 1954 but soon moved to Balham.

Bethnal Green

Lee Hurst lives here and runs his comedy club here.

Bloomsbury

Catherine Tate was born here – not that she's bowered – as was Dick Emery, a huge influence on Matt Lucas.

Catford

Ben Elton was born here in 1959.

Clapham

Paul Kaye, still best known as Dennis Pennis, was born here in 1965.

Chelsea

The Mighty Boosh's Noel Fielding was born here in 1973.

Ealing

Sid James lived in Gunnersbury Avenue, convenient for trips to Ealing Studios.

Elstree

Sacha Baron Cohen was born here in 1971 – not, as many have assumed, in Staines. Cohen, Matt Lucas and David Baddiel all went, at different

times, to the Haberdashers' Aske's public school in Elstree.

Eltham

Bob Hope was born here in 1902 and has a theatre named after him.

Finsbury Park

Gina Yashere was born here, though she grew up in Bethnal Green.

Hampstead

Stephen Fry was born here in 1957 but soon left for East Anglia.

Hounslow

Carry On star Charles Hawtrey was born here in 1914.

Lewisham

Spike Milligan was born in Poona, India, but grew up in Lewisham, while *Spaced*'s Jessica Stevenson was born in Lewisham but raised in Brighton.

Marylebone

Kenneth Williams spent most of his life here and Norman Wisdom was born here in 1915.

Parsons Green

Paul Merton was born here in 1957 – as Paul Martin – and moved across the river to Merton, adopting the borough's name as his stage surname.

Stanmore

Matt Lucas was born in this part of Jubilee Line country in 1974.

Teddington

Julian Clary was born here in 1959 but divided his childhood between here, Surbiton and Ealing.

as Hollywood is to US showbiz. For the entertainer Sid James, the ultimate diamond geezer who was actually born in Johannesburg, a ticket on a ship to London in 1946 was his passport to success. The city is still a magnet for acts. Down from the Midlands, Frank Skinner met his partner David Baddiel in Camden Jongleurs during the 1990 World Cup.

The proximity of a cultural-industrial base has, over the years, helped many comics get their first break. Spike Milligan's interest in showbiz was fuelled when he won a Bing Crosby crooning competition at the Lewisham Hippodrome. Frankie Howerd, who grew up in Woolwich, made his first live appearance at a London working men's club in 1921, when he was just four, and learned his trade as a live comedian in the city's music halls.

London was the capital of British music hall – the city still hosts a couple of fine examples today, notably the Hackney Empire and The Grand in Clapham – and still has a dynamic live comedy scene. In the 1960s, Peter Cook launched The Establishment, as much a social club as a venue for professional wits (though Lenny Bruce did play there). The club didn't last long., but Cook had had the right idea and, in 1979, the launch of The Comedy Store revived live comedy in the city and signalled a new era. Peter Richardson's club The Comic Strip, launched a year later, honed the talents of Rik Mayall, Adrian Edmondson, Nigel Planer, Jennifer Saunders, Dawn French and Robbie Coltrane, who would all follow Richardson – and The Comic Strip – onto Channel 4.

On the London circuit, though stand-up is no longer a club exclusively for white men, black comics can find it harder to break through. John Simmit has launched the Upfront comedy night at the Albany Empire in Deptford to help remedy

this, and acts like Gina Yashere, who grew up in a Nigerian immigrant family in Bethnal Green and has often gigged in British National Party-supporting areas of east London, have helped break down barriers.

Large, easy to scout, and right on the broadcasting industry's doorstep, London has featured in countless sitcoms from *Steptoe And Son* (set in Shepherd's Bush) to *Spaced* (set in Tufnell Park). In many series, London is just a convenient backdrop but, in a few great sitcoms, the city has almost become a character in its own right. It is impossible to imagine *Desmond's* being set anywhere but the Afro-Caribbean area of Peckham. The same locale – in particular the Nelson Mandela estate – gave *Only Fools And Horses* a nicely con-

What's so funny about Balham?

For such an obscure part of south London, Balham has a rich comic heritage. The utter insignificance of the place was satirized in the Frank Muir/Dennis Norden sketch *Balham Gateway To The South*, a fake travelogue recorded by Peter Sellers in the 1950s. Twenty years later, John Sullivan was sitting in a Wimpy bar in Balham when he noticed some blokes outside desperately trying to sell copies of *Soviet Weekly*. Amused, Sullivan used the memory to create *Citizen Smith*, a sitcom about a wannabe revolutionary catalyst called Wolfie Smith, who shouts "Power to the people!" a lot. Balham didn't really get the credit it deserved for inspiring this classic 1970s sitcom, as Wolfie led the Tooting Popular Front and posed, fist raised, in front of Tooting Bec tube station. Another Smith – the alternative comedian Arthur Smith – now styles himself the Mayor of Balham, often making his claim in song.

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Balham – still the “gateway to the South”

crete sense of place. The show was never as funny when it visited exotic foreign parts in a desperate, unnecessary, bid for Christmas viewers.

Equally, Bloomsbury is intrinsically right as the backdrop for Dylan Moran’s miserabilist bookstore owner in *Black Books* and it’s not just alliteration that makes the idea of *Bottom* flatmates Eddie and Richie as “Hammersmith hardmen” so mysteriously appropriate. Sean Lock’s witty underrated sitcom *15 Storeys High* drew much of its down-beat ambience from exploring the bizarre lives of the residents of a tower block in Kennington.

East London’s working-class culture is superbly, affectionately and occasionally unflatteringly caught by Johnny Speight’s *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC1 1965–75), set in Wapping. Garnett would, you suspect, have disapproved of the media’s colonization of nearby Shoreditch as

violently as Chris Morris did in his shortlived satire *Nathan Barley* (Channel 4, 2005).

At the other end of the social scale, the borough of Westminster has been the setting for three classy Whitehall sitcoms – *Yes, Minister/Yes, Prime Minister*, *The New Statesman* and *The Thick Of It*, which Alan Yentob calls “the bastard son of *Yes Minister*”.

British programme makers have often shied away from the obvious London landmarks. But the Tower of London featured in the *Friends* episodes devoted to Ross’s ill-fated wedding to Emily (*Cold Feet* star Helen Baxendale). In London, love blossomed for Monica and Chandler, while lust blossomed for Joey, whose repeated cries of “London, baby” even irritated Chandler.

Banana Cabaret

The Bedford Arms, 77 Bedford Hill, Balham, London SW12 9HD. Tickets 020 8673 1756 www.bananacabaret.co.uk

This long-established amphitheatre-style club has hosted almost every stand-up. The club is held in the theatre behind The Bedford pub.

Canal Café

Delamere Terrace, Little Venice, London W2 6ND. Tickets 020 7289 6056 www.canalcafetheatre.com

This leading comedy fringe venue hosts several shows a week, including the cult in-house show *NewsRevue*, a fast-paced topical show of sketches

and songs, updated weekly, which helped start the careers of Josie Lawrence, Bill Bailey and the *League Of Gentlemen* team.

Chuckle Club

London School Of Economics Bar, Houghton Street, London WC2. Tickets 020 7476 1672 www.chuckleclub.com

Now in its twentieth year, the Chuckle Club was described by *The Observer* as “London’s friendliest comedy club” and offers student prices every Saturday night with a strong selection of circuit performers. Proceedings usually start with a rendition of the “Chuckle Club Song” and a round of *Minnie The Moocher* with the audience compelled to join in by regular compere Eugene Cheese. There are three main comics and two or three open spots, often from new acts. Al Murray, Alistair MacGowan and Junior Simpson all cut their teeth on open spots here.

The Comedy Café

66/68 Rivington Street, London EC2A 3AY. Tickets 020 7739 5706 www.comedycafe.co.uk

The bright spacious Comedy Café is in the heart of hip Shoreditch. The Café became one of the top clubs on the London circuit in the 1990s. Tickets can cost £15 at weekends but Wednesday’s new act night is free.

The Comedy Café is run by revered promoter and comic Noel Faulkner, of whom Ardal O’Hanlon says: “Noel is probably the finest comic I’ve ever seen.” Faulkner is a lifelong Tourettes Syndrome sufferer but only identified his condition in his late thirties, soon after harnessing it for his comedy act. His eclectic career path has included the Merchant Navy, acting, dancing and escapology. Faulkner’s interest in

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comedy was stimulated when he went to comedy clubs with Robin Williams, while living, for twenty years, on a houseboat in San Francisco Bay. Faulkner no longer does stand-up but has played Edinburgh with a show based on his amazing life story.

The Comedy Store

1a Oxendon Street, London SW1 4EE. Tickets 0870 154 4040 www.thecomedystore.co.uk

The Comedy Store is Britain’s most influential comedy institution. Opening in 1979 above a Soho strip club, this comedy night was originally held in the cramped Gargoyle Club, with comics changing in a broom cupboard. The Store moved in 1982 to Leicester Square and in 1993 to Oxendon Street.

Among the groups to form under the club’s auspices were the Comedy Store Players in 1985. The group was originally inspired by Mike Myers (of *Austin Powers* fame) and Kit Hollerbach, who taught Neil Mullarkey, Dave Cohen and Paul Merton the games they had played in North America (many of which were originally games for deprived children

The opening line-up

The original running order for the first ever Comedy Store gig on May 19, 1979 at Dean Street was: Lee Cornes, David English, Tom Ticknell, Bill Beckett, Micky Mills, Alexei Sayle, Paul Goodman, Bob Peyton, Arnold Brown, Bob Flag, Phil Munnoch, Simon McBurney and Sandi, Brian Beck, Jimmy and Clive, Ed Shirman, Nina Fineburgh, Jon Jon Keefe, Harry Dickman and Eric Hoyer. Sayle and Peyton compered.

The Jongleurs story

Britain's biggest chain of comedy clubs was the brainchild of a young drama teacher, Maria Kempinska, who opened her first club in 1983 in an old roller-skating rink in south London, with a £300 overdraft. From such modest beginnings, Jongleurs quickly became one of Britain's top club chains.

The initial venue in Battersea still runs today. Like The Comedy Store, it has staged many then-unknown comics over the years – including Jack Dee, Paul Merton and Frank Skinner – who have later made their names.

In 1993 Kempinska and her husband John Davy opened a new club in Camden Lock. The network has continued to expand: there are now seventeen Jongleurs nationwide. Kempinska and Davy have now sold their stake in the company to Regent Inns, who plan to expand the chain further in the next few years.

Disliked by some critics for what has been described as a “chicken in the basket, stag do” approach to comedy, Jongleurs is hugely profitable.

in Chicago in the 1950s). The Players grew in popularity, developing the show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* (Channel 4, 1988–98).

Another long-running improv night to emerge from the London Comedy store is The Cutting Edge, partly founded by Mark Thomas and Kevin Day, in which comics make jokes on the spot about recent events, as suggested by the audience.

Tickets vary from £10 to £15. The Comedy Store is still the most prestigious place to play in Britain. The *Guardian* comedy writer William Cook memorably dubbed it “comedy’s unofficial National Theatre” – a fitting sound bite with an unfortunate acronym.

Downstairs At The King's Head

2 Crouch End Hill, London, N8 8AA. Tickets 020 8340 1028
www.downstairsatthekingshead.com

In this basement bar below a pub in a north London suburb, alternative comedy's original spirit endures. Downstairs At The King's Head is known for its friendly, intimate atmosphere. Founded in 1981 by Peter Grahame and Huw Thomas, the club has hosted names that have

long outgrown venues of this size, such as Rich Hall, Lee Mack and Ed Byrne. Ticket prices are, by London standards, low.

The Hen And Chickens

109 St Paul's Road, Islington N1 2NA. Tickets 020 7704 2001
www.henandchickens.com

The Hen And Chickens, by Highbury Corner roundabout, is one of London's most famous fringe theatres, offering a range of comedy nights, including stand-up, sketches and comedy dramas. The grand Victorian interior, with its traditional auditorium and candle lighting, creates an intimate atmosphere, making it a no-frills alternative to bigger London venues. The theatre was used by Eddie Izzard to try out new material in 2004.

Lee Hurst's Backyard

231 Cambridge Heath Road, E2 0EL. Tickets 020 7739 3122
www.leehurst.com

Situated in Bethnal Green, the heart of the East End, Lee Hurst's Backyard is a popular venue,

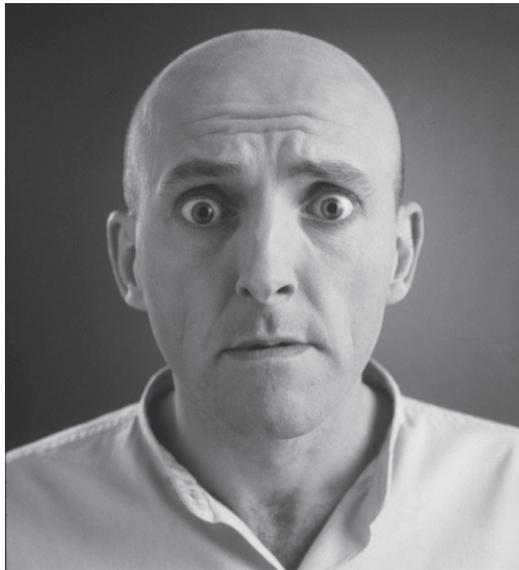
purpose-built by the onetime star of BBC1 sports quiz *They Think It's All Over*. Hurst opened its doors in 1998; a former builder, he personally laid the club's floor. The comedy is pretty uncensored. Most big names have played here at one time or another, and Hurst himself regularly comperes.

Lowdown At The Albany

240 Great Portland Street, W1W 5QU. Tickets 020 7387 5706 www.lowdownatthealbany.com

Beneath the Albany pub resides a cellarful of noise and wit laid on by a series of monthly comedy nights from Robin Ince's Book Club, a cerebral attempt to move stand-up away from stag dos and stale booze. Ince reads from the biography of a mainstream celebrity (Sid Little's

The Backyard's Lee Hurst



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has come in for a ribbing in the past), obscure indie cover records are played and acts range from stand-up to character comedy and sketch groups.

Up The Creek

302 Creek Road, Greenwich SE10 9SW. Tickets 0208 858 4581 www.up-the-creek.com

Up The Creek owes its cult reputation largely to Malcolm Hardee, who drowned in 2005, trying to row to his house barge. Hardee opened London's notoriously tough Tunnel Club at the southern end of the Blackwall Tunnel in 1984, compering, performing and leading the heckling. As a punter, you never knew if he was going to use his penis to urinate on you or to imitate Charles de Gaulle's nose. When The Tunnel closed, Hardee decamped in 1991 to Up The Creek, a

A pain in the backside

Chris Lynam recalls the gig where he burned his butt:

"When I was with *The Greatest Show On Legs* (Malcolm Hardee and Martin Soan's nude balloon act) the finale was Martin lighting the fountain clenched between my buttocks. At the Albany Empire once, there was an almighty explosion as the bloody thing backfired, sending me running with a loud ringing in my ears and a louder tingling in my arsehole. The thing had bugged me. I shot into the dressing room like a bullet out of a gun, and emptied a bucket full of ice for keeping drinks cool into the basin and sunk my stinging sizzling buttocks into its coolness. The smell of burnt butt filled the air. Malcolm walked into the dressing room, and in his wry sardonic understated way says: 'Fancy a curry Chris?'"

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slightly better behaved venue in Greenwich. The club (which now has venues in Croydon and Maidstone) is going strong and has a splendid mural depicting Hardee surrounded by a dozen of his most famous peers, in an irreverent re-creation of *The Last Supper*.

London Comedy Festival

www.londoncomedyfestival.com

The festival occupies around 600 venues across the capital, with 250 events and over 1000 performers. London's biggest-ever celebration of humour aims to cover all comedic disciplines from stand-up to film, literature and art.

The Midlands

The Midlands has been the target of some memorable comic send-ups, such as the Harry Enfield character "I am considerably richer than you", Timothy Spall's despondent electrician Barry in *Auf Wiedersehen Pet* and, best of all, Kevin Turvey, Rik Mayall's wide-eyed berk of an investigative reporter from Redditch. But the Midlands has never been short of home-grown wit. Birmingham, Britain's second city, dominates public perception of this region's comedy thanks, largely, to Jasper Carrott, Lenny Henry and Frank Skinner.

Carrott (1945–) grew up in Birmingham's Acocks Green suburb and started a Solihull folk club called The Boggery when he was 16. He played folk songs and compered but, noticing his banter got more reaction than his songs, soon focused on comedy. Another Solihull lad, Stewart Lee, formed a comic double act with Richard Herring when the two met at Oxford University.

Just outside Birmingham, Lenny Henry (1958–) was born Lenworth Hinton in Dudley. His family had emigrated from Jamaica in the 1950s. His formative comedy years were spent

in working men's clubs where he was unique – a young black man impersonating white characters such as Frank Spencer from *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* – and often told racist gags, realizing the error of his ways after appearing in the sitcom *The Fosters* (ITV, 1976–77).

Rik Mayall spent most of his childhood in Droitwich, Worcestershire. His first great character, Kevin Turvey, created for the sketch show *A Kick Up The Eighties*, was, he said, "just an accent, a mood, from the southwest Midlands". Frank Skinner (1957–) was born (as Christopher Graham Collins) in the Worcestershire town of Oldbury and was expelled from sixth form after being caught selling cut-price school meal vouchers to pupils.

Professional comics become harder to find as you head east across the Midlands. Python Graham Chapman was born in Leicester in 1941 during an air raid, but the east Midlands' undoubted capital of mirth is Nottingham: Steve Coogan collaborator Henry Normal, satirist John Bird, stand-up Jo Caulfield and comic actor Richard Beckinsale were all born there.

Birmingham Glee Club

The Arcadian, Birmingham, West Midlands B5 4TD. Tickets 0870 241 5093 www.glee.co.uk

Winning Chortle's Midlands Club Of The Year award in 2004, Glee established the first comedy night to become a big success outside London. Glee was created by a former City analyst Mark Tughan for whom building a comedy club was a lifelong dream. "We are first and foremost about comedy, but our audience is intelligent, we've never had that bear pit mentality", he says. Glee showcases big names and breaks many new acts. Every September, the club contributes a newcomers' night to the Birmingham Comedy Festival. Tickets for Glee can cost up to £15 but there are discounts and concessions.

Just The Tonic

Cabaret, 22 Fletcher Gate, Nottingham NG1 2FZ. Tickets 0115 912 9000 www.justthetonic.com

Just The Tonic has been running at the 240-capacity Cabaret Club for eleven years. The night

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aims to provide an edgy comedy alternative, showcasing acts with spark and originality. Ticket prices – even when a stand-up like Ed Byrne is playing – are very reasonable. There is a sister Just The Tonic club in Derby.

Promoter and compere Darren Martin also holds a weekly Wednesday night at Madame Jo Jo's in London's Soho. The club won Chortle's Midlands Club Of The Year award in 2002 and 2005. Memorable comedy nights here include Ross Noble's famous audience hair-cutting competition and Johnny Vegas's "pass the wheelie bin" night.

Leicester Comedy Festival

February www.comedy-festival.co.uk

The Leicester Comedy Festival has grown from a student project to Britain's biggest stand-alone comedy event, incorporating 180 events in 50 venues, and pulling in big names like Mark Lamarr, Jo Brand and The Mighty Boosh.

The Northeast

The Likely Lads, the classic comedy of class and culture set in Newcastle (co-written by local boy Ian Le Frenais), dominates the nation's image of northeastern comedy. From Terry and Bob, it's not too fanciful to draw a line of comically mismatched duos – one sensible, the other more anarchic – through Vic and Bob to Ant and Dec. There is a surrealist strain to

northeastern comedy – exemplified by Vic and Bob, Mark Gatiss, co-founder of the League of Gentlemen, and Ross Noble. For Noble, who was born in Cramlington in 1976, such humour was a natural reaction to growing up in a town that was "the ultimate in dullness". He says: "There was nothing to do so I used my imagination a lot."

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One of the League of Gentlemen's strokes of comic genius was to call the bizarre town in their show Royston Vasey – the real name of Roy “Chubby” Brown, Middlesbrough's answer to Bernard Manning.

A comic universe away from Chubby, but also born in Middlesbrough, was Bob Mortimer (1959–). After studying law, he moved to London where he met Vic Reeves (who, at the time, was impersonating Bryan Ferry, another northeastern cultural icon in exile) and established the Vic and Bob partnership. Reeves, born James Roderick Moir in Leeds in 1959, grew up in Darlington where he formed the Fashionable Five, a group of friends who would follow bands on stage and perform pranks.

Mark Gatiss became a connoisseur of weirdness growing up in Sedgefield, Durham. He lived opposite an Edwardian psychiatric hospital where his father sometimes worked as an engineer. “When I was little, we'd watch films with the patients. I remember being more concerned with frightening shapes in the shadows than whatever was onscreen. People routinely got out of their seats and shuffled towards you, like in *Dawn Of The Dead*”, he recalls.

Rowan Atkinson (1955–) was born in Consett. His father owned a farm there. Atkinson attended Durham Choristers School and St Bees, then studied electrical engineering at

Newcastle University before moving on to Oxford University and fame.

The Hyena Café

Leazes Lane, Newcastle Upon Tyne NE1 4PF. Tickets 0191 232 6030 www.thehyena.com

This purpose-built new venue in Newcastle's city centre often has the best showcase of acts in the northeast. The crowd is normally enthusiastic – as tickets are reasonably expensive they may want to get their money's worth – and acts like Mark Thomas, Ross Noble and Johnny Vegas have passed through. Hyena runs a monthly amateur sketch show called *Soup* and comedy workshops.



The Northwest

The northwest's famous cutting, sardonic wit has shaped the region's local culture, its influence exemplified both by the northwest's musicians

(especially The Beatles and Morrissey) and by the plethora of local comedians the area has produced over the years.

Lancashire

Before alternative comedy, the ultimate accolade for a comedian was to become a national treasure. Lancashire has given Britain at least three such treasures. George Formby (1904–61), the master of the ukulele and innuendo, was born in Wigan. Eric Morecambe (1926–84) took his stage name from the Lancastrian seaside town in which he was born. Les Dawson (1931–93) lived at Lytham St Annes, which was, he said, “so posh, when we eat cod and chips we wear a yachting cap”.

The caustic Jenny Eclair (1960–) also grew up in Lytham St Annes, although she was born in Kuala Lumpur. Born Jenny Hargreaves, she started calling herself Eclair while pretending to be French at a Blackpool nightclub.

Mike Harding (1941–), the self-styled “Rochdale Cowboy”, emerged in the 1970s with a distinctive blend of music and comedy. Harding’s stand-up shows were shown on the BBC in the late 1970s and early 1980s and he may hold the record for the world’s longest televised joke: he devoted a whole thirty-minute episode to a gag about a budgie.

Liverpool

Second city in the northwest is not a title Liverpool readily accepts so it is no great shock that Kevin Fearon, owner of the city’s successful Rawhide club, claims: “No other city can draw on such a heritage and has a reputation for comedy like Liverpool.”

The city’s contribution to comedy includes music hall legend Arthur Askey, Jimmy Tarbuck, Kenny Everett (who, as Maurice Cole, trained for the priesthood in Crosby) and the great Ken

Dodd, born on the city’s outskirts in Knotty Ash. Yet the most influential comedy to emerge from Liverpool may have been Richard Lester’s Beatles movie, *A Hard Day’s Night*. Like Tarbuck, John Lennon went to Dovedale school. Ringo Starr grew up in Dingle, the city’s rundown Protestant area featured in *Bread*, the Carla Lane sitcom in which Paul McCartney made an unprecedented cameo.

Co-written by Lane and Myra Taylor, *The Liver Birds* was the city’s feminine answer to *The Likely Lads*, charting the comic adventures of two young women sharing a flat on Huskisson Street near the city centre. The series’ title originated from the name given to the two sculpted birds that adorn the Royal Liver Building at Pier Head.

Though born in Blackpool, Ricky Tomlinson lived in Liverpool for years and began his stand-up career playing banjo and telling jokes as Hobo Rick in the city’s gangster-filled drinking clubs. Politically outspoken, Tomlinson had been deeply involved with local trade unions (after a stint in the National Front) and was imprisoned on a contested charge of political conspiracy for two years in 1972. Finding it hard to get work back in the building trade, Tomlinson turned to comedy.

Another politically minded Liverpoolian comic is Alexei Sayle who, though semi-officially known as the city’s leading alternative comedian, recently had to apologize for remarks about Liverpoolians being prone to sentimental “oh we’re the greatest people, you’ll never walk alone shite”. Maybe it’s just as well that Sayle lives in Bloomsbury now. Meanwhile, Michael Joseph Pennington, better known as Johnny Vegas, hails from St Helens, on Merseyside.

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The Laughter House

Baby Blue, Edward Pavilion, Albert Dock, Liverpool L3 4AF
The Sports Café, Sir Thomas Street, Liverpool L1 6BW
Tickets 0870 20 266 339 www.laughterhouse.com

The Laughter House was originally based in Liverpool's Slaughterhouse venue (formerly an abattoir) but has now spread across two venues. Baby Blue in the city's Albert Dock has Friday and Saturday night shows, while it's Fridays only at the Sports Café on Sir Thomas Street. The 10-year-old club has hosted the likes of Donna McPhail, Junior Simpson and former drug smuggler turned raconteur Howard Marks.

Rawhide Comedy Club

Royal Court Theatre, 1 Roe Street, Liverpool L1 1HL. Tickets 0870 787 1866 www.royalcourttheatre.co.uk

The most respected comedy name in Liverpool, Rawhide is the place to catch the biggest acts passing through the city. Moving this year to its fifth home in the Victorian setting of The Royal Court, Rawhide has grown from modest beginnings in 1995 in the foyer of the Everyman Theatre. Typically you should expect to pay between £5 and £13.50 at weekends, though special events may be priced differently.

The club has a boisterous reputation. Famously, when Mark Lamarr performed at the nearby Neptune Theatre, one heckler announced: "This is crap, I'm off to Rawhide", and left, leading Lamarr to make the impromptu decision to follow, taking the entire audience along with him.

Liverpool Comedy Festival

June–July www.liverpoolcomedyfestival.co.uk

Liverpool holds an annual comedy festival, which in 2005 offered over a hundred shows across forty

venues. Headline acts included Jimmy Carr, Daniel Kitson, Dylan Moran, Johnny Vegas, Peter Kay, Paul Merton and Liverpooldlian circuit favourites Simon Bligh and Anvil Springsteen.

Manchester

The historical birthplace of the industrial revolution, Manchester has always had an active comedy scene. The pre-alternative era of comedy in Manchester and beyond was the subject of Trevor Griffiths' acclaimed play *Comedians*, in which stand-ups betray their teacher's social-democratic ideals of comedy to win a judge's approval in a northern club. Griffiths was born in the city's Ancoats area in 1935 and set the play there. A politically charged drama, *Comedians* anticipated the new alternative comedy that made traditional working men's club comics such as Bernard Manning look obsolete.

Obsolete or not, Bernard Manning's World Famous Embassy Club – only really famous in the UK – is still open in Rochdale Road, in Harpurhey, the less salubrious part of north Manchester. Manning still hates alternative comedy: "It's all the fuckin' dog and the fuckin' cat and the fuckin' car, long drawn-out stories like they're talking to themselves." Manning is, however, said to be fond of Peter Kay, possibly because he thinks Kay has drawn on the Embassy Club for his *Phoenix Nights* series.

Many notable comedy stars have been born or launched their careers in Manchester. Les Dawson is from the Collyhurst district. Ronnie Barker (1929–2005) joined the Manchester Repertory Company as an assistant stage manager in his twenties, while Eric Sykes (1923–) was born in Oldham. Stand-up Chris Addison, whose *Civilization* show

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was one of the hits of Edinburgh in 2004, was born in Didsbury and admits he based his comedy on local DJ James H. Reeve who ran a phone-in show in the 1980s on Manchester radio. Fiona Allen, of *Smack The Pony* fame, was born in Bury, where Victoria Wood, born in Prestwich, went to school. Heading further east, Peter Kay grew up in Bolton where *Phoenix Nights* co-stars Dave Spikey and Patrick McGuinness hail from.

Manchester University was a seedbed of alternative comedy. Alumni Ben Elton, Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmonson were among the first televised alternative comedians who did not go to Oxford or Cambridge.

Even before the 1990s economic boom began to repair the ravages of two decades of industrial and economic decline, Manchester was basking in a musical renaissance, spawning such classic bands as The Smiths, New Order and “Madchester” bands such as the Happy Mondays. The history of these bands and the notorious Factory record label they signed for was documented in Michael Winterbottom’s comedy film *24 Hour Party People* (2002), which featured some half-decent acting from some significant contemporary British comedians, notably Rob Brydon, Dave Gorman, Peter Kay and Steve Coogan.

Coogan’s portrayal of Tony Wilson, the head of Factory, was described by New Order bassist Peter Hook as “the second biggest twat in Manchester playing the biggest twat in Manchester”. Probably the most famous contemporary Manchester comic, Coogan (1965–) was born in Middleton, north Manchester, into a large Irish family. He first gained recognition as Alan Partridge on *The Day Today*. Other Coogan characters include his drunken Mancunian wag Paul Calf. Coogan later starred in the film comedy *The Parole Officer* (2001) which was set in Manchester.

Paul Calf’s capacity for ineptitude is equalled

only by Frank Gallagher, the central character of the successful Manchester comedy drama *Shameless* (Channel 4, 2004–), created and produced by Paul Abbott, who grew up in nearby Burnley and based much of the raucous series on his own upbringing.

Manchester’s greatest sitcom is *The Royle Family*. Starring Ricky Tomlinson and Caroline Aherne, this affectionate, rounded satire of family life in the working-class northwest was co-written by Caroline Aherne (who, though born in London, grew up in Withenshaw) and fellow Mancunian Craig Cash. Cash co-wrote and starred in another amusing affectionate take on Mancunian life, *Early Doors* (BBC2, 2003). Set in The Grapes, a small pub in Manchester, the series offered well-timed gags underpinned with real emotional poignancy.

The Frog And Bucket

102 Oldham Street, Manchester M4 1LJ. Tickets 0161 236 9805 www.frogandbucket.com

The Frog And Bucket started life in a small Yates’s pub in Manchester city centre in 1993. Rough and ready, it was originally known as

The screenshot shows the website for 'The Frog and Bucket Comedy Club'. The header includes the club's logo and the tagline 'The Original Home of Comedy in the North'. Below this is a navigation menu with links for 'ABOUT US', 'WHAT'S ON?', 'NEWS', 'BOOK TICKETS', 'SPECIAL OFFERS', 'GALLERY', 'MEMBERSHIP', 'CORPORATE BOOKING', 'FORUM', 'CONTACT', 'FAQ', and 'LINKS'. The main content area features a 'Welcome to the Frog and Bucket Online' message and several promotional tiles for events: 'MONDAYS' (Beat the Frog, FREE ENTRY), 'BIG VALUE THURSDAYS' (More Bang for Your Buck), 'WEEKENDS' (BARREL OF LAUGHS), 'CHRISTMAS 2001' (Click Here For the Best Christmas Party in Town), 'Saturday 12th August' (Paramount Comedy @ The Frog, CLICK HERE), and 'THIS SUNDAY' (The Little Howard Appeal). The footer includes 'Mondays | Thursdays | Weekends | Sundays' and 'Booking Online'.

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The Little Frog until it bought out the pub in 1996. It has since welcomed the likes of Dave Gorman, Caroline Aherne and Johnny Vegas, and provided a stage for some of Peter Kay's early stand-up. Manager David Perkins remembers Kay's performances: "When he compered, acts couldn't follow him. He was just too funny."

Big-name acts still lend support, and Vegas compered The Frog's new act competition for the Manchester Comedy Festival in 2003. Steve Coogan tried out new comedy characters on the same night, as well as airing old favourites Paul and Pauline Calf. Tickets can cost from nothing (Monday nights are free) to £12 on Saturday.

XS Malarkey

Bar XS, Wilmslow Road, Fallowfield, Manchester M14 6SS
Tickets 0161 257 2403 www.xsmalarkey.com

XS Malarkey is perhaps the most underground comedy club in the UK, and has won the Chortle website's Club Of The Year award four years in a row. The night, which champions stand-up's grassroots, is run on a not-for-profit basis. Tickets can't be booked and the club runs on a first come, first served basis with a capacity of just 200.

Starting eight years ago in Scruffy Murphys, the club has for the last four years been located at Bar XS, in a converted railway station in Fallowfield, the heart of Manchester's student area. The club is open every Tuesday and for occasional one-off shows. Comperer and club organizer Toby Hadoke says the night gives people the chance to see a quality of stand-up no longer found on TV.



The Comedy Store Manchester

3 and 4 Deansgate Locks, Whitworth St., Manchester M1
5LH. Tickets 0870 593 2932 www.thecomedystore.co.uk

This sister club to the London Comedy Store works in a similar way, offering premium circuit acts and big names, and a capacity of 500. The original Comedy Store players – such as Paul Merton and Greg Proops – often visit.

Manchester Comedy Festival

September–October www.manchestercomedyfestival.com

Venues across the city host top acts and comperes such as Paul Merton. Jimmy Carr is a big fan: "A lot of towns have comedy festivals and it feels like it's just a bunch of gigs, but this is quite a cool thing."

Scotland

“Ten years ago there wasn’t much of a comedy scene in Scotland”, says Scottish comedian Sandy Nelson, part of Glasgow’s cult improv act Dance Monkeyboys Dance. While London paid higher prices and pulled in bigger names, live comedy in Scotland – outside of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival – languished. But today, with the impressive rise of the Stand clubs in Glasgow and Edinburgh, live comedy is a significant business in Scotland. Jongleurs in Glasgow has over 27,000 names on its mailing list and the Stand clubs sell out over 70 percent of their shows.

Scottish broadcasting has proved central to the country’s comedy boom, nurturing new talent and developing its own programmes, most notably the legendary sketch show *Absolutely* (Channel 4, 1989–93) and the unusual sitcom *Rab C. Nesbitt* (BBC2, 1989–99).

Absolutely was nominated for a Golden Rose of Montreux. In a mainly Scottish cast, two of the principal actors – Morwenna Banks and Jack Docherty – would get their own TV series. Docherty hosted a Channel 5 chat show in 1997, while Banks had a self-titled programme on Channel 5 and enjoyed some American success, appearing on *Saturday Night Live* and HBO’s sitcom *Dream On*.

Scotland’s most characterful sitcom, *Rab C. Nesbitt* began life as a sketch on the BBC Scotland comedy show *Naked Video* (BBC2, 1986–91). Set in Govan, the show followed Rab as he got drunk, chased women, got drunk again and got arrested – all in a strong Glaswegian dialect that made the show impenetrable for many. Like many a cantankerous, skiving drunkard, Rab

fancied himself as a “street philosopher”. The series reflected, some viewers complained, the most damaging stereotypes of Glaswegian and Scottish working-class life. But despite setting what one critic called “a new gutter standard for British television”, the show was enduringly popular. Gregor Fisher (1953–), who played Rab, was born in Glasgow and had seen enough real-life Rabs to give his characterization vulnerability and depth.

Billy Connolly (1942–) used Scottish working-class life to inspire his comedy. Born in Glasgow, to Irish immigrant parents, he was brought up in the city’s Anderston and, later, Partick districts. The Big Yin, as he became known in Scotland, soon gave up welding in the shipyards to become a folk singer and a comedian. In one of his best-known comedy skits, “The Crucifixion”, he likens Christ’s Last Supper to a drunken night out in Glasgow.

Glasgow is also the birthplace of the laconic alternative comedy pioneer Arnold Brown (1936–) and writer/producer/director Armando Iannucci (1964–), while Jerry Sadowitz (1961–) was born into a Jewish family in New Jersey, but raised in Glasgow after his parents’ divorce.

John Sessions (1953–) was born in Largs, North Ayrshire, and is best known for his brilliance on improvisation shows like *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*

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Glasgow Stand

333 Woodlands Road, Glasgow G3 6NG Tickets 0870 600 6055

Edinburgh Stand

5 York Place, Edinburgh EH1 3EB Tickets 0131 558 7272
www.thestand.co.uk

The Stand was the brainchild of comedian Jane Mackay and Tommy Shepherd, a former Labour party official. Living in London in the 1980s, they saw comedy clubs sprout up all over the English capital. Moving to Edinburgh in the early 1990s they were amazed to discover that the city which hosted The Fringe Festival did not have a dedicated comedy venue of its own.

Established in 1995, the original Stand still runs in Edinburgh. A second club was opened in Glasgow in 2000. While the Edinburgh club has attracted an international audience, the Glasgow club welcomes a more local crowd. For Shepherd, locality is key: “We programme our acts so the club is always of the city. We always have Scottish MCs and lots of Glaswegian acts, presenting them on bills alongside the best comedians in Britain.”

The Stand clubs promise five acts on most bills, and attract big names and lesser-known comedians alike. The club also offers beginners’ spots, comedy workshops and open mike nights. Prices vary from £1 to £10.

Edinburgh

Every August, Edinburgh becomes Britain’s comic capital as the host of the world’s biggest comedy festival. That isn’t the city’s only contribution to British comedy – Rory Bremner (1961–) and Ronnie Corbett (1930–) were both born there

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The screenshot shows the website for The Stand Comedy Club. At the top, there's a navigation menu with links: Home, What's on, Book, Food, Feedback, Corporate, Benefits, History, Acts, Shows, Access (DDA), and Fringe 2006. The main content area is titled "Welcome to The Stand Comedy Club." It features three columns of text. The first column discusses the club's history, established in 1995, and its commitment to value and variety. The second column promotes the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2006, highlighting the best contemporary live circuit. The third column lists specific events: "Wednesday at The Stand" in Edinburgh featuring a special midweek stand-up with Raymond Mearns, Paul Pirie, and Allen Chalmers, and a Glasgow event featuring a special midweek stand-up with Juliet Meyers, Susan Calman, and Al Kennedy. Logos for Edinburgh and Glasgow are visible at the top of the page.

– but the Edinburgh Fringe Festival has made the Scottish capital a pivotal force in British comedy.

The Edinburgh Fringe Festival (www.edfringe.com) is actually an umbrella term for a group of independently organized festivals running simultaneously, showcasing books, films, theatre, music and comedy. The most vibrant, by some distance, is comedy which now sells over a million tickets every year.

The Edinburgh International Festival was launched in 1947, as a lofty post-war initiative designed to help Europe reunite through culture. The event soon attracted more performers than it could handle and eight companies (six Scottish, two English) decided to ignore the competitive entry process, turning up uninvited to fend for themselves and, in the process, inventing what we now call the Fringe.

A notable by-product of the Fringe is the Perrier Award, created in 1981 as the Oscars of live comedy, which has rewarded such diverse talent as Frank Skinner, Lee Evans and The League of Gentlemen.

The Fringe fills Edinburgh, calling on over 250 venues, even filling churches, converted flats and bank vaults. In the late 1980s, three

venues emerged as the main showcases for comedy talent, The Assembly Rooms, The Gilded Balloon and The Pleasance. These have been joined, in recent years, by The Underbelly.

The Fringe also has dozens of free shows, showcase performances on the Royal Mile every day and a massive free outdoor event, Fringe Sunday (on the second Sunday of the festival).

The Assembly Rooms

George Street Assembly Rooms, 54 George St., Edinburgh EH2 2LR

Assembly Hall, Mound Place, Edinburgh EH1 2LU

St George's West, 58 Shandwick Place, Edinburgh EH2 4RT

Queen's Hall, Clerk Street, Edinburgh EH8 9JG

Tickets 0131 226 2428/624 2442 www.assemblyrooms.com

The Assembly, one of the Festival big hitters, offers top Fringe acts including comedy, theatre and music. There are four venues, fitted only for the festival, at George Street, Assembly Hall, St George's West and Queen's Hall. The Assembly bars are a good place to luvvy-watch, attracting many famous faces. The members-only Club Bar at the George Street Assembly Rooms sometimes opens its doors to the public with various membership schemes.

Pleasance Courtyard

60 The Pleasance, Edinburgh EH8 9TJ. Tickets 0131 556 6550 www.pleasance.co.uk

The Pleasance, Edinburgh, opened its two main theatres for the 1985 festival in the eastern end of Edinburgh's old town. Twenty years later, this highly respected venue offers eighteen theatre spaces ranging in capacity from 50 to 740 across

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two locations – the Pleasance Courtyard and the Pleasance Dome. New companies and performers are placed alongside more established comics and the theatre acts. In 2005, 240,000 people passed through its doors either to see comedy – in a typical day, 160 shows are running – or to use one of its ten bars.

Underbelly

46 Cowgate, Edinburgh, EH1 1EG

Baby Belly

The Caves, Niddry Street South (off Cowgate), Edinburgh EH1 1EG

Tickets 0870 745 3083 www.theunderbelly.co.uk

Underbelly opened in 2000 as a small performance venue used by long-running Fringe company Double Edge Drama. Inspired by another acclaimed Scottish company, Grid Iron, who performed in the vaults below Edinburgh's Central Library, the club took their comedy shows underground.

The comedy of bananas

Stand-up Mark Maier recalls his first festival:

"My introduction to the Edinburgh Festival was via the street. Standing on a crate, I would eat bananas to the tune of "Chanson D'Amour", timed so that a banana would be chomped on each ratatatat of the song. Aficionados of the Manhattan Transfer classic will know the song has six ratatatats ergo six bananas. Three shows a day, six bananas a show, by the end of August 1987 I had consumed 393 bananas (this includes rehearsal bananas). I waddled away from Edinburgh with twenty eight pounds and forty four pence. Or more precisely, two stone and forty four pence."

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Underbelly's atmospheric setting in the former bank vaults under George IV Bridge has become a must-see Fringe attraction. In 2005 the company added the Caves on Niddry Street to its list of spaces, now known as Baby Belly.

The Gilded Balloon

25 Greenside Place, Edinburgh EH1 3AA. Tickets 0131 668 1633 www.gildedballoon.co.uk

The Gilded Balloon, established in 1986, is a large, renowned festival venue now operating seven venues with over seventy shows per day.

In 1989 the Balloon devised *So You Think You're Funny?*, a competition to uncover new comic talent whose past winners include Rhona Cameron, Dylan Moran and Peter Kay.

The venue's home and largest performance space for sixteen years was in the heart of the Cowgate area. The Studio, where it all began, was a festival favourite along with its Gilded Saloon bar that opened all year round. In December 2002, a huge fire in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town destroyed the Studio and other buildings. The company focused on its second major venue, Teviot Row House, teaming up with Underbelly to publicize shows, and eventually recovered.

The Gilded Balloon is also famous for its popular late-night show *Late 'N' Live* that kicks off at 1am and has welcomed comics and impromptu guests like Frank Skinner, Jo Brand and Lenny Henry over the years.

The Southeast

If you accept Linda Smith's theory that a lot of comedians come from the edge of nowhere, the southeast – having more deeply marginal towns than most parts of Britain – should have produced more than its fair share of comic talent. And so it has. Smith herself hails from Erith, in Kent. The other comic talent to hail from the southeast's marginal towns includes David Walliams (Reigate), Peter Sellers (Southsea), Jo Brand (Hastings), Jimmy Carr (Slough), Junior Simpson (Luton), Jeremy Hardy (Aldershot), Harry Hill (Woking) and Simon Munnery (Watford). Jack Dee, born near Orpington, was brought up in Winchester. Writers to hail from the region's equally inconsequential places include Dick Clement

(Westcliff-on-Sea), David Nobbs (Petts Wood), Simon Nye (Burgess Hill) and David Renwick (Luton).

Some great sitcoms have made imaginative use of the southeast's banality. *The Office* (2001) wouldn't be as funny if the paper merchants weren't set in Slough, the sprawling new town John Betjeman hoped "friendly bombs" would destroy. The town only appears in the opening sequence, which shows the bus station and industrial estate, but it is the perfect setting for such a mockumentary. Ricky Gervais (1961–) was actually born in Reading, well placed to capture the ambience of the M4 corridor. *The Office's* setting was the latest in a glorious tradition of insignificant sitcom locales

which stretched back via Walmington-on-Sea (*Dad's Army*) to East Cheam (*Hancock's Half Hour*).

The coast has proved a reasonably fertile breeding ground for comedians. Apart from Eddie Izzard (who grew up in Bexhill-on-Sea), Peter Sellers (1925–80) was born to a family of entertainers in Southsea, Tony Hancock (1924–68) grew up in Bournemouth where his mother and stepfather ran a small hotel, and *Spaced's* Jessica Stevenson was raised in Brighton.

Komedia Brighton

44 Gardner Street, Brighton BN1 1UN Tickets 01273 647100 www.komedia.co.uk

This award-winning venue was forced to expand in 1998, moving into a former Tesco supermarket in Gardner Street where it rapidly became the south's premier live performance venue.

Komedia started in 1994, converting a Grade II-listed former billiard hall in Brighton's Kemp Town area into a theatre and cabaret bar. It staged then burgeoning acts such as Graham Norton, Al Murray, Omid Djalili and The League Of Gentlemen. The company promotes new work and runs several venues on the Edinburgh Fringe. Ticket prices are pretty reasonable, especially for the southeast.

Wales

The English joke that the Welsh have no sense of humour. But English stereotypes of miserable, moody Welshmen don't explain how the principality came to produce some of the comic



Brighton Paramount Comedy Festival

www.brightoncomedyfestival.com

The inaugural Brighton Paramount Comedy Festival was launched in 2005. Organizers hope with time it will become England's answer to the Edinburgh Fringe. The festival's mix of old and new talent included the likes of Daniel Kitson, Jimmy Carr and Peter Kay.

talent behind *The Goons*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *The Fast Show*, French and Saunders and *Marion And Geoff*. Welsh humour is – as Welsh interviewees told Polish researchers on a British

Undergraduate humour

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge have nurtured some of Britain's finest wits and hugely influenced the development of sketch comedy and satire since the 1960s.

Founded around 1209, the University of Cambridge has probably never been as culturally influential as in the last fifty years, as many of its alumni moved into film and broadcasting. Cambridge University's Footlights drama society has produced some of Britain's best-known comedians including Douglas Adams, Clive Anderson, Peter Cook, Stephen Fry, Clive James, Simon Jones, Hugh Laurie (who was actually born in Oxford), Rory McGrath, Bill Oddie, Tony Slattery, Morwenna Banks and Sandi Toksvig.

Oxford University traces its roots back to the eleventh century and, in the last half-century, has produced such wits and comics as Alan Bennett, Dudley Moore, Rowan Atkinson, Griff Rhys Jones, Hugh Grant, Richard Herring and Stewart Lee.

Monty Python was a true Oxbridge merger, created in the late 1960s by Graham Chapman, John Cleese,

Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin. The team had got to know each other gradually, first meeting through university – Chapman, Cleese and Idle were at Cambridge together, while Jones and Palin were at Oxford – with Gilliam joining the troupe later. The success of *Beyond The Fringe* (with Cook, Bennett and Moore all playing a part) and *Python* established Oxbridge humour as a mini-genre, renowned for its satirical bent, intellectual allusions and a certain comic anarchy. Although some later comics have regarded Oxbridge humour as culturally elitist, the universities continue to nurture comic talent.

For comedy nights in the two university towns check out:

Oxford:

The Bullingdon Arms (01865 244516)

The Oxford Free Beer Show at The Cellar (01865 244761)

Cambridge:

The Bath House Pub (01223 350969)

The Junction (01223 511511)

Council project – dry, sardonic, sarcastic, so self-deprecating as to be almost masochistic, addicted to wordplay and driven by certain recurring motifs: rugby, social pretensions and the arrogance of the English. Nicky Thompson, a stand-up from Cardiff, says: “We are Celts, we love to talk, we are a nation of great storytellers and weavers of magic.”

Swansea was the setting for the comic movie *Twin Town* (1997) which launched the career of Welsh comic actor Rhys Ifans, latter better known as Hugh Grant's unhygienic flatmate in *Notting Hill*. This dark take on regional life after two decades of industrial decline highlighted the social divisions in a city

that Dylan Thomas once dubbed the “graveyard of ambition”. One-time *Comic Strip* star Keith Allen, who plays a magic-mushroom-eating farmer in the movie, was born in nearby Llanelli.

The Goon Show's Harry Secombe (1921–2001) was born in a hillside-terraced house in Swansea's St Thomas area. Rob Brydon (1965–) was also born in Swansea, though he moved to Baglan, near Port Talbot. His cuckolded cabbie character Keith Barret was introduced on the BBC Wales radio show *Rave*.

Among the comics born in and around Cardiff are Griff Rhys Jones (1953–), though his family soon moved to Sussex, and *The Fast*

Show's Paul Whitehouse (1959–), who was born in Stanleytown in the Rhondda Valley.

Legendary comedian and magician, Tommy Cooper (1921–84) was born in Caerphilly. The fact that he moved to Exeter when he was three hasn't stopped Caerphilly planning to honour him with a huge bronze statue. Hywel Bennett (1944–), who starred as laconic, lazy graduate Shelley in the eponymous sitcom, is from the coaltown of Ammanford.

The most iconic Welsh comedian is Max Boyce (1945–), from Glynneath in southwest Wales. His *We All Had Doctors' Papers* became the first comedy album to top the UK charts in 1975. Boyce is an acknowledged inspiration for Carmarthen-born stand-up Rhod Gilbert (1969–), whose habit of telling surreal stories

about rural life suggests there's something in the idea that the Welsh are born storytellers. In northwest Wales, Dawn French (1957–) was born in Holyhead while former Python Terry Jones (1942–) is proud of his Welshness, though he left Colwyn Bay when he was five.

Cardiff Glee Club

Mermaid Quay, Cardiff Bay CF19 5BZ Tickets 0870 241 5093 www.glee.co.uk

Voted Chortle's Club Of The Year for Wales and the West in 2003, 2005 and 2006, the Cardiff Glee Club in the recently redeveloped Cardiff Bay area has hosted the cream of British stand-up. Tickets can cost up to £15, though there are discounts with concessions and online booking.

The West Country

The West may not have a sharply defined comic identity but it has been home to such different comedians as Peter Cook (born in Torquay), John Cleese (Weston Super Mare), Mark Lamarr (Swindon), Charlie Higson (Frome) and the greatest British comedy actor of the last century, Cary Grant (Bristol).

Bristol

Though *The Young Ones* was set in north London, their student house was in Bristol, at 1 Coddington Road, Bishopston, while *The Kebab And Calculator* (their local pub, seen in the epi-

sode *Boring*) is actually *The Cock O'The North* in Henleaze, one of only two round pubs in Britain.

Fresh-faced new stand-up Russell Howard, Perrier nominee Mark Watson, John Bird and Justin Lee Collins (famous for his catch phrase, "I love it", delivered in a thick Bristolian accent) were all born in Bristol. Other promising young stand-ups from here include Jon Richardson, James Dowdeswell and Mark Oliver, while Lee Evans was born in nearby Avonmouth. His father Dave Evans was a popular entertainer in working men's clubs whose constant touring meant Evans regularly changed schools, always feeling like the "new kid" nobody knew.

Bristol University has a remarkable comic pedigree. Chris Morris studied Zoology there,

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while other alumni include *Spaced*'s Simon Pegg and Nick Frost, Marcus Brigstocke, Danny Robbins (creator of the music/comedy crossover character DJ Danny) and *Little Britain*'s Matt Lucas and David Walliams.

Jesters Comedy Club

142 Cheltenham Road, Bristol BS6 5RL. Tickets 0117 909 6655 www.jesterscomedyclub.co.uk

Jesters is Bristol's biggest comedy club. Every Friday and Saturday night promises four good-quality circuit acts with the occasional bigger name. Student Comedy Night runs every Wednesday through term time and the first Sunday of every month showcases gay comedy. Previous guests include Four Poofs And A Piano, Dan Antopolski and Ian Cognito, who lives nearby on a canal boat. Prices vary from £5 to £12.

Slapstick January

www.slapstick.org.uk

Bristol hosted its first tribute to silent slapstick in January 2005, compered by long-time slapstick fan Paul Merton. Organized by local silent film buffs, the festival airs a host of rarely seen gems from such silent greats as Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd.

Bath, Somerset and Swindon

Bill Bailey (1964–) and Julia Davis (1966–) were both born in Bath, with Davis joining a local the-

atre group and then forming an improv troupe with Rob Brydon. Richard Herring (1967–), raised in Cheddar in Somerset, says: "When we did *Lee And Herring*, we used to make jokes about Somerset being backward, so we did get some mileage out of it." His partner Stewart Lee claims his grandfather nearly ran a hotdog stand near Cheddar Gorge but became ill: "If we had moved, Rich and me would have gone to the same school."

Mark Lamarr has less humorous memories of his home town, Swindon. He left for London as soon as he could saying: "It's a very, very narrow-minded and bitter little town. I don't want to be all London, London, aren't I brilliant for living here, but in a sense, I do think you end up where you deserve or where you want to be. People who live in Swindon probably haven't got that much enthusiasm for life generally."

Devon and Cornwall

Torquay is home to two of British comedy's greatest legends: Peter Cook, who was born in Bronshill Road, and Basil Fawlty. John Cleese's immortal creation was based on a real Torquay hotelier who distinguished himself by telling Terry Gilliam his table manners were too American and throwing Eric Idle's briefcase into the street in case it had a bomb in it. The first character based on that hotelier appeared in an episode of ITV's Sunday evening sitcom *Doctor At Large* in 1973. After the episode had been shot, producer Humphrey Barclay told Cleese: "You could probably build a series around that character." Elsewhere in Devon, Peter Richardson, the genius behind *The Comic Strip*, hails from Newton Abbott.

The famously lewd comic Jethro (1948–) was born in the small village of St Buryan, West Cornwall. The son of a farmer, with a distinct Cornish accent, he is a local legend. Though she

had to go to Scotland to get her break, Morwenna Banks (1964–) was born in the Cornish coastal village of Flushing.

Yorkshire and Derbyshire

With the exception of Frankie Howerd (born in York in 1917, though he soon moved to London), the east side of the Pennines is probably more famous for comic characters than stand-up comedians. The most popular sitcom set here is *Last Of The Summer Wine* which has made the charming Peak District town of Holmfirth a tourist magnet. The north Derbyshire town of Hadfield has provided the backdrop for *The League Of Gentlemen*, a hybrid sitcom/sketch show. Given the bizarre events in the show's fictional northern village, it's hard to imagine Hadfield experiencing a similar tourist boom.

In the last twenty years, the region has inspired several movie comedies that have offered a grittier, socially conscious, working-class alternative to the London-centric, English Heritage view of Britain presented by such Richard Curtis movies as *Four Weddings And A Funeral*.

The urban decay of Bradford's Buttershaw estate was the setting for Alan Clarke's 1986 movie *Rita, Sue And Bob Too*, a story of a married man's illicit affair with two teenage babysitters. *Brassed Off* (1996), set in the Yorkshire town of Grimley, is Michael Frayn's dark comedy about the troubles faced by a Yorkshire colliery brass band after their pit closes. The same

mix of comedy and social statement drives *The Full Monty* (1997), the Oscar-winning comedy drama musical about six unemployed British steel workers in Sheffield who form a male striptease act.

The Northern Irish scene

In 2006 the BBC announced a host of new comedies for radio and television for its Northern Ireland viewers, proof that Jimmy Cricket and Frank Carson are not the be-all and end-all of comic talent north of the Irish border. The comedy scene in Belfast got a kick-start in the early 1990s when Patrick Kielty helped set up its first comedy club, The Empire. Other comics who have subsequently crossed over in club and TV terms include Michael Smiley (*Spaced*, *15 Storeys High*) and Colin Murphy (*People Like Us*). Smiley and Murphy still contribute to home-grown comedy productions.

Northern Ireland's recent history presents an obvious problem for live comedians but Derry stand-up Daniel McCrossan says it's hard to avoid the subject. "You see so many comedians here using the troubles because it's personal, we've experienced it." Ignoring it – unless a comic has a surreal or physical style that legitimizes that choice – would shackle a comic and, to an audience that has endured the same events, feel distinctly odd.

GEOGRAPHY LESSONS: COMEDY AROUND BRITAIN

Local hero Michael Palin says *The Full Monty* has changed the city's image: "I was a teenager living in Sheffield, an uncompromising industrial city without a hint of glamour, until recently, when the demise of its industry became the subject of *The Full Monty*."

A native of Sheffield, Palin (1943–) made his first dramatic appearance at Birkdale Preparatory School as Martha Cratchit, in a school production of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, suitable preparation, you might think, for some of his later Python roles.

Sheffield's greatest gift to alternative comedy is probably the comic actor Graham Fellows (1959–), now better known as the "versatile singer/organist" John Shuttleworth. In his fictional biography, Shuttleworth was a security guard for a sweet factory in Rotherham.

Alan Bennett (1934–) was born slightly further up the M1 in Leeds though, like Palin, he got his first real taste of the comedy business at Oxford. Bennett met Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller and Peter Cook at Oxford University,

achieving instant fame with the influential satirical revue *Beyond The Fringe*. Bennett is now best known for his *Talking Heads* monologues, his TV adaptations and his hilarious memoirs.

Leeds is also the birthplace of Julian Barratt, half of The Mighty Boosh. Ade Edmondson, grew up in nearby Bradford. The Perrier-Award-winning comic Daniel Kitson is from Denby Dale, famed more for its pottery than for its comedy.

Hull has been home to Maureen Lipman, Boothby Graffoe and Reece Shearsmith, famous as Papa Lazarou in *The League Of Gentlemen*. The League – also Mark Gatiss, Steve Pemberton and co-writer Jeremy Dyson – met as drama students at Bretton Hall in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, and discovered a shared taste for the nasty classics of British sci-fi and horror cinema.

The Last Laugh

The Lescar Hotel, 303 Sharrow Vale Road, Sheffield S11 8ZF. Tickets 0114 267 9787

The Roundhouse, Ponds Forge Sports Centre, Sheffield S1 2PZ. Tickets 0114 223 3505

www.lastlaugh.biz/content and www.sheffieldcomedy.com

The Last Laugh Comedy Club was started over a decade ago by former comic Oliver Double (who now lectures on stand-up comedy) and friends. The club is now compered by local comedian Toby Foster (Les in *Phoenix Nights*). Dara O'Briain, Daniel Kitson and Will Hodgson have played here, and there are Edinburgh previews every summer and an annual festival in October.

Thursday evening is held at The Lescar, Yorkshire's longest-running comedy club, where Foster still comperes most weeks. On the weekend, shows are at the Roundhouse with four comedians every week, a late bar until 1am and, inevitably, higher ticket prices.



The HiFi Club

2 Central Road, Leeds LS1 6DE. Tickets 0113 242 7353
www.thehificlub.co.uk

Originally The Central School Of Ballroom Dancing in the 1950s, this venue was famous for its northern soul and disco nights in the 1960s and 70s. After a makeover, the club reopened as the HiFi in 2000. Primarily a music venue, the HiFi hosts Friday and Saturday comedy sessions, drawing in big names like Richard Herring. Tickets normally cost £10 or less. On Saturday nights, audience members are invited to stay on for the Boogaloo club that runs until 3am.

City Varieties Music Hall

Swan Street, Leeds LS1 6LW. Tickets 0845 644 1881 www.cityvarieties.co.uk

The City Varieties Theatre in Leeds has been a popular entertainment venue since the eigh-

GEOGRAPHY LESSONS: COMEDY AROUND BRITAIN

teenth century, first in a pub called the White Swan and then, from 1865, at the City Palace Of Varieties.

Famous performers from the past to have played here include Houdini, Bud Flanagan and Charlie Chaplin but the theatre is best known as the setting for BBC1's music hall show, *The Good Old Days*. The theatre has hosted such notable current comedians as Sue Perkins and Ross Noble.

Grin Up North – The Sheffield Comedy Festival

www.sheffieldcomedyfestival.com

The first ever Grin Up North, the Sheffield Comedy Festival, was launched in 2005. Running over two weeks, the festival showcases new talent as well as drawing in the big names.