

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

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Miss Ruby Violet Hurn 1908-2007

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Ruby Hurn playing her violin. Photograph ©Saffron Walden Museum.

On 1 October 2008, Ruby Violet Hurn was born at Madison Bull Lodge, Audley End, where her father, Harry Hurn, was head groom to Lord and Lady Howard de Walden. Her mother was Lydia (Mabel) nee Housden, who bore two younger sisters to Ruby, Connie and Mary. Later on, the family lived at 14 Freshwell Street, and then at 63 Victoria Avenue in Saffron Walden. Ruby, who was educated at Cambridge House in the town, from an early age showed considerable musical ability and a particular aptitude for the violin. She became a pupil of Mr Sydney Brooks, a cellist and orchestral conductor. Aged 13, having played in a concert in aid of parish church funds, Ruby was called forward to the platform where Dr John Atkinson, on behalf of those interested in her career, presented her with an engraved silver serviette ring.

Her ability was recognised when, in 1924 aged only 16, she gained a place at the Royal College of Music, studying under Mon. Rivaide, the principal violin professor. Ruby's remarkable talent, passion for her instrument and great perseverance induced her tutor, Sydney Brooks to approach Lord and

Lady Howard de Walden who, after hearing Ruby play, generously undertook to pay all her fees for the three years she studied at the Royal College.* She received further support from Saffron Walden people when, in order to help her improve her violin technique, funds were raised to enable her to buy a quality instrument. Fund-raising included a concert at Saffron Walden Town Hall, given by the local Orpheus Orchestral Society, and among performers was Miss Olga Haley, one of England's greatest singers. On 9 January 1925, Ruby went to the Parish Room to receive from the townspeople of Walden an 1841 Claud Chevrier violin, which she used for many years.



Poster advertising concert in the Town Hall by Miss Olga Haley.

Ruby travelled each day to London to study, and in her spare time she enjoyed riding her piebald pony, Polly, and playing tennis and hockey with her sisters – she also loved dogs. In 1923 and 1924, Ruby played in the Grand Concert for the Orpheus Orchestral Society, and also in the Amateur Operatic Society's production. She accompanied silent films and led a ladies' string trio that played in the Lefevre Department store in Canterbury. In 1939 she won several awards at the Kent Musical Festival – by then her mother had left Walden, her father having died some years earlier. The Second World War brought an end to this part of Ruby's career. She joined the WAAF and was stationed at Detling, Kent when it was bombed, sheltering in a trench with her dog during the raid. She used her musical talent to entertain the forces and played in entertainments organised by

E.N.S.A., travelling extensively – it was a hectic schedule. Her diary for 1942 shows her playing at RAF garrisons across the country, playing in 45 places in England and Scotland from January to March. Days off seemed to be very rare. On one occasion the comedians in her group were having a hard time with some Irishmen in the audience, but when Ruby took to the stage playing 'Danny Boy', you could have heard a pin drop!

Early in 1943 Ruby went for an audition at the New Theatre with the Sadlers Wells Opera Company. She could sight-read anything. She was invited to join the company at a wage of £10 a week. This was the start of her long association with the English National Opera. The theatre could not house both Sadlers Wells ballet and opera at the same time, and the two companies alternated going on tour. Mrs Pearl Barber joined and she and Ruby became life-long friends, touring as Ruby and Pearl, known as 'the jewels, often in Ruby's van, along with her dog.

After the war the company returned to the Sadlers Wells Theatre, then moved to the Coliseum. Ruby became sub-principal violin and deputy leader of the Sadlers Wells Orchestra. Until her retirement aged 67, Ruby lived in Cricklewood, then moved to Cranleigh in Surrey to be near Pearl and John Barber. From here she would regularly travel to London to play in quartets and join the symphony orchestra at Guildford and elsewhere, as well as playing locally.

During her later years, in spite of deteriorating sight and hearing, she still practiced her violin and aged 80 was still recording pieces with friends. At a reunion in the Coliseum many years after she retired, it was impressive to see the number of players who remembered with immense gratitude this outstanding violinist and leader.

Ruby died aged 98 years on 25 April 2007. During her funeral service held at St Nicholas Church, Cranleigh, a recording of her playing the violin at the age of 80 was included – her ability at that age was still outstanding. Thus ended the long, distinguished and creative life of Ruby Hurn, the Saffron Walden child prodigy who, boosted by the support of the town and its people, went on to become one of the most noted musicians of her time.

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