

The Blue Plaque

Noel Coward

Nick Rennison

Although he became the epitome of metropolitan wit and sophistication, Noel Coward was actually born in the quiet suburban surroundings of Teddington in Middlesex.

His grandfather had been the organist at the Crystal Palace and he was the son of a piano salesman and a fiercely ambitious mother who devoted herself to furthering his early career on stage. As a teenager he appeared in the D. W. Griffith film 'Hearts of the World' and then shot to fame in 1924 as the writer and star of *The Vortex*, a controversial drama about a tormented young drug addict and his difficult relationship with his mother.

A succession of lighter, stylishly comic plays like 'Hay Fever' and 'Private Lives' kept him in the public eye throughout the 1920s and 1930s. At one point in 1925 he had three shows running concurrently, a record that was not to be matched until Andrew Lloyd Webber repeated it fifty years later.

During World War II Coward worked for the intelligence services and also collaborated with the film director David Lean to create the morale-boosting propaganda drama 'In Which We Serve'. The collaboration was a happy one and, in 1945, the two men worked together again on what has become a classic British movie of the period - *Brief Encounter*.

After the war Coward's type of drama became unfashionable but he reinvented himself as a cabaret artist and a masterly performer of his own songs. As somebody once said of Coward, "he was his own greatest invention." He himself attributed his perennial appeal and his talent to amuse to his capacity, often well-disguised, for hard work. "The only way to enjoy life," he said, "is to work. Work is much more fun than fun."

For the last decades of his life he lived chiefly in Jamaica and it was on his estate there that he suffered a fatal attack in March 1973.

The Blue plaque is on the house in Waldegrave road, Teddington, where Noel Coward was born.



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