

BLUE PLAQUE FOR ACTRESS CELIA JOHNSON

Acclaimed stage and film actress, Dame Celia Johnson (1908 - 1982) has been commemorated with an English Heritage blue plaque at 46 Richmond Hill, Richmond upon Thames, TW10, where she was born and lived until 1924. Actor Sir Tom Courtenay unveiled the plaque.

Celia Johnson was born in Richmond upon Thames, the younger daughter of Robert and Ethel Johnson, in 1908. Celia - known to her family as 'Betty' - enjoyed a happy, settled childhood. Educated at a local school and St Paul's Girls' School (1919-26), she excelled at French, gym and lacrosse, and played in the school orchestra under Gustav Holst. Although her acting experience was limited to appearing in the annual French play at school, she decided to apply to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). She later explained, 'I thought I'd rather like it. It was the only thing I was good at. And I thought it might be rather wicked'.

Johnson took up her place at RADA in 1926, and talent was nurtured by her tutor, Alice Gachet, who sent her to Paris to spend a term studying under Pierre Fresnay at the Comedie Francaise. On leaving RADA in summer 1928, she was engaged for the summer repertory season at the Theatre Royal, Huddersfield, where her first role was Sarah Undershaft in Shaw's Major Barbara. Back in London, Johnson appeared at the Lyric, Hammersmith, which brought her to the attention of the actor-manager Sir Nigel Playfair. Johnson quickly gained parts in a string of lightweight West End dramas and reviewers noted her ability to shine in mediocre productions. Johnson's name was made with a two-year run in Merton Hodge's *The Wind and the Rain* (1933-35), followed by a portrayal of Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* (1936) and of the second Mrs de Winter in *Rebecca* (1940); the successful run of *Rebecca* came to a swift end when a bomb destroyed the theatre in September 1940.

During this time, Johnson's personal life flourished - in December 1935 she married the journalist and travel writer Peter Fleming, and following the birth of a son in 1939 she combined acting with an entirely separate family life centred on Merrimoles, her home in Oxfordshire. After the outbreak of war, she joined the Women's Auxiliary Police Corps and later appeared in a publicity film about the ATS, *We Serve* (1942), directed by Carol Reed. Given the demands made on her time by family life and her war duties, Johnson turned to radio and film work as being less time-consuming than the theatre. In 1941 she made *In Which We Serve* with Noel Coward and David Lean,



followed in 1943 by *This Happy Breed* with the same team. The success of these two films prompted Coward to adapt his short play *Still Life* for the screen and in September 1944 Johnson was offered the part of Laura Jesson in her most celebrated film, *Brief Encounter* (1945). Johnson and the rest of the film crew spent four weeks filming on location in Carnforth, Lancashire; she was in her element playing the heroine, a conventional middle-class housewife who falls in love with a doctor, played by Trevor Howard, after a chance meeting in a station buffet.

Immediately after the war, Johnson retreated into family life and had two more children, both daughters, in 1946 and 1947. Although she appeared in a number of plays, including the title-role of the Old Vic's production of *St Joan* (1947), her acting career played second fiddle to her life at Merrimoles for the next decade. An inspired pairing with Ralph Richardson in Robert Bolt's *The Flowering Cherry* proved a welcome return to the stage in 1957, and the following year she was awarded the CBE 'for services to the theatre'.

The 1960s saw Johnson join the National Theatre Company to play in Ibsen's *The Master Builder* (1964) and a revival of Coward's *Hay Fever* (1965). Her performance in *Relatively Speaking* in 1967 first brought Alan Ayckbourn's work to attention in London. Johnson appeared in the film of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* in 1968, and discovered a talent for television drama that sustained her through the 1970s. *Hay Fever* and *Relatively Speaking* were reproduced for television, and she appeared in *Romeo and Juliet*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, and a memorable adaptation of Paul Scott's *Staying On* which in 1980 reunited her with Trevor Howard, her co-star in *Brief Encounter*. In 1981 Celia Johnson was created a DBE, the ninth theatrical Dame since the Second World War.

She died suddenly after suffering a stroke at Merrimoles in 1982, just after Angela Huth's new play *The Understanding* - which opened in a pre-West End run at the Richmond Theatre - had brought her to work again alongside Ralph Richardson. Celia Johnson's daughters, Lucy and Kate, who both attended the unveiling, said: "We are thrilled an English Heritage Blue Plaque has been erected on the house where our mother was born - we are sure she would have been delighted. She loved England and, in a way, portrayed a particular kind of English woman on stage and television and, of course, in her films, notably *Brief Encounter*."

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