

**Basil Hartley and  
Novello House  
(2 Ladywood Road)  
© by Hilary Dyson**



**Novello House**

Novello House, 2 Ladywood Road, is a very substantial Victorian looking house standing in its own grounds. There is a large garden, and a garage which was formerly a coach house. Most of the houses adjoining this property were developed at the end of the 19th century on land that was originally part of a huge estate that included Roundhay Park. This estate that had belonged to the Duke of Norfolk in the dim and distant past was eventually purchased by two affluent Quaker businessmen. In broad terms, the South side of Wetherby road was acquired by Samuel Elam and the North of the road by Thomas Nicholson. At that time Wetherby Road was very much a country road.

The house which was possibly built by the Fenton Brothers, of Woodlands, was perfect for Victorian families but after many years fulfilling this purpose it was purchased in 1976 by Basil Hartley who turned it into a theatrical boarding house though it still kept its aura of a family house.

Basil had successfully combined two careers, one as host of a theatrical boarding house and his second career as a window display artist at Gladys Vollans curtain shop on Vicar Lane. In his youth he was the youngest window display manager in Yorkshire and won many prizes in competitions for which he was very proud. His professional and easy manner contributed a great deal to the popularity of his boarding houses together with the cooking provided by his mother.

Mrs Hartley came from a Dales' farming family and had always been used to providing ample portions for the farm hands, Yorkshire pudding being her speciality. When Basil's father died in the first World War she remarried, became Mrs Hatch and moved to Leeds. Her second husband was a manager for the Co-op. They set up home in a large house on Roundhay Road.

Both Basil and his mother were gregarious and they often took in lodgers. Basil would help to serve the meals and it was there that he learnt how to cater for people. No doubt he made many friends who would spread the word that it was a good place to stay, where they were well fed and looked after. The house on Roundhay Road, no. 183 was called appropriately, Vaude Villa. This house was one of the large red brick Victorian houses that had interesting features like terracotta heads over the doors. They also had long gardens leading to Roundhay Road. Originally the houses had steps with iron railings leading down to the cellar. In 1950 Basil went to live at 34 Wetherby Road and later Basil's mother moved in with him leaving her home in Roundhay Road.

I feel sure that Basil and his mother made a great team. He must have missed her very much when she died, and he donated a seat in her memory that was placed originally in Canal Gardens but was later moved to in front of Oakwood Library. As well as being a great cook she had been an enthusiastic ballroom dancer

and would probably have appreciated the talents of their many professional theatricals such as Des O'Connor, Hughie Green, Max Wall, Deborah Kerr, Jimmy Young and Jon Inman. Inman, like Basil, had originally been a window dresser, before going on the stage. He worked for Austin Reed, which must have been very useful experience when he was in the very successful TV show 'Are You Being Served'.

Basil had many memories of these visitors and had literally hundreds of signed photographs, including one of Grade Fields and her Italian husband Boris.

Basil successfully carried on his family tradition of running a boarding house as well as being a window dresser. Ivor Novello came to 34 Wetherby Road and stayed for several weeks whilst he was appearing at the Grand Theatre in Leeds. This house was eventually named Novello House in his honour when he died in 1951, at the suggestion of Olive Gilbert who often stayed there when she and Ivor were appearing at the Grand Theatre.

Composer, playwright and actor, Ivor Novello was a great favourite with the Leeds theatre-going public. His gentlemanly manner and suave appearance suited the various shows that he starred in such as 'The Dancing Years' and 'King's Rhapsody' Novello's Welsh background and knowledge of music gained from his mother who was a music teacher complimented his natural ability.

Ivor played the piano and sang, he won a scholarship to Magdalen College School in Oxford as a treble. He went on to write music for shows and starred in many of them. One song attributed to him which was very popular during the first World War was called 'Keep the Home Fires Burning'. Musical shows often ran for several weeks in the 40s & 50s some even for years. The Dancing Years ran for ten years in London and toured round England. This show ran in Leeds at the Grand for three weeks and Ivor appeared in this show in the character of Rudi Kleber. Also in the show were Olive Gilbert and Muriel Rayner. Perhaps the most popular song from this show was 'I Can Give

You The Starlight'. Ivor must have got to know Leeds well when he appeared during the war. He also had his productions in Leeds of 'Glamorous Nights' in 1948, 'Perchance to Dream' 1949 and also 'Careless Rapture'. Ivor died in 1951 from a thrombosis only hours after appearing in 'King's Rhapsody'.

It was in the late 70s that Basil finally moved into number 2 Ladywood Road and this house also became known as Novello House. It is a double fronted stone building with eight bedrooms, a drawing room, dining room, sitting room, large kitchen, cellars and bathrooms. There are many noteworthy features like marble fireplaces with oak or mahogany surrounds, chandeliers, stained glass windows, beautiful doors, deep skirting boards, architraves, and ceiling roses. A white piano that Ivor Novello played in the original Novello House at 34 Wetherby Road is now in the sitting room at 2 Ladywood Road.



**The baby grand piano Ivor Novello used to play**



**Fireplace at Novello House**

When his mother died, Basil decided not to provide meals for his guests and he put in a small kitchen that his guests could use whenever they liked. As the guesthouse was only a few minutes walk away from the Oakwood shopping parade, this gave many of us the opportunity to see these famous people in our local shops.

The Society's Honorary Treasurer, Jeanne Wriggleworth, was a personal friend of Basil Hartley and she has happy memories of him. He used to recommend her shop, 'Upper Crust', to his guests for their 'before theatre' light meals, usually telling her in advance whom to expect. He advised her to address his star guests by name, to show she had recognised them but they both realised it would be inappropriate to allow requests for autographs in a busy shop. He also gave her advice on her shop's window dressing. To be invited to Novello House for a sherry and to listen to some of Basil's stories about the stars, Jeanne says, was a real treat.

Basil was a kind-hearted man. His theatrical boarding house was clearly not a suitable place for pets or children but there were occasions when he would make exceptions to these rules. When a young up-and-coming comedian, who later went on to become a very successful star of films and TV for many years, turned up on his doorstep with his wife and family, they were made welcome, and another exception was made in the case of Irene Handl's little dog, her constant companion.

To be able to stay in the lovely warm welcoming atmosphere of Novello house after a hectic time on the stage in Leeds must have been a great relief to many show business personalities. This is borne out by the many stars who returned year after year. Basil is remembered by many show business people as a good personal friend who provided a homely refuge in which to relax and recuperate after long hours treading the boards at the Grand Theatre.

When Basil died in 1997 there were messages of remembrance and appreciation in the newspapers. The house was however left in the capable hands of his niece who continued for a while to carry on the family tradition.

Now however, Novello house is being sold and so will probably revert to being a private house. I feel sure though that the warm friendly atmosphere of the house will continue. Maybe perhaps, in occasional quiet moments, there will be heard distantly muffled strains of Novello on the piano, the clinking of teacups and guffaws of laughter, visiting relics of a wonderful bygone age.

## **Acknowledgements**

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