

GRACIE FIELDS HOME & ORPHANAGE

By Caroline Fields



Florence with her mother and brother

I have been successfully touring a musical play called *Our Gracie* based on the life and songs of Gracie Fields and, in doing so, have been privileged to meet many fascinating people associated with Gracie:

- Joan Moules, author and biographer, who kindly proof-read the script for any inaccuracies in the story line. Joan is a prolific writer and her three books on Gracie are still widely read. Gracie and Joan were dear friends and

Gracie gave Joan a large collection of her clothing to dispose of as Joan saw fit. Apparently Gracie told Joan "to cut 'em up for dish cloths". There were no charity shops then! Joan has kindly given me some of Gracie's beautiful stage dresses, which I wear in the show. Recently I measured one of Gracie's skirts, it has a seventeen-inch waist!

- John and Anne Taylor, who are mentioned in every Gracie biography and who appear regularly on television relating their time spent with her. John began his life-long friendship with Gracie as a fan but it became a role reversal when Gracie began to rely upon him more and more. When he told Gracie he planned to marry his sweetheart Anne, Gracie said she wanted to meet Anne to give her approval before he did. Luckily for them - Gracie approved the match! John spent hours answering Gracie's fan mail and she even taught him to forge her signature!

John and Anne were often invited to stay at Gracie's home in Capri, *Canzone Del Mare* (Song of the sea), whereas anyone else would be put up at the nearby hotel *Regina Cristina*. As there was only one main bedroom, John and Anne slept in Gracie's private sitting room on two loungers. John would also 'ferry' anything Gracie requested from England - including every new record release. John and Anne speak about Gracie with undying fondness and still travel to Capri once or twice a year to tend to Gracie's grave.

- Florence Merton, who at the tender age of three entered a new world when she was taken to Gracie Fields Home & Orphanage, which took in children of parents who were in 'the business'

Whilst little is known of Florence's father, Henry Merton, a music hall artiste, magician and mimic of animals and wild beasts, it is known he often toured with Gracie - including a tour of South Africa in 1934 (Nellie Wallace was also on the bill). It is also documented that he appeared in *White Horse Inn* at the London Coliseum in 1931. On the day he died, 26th June 1935, he was on his way to begin a lucrative long-running contract on a radio show with the BBC. He was forty-three.

After losing her husband, Florence's mother was left penniless and had to find work (The Variety Artistes' Benevolent Fund paid for Henry's funeral). It was difficult caring for two young children for, whilst Florence's brother, who was 9 years old at the time, would be at school during the day whilst mum was at work, the problem was, what to do with little Florence? Lottie Albert, secretary of The Theatrical Ladies Guild, had the answer.

When Florence arrived at the orphanage in 1935, it had been open only two years and there were few children there at the time. She was made to feel welcome and was well cared for. She remembers her time there with fondness - apart from the time matron made her stand in the corner with a basin on her head for leaving food on her plate. Florence hated marrow and, as it was often on the menu - she resigned herself to the basin - and, to this day, still dislikes that particular vegetable!

'Auntie' Gracie visited as often as possible, as did Gracie's sister Betty, when they would play, talk and sing to the children. Occasionally, the children were invited to *The Haven* - Gracie's own house in Telscombe near Brighton for a holiday, which was a great treat eagerly awaited. Betty would bathe the children, three at a time, in a huge bath in Gracie's bathroom, which Florence describes as looking 'like a palace with gleaming chrome everywhere, beautiful green and cream tiles and big white fluffy towels'. Then Betty and Gracie would cuddle them and sing them to sleep. Florence says there was always a lot of singing, "*Little Sir Echo* was usually sung when Margaret, another girl there, and I were pushed by Gracie on the garden swing". Gracie told the children that, as she had no children of her own, she loved to look after them and they made her very happy! (Many years later, in 1984 - Thursday 26th April - Florence and her husband went to buy the swing at the auction of Gracie's house contents but although it was described in the catalogue - it wasn't there to be sold!)

After four years, with the war fast approaching, Florence's mother, who had become self-sufficient by that time, wanted her daughter back home, but there was a problem. Someone from America wanted to adopt her and it took many months and a great deal of persuasion before 'Auntie' Lottie would let her go!

Eventually returning home, Florence found herself with a new father - a step dad Monty - who, she says, was the best father anyone could have wished for.

(Editor's Note: Young Florence is probably better known to many members of the BMHS as Floss White, a regular face, along with her husband Peter, at the Study Group meetings and social events.)

