



FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF WAKEFIELD

PHYLLIS' PLAQUE



REMEMBERING

PHYLLIS LETT

PHYLLIS DESERVES A

BLUE PLAQUE BECAUSE...

of her incredible talent which saw her travel the world as one of the leading contraltos from our region, and one of the major names on the British and global entertainment scene at the time.



Due to Phyllis being both a celebrity and someone who lived slightly later than many of our other women, we have a number of photos of her throughout her life.



A WOMAN OF TALENT AND DEDICATION

BY STEVEN B WILLIAMS

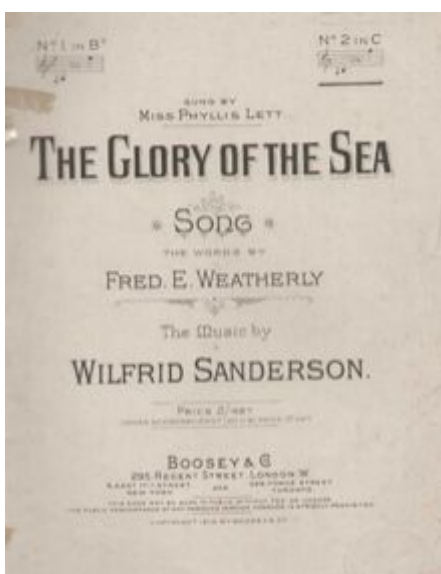
When it came to writing the play "Difficult Women" it was easy to pin down major events in the lives of our women and to let the women speak for themselves. That's thanks to the tireless efforts of our researchers who had sought out all the courageous, incredible and audacious things our women had done. Phyllis was no exception. What was absolutely lovely in Phyllis' story was reading about her relationships, and in particular her relationship with Charles Rupert de Burgh Ker, and their daughter Paddy.

I hadn't planned on using Phyllis as a lens to discuss the struggle so many women still endure as circumstances force them to juggle work and family life and the unfair sacrifices we demand of women because of that pressure. But slowly these themes began to filter through into Phyllis' and Charles dialogue. In truth, we do not know if Phyllis did struggle with choosing between her life as a touring performer and settling in Australia with her husband to have her family, but it does appear that, at some point, a choice was made as slowly Phyllis' tours tailed off and she concentrated on regional and local performances.

What is apparent in the factual accounts we have is the love Phyllis had for her family, and how devoted to them she was. Phyllis was a star, and her family life did not diminish that. If anything, looking back now it makes her light that much brighter.



We may think of HMV as just another retail store, but to have a recording made by His Master's Voice was a significant achievement.



Phyllis was highly sought-after as a performer and was specifically requested by several famous composers including Sir Edward Elgar and Sir Henry Wood.

TIMELINE

- 1883 — Registered via baptism in Redbourne, Lincolnshire to Richard Alfred Lett and Bithiah (nee Appleford).
- 1885 --1887 — The family relocates to Wakefield.
- 1891 census — Phyllis and her eight siblings minus Lewis are recorded at 6 South Parade where Richard Lett ran his medical practice.
- 1894-1900 — Phyllis Attends Wakefield Girls' High School. This coincides with Miss Gertrude McCroben becoming headmistress
- 1900 — Phyllis prepares to enter the Royal College of Music. Brother Richard dies in 2nd Boer War aged 19
- December, 1902 — Father Richard dies aged 55
- 1903 -1904 — Enters the Royal College of Music. Phyllis mother Bithiah dies in 1903 followed by Phyllis' uncle in 1904.
- 1905 — Sings at the Reception after the unveiling of the Queen Victoria statue in the Bull Ring, Wakefield
- 1906 — Becomes RCM Associate and studies in Paris
- 1908 — Phyllis records "Love's Old Sweet Song" at HMV Recordings.
- 1914 — Phyllis performs at the Corn Market in Westgate, Wakefield, where she will perform again on several occasions.
- 1916 — The Worshipful Company of Musicians awards Phyllis a gold medal for services to music.
- June 1923 — Phyllis is engaged to Charles Rupert de Burgh Ker. In December she embarks on a tour of New York.
- June 1924 — Marries Charles Rupert de Burgh Ker, St George Hanover Square, London
- 1925 — Moves to Australia
- 1926 — Birth of daughter Patricia "Paddy" Bamford
- 1927 — Phyllis embarks on a tour of New Zealand. She and Charles split their time between Australia and the UK
- 1933-1934 — Visits England
- 1st June 1962 — Dies in Yea, Australia. Her gravestone reads: "Her great courage and devotion knew no bounds."



FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF WAKEFIELD

AN ACCLAIMED CONTRALTO

BY SARAH LEAH COBHAM

Nationally acclaimed contralto Phyllis Lett made her singing debut in Wakefield's Corn Exchange around 1899 during the Boer War when she was in her teens.

Until she was 17, Phyllis lived at 6 South Parade, Wakefield, with her family, but pursuing her dream meant she had to leave the city she loved to live with her mother's brother, Stephen Appleford MD in Hertfordshire. Medicine was a prominent profession within her family. Her father ran a GP practice from the family home, but Phyllis's voice, her stage presence and beauty caught the imagination of the nation and took her far away from the city that loved her. Elgar sought her out to perform his masterpiece 'Dream of Gerontius' from 1907 onwards and wrote, 'If we could get Phyllis Lett' to Sir Ivor Atkin's when planning the nationwide tour of 'Sea Pictures' which she went on to premier in Hull in 1909.

By 1916 Phyllis Lett had been awarded The Musician's Companies Gold medal for her outstanding contribution to the music profession. She was just 33 and the only woman within one hundred years to achieve such acclaim. With regular performances at The Proms, and seen as a national treasure by the BBC and gramophone industry alike, this incredible woman's achievements have literally been forgotten. Her formative years in Wakefield were full: of music, of medicine at home, and of progressive education at school. Indeed, the reputation of the Wakefield Girls High School under the leadership of headmistress Gertrude McCroben was one of the reasons the family moved to Wakefield. WGHS embraced the concept of physical education by delivering the radical Ling system (which later went on to be adopted by the National School Board as the Physical Education Curriculum across England and is to this day the bedrock of modern physiotherapy). The School also delivered the Jaques-Dalcoze method, which combined the development of musical understanding with extensive use of gymnastics. Phyllis was not alone in being talented however, with all the eight Lett children going on to become successful in their own right.

For example, Phyllis' sister Olive became a leading advocate in the Ling System and taught Swiss Gymnastics to the military. Olive was also at the forefront of the cultural revival of Morris Dancing and was heavily involved in competitions at the national level. The forth of eight children, and born circa 1883 in Redbourne Lincolnshire, Phyllis returned again and again to Wakefield to perform as part of her concert tours with philharmonic orchestras and for special occasions. One such occasion was the unveiling of Queen Victoria's Statue in the Bull Ring in 1905.

At just 21 in 1900, her professional success knew no bounds as she topped concert bills alongside other famous opera singers such as Dame Clara Ellen Butt. Privately however, Phyllis had suffered personal tragedy with the loss of her older brother Richard who had enlisted in the Canadian Mounted Police when she was just 15 and who had died of typhoid fever in Pretoria, South Africa in 1900 as part of the Canadian 2nd Mounted Rifles just one year later. Suffering from grief and ill health her father's medical practice subsequently failed and the family went bankrupt, moving from the upmarket South Parade to the more modest Cheapside in 1901. Her father died of meningitis in 1902. Medicine did not vanish from the family's legacy however, as Phyllis's oldest brother, Hugh, was also a gifted doctor and would later become the President of the British Medical Association and a Baronet.

Yet in the wake of Richard's death, and with no means to support herself, Phyllis's mother Bithiah eventually moved to live with her sister in Epping Essex, leaving behind Eva, Phyllis's youngest sister, still at the Girls High School.

The remaining members of the family, Olive, Hilda, Lewis, Hugh and Norah separated and scattered. At just 19 years old Phyllis moved to live with her mother's brother, Stephen Appleford MD, in Hoddesdon in Hertfordshire. As his medical practice was in Finsbury Park this enabled Phyllis to take up her place at the RSC.

Despite the tragedies that blighted Phyllis' later teenage years, and within a few months of her mother dying in 1903, Phyllis made her official singing debut at The Royal Albert Hall as part of the Royal College of Music Concert Season. Within three years she was contralto soloist at all the chief musical festivals of Great Britain. The National Portrait Gallery commissioned a portrait of her and she was made an associate of the Royal Choral Society and awarded prizes from the RSC for her talents as a principle singer.

Musical talent and skills had also been gifted to her sister, Hilda, whose own career as a violinist within the highest orchestras was also taking off. A student of The Guildhall School of Music in London, by 1906 the sisters were re-united, touring and performing together. Phyllis was studying in Paris under the Polish Opera Singer Jean de Reszke and Hilda had gone to St. Petersburg to study with the great master Leopold von Auer. By 1908 Phyllis, one of the few artists recording for Eddison Bell on the 'flat records' rather than cylinder, was being heard more on the wireless. She went on to record with His Master's Voice and by 1923, as gramophones became more popular and accessible, was featured regularly in gramophone concerts broadcast live on the BBC nationwide. She was made an Associate of the Royal College of Music in 1906 and as a noted Elgarian, Phyllis Lett graced the top of the bill at the Queen's Hall in London in 1910 with the London Choral Society and The London Symphony Orchestra with Omar Khayyam. Singing at The Proms in front of royalty was normal for Phyllis as her life and talent led her to mix with more and more esteemed members of society. This included the Duke of York. So inspiring and beautiful was her voice that great composers such as HJ Edwards were writing specifically for her. These songs were often debuted as part of the Proms Concerts.

Never forgetting her roots Phyllis and her sister Hilda often returned to Wakefield, for example for a Grand Evening Concert at the Corn Exchange in 1914. The sisters were now focused on raising funds for the war effort and exercised their considerable influence in conjunction with WGHS. The sisters returned to Wakefield once again in 1915 to perform a Grand Ballad Concert at The Corn Exchange. Not only was Wakefield still considered home but its reputation as having one of the finest philharmonic choral societies kept it firmly on the concert tour programme.

Incredible recognition for her services to music came to Phyllis in 1916 when she was awarded a Gold Medal by The Musicians' Company for outstanding contribution to music services. The first woman to be recognised and the only one during the 20th century, this award coincided with her singing Mendelssohn for overseas soldiers at Westminster Abbey. Tours to Europe, Russia and the USA followed and with her rising fame she took Pathe Freres, a very early recording company, to court for continuing to distribute poor quality recordings of her voice from 1910, claiming they were damaging her career.

Phyllis won.



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BY SARAH LEAH COBHAM

During 1924 Phyllis married her long time friend Mr Charles Rupert de Burgh Ker of Australia. He was an honoured war hero and the owner of a large sheep farm at Wyaldra in North Queensland. Their wedding was attended by great musicians of the time. Sir Newman Flower gave her an original copy of Handel's Messiah as a wedding present and shortly after she was invited to sing 'Land of Hope and Glory' at The Royal Albert Hall as Stanley Baldwin was returned as the new Prime Minister. Upon her announcement to leave England to go and live in Australia she became even more in demand with her final live concert in the UK being at the Good Friday Gatherings at Crystal Palace where over 15,000 people attended. A farewell wireless concert was arranged which was broadcast to over 10,000,000 people across the UK with the famous Italian singer Luisa Tetrazzini coming from Italy to sing specifically with Phyllis.

Phyllis' life changed after the birth of her only child, a daughter, Patricia and an increase in the rheumatoid arthritis that had begun to curtail her career in the years before. Based both in Melbourne and at her husband's homestead she is reported to have shared a story of how fame followed her in the most unexpected places. Having arrived only three weeks prior, a man called at the homestead asking for directions to a neighbouring farm. Giving directions as best she could, Phyllis was surprised when he said, as he left, how it was good to see her again, and that the last time he had seen her was at The Royal Albert Hall. Phyllis did tour New Zealand and some parts of Australia when her daughter was just one year old but, despite that being an incredible success with extra dates added in New Zealand, she cancelled once she returned to Sydney due to extreme pain. There were some concerts in Richmond in the following years and she was nominated to be the patron of the newly formed Richmond Philharmonic Society in 1935.

**"HER FINAL LIVE
CONCERT WHERE
OVER 15,000 PEOPLE
ATTENDED."**

Now focused on raising her child, Phyllis only returned once more to England, no longer putting a 'professional singer' on the passenger list under occupation as she did when she travelled to New York but rather a woman whose occupation was 'home duties'. Perhaps it's because she died so far away from her native country, or perhaps it's because she stepped back from the fame and limelight of her youth, but when Phyllis died her passing only merited a six line obituary published in The Stage. Reporting of her movements happened less and less in the Australian press who followed the celebrity circle during the 40s and 50s. By 1950 her own name, Phyllis Lett (contralto singer), was often only found within parenthesis next to her husband's, if she was mentioned at all. Phyllis died in 1962. Her headstone reads, 'Phyllis Loving Wife of Charles Rupert de Burgh Ker, Fond Mother of Patricia, Her Great Courage and Devotion Knew No Bounds, Passed Away 1st June 1962'.



The family's legacy did not end with Phyllis, however. Eva Lett, Phyllis's younger sister, went on to become the first female principle of Ripon College and played a significant role in Wakefield for the rest of her life. Lewis discovered petroleum in Papua New Guinea and published highly regarded novels full of adventure about his life there. Olive went on to deliver the Ling System and teach and represent Morris dancing at a national level. She was also heavily involved with the suffragette movement in London. Norah became a code breaker in the First World War, and Hilda was just as accomplished and famous as her sister for her violin playing whilst Hugh was instrumental in the establishment of the NHS and was awarded a baronet. As noted previously, Richard aka 'Dick' never reached his potential but died, tragically, in the Boer War, not of an injury but of poor sanitation yet his career to that point suggested he would be as highly accomplished as his siblings. This eminent and remarkable family began their lives in Wakefield and had all, in their own way, been forgotten -- until now.