

Dame Ellen Terry GBE

Key Features

- Born Alice Ellen Terry 27 February 1847, in Market Street, Coventry
- Married George Frederic Watts, artist 20 February 1864 in Kensington. Separated 1864. Divorced 13 March 1877
- Eloped with Edward William Godwin, architect in 1868 with whom she had two children – Edith (b1869) and Edward Gordon (b1872). Godwin left Ellen in early 1875.
- Married Charles Kelly, actor 21 November 1877 in Kensington. Separated 1881. Marriage ended by Kelly's death on 17 April 1885.
- Married James Carew, actor 22 March 1907 in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, USA. Unofficially separated 1909.
- Died 21 July 1928 Smallhythe Place. Funeral service at Smallhythe church. Cremation at Golders Green Crematorium, London. Ashes placed in St Paul's Covent Garden (the actors' church). Urn on display on south wall (east end).

A brief marital history

Ellen Terry married three times and, between husbands one and two, eloped with the man who

Ellen Terry's first marriage was to the artist G F Watts. She was a week shy of 17 years old, young and exuberant, and he was a very neurotic and elderly 46. They were totally mismatched. Within a year he had sent her back to her family but would not divorce her.

When she was 21, Ellen Terry eloped with the widower Edward Godwin and, as a consequence, was estranged from her family. Ellen said he was the only man she really loved. They had two illegitimate children, Edith and Edward. The relationship foundered after 6 or 7 years when they were overcome by financial problems resulting from over-expenditure on the house that Godwin had designed and built for them in Harpenden.

Ellen returned to the stage and, despite being frowned upon for being single with two illegitimate children, she became a successful actress. Pressure was then put on Watts to divorce her, which he eventually did in 1877. Later that year, Ellen married the actor Charles Kelly but after two years he left her for another woman and they were legally separated in 1881.

Ellen married for the third time, in 1907, when she was 60. Her husband was the American actor James Carew who was only 32. Although they met in Britain, they married in the United States when on tour there. This marriage also failed, not least because of their age difference. Neither of Ellen's children liked him – Edith went so far as to plant a hedge between Priest's House and Smallhythe Place so that she would not be able to see him. James Carew did much to modernise Smallhythe Place and, despite separating from Ellen Terry in 1909, remained friends with her. They were still legally married when Ellen died in 1928.



Ellen at 17



Edith, Ellen and Edward



Ellen and James Carew

Biography

Ellen Terry was one of the first modern stars of the British stage. A contemporary of Eleanora Duse and Sara Bernhardt, she acted opposite Henry Irving at the Lyceum Theatre. Her portrait was painted by the leading artists of her day, G. F. Watts and John Singer Sargent. Ellen Terry was a prolific letter writer, famously corresponding with George Bernard Shaw over a long period. A hard-working performer, she toured the UK and USA with the Lyceum company and later lectured in the UK, USA and Australia on Shakespeare's female characters. A generous hearted and free-spirited woman, she was ahead of her time in many ways.

Ellen Terry was the daughter of Benjamin and Sarah Terry, both provincial actors. She was one of eleven children (two of whom died in infancy). Ellen never went to school. She first appeared on the stage on 28 April 1856, at the age of nine, playing the boy Mamilus in Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale" at the Princess's Theatre in London every night for one hundred and two nights. Her older sister Kate, who had begun acting in London in 1852, also played at the Princess's Theatre. She continued acting at the Princess's Theatre until 1859. For the next two years, Ellen and Kate travelled the country as strolling players, accompanied by their parents and a musician. They travelled to a different town almost every day and slept in small inns. The family returned to London in 1861. In 1862, she joined her sister Kate in Bristol and began working with J.H. Chute's stock company where she played a wide variety of parts. When first cast for a burlesque role, Ellen pointed out that she was unable to sing or dance, was told that she had to do it anyway, and grew to enjoy burlesque as much as Shakespeare. It was in Bristol that she met the renowned artist George Frederic Watts when she had posed with her sister Kate for his painting 'The Sisters'. The following year, she again returned to London to join the Haymarket theatre where she appeared in more Shakespearean roles. Around this time, she was photographed by Lewis Carroll and may well have been the inspiration for the Alice (her first given name) of "Alice in Wonderland" which would be published two years later. She was well established as an actress when, in 1864 and still only 16 years old, she married Watts (aged 46). The marriage lasted only 10 months (although they were not divorced until 1877) and she returned to her parents.

In December 1867 she appeared with the great Henry Irving for the first time as 'Katherine' to his 'Petruccio' in "Katherine and Petruccio", Garrick's boiled-down version of the "Taming of the Shrew", and he was so taken with her performance that he promised to make her his leading lady if he ever went into management on his own account.

At the age of 21, Ellen eloped with Edward Godwin, an act that estranged her from her family and the acting profession. She enjoyed domestic life and had two children, Edith (Edy) in 1869 and Edward (Teddy) in 1872, by Godwin. Both children would later adopt the surname 'Craig' (from the rock Ailsa Craig off the Scottish coast) to escape the stigma of being born out of wedlock. Godwin overstretched himself financially with the building of their home in Harpenden and when the bailiffs came knocking, he absented himself, leaving Ellen to support their two children. Ellen had little choice but to return to the stage and enjoyed some early successes.

In 1877 she was divorced from her husband, G F Watts, and shortly afterwards married the actor Charles Kelly. After touring with her new husband in 1878, she became leading lady at the Lyceum Theatre in London when Henry Irving, having taken over the lease there, made good on his promise made ten years previously. This heralded a golden period in her career, and her partnership with Irving would dominate English theatre for the next twenty years. She toured the United States and Canada with Irving and the Lyceum company several times between 1883 and 1902. The partnership ended in 1902 when Irving's lease on the Lyceum expired and, following a period of financial difficulties, the Lyceum company went bankrupt. Ellen's last performance there was fittingly as 'Portia' on July 19th, 1902. She played her last engagement under Irving's management at Bristol later that year before entering into management on her own account. From April 1903 she took over control of the Imperial Theatre with the aid of her son Edward, the first play she produced there being Henrik Ibsen's "The Vikings". Her daughter Edith also joined her there for a time. She appeared with Irving one last time in July 1903, playing her old role of 'Portia' in an all-star benefit performance of "The Merchant of Venice" for the Actors Benevolent Fund. Her tenure at the Imperial was short lived

and Ellen was totally devastated when Irving died two years later (at his hotel shortly after completing what would be his final stage appearance). Ellen took a long break from the stage at this juncture, and even considered ending her career.

She reappeared in April 1906 however, to play 'Lady Cecily Waynelete' in George Bernard Shaw's "Captain Brassbound's Conversion" at The Court Theatre. Her stage career had now spanned fifty years since her earliest performance as a raw nine-year-old child. At the Drury Lane Theatre on 12 June 1908, many famous players joined her in a pastiche of scenes marking her jubilee. Ellen played 'Beatrice' in a scene from "Much Ado About Nothing", W.S. Gilbert personally directed a scene from "Trial by Jury", and even the great Caruso came to sing for her. A testimonial fund was begun for her, which raised the amazing sum (in those days) of around twelve thousand pounds, enough to ensure a comfortable retirement. The proceeds were presented to her at a banquet at the Hotel Cecil where Winston Churchill read an address.

The following year she undertook a successful tour of America - her daughter travelling with her in the capacity of stage-manager. During that tour, in Pittsburgh on 22nd March 1907, she secretly married the American actor James Carew who had been a cast member of "Captain Brassbound's Conversion" with Ellen at The Court in London. It was a reversal of her first marriage, Ellen being almost thirty years the senior of her new husband who was in fact younger than either of her own children. Edith did not approve of the marriage and would have nothing to do with Carew. She even went to the extent of planting a hedge between their homes to ensure that she did not see him. Her new marriage broke up after only two years, seemingly in amicable circumstances as they appeared on stage together after the break-up and continued to share the same registered address.

In 1910 she embarked on another visit to the USA, successfully touring delivering a series of lectures on Shakespeare's heroines, a subject with which she was so intimately familiar. She appeared across the country on this occasion from east coast to west, and was wonderfully received everywhere she appeared. On her return to England, she continued to present these lectures between regular stage appearances over the next few years. In 1914 she undertook a lecture tour of Australia, which was cut short by the start of the First World War. Returning by way of the USA, where she gave more lectures as well as readings and recitations from her best-known roles, she admitted herself to hospital for an operation for the removal of cataracts from both eyes. The operation was only marginally successful.

In August 1916, Ellen made her first cinematic appearance as 'Julia Lovelace' in "Her Greatest Performance". She appeared in 3 subsequent films – The Pillars of Society (1921), Potter's Clay (1922) and The Bohemian Girl (1922). Her last full stage role was as 'the Nurse' in "Romeo and Juliet" at the Lyric from April 1919. Her last stage appearance was in 1925, as the Ghost of Miss Susan Wildersham in Walter de la Mare's "Crossings" at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith.

In May 1922 Ellen Terry received an honorary degree from the University of St. Andrews. In 1925 she was made a Dame, Grand Cross, of the Order of the British Empire (GBE). Alas, she was not the first theatrical Dame (unlike Henry Irving, who was the first theatrical Knight). This honour went in 1921 to Genevieve Ward, a long-forgotten American-born actress who had started her stage career as an opera singer under the name of Madame Guerrabella.

Ellen Terry was a prolific letter writer, famously corresponding with George Bernard Shaw for many years. Her memoirs, "The Story of My Life", were published in 1908, and her correspondence with Shaw appeared as "Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw" in 1931.

Sadly, the last few years of her life were blighted by increasingly blindness and senility although she was still able to divide her time between Smallhythe and her flat in London. But by the end of 1927 the flat had been given up and she spent Christmas that year with Edy at her London flat. Ellen travelled to Smallhythe for the last time in March 1928. Her health continued to decline and, in early July, Edy moved her mother's bedroom downstairs to the sitting room so that she could be taken into the garden in a wheelchair. Ellen suffered a stroke at 10.15am on 17 July and passed away at 08.30 am on 21 July 1928. A funeral service was held in Smallhythe Church on 24 July and then the coffin was taken by road to Golders Green for cremation. In August 1928, after protracted negotiations, her ashes were placed in St Paul's

Covent Garden, London (the actors church). The urn is in a silver box in a "safe" covered with a grille on the south wall of the church near the altar. The silver box was made by John Paul Cooper, a protégé of Ellen, and was originally a biscuit barrel. Edith chose it for the urn in the belief that Ellen Terry would have been amused by it.

Her stage career had spanned an incredible sixty-four years and made her one of the most loved and best-remembered English actresses of all time. Although she was never a great beauty in the conventional sense, Ellen had an innate charm of manner, voice and facial expression that quickly endeared her to all who knew her. In the words of drama critic Dutton Cook she was "an artist of real distinction. With all the charms of aspect and graces of manner gifted with a voice of silvery and sympathetic tone, while her elocutionary method should be prized by her fellow actors". A glowing tribute, issued before her association with Irving and the best performances of her career. Few other women ever contributed so much to the stage as Ellen Terry or, probably, ever will again.

Ellen Terry's estate was valued at £22,231 1s 2d gross (£19,697 16s 3d net), equivalent today to approximately £950,000 gross ((£850,000 net). In a complex series of bequests, she left the property at Smallhythe to Edith Craig, £200 to James Carew (husband) "as a token of goodwill" and £100 to Nelly Gordon Craig (granddaughter). Edith also received one half of the residue (provided that the value of the property was taken by her as part of her half share). The other half share was divided in various proportions among Edward Gordon Craig, Nelly Gordon Craig (granddaughter), Teddy Gordon Craig (grandson), Elena Meo (described as Mrs Elena Gordon Craig, daughter-in-law) and Edith Craig.

Visitors often ask about Ellen's height. No record of her height in adulthood has yet been found but on 21 December 1862, when Ellen was 15 years old, E W Godwin recorded on the back of a photograph (see NT/SMA/PH) Ellen's height then as 5ft 5in. It can be assumed that, as an adult. she was a couple of inches taller.