

Doreen Freeman Burgess

also featuring... Victor Barrett and Bob Burgess

After the Second World War when life became easier again, ballroom dancing was to British youth what skateboarding and rollerblading are to the adolescents of today.

The years between 1946 and 1962 brought forth an "avalanche" of successful partnerships such as Charles Thiebault and Doreen Beahan, John Wells and Renee Sissons, Wally Fryer and Violet Barnes, Victor Barrett and Doreen

Vita

Doreen Freeman

Birthdate

August 8, 1930

Birthplace

East London, England

Father

Henry Freemann, clerical worker for London Transport

Mother

Alice White, homemaker

1946

begins dancing with Victor Barrett

1947

wins *World Professional Championship*, second in the *British Open*

1960-61

wins the *Star Championship*

1961

begins dancing with Bob Burgess

1961-63

places second in the *World Professional 10 Dance Championship*

Doreen was Victor Silvester's partner for eight years in the hit show "*BBC Dancing Club*."

Freeman, Len Scrivener and Nellie Duggan, Sonny Binnick and Sally Brock, Harry Smith-Hampshire and Doreen Casey, Benny Tolmeijer and Silvia Silve, Bob Burgess and Doreen Freeman, Peter Eggleton and Brenda Winslade, and the Australians Alf Davies and Julie Reaby. Records of that time are scarce, and the only sources that grasp the essence of this era are the few books in circulation such as *Blackpool my Blackpool*, by Kid Hallewell; *The World of Phyllis Haylor* edited by Bryan Allen, and *Modern Ballroom Dancing*, by Victor Silvester.

But the best testimonies come from those icons who were part of it all - like the beautiful and graceful Doreen Freeman - a superstar of ball-

room. As of 2009, she was still teaching, holding lectures and capturing her audience through youthful expressiveness and graceful movements, physical testimonies to her demanding training and deep understanding of ballroom dance.

Doreen said that from a young age she always wanted to perform - to dance. But because her father was ill and unable to work, funds were not available. But at 16, she went with some girlfriends to a studio on Regent Street, where for a modest admission fee, public social dances were held Sunday evenings. "I remember the second time we went, the man who ran the studio asked me to dance," she recalled. "I was so scared because I had no training at all. I didn't know him, and only found out later that night that he was the reigning number 2 professional dancer in the world, Victor Barrett!"

About a month later, Tom Bentley, another professional dancer, who also recognized Doreen's talent, gave her some free lessons. They danced together regularly for a few weeks, until Victor, who had seen them dance and who had recently broken up with his partner Marie Taylor, asked Doreen to dance with him. "I was quite shocked and amazed," Doreen remembered. "I later found out that he wanted to dance with me because he thought I had a very responsive body when being led."

Victor, aware of Doreen's financial situation, agreed to train her without charge. He also paid all her expenses at the *British School of Dancing*, and for a few months he was her only trainer. When Doreen had a solid foundation in the fundamentals of ballroom dancing, Victor took her to Josephine Bradley for further training. (See also *Josephine Bradley*)

Doreen remembered: "He took me for a lesson and Josephine told me to do all sorts of things. For example, she referred to the *CBMP*, but I didn't know any technical names, so I asked, 'What is that?'

"Don't worry about it', she replied. 'Just do what I tell you.'

"I had to turn my body sideways more in a certain position, so my partner could pass outside. I tried this and said to Josephine, 'I feel horrible, and twisted around.' She looked down her nose at me, turned her back, and said to Victor,

'Take her away Victor, if she can't or won't do what she's told, don't waste your time on her.'

"And with that she threw me out of her studio! It was awful. She turned and went upstairs to her studio apartment. Victor grabbed my coat; and as he was opening the door for me I turned and said, 'I am not coming here anymore!'

"If she will take you back, you will come here every week until you can do what she says!' he replied.

"Unknown to me, Josephine had heard everything, and many years later she would recall the story saying 'If I hadn't taken you back, you wouldn't be the dancer you are today. 'Yes, you're quite right,' I replied. 'I wouldn't, so thank you very much!'

"She was such a character."

In the book *The World of Phyllis Haylor*, Phyllis writes about Victor: "It is well known that Victor Barrett is a creative dancer and that he has made many valuable contributions to modern ballroom dancing. His first aim has always been to express movement in the most rhythmic manner possible





and, although competing at a time when a forceful style was particularly dominant, he didn't follow the general trend. For this decision he may have paid dearly, since although he probably won a record number of championships, the top honours of *Star-* and *British Championship* eluded him."

And about Doreen she wrote in 1957: "Doreen Freeman has flair and to my mind is one of the most interesting personalities of this or any other day. She loves dancing and is most sensitive to detail, which to me is important at a time when so many girls are content to be just a partner with no particular interest in anything other than their own immediate impact on an audience. She regrets the tendency among adjudicators to overlook untidy, untrained feet in girl competitors. Although essentially modern in outlook she has no use for glamour on the dance floor unless it is combined with a genuine attempt at perfection."

But before it came to this, Doreen danced her first *British Open Professional Championship* in 1947 with Victor, and came second after John Wells and Renee Sissons, and Wally Fryer and Violet Barnes who were tied for first place. She also placed first in one of the early *World Championships* in that same year (See also *Historical Notes*). She started right at the top! Victor and Doreen danced in many competitions, consistently placing in the top of the finals. They got married, and had a daughter, Wendy. Then one year at the Blackpool Festival, Victor decided on the spot to retire. Doreen was shattered. She had only danced a few years and didn't want to stop.

In 1953, Bob Burgess's wife and partner Margaret Baker, sadly, died while undergoing minor surgery. In 1947, they had placed second in the *British Open Amateur Championship* and were finalists in the professionals in 1952 and 1953. After a couple of years, Bob returned to the dance floor with Jeannette Wilson and for two years made the finals. He then danced with Eileen Henshall again for two years, and they split-up at the end of 1958.

Neither Victor nor Doreen could drive; so Bob, on his own now, drove them to dance in shows. They were frequently booked in shows after retiring from competition. The three became good friends and one day Bob asked Victor if he could compete with Doreen. Victor agreed. However, he later changed his mind because he didn't want Doreen to compete anymore. One thing led to another and they split up.

Doreen, now free to dance with Bob, started to compete over 10 dances at the same time as Bill and Bobbie Irvine, Peter Eggleton and Brenda Winslade and Walter Laird and Lorraine. In 1962 they came second in the *World Championship* in Australia behind Bill and Bobbie, opened a studio, (*the Starlight, later owned by Bill and Bobbie*) and led the typical life of professional dancers. Travelling and being in the studio until late at night hasn't changed much even today. They frequently went to the U.S., working in the *Arthur Murray Studios* mainly in New York, and for many years Doreen also danced with Victor Sylvester on a television show in London called the *BBC Dancing Club*.

"I was Victor Sylvester's partner on the *Club* for eight years," Doreen recalled. "It was a great program that was on every other week. The show made me famous and it was also a great boost for dancing."

In England, between the First and Second World Wars, it was predominantly the upper class that took formal dance lessons, and Victor, Jo and Phyllis were their teachers. But later, in the late 1940s, *Mecca Ltd.* built glamorous ballrooms where almost anyone could afford to go and dance for 50 pence. That really opened it up to the masses!

"The Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, was originally a *Mecca* ballroom. Then it was called the *Lyceum*. I danced the *U.K. 10 Dance Championships* there. The *Hammersmith Palais* was another famous dance venue. In the 1940s and '50s every Tuesday was demonstration night, and if you got asked to do a show there, you had arrived! These ballrooms were why England produced so many good



Left: Bob & Doreen in a team match
Middle: Bob and Doreen winning
Right: Doreen lecturing in Blackpool 2003