

Family Entertainment in the years before the Second World War

The gaslight made life much easier than before, but the glass shade for the light would shatter now and then. One special Sunday, tea was ruined by the shattering of the globe over the set table. A sliver of glass cut the back of my hand and everything on the table had to be thrown out. A highlight of the week was ruined. We had a wind-up gramophone then plus about twenty old 78 records. My father thoroughly liked live entertainment, football in winter, cricket in summer. That was his bringing up. Walking from No. 12 Junction Row where he lived to watch Sunderland A.F.C. was a great achievement, only done at the beginning of the season and late on towards the end. His favourite record was 'Bird Songs at Eventide', singer John McCormack on HMV same as the make of the gramophone. To me, as a child, the singer was a million miles away, it was very moving. 'Whispering' another HMV song by Jake 'Whispering' Smith was played regularly. Much later I found that the song came from the USA through dance bandleader Roy Fox, as it was his signature tune. 'Look for the Silver Lining' by Jerome Kern was sung by a Columbia record singer Jesse Matthews who recorded it in the twenties. She also sang the song in a show "Wild Rose". She passed away in a Middlesex hospital when my son worked there for a short time in June or July 1981. 'The Sun Has Got His Hat On' was recorded on the other side. It did cheer everyone up. Not to forget Gracie Fields, who recorded in August 1931 'Sally' HMV 7EG 8071 written by William Haines, Harry Leon and Leo Towers UK. Her theme song. Those who lived in the 30s and of working people knew that Gracie was the cheerleader of the poor. Today, the young who have everything going for them, have no idea who Gracie Fields was.

Dame Gracie (Stans) Field was born 9th June 1898 at Rochdale and died on the Isle of Capri 27th September 1979. She appeared in Music Hall as a child. Between 1918 and 1925 she worked at the Middlesex Music Hall working alongside Archie Pilt who was a comedian. She married him in 1930 then moved to America in 1931. Up to 1946 she made 16 films. She left her first husband in 1938 for her film director Monte Banks. Just before the war started in 1939. Having been back in England she moved to Canada, the reason being that had Monte Banks remained in England he would have been interned as an alien, just like Bianco the ice cream man in Hetton was. It is worthy noting that Bianco's son fought in the British army. Gracie was asked by Winston Churchill to go to America to raise funds and this is what she did. She also entertained the allied troops with her famous voice. For her efforts she received a CBE in 1938 and later in 1978 was made a Dame of the British Empire (DBE). The famous songs such as, Danny Boy, The Lord's Prayer, At The End Of The Day, etc. she recorded after the war. She was still singing on stage close to her death in September 1979.

Harry Parr Davis was her pianist. He was born at Briton Ferry 24th May 1914 and died in London 14th October 1955. He was a Welsh composer and his impressive piano skills gained him the role of Gracie's principal accompanist until 1945. He wrote many of her

songs, especially for film, including 'Sing as we Go' in 1934 which became one of Gracie's defining performances. He also wrote songs for George Formby. Davis toured America with Gracie throughout 1937 and Canada in 1940 but left her in 1945. By then he was established as a film composer and writer for musical theatre. He wrote many famous songs such as 'Pedro the Fisherman' and 'Wish Me Luck' as well as 'I Leave my Heart in an English Garden' and other songs which invoked stoicism or patriotism or optimism which were always well-received by the British public. His music surrounded the fervour of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. He died of a stomach haemorrhage in 1955.

Martin Lewins.