

## Leslie Howard

Leslie Howard, the producer and actor, lived at Stowe Maries, Balchin's Lane. He was lost over the Bay of Biscay in 1943.



Leslie Howard was of Hungarian-Jewish extraction and was born Leslie Steiner in England in 1893. His parents moved to Vienna where Leslie spent his earliest years, and later returned to London. He wanted to be an actor, but his father insisted he took a safe, steady job as a bank clerk. On the outbreak of the First World War he enlisted in the cavalry and was commissioned in the Northamptonshire Yeomanry. He was later invalided out.

He had by then married Ruth Martin. He took up a stage career as Leslie Howard, found there were more opportunities in America, particularly on Broadway, and became a success. In 1928 he returned to London to star with Tallulah Bankhead in *Her Cardboard Lover*. He put on a show called *Berkeley Square* which he took to America with great success and went in to the new 'talkie' films. He then decided to invest in a home in England and in 1931 bought Stowe Maries here in Westcott.

In the following years Leslie moved between England and Hollywood producing and acting - in plays and in films, such as *Pygmalion* in which he played Professor Higgins. He took the part of Sir Percy Blakeney in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and starred as Ashley Wilkes in *Gone With The Wind*. He was living in Hollywood, but when war became imminent he returned to England to 'do his bit'. It was felt he could help most by producing films designed to gain American support for the British cause. As a result he made *Pimpernel Smith*, *The 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* and *The First of the Few*. With the same aim he broadcast a series of talks to America called *Britain Speaks*.

In April 1943, Leslie Howard agreed to travel to Madrid and Lisbon for a lecture tour sponsored by the British Council, as part of the effort to maintain good relations with Spain and Portugal. He finished the tour in Lisbon and on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1943 took off for London as a passenger in a civilian DC3 aircraft. An hour or so after take-off the plane was shot down by German fighters over the Bay of Biscay. The aircraft was clearly marked as a civilian plane and, under an international agreement observed by both sides, should have been safe from attack. The crew and passengers were all lost and the plane was never recovered. The mystery as to why it was shot down has not been solved.