

# Gracie Fields

*This is the program at Edmonton. I was at her concert. I have kept one picture, and Barry West writes up and stage picture down your note in the Ed. Journal. W. B. [unclear] 10708-84 AVK  
Edmonton*

Gracie Fields first saw the light of day in Rochdale, a small Lancashire town in the north of England, on January 9th, 1898. Right from the very beginning her mother was determined that her Grace was going to go on the stage some day and be the big star that she herself had always longed to be. So Mother, an eminently practical woman, took an eminently practical step to get inside the doors of the theatre world. She did the theatrical laundry for the local theatre, collecting it on Monday and returning it on Friday and Saturday. As a very little girl, Gracie accompanied her Mom and together they would contrive to catch the show from the wings and learn the songs that the stars sang. At the age of seven, Gracie won a singing competition—and a prize of ten shillings. This was the first rung of the ladder “going oop,” as her Mother put it.

From then on she joined juvenile troops, learning to sing and dance. This was all very well for Gracie, but the neighbors began to worry her Mother and Father, saying they were sending young Grace to the devil instead of to school. When she was four-

teen, her Mother decided she must learn a trade, just in case she ever lost her voice. So into the cotton factory went Gracie. Her day started at five in the morning so she could be at the factory when work began at six sharp. A half hour break for breakfast at eight, more work until twelve-thirty, an hour for lunch, and more work until five-thirty in the evening. A full working day, but Gracie didn't do a full day's work! Gracie loved to sing and the girls loved to listen, one of them keeping a lookout in case the boss should catch her out. Of course, the boss eventually did catch her, and out she went. But meanwhile ever-resourceful Mother had been busy collecting names and addresses of managers and agents in Manchester, and she proceeded to waltz young Grace from one to another until she succeeded in getting her a trial show.

This, then, was the real beginning—and from that time Gracie has never looked back and has never left the theatre. From a single variety act, she later went into several revues. The most important of these, “Mr. Tower of London,” ran for six and a half



*Always ready for a “cuppa”*

of concerts in America and Canada for British War Relief and the Navy League. All through the war years Gracie continued working for the U.S.O. and for E.N.S.A., singing to troops and in hospitals in all the Allied war theatres around the world—Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Burma, India, Ceylon, Borneo, New Guinea, the Philippines, Okinawa, Greece, North Africa, Italy, France, and finally in Germany.

After a short vaudeville engagement at the 44th Street Theatre in New York City, Gracie was offered her first radio show. At first only a five minute spot, it very quickly lengthened into a fifteen minute show. Then followed her first American film, 20th Century-Fox's “Holy Matrimony” with Monty Woolley. She takes great pride in the fact that this picture reached the ‘ten best films’ list for that year.

During the course of her varied career Gracie has received many honors, the first from King George VI, when she was made a Commander of the British Empire. In 1964 she took part in her ninth Royal Command Performance. She was one of the

first, and one of the very few actresses to be awarded the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. Her home town gave her the Freedom of the Borough of Rochdale, an honor not often conferred, least of all on women citizens.

Another high spot of her professional career came in 1956 with her performance of her first dramatic part in television, in Sir James Barrie's “The Old Lady Shows Her Medals.” For this she received the Sylvania Television Award for an Outstanding Performance by an Actress, and a nomination by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for the Best Single Performance by an Actress.

These days Gracie doesn't work quite so hard. Years ago in 1930 she had bought a villa on the Isle of Capri as a place to retire to when she reached the ripe old age of fifty. Now she is past sixty, but far from retiring completely. Constantly in demand for appearances in England or Australia, Canada or America, Gracie delights in forgetting about ‘retirement’ to come and do a little more of the work that means so much to her and that she loves so dearly.