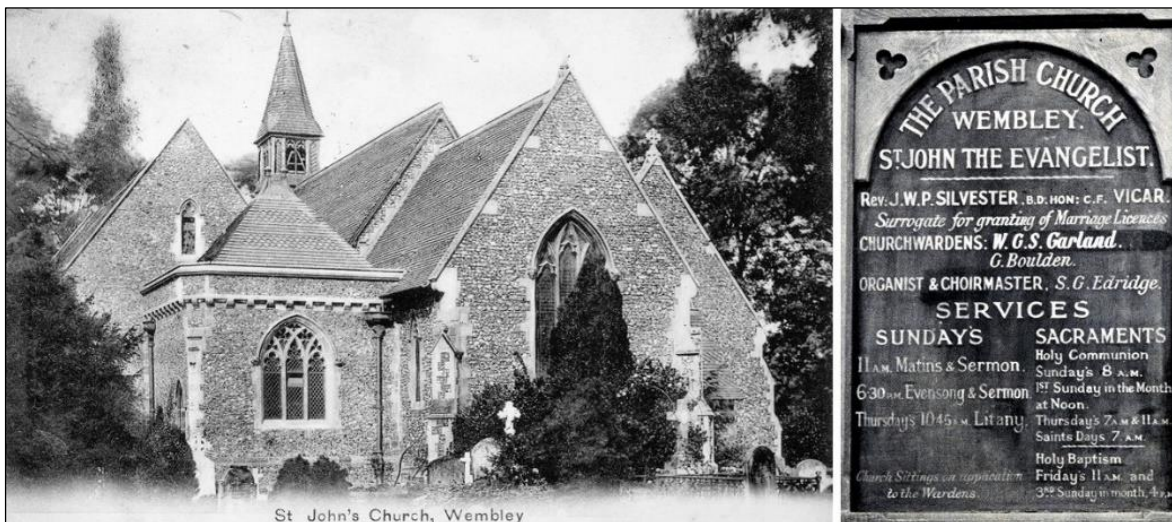


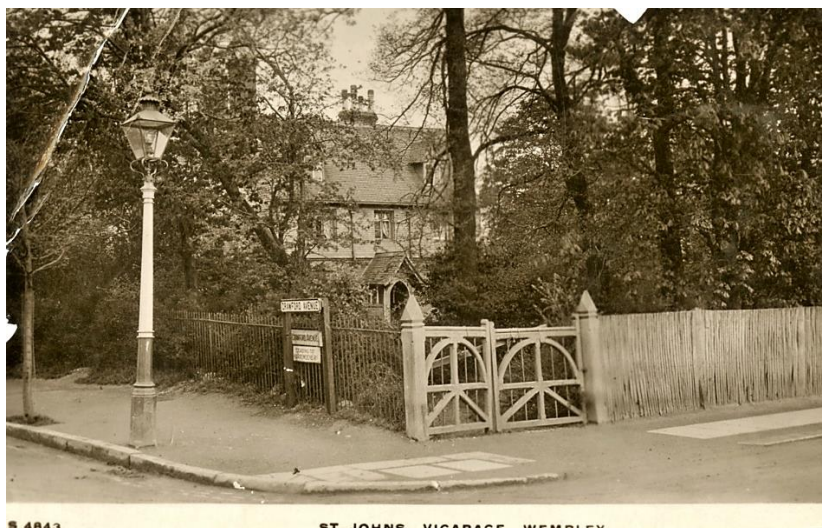
Victor Silvester – Strictly from Wembley

This is the time of year when many people look forward to watching “Strictly Come Dancing” on a Saturday evening. But “Strictly” may never have happened if it were not for a man born in Wembley!



1. St John's Church and its noticeboard, when Rev. Silvester was its Vicar. (Brent Archives 1197 and 9523)

In 1895 John William Potts Silvester, a recently ordained Church of England priest, arrived in Wembley to serve as a curate at St John the Evangelist Church. Because of the ill health of the vicar he came to assist, Silvester became the parish priest a year later, a post he held until 1944. He and his young wife Kate, from Lancashire like her husband, moved into the vicarage in Crawford Avenue, and she was to bear him successively two sons and then four daughters.



2. A postcard of St John's Vicarage, first half of the 20th century. (Brent Archives online image 10605)

The eldest son rejoiced in the name of Temple St John Hudson Silvester, being named after the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Frederick Temple, St John's Church and his mother's maiden name! Their second son was born in the vicarage on 25 February 1900, and was named Victor. This was probably because of a “victory”, the relief of Kimberley during Britain's war with the South African Boers, which had been reported in “The Times” the previous day. Victor's middle name was Marlborough, after another bishop.

With all this C of E background, you might think that the Silvester boys were destined for a career in the Church. But Temple served as an officer in the Royal Flying Corps during the First World War, then went on to qualify as a doctor; and Victor, well ,,,!



3. Ardingly College, in West Sussex (designed by a Victorian church architect?). (Image from the internet)

I don't have details of his early education, apart from that he had private piano lessons at home. When he was old enough, Victor was sent away to school, originally at Ardingly College in Sussex, a school with strong Anglican associations, from which he ran away. He was then sent to St John's School at Leatherhead, established in 1851 for the sons of Anglican clergy, and he ran away again. Finally, his father realised that a boarding school did not suit Victor, and he was sent as a day boy to John Lyon School in Harrow.

Victor "escaped" from school again during the First World War. Although not yet fifteen, he was tall and was able to persuade a recruiting sergeant (how much persuasion did he need?) that he was of military age. Apparently, he joined the London Scottish, a Territorial regiment at the end 1914, serving for sixteen months. After that he enlisted in the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, adding four years to his age, presumably to account for his previous service while pretending to be of military age. However, he was discharged a week later, perhaps at his father's request, on the grounds that he was still under-age.



4. Young Victor in his Highlanders army uniform, and a WW1 Red Cross ambulance. (From the internet)

He then joined the Red Cross First Aid Service and served with them in France from October 1916 to June 1917, thereby becoming entitled to the British War Medal and Victory Medal. Victor was next transferred to the First British Ambulance Unit in Italy, and was awarded the Italian bronze medal for military valour for his part in the evacuation of San Gabriele, during

which he was wounded. In early 1918, he re-enlisted in the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, having finally reached military age.

Towards the end of his life, Victor Silvester claimed that he was forced to witness, or even take part in, one or more executions of British soldiers by firing squad. He had not mentioned British executions years earlier in his autobiography, although he did refer to witnessing summary executions by the Italians of their deserters. Perhaps he had a false memory of events, based on this, but it is conceivable that the claims were suppressed by his publisher. After all, in those days, the fact of the executions was largely hushed up - it was only in 1998 that a list of death sentences and executions (some 10% of the sentences pronounced) was published.

As Victor was under nineteen at the time of the Armistice he did not serve abroad with the Argylls. It seems that he was considered for a commission, and spent time at Worcester College, Oxford, undergoing officer training. At the end of the war Victor was nominated for a place at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. His father, who had himself spent the war in uniform as a temporary Chaplain to the Forces, must have been relieved that his wayward son had at last found some sense of direction, but he was soon to receive a rude shock.

At a tea dance, while waiting for his call-up to Sandhurst, Victor was offered work 'partnering unattached ladies' and after two weeks of tuition he took this up. He did go to the Royal Military College, but following a familiar pattern, he left after just three weeks. This was partly because he felt his previous experience in the army was being ignored or belittled, but perhaps the unattached ladies also had a certain allure.



5. Victor Silvester ballroom dancing with his wife, Dorothy, c.1930. (Frontispiece "Modern Ballroom Dancing")

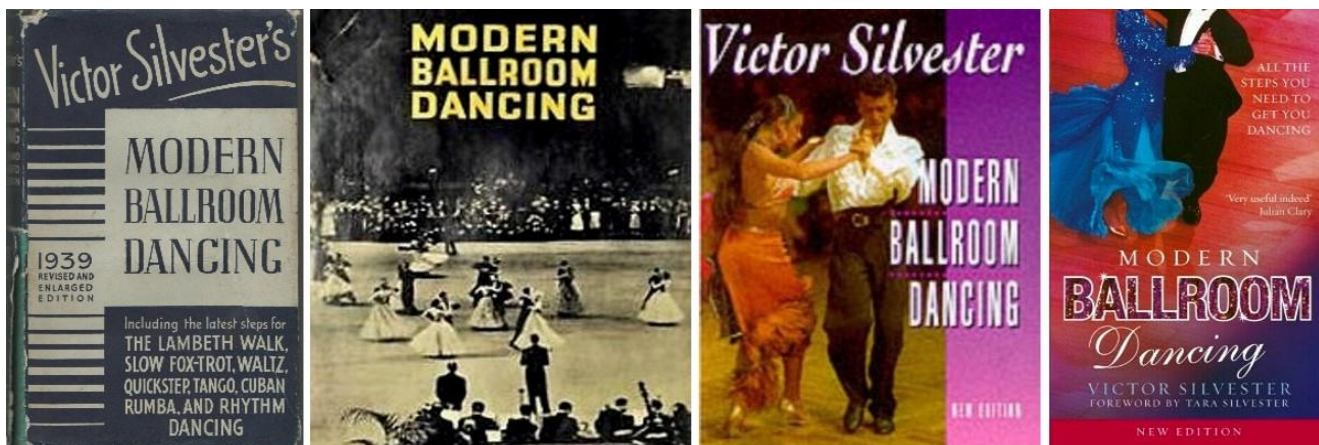
By 1922, Victor Silvester was a full-time professional ballroom dancer, and practicing with his partner, Phyllis Clarke, for the first World Ballroom Dancing Championships, which they won. At the Empress Rooms, he met Dorothy Newton, then in the chorus of a musical at the London Palladium, and they were married in December that year. While his mother, brother and sister

Gwendolyn came to the wedding at St Stephen's Church, Gloucester Road, Victor's father did not attend. Was this because the staid Victorian clergyman regarded his son as little better than a gigolo? (If you don't know the meaning of that word, look it up in a dictionary!) Or perhaps he was too busy, both as Wembley's Vicar, and a member of its Urban District Council (from 1911 to 1926, and its Chairman in 1921/22).



6. Rev. J.W.P. Silvester at the door of St John's Vicarage, 1925. (Brent Archives online image 9258)

In 1923, Victor opened his first dancing academy, in partnership with his wife. As a leading exponent, he was also involved in drawing up the rules used for ballroom dancing competitions, and went on to write books on the subject. His "Modern Ballroom Dancing", first published in 1927, quickly became the "bible" on the subject. Victor regularly updated the book in his lifetime, and it is still in print today after more than sixty editions, the most recent in 2005, when a certain TV programme renewed public interest in ballroom dancing.



7. A selection of "Modern Ballroom Dancing" book covers, from 1939 to 2005. (Images from the internet)

Beginning with the history of ballroom dancing and why it is such an enjoyable activity, the book describes the basics of how to hold your partner and move during a dance, before going into detailed instructions for each type of dance. Some of the instructions (these are from the 1942 edition) would certainly raise eyebrows, if not hackles, today.

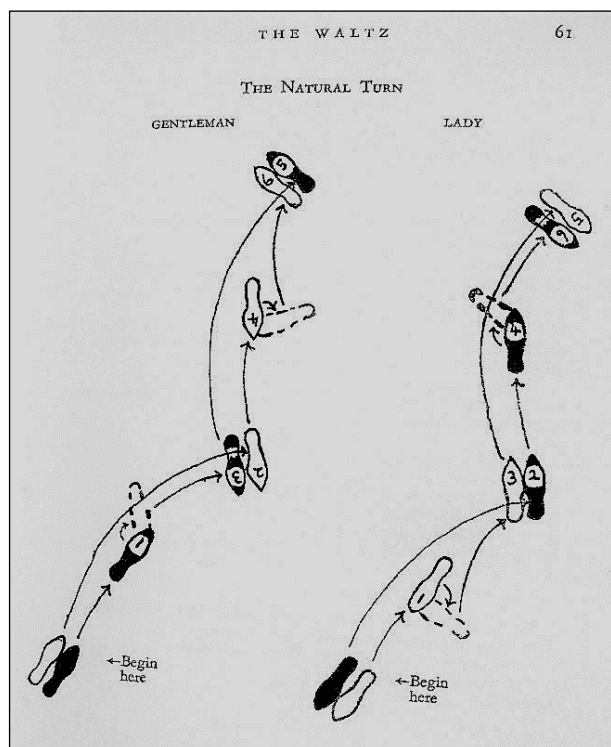
Extract from "The Gentleman's Hold": 'Steer and control your partner with your body and right hand – not with your left. The left hand is held up for balancing purposes and appearance, not for leading your partner with.'

Extract from "The Lady's Hold": 'Never attempt in any way to lead or guide your partner, submit yourself entirely to him. Do not lean on him or anticipate what is coming next, just follow.'



8. Photographs showing the correct "Hold" and "Balance". (From "Modern Ballroom Dancing", 1942 edition)

Every different type of ballroom dance, be it waltz, foxtrot, quickstep, tango etc., is covered, with diagrams to show the steps for the gentleman and the lady for every move used in the dance. For five shillings, you could buy the book, and teach yourself the dance movements at home. The only extra thing you would need was the music.



9. Steps diagram for "the Natural Turn" in the Waltz. (From "Modern Ballroom Dancing", 1942 edition)

Victor became concerned that the strict tempo, or number of beats per minute, necessary for the dances to be performed properly, was often absent in the way that dance music was played. His answer, in 1935, was to form his own Ballroom Orchestra, which was soon playing at live ballroom dancing events, and from 1937 on the wireless. Before long, he also had a recording

contract, which saw dozens of records available, which people could play on their gramophones to dance to.



10. The label from a Victor Silvester gramophone record, and advert for more of these. (From the internet)

Although many of the tunes they played were from songs, unlike some other dance bands Victor's never used a vocalist. He felt that dancers should be allowed to concentrate on the music – strict tempo was the key to the dance. If you would like to experience the sound of Victor Silvester and his Ballroom Orchestra, you can hear "It's a Lovely Day Today" here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clikUPRW_A&feature=emb_logo



11. Victor conducting his orchestra, and playing at a ballroom in the 1950s. (Images from the internet)

When I was a child in the 1950s, our bakelite radio set was usually tuned to the BBC Light Programme, and Victor Silvester was a popular broadcaster. Decades later, I still carry his signature tune in my head, along with the catchphrase 'slow, slow, *quick quick*, slow'! He also had his own BBC television show, "Dancing Club", which ran through much of the 1950s and 60s, as well as continuing to produce numerous records of dance music. He was the subject

of a "This is Your Life" TV programme in 1957, and was awarded the OBE, for services to ballroom dancing, in 1961.



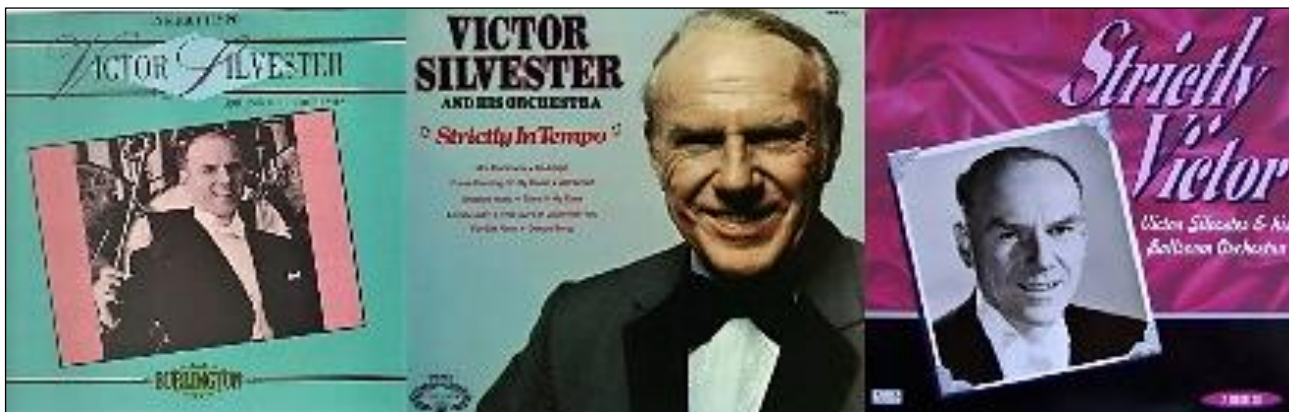
12. Victor on "This is Your Life", and with wife Dorothy after hearing of his OBE award. (From the internet)

By then, he had twenty-three dance studios, run by instructors he had trained, across the country. One of these was in the ballroom at the Majestic Cinema in Wembley High Road, where he sometimes conducted his orchestra. The Majestic, later an Odeon cinema, closed in 1962, and was demolished to make way for a C&A Modes fashion store (now Wilkinsons).



13. The Majestic Cinema, with Victor Silvester dance school, Wembley High Road, 1961. (W.H.S. collection)

Cruelly for a dancer, his wife Dorothy had a leg amputated in later life. Victor himself died of a heart attack in August 1978, after swimming while they were on holiday in the south of France.



14. Three of the many LP record covers of Victor's Strict Tempo dance music. (Images from the internet)

During Victor's lifetime, over 75 million of his dance music records were sold, with more on compilation LPs since then, and all of them played in strict tempo. Dancing in strict tempo, to strict rules, was a key theme of Baz Luhrmann's 1992 Australian film "Strictly Ballroom".



15. A "Strictly Ballroom" film poster, and the logo for BBC's "Strictly Come Dancing". (From the internet)

BBC television had a long-running ballroom dancing programme called "Come Dancing", at various times from 1949 through to the 1990s. This started life as a show where professional dancers displayed their skills, and taught others how to dance. From 1953 it changed to a competition, and over more than 400 episodes its presenters included Peter West, Terry Wogan and Angela Rippon. When it was relaunched in 2004, with celebrities and professional dancers paired to compete in a knock-out format, a new title was needed. It's a reflection of the influence of Victor Silvester on ballroom dancing that it is now "*Strictly* Come Dancing."

**Philip Grant,
Wembley History Society, November 2020.**

I would not have known about Victor Silvester's Wembley connections, let alone be able to write about them, if it were not for my late Wembley History Society colleague, Richard Graham. He wrote an article, "The bandleader and the clergyman", for a Journal I was editing in 2009, and much of what I have written above was adapted from his work. This local history blog is dedicated to Richard's memory.

This article was written for, and first published on, the "Wembley Matters" blog website, but anyone is free to share it on a "not for profit" basis. Our local history belongs to all of us!