

'Let's have a song about the Isle of Man' ¹

Florrie Forde at the Derby Castle: 1900-1939

Maurice Powell

Florrie Forde was the best loved and most enduring variety artiste who ever appeared in Douglas, and the variety artiste that the Manx truly took to their hearts. She made her debut at the Derby Castle on 10th September, 1900, at the beginning of a two-week engagement, billed as 'The charming and popular comedienne', supported by Zanfretti and Napio, the 'continental grotesques and musical knife grinders', and Bedini and Arthur, a comedy juggling act.²

Variety artistes - 'all of them very good ones' - appeared during the intervals in the very full dance programmes during which the 'believers in the poetry of motion', and 'lovers of the terpsichorean art', jostled around the magnificent ballroom of the 'Palace by the Sea', to the enchanting music from Harry Wood's excellent band.³ She was a handsome, magnificently-bosomed, young woman, twenty-five years old, and a petite 7st 2lbs. Within twenty years she will have ballooned to a Valkyrie-like 16st, and frequently made reference to her ample proportions, and unlikely role as a pantomime principal boy, in her songs.⁴

By 1900 Florrie was starting to make a name for herself in the London music halls where she first appeared, fresh from Australia, at three halls during the Bank Holiday of 1897.⁵ In fact she had been on the stage since the age of fourteen, and one of her first recorded appearances was in 1892 when she sang George Grossmith's comic song *See Me Dance the Polka*. From the beginning she seems to have enjoyed the direct communication and lively exchanges with her audiences rather than the more produced and directed format of pantomime.

She appeared in Melbourne, Adelaide and Sidney, sometimes billed as 'A Charming Serio-comic Artiste', or the 'Australian Marie Lloyd', and sang songs which some thought risqué, such as *How do they do it?* which attempts to portray the intricacies of love-making with a barmaid, a coster's donah⁶ and an actress, and *She Wore a Little Safety Pin, Behind*. Charles K. Harris' *After the Ball* was another early success. In 1894 she made her debut with Harry Rickards, the London-born 'lion comique' and impresario, known as the 'Wizard of Oz!', who had settled in Australia after a career as a music hall performer.⁷

She had been with Rickard's company three years when G. H. Chirgwin, 'The White-eyed Kaffir', encouraged her to go to London, and asked her to tour with him. She declined his offer, but after a farewell benefit concert in 1897, which raised £260, she travelled to London to 'go it alone', appearing at three London music halls that August Bank Holiday. Even at this early stage in her long career, she had 'an uncanny faculty for taking hold of an audience', according to the music hall historian S. Theodore Felstead.

'Her catchy songs never fail to please'⁸

Florrie's reviews during her first two Douglas seasons were brief, generally positive, but failed to mention any of her songs by name. Harry Wood, the musical director at the Derby Castle, recalled

years later in *Cavalcade*⁹ that she sang *Down at the Old Bull and Bush* - her first big hit, and a music hall 'classic', which in fact she actually first sang in Douglas in 1904 - and some of her earlier successes such as *He kissed me when he left me, and told me to be brave, Not a M-U-G, What-ho, She Bumps* and two songs which she had brought with her from Australia: *Only a Working Girl* and *The Day I Backed the Winner*.¹⁰

The essential elements of her act were in place from her first Douglas appearances. According to the *Times*, she was 'an artiste of reputation . . . who can sing!' Her songs caught on immediately and her audiences 'took up' the choruses with gusto. Not everyone was impressed. The reviewer in the *Manx Sun* in September 1900 wrote rather snootily: 'I never could see any art in such music hall turns as Miss Florrie Forde gave us'. His was a minority opinion for the overwhelming majority of holiday makers ' . . . heard Miss Florrie Forde with pleasure, and sought the kingdom of sleep, well satisfied with their night at the Derby Castle'.¹¹

Florrie appeared at both the Palace Opera House and the Derby Castle Ballroom in 1901, but thereafter appeared exclusively at the latter venue. Furthermore, in 1901, the local newspapers began their thirty-two year fascination with her extravagant and flamboyant costumes. 'New songs, handsome dresses' promised the *Times* when promoting her 'Special and Expensive Engagement'.¹²

For reasons which can only be guessed at, at this distance in time, Florrie did not appear in Douglas in 1902. Her name is absent from the surviving Palace & Derby Castle Company engagement and account books,¹³ and the local newspapers. Perhaps some of her songs were considered too risqué by the management of the company who were anxious to advertise their entertainments as 'Keeping Comedy Clean with Real Family Shows'. Songs such as *How Do They Do It* and *You Know and I Know* were perhaps too redolent of Marie Lloyd and the seedier, naughtier side of music hall entertainments. Florrie's was 'a sugared wink' rather than a knowing, saucy one!¹⁴

Florrie returned to the Derby Castle in August 1903 and impressed the *Times* reviewer with her 'fine physique, abounding vivacity and an abundant voice . . . even in the furthest corner of the crowded pavilion, every word told'. After only two seasons at the Derby Castle she was welcomed back as ' . . . an old favourite of this town . . . and with her bright and catchy songs made a great success'.¹⁵ Four songs are mentioned in her reviews including Henry M. Watson's *Looping the Loop with Lucy* - from whom she bought 'all rights' for a guinea - a song about a girl who, tiring of motor cars, takes to the air for her thrills; *Ba! Ba! Ba!* about a sheep stealer who evades justice by pretending to be a sheep! and *That's What the Girl Told the Soldier*. A report in *Examiner* declared that Florrie was 'a better comedienne than whom it would be difficult to find'.¹⁶

In 1904 the *Mona's Herald* noted that her 'new and catchy songs, which are well received by the audience', included *Bull and Bush, Ba! Ba! Ba!* and *What is the Use of a Man?* The *Examiner* referred to her as 'the Chiefest amongst the variety turns . . .' and noted that *Bull and Bush* was encored.¹⁷ The supporting acts that year included Vasco the mad musician, who played 25 musical instruments in fifteen minutes, and The Matweef Hugostons, a troupe of comedy vocalists, whirlwind dancers and acrobats.

The *Manx Sun* referred to her as ‘. . . the famous burlesque artiste, and perhaps the greatest attraction’, and noted that the great reception she received from Lancashire visitors particular, ‘speaks volumes for her popularity’.¹⁸ Her ‘fine physique, abounding vivacity, and abundant voice, which she knows how to use’, was remarked upon by the *Times* and that her songs were ‘melodious and well chosen . . . what Florrie Forde sings tonight will be hummed or whistled by the woman, man, girl or boy in the street’.¹⁹ Appearing in the Derby Castle ballroom at 9.45 each evening, she normally sang four or five songs, some of whose catch choruses ‘took’ immediately, such as *Here’s Your Hat, What’s Your Hurry*. Her willingness to comply graciously with pressing requests for encores further endeared her to the holiday makers.

A curious incident occurred in Douglas in August 1904, and attracted a good deal of attention in the local newspapers.²⁰ Florrie became embroiled in a fracas on the pier when seeing a friend onto a steamer. Her party had apparently gone on board to wish their friends *bon voyage* prior to the sailing and upon disembarking had inadvertently used the passenger only gang-way. This resulted in an altercation with some of the pier constables, instigated by the use of ‘provoking language’ from a Mrs May Turnbull, and an amount of ‘pushing and shoving’, during which Florrie sustained a slight abrasion to the skin of her right wrist, and some ‘pain at the back of right knuckle’. Florrie and friends together with the constables concerned appeared at Douglas Magistrates Court on 20th August, and all charges were dismissed as the evidence was considered to be contradictory and ambiguous. Each side paid their own costs as both were ‘a little to blame’.

Perhaps the most interesting piece of gossip to emerge from this trivial event was the fact that Florrie was said to accompanied by her ‘husband’ Percy Krone, and that ‘Mrs Krone is known as Florrie Forde in the profession’. Percy Krone was not Florrie’s husband, but the American co-writer of the lyrics of Tilzer’s *Down at the Old Bull and Bush*. She was at this time between husbands, but whether she and Mr Krone were anything more than friends and business colleagues, is mere speculation.²¹ He may well have been accompanying her as she toured that summer in order to gauge the popularity of *Down at the Old Bull and Bush*, which had been adapted from the earlier brewing company commissioned song, *Under the Anheuser Bush*, the previous year. This would not be the only occasion in Douglas during which Florrie acted forthrightly in the face of what she perceived to be officiousness. Life could never be said to be dull when Miss Florrie Forde was in town.

Florrie Forde introduced new songs to Douglas each season in addition to the pick of the crop from previous seasons. Thus, *Bull and Bush* was demanded in July 1905 along with four other songs including *All Aboard for Douglas*, ‘a new song with a local flavour’, probably adapted from Orlando Powell’s and Henry von Tilzer’s *All Aboard for Margate*, which seemed likely to equal the popularity of *Bull and Bush* at least for that season:

All aboard for Douglas! Come! Let’s be jolly with Maudie and Molly . . .

Maidens and Misses, they all love their kisses, so all aboard for Douglas on a summer’s day!

Billed as 'England's premier burlesque artiste', Florrie introduced *Has Anybody Seen a German Band* in 1906. In September she appeared at the benefit night for Charles Fox Jnr, the manager of the Palace & Derby Castle Company, and the local newspapers recorded that:

Her vogue shows no sign of declining . . . always a magnificent reception . . . she would stay on stage all evening . . .

She's a Lassie from Lancashire featured in 1907, and *Oh Oh Antonio* in 1908. In 1909 she introduced the first and most enduring of her 'Kelly' songs, *Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?*, the chorus of which contains a neat reference to the previous year's 'hit' song:

He's as bad as old Antonio, left me on my own-i-o.²²

In 1910 another hugely popular song with a Manx flavour was first heard at the Derby Castle: Will Letter's and C. W. Murphey's *Flanagan*, which in turn contains a reference to *Kelly* in the chorus:

Take me where the folks all cry, K-E-double- L-Y!²³

Meet me in Kellyland appeared in 1911 along with the knowing *They're all single by the seaside*:

They're all single by the seaside, all single by the sea . . .

When they see a pretty face, or a dainty piece of lace,

They're all single by the sea.

In 1912, the year she appeared at the first ever Royal Command Variety Performance in the presence of King George V, she introduced *We Must Have a Song About the Isle of Man* and *Hello! Hello! Who's Your Lady friend?* into her act. The key to her success was undoubtedly her ability to 'make a song go' with an audience, and furthermore, if an audience didn't pick up the chorus after the first hearing, she would drop the song from her act!

On 21st July 1913, Florrie 'floated' onto the stage at the Derby Castle and into history. Before an audience of four thousand, she sang one of her most famous songs for the first time, *Hold Your Hand Out Naughty Boy*. However, the occasion became momentous because of a quite different song altogether, *It's a long way to Tipperary*, which was destined to become one of the iconic marching songs of the First World War, although at first she was reluctant to include it in her act.²⁴ The *Times* caught the mood of the occasion in its coverage of her appearances that season:

. . . how they sang the choruses boosted by soldiers' voices. . . never has Florrie Forde received such a reception. . . it is doubtless whether any other artiste could please a Bank Holiday crowd like Miss Forde.

Within a few short weeks, the ballrooms and variety theatres at the Palace and the Derby Castle had fallen silent. The variety and concert artistes cancelled their engagements, and Douglas rapidly became a ghost town, devoid of entertainment. It was to be a long and dismal five years before the town came alive again to the sounds of Harry Wood's dance orchestra and Florrie once again leading the holiday crowds in her exuberant choruses.

'I'm Fat, Fair and Forty': Florrie Forde in the 1920s

Some stars from the heyday of music hall continued to appear in Douglas after the First World War for a while including Little Tich, Hetty King and Wilkie Bard, but only Florrie continued to appear in

Douglas season after season between the wars, a cherished reminder of the good old days. Florrie's relationship with the Isle of Man, its people and its visitors, was recognised as special and unique.

Her return to Douglas after an absence of five years was a triumph. She had been appearing at the Derby Castle when war was declared, and here she was at the Palace for Glasgow Fair week in July 1919, as 'sonsie and buxom as ever'. The *Times* hailed her as 'probably the greatest chorus singer in the world' and declared that 'no more popular vocal comedienne than Miss Forde has ever occupied the variety stage in Douglas'.²⁵ Florrie's engagement was normally for three and sometimes four weeks in late July and early August, and every season she brought with her not only new songs, but amazing new dresses, each costing over £100. During her act she usually sang five songs with five changes of costume and miraculously needed only one minute between songs to change from one dazzling creation to another. The *Mona's Herald* reporting on her 1920 costumes wrote: '... her dresses are creations of gorgeous design and beauty and command breathless admiration'.²⁶

Some fascinating cartoons of the stars appearing at the Palace and Derby Castle were published during June and July 1923 in *The Evening Telegram*, and Florrie is depicted in full highland costume during 'Scotch Week', although there is no record of her ever wearing such an outfit.²⁷ Indeed the cartoonist admitted that 'I have drawn her in this costume because her others are too wonderful'. As indeed they were, for more column inches would be devoted to her sumptuous frocks, their 'beautiful material and exquisite design', than were expended on her songs. Indeed, during the 1930s *Femina* of the *Times Woman's Sphere* paid an annual visit to the Derby Castle just to interview Florrie and report on her new gowns: 'There seems to be no end to Miss Forde's wardrobe', she wrote.

Her songs in the immediate post-war seasons included war-time favourites such as *Pack up your Troubles* and *Mademoiselle from Armentieres*, but apparently she declined to sing *Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly* despite the Palace audiences calling for it. Perhaps she wished to reserve her 'Kelly' songs for the Derby Castle, or she instinctively began to feel that it was time to introduce new, more modern themes into her act.

In August 1919 she transferred to the Derby Castle which once again became her true Douglas home. So many people wanted to see her that Florrie was the only variety artiste who traditionally performed in the Derby Castle ballroom, rather than the smaller variety theatre. The soubriquet 'larger than life' applies to her more than any other artiste who appeared in Douglas, and her popularity was such that even her 'ample proportions' could be gently poked fun at:

We heard a Palace director say the other day that Miss Florrie Forde always filled the Derby Castle ballroom whenever she appeared. We know Miss Forde can always take a joke at the expense of her ample proportions, but surely ...²⁸

Away from the variety stage in the world of pantomime, Florrie was a rather matronly type of principal boy.

'Forde, and the world Fordes with you'²⁹

Florrie's new topical songs included *Oh, Georgie, what are you going to do?* - a song about a young girl whose marriage is postponed whilst her husband-to-be was in France - and according to Harry

Wood in *Cavalcade, Flanagan*, one of her most popular Manx songs. She also introduced a new 'Kelly' song: *Kelly's Come Back*, and *Hold my hand I've got Wind up*, a song about a young girl taking her first flight, which mirrored Florrie's own experience of a flight she took in an Avro biplane from Douglas beach during that first post-war summer. Florrie 'thoroughly enjoyed' the experience and received a great reception on landing.³⁰ For the 1920 season she introduced *I'm forever blowing bubbles* and the *Mona's Herald* recorded the audience's approval:

. . . and she will induce her admirers to shout her choruses with enthusiasm. She is not to be judged by any rule. She is a real distinct personality, who has endeared herself to a great big public. Whilst on stage she holds her audience by the sheer electricity of her musical individuality.

The songs Florrie introduced to Douglas between the wars are not amongst those that she is most remembered for today: the old favourites like *Bull and Bush, She's A Lassie From Lancashire, Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly, Oh, Oh Antonio*, and the song she didn't take to at first, *Tipperary*. However, many of her post-war songs were more up to date although none of them embraced the current jazz style that the contemporary dances did. She first sang *Old Pal, Why Don't You Answer Me* in 1921, *Ma, Look at Charlie and Sally* in 1922 and *Yes! We Have No Bananas* in 1923, a song whose instant success prompted a competition at the Derby Castle open to all adult amateurs for the best performance of the chorus.³¹ The judges were Florrie herself and the music publisher Lawrence Wright, and the song competition proved to be so popular that that it was repeated the following year with a new song, *Pasadena*, and thereafter became a regular feature of her annual engagement.

It was at this period that Florrie began to tour with her own revue: *Flo and Company*, whose cast included newcomers Chesney Allen and Bud Winthrop - who adopted Florrie's maiden name of Flanagan- whose careers she encouraged and fostered, and who became famous as Flanagan and Allen. In February 1924 the death of Henry James Williams, credited along with Jack Judge as the author of the song *Tipperary*, was announced in the *Manx Free Press*, which in a brief obituary reminded readers that Florrie had first sung the song in Douglas in July 1913. *Seminola*, her big hit of 1925, was also the competition song that year during a season that also heard perhaps the silliest song she ever sang: *A n'egg, some n'ham and a n'onion*:

Some people like bacon for breakfast, that is the usual dish . . . others like porridge, bananas and tripe, and some folk would rather have fish.

The chorus contains two strange references: the first to the hanging of the murderer Charlie Peace and his last hearty breakfast of bacon; the second to Joe Peck and 'the sledge-hammer punch'.³²

The names of the winners of the annual song competition were occasionally published in the newspapers, and we learn that in 1926, a Mrs Moore of Macclesfield received the first prize of £6 for her spirited rendering of *I ain't never been kissed*. This song was another of Lawrence Wright's publications, thus it will be appreciated that not only were the competitions great fun and enjoyed by all, they also proved to be an excellent vehicle for promoting a publishers' latest songs.

'Good old Florrie'

Florrie's popularity continued undimmed during the years up to World War II. She seemed to be an unstoppable force; the summer visitors couldn't get enough of her, never tired of hearing the old and new songs and speculating about her extravagant costumes. The *Ramsey Chronicle* summed up her appeal in the following words:

She has a place in everybody's heart . . . she gets everyone to forget themselves, lose their dignity, and to join in the chorus and enjoy it.³³

Another reviewer, in the *Examiner*,³⁴ was unable to recall when she first appeared in Douglas - or out of sensitivity chose not to speculate - but noted that she 'still retains her old charm'. In other words, at heart she was an old-style music hall star, who never sought to change her act and never lost the loyalty of her audiences.

A personal act of charity which particularly endeared her to the Manx people occurred in 1927, when she erected a tombstone at her own expense - a white memorial tablet - in Kirk Patrick Churchyard over the grave of an 'Unknown British Sailor' washed ashore near Peel in February 1918, inscribed with the words:

'Some Mother's Son'. Erected by Florrie Forde, 1927.

Florrie visited the grave every year, always leaving a bouquet of red and white roses, and together with the music publisher Bert Feldman, took charge of its maintenance by having a collection box installed at the gate.³⁵

Femina continued to report on Florrie Forde's eye-catching costumes, but increasingly paid tribute to her endeavours on behalf of Manx charities, noting one year that:

. . . she had not been on the Island two minutes before she started the organisation of the charity fete . . . in which she is the shining light. She is an ardent worker for charity, and Manx charities have a particular claim on her *because she loves the Island intensely*.

The charity fête in question was inaugurated by Florrie in 1924, when, at her own expense, she organised stalls on the promenade selling all manner of items, and raised £50 for the Lifeboat Institution, and just over £27 each for Noble's Hospital and the Isle of Man Children's Home. The following year Noble's Hospital received £60 from this event, and in 1926 she considerably expanded her original idea to include a Dance and Cabaret at the Derby Castle which featured five syncopated bands, Harry Wood's orchestra, comedians, singers and dancing girls. Florrie's charity garden fête quickly became established as an annual event in the summer entertainment calendar and soon moved to the more spacious Palace grounds. Florrie and her guest artistes from the current Douglas shows gave their services free and the Directors of the Palace & Derby Castle Company made no charge for the use of their facilities. The 1926 fête raised just over £313, and the funds were again distributed by Florrie in person to her favourite Manx charities: Noble's Hospital, the Children's Home, and the Lifeboat Institution.

In 1930 three thousand holiday makers attended the fête and £300 was raised. On this occasion she sang some of her old favourites including *Hold Your Hand Out*, *Naughty Boy*, *Kelly*, *Flanagan* and *Bull and Bush* accompanied by Harry Wood's Palace Orchestra. The year 1933 was another bumper

year with comedians Sandy Powell and Billy Bennett appearing; the side-shows, stalls and afternoon teas on the Coliseum verandah proved to be very popular. A record four thousand people attended the 1935 fête, and £280 was raised for Noble's Hospital and the Jane Crookall Maternity Home, who, coincidentally, were celebrating the birth of their 1000th baby that year. The fête took place every year up to and including 1939, and over the years new charities, such as the Work for the Workless Fund, were added to her preferential list. The largest amount of money raised at a single event was £344 in 1937.

Sadly, only one item of correspondence between Florrie Forde and Harry Wood, the musical director she was most closely associated with on the Island, has survived in the shape of a brief note posted a few days before her appearance in Douglas for Scotch Week, 1930, her twenty-fourth visit to the Island:

10, Howitt Rd

NW3

16.7.30

Dear Harry Wood

All being well will be with you on Monday morning. Please let me know to the Castle Mona times for rehearsal.

Sal & obbli (?)

Yours sincerely

Florrie Forde

Not a great deal can be deduced from this note,³⁶ other than she probably travelled to the Island on Saturday 19th or Sunday 20th July, stayed at the Castle Mona Hotel next to the Palace complex, and would be available to rehearse her songs the following morning in readiness for her first appearance that evening at the Derby Castle.

The Star of Film and Radio

In August 1929 Florrie Forde made her first broadcast from the BBC's London studios; she was subsequently inundated with congratulatory letters and telegrams which both delighted and surprised her, as she had little idea of just how loved she was outside 'good old Lancashire'. She admitted to being nervous at first, standing in front of the microphone in a small room full of people, but soon got used to things. In 1933 she sang *Kelly* in a concert broadcast on the National Programme, and recorded *She's a Lassie from Lancashire*.

She was 'on the air' again on Saturday 10th August, 1935, as part of a special 'Isle of Man Night', a broadcast tour of the main Palace & Derby Castle Company entertainment venues, which featured Florrie at the Derby Castle, Douglas Swallow's band from the Palace and the organist George Tootell from the new Regal Cinema.³⁷ Florrie sang *Warm the Little Cockles of Your Heart* and a new song *Lullaby of Broadway*, and judging from the many appreciative letters received at the *Times* office shortly afterwards, 'Douglas on Air' brought back many happy memories of the 'Sunshine Isle'.

In November 1934 she appeared in a short film entitled *My Old Dutch*, advertised as 'a heart-warming cockney cavalcade', which was shown at the Royalty Cinema, Douglas. That same year she appeared in *Say It With Flowers*, which told the story of a group of London shopkeepers who organise a benefit concert in their local pub to raise enough money to send a sick lady to the seaside for her health. Other music hall stars who also appeared in the film included Charles Coborn and Marie Kendall. In 1936 she starred in *Royal Cavalcade*, a film about the reign of King George V, during which she sang *Tipperary* during the First World War scenes. Florrie was heard on the radio again in 1937 in a series called 'Scrapbook for the Year'. The year in question was 1913, and she featured in the final scenes which were set on the Isle of Man.

The Falcon Cliff Hotel was the setting for a scene in a short film version of the pantomime *Cinderella*, made on the Island by Falcon Cliff Studios in July, 1938, with the proceeds donated to charity. She appeared as the abused, humble kitchen drudge who becomes a Princess, complete with a nine-foot-long wedding train made from a table cloth. Other cast members included Eva Kane as Prince Dandini, and Billy Danvers and David Poole as the Ugly Sisters.³⁸ The following year the Falcon Cliff Hotel was again used for scenes in *Red Riding Hood*, when she once again played the title role, with a supporting cast who again included Eva Kane, Billy Danvers and the Perfectly Proper Pyjama Girls.³⁹

Rumours of my retirement are greatly exaggerated.

It was in 1927 that rumours of her impending retirement started to circulate. Her response? Not Yet! The rumours faded away for a few seasons as she continued to be as popular as ever and, apparently, to preserve the secret of eternal youth. In 1931 whispers began to circulate again when the *Ramsey Chronicle* announced that it was 'probably her last appearance in Douglas'.⁴⁰ *The Mona's Herald* countered this claim, declaring authoritatively that she was 'definitely not retiring, though she is uncertain as to whether or not she will again appear at the Derby Castle'.⁴¹ Reviewing her last appearance of the season in August the *Herald* seemed to have changed its mind:

It was with great reluctance that the holiday crowd bid farewell to Miss Florrie Forde, the famous chorus-song singer, at the Derby Castle ballroom on Saturday night . . . there are *rumours* that this maybe her last visit.

The reviewer admitted that it was hard to imagine a Manx holiday season without her as she was loved not just as an artist 'but as a woman of great generosity'.

Needless to say, Florrie was back at the Derby Castle the following year, although she was not present during Scotch Week due to illness. When she did appear she seemed far from well, but rallied, and seemed much like her old self in front of the huge audiences as she let rip with *When the Band Goes Marching By*, *When the rest of the crowd goes home*, *Pull up your socks* and *Auf Wiedersehen*, during which she sang the verse and Miss Grace Hartington - appearing in the revue *Non-Stop Nonsense* - sang the first chorus from the balcony. She was recalled several times and presented with a bouquet after each song. The *Examiner* enthused about her 'gorgeous dresses, each costing hundreds of pounds', and her 'magnetic personality which moves everyone to song', and stated without any supporting evidence, that this was 'definitely her last appearance in Douglas'.

Florrie herself added to the confusion during an interview with Arthur Q. Moore in the *Mona's Herald* in July 1933 when she responded to the persistent rumours about her imminent retirement:

I think that you may take it as definite that this month's engagement in Douglas will be the last as far as the Isle of Man is concerned – but I am not going to say that I am retiring completely from the stage.

In July 1935, *The Mona's Herald* opened its season's preview with the following statement:

Did you Know? That it is practically certain that Miss Florrie Forde will be coming to the Island again next season- in spite of those "retirement" stories.

And so it proved to be for four more seasons.

She still wields her old spell.

The crowds attempting to get into the Derby Castle Ballroom to see Florrie perform grew larger as the 1930s progressed. In 1934 the ballroom was packed to the rafters as seven thousand holiday makers joined in the choruses, and received a tremendous reception that seemed to overwhelm her. The costumes were more extravagant than ever, and, as the *Examiner* observed: 'Florrie leading her mighty chorus each night is certainly one of the highlights of Douglas . . .' The following year even the huge Palace Ballroom could not accommodate all those who wished to see and hear her. Wherever she went, her biggest fan went with her, and was always at the side of the stage during her performances: her Pekinese Bonzo, who apparently could speak just one word: 'Mother'.

During Florrie's 1935 season the *Examiner* reprinted an article from August 1910 announcing the death of Will Letters, co-author of *Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly? Flanagan and Wilkie Bard's Put Me on the Island Where the Girls are Few*. The appearance of this article will have brought back memories for her, although she may have been surprised by the implication that *Kelly* 'became so popular as to be a nuisance'.

New songs appeared as regular as clockwork every season: *Let's All be a Happy Family*, *Diddle-dum-dee*, *I'm Fair, Fat and Forty* and *Riding the Range in the Sky* to name just a few. A favourite encore during Scotch Week was Harry Lauder's *A Wee Deoch-an-Doris*, during which the audiences swayed and joined in with gusto, just as they had always done.

Florrie in her own words

In 1924 Florrie wrote a series of articles for the *Empire News* about her remarkable career, extracts of which appeared in the *Examiner* later that year.⁴² Written with 'delightful frankness, and in a breezy and refreshing style', she attempted first of all to 'apply the closure to the interminable arguments which have raged for many years over the lady's age'. Although she had been touring the halls for 'a good number of years . . . but not as long as some people think', Florrie confirmed that she was not yet sixty, and contrary to some reports had not been performing for fifty-nine years. 'I am forty-eight on the 14th August, and I have only been on the halls thirty-three years'.

Her life story featured many references to her years at the Derby Castle and one concerning a second brush with the law. Florrie and lady friend were seeing the friend's husband off on a steamer from Victoria Pier, and as the lady attempted to give her husband a last hug before departure, she was roughly pulled away by a policeman. Florrie was indignant and flew to her friend's defence

crying: 'How dare you put your hands on a lady!' She found herself restrained 'and before I knew where I was I found myself sitting on the pier, looking as dignified as 16 stones very well could'. She was summoned for obstruction but countered with a summons for assault against the police whom she referred to in court as 'a lot of Manx cats'. Both cases were dismissed. Florrie always looked back on the incident as something of a joke: 'I never have happier times anywhere than in the dear little Isle of Man'.

Florrie also shed some light on her terms of engagement in Douglas, and confirmed that it was she who insisted that she always perform in the Derby Castle Ballroom rather than the variety theatre. Apart from the fact that the theatre could never hold the thousands of holiday makers who clamoured to hear her, Florrie responded to her audiences best when they were just a few feet in front of her. She revealed that one season the crowds joined in with the choruses so vigorously that the police asked if she would request her audiences not to sing her choruses on the promenades as it was causing a disturbance. She graciously acquiesced, but wrote 'It struck me as being the way of making them do it more than ever'.

In an interview with the *Mona's Herald* in 1933, Florrie recalled that the music publishers Bert Feldman and Lawrence Wright often mingled with the crowds as she 'tried out' the latest songs, 'anxiously awaiting the holiday makers' verdict'. The most popular songs could make a small fortune for the publisher and composer if she could 'make them go', and if Florrie couldn't make a song 'go', nobody could. Further insights into her years at the Derby Castle came from an interview with 'The Song King', Bert Feldman in the *Mona's Herald* in 1935.⁴³ Feldman was credited with bringing Ragtime and Jazz to Britain, but in the course of the interview conceded that as a result popular music was 'dominated by rhythm as opposed to melody'. He continued:

What strikes me most about the holiday crowds this year is that they have gone right back to the old-time type of chorus song. Two of the biggest song successes of the moment were written over sixty years ago. And just look at the popularity of Miss Florrie Forde . . . at the Derby Castle! That is because she represents a typically British form of entertainment.

Brief reminiscences of Florrie and the summer seasons in Douglas continued to appear frequently in the local newspapers. One contributor to the *TT Special* of 1935 became a little misty-eyed as he recalled Florrie Forde singing *Tipperary* at the Derby Castle: 'the song that was to lead so many men along the muddy roads to Flanders'.⁴⁴ For many holiday makers, a night at the Castle singing along with Florrie was an almost magical, life-enhancing experience. An article entitled 'Oh, let us be Joyful', published in the *Examiner* in 1938, contained a reminiscence of Arthur Marsden, the popular proprietor of the Douglas Head Hotel, who recalled the power of the holiday community singing on the Island:

. . . a mighty choir lifts up its voice, and for sheer concentrated happiness, there is nothing like it anywhere in the British Isles . . . they lustily joined in the choruses of the season's 'musical trivialities' led by Florrie Forde, and the following morning could be heard singing those same songs on the promenades . . . the most potent tonic for jaded workers known to mankind . . . let the people sing! 'Let them be children again!'⁴⁵

Florrie's name came up again in 1938 when Harry Wilson was appearing at the Derby Castle with his show *Laundry Blues*, and maintained that he had not only orchestrated many of her most popular songs including *Bull and Bush*, *Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?*, *Flanagan* and *Antonio*, but also some of George Formby's current successes such as *Chinese Laundry Blues*.⁴⁶

'Florrie Forde defends the Isle of Man' was the striking headline in the *Times* in December 1935, above an article in which she took issue with one Raymond Bennett, a reporter from the stage journal *Era*, who had written 'a ridiculous, stupid and utterly untrue article' about the Island entitled 'The Island God Forgot'.⁴⁷ A short time afterwards the same reporter arranged an interview with Florrie for a piece entitled 'The Woman who won the War', but found himself having to justify the views expressed in his earlier article. It makes interesting reading in the light of the shabby way Douglas Town Council was to treat her two years later:

I've got a bone to pick with you young man. Why did you write about the Isle of Man as you did? You were in the Isle of Man a week, why, you know nothing about it. I have played in the Isle of Man for thirty-one consecutive years . . . and I have not exhausted the beauties of the Island. You may have been taken on a trip round the Isle, but that conveys nothing . . . I wish you could come to the Isle of Man with me. I guarantee that I would make you write as enthusiastically in favour of the place as you previously wrote against it.

Femina returned to the ever-fascinating topic of Florrie's costumes in *Woman's Sphere* in 1936, describing her as 'a perfect marvel'.⁴⁸ Her ability to 'hold' an audience was undimmed, but the reporter hinted that women were more interested in her beautiful gowns than her rousing choruses. A particular favourite that season was 'a turquoise satin and silver ensemble, comprising a graceful frock and a lovely cape, which is trimmed with three hundred and twelve ermine tails. When I say ermine, I mean the real thing too'. Other glamorous costumes were made from white fox fur and black silk velvet, and one of her famous hats was trimmed with £500 worth of paradise plumes. Her diamonds were almost as famous as her dresses, but when asked if she was wary of wearing so many valuable jewels, she replied: 'not a bit'.

Our Florrie, Manxland's Greatest Ambassador

In 1938 a series of letters to the *Examiner* started a campaign to have the Freedom of the Borough of Douglas conferred on Florrie Forde. After all, her fans argued, she had achieved as much, if not more, for the town than Gracie Fields had for her native Rochdale: she had a thirty-four-year legacy of appearances in Douglas; her 'Kelly' songs had spread the name Isle of Man all over the world; she never lost an opportunity when 'on the air' to publicise the Island by singing one of her other Isle of Man songs; she had raised thousands of pounds for Manx charities over the years and had adopted the grave of the unknown Manx sailor. As one correspondent signing himself 'Kelly from the Isle of Man' wrote:

We Manx people owe it, and far more, to her. What about the publicity she gives us, especially on the wireless? She belongs to us and is nearly Manx. It's an idea that would cost us nothing. Now then, all you town officials, let's be hearing from you about this wonderful honour which is long overdue. What about it?

That year five thousand people attended her charity fête which once again raised a considerable amount of money. During his address the Mayor of Douglas said of her: 'The name Florrie Forde stands for humanity'. Yet despite the groundswell of public feeling in favour of the suggestion, when the Douglas Town Council considered the matter, behind closed doors, the idea was inexplicably rejected by the majority of Councillors.⁴⁹ The *Examiner* urged second thoughts and invited those who felt strongly about the matter to write either to the paper or the Town Clerk. The idea was put forward again in 1939, but by then it was too late. Not for the first time, the Island missed an opportunity to give and receive honour.

Her last season

What would be Florrie Forde's final season at the Derby Castle began with the usual flurry of appearances throughout the Island in July. The new Jane Crookall Maternity Home was opened at a cost of £17,500, by Lady Rose Leveson Gower; Florrie herself donated six hundred pounds. 'Femina' from *Woman's Sphere* made her annual visit to Florrie's dressing room at the Castle to view the season's frocks and outfits for her new songs. On a sadder note, her aged 'talking' Pekinese was put to sleep that month. Bonzo had been her faithful companion throughout twelve seasons in Douglas, and she will have felt the loss keenly.⁵⁰

Her charity work continued unabated, commencing with the Peel Open-Air Fête and Flag Day at the end of July, during which she crowned a doubtless proud Vivienne Gawne Peel's Rose Queen of Sunset City, and raised three pounds and nine shillings from the sale of her autographed photographs. Her annual charity fête was transferred to the Palace Coliseum because of unseasonably poor weather, but nevertheless was attended by 4,500 people, and raised £370 4s 6d, of which £129 went to Noble's Hospital. G. H. Elliott, 'The Chocolate-Coloured Coon', was among the guest artistes who appeared with Florrie together with compère Billy Danvers.

Her two-week engagement at the Derby Castle was fully covered in the local newspapers:

A marvellous reception . . . cheered to the echo . . . sang five numbers including *Count Your Blessings*, *Cheerie O*, *They Say* and *Boomps-a-daisy* (her big hit of the season) . . . repeatedly recalled and sang some of her old favourites: *Bull and Bush*, *Pack Up Your Troubles*, *Tipperary* and *Good-bye-ee* . . . with all her old verve . . . her clothes this year are more magnificent than ever . . . powder blue, mauve, petunia, rich brown and gold . . . audience singing so lusty it almost drowned out FF herself.⁵¹

Her other new songs of the season included *There's No-one Can Love like a Fat Girl*, *Pals* together with older favourites. Other stars appearing in Douglas during July and August included Sandy Powell at the Gaiety Theatre; Wilson, Keppel and Betty in *Cleopatra's Nightmare*; Wee Georgie Wood; the Katz Saxophone Six; and Raymond Smith, England's rising ventriloquist. Joe Kirkham's Band provided dance music at the Palace, and Bert Noble at the Derby Castle. Webster Booth and Anne Ziegler appeared at the Villa Marina. The most popular films showing in Douglas in July and August were *Goodbye Mr Chips*, starring Robert Donat; John Wayne in *Stagecoach*; Errol Flynn and Bette Davis in *The Sisters*; and the comedies *Trouble Brewing* starring George Formby and *Shipyard Sally* starring Gracie Fields.

At the commencement of her performance on the last night - Saturday 12th August - the crowds surged towards the stage when the orchestra stopped playing for dancing, in order to be closer to ' . . . the great personality of variety'. History was repeating itself, as it is apt so to do, and for the second time that century, Florrie Forde was appearing at the Derby castle on the eve of war.⁵²

A final word concerning Florrie Forde comes from her co-star of many shows, the comedian Wee Georgie Wood:

The kindest woman imaginable, and when she went to any large town, her first enquiry was: "Who is on the danger list in hospital? Get me the list and I'll send them some flowers".

Maurice Powell, Andreas, July, 2017.

Notes

Isle of Man Times: 'Times' in the text: IoMT.

Isle of Man Examiner: Examiner in the text: IoME.

1. Florrie Forde's 'hit' song for Douglas in 1912.

2. *IoME*, 8th September, 1900.

3. *IoME*, 22nd September, 1900.

4. Florrie Forde's 27 years in panto were recalled in *The Australasian*, 5th March, 1921, where she was referred to as 'the biggest principal boy on the panto stage'.

5. Florrie Forde was born Flora May Augusta on 16th August 1875, in Fitzroy, Melbourne, the sixth of eight children of Lott Flanagan, an Irish-born stone mason and later hotelier, and Pheobe nee Simmons, possibly of Jewish extraction from London or the USA. Her parents' marriage ended around 1878 and her mother re-married in 1888 to Thomas Forde, a theatrical costumier, whose name she adopted. Florrie was in a convent for a time, but ran away with her sister Nan to an aunt in Sidney, and became an under house maid at Government House. See Jeff Brownrigg, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, supplementary volume, 2005.)

6. British slang from the Italian 'Donna' meaning a Lady or wife. See Gus Elen's music hall classic: *Never Introduce Your Donah to a Pal*)

7. Rickards also gave the Melbourne entertainer Albert Whelan, of *The Whistling Bowery Boy* fame, his first opportunity, and brought Marie Lloyd, Katie Lawrence and Little Tich to Australia.

8. *The Manxman*, 22nd September, 1900.

9. *Cavalcade*, compiled in 1937-8, is Harry Wood's personal, unpublished record of the music, the variety and concert artistes that appeared at the Falcon Cliff, the Palace and the Derby Castle between 1884 and 1938.

10. Florrie Forde was always fond of a 'flutter'.

11. *IoMT*, 13th July, 1901. JHW 'A Night at the Derby Castle'.

12. *IoMT*, 5th July, 1901.

13. The Falcon Cliff, Palace and Derby Castle engagement books, ledgers, cash books, contracts etc MS 11627, 10258 and 9398, at the Manx Museum.)

14. Louis MacNeice, in his poem *Death of an Actress*, referred to her '... elephantine shimmy and a sugared wink'.

15. *IoMT*, 11th July, 1903.

16. *IoME*, 18th July, 1903.

17. *IoME*, 20th August, 1904.

18. *Manx Sun*, 20th August, 1904.

19. *IoMT*, 20th August, 1904.

20. *IoMT*, 27th August, 1904.

21. Florrie Forde had married Walter Bew, a 31 year old water police constable from England, in Australia in 1893. In 1905 she married Laurence Barnett, an art dealer, and settled in Brixton, South London, (see 1911 census) and later Shoreham, Sussex. *Bull and Bush* is Krone's only known composition; he died in South Yarra in 1964 after an adventurous life which encompassed fighting in the Boer War, owning a shipping company in Fiji, and being an honoured member of the Melbourne football and cricket clubs.

22. See Maurice Powell, *Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly? Kiaull manninagh jiu*, Culture Vannin, manxmusic.com, April, 2017.
23. Coincidentally, Florrie Ford's dresser at one period was one Sarah Randal Kelly, born 1873, Liverpool. See *The Kelly Family History*, liverpolitan.im.)
24. See Maurice Powell, *Tipperary and the Isle of Man: New Evidence*, Culture Vannin, manxmusic.com 2014.
25. *IoMT*, 26th July, 1919.
26. *The Mona's Herald*, 21st July, 1920.
27. Reg Harrison, *The Evening Telegram*, 26th June, 19th, 17th and 24th July.
28. *The Manx Free Press*, 'From the Armchair', 4th Aug, 1924.
29. *IoMT*, 31st July, 1925.
30. *IoME*, 2nd August, 1919.
31. *IoME*, 8th July, 1938. In the course of an article entitled 'His Life of Melody', the music publisher and composer Horatio Nicholls, aka Lawrence Wright, recalled receiving a telegram from Florrie Forde after she first tried out *Yes, We Have No Bananas*: 'Song no good'.
32. Charles Peace was executed in Armley prison, Leeds in 1879, for the killing of a Manchester policeman and the shooting of his neighbour's husband in Sheffield. Joseph Edward Peck, known as Kid Peck, the lightweight boxing champion from Florida; his career spanned the years 1921-32, and twenty-five percent of his wins were 'knock-outs'.
33. *The Ramsey Chronicle*, 7th August, 1925.
34. *IoME*, 19th July, 1929.
35. *IoME*, 22nd July, 1927. Maurice Powell, *Miss Florrie Forde's Act of Grace*, Culture Vannin, *Kiaull manninagh jiu*, manxmusic.com, May, 2017.
36. Haydn Wood Music Library and Archive, Victoria, BC, Canada.
37. The Broadcast was relayed to the North, Midland and Newcastle regions between 8.50pm and 10.00pm.
38. *IoME*, 22nd July, 1938.
39. *IoME*, 4.8.1939.
40. *Ramsey Chronicle*, 24th July, 1931.
41. *The Mona's Herald*, 21st, July, 1931.
42. A Sunday newspaper founded in Manchester in 1884 as *The Umpire*. It was renamed *Empire* in 1917 and *Empire News* shortly afterwards.
43. *Season Snaps* by Promenader, the *Mona's Herald*, 23rd July, 1935.
44. *How I Discovered the Isle of Man*, from a *TT Special*, 12th June, 1935.
45. *IoME*, 21st August, 1938.
46. *IoME*, 12th August, 1938.
47. *IoMT*, 28th December, 1935.
48. *IoMT*, 25th July, 1936.

49. One possible objection - that Florrie Forde was not Manx-born - has no real credibility. Many of those honoured in *New Manx Worthies* were also not Manx-born, including Harry Wood, the musical director of the Palace & Derby Castle; G. H. Wood, the Manager and Director of the Isle of Man Railway Company; the Venerable E. H. Stenning, a Vice-Principal of King William's College and Archdeacon of Man; B. E. Sargeant, a prominent Government Secretary and Treasurer, and Miss M. L. Wood 'The Mother of Manx Music'.

50. 'Talking Dog Dies', *IoME*, 28th July, 1939.

51. *IoMT*, 5th August, 1939. 52.

52. Florrie Forde died in her car on her way to the Tivoli Theatre, Aberdeen, after performing at a naval hospital. Her last song was said to be *Good-by-ee*.