



They were the original celebrity couple, but the relationship between Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh was as tempestuous as it was passionate, as Steve O'Brien discovers



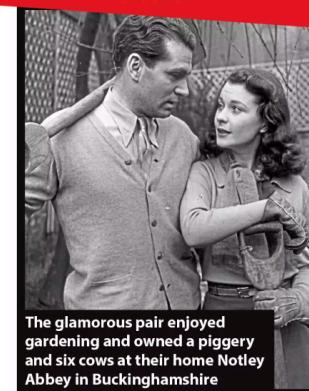
The couple were so mad about each other while filming *Fire Over England* that they were known as 'the lovers' on set



Arriving for the opening of *Gone with the Wind*, Vivien was virtually unknown when she won the lead role of Scarlett O'Hara

DID YOU KNOW?

Olivier and Leigh appeared in three films together: *Fire Over England* (1937), *21 Days* (1940) and *That Hamilton Woman* (1941). Leigh won two Best Actress Oscars, for *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.



The glamorous pair enjoyed gardening and owned a piggery and six cows at their home Notley Abbey in Buckinghamshire

In 1939, few stars of stage and screen shone brighter than Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier. That year's Best Actress Oscar winner and the most acclaimed thespian of his generation were, by the decade's end, among the most celebrated figures worldwide. Yet their renown as a pair surpassed even their individual popularity. Before Burton and Taylor, there was Olivier and Leigh, the first celebrity couple, but their relationship was marked by passion, infidelity and, ultimately, tragedy.

They first met in January 1936, when Olivier, then 28, approached the fast-rising star to congratulate her on her performance in the play *The Mask of Virtue*. 'That's the man I'm going to marry!' Leigh later enthused to a friend, except there was a problem. Not only was Olivier married, to the actress Jill Esmond, but Leigh was too, to the barrister Herbert Leigh Holman. For his part, Olivier was just as smitten by the 22-year-old actress, 'Apart from her looks, which were magical,' he wrote in his autobiography, *Confessions of an Actor*, 'she possessed beautiful poise... She also had something else: an attraction of the most perturbing nature I have ever encountered.'

The affair would begin soon after, when they were both cast in the movie *Fire Over England* (1937). 'I couldn't help myself with Vivien, no man could,' the actor is quoted as saying in the book *Lord Larry: A Personal Portrait of Laurence Olivier*. 'I hated myself for cheating on Jill, but then I had cheated before, but this was something different. This wasn't just out of lust. This was love that I really didn't ask for but was drawn into.'

Their relationship would become an open secret in Hollywood and in 1937 they both formally separated from their respective spouses. They married in a quiet ceremony in Santa Barbara, California in 1940.

The intensity of the Olivier/Leigh romance is vividly captured in a trove of over 200 letters. In a 1938 note, Olivier wrote, 'I woke up absolutely raging with desire for you my love... Oh dear God how I did want you.' Leigh responded, 'If we loved each other only with our bodies I suppose it would be alright. I love you with much more than that. I love you with, oh everything somehow, with a special kind of soul.' Another letter from Olivier, written during a separation, reads, 'I am sitting naked with just my parts wrapped in your panties. My longing for you is so intense.'

BREAKDOWN & BETRAYAL

For all of the couple's hot-blooded passion, their marriage was tumultuous. Leigh's mental health had always been precarious (she'd suffered a nervous breakdown while filming *Gone with the Wind*, 1939) but as the Forties wore on, her behaviour was becoming increasingly erratic. Diagnosed with manic depression, which was worsened by her drinking, at one point she physically attacked Olivier during a rehearsal for a theatrical production of *Hamlet*. Another incident found her wandering naked in the public gardens outside her and Olivier's London home. When the black cloud overwhelmed her, the actor would describe his wife as 'trembling on the edge of a cliff, even when she's sitting quietly in her own drawing room.'

In 1953, Leigh had another breakdown on the set of *Elephant Walk* (1954). It was so severe she was forced to leave the production (Elizabeth Taylor replaced her). With limited medication available for what's now known as bipolar disorder, Leigh was treated with electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). As the actress's biographer Lyndsy Spence revealed in the book *Where Madness Lies*, Olivier was shaken by the difference the treatment had on his wife, 'The

pale face, marked by the ECT, and the colourless eyes were that of a stranger,' she wrote. 'He believed the treatment had robbed the "best parts" of her. She was no longer the girl he fell in love with.'

There were multiple infidelities on both sides during this time and, by the end of the decade, Leigh had embarked on a relationship with the actor John Merivale while Olivier was in the midst of an affair with the actress Joan Plowright. Realising their marriage was over, the couple divorced in 1960. Olivier married Joan a few months later.

He would remain with Plowright until his death in 1989, while Leigh never remarried. Despite their break-up, the two remained in contact, if only by letter. In May 1967, five weeks before her untimely death, aged just 53, from tuberculosis, Olivier penned his final correspondence to his former wife, signed simply, 'Sincerest love darling, your Larry.'

And it appears theirs was a love that remained in Olivier's heart long after her death. In the last years of Olivier's life, author Anthony Holden was at the actor's home when a Vivien Leigh movie came on the television. Holden watched as Olivier was overcome with emotion. 'This,' he told the writer through floods of tears, 'this was love. This was the real thing.'