

Joyce Grenfell Memorabilia

For many of us, the name “Joyce Grenfell” brings to mind one of her more famous characters, Sergeant Ruby Gates, the policewoman in the St Trinian’s series of comedy films in the 1950s. The films also featured Alastair Sim (playing both the headmistress and her brother) and George Cole as “Flash Harry”. In the St Trinian’s films, as in many of her other roles, she played an essentially optimistic Englishwoman, enthusiastic but ingenuous. As a comedienne, her brand of satire was gently mocking, but never malicious. Her versatility as an entertainer saw her succeed in radio, on the stage and in film.



Joyce Grenfell. Photograph by Lord Snowdon.
From "Gala: A Tribute to Joyce Grenfell"

The Seaborn Broughton and Walford Foundation holds a small collection of Joyce Grenfell memorabilia which was donated by Elizabeth Butcher. The collection was created by Lady Nancy Fairfax, a close friend of Joyce Grenfell. They first met at a party given by Googie Withers during Grenfell’s first visit to Sydney in 1959 and the occasion is described in Grenfell’s autobiography, *In Pleasant Places*:

That luncheon party turned out to be one of the biggest blessings ever to come my way. I met those whom I continue to count among my dearest friends, and through them others of equal importance came into my life. One of the reasons I love Australia is the quality of friendship I find there; it is deep and of a lasting order, and I prize it beyond rubies.¹

During her time in Sydney, her revue at the Phillip Street Theatre “Meet Joyce Grenfell” played to full houses for three months. A programme for the show forms part of the collection.

Joyce Grenfell and Nancy Fairfax remained in close touch during the following years, corresponding regularly. Copies of several lectures and radio talks were sent to the Fairfaxes, often annotated “Darling Nancy & Vincent, love from Joyce”. These addresses frequently focused on communication and morality, springing from her deep religious faith. A fascinating account of

Grenfell's "royal occasion" when she dined with the Queen at Windsor Castle before entertaining Her Majesty's Ascot house party describes in detail the Castle's décor, the meal, the outfits worn by the guests and the reception her performance received:

The Queen and all the royals were extremely generous and I have had a charming letter from the Queen in her own hand in which she says "You and Mr Blezard [her accompanist] gave everyone great pleasure and a really good laugh and I hope we made a good audience in spite of the stuffed shirts".²

In fact, this was to be her final public performance before retiring from the stage, although she continued to appear on television for some time, while also writing two autobiographies, *Joyce Grenfell Requests the Pleasure*, published in 1976, and *In Pleasant Places*, 1979.

Joyce Grenfell died in November 1979, at the age of 69. Amongst the papers collected by Lady Fairfax are several newspaper clippings of obituaries and an Order of Service for a Thanksgiving Service held at Westminster Abbey on 7th February 1980. In January 1985 a "Gala Tribute to Joyce Grenfell" was held at the Aldwych Theatre in London. The programme for the event includes photographs taken throughout her life, tributes from those who knew her well and the following poem, written by Joyce Grenfell:

If I should go before the rest of you
 Break not a flower nor inscribe a stone
 Nor when I'm gone speak in a Sunday voice
 But be the usual selves that I have known.
 Weep if you must,
 Parting is hell,
 But life goes on,
 So sing as well.³

Ann Peck

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¹Grenfell, Joyce. 1979. *In Pleasant Places*, Macmillan, London.

² Grenfell, Joyce. 1973. 'Visit to Windsor Castle June 21 1973', private papers.

³ "Gala: A Tribute to Joyce Grenfell". 1985. The Ad Graphics Group Ltd, London.