

Elgarian Birthdays

A miscellany of notes, from contemporary sources, on how Elgar spent some of his birthdays.

THE YEAR OF HIS BIRTH - 1857

You know, since you compel me to begin at the beginning, that I 'began' in Broadheath, a little village three miles from Worcester, in which city my father was organist of St George's Catholic Church, a post he held for thirty-seven years.

Edward Elgar

The little house where he was born is three and a half miles from Worcester, and his father - who had come to Worcester from Dover to tune the pianos for the Dowager Queen Adelaide, who was living in the county at Witley Court - had to drive in and out in a pony cart.

Carice Elgar-Blake



How well I remember the day he was born. The air was sweet with the perfume of flowers, bees were humming and all the earth was lovely. There seemed to us little ones to be a lot of unnecessary running about in the house, and Father came tearing up the drive with a strange man in a carriage. And before that, an old lady whom we had never seen before arrived with a large bag, and we were told by the younger maid there was a baby in that bag! That was good enough for our weak comprehension, and so we were taken a scamper across the heath to be out of the way.

Lucy Elgar

COMING OF AGE - 1878

Aged 21 and seeking work as a musician.

To Musical Catholic Noblemen, Gentlemen, Priests, Heads of Colleges, etc., or Professors of Music. - A friend of a young man, possessed of great musical talent, is anxious to obtain partial employment for him as Organist of Teacher of Piano, Organ, or Violin, to young boys, sons of gentlemen, or as Musical Amanuensis to Composers or Professors of Music, being a quick and ready copyist. Could combine Organist and Teacher of Choir, with Musical Tutor to sons of noblemen, etc. Has had several years experience as Organist. The advertiser's object is to obtain musical employment for him, with proportionate time for study. Age 21, of quiet, studious habits, and gentlemanly bearing. Been used to good society. Would have unexceptionable references. Neighbourhood of London preferred: the Continent not objected to. Disengaged in September. Address Alpha Beta, TABLET Office.

Advert in The Tablet, 1st June

HALF CENTURY - 1907

2nd June 1907, Elgar's 50th birthday, fell on a Sunday, and while Alice, Carice, and his niece May Grafton were at Evensong, he wrote the part song 'Love', and dedicated it to Alice.

wrote C.A.E. on it - wh. made A feel very unworthy & deeply deeply touched.

Alice Elgar diary

However, birthdays, or at least his own, meant little to him.

Trying to him as usual.

Alice Elgar diary

THE WAR YEARS - 1914-1918

By 1914 the Elgars had lived in Severn House, Hampstead, for two years. Elgar headed for the country whenever he could get away, and the last summer of peace saw him going down to Worcester to stay with his old school friend, Hubert Leicester. Hubert's son Philip was present.

Tomorrow (3rd June) Hon. Freedom of Worcester to be presented to B. W. Leader, RA. Elgar came down for the function & stayed at Whitstones. Arrived Shrub Hill 4 pm & came down to tea. Then went with Father up town, called on Henry Elgar, & returned about 7 to dress. Then he went with Father & Mother to 'The Stalls' (H. Bush's) to dine with Leader who was staying there. Returned home about 10.30, & then we four sat & smoked & chatted in study till 12.30.

E. looked well but very grey. Has aged somewhat since I last saw him. Very jolly & chatted away about old times in most vivacious way. Cannot recall all the conversation, but he was full of anecdotes, mostly relating to the old school and Reeve.

He would drink nothing but a little soda-water. Smoked incessantly. Carried a supply of pipes in a little green ladies' handbag, with matches, tobacco &c. These pipes were all small briars with long vulcanite stems.

Philip Leicester

In 1916, while Alice visited their old friends, the de Navarros, in Broadway, Edward went to Stoke Prior to stay with his sister Pollie and her family.

I am here & much better - so far: it is lovely and - lonely. I rest & play with the dog & cut down thistles.

Letter from Elgar to Alice Stuart Wortley (Windflower), 3rd June

By 1917, Alice Elgar had bowed to the inevitable and found a country cottage in Sussex - Brinkwells - which they took on long-term rental. They first went there together on 24th May, nearly missing their station (Pulborough), and then getting lost.

but a kind farmer's daughter showed a short cut.

Alice Elgar diary

I am delighted to tell you that Edward's first exclamation was 'It is too lovely for words' & he was quite pleased with the house & has loved every minute since we came - So you may think how relieved & pleased I felt. I am in the garden & before my eyes lies a wonderful deep wood & low hills beyond & then the Downs, larks are singing as there are some fields as well, & a nightingale is heard sometimes, & in the evening the nightjars go whirring around on the fringe of the wood - It is a most extraordinarily lovely spot. Endless walks & paths in the woods - There is also a Carpenter's bench & tools & c & E. has already made me 2 rustic footstools.

Letter from Alice Elgar to Alice Stuart Wortley, 26th May

Carice joined them on 26th May, and all three spent his birthday at the cottage. Edward and Alice returned home to Severn House on 4th June.

1918 saw the Elgars again at Brinkwells for his birthday. Two very different letters were written that day, to the organist Percy Hull, at that time a prisoner in Germany, and to his daughter Carice in London.

I have had a bad winter and the evil days culminated in a severe operation on my throat; we are in this lovely cottage in the woods, high above the world in peace, plenty and quietness and I am trying to get well and strong to do something useful again.

Carice is still in London very busy with her war work but she is coming down to us again soon and enjoys the country very much.

Letter from Elgar to Percy Hull, 2nd June

Sunday Joon the Tooth

Darling:

When you go to Hampstead will you seize the TROMBONE, which shd be hanging on the wall in the workshop & give it over to the household (I do not know who is now in charge) and ask them to clean it thoroughly. Be careful how you handle it as it may slip apart and bruise; if you hold it at first by the lower part you will jolly soon see what slips about, ... but it may be stuck from accumulated verdigris. When cleaned I will instruct 'em what to do next. I am giving it to the Y.M.C.A. It's vilely dirty, I fear.

The country waits your coming and so do I, - also a cask of cider which arrd yestere'en and the tapping thereof will be a sollum serremony between you & me! Perhaps!

Letter from Elgar to Carice, 2nd June

... Lovely, exquisite day - E.'s dearest birfday - No letters & no presents had come for him except some asparagus from Rosa ...

Alice Elgar diary

Rosa Burley was an old family friend, and one-time headmistress of 'The Mount' in Malvern where Elgar taught violin in the early 1890s. Her book "Edward Elgar - the record of a friendship" is currently out of print, but turns up frequently on the second-hand market.

The birthday 'went off' very quietly with the assistance of your good asparagus: it was wrong of you to send a valuable present but it was enjoyed.

It is, of course, lovely here & requires much weeding: however, the gardener has been furiously attacking the weeds & the place looks much more civilised than last year despite your frantic efforts with Carice. If you know anyone requiring 'Willow-bark' (I think that's right) I can supply it by the ton.

I hope you are well : I am rested but do not get well at all & never shall. But I am strong & eat & sleep & work work work.

Letter from Elgar to Rosa Burley, 6th June

You may be interested to know that Elgar Editions has published a book on Elgar during the Great War, "Oh My Horses!", edited by Lewis Foreman.

YEARS OF SADNESS - THE EARLY '20s

Lady Elgar died in 1920. Elgar was shattered, and for the next few years little original music came from his pen. He continued to spend his birthdays away from London whenever possible, either at Brinkwells, or with his sister Pollie at Stoke Prior. Plans for 1920, however, were disrupted by illness, and Elgar found himself in the Grove Private Hotel in Great Malvern.

It was most kind of you to send me a telegram - I think Father is getting better - It was all arranged that he should go to his sister yesterday, but he had another giddy attack in the morning, so it all had to be put off, & I fled for a Dr. (who has turned out most understanding) & we found these rooms, where he is really comfortable I think & has a lovely view, & nice light food - it is really a very nice place. The Dr. says he is better today, but wants to keep him quite quiet a little longer - only quite sees that that depresses him so much & worries him, so I daresay will allow him to do more tomorrow - I do not yet know about returning or any future plans yet - its all very trying & difficult. It is so distressing this giddiness again - & depresses him so - & everything seems useless & hopeless.

Letter from Carice Elgar to Alice Stuart Wortley, 2nd June

The following year he grew by degrees more cheerful; and as the spring drew on he became quite his old self. I was delighted when he told me he was going down to Brinkwells again; for I had hopes that it would have the same effect on him as before, and that the sight of those woods and all the things he loved would set him off again in a new direction. He was very happy there, and enjoyed playing works he had already written. Hopefully I took my violin there. But never was there anything new for me to play.

W H Reed, late May

I am so sorry we are away during your visit in & near London. We came away a fortnight ago - it is lovely here but very, very sad. We return for a short time on Wednesday - I have business to see to. It wd have been lovely to have had lunch with you & to see you & hear you again. The last months have been too much charged with melancholy memories for me to be like a human being - I am not fit for the company of my kind.

I have orchestrated a Bach fugue in modern way - largish orchestra - you may not approve. I did want you to see it before printing but I had to send it to the engraver - however, many

arrgts have been made of Bach on the 'pretty' scale & I wanted to shew how gorgeous & great & brilliant he would have made himself sound if he had had our means.

Letter from Elgar to Ivor Atkins, 5th June 1921

70th BIRTHDAY - 1927

To celebrate this auspicious occasion HMV issued a new 'electrical' recording of Elgar conducting his Second Symphony, a recording still available on CD today.

The BBC broadcast a birthday concert from No. 1 Studio, Savoy Hill. Elgar conducted Cockaigne, The Music Makers with Muriel Brunskill as contralto soloist, the Cello Concerto with Beatrice Harrison as soloist, the Enigma Variations, Sea Pictures, again with Muriel Brunskill, the second Pomp and Circumstance March, the part song "My Love dwelt in a Northern Land" and "As Torrents in Summer" from King Olaf. During rehearsals Elgar was presented with a handsome silver salver 'From his friends in the BBC'.

In a break in one of the rehearsals, Sir Edward was presented by Mr. Pitt with a salver which was a birthday offering from members of the orchestra and his other friends in the BBC. It was given and accepted amid the laughter with which old friends mask their deeper feelings, and the little ceremony was one of the happiest of many which that studio witnessed in the few years of its busy life.

BBC Note (1932)

June 2nd was Elgar's 70th birthday. In the evening the BBC broadcast a special concert in his honour which he conducted. At the end of it he made a short speech and ended it with the words, 'Good-night, everybody. Good-night, Marco.' Elgar loved this incident, to which over several years he was apt to refer, and he always claimed that according to Madge Grafton, who was listening at Napleton, Marco became terribly excited and rushed around the room barking, looking for him.

Wulstan Atkins

Among the listeners that evening was another Sir Edward, the composer Edward German.



Yes, Elgar is a great man. I listened in on his Birthday and was greatly impressed both with his wonderful idiom and his own wonderful vitality in conducting the whole of the long programme.

Edward German

I suppose 70 is an 'occasion' - ! and so I send you my greeting - also my thanks for the pleasure your music have given me these many years.

I need not say more.

P.S. I listened in on your Birthday

Letter from Edward German to Elgar

Thank you: but my music cannot possibly have given you one hundredth part of the joy your music has given me.

Letter from Elgar to Edward German

THE FINAL YEARS - THE 1930s

In 1931 Elgar was created a Baronet in the Birthday Honours. Fittingly he chose the title 'First Baronet of Broadheath'.

I do not know if it is permissible to send personal thanks to His Majesty the King: but, if it is allowed I shall be grateful to you if you find it possible to convey to His Majesty an expression of my sincere thanks for the honour which I am informed by the Prime Minister is to be bestowed on me. This continues the happy memories I hold of recognition by the Royal Family. As long ago as 1891 Her late Majesty, Queen Victoria, sent several messages of appreciation to me by my old friend, Sir Walter Parratt, my predecessor as Master of the Music; since that time the kindly interest of King Edward was very precious to me, and the present honour to be conferred by His Majesty fills me to-day with a gratitude which I cannot help wishing might be made known to the King.

Letter from Elgar to Sir Frederick Ponsonby, 2nd June

None of the good wishes that will reach you today will be more sincere than those which I send you from an old and grateful friend.

But why cannot we do things properly in this country. They might at least have offered you a Peerage, after all you have done for Music. I know this to be a wide spread opinion among musicians. After all your work will remain a national heritage, and a pride to all of us, and we may as well take the will for the deed.

Letter from Granville Bantock to Elgar, 3rd June

The following year was another milestone, Elgar's 75th birthday

Father's 75th birthday. Lovely day. Hectic morning - telephone, telegrams etc. etc. To see Father off by 12 train & round town. Very good spirits.

Carice Elgar diary

Sir Edward Elgar celebrates his 75th birthday today and congratulations and affectionate wishes go out to him from every music-lover the world over.

He has quite an obsession that nobody wants his music, and it is an open secret that a great festival of his works would have been given on his 70th birthday and again today but for his very definite refusal to allow any such celebration to take place. He is one of the greatest musicians in the world, and it is splendid to know that he has been spared to us all these years unimpaired in health and vigour. The name Elgar will undoubtedly take its place among the immortals.

Landon Ronald, News Chronicle, 2nd June

But alongside the public celebrations were signs of a rejuvenation of Elgar's spirits. A new symphony was on the horizon, and a new muse in the person of Vera Hockman. The story of

the Third Symphony can be found elsewhere on this site, and the story of Elgar's relationship with Vera Hockman in Kevin Allen's book, 'Elgar in Love'.

Always happy in the company of children, Elgar had commissioned a set of notes for the new symphony from Vera Hockman's daughter Dulcie.

I shall require strings and strings of semiquavers, demisemiquavers and of course all the other kinds of notes, also rests, dots, etc. You go out and catch them in a butterfly net and then hang them out to dry for a considerable time - and don't forget to include a pair of scissors and a paste pot because I usually compose by cutting out other people's music and pasting it on to my own.

Letter from Elgar to Dulcie Hockman, Spring 1932

I, Dulcie, agree to supply the required quantity of notes, rests, dots, etc. Also scissors and a paste pot to be despatched to Edward Elgar by June 2nd, 1932.

Dulcie Hockman contract with Elgar

On the appointed day Dulcie sent off strings and strings of notes, dots, rests as ordered, nor did she forget to include the account, together with a few words of advice as to how a beginner should set about composing a Symphony and what pitfalls to avoid. But alas! the consignment failed to meet with Edward Elgar's approval. They were old stock ("possibly suitable to the second-rate stuff I turn out nowadays") and quite intractable, all the wrong notes for the wrong instruments. But the contract had been signed so the only thing to do was to grin and bear it and despatch a cheque signed by Marco, Mina and Mobey, Edward Elgar's three dogs.

Vera Hockman

On what was to be his last birthday, in 1933, Elgar was made a G.C.V.O. in the Birthday Honours.

On occasion he would visit my father in his office. Once he pulled some manuscript sheets out of his pocket and said: 'Here, would you like these?' 'These' were sketches for the Introduction and Allegro for Strings. Another time he dangled the insignia of the G.C.V.O. in front of my father, as who should say: 'See what they've given me?' In actual fact he was not at all pleased, as he was hoping for the peerage he never got

Alan Webb

Elgar had been in Paris conducting the Violin Concerto with Yehudi Menuhin, and visiting the composer Frederick Delius. He was accompanied by Fred Gaisberg from HMV. He flew back to England on his birthday, travelling in style with Imperial Airways, and then went on to W H Reed, who lived not far from Croydon Airport.

Elgar had not flown before, and was very taken with the experience. "Well, to put it poetically, it is not unlike my life. The rising from the ground was a little difficult; you cannot tell exactly how you are going to stand it. When once you have reached the heights it is very different. There is a delightful feeling of elation in sailing through gold and silver clouds. I should have liked to stay there for ever. The descent is like our old age - peaceful, even serene."

Sheep shearers came. Lovely day. left at 8. 30 & got to Vera's at 10.15 went on with her to Aerodrome. Plane half an hour early so could not see it land. Father all safe & very well & had loved it - Mr Gaisberg too. Drove him to Mr Reed's had champagne for his birthday & heard about Paris & Delius. Mr Gaisberg & photographers came & took pictures of him being toasted. He left with Dick for Worcester about 12.30. Vera & I to see lovely spaniel puppy & back to lunch & sat out after looking at birds. Early tea & left about 3.45, shopping at Dorking & home about 6.30. Very hot.

Carice Elgar diary

On his way home he stopped off at Broadway.

He seldom passed our house on his journeys between Worcester and London without looking in, if only for a quarter of an hour. On his last birthday he appeared thus unexpectedly, looking radiant; he had just flown from France and was as excited about it as a schoolboy.

Mary de Navarro

Dear Barbarossa.

I got back safely & found Marco Mina etc. well & wellcoming. I do not know how to thank you for all you did - so I do not try, but believe me I am very grateful. Our visit to Delius was a great event for me.

Letter from Elgar to Fred Gaisberg, 3rd June

Compiled by Martin Bird.

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