

Writer and researcher Chrissy Fletcher, from New South Wales, Australia, has been delving into the life of a Shakespearean actress of the early 1900s, Lily Brayton, and found that she lived out her days at Redcliffe, Dawlish.

# Fascinating tale of 'famous' actress

**M**y research into the legend of a rural hamlet in New South Wales brings me to Dawlish. And it involves the Shakespearean actors Lily Brayton and Oscar Asche, of Chu Chin Chow fame.

Brayton, in south-eastern NSW, was a small rural village until it was destroyed by bushfire in 1965. Now only a few signposts and a farm or two remain.

Granny Lacey (nee Catherine Pluck) was the postmistress in 1913 when the town needed a name change for postal reasons. Catherine Lacey's farm was named Brayton. The post office was in her farmhouse and so the town took that name. Granny Lacey claimed the name Brayton was for Lily Brayton, who was her childhood friend. She had a photograph of Lily to back up her claim which now hangs in a nearby museum.

This legend has been upheld for nearly 100 years and the local people are quite proud of their connection with beautiful Lily Brayton. Lily and her Australian-born husband, Oscar Asche, twice toured Australia with their theatrical company before the first world war. They were a huge success and played to sell-out audiences in all major cities on each tour.

As an historical writer, I planned to write a small monograph on 'How Brayton got its name'. I began researching the lives of

Lily and Oscar and also the background of Catherine Lacey. The little research project has grown into a book-length story with truth proving, indeed, to be stranger than fiction.

Lily was born in 1876, one of five daughters of Dr John Grindall Brayton and his wife, Mary Alexander of Hindley, Lancashire.

From a young age, Lily yearned to be an actress but her father was against it. After his death, Lily applied to the theatrical entrepreneur Frank Benson for an interview. She auditioned for Benson, got a job with his company and began her remarkable career as a Shakespearean actress, noted for her beauty and magnificent voice.

Lily met fellow Bensonian Oscar and they married in 1898. He was a powerful, charismatic and talented actor/producer and in 1915 he wrote and produced Chu Chin Chow, a musical pantomime based on the Tales of the Arabian Nights. Chu Chin Chow was a phenomenal success and ran for over five years at His Majesty's Theatre in London. Lily and Oscar played the lead roles for over 2000 performances in what became the longest running play on the London stage.

Oscar and Lily made a fortune out of Chu Chin Chow, but because of his love of greyhound racing and bad business practices, Oscar lost the lot. They separated in about 1922 after Oscar began an affair with one of the harem girls from Chu. He remained with his mistress who bore Oscar a daughter. Still in business with him and



ASPIRING ACTRESS: Miss Lily Brayton performing in her early acting career as Ildico, in Attila.

sympathetic to his financial circumstances, Lily rented Oscar a grace and favour home next to her cottage in Marlow, Buckinghamshire. He lived a kind of dual life there and with his mistress and daughter in London.

Oscar died at Marlow in 1936.

Two years later, Lily married retired Scottish doctor, Douglas Chalmers Watson. They planned to live six months each at Marlow and at his farm outside Edinburgh. The

second world war intervened and they were grounded at the farm. I made contact with a granddaughter of Dr Watson, who remembered Lily as being warm, gracious and regal. Watson had none of these attributes and locked

himself away after his marriage, leaving Lily to pass the war years with only the company of her dresser Emily and the doctor's daughter and grandchildren. Watson died in 1948 and Lily and Emily retired to Dawlish.

She purchased Redcliffe in East Cliff Road, Dawlish, and shared her home with Emily, Lily's sister Annie and her husband Henry Bouchier, and their daughter Agnes (Betty).

Lily was lonely and unhappy in Dawlish. She missed her London life and friends. She became president of the Dawlish Repertory Company in its early years and enjoyed going to the theatre until her health began to fail. Even though she was the widow of Dr Watson, she always referred to herself as Mrs Asche and reminisced only about the Chu Chin Chow days, hardly mentioning her fabulous career before that.

Lily died at Redcliffe on April 30, 1953. Her ashes were placed in Oscar's grave in Berkshire's Bisham churchyard. The tombstone marks the burial place of Oscar and his wife Lily. Of course, Lily was not Oscar's wife when she died.

While looking for Lily, I have had many serendipitous finds. Links keep coming back to Australia in strange and mysterious ways. Unbelievably, three contacts have connections to the street where I live.

After Lily's death, her companion Emily moved to Australia, where her family had immigrated years earlier, and I have

been in touch with Emily's descendants.

And what about the township of Brayton, New South Wales, and the legend of its name? Through researching Catherine Lacey, I discovered she was 40 years older than Lily so could not have been her childhood friend. Her death certificate revealed she had been in NSW since 1851 and was born in Dublin, in the seaside town of Bray.

It was common practice in early Australia for farmers to name their properties after their homelands in the 'old country'. So Brayton was named for Catherine Lacey's birthplace and not for Lily. And the photo of Lily which is now enlarged and hanging in a nearby museum is just one of hundreds of postcards of Lily in costume produced in the early 20th century.

After setting out to write the story of a legend, it turns out the legend is false.

In Lily's will dated 1951 she left small legacies to Dawlish residents: her gardener Frank Lee and Mrs Griffen, the daily worker at Redcliffe; a Mrs M Chadwick, of Farriford, Fry Road, Dawlish, witnessed Lily's will, also Lloyds Bank manager and bank clerk (names indecipherable) of Dawlish.

If you can help with information on Lily Brayton during her time in Dawlish from about 1949 until her death in 1953, write to Chrissy Fletcher at 35 Osborne Road, Burraido, NSW Australia or email to fletcher@hinet.net.au.



CHARISMATIC: The talented actor/producer Oscar Asche, who married Lily Brayton in 1898.



LATER YEARS: Pictured is Lily with walking stick, the Melville family and Lily's dresser and companion Emily on the left.



SIGNED PHOTOGRAPH: A signed photograph of 'auntie Lil and uncle Oscar'.