

The Blue Plaque

Vivien Leigh

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Born in Darjeeling in India just before the First World War, Vivian Mary Hartley was the daughter of a British businessman and his wife. Married at the age of nineteen to an English barrister called Herbert Leigh Holman and soon the mother of a daughter called Suzanne, she nonetheless pursued her ambition to be an actress, taking her husband's middle name as her own stage alias.

After brief appearances in several low-budget British films, she was signed to a five-year contract by the legendary producer Alexander Korda and, in 1937, he cast her opposite Laurence Olivier in a film called *Fire Over England*. The two stars began a tempestuous relationship that spelled the end for both their marriages.

Two years later Vivien Leigh, who had travelled to America to join Olivier on the Hollywood set of *Wuthering Heights*, won the much publicised prize of the role of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*. That an English actress should play a fiery heiress from the Deep South was much commented on but George Cukor, originally scheduled to direct the film, said she got the part because "there was an indescribable wildness about her" as if she was "possessed of the devil". She won an Oscar for her performance.

Now married to Olivier, she continued a career on stage and screen and the two became the most glamorous and newsworthy couple in Britain. In 1951 she won a second Oscar, this time as the faded Southern belle Blanche DuBois, in the film version of Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

In the years that remained to her, Vivien Leigh's life was overshadowed by both personal problems and health difficulties. She had two miscarriages, the marriage to Olivier broke up and she was diagnosed as a manic depressive.

In 1967 she died of tuberculosis in her apartment in Eaton Square which is now marked with a blue plaque. She was still only in her early fifties. On several nights after her death the lights of London theatres were dimmed in her honour.



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