

Winifred Oughton – Renowned Actress and First President of Effingham Junction Women's Institute

JEREMY PALMER

Winifred Oughton was another of the very fine actors, such as Yvonne Arnaud, Beatrix Thomson and Andrea Malandrinos, who lived in or near Effingham for significant periods of their lives. Winifred took up residence at Effingham Junction in 1934 and lived there for thirty years until her death. Noted early in her career for her roles in Shakespeare's plays, she went on to display a high degree of versatility in other roles besides becoming a well regarded teacher at RADA.

Early life

Winifred Oughton was a noted character actress and stage teacher who lived at Effingham Junction for thirty years, and was also a founder member of the Effingham Junction Women's Institute.

Annie Winifred Oughton (her full name) was born in 1890 in Camberwell to Anna Maria (née Edwards) Oughton and David Oughton who had married on 16 February 1889 at St Paul's Church in Forest Hill. David was described in the 1891 census as an importer and clerk. The family was then living at 10, Selwyn Terrace in Dulwich.

Winifred may have acquired her passion for the theatre from her father. From around 1885 David was involved in acting in and producing amateur dramatic performances around Brighton and, later on, in South London. The advertisement in Figure 1 from 1890 mentions David Oughton of 10, Selwyn Terrace as a Business and Stage Manager associated with amateur dramatic productions. His stage manager role continued through the 1890s. By 1897 he was working as a Stage Manager at the Reading County Theatre, but thereafter he disappears from the records, to the point where in 1899 his address was being urgently sought by Houghton's Dramatic Agency in Waterloo.

He was also missing from the Oughton household in the 1901 census where we find Anna Maria and Winifred living with Anna's father, Edward Tickner Edwards, in Camberwell.

Theatrical career

At the time of the 1911 Census Winifred was living with two aunts in Fulham, her occupation given as a student in training at Hereford College.

Her theatrical career began in 1915 with a walk-on part in *The Merchant of Venice* at the Old Vic. Her first notice seems to have been from 6 March 1918 when her portrayal of First Gentleman in *Cymbeline*, which starred Sybil Thorndike at the Old Vic, was described as 'quite pleasing'. She remained in the company for

Opera Theatre,
CRYSTAL PALACE

Monday Evening, April 28, 1890,

MISS BLANCHE GREY'S

FOURTH ANNUAL AMATEUR

Dramatic Performance,

In Aid of the Funds of the
NORWOOD COTTAGE HOSPITAL,

PLOT & PASSION

The late Tom Taylor's Celebrated Drama, will be
acted, **PRECEDED BY A FARCE.**

Tickets 5s. (dress optional), 3s. 6d., 2s. 6d., 1s. 6d., 1s.,
including Admission to Palace after 6.30 p.m.

Tickets and Particulars from Miss Blanche Grey,
Grecian Villa, Beulah Hill, Norwood; and the
Business and Stage Manager, Mr. David Oughton
H. Marco, 10, Selwyn Terrace, Upper Norwood.

Further Particulars shortly.

Figure 1 From the *Norwood News*, 29 March 1890.

five years, being noted for playing male roles such as Artemidorus in *Julius Caesar* while the War continued and then – at the Old Vic’s reopening in October 1919 – as Mistress Quickly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Her first real notice in a widely read publication arose for her playing the title role in the farce *Aunt Maria* at the Royal Theatre, Leamington. An issue of *The Stage* published on 26 May 1921 commented that:

‘Miss Winifred Oughton gave an excellent performance of the title role and displayed the versatility demanded by the part.’

She does not seem to have attracted any in-depth reviews during the 1920s, probably because either she was cast in supporting roles or else was playing lead roles but only in productions touring the provinces. By the end of the decade she was becoming a character actor known for playing fierce spinsters and landladies. For example, in the newspaper *Truth* (issue of Wednesday 30 July 1930) her role in Rodney Ackland’s *Dance with No Music* was mentioned as follows:

‘A too brief glimpse of Winifred Oughton gives us a landlady not of the stage but of any digs in which impecunious bachelors have ever languished.’

Electoral Registers show that Winifred and her mother Anna Maria resided at 148, Mitre Street in Norwood from 1929 up to 1934. In 1934 Winifred moved to a house named Hathaway in Surrey Gardens, Effingham Junction, joined by her mother from 1937. In the 1939 Register Winifred describes herself as an ‘Actress Straight plays and films’, with her mother doing unpaid domestic duties. The pair continued living in Hathaway during the War, until Anna Maria’s death in the second quarter of 1945. Winifred would remain at Hathaway until her death in 1964.

She appeared with other Effingham-based actors on a number of occasions. In June 1926 she and Beatrix Thomson were in *The Years Between* at The Everyman Theatre in Hampstead. She was joined in Effingham by her great friend Yvonne Arnaud in 1937. Winifred had first acted with Yvonne Arnaud in J B Fagan’s *The Improper Duchess* (1930), taking the role of Gunning. *The Stage* (issue of 15 January 1931) described her thus:

‘Miss Winifred Oughton as the English maid of uncertain age was typically English against so much that was American.’

Another Effingham resident actor, Andrea Basil Malandrinis, also appeared in this play. *The Improper Duchess* was a substantial success enjoying a run of 348 performances over 10 months at The Globe. The three Effingham actors then continued in a revival of the same author’s *And So To Bed*.

Winifred’s role in *The Improper Duchess* was also the first one for which she appeared in cast photos in the leading theatre papers, such as *The Sketch* on 11 February 1931 (Figure 3). She was also depicted in cartoon form with Andrea Malandrinis in *The Bystander* on 4 February 1931 (Figure 4).

From 1930 she began to appear in British films, maintaining a career as a character actor on the screen until 1950. Figure 5 shows her in a typical housekeeper role in the 1932 film *There Goes the Bride*, a British farce directed by Albert de Courville and notable for giving David Niven his first, uncredited screen role.

From at least as early as 1923 she was also interested in teaching drama. She had a particular connection with schools in Gloucester, working with Ribston Hall High School for Girls on a production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1923), *Twelfth Night* (March 1925) and *The Merchant of Venice* (1927). From 1930 she was a director of the Schools Theatre, an organisation associated with the Old Vic whose purpose was to bring professional actors into schools to help in productions, as she herself had already been doing.

Her work with the Schools Theatre extended to giving public lectures and demonstrations across the South of England. She seems to have ended her involvement with the Schools Theatre by 1935 when besides her acting career she became a teacher at RADA, this coinciding with her move to Effingham from South London.

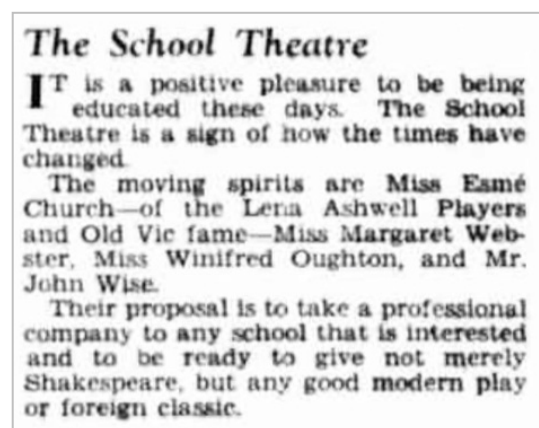


Figure 2 Oughton and the Schools Theatre, from the *Daily Herald*, 30 April 1930.



Figure 3 Arnaud and Oughton in *The Improper Duchess*, 1931.



Figure 4 With Malandrinos in *The Improper Duchess*.



Figure 5 Oughton in *There goes the Bride*; from *The Sphere*, 12 November 1932.

We have been left some account of Winifred's teaching methods. She was known for insisting on exceptionally high standards. The actor David Weston in his autobiography *Covering Shakespeare* recounts being taught by her at RADA in 1957:

'We were directed by a ferocious, hunch-backed old woman called Winifred Oughton. "You'd better learn to type, dear," was one of her kinder comments to the girls, many of whom she reduced to tears. She was obviously not impressed by my attempts at virility – standing legs apart with my hands on my hips ... Her report at the end of the year, when I went off to do my National Service, was brief and to the point: "Good luck David, and come back to us a man".'

Her demands were not limited to young people hoping to become professional actors. Michael Waller, brought up in Effingham during the War, recalls:

'My sister was involved with amateur dramatics at the Rowland Lubbock Memorial Hall under the guidance of Winifred Oughton, who it seems was quite demanding, requiring high standards. My sister returned home after rehearsals quite emotionally drained.'

By the mid-1930s she was well-established as the actor of choice for acerbic older women. A notable example was in *Grief Goes Over* at The Globe in June 1935 for which the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* (14 June 1935) proclaimed:

'Perhaps the most real character in the play is an uncomfortable old aunt, perfectly played by Miss Winifred Oughton.'

In 1941 she again starred with Yvonne Arnaud in Margery Sharp's *The Nutmeg Tree* at The Lyric, this time playing Arnaud's devoted Cockney maid Griffin; Figure 6 shows her (at left) in a scene from this production.



Figure 6 Oughton (at left) in *The Nutmeg Tree*, from *The Bystander*, 8 October 1941.

In the early part of the War she was also highly active in the Effingham Women's Institute and when that organisation split into two entities she served as the first President of the Effingham Junction Women's Institute. The latter met at the Rowland Lubbock Hall in Effingham Junction after being formed in December 1940. Winifred resigned at the end of 1943. During those years she persuaded some of her co-stars on the stage to travel down to Effingham to talk to the members, while Yvonne Arnaud often entertained the WI members on the piano. As well as her phenomenal efforts to support the War effort through fund raising, morale boosting talks and jam-making on an industrial scale, Winifred organised a series of Shakespeare festivals.

In 1942 Leslie French, one of the greatest Shakespearean actors of his time, visited to perform songs from the Bard's plays, accompanied by Yvonne Arnaud on the piano (see Figure 8: *The Surrey Advertiser*, 21 November 1942).

Perhaps the most surprising guest speaker was Naomi 'Micky' Jacob, who visited the Institute on Monday 13 April 1942. She was a prolific author, playwright, journalist, broadcaster, actor and political activist who had recently returned from Italy where she had been living for her health. At the time of her visit she was appearing on stage in *The Nutmeg Tree* with Winifred and Arnaud.



Winifred Oughton gives an excellent performance as Griffin, Julia's devoted Cockney ladies' maid, who has social aspirations for her adored employer

Figure 7 In *The Nutmeg Tree*, 1941.

WOMEN AND SHAKESPEARE
 Members of the Effingham Junction Women's Institute held their first Shakespearean festival at the Rowland Lubbock Memorial Hall on Monday. It was produced by Miss Oughton, assisted by Mrs. Boxall and Mrs. Lowry as stage managers. "Half an Hour in Shakespeare's England" was presented by Mesdames Church, Edwin, Ford, Goddard, Manning, Pimm, Williams, Wood, and Frances Edwin, and in the scene from "The Merry Wives of Windsor" Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Manning were particularly entertaining. Miss Oughton (the president) introduced the Shakespearean actor, Mr. Leslie French, who entertained with songs and episodes from the plays of Shakespeare. He was accompanied at the piano by Mrs. Hugh McLellan (Miss Yvonne Arnaud). Scenes from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" were played by Doreen Boxall, June Crane, Tony Freeman, Donald Gotts, Audrey Williams, Wendy Freeman, and Pat Merrell. During the interval Miss Oughton gave a resumé of the activities of the Institute, including adoption of the trawler Roletta and sending comforts and gifts for the crew for Christmas, the canning of 9cwt. of tomatoes, and aid to Russia. She also spoke of the two funds the Institute was particularly interested in—Cancer Relief and the Royal Surrey County Hospital, Guildford. The proceeds on this occasion were for the Cancer Relief Fund, and her appeal for it was endorsed by Mrs. McLellan. Later Miss Oughton mentioned extra entertainments that had been arranged by the Institute, including a play on Russia, special speakers on America and Russia, children's entertainments, and another Shakespearean programme on Shakespeare's birthday, April 23rd.—A total of £9 0s. 6d. was realised for the Cancer Relief Fund.

Figure 8 In the Effingham Junction WI, 1942.



Figure 9 Naomi Jacob.

Figure 10 Jacob at Effingham Junction WI, *The Surrey Advertiser*, 21, Nov 1942.

Naomi Jacob was famous for her butch and flamboyant appearance, crew cut hair, wearing a monocle and a First World War Women's Legion uniform (Figure 9). She enjoyed discreet affairs with other women, although her many romantic novels were much more conventional. According to *The Surrey Advertiser* (Figure 10) the packed audience enjoyed from her:

'... a most delightful talk on her travels through France to Italy and her experiences there before the War.'

TWO NOTABLE VISITORS
ENTERTAIN WOMEN'S INSTITUTE
AT EFFINGHAM
 Effingham Junction Women's Institute held their monthly meeting on Monday this week, and there was a large assembly.
 Miss Oughton (president) was in the chair. Announcements included a proposal to hold a course of dress-making classes, commencing on April 23rd next at 2 p.m., and as one of the items will be renovations it should prove a useful help in war time.
 Many people have responded to Mrs. Godfrey's appeal for toys, etc., to be sent to the Malden Children's Nursery for war workers' children, but more are required and should be sent to Downe, Cobham Road, East Horsley. During the week commencing April 20th there is to be a house-to-house collection by the members of the Institute for the Blind. In previous years about this time an appeal has been made to members and friends for fresh eggs for the hospital at Guildford, and although this year eggs may be rather scarce the president asked members to bring what they could to the meeting on May 4th.
 After the business the President welcomed Miss Naomi Jacobs, the well-known novelist, and also members from eleven other institutes and their friends, about 100 being present altogether. Miss Jacobs gave a most delightful talk on her travels through France to Italy and her experiences there before the war.
 The surprise item, promised to the members some time ago, turned out to be the welcome appearance of Miss Yvonne Arnaud (Mrs. Hugh McLellan), who played the piano in a manner which delighted all present. Another appreciated item was given by Miss Barbara Sharp, who played the violin. Tea was later served to the members and visitors (about 140).

Dame Sybil Thorndike, one of the greatest actors of the 20th century, was another visitor to the Effingham Junction WI. Dame Sybil was associated with Winifred's career from its start at the Old Vic, and Winifred had been a member of Dame Sybil's company through the 1920s. Dame Sybil had been one of the patrons of the Schools Theatre and, as mentioned, they had appeared together in *Grief Goes Over* at The Globe in June 1935.

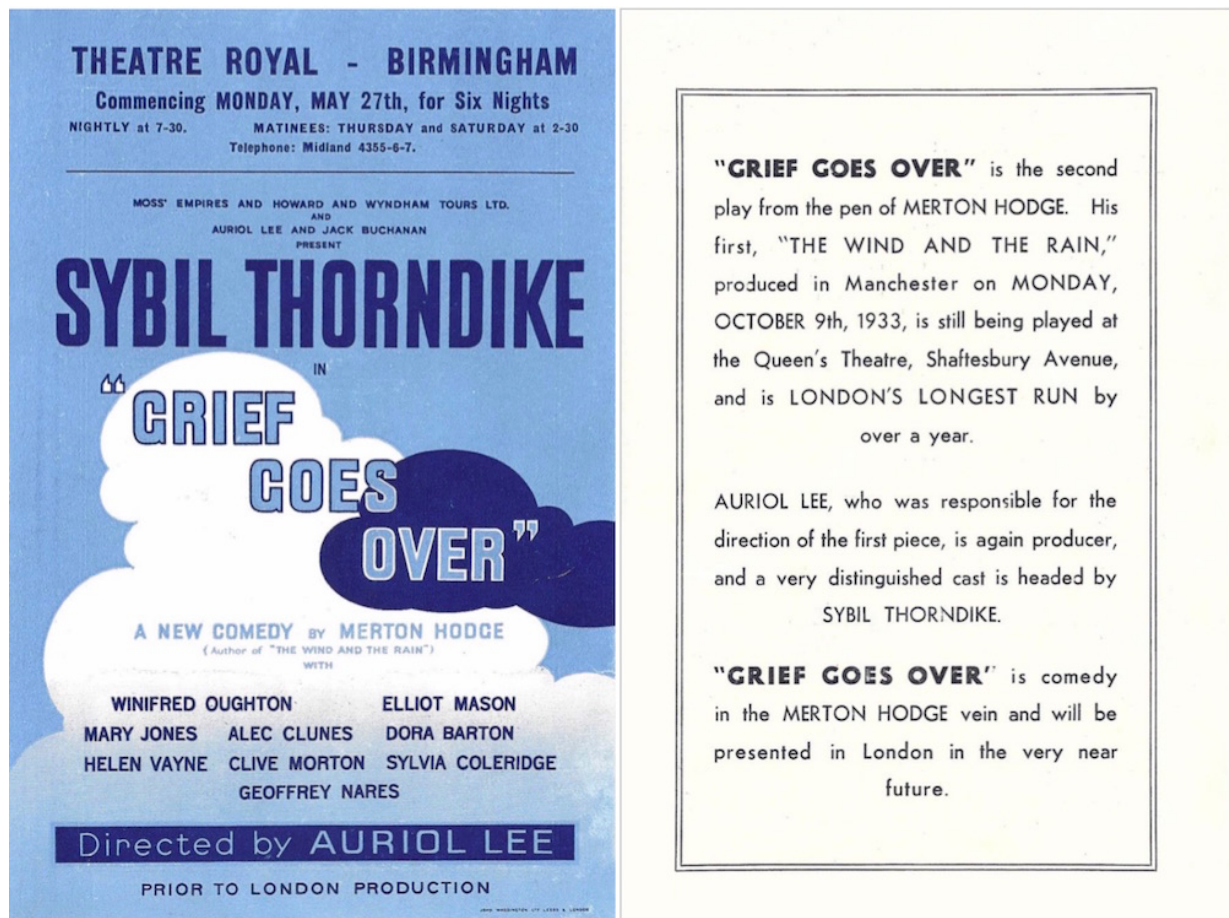


Figure 11 An original flyer for *Grief Goes Over*, for the run commencing 27 May 1935 at the Theatre Royal.

On Winifred's instigation Dame Sybil visited the Effingham Junction Women's Institute's sold-out meeting in March 1943, described by *The Surrey Advertiser* (Figure 12) as follows:

'Her wonderful rendering of Shakespeare, in drama and comedy, her charm of voice and manner in the rendering of verse, and her dramatic art in the scenes from *Macbeth*, delighted the audience.'

Dame Sybil was also present at Winifred's probable last public appearance in June 1963. This was at a celebration of the Old Vic hosted by Dame Sybil, prior to its temporary closure for refurbishment. Dame Sybil's association with Surrey was cemented when Leatherhead's Thorndike Theatre was named after her and opened in September 1969. This also marked Dame Sybil's last appearance on stage, in John Graham's *There Was an Old Woman*, playing 'a poor old blighter who sleeps in the park every night'.

Winifred also co-authored with a lady named Brenda Cross two plays based on books – *Wuthering Heights* and *Little Women*. The former premiered at the Guildford Repertory Theatre on Tuesday 3 September 1946. *The Stage* (5 September) praised her adaptation, saying:

'Five weeks ago Winifred Oughton was asked to produce *Wuthering Heights* for the Guildford Repertory Co and ... decided to write a new one in collaboration with Brenda Cross. The result is a fine adaptation. The play though faithful to the original retains nothing of its disconnected nature.'

although the reviewer thought that Winifred's success was marred by indifferent acting. *Little Women*, again written with Cross, was reported on as early as 28 December 1940 when the Surrey Gardens Repertory Company read a scene from it at a WI meeting. However it was then adapted for the BBC in 1950-51 into a six-episode series, giving it the distinction of being one of the first dramatic series to be shown on

television. It was broadcast live from 12 December 1950 but as it was not recorded it is now considered 'lost'.

VISIT OF DAME SYBIL THORNDYKE
 The attendance at the March meeting of Effingham Junction Women's Institute, which was an invitation one, packed the Rowland Lubbock Memorial Hall on Monday. Miss Oughton (president) announced that the collection at the "Aid to Russia" evening, given recently, amounted to £6 13s., and gave a reminder of the M.O.I. film show on March 15th. The president then introduced Dame Sybil Thorndyke, who gave excerpts from her varied and extensive repertoire. Her wonderful rendering of Shakespeare, in drama and comedy, her charm of voice and manner in the rendering of verse, and her dramatic art in the scenes from "Macbeth," delighted the audience. Mrs. Pimm, a vice-president, expressed thanks to Dame Sybil for her kindness in coming and for her entertainment, and presented her with a "utility basket" containing home-made produce, such as preserves, eggs and spring flowers, collected by the committee. The president introduced Dame Sybil to the committee, and afterwards showed her the display of potato dishes prepared by members of the Institute and presided over by Mrs. Martin and the food committee. The posters and decorations of "Potato Pete" were lent by the Ministry of Food.

Figure 12 Dame Sybil at Effingham Junction WI, March 1943.

That it was not recorded may have had something to do with a dispute between Equity and the BBC concerning payments for actors when recorded transmissions were repeated. Recording technology was a relatively recent innovation for television. For *Little Women*, after protests from Equity, its student actors were paid a minimum wage (*The Stage*, 18 January 1951). ELHG has discovered that one photograph (Figure 13) of the cast has survived.



Figure 13 Cast members in *Little Women*, from *The Sketch*, 3 January 1951.

Her last appearance on stage was in the first run of Agatha Christie's *The Unexpected Guest* at The Duchess Theatre in August 1958.

The description of her performance as Miss Bennett, contained in her obituary in *The Stage*, summed up her appeal:

'... an old family retainer, loving but unsentimental, wise and true, when she gave a characterisation of singular verisimilitude, perfectly timed and projected. She was one of those sensitive, experienced, thoroughly reliable artists who is an asset to any production.'

Her retirement after this play also coincided with her retirement from teaching. In recognition of the esteem in which she was held, after her death on 26 December 1964, RADA established the Winifred Oughton Memorial Prize.

Her obituary in *The Stage*, issue of 21 January 1965, is shown in Figure 14.

WINIFRED OUGHTON

The last theatre recollection one has of Winifred Oughton, who has died at the age of 74, is of her at the Duchess in "The Unexpected Guest" as an old family retainer, loving but unsentimental, wise and true, when she gave a characterisation of singular verisimilitude, perfectly timed and projected. She was one of those sensitive, experienced, thoroughly reliable artists who is an asset to any production, but she also had a high degree of creative imagination.

She made her first appearance at the Old Vic in 1915 walking-on in "The Merchant of Venice" and remained there for five years playing more than seventy men's parts, including Justice Shallow and Osric. She was with Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson for six years, and at the Arts in 1930 played Mrs. Marling in "Dance With No Music". At the Globe she appeared as Gunning in "The Improper Duchess" and as Julia in "And So to Bed". Yvonne Arnaud

being the star of both plays, at the Adelphi played Edith Sandford in "Nymph Errant" and at the Cambridge Mrs. Terence in "Night Must Fall". After touring Scandinavia as Lady Bracknell in "The Importance of Being Earnest", Miss Oughton went to Liverpool Playhouse with the Old Vic Company.

She was the part-author of two plays, "Wuthering Heights" and "Little Women". Her work as a teacher at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art from 1935-58 was of enormous value.

The many friends of Miss Oughton will be glad to hear that her ex-pupils at RADA are trying to establish a Memorial Prize to perpetuate her name.

The Principal of RADA will be grateful for sums, however small, to be sent to him at 62, Gower Street, W.C.?

Figure 14 Obituary for Winifred Oughton, January 1965.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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