

Gwen Farrar and the Effingham Theatrical Colony

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The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the musician, revue artist and actor Gwen Farrar's life and career in Surrey. We will look at how the theatrical colony in Effingham formed and how this might have influenced Gwen's decision to lease a cottage in the village. We will examine how Gwen knew members of this group, both before and during her life in Effingham.

Background

In recent years there has been a surge of interest in the revue artist Gwendoline ('Gwen') Farrar. She was born on 14 July 1897, the third of an eventual six daughters of Sir George Herbert Farrar and Lady Ella Farrar née Waylen. Sir George had prospered in gold mining activities in South Africa, and during the Boer War was 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, remaining there until her death on 29 December 1922 following an accident while 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.



Figure 1 Gwen Farrar.

Her soon-to-be partner Norah Blaney was born as 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 late 1914, despite parental disapproval. Albert served in the London Regiment (the London Scottish) in the War, until his death in 1918.

By comparison, Gwen had performed publicly in concerts only in the area around Chicheley. Her earliest appearance as a cellist was in November 1914, performing in a concert raising funds for Belgian refugees at Harrold Hall. She also appeared in a number of concerts with the great tenor (and close neighbour to Chicheley Hall at Great Billing) Gervase Elwes from as early as 1916 (at the Science and Art Institute, Wolverton on 27 April).

Elwes had inherited a substantial estate. Although 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 beginning to perform professionally 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 proved to 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 petitioned Elwes to include the troublesome Gwen as well.

Some of Elwes' thoughts from the Front were included in the biography [*Gervase Elwes* by Winifride Elwes and Richard Elwes, *publ* Grayson & Grayson, 1935] written by his widow, including sketches of Gwen and Norah. The following entry on p251 was dated 20 June 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...!'



Figure 2 Gervase Elwes.

Gwen and Norah's partnership began on a later tour in October/November 1917, when another of the touring artists, the comedienne Wish Wynne, injured herself. This time Gwen and Norah paired up to fill in when Wynne could not perform. They seem to have extemporised one of Norah's comic songs, with Gwen clowning around on the stage with her cello. Evidently the watching Tommies loved it and demanded more.

Returning from the Front, Gwen later recounted what had 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 that Norah's first husband Albert had died within a fortnight of the Armistice – it is tempting to wonder whether this played any role in their decision. Norah left us this account:

'PARTNERS AND PALS

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.'

[*Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, 8 March 1924]

We know that Norah had also moved into Gwen's house at 217 King's Road, so were now partners both on- and off-stage. Although Norah married their theatrical agent, Philip Barron Bruce 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.



Figure 3 Norah and Gwen.

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 performing in the opening casts with an act which 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 partying with the most fashionable people all across the West End.

They were then taken over to the United States by Flo Ziegfeld who wanted to use them in his musical comedy *Going South*, with the intention of also including 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, after arguments over business, Gwen left Norah behind and headed home in March 1926. Norah was furious; she and Gwen did not speak for 18 months and their act did not reunite until the end of the 1920s. Norah restarted her solo career, appearing in musical dramas such as Rudolph Friml's *The Vagabond King* which ran for 480 London performances before touring.

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 their reappearance together on stage was delayed until they joined the production of *The House that Jack Built* after it transferred to the Winter Garden in 1930. They then opened in André Charlot's *Wonder Bar* at the Savoy Theatre in December 1930, a lavish production which intentionally blurred the distinction between the stage area and the audience in its recreation of a Vienna night club.

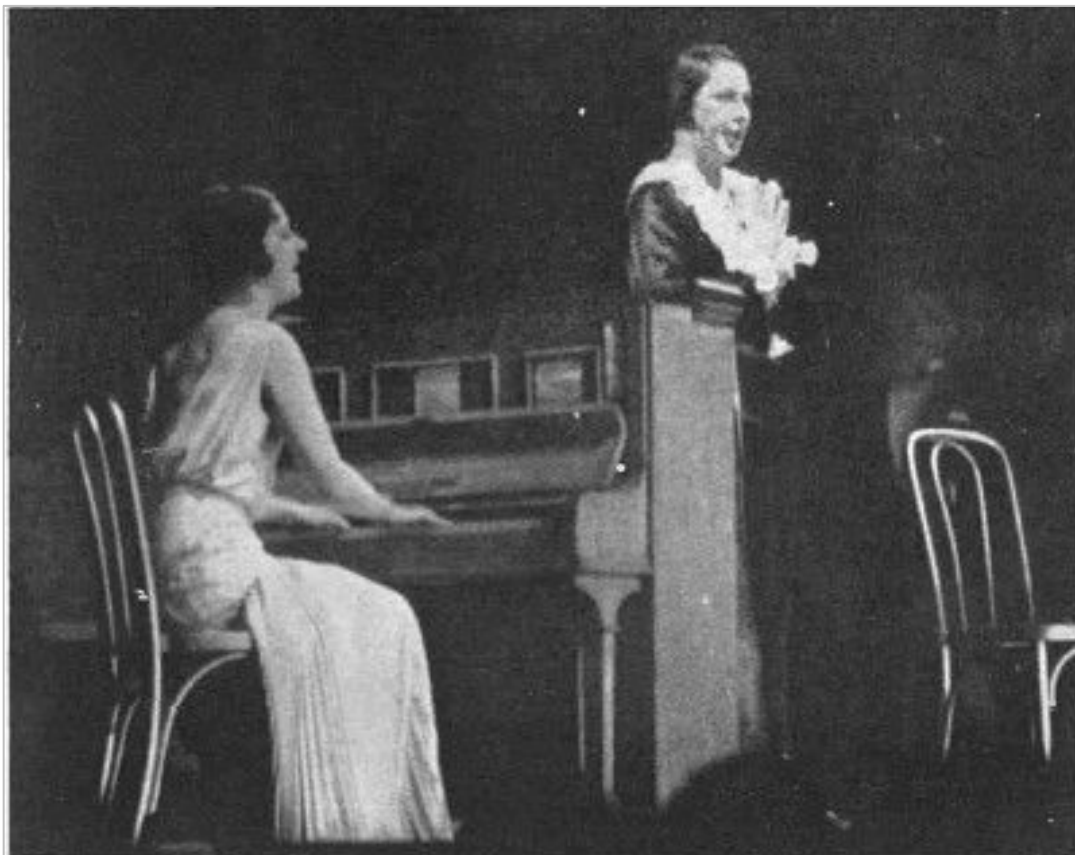
Their reunion lasted until a little under two years. It was dissolved after Norah divorced Philip Durham, became engaged to the Bradford surgeon Basil Hughes and gave up her career on the stage. Their farewell appearance at the London Palladium was reported by *The Yorkshire Post* on 15 February 1932:

"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."



Figure 4 Norah playing the part of Huguette in *The Vagabond King*; *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 28 May 1927.



OLD COMRADES: Miss Norah Blaney and Miss Gwen Farrar have their bright little turn at the piano in this novelty revue. The scene is a Viennese night club whose audience overflows from its own stage into the stalls and cocktail bars

Figure 5 Norah and Gwen in *Wonder Bar*; *The Graphic*, 13 December 1930.

Through the 1930s, although 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 in 1935. These recordings occurred while Gwen had taken a cottage in Effingham, and this article will consider why she might have chosen Effingham for her country retreat as well as her wider connections to Surrey.

Meanwhile Norah and Basil Hughes 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 3,000 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 on the opening episode of a radio series entitled *Vaudeville of 1944*, broadcast on 29 January 1944.

Earliest appearances in Surrey

Gwen's probable earliest public appearances in the Surrey locale can be traced by the charitable concerts in which both she and Norah appeared in the months following their return from the Front in 1917. The *Westerham Herald* of 17 November 1917 reported Gwen's appearance at a 'Variety Sale and Entertainment' at the Hoskins Assembly Room in Oxted, with the other entertainers including André Mangeot, a close friend of future Effingham residents Lady Audrey Hale (née Lewin) Waterhouse and Yvonne Arnaud. A month later, on 16 December, both Gwen and Norah appeared individually in a concert for soldiers held at Godalming Borough Hall, concluding with a comic duet [*West Surrey Times and Surrey Advertiser*, 22 December, 1917]. Norah then performed at the Public Hall, Woking on 20 March 1918 under the auspices of the newly-formed Martinsyde Musical Society [*The West Surrey Times*, 22 March 1918]. This was just days before their double act was – in all likelihood – formally launched at the Richmond Hippodrome as *Nora [sic] Blaney and Somebody Else* [*The Surrey Comet*, 23 March 1918] and staged twice nightly (but far down the bill) for the following week.

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"Razzle-Dazzle" from Drury Lane and Empire Theatres.

Figure 6 Norah and Gwen at the Richmond Hippodrome:
Richmond Herald, 23 March 1918.

Gwen and Norah's first documented visit to the immediate Effingham area was in July 1924, when they performed at a private party held in the nearby parish of Great Bookham at Polesden Lacey, owned by the wealthy socialite Maggie Greville. This engagement was reported in *The Sketch* on 23 July 1924) but Norah also recorded her own memories of the event in conversation with the actor Derek Hunt in the 1970s:

'One night on a Sunday ... we were engaged to go down to Sussex [sic] at a place called Polesden Lacey which was owned by a rich American widow called The Honourable Mrs Ronnie Greville, and we were engaged to go down and entertain at a house party. And we went down and there was a room put to the side for the artists you see, and champagne, sandwiches and so on...so we started getting ready, Gwen started tuning up the cello and all the rest of it, and we heard gasps and groans and up the stairs came a gentleman who'd just been performing to the party, and it was no other than dear Will Fyfe! And he was sweating like a pig. He said "Oooh girls I wish you luck...I sang me guts out to them and never got so much as a titter!" Before we went to them, we said to him "Who's there and how many?" He said "I counted 8 gold chairs and 8 people. That was all". I said "Who?". "Well," he said, "there's our hostess who's paying your fee and my fee, and the Queen of Spain, Queen Ena, and Prince and Princess Arthur of Connaught." So down we went, sang our songs and not a titter! Nods of approval and one or two little half-smiles, you see... and when we finished Ronnie Greville came up and said "Her Majesty would very much like you to be presented to her. So we went up, did our curtsy and the Queen said "I very much enjoyed your performance." And we thought "You liar!" However that was that.'

Other theatrical people in Effingham

Certain friends in Gwen's theatrical circles had already discovered the village's charms, principally her close friend, the singer, dancer and celebrity Teddie Gerard, who owned a property named Orchard Cottage on Effingham Common. The earliest documented date for which we can be reasonably sure that she was there is Friday 24 August 1923, as the diarist Una Troubridge mentions a visit to Teddie's cottage for 'tea, dinner and a wet walk across country' [*Canadiana Heritage* website, Lovat Dickson fonds H-1196, digitised image 1491]. That her cottage was in Effingham is confirmed in the entry for 16 September when Una noted a visit from Teddie's to the 'Hut' for lunch, this being the Hut Hotel in Wisley, on the Portsmouth Road. A month later, information about Teddie's country retreat appeared in newspaper articles concerning a motoring accident she had suffered on the way to Cobham ['Miss Teddie Gerard Motor Smash', *London Daily Chronicle*, 19 October 1923]. Gwen appears in the Troubridge diaries, but only within the context of the London social scene.

Although Teddie Gerard was established in Effingham, it seems to have taken until 1928 for others from the theatrical community to discover the village. An article *About Plays and Players* by Bernard Buckham [*Daily Mirror*, 15 August 1928] reported that the great theatrical impresario Charles Blake Cochran was based in Effingham for the summer, combining pleasure and work:

'A Surrey Retreat – "This is a nice place to work in," says C B Cochran, writing me from Effingham. "Today I have Doris Zinkeisen here conferring with Marjorie Moss and George Fontana and self as to costumes and décor for a new dance scena which they will do in the American production of "This Year of Grace." They will also do the Blue Danube waltz now done at the Pavilion by Jack Holland and Jean Barry."'

A month later Buckham [*Daily Mirror*, 12 September 1928] checked in again on Cochran, still in Effingham where he was now working with M Saint-Granier, a French actor, singer, author and producer; in this article he compared Saint-Granier to Cole Porter who in turn was to write the music for the new revue being worked on. Where Cochran was staying was revealed a week later – Lower Farm, off Effingham Common Road – with a parade of photographs (see Figure 7) of his famous friends relaxing in its gardens [*The Sketch*, 19 September 1928].

The revue that Cochran and Saint-Granier had been working on may have been *Wake Up and Dance* which opened on 27 March 1929 at the London Pavilion and starred, among others, Sonnie Hale and Tillie Losch (as pictured in the article) with music and lyrics by Cole Porter.

One individual shown in the photographs possibly casts light on why the Cochrans had come to Effingham. Mrs. Roger Pilkington, described as 'The Photographer of this Page' was hitherto known as Heather Louise Forster Chapman. She was a significant presence amongst the Bright Young People, well-known for driving the streets of Kensington and Chelsea in a large sports car with a Dalmatian dog secured in the passenger seat. Heather hailed from a relatively undistinguished background but by 1925 seems to have become a favourite and lover of the Standard Oil heiress Joe Carstairs. Possibly as a cover for her potentially scandalous dalliance, Heather married Sir Roger Pilkington in January 1927. Although this was a conventional enough ploy, it was to go terribly wrong when the artist John Wells' striking portrait entitled *Mrs Roger Pilkington* became the star of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. Unfortunately the sitter for

the portrait was Roger Pilkington's mistress, Cora Chambers, not his real wife Heather. When this came to light, Heather had no option but to sue for divorce, the *decree nisi* being granted a few weeks after the Effingham photographs appeared. Possibly these photos were the first shots in a prolonged reclamation of her identity; Heather continued to call herself Mrs Roger Pilkington for the rest of her life, becoming one of the prime party hostesses for the Bright Young People and hosting some of the most notorious and eagerly reported events of the time.

578 *The Sketch* Sept. 19, 1928



A PEACEFUL INTERLUDE: MISS NANCY BARNETT (ONE OF COCHRAN'S YOUNG LADIES), MRS. CHARLES COCHRAN, AND MRS. WILLIAM MOLLISON (FORMERLY MISS JOAN CLARKSON).



THE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THIS PAGE: MRS. ROGER PILKINGTON AND FRIENDS.



PRODUCER AND CRITIC "OFF DUTY": MR. C. B. COCHRAN AND MR. PHILIP PAGE.



PYJAMAS AND A "PEKE": MRS. COCHRAN WITH MRS. WILLIAM MOLLISON, AND THE PEKINGESE "YOUNG WOODLEY."



DANCE, DANCE, DANCE, LITTLE LADIES! MISS TILLY LOSCH AND MISS LAURI DEVINE.



THIS FOR A HALF: MR. SONNIE HALE AND MISS BARNETT AT CLOCK GOLF.

Mr. Charles Cochran, who is known as "the world's greatest showman," spent a well-earned holiday this summer with Mrs. Cochran at Lower Farm, Effingham, Surrey. Mr. and Mrs. Cochran are famous for their hospitality, and a great many people, especially those who have made "This Year of Grace" so famous for its galaxy of beauty and talent, found themselves in this delightful spot.—Miss Nancy Barnett is one of Mr. Cochran's Young Ladies in his latest success at the Pavilion.—Mrs. William Mollison was formerly Miss Joan Clarkson, who first appeared in "The Gold-Diggers," where she met her husband, the well-known producer. They were married quite recently.—Miss Tilly Losch and Miss Lauri Devine are both particularly bright stars in Noel Coward's revue. Their dancing is marvellous.—Sonnies Hale, who is the husband of Evelyn Laye, is also a man of many parts in the same production.—Mr. Philip Page is a distinguished dramatic and musical critic.

GRACES FROM "THIS YEAR OF GRACE" ON HOLIDAY.

Figure 7 Friends of Charles Blake Cochran at Lower Farm: *The Sketch*, 19 September 1928.

Heather's intimate involvement in Joe Carstairs' set also linked her into the Bohemian and lesbian circles of Chelsea in which Gwen and Teddie Gerard moved. Heather was a close friend of Cochran's wife Evelyn Alice and so it is reasonable to hypothesise that, acting on information from Teddie, she suggested Lower Farm as a working holiday location for the Cochrans.

Lower Farm was occupied from 1927 to 1930 by Joseph Pearman Smith and his wife Marjorie Jean Illesley. Joseph Pearman Smith's trade in the 1921 Census and in the 1939 National Register is described as that of export and import merchant. No known connection between the Pearman Smiths and Cochran has so far emerged. It is possible that Lower Farm was vacated for periods by the Pearman Smiths and their four children, allowing Cochran full use of the house. From a later *Country Life* advertisement we can gain some idea of the size of the property as it had been in the late 1920s:

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FINE OPEN POSITION



An imposing modern Country House with pleasing brick elevations. Architect-designed and first time on the market.

Spacious hall, 3 reception rooms, 4 principal and 3 secondary bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, cloakroom, kitchen.

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FOR SALE BY PRIVATE TREATY OR AUCTION LATER

CURITT & WEST, Effingham Office. (E.98)

Figure 8 Lower Farm for sale: *Country Life*, 16 August 1956.

Seven bedrooms would have been required to accommodate the Cochrans and all their visitors. Cochran returned to Effingham in 1929. In *The Diary of a Man About Town* [*Daily Chronicle*, 27 August 1929], the writer 'Quex' reported a somewhat circuitous return to Lower Farm:

'Some time after 1am on Saturday morning Mr. C B Cochran and I left London and motored into Surrey towards Shere, a show-place of rural loveliness, and through a succession of hedge-lined lanes and sleeping villages until we came to Effingham, and turned off the road towards a farmhouse with stables and a duck-pond and an old-world garden, and a Wendy house for children... It was the country retreat that Mr. and Mrs. Cochran have found for themselves during the summer months; and on Sunday afternoons receive visits from the friends.'

Visitors this year included Archibald 'Arch' Selwyn, an American theater owner and stage producer, who had taken a number of Cochran's West End successes over to Broadway in the 1920s, and his brother Edgar who also worked in Hollywood as a screenwriter, producer and director. Tilly Losch was back again; Quex recounted a walk with her in his column of 19 September:

'One day this summer, at Mr. and Mrs. Cochran's country house at Effingham, Miss Tilly Losch, who now ranks as one of the leaders of the ballet at the Vienna Opera House, surprised me by her liking for long walks. We set out for a short stroll across country; it extended to miles.'

On the way back we called at a village inn. The signboard bore the name "Douglas Haig" and the landlady informed me that she was psychic. She had been told at a séance that she would keep an inn that was named in memory of a great soldier.

She said that her spirit messages came from Joey Grimaldi, the Sadlers Wells clown. She showed me an excellent coloured etching of that famous character. I learned afterwards that it was the gift of Mr. Cochran, who bought the drawing for her after he had heard her story.'

The licensee of *The Sir Douglas Haig Hotel* in Effingham was at this time Albert Frederick Froud, with his wife Catherine Emily, who relinquished the licence after Albert's death in April 1935. Two days later Quex expanded on his Effingham observations, writing in his article *Surrey Theatrical Colony*:

'The other day I mentioned the tucked-away Surrey village of Effingham and the farmhouse where for two years in succession Mr. and Mrs. C B Cochran have spent the summer. Other theatrical folk have settled there too.

Miss Teddie Gerard has a house and small estate in the neighbourhood. In the winter, when she goes to her villa in Capri, a bailiff looks after it for her. Miss Celia Glynne and Miss Betty Chester share a cottage not far away, and Miss Clarice Hardwicke has also become a local inhabitant.'

Given the temporary nature of their residences it has not been possible to identify exactly where these three actresses were staying. Teddie Gerard had worked for Cochran, replacing Alice Delysia for a month in *As You Were* in June 1919, followed by *The Eclipse* at the Garrick. Betty Chester had worked alongside Gwen in *White Birds*, which had opened at His Majesty's Theatre on 31 May 1927. (Curiously, Gwen's partner in financing the profligate disaster that *White Birds* became was Ernest Everard Gates, son and only heir to the fortune acquired by his father, the Bradford mill owner Ernest Henry Gates. Ernest Henry was the second child born to an Effingham family, whose previous two generations had lived around Effingham and Little Bookham, working as labourers and bricklayers. Ernest Henry's grandparents, Henry and Sarah, were buried in St Lawrence churchyard in the 1860s. Ernest Everard eventually returned to Surrey, living in Hascombe and then at a property named Hurtwood House, near to the Windmill Inn on Pitch Hill above Ewhurst).

A month after Quex's ramble with Tilly we can finally place Gwen in Effingham for the first time, thanks to another diary-writer of the age, the photographer Barbara Ker Seymer. In her diary for 12 October 1929 she writes:

'... motor down to Teddie Gerard weekend, Gwen Farrar and Olivia'

'Olivia' was Olivia Wyndham, a society photographer whose studio Barbara Ker Seymer took over once Wyndham had departed for America. She and Gwen shared many close friends, and to differing degrees circulated within the Bright Young People scene.

Although Gwen was not living in Effingham at this time, there is some evidence that Grove Paddock was not the first cottage she had leased. However, locating Gwen's 'other' country retreats is as difficult as pinpointing where other theatrical people lived in the Effingham area. Chronologically the probable first location was revealed in an article written by Betty Kirby-Green entitled *Chorus Girl to Air Heroine* [*Sunday Post*, 28 November 1937]. Betty recalled Gwen and Norah taking a cottage adjacent to the Links Hotel at Thurlestone (owned by Betty's father) on the South Devon coast. In this case Norah's mother, Molly Cordwell, was also installed in the cottage, and struck up a friendship with Betty's mother. The early 1920s is a best guess for this occupation; the cottage was probably used as a bolt-hole from the London scene to allow Gwen and Norah to work on new material. The same may have been true for a cottage they are alleged to have taken in West End, Esher, probably around the time of their reunion in 1929 or 1930. The earliest mention of this is in an article by 'Bystander' [*Esher News and Mail*, 27 June 1974] entitled *Esher: Art Centre* where the author asserts:

'Gwen Farrar and Norah Blaney lived for a time at The Chequers, West End.'

The Chequers, once a pub, still exists as a house. In later articles on the same subject, it is mentioned that Carl Brisson, a Danish film actor and singer, had also lived there. Gwen and Norah appeared with Brisson in *Wonder Bar* (Savoy Theatre, 1930 into 1931), so this may provide an approximate date for when they took occupation. In 1932 and 1933 Gwen was pictured firstly at Hurst Park Racecourse in West Molesey and then at Sandown Racecourse with her temporary musical partner Rex Evans; both these places were within convenient reach of Esher. Finally, in Gwen's small archive at Talton Lodge there is a colour painting of a cosy living room, inscribed on the reverse in one hand with 'Painted by Gwen Farrar' and in another hand with 'Her cottage at Hassocks Sussex 1940 – 1945'. No trace has ever been found of this cottage.

Gwen in Effingham

By 1934 Gwen's life and career were moving in new directions. Norah had retired from the stage following her wedding to the Bradford surgeon, Basil Hughes, in February 1932. Gwen had not retired but had not been seen in a London revue since *After Dinner* in October 1932, which had opened and closed in the West End within a week. Her quest to find a musical partner to replace Norah was one that would remain unfulfilled throughout the 1930s. Hence the move to Effingham also coincided with Gwen branching into new forms of entertainment, such as supporting roles in British movies beginning with *She Shall Have Music* in 1935, as well as occasionally producing and directing plays in London. In July 1934 she let out her house at 217 Kings Road to Benn Wolfe Levy, a playwright and screenwriter, and his wife the American actress Constance Cummings, who in time would build their own, starkly modern house in Old Church Street. Gwen meanwhile toured her act with Rex Evans through the summer months.

Gwen's residency in Effingham officially began when she signed a lease on a property named Grove Paddock (also referred to as Grove Paddocks and Groveside) beginning on 14 June 1934.

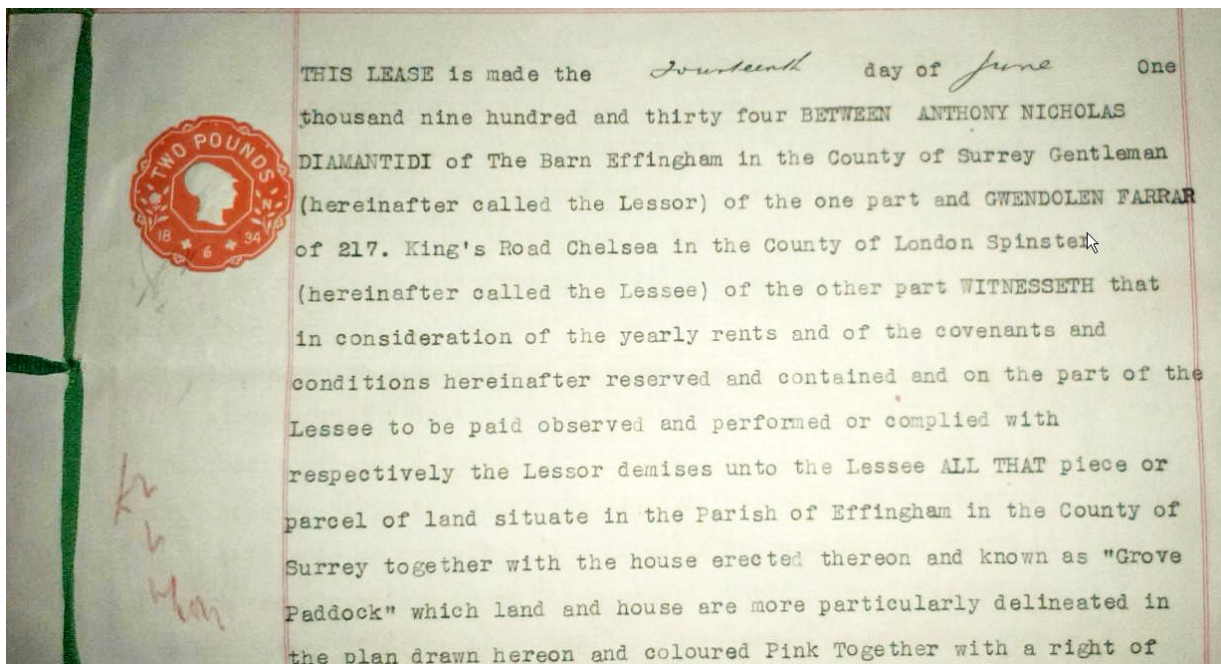


Figure 9 The start of Gwen's lease on Grove Paddock, 14 June 1934.

Grove Paddock was both a new and an old house, one of three attractive properties relocated from their original sites to Effingham by the property developer Anthony Nicholas Diamantidi. Grove Paddock was built on land to the north-east of Diamantidi's property Grove House which in turn was situated opposite the recently established Effingham Manor Golf Club. It is not known if Gwen was a member of the Golf Club although we do know that friends of Gwen from the Stage Golfing Society had played matches at the Club as recently as 1931 and 1932. The Club did have a Ladies section; for example caricatures published in *Tatler* from 17 October 1934 show a Mrs Donovan as the 'Lady Captain' and the author states they have '120 members of the gentle sex'.

Grove Paddock, when Diamantidi was advertising both it and his main house The Grove (in *The Surrey Advertiser* from 24 September 1937 and later in national newspapers), was described as

'A Charming Cottage Residence and Gardens of over an acre. Let on lease.'

being offered for private sale or, failing that, sale at auction by Hampton and Sons on 16 November. Evidently it did not sell, as *The Observer* of 14 November mentioned both properties were to be auctioned, adding that Grove Paddock's lease was worth £180 pa.

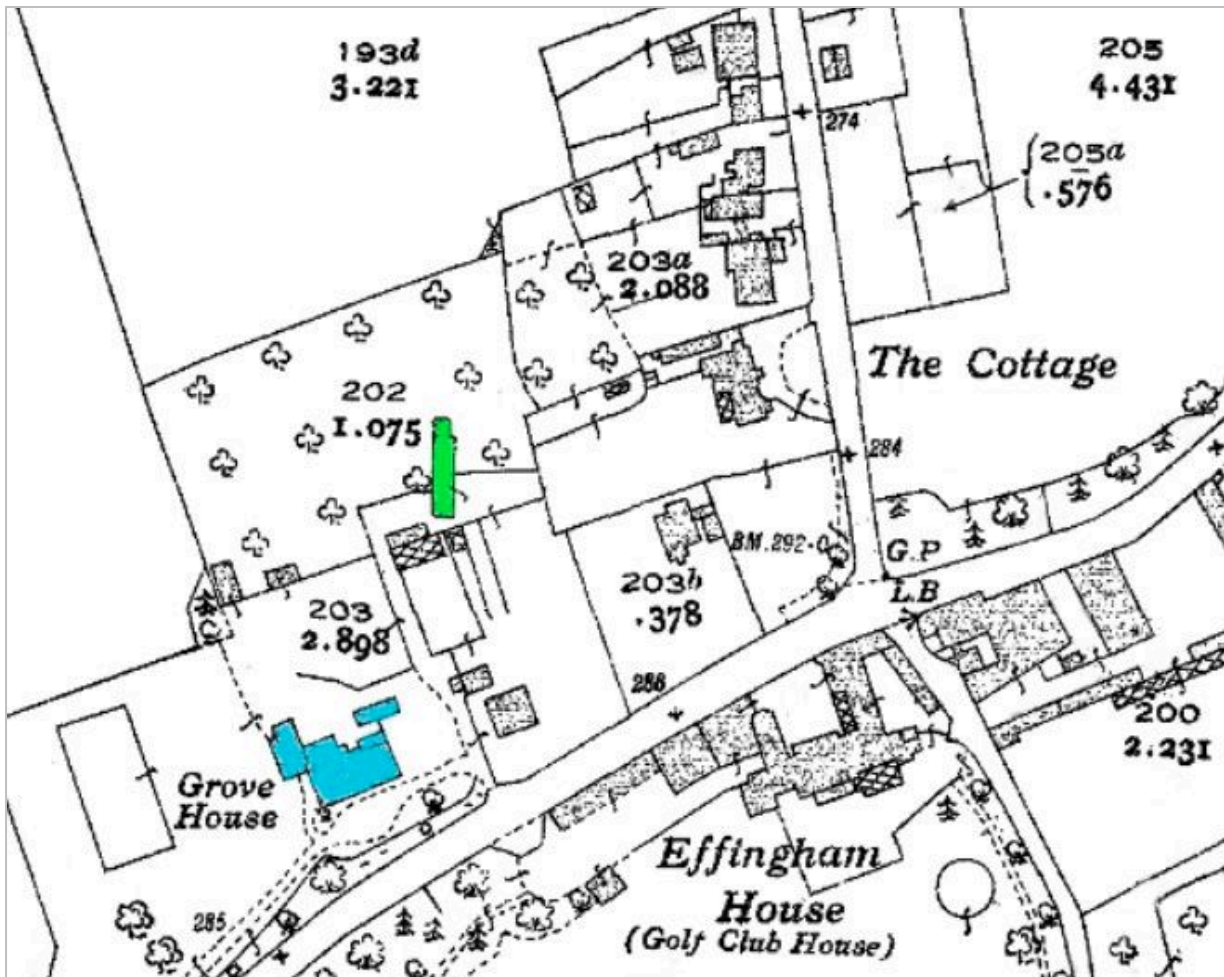


Figure 10 OS map of Effingham in 1934 showing Grove Paddock (green) and Grove House (blue).

The Gwen Farrar archive contains a number of undated photographs and among them are a few which were taken in the garden of Grove Paddock.



Figure 11 Relaxing around the swimming pool at Grove Paddock.

Figure 11 shows a party relaxing around Grove Paddock's swimming pool, a feature which, with the stone bench on the far side, survives to this day. The bench was originally complemented with a stone table, which is seen here being used for *ad hoc* seating at the opposite end of the pool, closest to the house. The woman lying by the pool on the right of the photo might be Teddie Gerard; she had arrived on the *SS Hakoziaki Maru* bound from Yokohama to London, stopping off at Naples and arriving in London on 17 June, three days after Gwen had signed the lease. She travelled as 'Mrs T M Gerard' and it seems too much of a coincidence that she would return from her villa on Capri just as Gwen was moving to Effingham. This might imply that the party was held in the second half of June 1934. Teddie returned to Naples on 10 August.

The scene in Figure 12 looks like a house-warming party for Grove Paddock; the garden is generally rather unkempt, although the saplings appear newly planted and staked. The guests are seated on a motley collection of chairs, making do where they can.



Figure 12 Gwen's guests at Grove Paddock.

Figure 12 shows that Gwen's guests included Audrey Carten (seated in the lower left corner), playwright and one of Gwen's closest friends. Audrey would later begin a lifelong relationship with Caroline Paget, eldest child of Charles Paget the 6th Marquis of Anglesey, muse of Rex Whistler and much photographed by Cecil Beaton. Gwen had previously written revue sketches with Audrey, as well as producing the play *Gay Love* written by Audrey and her sister Waveney at the Lyric in March 1933. The man seated on the stool behind Audrey is possibly Rex Evans. Gwen's musical partnership with Rex Evans, pianist, raconteur, actor, and later an art gallery owner in Los Angeles, was especially busy with shows in July and August 1934. Their musical partnership lasted from July through to early October, and seems to have encompassed shows in London, Liverpool and Edinburgh. Gwen's friendship with Rex Evans went back to the early 1930s, which may explain why their musical partnership proved more durable than other musical partners she had tried such as Anne Denys/De Nys and Edward Cooper.

It has not been possible to make more than tentative identifications of Gwen's other guests. However it is worth pointing out that the woman seated on the stone table in Figure 11 and looking down is wearing a sandal with a white toe cap and a black strap running along the centre of the shoe. This shoe appears also beneath the table seen in Figure 12, so we can be reasonably confident that the wearer is the same person in both photos. The two men, from what we can see of their clothing, also appear in both photographs. Lastly, we can see Gwen Farrar herself in Figure 11, leaning forward behind the seated man on the left. She is wearing a light tan blouse, which also suggests she is the 'arm' seen on the far left side of Figure 12. If this is correct then it suggests that both of these photos were taken by one unknown person, possibly using Gwen's camera. Thus there are four people who appear in both photographs, leaving possibly Teddie Gerard also in Figure 11 and the woman sat at the table and holding a drinking glass in Figure 12.

That Audrey Carten was present might suggest that her sister and writing partner Waveney was also at the party. Waveney had married the wealthy Russian art, fur and horse trader Vladimir Provatoroff in 1932. However, neither of these two distinctive figures can be seen in these photos, but a third one in Figure 13 may well show Vladimir Provatoroff's mother, Maria Lazarevna Provatoroff.



Figure 13 Perhaps Vladimir Provatoroff's mother, Maria Lazarevna Provatoroff, at Grove Paddock.

However it is not possible to say if this photo was taken on the same day. Another photo in the collection shows the pianist and comic actress Yvonne Arnaud standing outside the entrance porch to Grove Paddock. Arnaud would move to Effingham in the summer of 1937, being long-standing close friends with the Waterhouses, but beyond that there is no evidence she moved in the same professional and social circles as Farrar and Blaney.

The Russian connection is also apparent in the manner by which Gwen probably came to know Grove Paddock's owner, Anthony Diamantidi. This is through his involvement with the Ballet Russes. It is known that dancers from the Ballet Russes were coming down to Grove House for parties in the 1930s. These parties are mentioned by Irina Baronova in her autobiography *Irina: Ballet, Life and Love* [publ Penguin/Viking, 2005]. According to Katherine Sorley-Walters' history of the company, Colonel De Basil – the director of the De Basil Ballets Russes – and his wife Olga Morosova were frequent visitors to the Diamantidis in the 1930s.

One known link from Gwen to the Ballet Russes is via their erstwhile principal dancer, Anton Dolin. He was born in Slinfold, Sussex and had joined Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in 1921. He was also employed in various revues, including Archie de Bear's *The Punch Bowl* (1925) in which Gwen and Norah had leading roles. Dolin and Gwen's professional lives intersected again two years later, in the previously

mentioned short-lived revue *White Birds*. Dolin is shown in Figure 14 with Gwen and Norah, with a reference to the production in which they were starring, *Wonder Bar* at the Savoy Theatre in May 1931.



Figure 14 Anton Dolin and Norah Blaney at far left, Gwen Farrar at far right; *The Sketch*, 6 May 1931.

Finally we also have the eye witness testimony of former Effingham resident Lena Bridger, who mentions Gwen and the Ballet Russes dancers in her oral history:

'In those days Mr Diamantidi lived at Grove House and members of the Russian Ballet visited him and came into the shop. Two actresses Gwen Farrar and Norah Blaney lived at The Paddock... They used to dress up and walk up the village and all sorts of peculiar things.'

Although Lena was mistaken in believing that Norah also lived there, it is understandable as Norah still occasionally worked with Gwen in the 1930s. For example, their last set of recordings was made on 15 February 1935. These comprised two original songs, *Another One Gone* written by Beverley Nichols (another guest and friend of Mrs Greville's at Polesden Lacey) and their finest recording, a unique duet take on *Maybe I'm Wrong Again* by Joe Trent and Jack Bennett. At the same time they recorded two medleys entitled

Old Favourites 1 and *Old Favourites 2*, each featuring snippets of their most famous songs from the 1920s. Norah would later write to the BBC and ask them to not use their 1920s recordings because of the poor quality. These medleys may have been an attempt to capture at least snippets of their songs with improved equipment. Nichols would make his own move to Surrey in 1946, when he bought the Georgian house Merry Hall in Agates Lane, Ashstead.

Both before and after the 1935 recordings, Gwen made appearances in *The Surrey Advertiser* by adding to a lifetime of infrequent but regular motoring infringements:

2 February 1935: Epsom magistrates fined her £1 for driving without a rear light and a further 7s 6d for failing to sign her driving licence.

30 March 1935: she was fined 40s at Epsom Police Court for (again) driving without a rear light, and 10s for (again) failing to sign her driving licence.

Her address on both occasions was given as 'Groveside' Effingham, rather than 'Grove Paddock'.

Another friend from Gwen's life in Kensington and Chelsea, now residing at Norwood Farm on Effingham Common, was Lady Audrey Waterhouse. Gwen had an association with Lady Waterhouse that stretched back to at least 1921. This was an important year for Gwen and Norah's musical act as they would perform in front of royalty at the first Royal Variety Performance in October. Off-stage, Gwen and Norah, together with Lady Waterhouse and a woman named Mrs Dorothy Monteith, at the end of January 1921 opened a venue for young artists named the Chelsea Art Gallery at 91 King's Road. This was in a building described as a Government aeroplane factory and possibly also used by the Aeronautical Inspectorate Division.

The four women converted the building into a teashop and academy, for the purpose of allowing unknown artists to show their work at 5s per canvas. However for the opening, as the newspapers reported, the walls were hung with paintings by famous artists such as CRW Nevinson, Francisco Sancha and Ethelbert White, among others. Lady Waterhouse's role was to design the furnishing scheme, including painting the lampshades and buying the china and curtains. A report in *The Pall Mall Gazette* reported that she wore:

'a lovely printed silk frock with a cherry-red ground and collar and hem of beaver'

The Gallery lasted until at least October 1921 when it advertised an exhibition of 'Ladies Work and Craft' [*The Kensington News & West London Times*, 21 October 1921]. Lady Waterhouse remained a friend of Gwen and Norah, attending Norah's engagement party to Philip Barron Bruce Durham and being among the guests at their subsequent low-key wedding on 7 September 1922.



Figure 15 Dorothy Monteith and Gwen at the Chelsea Art Gallery, 1921.

Completing this home-from-home, the singer, dancer and actress Teddie Gerard had, as mentioned earlier, owned a property named Orchard Cottage on Effingham Common since 1922. Gwen and Teddie had possibly been lovers in the early 1920s, both being part of the scene revolving around Joe Carstairs. There is a collection of intimate photographs, which probably date from this time, in the Gwen Farrar archive showing Gwen and Teddie relaxing together outside an unknown house. We know that their friendship continued into the 1930s, as Norah described her and Gwen visiting a very ill Teddie in Effingham [undated audio conversation with Norah, recorded by Derek Hunt]. Teddie's presence in Effingham was probably the main inspiration behind Gwen's choice to rent Grove Paddock. That said, in the 1930s Teddie was dividing her time between Effingham and her villa on Capri, so Effingham may have suited Gwen for additional other reasons. From 1932 Teddie's address was modified to 'The Bungalow, Orchard Cottage' so she may have downsized into a smaller property within the grounds of Orchard Cottage. Indeed across three auctions in 1936 and 1937 Teddie disposed of the contents of her houses.

Gwen kept the lease on Grove Paddock until 9 May 1938. At this time Diamantidi was in the throes of updating his property portfolio in Effingham; on 14 December 1937 a notable auction of Grove House's contents had taken place. Thereafter Grove House was converted into separate dwellings. Gwen may have seen this as a signal to give up the lease and return to London. At the same time she had begun an affair with Dolly Wilde, niece of Oscar, whose similar talent for barbed wit was diminished by an array of addictions. Dolly, with her various health issues, needed more personal care than Gwen could provide from a country cottage.



Figure 16 Gwen and Dolly in Paris at a bar in the Champs Élysées; *The Tatler*, 3 November 1937.

From August 1938 Grove Paddock was occupied by the motor racing driver Roland Stuart Scott Hebler, who married and raised a family there during the war years. He may have known Gwen through the Brooklands racing driver, Patricia 'Poppy' McOstrich, who had friends in common with Gwen such as the stage mimic Elizabeth Pollock. Hebler had sold his rebuilt Talbot PL4 to McOstrich and her racing partner Geraldine Hedges in 1932, and these women raced it for the next two years.

Gwen's last association with Surrey was producing two plays at the Richmond Theatre, staged in the week commencing 13 December 1937. These were *Someone to Dinner* by Inez Holden and Arthur Reid and *Nothing Ever Happens* by Eda Clarke, with both plays being performed each evening.

Gwen's departure from Effingham saw the slow dispersal of the theatrical colony. Teddie Gerard returned for good from Capri at the start of the war with the same intention of entertaining the troops as Gwen and Norah had done, but died soon after on 31 August 1942. Gwen herself died after being admitted to hospital on 25 December 1944. Lady Waterhouse succumbed to a long illness at Norwood Farm on 7 September 1945, aged 62. Although artists from various disciplines would continue to make Effingham their home, with Gwen and Teddie gone the village must have seemed quieter, with far fewer of the 'peculiar things' that Lena (née Keeling) Bridger seemed to envy while keeping at arm's length.

Today the house Grove Paddock still exists, but renamed as The Paddock and with much of its gardens used for the construction of the Paddock Grove estate. Gwen's house at 217 King's Road Chelsea has also survived, with a surprising amount of its interior recognisable from the time when Gwen lived there. The antiquity of Orchard Cottage and Norwood Farm saved them from development, although this factor did not prevent other very old houses in Effingham from being demolished.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For many years Gwen and Norah's story was lost, eclipsed by those whose music and legends endured from the 1920s, and who forged international careers once the audiences for revue and variety discovered new forms of entertainment. That they were rediscovered is due to the efforts of Alison Child who began the process of uncovering their lives and, with Rosie Wakley, recreating Gwen and Norah's songs on stage. Coincidentally at the same time Effingham Local History Group (ELHG) was beginning its investigations into Effingham's forgotten theatrical colony and this has led to an ongoing collaboration with Alison. She brought Gwen and Norah to a much wider audience with her biography of them *Tell Me I'm Forgiven – The Story of Forgotten Stars Gwen Farrar and Norah Blaney* [publ'Tollington Press, 2019] which was shortlisted for the Polari First Book Prize 2020. Our efforts were given a significant boost by Philip Jones, who living in Norah and Basil's house in Baildon, was intent on researching and publishing his work on their lives. Between us, this continues to generate a huge amount of new information on Gwen and Norah's circle of friends, family, acquaintances and fellow travellers.

Particular thanks must also be extended to the late Sir Andrew Watson, and to Olivia Hatch of Talton Lodge who kindly allowed ELHG to use photographs from the Gwen Farrar archive in this article.