

Travel

It's a long way from Dukinfield

WC Fields had a love-hate relationship with his home city of Philadelphia . . . and strong ties to Tameside, as **Lindsay Sutton** discovers



» SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE Philadelphia, birthplace of the American revolution, combines big city excitement with small town charm

It may seem far-fetched but it's claimed that the great American comedian and film star, W. C. Fields, could trace his ancestry to the small town of Dukinfield in Tameside.

Even more bizarre is the thought that this gin-guzzling, anti-establishment and eccentric icon of pre and post-war Hollywood should be linked to nobility.

Apparently, Fields - real name William Charles Dukenfield - was the great, great grandson of Lord Dukinfield of Cheshire.

What is definite is the slight alteration in the spelling of the family's surname, from Dukinfield to Dukenfield. It happened when the family emigrated from Britain to Philadelphia, the city where Fields was born and with which he had a love-hate relationship all his life.

The great comic's one-liners are still legendary, and usually have a twist to them. His classic: "I'd rather die than go to Philadelphia" was in effect a build-up to the punch-line on his deathbed: "You know, on second thoughts, I'd rather go to Philadelphia."

With his bright-red bulbous nose - a product of too much alcohol; his witty expressions and acid asides; his immaculate timing and his nonchalant, couldn't-care-less delivery, Fields was a character who superficially repulsed good, understanding folk. In fact, he quite appealed to them for his honest and forthright appraisal of situations and his astute observations.

In historic Philadelphia, barely seven hours flight direct



WIT The great American comic and eccentric WC Fields

from Manchester, the only testimony to Fields is a small street sign outside the city-centre shop where he worked as a young man.

But if the sign seems unworthy recognition of this silver screen legend, his expressions are still live currency in this vibrant US city. Many of his one-liners relate to drink, a theme which made him famous and which he perpetuated, almost as a trademark.

"A man's got to believe in something and I believe I'll have another drink," is one of the classics, delivered in that characteristic slow drawl.

His capacity for gin and vermouth was as legendary as his wit. While filming, he carried round a silver flask, on which were engraved the unlikely words Pineapple Juice. When a weary director ordered a hired hand to pour away the neat spirit and replace it up with real pineapple juice, the unaware Fields took a mouthful, spat it out theatrically and

observed: "Somebody has put pineapple juice in my pineapple juice."

One of his tricks was to take an everyday homily and add a pithy comment to the end, as in: "Start your day with a smile . . . and get it over with." Or: "A thing worth having is a thing worth cheating for." His cynicism made people squirm and laugh at the same time, as with: "I'm free of all prejudice. I hate everyone equally." Then there's: "If at first you don't succeed, quit. There's no use being a damn fool about it."

His apparent misanthropic approach, particularly his comments about women, were carefully contrived and equally carefully constructed, such as: "It was a beautiful blond who drove me to drink . . . and I never got the chance to thank her."

In his younger days, Fields was an accomplished juggler and became quite a celebrity on the world stage, appearing in London, Paris and New York. He was the son of Jim Dukinfield, who had emigrated to America with his father John, leaving behind the

family's comb-making business, which Fields' grandfather set up in Sheffield after moving there from Dukinfield.

Fields claimed his upbringing in Philadelphia was tough, with his father taking to drink as he drifted from job to job. Certainly, young Bill, as he was known, left home at 18 to hone his act as an eccentric juggler, before transferring to film in the 1930s. Gradually, his cult status grew, culminating in famous film comedies such as *It's a Gift*; *My Little Chickadee*, co-starring Mae West; *The Bank Dick*; *You Can't Cheat An Honest Man*, and *Poppy*. He even played Mr Micawber in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*.

Fields loved odd-sounding words and revelled in slowly enunciating the name of his birthplace Phil-a-del-phi-aaaargh! The drawled ending was a great delight.

Philly, as it's known today, is a delight too and well worth a holiday visit. It's the birthplace of the American Revolution and was its first real capital before the British temporarily re-conquered the city, forcing the United States Congress to shift inland to first Lancaster and then York. Long before Washington DC was even thought of.

History abounds in Philly, the place where Founding Fathers like Benjamin Franklin, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson set up the breakaway United States of America. There's Liberty Bell, the Liberty Bell and Victorian markets to die for. There's cheap shopping too, with no tax on clothes or shoes, a legacy of the city's early Quaker influence. If you want to push out the boat, stay at the swish Rittenhouse Hotel, in its own garden, city-centre square. It's the best, as chosen by Pavarotti himself.

And if you're boxing clever, you can stand on the art gallery steps where Sylvester Stallone filmed *Rocky*. Like Fields, he came from Philly and he was knock-out too, in his own way.

FACT FILE

Manchester - Philadelphia return flight with US Airways - £518.30. usairways.com. Rittenhouse Hotel, Philadelphia - from £135 for a superior room. Philadelphia City Pass - £28 for adults, £19 for children 4 to 12. Offers 50 per cent saving off combined regular admission price of several main attractions (including hop-on, hop-off trolley/bus tour). Car hire from Dollar Rental booked through skycars.com for seven days from £108. Contact: visitpa.com/uk or philadelphiausa.travel and taxfreephilly.com

'I'd rather die than go to Philadelphia. You know, on second thoughts, I'd rather go to Philadelphia'

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