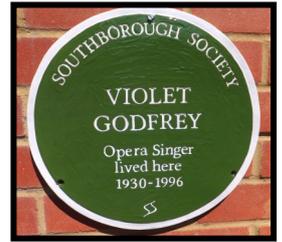


Violet Godfrey - Opera Singer By Maxwell Macfarlane Location of Plaque—The Ridgeway

Violet Amy Clara Godfrey, who was born in 1898, was the only daughter of Mr & Mrs Arthur Godfrey of London. Little is known of her early years except that her parents were strong and successful swimmers and so was Violet who, at one time, was in training for a cross-Channel swim.



She studied singing at the Guildhall School of Music and became a professional singer, much in demand for her beautiful contralto voice.

In 1921 she married Frederick H. Owles of Tunbridge Wells and they eventually had two daughters. At first they lived in Tunbridge Wells but, in 1930, they bought a house on The Ridgeway, Southborough, called “Beaucrest”, which was later numbered No. 16, where Violet lived for the rest of her life.



Violet Godfrey in Merrie England

In 1922 she made her first radio broadcast for the experimental station 2LO, which later became the BBC. She continued to broadcast and sang on occasions with the BBC Chorus from 1935 to 1950. She took part in one of the earliest television programmes from Alexandra Palace. She also taught singing, using her maiden name throughout her performing life.

After her marriage, she began to sing, as an amateur, with local operatic companies, mostly as a leading female singer in Gilbert and Sullivan productions at the Royal Victoria Hall (RVH), Southborough. These were fully reported in the local newspapers, and Violet’s name appeared many times

with fulsome praise, for example:

1929. The Mikado. “Violet Godfrey as Katisha gave a display of acting that is seldom seen in amateur theatricals or operatics. She gave a very talented display and held the audience spellbound.”

1933. Ruddigore. “Violet Godfrey, in the controversial role of Mad Margaret, again proved herself a talented actress. Here again was a clear and powerful singing voice. She held her audience more than any other member of the cast.”



Violet Godfrey as Mad Margaret in Ruddigore

1934. The Pirates of Penzance. “The pirate maid of all work was admirably played by Violet Godfrey. Except that she is more good-looking than is allowed the part, Miss Godfrey filled it emotionally, physically and psychologically. She still possesses the best voice of the company and acts with a vigour which makes one believe in her characterisations.”

1935. No, No, Nanette. “Starting with the advantage of possessing the best voice of the company, and a capacity to use it feelingly, she added to this bright laurel by moving through the play with grace and command of situations which make her presence a delight.”

1936. Iolanthe. “Mature and full, the voice of Violet Godfrey is admirably suited to her regal acting. Miss Godfrey was, in fact, one of the mainstays of the show.”

1949. Ruddigore. “It is unnecessary to comment on her lovely voice, but her performance and acting were one of the features of the show.”

1963. The Mikado. “Her compelling presence fills the whole stage and rolls out copiously and hypnotically into the auditorium.”

During the Second World War, as Mrs Violet Owles, she was the Chairman of the Southborough and High Brooms National Savings Organisation and coordinated the

local street collectors, schools and tradespeople, especially during the town's Warship Week, 21-28 February 1942, with the aim of raising £50,000 in order to adopt HM Motor Torpedo Boat No. 89. After a hectic week of parades, whist drives, entertainments, raffles and other events to raise money through the purchase of War Saving Certificates and stamps, it was finally announced that the target had been exceeded by £7,000, a tremendous result achieved by all concerned. Subsequently, Mrs Owles was very much involved in raising funds for the purchase of comforts for the crew, not least a puppy mascot (which unfortunately turned out to be not a good sailor), until MTB 89 was withdrawn from operations in the Mediterranean Sea in July 1944.

In 1950, Violet Godfrey became conductor of the Leigh and Burwash choral societies. In 1954 she formed the Tunbridge Wells Girls' Choir, then in 1955 the Southborough Afternoon Guild Choir. In 1958 she decided to form a mixed adult choir and named it the Kentish Choral Society. In 1959, when Tunbridge Wells was celebrating the Golden Jubilee of its Royal Charter, her choral societies contributed one hundred voices to a production of “Merrie England”.

The Kent Choral Society gave many successful concerts under her baton, mainly in 1969, and continued to do so under new conductors until its last concert in 1979.

Violet Godfrey fell and broke a leg in November 1996. After complications set in, she died on 23 December 1996.



Violet Godfrey as Ruth in the Pirates of Penzance, at the RVH Southborough