



HOME CHAT

February 2000

The Newsletter of The Noël Coward Society

The Sale of the Contents of Firefly

I guess all of us feel upset at the reported sale of the contents of Firefly. In a perfect world the house and its contents would be left as a museum, a tribute to Noël Coward and a focus for our interest. However, we do not live in a perfect world.

When Coward died, Firefly was inherited by Graham Payn. He generously gave it to the Jamaican Government and into the care of the Jamaican National Trust. Unfortunately, they did not have the money to maintain it properly, and in a climate that destroys fabrics, furnishing and artefacts, it fell into disrepair. Then along came a white knight in the form of Chris Blackwell, the son of Noel's friend Blanche Blackwell. He leased the house, along with Goldeneye (Ian Fleming's Jamaican home, where he wrote many of the James Bond books). He lavished money and care on the house, restoring it to its former glory and putting it into a proper condition as a museum.

Unfortunately, it does not attract the paying visitors it needs to provide the money for its continuing upkeep. The tourist hotels in Jamaica tend to be self-contained resort style, they do not encourage visitors to go site seeing, and certainly not off the beaten track to find the specialist interests like Firefly.

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H ello,

F irst I must say thank you for all your kind words on the first newsletter. Also, for the wonderful support. Many of you have contributed to this edition of H ome Chat, so much of my work has been copy typing.

I 've been spending my time typing up mailing lists of theatres and art centres where we might recruit more members. More members means more income to allow us to do some of the things we want to do, and more events for you to choose from. N obody can be expected to attend every event (unless they want to) but a big membership means that we should be able to run a variety of events successfully.

I think I have made great strides in advertising the S ociety in the U K , but I do need some help for U S A, Canada, Australia and N ew Z ealand. I n those territories, does anybody know of a good reference book to the addresses of theatres, amateur theatre companies, art centres etc where we might attract some membership?

G areth



Further, the relentless Jamaican climate continues its damage with the paintings, books and furnishings. Some of the paintings will soon not be fit for viewing unless something is done to protect them. And, of course, there are high crime rates in Jamaica, and the contents of Firefly could be an attractive target for thieves.

So, what is Chris Backwell to do? Well, it seems sense to restructure the whole use and presentation to attract more visitors, to use it with the Goldeneye complex, and to sell off some of the contents to people who will appreciate them, replacing some of them with good copies. I know that he has taken a lot of advice and talked to Graham Payn about the future of Firefly.

On behalf of us all, I have been in touch with Chris Blackwell's company, and I have their assurances on some critical points:

First, Firefly and Noël Coward's grave will continue to be available for any of us to visit.

Second, Sotheby's will handle the sale of the items.

Third, that the Society will be allowed to see what is on offer before the general public and be able to place an early bid.

Back to my opening sentiment. I wish this was not necessary, but I cannot think of a better alternative. And, at least we have secured some privileged opportunity to ensure that some of the items will come to loving homes with some members.

GCP

www.noelcoward.co.uk

The Society has inherited the Noël Coward website from the Centenary Committee.

One of our members, John Hunter Knowles, has taken it over as our web master, and he is starting to make some changes as it moves from being an information site for the Centenary Celebrations to being our site.

Initially, it will be re-organised to give basic biographical details of Coward for the passing browser. Then some guide (advertisement) as to how to join the society and, of course a diary of events and production news.

It will also give a guide to the published books that may help anyone interested in Noël. From there we can build it into something even more advanced and helpful.

Society Meeting

The Society held an informal meeting at The Antelope Pub on the 2nd February.

A number of members came along, just to have a drink, meet each other and to chat. We found the main bar a little too crowded, so we quickly arranged with the landlord to overspill into an upstairs room where we could chat happily.

I was surprised how close the bar was to Coward's stage directions in *Peace in Our Time*, it only took a little imagination to project the pub onto the stage of the Lyric Theatre in 1947. Equally it was easy to imagine Noël dropping by for a drink in the 1940's and 50's, a cosy pub only a short walk from his own home in Gerald Road, or his mother's flat in Eaton Square.

We were joined by three special guests: First and foremost, Mrs Joan Hirst, originally the assistant to Lorn Lorraine and still the Coward Estate's secretary in London. Marcy Kahan, a playwright and Coward devotee, who had recently had her play "*Design for Murder*" broadcast by the BBC came along. Her play has Noël; Lorn Lorraine; Cole Lesley and Clemence Dane as its main characters. And a very good play it was too. I am delighted to say that Marcy has now joined the Society. I am ever hopeful, as she told me that there was talk of her writing another Coward based radio play to follow up her success (*Present Slaughter? Private Deaths?*) And then Steve Ross, the doyen of cabaret entertainers of New York and London dropped by for a drink and a chat.

All too soon a couple of hours had flown by, and Robert Gardiner whisked me off to listen to Steve Ross in cabaret at Pizza on the Park.

GCP



Hay Fever in the Midst of Winter

- From Lesley & Laurie Gimbrett

Lesley and I became devotees of Noël Coward about five years ago.

During that time our main interest was collecting his wonderful songs and music on 30 CD's and LP's when we could find them. We have also amassed a large book collection.

Last year was ecstasy for us as Noël's Centenary Celebration allowed us to see many of his plays and musicals that up until then we had only read about.

As the year drew to a close with the wonderful Savoy Gala and finally the weekend before Christmas 'Relative Values' at the Hampton Hill Playhouse (near Waldergrave Road, Teddington, Middlesex – not far from the border of Surrey) where a few days earlier Sir John Mills had unveiled a huge portrait of Noël, commissioned for his centenary and proudly displayed in their Coward Room (*Actually, Sir John couldn't make it on the night, he was unwell – so the portrait was unveiled by his daughter Hayley – who is a patron the that theatre's appeal fund – gcp*).

We now thought we would be starved of Noëlly entertainment, but after Christmas the postman delivered news that Newpalm Productions were presenting 'Hay Fever' at the Civic Theatre, Chelmsford in late January.

We were a little apprehensive, as we had seen the Declan Donnellan production at the Savoy with Geraldine McEwan. It was a bizarre interpretation with the play starting very confusingly with the Victorian melodrama 'I Love's Whirlwind' and ending with all the cast coming back onto the stage to sing 'Tea for Two'!

Happily there was no need for our fears as the Newpalm Production was well presented, well acted and delightfully funny.

This 'Winsomely' comedy of bad manners was centered around the dysfunctional Bliss family. A couple of our favourite scenes were in the second act where the ill-fated guests lack of role-playing talent was mercilessly and comically exposed and hilarious to watch. In a later scene Judith Bliss and the bemused guest Richard Greatham were alone in the room Judith had been playing the piano and singing a French song and was utterly enchanting to Greatham who momentarily captivated by her charm kisses the nape of her neck. Judith in a fit of hysterics jumps up, screaming, "What are we going to do?" "David must be told everything" and then of course the final scene with the sound of the departing car, carrying off the hapless guests and Judith's flabbergasting comment ... "How very rude"

There were many other highlights in this wonderful play including the immortal lines "On a clear day you can see Marlow" where a vision of Noël wagging his finger at Dame Edith Evans sprang to mind and caused a chuckle.

We can only hope that the interest for Coward's work during last year's celebrations will continue into the twenty-first century.

Rehearsing Brief Encounter

A new play by Phil Smith

I came across this new play from the Oxford Touring Theatre Company. I haven't seen it yet myself, but I thought it might be of interest to members:

To quote from their publicity blurb:

An actress and a director meet for the first time. They are to rehearse a play of that classic film 'Brief Encounter'. She has done a soap and known some fame. He is young, aspiring and hopeful. The Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson love story lights the blue touch paper and suddenly the two unsuspecting people are rocketed into the stratosphere of love. But, for the Howard and Johnson doubles, the fireworks are just about to start! They, too, are not free to love...

Performances:

Up to 18th March in various halls and theatres around Oxfordshire. Then it has a short UK tour:

20/03 – Eastbourne

21/03 – Otford, Kent

22/03 – West Malling

23-26/03 – Mansfield

29/03 – Radlett

30/03 – Taunton

31/03 – East Portlemouth,
Devon

01/04 - Lustleigh, Devon

04/04 – Leighton Buzzard

05/04 – Wellingborough

06/04 – Driffild, Yorks

07/04 – East Cottingham,
Yorks

08/04 – Wakington, Yorks

For details phone the OTTC on
01865-778119



Production News

Listed below are the forthcoming Coward productions known to us. I am trying to get a handle on amateur productions in ex-UK, but it is a bit harder.

Professional:

A Song at Twilight	Gielgud Theatre London	until 4 th March
Volcano	Palace Theatre, Westcliff	22 nd May–10 th June (We hope to organise a Society trip)
Present Laughter	Birmingham Rep	23 rd June – 22 nd July
Private Lives	Shaw's Corner, Hertfordshire Hever Lakeside Theatre, Hever, Kent	30 th June – 2 nd July 4 th August–19 th August
Blithe Spirit	Gawsworth Hall, Macclesfield State Theatre Company of South Australia	2 nd August–5 th August 14 th April–16 th May
Waiting in the Wings	Walter Kerr Theatre, New York	Current
A Song at Twilight & Shadows of Evening	Lucille Lortel Theatre, New York	February
Hay Fever	Court Theatre, Christchurch, New Zealand	10th June–16 th July
Design for Living	Broadway, New York	November 2000

Amateur (UK):

The Vortex	The Lace Market Theatre	5 th –10 th June
Present Laughter	The Village Hall, Pattingham, Staffordshire	17 th –20 th May
Hay Fever	The Gatehouse Theatre, Stafford	4 th –8 th April
Cavalcade	The Kenton Theatre, Henley-on-Thames	20 th – 25 th March
Blithe Spirit	The Strode Theatre, Street, Somerset	2 nd – 4 th March
Still Life	Hampton Hill Playhouse, Teddington	8 th –11 th March

Also:

At the New York Library for Performing Arts:

Star Quality	Play Reading	13 th March
Volcano	Play Reading	20 th March
An Evening with Sheridan Morley		3 rd April
If Love were All	The Lives & Loves of Noël & Gertie	5 th April
Coward & Porter	Performance by Songfellows	29 th April

Films:

Relative Values	In post production	Opening April
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Gossip:

Films of Blithe Spirit; Hay Fever and Quadrille are being planned. Elaine Stricht may reprise her concert production of Sail Away on Broadway (currently being negotiated).



My Coward Year

- by Gill Joye

My birthday is in January and, just for once, I was determined to celebrate it somewhere warm so I started the Noël Coward Centenary year in style by achieving my ambition to visit Firefly. A week spent at the elegant style Jamaica Inn, gave us a taste for the free planter's punch served daily on the beach at 11am and for the not so free choice of cocktails available before dinner in the evenings. It would have been easy to have spent the entire week lazing on the beach but we did manage to stir ourselves to visit a few sites, the main one for us being Firefly. Roads in Jamaica are not good so, rather than hire a car, we organised a taxi for the Sunday morning (my birthday) and were duly driven to Noël's home.

Before going to Jamaica I had tried to find out about visiting Firefly without a lot of success. There was limited information on the Island Outpost Website and the leaflets promoting Firefly at the hotel hardly mentioned the Coward connection, but did offer guided tours, stated lunch and tea could be obtained, and that it was a good place for parties and similar events. So we set off not knowing what to expect and armed with only the knowledge I had gleaned from my Noël Coward book collection. With hindsight I suppose I was expecting something along the organised lines of visiting National Trust and similar houses in England, a totally misguided idea as I soon found out.

The drive there seemed quite a long one, although that may have been because the state of the roads meant that Leonard, our taxi driver, had to keep slowing down to avoid big potholes. However, it was a pleasant drive which gave us time to admire the countryside and, as we neared Firefly, our decision to hire a taxi proved wise as the road up to the house became evermore narrow and tortuous. We were fortunate to arrive just as a guided tour was about to start and duly joined the group of American tourists as they set off up the path to the house. However, it only took me a few minutes to realise that I didn't really need a guide to tell me about Noël's life and works so at that point we hung back and followed slowly after them. This ploy enabled us to take our time looking around the house, and to take photographs once the party had all moved on to the next bit. In fact, only once did I have to ask a rather stout American if he would mind moving slightly so that I could get an uninterrupted photograph of one of the rooms. By the time we had been round the house and reached the cliff-top garden the tour party had long gone, rushed on no doubt by their courier, while we stayed on, taking our time. This is a beautiful tranquil place and has to be seen to be fully appreciated and I was especially reluctant to leave. One last place to visit was the promised gift shop. After the beauty of the surroundings, this was a disappointment with little stock and it did not appear to me making much of an effort to promote itself or Firefly. But perhaps I was expecting too much: this was Jamaica after all, and apart from that we were told that an American tourist had been in a few days earlier and purchased a lot of stock. Despite this I did not leave entirely empty handed, and although two of them are too big I came away with three different tee-shirts, not to mention eight copies of the only available postcard (North Cost scene – St Mary, painted by Noël) handed to us in lieu of small change. Purchases complete, it was time to linger again, with one last look around the house – it was my birthday after all – and to sit in the sun in the garden and try to imagine how it had been when Noël lived there. Eventually reality in the form of Leonard came to find out if we had got lost and we made our way back to Jamaica Inn. A truly memorable birthday, which the following week turned into an even more unusual holiday when we went to Antigua where I had the misfortune to break my ankle. What a good job we had chosen to go to Jamaica for the first week, otherwise I may never have made it to Firefly.

Back in England it was a few months before I was fully mobile again and my next celebratory event had to wait until May 22nd when I went to the Noël Coward Study day organised by the Theatre Museum in London as part of the Covent Garden Festival. Entitled "*Where are the songs we sung?*" this was a day of two distinct halves. The morning consisted of early film and television footage of Noël performing medleys of his songs and extracts from some of his filmed works, including *Operette*, *Cavalcade* and recently discovered footage of an early film of *Bittersweet*. The afternoon session had been billed as a musical workshop, and with no clear idea of what a musical workshop was I took my seat in the small theatre in the museum. It was a fascinating afternoon in which David Kernan held a musical masterclass with four aspiring young singers. The two men and two women had each chosen two of Noël's songs and were coached by David with their performances. Not being in the least musical myself, to be there and see and hear how their renditions of songs such as *Chase Me Charlie*, *Twentieth*

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Century Blues, *Sail Away* and *Nina* improved during the afternoon almost made me wish I could join in, although it is to be hoped that the young man who chose *Nina* did not know that the audience had already seen a film of Noël singing that song during the morning session.

Earlier in the year I had decided that I would particularly try to attend performances of Noël's works which I have never seen, so I made a point of obtaining tickets for the "concert performance" of *After the Ball*, which was presented as part of the Covent Garden Festival later in May. Unfortunately, seven months on, my lasting impression of that evening is only that the theatre was packed and it was very very hot. While musically satisfying, a concert performance largely shuns the acting and lacks any kind of spectacle. However, a few weeks ago the performance was broadcast on BBC radio and that I did enjoy, perhaps because my imagination could visualise the action missing from the live performance. On the following Saturday the Theatre Museum organised a "Noël Coward Trail", consisting of performances of some of his songs in the museum itself, followed by a guided walk around the areas of Covent Garden most associated with Noël and ending with an informal discussion between Sheridan Morley and John Lahr about Noël and his works.

A scorching weekend in London in July took in two very different performances: *Sail Away* at the Tower Theatre, Islington, was my next stop, followed by a matinee of *Hay Fever* in the West End the following day. Not having seen *Sail Away* before or having heard of the Tower Theatre either, I had no expectations and can say that on the whole I enjoyed the enthusiastic performance by a cast reminiscent of a good local drama society coping on a tiny, but packed, auditorium. *Hay Fever* was another matter. The lure of seeing Geraldine McEwan had been the reason we decided to get tickets for *Hay Fever*, but I realised all was not well when the melodramatic opening depicting "Love's Whirlwind" made my husband ask if we were in the right theatre. My overall impression is of a very hot afternoon, spent in a half empty theatre, watching a Noël play wrecked by its director, and only sticking it out because the theatre's air-conditioning made it pleasanter than going outside.

It was not until November that I set out on my next Noël venture, the Noël Coward Centenary Conference at the University of Birmingham. I knew when I booked my place that I was venturing into largely unknown territory, so it was with nervous anticipation that I boarded a train for Birmingham on Sunday 31st October. A report on the Conference has already appeared in *Home Chat*, so suffice to say that it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience, I learned a lot, and met and made friends with several like-minded fans.

Attendance at the Conference also made me decide to go and see Corin and Vanessa Redgrave in *A Song at Twilight*. Again a matinee, in Row B of the stalls in a theatre which was packed with a highly appreciative audience. This was by far the best Coward production I saw during 1999 and even my husband, who is not a great Coward fan, was spellbound by Corin Redgrave's superb performance as Hugo Latimer. The year was flying by and with December approaching there were some tough decisions to make about what I could still get to see and what had to be left out. So out went *Not Yet the Dodo* at the British Library and in came the Centenary Gala, which the website had listed as taking place at the Theatre Royal in October, but which was now to be on 12th December at the Savoy Theatre. Fliers advertising this had been given out at the Birmingham Conference and I wasted no time in booking two tickets. This was definitely not something I was going to miss! Since it was a Sunday performance and catching a late train home did not appeal, I also had no difficulty persuading my husband that we really should make a weekend of it.

The Gala was introduced by Richard Attenborough and from then on proceeded to be a fast evening's entertainment of readings, extracts from *The Vortex*, *Private Lives*, *Design for Living*, *Still Life*, *The Astonished Heart*, and with enough celebrities taking part to satisfy the most blasé. A few I had never heard of, but most were household names – Joanna Lumley, Simon Callow, Edward Fox, Stephen Fry, Donald Sinden, Helena Bonham Carter, Greta Scacchi, Alan Bates, and lots more., including Noël's last accompanist, Peter Greenwell, and Sir John Mills, who were the hits of the evening. All that and still another evening of Noël to follow at the National Film Theatre on the Monday, a feast to be savoured. Entitled "Remembering Noël", the evening began with a small drinks reception for invited guests and was followed by a discussion on stage, where Barry Day, Constance Cummings and Richard Attenborough spoke about their memories of Noël. The event was chaired by Sheridan Morley and was illustrated with clips from many of Noël's films including his first appearance as a boy pushing a wheelbarrow in *Hearts of the World* and later successes in films such as *The Italian Job* and *Boom*. And thus ended my year of Noël celebrations. Celebrating my birthday this year at home in Kent on a damp evening in January was a far cry from sitting in the sun at Firefly and drinking cocktails at Jamaica Inn.



Mystery Books

A couple of weeks ago, the postman delivered two Noël Coward books to the Society office. Look as we might, we could spot no name or address or message from the sender. If anyone knows who sent them, then please let us know, so that we can thank them.

Otherwise we will assume that they have been generously donated by an anonymous well-wisher, and they can be sold for Society funds.

The Books are:

“The Amazing Mr Noel Coward” by Patrick Braybrooke. 1933. It’s a first edition. Its cloth bound, without a dust jacket, in fairly good condition. It has a library impression stamp on the first few pages for “Vaughan’s Library, 30 Marchmont St., WC1” .

The other is **“The Privilege of His Company – Noël Coward Remembered”** by William Marchant. 1975. It’s a first edition, in good condition, still with its dust jacket, although that is torn. It is marked on the flyleaf with the signature “Simon Ceaser? 1978.

Highest offer by the copy date of the next *Home Chat* (20th March) for either.



The photo of Noël (above) taken from the frontispiece of “The Amazing Mr Coward” and sub-titled “What shall it be next?”

An anecdote taken from the programme for the Centenary Celebration at the Savoy Theatre: From Lucy Fleming – During the Rehearsals for *Hay Fever* at the Duke of York’s in 1968, when I was playing Sorrel and my mother, Celia Johnson, was playing Judith Bliss, we did a final run-through in front of Sir Noël. We waited, with eagerness for the Master to climb up on to the stage to tell us what he thought. His words were brief: “It’s an awfully good play.”

Offers

Firefly – Noël Coward in Jamaica: by Chris Salewicz and Adrian Boot (Victor Gollancz pub. price £17.99) A book of original photographs by NC and others (including a number that are new or not previously published), and a text by Chris Salewicz. Now, with Firefly to change, this is the vital photographic record of how it was.

Order through the Littlehampton Book Service’s mail order department, on +44 (0) 1903-828800, quoting reference NCS2000. You will receive the book for £11.70 (instead of publisher’s price of £17.99). Postage will be charged at £2.50 for UK and £3.50 for Overseas.

Noël Coward – A Life in Quotes: compiled and introduced by Barry Day (Metro Books pub price £9.99) A book of quotes, many of them well known, but a surprising number that are new or have been mined and polished from less well known seams.

Order by telephoning the publisher’s credit card sales line (+44 (0) 1476-541080) and claim a £1 discount as a member of the Society (UK members £8.99, p&p free; Overseas members £8.99 but postage £4).

Noël Coward – The Centenary Celebration at the Savoy Theatre London, 12 December 1999. The Executive Producer of the show, Robert Gardiner, has kindly donated a few copies of the beautiful programme of this special event for collectors to buy. £10 inc postage.



Our help is needed – and Noël would have approved



One of the charities that was very close to Noël's heart was the Actors' Orphanage. He was President from 1934 to 1956. Now one of our members, Susannah Slater, was a child at the orphanage, Silverlands, in the 1950's, and she needs our help to trace anyone who was at the Silverlands (or its Rutland Gate outpost for older children) at about that time.

She is planning a reunion at The Boat House, Chertsey, South West of London, on the 8th-10th September 2000. The Boat House used to be The Chertsey Bridge Hotel where lucky children from Silverlands were taken by visiting relatives for a Sunday tea. The reunion weekend promises to be quite an event, with Lord (Richard) Attenborough and others from The Actors' Charitable Trust (which took over from the Orphanage) hoping to be there. It would be a pity if some missed it because we couldn't help trace them.

Susannah has many memories of Noël and her time at the orphanage: *"I myself remember being picked to present the bouquet to Mary Martin when she and Noël opened at the Café de Paris in 1952. The excitement of having a dress specially made for the occasion which led me to forever after being called 'Little Miss Nylon', and the terror of having to trip down those stairs without falling and doing my best curtsy."*

So if you know of anyone who might have been at Silverlands, then do make sure they get in touch with Susannah at Vicarage Cottage, Church Lane, Henfield, West Sussex, BN5 9NY. Telephone +44 (0)1273 492743. She is already in touch with some from the USA and Australia and other parts of the world. But there are still plenty more to find. I know this isn't easy; people do not necessarily let it be known that they were in an orphanage so go carefully. However, many have gone into theatre or are associated in some way, so they may be closer to you than you realise. Please see what you can do to help.



Conversation Piece

The first edition of *Conversation Piece* is on its way, it's just running a bit late with teething problems.

Marvellous response to the appeal for puzzles for the magazine, from Ray Dutton and Philip Leather. Thank you. A couple of puzzles will be in *Conversation Piece*, with prizes for correct entries (if we can finalise the sponsorship agreement with a record producer)

WANTED

A copy of the video of Blithe Spirit film (1944) with Rex Harrison et al.

Roy Holland
01244-332348

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