

The Worthing Society

Conserving, Preserving
and
Safeguarding our Heritage
Heritage Leaflet No: 6

GLADYS MORGAN



(1898 - 1983)

This is the sixth of a series of leaflets being produced by the Worthing Society to accompany the plaques erected throughout the Town to commemorate notable people, buildings, and events in the town's history. For more information about the Society and its activities go to our Web Site at: www.worthingsociety.org.uk

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Gladys Morgan was one of a rare breed from the golden days of twice-a-night variety – a Welsh, female, stand-up comic. She made Worthing her home for 47 years. To the general public she is probably a forgotten name, but to variety enthusiasts and performers she is still held in high esteem. Her style was big and broad, although physically Gladys was the exact opposite, being a petite 4'10" tall. Dressed in her trademark striped blazer and beret, she had a vividly expressive face and a toothless smile. But her calling card was her laugh – a high-pitched maniacal cackle that proved to be hugely infectious. When she made her debut on the popular radio programme, *Welsh Rarebit*, in 1950, she was given a three minute spot. She filled that first appearance with just her laugh. She came on, laughed, the audience erupted, she laughed again and before she got round to using her script, her three minutes were up, and a star was born!

Like Hylde Baker, Gladys had to wait until middle age (she was 52) before she achieved her fame. Born in Swansea in 1898, Gladys had been treading the boards in concert party, pantomime and revue for forty years with limited success. Blessed with a fine soprano voice, she started out in the profession as a singer, until one fateful day in an Isle of Man concert party when she was asked to play the part of an old deaf woman in a comedy sketch. From then on Gladys was hooked on laughter-making. She married the comedian Frank Laurie and toured as a double act, with Frank as the 'comic' and Gladys as the 'feed', but bookings were scarce. Fate took a hand when they were playing Liverpool in a week of cine-variety. An agent caught their act and suggested that they swap roles as Gladys had a gift of a face for comedy. They did this and the act Morgan and Laurie was born and plentiful dates followed. During the war the couple worked for ENSA, the organisation set up to entertain troops, and their daughter, Joan, and her husband, Bert, joined the act.

Gladys's big opportunity came when she was asked to audition for Mai Jones, *Welsh Rarebit's* producer. Up until then Gladys had worked in a Lancashire accent influenced by her idol, the outrageous Northern comic, Frank Randle. At last she was able to use her native Welsh accent and she proved so successful that she became a regular on the show for several years. Frankie Howerd heard her and wrote Gladys a 'fan' letter, saying that she had 'the most striking personality I've heard for many a day', and booked her as a permanent member of his radio series, *The Frankie Howerd Show*. In the '50s Gladys and her family toured the variety halls incessantly and her popularity further increased when she joined the cast of *Educating Archie*, starring ventriloquist Peter Brough and his dummy Archie Andrews. In 1956 Gladys had the honour of representing radio and television at the *Women Of The Year* luncheon at the Savoy Hotel.

Sadly, very little of Gladys's work exists in the BBC archives, but she was incredibly busy on radio and television during the 1950s and early 1960s in such shows as *Workers' Playtime*, *Midday Music Hall*, *Blackpool Night*, *The Good Old Days* and *Sunday Night At The London Palladium*.

The family appeared at the London Palladium for a season in 1961, with their friend Frankie Vaughan, and for five years Gladys toured South Africa in an old time music hall production. So successful was she there, that the family recorded a radio series, *The Morgans*, for Springbok Radio.



In 1965 Gladys appeared in the film *The Wild Affair* with Nancy Kwan, Terry Thomas and Bud Flanagan.

It was because of all her broadcasting commitments in the South of England in the 1950s that Gladys made the decision to move the family to Worthing in 1958 and it was there that she died in 1983, aged 85.

In 2006 BBC Radio Wales paid tribute to the 'Welsh Queen of Comedy' with a thirty-minute celebration and, in December 2012, at the instigation of Geoff Bowden of the British Music Hall Society, a Blue Plaque was unveiled outside Gladys's Worthing home at 30, Salisbury Road, by Gladys's daughter, the singer and comedienne Joan Laurie.



Gladys's daughter unveiling the commemorative plaque at 30, Salisbury Road, Worthing on the 11th December 2012 Accompanied by (from the left) :-

**Roy Hudd (well known entertainer and President of the British Music Hall Society)
Wyn Calvin (comedian and Vice President of The British Music Hall Society)
David Sumner (Chairman of the Worthing Society)
Councillor Charles James. (Mayor of Worthing)**

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