

Before
they were
famous

Gary Barlow

Magic shows, working
men's clubs and Joseph:
how the Take That star
found fame and fortune

'I've always had the X factor'



Gary played Joseph in his last year of primary school



A teenage Gary in award-winning club act Stax with John Tedford

As he skilfully appraises this year's X Factor contestants, it's hard to believe Gary Barlow has ever been anything other than self-assured and successful. But prior to his polished performances as a judge on the show and before he became a boy band icon and bestselling solo artist, Gary was just an ordinary lad living on a council estate,

crippled by shyness yet dreaming of stardom.

He was raised in a modest red brick bungalow in Frodsham, a small market town in Cheshire. Money was tight for the Barlow family. Gary's dad Colin ploughed fields for a local farm and took another job with a fertiliser company to earn extra cash to bring up Gary and his older brother Ian, who's now a builder. Neither

TURN FOR MORE ➔

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his dad nor his mum Marge, a teacher, was musical. In fact, Colin's interests were far more quirky – he bred pigeons in the back garden and used to get Gary to perform magic tricks for his friends when he held his pigeon club evenings.

'My parents never encouraged me to hog the limelight, but I got good enough at the magic for my dad to take me along as the entertainment,' Gary remembers. 'It didn't matter what I was doing

– it was the audience I loved.' As *Now's* exclusive picture shows, during his last year at Weaver Vale Primary School Gary even put on a silk robe to play the lead role in a school production of *Joseph And The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

When he was 11 he started at Frodsham High School, but performing was still Gary's priority. That Christmas his dad bought him a keyboard. It filled his bedroom so Gary barely had space to sleep, but he taught himself to play and within a few weeks he was entertaining locals at the area's working men's clubs with his own songs.

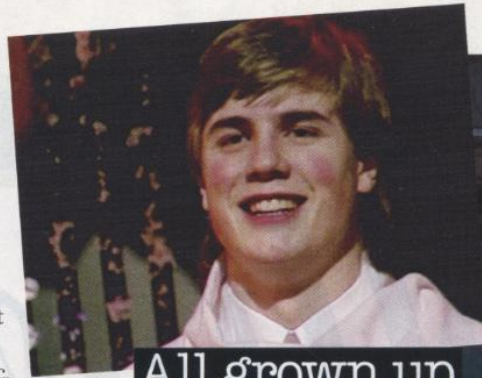
Vicky Mason, 65, a barmaid at Connah's Quay Labour Club in Clwyd, where Gary got his first gig, tells *Now*: 'Gary looked so angelic. His parents would drive him to the club and watch proudly while he played. He did two sets of 45 minutes and would drink coke on draft in between. The club paid him £18 every Saturday. He was obviously very talented. But when he wasn't singing he hardly said a word.'

'I KNEW HE HAD IT FROM THE START'

Gary, now 40, had been booked there after the club's concert manager Norman Hill spotted him at a talent audition. 'Right from the start Norman said Gary would be

famous,' says Vicky. 'But I don't think anyone could have realised just *how* famous. I certainly didn't.'

At 14, Gary left Connah's Quay when he was offered a spot performing at a Royal British Legion club in Runcorn. He did four gigs every weekend, finishing at 2am, and earned around £140 a week. He then joined a group called Stax when their pianist dropped out. Former member John Tedford, 60, says: 'I knew he



All grown up

He's come a long way from the fresh-faced 15-year-old on *A Song For Christmas* (above) to this year with wife Dawn (right).

had it the moment he started playing the piano. He never used to go on stage until he'd rehearsed to make it perfect. After the gig I used to go to the bar and get a pint of bitter but all Gary wanted was a pint of blackberry juice and a bag of pork scratchings.'

Not content with being known locally, Gary entered a BBC Pebble Mill songwriting competition called *A Song For Christmas* in 1986, when he was just 15. He reached the semi-finals, and was rewarded with a recording session at Strawberry Studios in Stockport.

It was there that Gary – who left school with six O Levels – first became friends with Mark Owen. Together with fellow



aspiring pop star Robbie Williams, they formed a pop group called Cutest Rush. The trio caught the attention of Nigel Martin-Smith, an ambitious music manager. He brought Jason Orange and Howard Donald on board and in 1990, when Gary was still only 19, Take That were formed. It wasn't long before the days of back garden magic tricks and working men's clubs were a distant memory.

Words: Antonia Hoyle. Photos: Bigpicturephoto.com, ITV, LFL, Rex Features, Trinity Mirror, WENN

Barlow's body barometer

Like his career, Gary's bod has had its ups and downs



1992

Clean-cut and slim in the early Take That days. What's with that hair, though?



1995

As the end of TT nears, is the stress showing in Gaz's weight?



1996

Chiselled, toned and with a flat tummy, Gary prepares to go it alone...



2004

Eight years and one iffy solo career later, our boy has piled on the pounds



NOW

After TT triumph and X Factor fame, it's no bulk and all buff. Hooray!