

# The Castles of Norwich

## The Irving Berlin Connection



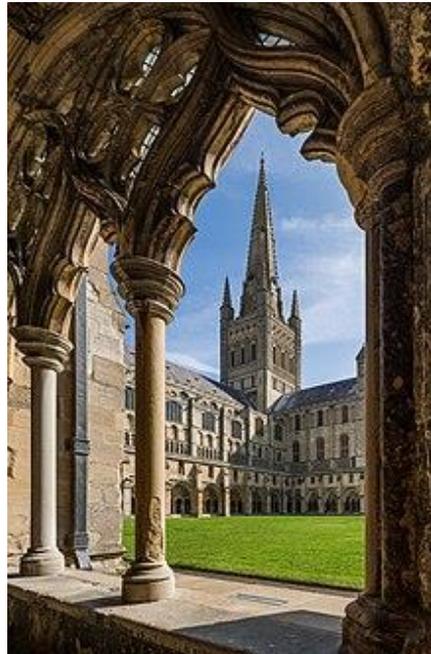
Knowing that I have a readership beyond the City of Norwich, beyond the County of Norfolk in which the city is situated, and even beyond the shores of Great Britain, I would be disappointed if the apparent parochial title of this piece acted as a disincentive to any potential reader. Further reading may reveal some surprising history beyond this locality.

History for the sake of academic learning has never been my favourite subject ever since I was one of the unfortunate pupils who was subjected to the recitation of tedious notes by my now long-passed school history teacher Mr Davies. For some reason long lost in the history of my school, Mr Davies had been given the nickname of Porky by the generations of pupils that had gone before me. I never did fathom the background to that name. Porky was himself a relic of the past with his black gown and mortar-board headwear. Just like the cabbage that I despised then but was made to endure at home, the enforced diet of the history of the Spartans, the Phoenicians and the Athenians left me with a distaste for ancient history which I have never overcome. Such ancient history, and the dreaded cooked cabbage, I can now avoid at my own option. Hurrah!

However, in more recent time I have found that ancient buildings that are part of history and which still exist around me and are often taken for granted or largely ignored in everyday life, can reveal stunning historical facts about their history and about the people associated with them.

The city of Norwich, now my adopted nearest city, has some fine examples of this. Most notable are the city's Anglican Cathedral and the city's Norman castle built around the 11<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the Norman conquest. Both have outer walls built with stone transported from the area around Caen, Northern France. This not only entailed the stone's passage by sea across the English Channel from France, but thereafter its further passage by water into the city via the Wensum river and finally, in the case of the cathedral, via a canal specially dug from the river to the final construction site. No mean task in the tenth or eleventh century. The cathedral spire at 315 ft is the second highest in England after Salisbury Cathedral, the latter

apparently so attractive and important that in 2018 two Russian agents felt they just **had** to visit the city to see the famous Cathedral (also happening to find it convenient to bring with them the nerve agent Novichok to smear it on the door handle of an exiled Russian dissident resident in Salisbury!)



Today Norwich Cathedral enjoys a full life with daily services and a community living in the ancient houses and buildings built around it, which includes the Norwich School, one of the oldest independent schools in the country dating back to the completion of the Cathedral itself.

The other Norman edifice Norwich Castle is now in the hands of the city's Museum Service and has notable collections of paintings, artefacts and natural history displays. The castle maintains a stately presence overlooking Norwich marketplace.



However, fearing that this may become a piece that Porky would have been proud to dryly recite, that's perhaps enough on the history of these great buildings though, if it has any way whetted your appetite, much more information about them is readily available from online sources.

I merely use the forgoing to introduce to you another Norwich Castle that, though little known locally, has a history beyond the city, and in fact more famously in the USA. I start with another Norwich landmark – The Great Eastern Hotel.

The hotel took its name from the Great Eastern Railway station that is situated on the opposite side of the river Wensum and which flows through the heart of the city and which brought that Caen stone. The hotel is accessed from the station by a bridge across the river and is still the main exit from the station into the city. The hotel, later renamed the Nelson Hotel, was rebuilt in a modernised style and is now part of the national budget-hotel chain, Premier Inn.



At the turn into the 20<sup>th</sup> century the hotel was run and occupied by William and Jane Blythe – they had inherited it from William's father. They had five children, four girls and a boy. The eldest girl was Coraline

Maud, born in 1881 and the only boy, Vernon was born in 1887. Vernon attended the Norwich School and later Birmingham University where he gained a degree in engineering. However, Vernon's real passion was entertaining and performing magic tricks. Older sister Caroline, being now known as Coralie, was apparently very independent minded and even rebellious and she was drawn to the theatre, becoming an actress and appearing in London to good reviews. In 1904 she married Lawrence Grossmith, son of famous George Grossmith who had been a stalwart in the D'Oyly Carte comic Savoy Operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. Coralie had become engaged to George in 1896 at the age of 15. Sadly, mother of five Jane Blythe died at the age of twenty-eight when Vernon was only four years old.

Vernon and Coralie were able to demonstrate their theatrical talents by entertaining the clientele at the hotel, and later more widely in other hotels and pubs beyond Norwich and eventually in London. Vernon's major act by then was magic and illusion, basing his act on famous escapologist Harry Houdini. Along the way Vernon changed his name from Blythe to Castle, and I speculate that this was inspired by that great Norman Castle that dominated his home city. To supplement his income, he continued to use his engineering skills too and is credited with inventing the door lock for public toilets enabling people all over the UK, and perhaps beyond to 'spend a penny'.

In 1906 Coralie and Grossmith were invited to take their talents to New York, and they suggested that Vernon, now 19 years, travel with them since his entertainment skills could best be honed and developed to his advantage in the USA. Vernon's entertaining repertoire had now developed into comedy to accompany his magic. His father somewhat reluctantly agreed, but insisted on accompanying them all to the USA. It is recorded that they all travelled in the company of American songwriter Jerome Kern (later of 'Showboat' and 'Smoke Gets In Your Eyes' fame). Father William Blythe apparently returned home immediately, leaving Vernon, sister Coralie and her husband Lawrence Grossmith to find their fame and fortune.

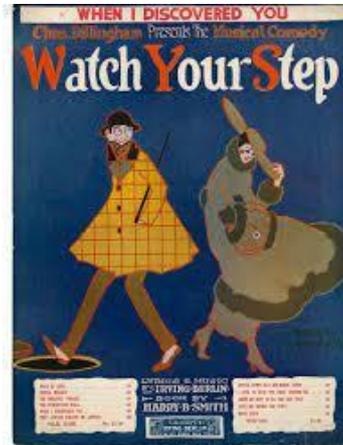
They were greeted in New York by Lawrence's brother George Grossmith Jnr. who was already well connected in the USA, and with producer Lew Fields in particular. Soon Coralie and Lawrence were given parts in Fields' new show *About Town* – and Vernon too was given a comedy role. Vernon's onstage antics soon gained him attention and Fields gave Vernon a run in another of his productions. Soon Fields' admiration and attention was now fully on Vernon as sister Coralie's career went out of the producer's focus. She was to return to London with husband Lawrence Grossmith, the latter becoming a manager at the Savoy theatre, Richard D'Oyly Carte's theatre home for the Gilbert and Sullivan Savoy operas. The Savoy Theatre had opened in 1881 and was first theatre or public building in the world to be lit by electricity generated from steam engines on an adjacent piece of land.

By the age of 23 Vernon was living an independent life as a professional entertainer, his talents now extending to movement and dancing. With his sister now back home and able to keep one eye on his Norwich family, Vernon was able to concentrate on his blossoming career in the USA. His success enabled him to settle in New Rochelle, a city in New York State which gave easy access to the theatres in New York City.

In the hot summer of 1910, he visited a yacht and rowing club on Echo Bay, Long Island as relaxation from his theatrical work. It was a visit destined to shape his future career and life for it was there that he met the self-indulgent Irene Foote, daughter of a physician. Initially branding him much too thin and 'not my cup of tea', she later became infatuated with the fresh-faced, youthful and engaging Englishman, as well as seeing his connections to Fields as a way to further her own ambitions as a dancer and actress. Vernon was obviously attracted to this all-American female who had a love for the pool and poolside at the club, and had cut or bobbed her hair short for convenience after being in the water.

They married twelve months later and, due to his own influence with Fields, Irene was given a part in Fields' 1911 production *The Hen-Pecks*. The couple now concentrated on their dancing, and they performed the

latest American ragtime dances such as the Turkey Trot and the Grizzly Bear. After appearing in Paris for a short spell the pair's reputation in the USA meant that in 1914 they had starring roles in Irving **Berlin's first Broadway production, *Watch Your Step*, written with them in mind.** They added the Fox Trot to their repertoire and later toured with the show across the USA, their elegance and good taste adding respectability to dancing in close physical contact, something that had been viewed with suspicion before.



In addition to their onstage appearances, the couple opened their own dance school and were in demand by the rich such as the Vanderbilts who were apparently prepared to pay \$1,000 an hour for lessons.



As a couple they had now achieved celebrity status, Irene being seen as a paragon of style, fashion and good taste. Her boyish bobbed hair, earlier a convenience to her as a keen swimmer, soon became the style which

all the young female socialites wished to copy. The pair now lent their names and images to advertising various products ranging from clothing to cigars. They also developed together a love of animals, including a favourite monkey, Rastus, that accompanied them to the theatres.

1915, and it now the second year of World War 1 in Europe. Vernon was naturally interested and concerned about the news that was coming across the Atlantic about the conduct of the war and the zeppelin attacks around Norfolk and Suffolk. America was not to enter the war until 1917, despite the loss of around 120 Americans on the Lusitania which was torpedoed by a German U-Boat in May 1915. Among the Americans lost was Charles Frohman, producer of one of the shows in which Vernon and Irene has performed. Frohman was a frequent visitor to England where he leased London's Duke of York Theatre and where he had staged the first production of Peter Pan to much acclaim. Vernon was deeply shocked by the German action against a civilian ship and the unwillingness of US President Wilson to take appropriate action. Vernon was overcome by his feeling of allegiance to his native Britain, and he left the cast of *Watch Your Step* with its weekly pay of \$1,000, to return to the UK, enlisting in the Royal Flying Corps to train as a pilot. He was a natural and fearless pilot showing the same guile and agility in the air that he had shown on the dance floor. He was later to complete 300 combat missions over Europe's Western Front and was awarded the Croix de Guerre by France in 1917.

Irene remained in the USA and continued her acting and dancing career, though '....I found myself lost as a solo dancer....'

With the USA eventually joining the war in 1917, Vernon returned there to become an air training instructor out of Benbrook Field, Fort Worth Texas. His own pet monkey, Jeffrey, accompanied him and the trainee on his training flights.

On 15<sup>th</sup> February 1918, aged thirty, he was taking off to undertake one of these training flights when he was forced to take evasive action to avoid colliding with another incoming flight, the other 'plane seemingly at fault in the course it was taking. His emergency action caused his 'plane to stall and Vernon's aircraft crashed. Though the student pilot and pet monkey Jeffrey survived, Vernon was killed by the impact of the crash.



He was transported with honours to New York where his funeral route was lined by admirers and he was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, New York, burial home of many notable people, including Irving Berlin, composer of the score of *Watch Your Step* that had made him and Irene so famous. A street in Benbrook, Texas is named in his honour where there is also a memorial. It carries the inscription 'He Danced With Death'. Fearing his death in action he had earlier deposited a letter with his sister to be passed to Irene on the event of his death. It ended, 'Be brave and don't cry my angel – Vernie'.

Irene went on to appear in a dozen or so films and shows and remarried three more times before dying in Arkansas in 1969 aged seventy-five. She is buried with Vernon at Woodlawn Cemetery. In some hairdressing circles the Castle Bob is still an understood style of hairdressing for women. Illustrating her love of animals, Irene set up a charity called Orphans of the Storm which still exists today.

There can be no greater tribute to their talent than when, in 1939 Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers played Vernon and Irene respectively in the film *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, though it seems that Irene was very unhappy at certain depictions of her in the film, in particular Ginger's refusal to wear her hair in the Castle Bob style.

Whilst few will be unaware of the immortal dancing partnership of Astaire and Rogers, it is widely accepted that they took their inspiration from Vernon and Irene, and the popularity of ballroom dancing in every age right up to the present owes much to the style and techniques developed by the Castles over one hundred years ago. It is not exaggerating to say that at the height of their fame they were among the few most famous couples in the Western world. Vernon's legacy though goes beyond that of a dancer, having become both a stage celebrity and a war hero in a comparatively short life of 30 years.

Sadly, I find that few in Vernon's home country or City of Norwich are aware of the name Vernon Castle and the impact his life had on the development of dance as well as his exploits as a decorated war hero.

As far as I know, the only tributes to him in Norwich are a room in his name in a far corner of Norwich's city library, and a dusty plaque on what was his hotel home, unnoticed by those who hurry by en route to Norwich railway station or to the nearby night leisure spots. It was unveiled by dance celebrity Darcey Bussell in 2019,

I dedicate this piece to his memory.



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**Vernon Castle  
(1887 - 1918)**

*Innovator of modern dance  
and heroic World War I flying ace.*

*Born in Norwich and brought up in  
The Great Eastern Hotel which  
once stood on this site.*

