

## The Search for Gull Cottage

By  
John D'Angelo

In 1945 a book entitled "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir" was published in England. The novel had been written by R.A. Dick and two years later the story was made into a movie that captivated scores of people. Later on the story was made into a television series which ran for two seasons.

Over the years, and to this day, people have talked about Gull Cottage and wondered if it was real or just a figment of the imagination of the writer.

I have found that there are three Gull Cottages. The first was described in the original book, the second was in the 1947 movie, and the third was in the TV series. One was not real and was a studio set that was only built for the movie. One was a real home that exists today, but it was not near a cliff on the water. The cottage in the book may have been a true cottage that the author based her novel on.

To fully understand the background involving Gull Cottage I first needed to learn as much about the author as possible.

The Author:

R.A. Dick was a Pseudonym for Josephine Leslie. When she wrote *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* she was either advised to use a man's name or she decided to do this on her own accord. Perhaps it was thought that a book by a man would have a much better chance at being purchased than if it were by a woman and Josephine Leslie used R.A. Dick. In any case, the book was published, became popular in England, and 20th Century Fox purchased the film rights from Mrs. Leslie. Philip Dunne was chosen by 20th Century Fox to write the screenplay. After writing *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, Mrs. Leslie's writing career never really "took off" and her writing consisted of a few plays and one more novel, *The Devil and Mrs. Devine*, published in 1975.

I attempted to get as much background information about Josephine Leslie as possible, but I was not able to find records of interviews, biographical data, or much of anything about her even though I did write to a number of sources in the United Kingdom. The most detailed response I did receive was from John Wells, of the University Library, Cambridge England, who really tried to get as much information about her on my behalf. I am very grateful to Mr. Wells for the information he was able to supply to me. On the next page is the information Mr. Wells was able to give to me.

Dear Mr D'Angelo,

Thank you for your enquiry. I regret that I can find no indication from the handlists so far prepared of the Royal Society of Literature Archive held in Cambridge University Library that Josephine Leslie had any dealings with the Society. Had she held a Fellowship I would have expected there to be a "Fellow's file" recording this.

She is not one of the 'Names of Modern British and Irish Literature' (<http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/library/LocationRegisterNameAuthorityList.pdf>) and as such has no entries in the Location Register of 20th Century English Literary Manuscripts (<http://www.reading.ac.uk/library/about-us/projects/lib-location-register.aspx>) or the WATCH project database (<http://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/watch/>). Nor is she recorded in the National Register of Archives Personal Name index (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/searches/simpleSearch.asp?subjectType=P>).

The British Library catalogue and Cambridge University Library supplementary catalogue support 'Josephine Aimee Campbell Leslie' as her full name, and the National Union Catalogue additionally supports 1898 as her date of birth. The Cambridge University Library supplementary catalogue also gives a married form of name as 'Mrs M. E. Leslie'.

From these catalogues I have found details of further publications under the pseudonym 'R. A. Dick', as follows:

'The Adventures of Juma', London: Museum Press, 1949  
'She Walked to the Wedding', London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953  
'Unpainted Portrait', London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954  
'Light and Shade', London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956  
'The Second Blessing', London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958  
'A King Will Come: a Play in One Act', London: Evans Brothers (acting edition), 1959  
'Witch Errant: An Improbable Comedy in Three Acts', London: Evans Brothers (acting edition), 1959  
'Duet for Two Hands', London: Robert Hale, 1960  
'Wanted', London: Robert Hale, 1962

'The Ghost and Mrs Muir' was reprinted in 1947, 1971 and 1972, at the least. The only copies of 'The Devil and Mrs Devine' noted in the catalogues are from 1974 (New York: Pocket Books) and 1975 (London: Millington).

Yours sincerely,

John Wells

Mr. Wells' information was extremely helpful, but unfortunately I was not able to dig much deeper. I did find out that she died in 1979. I had seen bits and pieces of information which indicated that she was born in Wexford Ireland in 1898 and later on lived in England, but other than that I do not have any more information about her, nor do I know where she was buried. I did purchase her second novel, *The Devil and Mrs. Devine*, in the hopes that the dust cover might have additional information about her, but there was no information, other than stating that she had written *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. To this day I have been unable to get any additional information about Josephine Leslie.

## The Cottages

Mrs. Leslie wrote about Gull Cottage being situated in the village of Whitecliff on Cliff Road. Her description of the cottage was well detailed in her book and the location was somewhere close to the sea. Based on the name *Whitecliff* the location could have been in the Dover area which is well known for its white cliffs. She described Gull Cottage as it appeared to Lucy Muir:

"It was a small, grey stone house, standing at some distance from its larger neighbor. A grey stone wall curved out into a round bastion, dividing the house and garden from the road. A large bow-window with faded blue shutters looked out from the upper floor over the sea, as if it were a trap to catch the sun's rays from every angle of the day."<sup>1</sup>

When *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* was made into a movie in 1947 by 20th Century Fox, the movie studio constructed a shell to be used for exterior shots, which was torn down at the end of shooting. The interior sets were built on sound stages at 20th century Fox. The producers decided to use the California coast to represent the rugged coastline of southern England and the Palos Verdes area has been named as the place where the mockup of the cottage was built and where the coastal images came from. Google Earth is an excellent tool for searching out geographic locations and the Palos Verdes sea coast does have a beautiful rugged coastline that is strikingly similar to the English coast.



Google Earth Street View of Palos Verdes Today

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<sup>1</sup>Page 10 *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* copyright 1945 by Ziff Davis Publishing Co.

Palos Verdes is a curved cliff running from the Palos Verdes Peninsula on the south to Point Vicente on the north, where the Point Vicente lighthouse is. The peninsula has lost some of its sharpness over time from when the movie was made in 1947 from either earthquake activity, erosion, or both. The main road, Palos Verdes Drive, South probably was not a major road in 1947. I did see on the Google Earth image a dirt road called the Pescadero Trail. It is possible that the cottage set was built here. Rancho Palos Verdes is a large grouping of homes which may now cover the area where they built the cottage set.

The cottage that was built by 20th century Fox was a Georgian design with a hipped roof, paired chimneys and it and fairly closely matched the description by Mrs. Leslie, but rather than just having a bay-window on the second floor they expanded the entire right side of the house giving a bay window to the sitting room and a terrace above the sitting room to allow the bedroom to open up onto the terrace. The detail of the interior room sets was to a very high standard giving an excellent atmosphere. Georgian style homes are symmetrical with a center front door, paired chimneys on each side of the house, and can be found with hipped or gable roofs. I have seen a large Georgian home near me that used a mansard style roof, but the primary characteristic is that they are symmetrical.



A Still of Gull Cottage From the *Ghost and Mrs. Muir* DVD

If you have not seen the original 1947 movie starring Gene Tierny as Lucy Muir, and Rex Harrison as Captain Daniel Gregg, you can purchase the DVD at a number of stores and online. The DVD contains extensive special material including still photos of the sets that were used in the movie. Also in the movie is a very young Natalie Wood playing the role of Anna Muir, that just put a lump in my throat, knowing how her life ended.

The next Gull Cottage was in a TV series entitled *The Ghost & Mrs. Muir*. I found the following information on Wikipedia <sup>2</sup>. Starring Hope Lange as Carolyn Muir and Edward Mulhare as Captain Daniel Gregg, the series depicted the location as being on the coast of Maine in contemporary times. The series only lasted for two years, first it aired on NBC from September of 1968 to the spring of 1969. The ratings were not strong enough and NBC dropped the show. ABC picked up the show and it aired on ABC from September of 1969 to April of 1970 at which time the show also did not perform strongly enough and was not renewed.

Although the location for the cottage was supposed to be in Maine, the exterior shots were made in the same location as the original film, Palos Verdes. The cottage, in this case, was not a set but was a real home located in Santa Barbara California. The picture below was found in an old real estate ad that is still on the internet. The web site "Hooked on Houses" posted the original ad.<sup>3</sup>



The Santa Barbara "cottage" is really quite large, almost 5,000 square feet in size and the asking price at the time the ad was published was \$ 3.75 Million. The house still exists today, it is not right on the water, but is 1/4 mile from the shoreline. It is in a neighborhood with closely packed homes and there is not much property at the home site. Once again the home was used for exterior shots and the interior shots were taken using sound stage sets. Rather than Georgian, the design is Queen Anne and Craftsman based. It has been said that the real interior of the home was nicer looking than the sound stage sets. I am normally a lover of a smaller home and prefer a home less than 3,000 to 1,200 square feet in size, but this home is beautifully crafted and the real interiors are superb.

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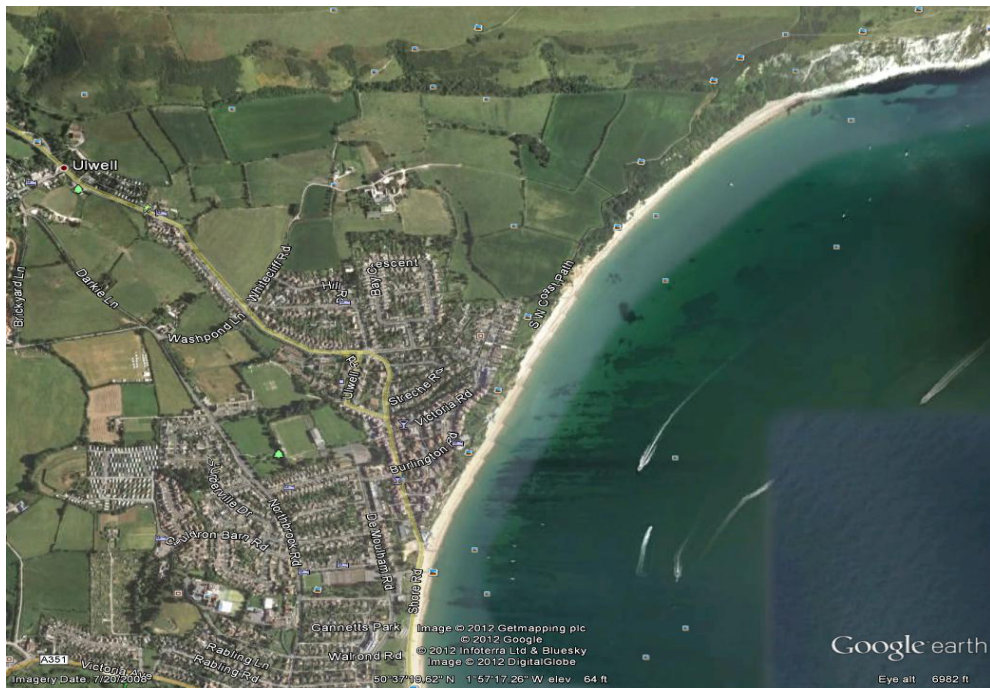
<sup>2</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Ghost\\_%26\\_Mrs.\\_Muir\\_\(TV\\_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ghost_%26_Mrs._Muir_(TV_series))

<sup>3</sup><http://hookedonhouses.net/2011/08/29/gull-cottage-from-the-ghost-mrs-muir-tv-show-for-sale/>

This brings me to the final cottage in this short paper. I wondered if there had been an actual cottage in England that may have been the inspiration for Josephine Leslie. As previously mentioned there is not very much to go on regarding Mrs. Leslie's life, other than the fact that she lived in England and she placed Gull Cottage in the village of Whitecliff.

I have to say that Wikipedia, Google and Google Earth were the tools that I used in my search and without them I might have been stopped cold. The first clue was the name of Whitecliff and the other clue was that Mrs. Muir took a train to Whitecliff. I found a Whitecliff Bay, but this was on the south coast of the Isle of Mann and although the shore line looked the part, I felt that the location of the model for Gull Cottage, if it really existed, was on the mainland. I searched all over the coast of England, north, south, east and west, but my gut was telling me to concentrate in the southern area.

I discovered lots of places that used the name of "White" in their names, but no Whitecliff villages appeared. Then I came to the village of Swanage England.



Google Earth View of Swanage, England

In the upper right of the picture you can see white cliffs and Swanage is placed on the "Downs" which are the sloping lands between the white cliffs that make a gentle slope to the water. Eventually as I looked around the village I found "Whitecliff Road" and in addition I discovered that Google Earth had placed one of their mapping cars on the road which allowed me to use "Street view". By switching to the street view option I was able to "travel" along the road. I started from town and traveled northward on Whitecliff Road.

As I came to the end of the road I saw a Georgian design cottage that closely matched the description given by Josephine Leslie. It was a stone cottage and even had the wall she described running along the property and encasing the yard.



Google Street View of the Cottage

Unfortunately, the Google car had not gone any further up the road and I was unable to get a closer view of the cottage, but a photo of the cottage was taken by "helenkala" and has been posted on Panoramio. The photo can be clicked on when you are in Google Earth if you have "Panoramio" activated in the menu. The cottage is slightly less than a half mile from the sea and has good views of the village below and the water. I have no idea who owns the cottage, or even if it has a name, but by using the Google Earth ruler I have determined that it is about 30 feet wide by 24 feet deep, and the two floors would amount to 1,440 square feet of living space. There is no bay window on the second floor or shutters, but I think I may have finally have found the inspiration for the original Gull Cottage of Josephine Leslie's novel!

John D'Angelo