

Gwen Farrar and Norah Blaney - an introduction to their lives and careers

By Jeremy Palmer

Of all the Effingham people we are considering in this Exhibition, Gwen Farrar is possibly the only individual who in recent years has become more widely known and admired. This is due to the efforts of Alison Child who first began by performing Gwen and Norah's songs to appreciative audiences, before her research into their lives formed the basis of her book "Tell Me I'm Forgiven - The Story of Forgotten Stars Gwen Farrar and Norah Blaney". Alison has collaborated with the Effingham Local History Group on events which have brought Gwen and Norah's lives to an ever increasing number of people.

This is a short essay to introduce Gwen and Norah to you, so that there is a context for how Gwen Farrar arrived in Effingham in 1934. For much more information on them and on Alison's book, please visit Alison Child's website "[Behind the Lines](#)".

Gwen Farrar was born July 14th, 1897, the third of an eventual six daughters of Sir George Herbert Farrar and Lady Ella Farrar nee Waylen. Sir George had prospered in gold mining activities in South Africa, and during the Boer War would be mentioned in dispatches and awarded the D.S.O. In 1902 he was knighted, and after the Boer War became leader of the opposition in the first Transvaal Parliament. In 1911 he was created Baronet Farrar, for his role in the creation of the Union of South Africa.

During WW1 Sir George was sent to South Africa, but in 1915 while repairing damaged water boreholes, he was killed in a rail accident. Thereafter Lady Farrar returned to the family residence at Chicheley Hall, Buckinghamshire, until her death on Dec 29th 1922 following an accident moving furniture.

Gwen inherited a fortune, albeit a fortune controlled by a trustee, indicating that her father was not confident it would be used wisely. She was educated at an exclusive girls school in Ascot, from which she ran away. She studied classical music and was taught cello by Herbert Walenn, England's leading exponent of the instrument. She also developed a remarkable baritone speaking voice, and a deep, lugubrious singing tone. In January 1917 she qualified with Honours for violoncello playing from the London Royal Academy of Music.

Her soon-to-be partner Norah Blaney was born Norah Mignon Cordwell, on 16 July 1893 in Fulham, taking her stage name Blaney from her maternal grandmother. Her father was an oboist with Sir Henry Wood. As a child she had showed great musical promise, winning scholarships for the piano from the age of 13, and gold medals at the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music. She gave piano recitals as a child, performing abroad in Paris and Belgium, before making her stage debut in 1910. Thus by 1917 Norah had already been performing professionally for a number of years, earning a living through her music and receiving notices of high praise, both for her classical playing and for the comic songs she performed.

She was also married, to the pianist Albert Charles Lyne. They had met when both were part of a concert party in Cliftonville and had married in Thanet in the face of parental disapproval, in late 1914. Albert would serve in the London Regiment (that is, the London Scottish) in the War, until his death in 1918.

By comparison, Gwen had only performed publically in a few concerts in the area around Chicheley. However she had performed at least once on stage with the great tenor Gervase Elwes. Elwes, a close neighbor to Chicheley Hall at Great Billing, had inherited a substantial estate. Though he had trained as a lawyer and diplomat, and spent some years in Brussels, he followed his heart in first taking formal singing lessons and then making his first professional performances in the early 1900s. Gwen might therefore have seen him as a role model for following a musical career ahead of the privileges of an aristocratic life.

Elwes would be instrumental in bringing Gwen and Norah together. He had agreed to lead one of Lena Ashwell's WW1 concert parties, touring the lines in France in mid-June 1917. Ashwell, a pioneering Edwardian actor-manager, believed that bringing music to the troops might offset their suffering at the Front. Norah was already part of the party when Lady Farrar successfully implored him to include troublesome Gwen as well.

Some of Elwes thoughts from the Front were included in the biography written by his widow, including sketches of Gwen and Norah. The following is from June 20th 1917:

Norah Blaney is very amusing and a wonderful pianist, and Miss Farrar is also most entertaining and as clever as can be. She and Miss Blaney make up the young and giddy part of our Company and of course have great fun with the young officers. We call them the bad girls of the family! Miss Farrar and I have dogfights sometimes for the entertainment of the officers when we are dining at their Mess. She can growl excellently and her wounded dog is priceless, so that when we are both doing a dog-fight the noise is really quite life-like...!

("Gervase Elwes" by Winifride Elwes and Richard Elwes, p.251)

Gwen and Norah's partnership began when another of the touring artists, the comedienne Wish Wynne, injured herself. Gwen and Norah paired up to fill in when she could not perform. They seem to have extemporized one of Norah's comic songs, with Gwen clowning around on the stage with her cello. We're told that the watching Tommies loved it, and demanded more.

Returning from the Front, Gwen later recounted what happened in a biographical article from the Sunday Post in 1920. When the Armistice was declared she and Norah had had their own Council of War, at which they decided that based on the audience reaction to them in National Sunday League concerts, they would develop their act in the music halls. If we take this at face value, since we know Norah's first husband Albert had died within a fortnight of the Armistice, it's tempting to wonder whether this played any role in their decision. Norah left us this account:

We came back to England and Gwen and I were such good pals by this time that the thought of parting from each other was almost unbearable. It so happened that I was engaged to sing at the

Palladium at one of the Sunday evening concerts and I asked the manager if I could bring my friend along with me and do a double turn. He didn't like the idea at first but at last I managed to win him over so Gwen came along almost as a bit of a make weight as she afterwards put it and absolutely refused to share my fee although I pressed her to take half. To come to the point quickly we made a wonderful hit and the manager was delighted with us. After the show a Music Hall agent came to see us and told us we must go on the Halls. Gwen said it was a thrilling idea so on the Halls we went and the agent booked us solid for four years.

We know Norah had also moved into Gwen's house at 217 King's Road, now both partners on and off-stage. Although Norah married their theatrical agent, Philip Bruce Barron Durham, in 1922, this was a marriage which showed every indication of having been as stage-managed as the West End productions in which they were starring.

Over the following five years they developed their act, and incorporated many new songs into their repertoire. They mixed highly sentimental numbers with more comedic and satirical fare, full of tongue-in-cheek references to figures of the day, passing fads and social observations. Touring the music halls toughened up and sharpened their act; from here they graduated to brief slots in established revues, then part of the opening cast with an act that rarely drew poor notices. By 1925 they were at the height of their fame, appearing in the highly successful revue "The Punch Bowl" at the Duke of York's Theatre, receiving rave reviews and appearing at all the best parties with the raciest and most fashionable people all across the West End.

They were then brought over to the US by Flo Ziegfeld who wanted to use them in his musical comedy "Going South", with the intention to also include Gwen and Norah in his 1926 Follies in Palm Beach. This was the only one of his Follies not to open on Broadway. But the New York winter tested the health of both women and illness caused them to cancel performances. Florida's climate revived their spirits but Gwen, missing London, left Norah behind and headed home. Norah was furious; she and Gwen would not speak to each other for 2 and a half years, and would not perform their double act again until the end of the 1920s.

It took Norah's flat to be burgled in December 1927 to bring them back together, Norah calling on Gwen for help as her husband, Philip Durham, was mysteriously absent. Because of professional commitments they wouldn't reappear on stage together until they joined the production of "The House that Jack Built" after it transferred to the Winter Garden in 1930. They then opened in Andre Charlot's "Wonder Bar" at the Savoy Theatre in December 1930, a lavish production that intentionally blurred the distinction between the stage area and the audience in its recreation of a Vienna night club.

Their reunion lasted until a little under 2 years. It was dissolved after Norah divorced Philip Durham, became engaged to the Bradford surgeon Basil Hughes and gave up her career on the stage. Their farewell appearance at the London Palladium was reported by the Yorkshire Post on February 15th 1932:

The couple, who presented one of their distinctive double musical turns, were given a tremendous ovation, and Miss Blaney had to make a speech. The house was thronged, and every item by the pair,

who were making the last of thousands of joint appearances, was cheered to the echo. They received many curtain calls and finally came through the tabs to receive handsome bouquets. When silence fell Miss Blaney's speech was short but to the point. "I want to thank you for the wonderful way we have been treated all these years. I now want to say 'Goodbye' and give my love to you all. Bless you, and be as sweet to Gwen as you have been to us both.

Through the 1930s, though Norah was retired from the stage and Gwen's career had taken new directions in theatrical production and supporting roles in movies, they were occasionally reunited either at charity events or in their last recordings from 1935. These recordings occurred while Gwen had taken a country cottage in Effingham, and we look at why and how Gwen might have chosen to live here in a separate presentation elsewhere in this Exhibition.

Meanwhile Norah and Basil were pillars of the Bradford community, Norah even unsuccessfully standing for political office. Gwen and Norah came to national attention once more in 1937, through their joint support for the National Spinsters' Pensions Association, leading a procession of 3000 women across London protesting against inequalities in how women received pensions.

At the outbreak of war Gwen and Norah reunited for a last and brief series of concerts around the Chicheley area, joined by other stars to support the forces. However their intention of travelling to France to entertain the troops was prevented by illness. The last time, as far as we know, that they worked together was for a two-part program on the history of the Coliseum theatre in London, broadcast on the BBC in June 1943. Gwen Farrar died after being admitted to hospital on 25 December 1944.