

Cary Grant



Grant in RKO publicity still for *Suspicion* (Wikimedia)

Despite being married five times there have been debates and rumours about Bristol-born Cary Grant's sexuality ever since he became a star in the 1930s. With his debonair manner, comic timing and mid-Atlantic accent he was Hollywood's definitive leading man for over 30 years. In 1999 he was named second-greatest male star of the Golden Age of Hollywood (after Humphrey Bogart) by the American Film Institute. For ten years on-and-off he lived with tall, handsome, muscular film star [Randolph Scott](#) (1898-1987) who some consider to have been the love of his life.

Born Archie Leach at 15 Hughenden Road in the northern Bristol suburb of Horfield in 1904, the family later moved to 5 Seymour Avenue, Bishopston. His father, Elias, was an alcoholic tailor presser at Todd & Co clothing factory off Portland Square, and his mother Elsie was a seamstress. She suffered from clinical depression after the death of Archie's brother, John, who died of meningitis the day before his first birthday in 1899. She blamed herself and never totally recovered from it.



15 Hughenden Road

Archie was christened at Holy Trinity church, Horfield, and attended Bishop Road Primary School, Bishopston 1908 -15. Grant's love of cinema began with visits with his mother to the refined Clare Street Picture House and with his father to watch Charlie Chaplin and the Keystone Cops at the Metropole, Ashley Road, which he later recalled smelt of damp raincoats.

When Archie was nine his father committed his mother to Glenside Mental Hospital, Blackberry Hill. Archie was told his mother had gone on a long holiday, and later that she was dead.

Archie and his father later lived at 21 Picton Street and 12 Campbell Street, St Paul's. In 1915 his father moved to Southampton to begin a new life and family with his common law wife, Mabel Johnson, leaving Archie with his grandmother. He attended Fairfield Grammar School in Fairlawn Road 1915-18 but was expelled, reputedly after he had been caught in the girl's toilets.

At 13 he worked as a lighting assistant at The Empire Theatre, Old Market, and briefly as a callboy at the Bristol Hippodrome. He was befriended by the Bob Pender acrobatic troupe who appeared at The Empire before he toured the UK with them, followed by a tour of the United States in 1920. When the troupe returned to Britain in 1922, Grant stayed on in the US and became a stilt walker on the vaudeville circuit. He first appeared on Broadway in 1927.

In the early 1920s Grant shared a New York loft apartment with the gay Australian Hollywood costume designer [Orry-Kelly](#) (1897-1964). In later years Grant told Orry-Kelly to 'tell them nothing' about their years together in Greenwich Village. Archie Leach appeared in his first film in 1931, changed his name to Cary Grant and again shared rooms with Orry-Kelly.

Grant made two films with Mae West in 1933 and she later claimed to have 'discovered' him. She reputedly asked a Paramount office boy who he was and received the reply "Oh, that's Cary Grant, he's making [Madam] Butterfly with Sylvia Sydney" to which West retorted "I don't care if he's making Little Nell, if he can talk I'll take him". Later referring to her famous quote Mae West reportedly said "He never came up to see me, not even sometime".

Grant met Randolph Scott at Paramount in 1932 and they soon moved in together, sharing a house in Hollywood and later a Santa Monica beach house. Rumours about their "bromance" soon began when a journalist claimed the pair were "carrying the buddy business a bit too far".

A 1934 magazine article by gay journalist Ben Maddox appeared with [photos of Grant and Scott](#) in swim trunks and working out in the gym. In 1939 *Photoplay* magazine reported on "The Gay Romance of Cary Grant", albeit using the word with its original meaning. Grant's secretary Frank Horn was gay, and Grant and Scott also shared their house for a time with gay film star and interior designer William Haines. Whether Grant really had any homosexual feelings or indeed acted on them cannot be proven but he was at ease mixing with gay men in an age and industry where homosexuality was at best frowned upon, if not illegal. It was said "Archie Leach was gay but Cary Grant was straight".

Fashion critic and journalist Richard Blackwell, then an actor at RKO, and society photographer Jerome Zerbe who took publicity shots of Grant and Scott at their home both claimed to have slept with both. Blackwell wrote in his autobiography that Grant and Scott "were deeply, madly in love, their devotion was complete". It was said Scott saw their relationship as "locker room playing around". Several witnesses reported having seen Grant and Scott in their 70s holding hands in the Beverley Hills Hotel.

Grant was put under pressure to marry by Paramount and became engaged to film actress [Virginia Cherrill](#). In November 1933 Grant, Cherrill and Scott sailed together to England. Scott signed a ship's menu card "To my spouse, Cary-Randy". They visited Bristol and there were rumours the wedding would take place in the city but the ceremony took place in London the following year. The marriage only lasted 13 months. Grant attempted suicide by taking poison and moved back in with Scott. Grant later said "My first wife accused me of being homosexual" but Cherrill always denied this.

Grant's father, Elias Leach, died in December 1935 aged 63 and was buried in Canford Cemetery, Bristol. Grant was in the UK making a film. His reaction was muted. On his deathbed Elias told his son the truth about his mother. Grant got Elsie out of the asylum and moved her to 93 Whiteladies Road and arranged an allowance for her. From then on he visited her at least once a year, apart from the war years, but found her emotional intensity very stressful and their relationship was strained.

In 1938 Grant made the classic screwball comedy *Bringing Up Baby* with Katharine Hepburn. It is believed to be the first film in which the word "gay" is used in an overtly homosexual context when Grant, explaining why he's wearing a marabou-trimmed negligee, exclaims "Because I just went gay all of a sudden". The film's costumes were designed by gay designer Howard Greer.

In 1940 Grant and Scott made their only film together: *My Favourite Wife*. Hollywood gossip columnist Hedda Hopper wrote to Gardner Cowles, editor of *Look* magazine, saying of Grant "He started with boys and now he's gone back to them" and told him she believed Grant was having an affair with his chauffeur. Cowles replied "I have long suspected a few things about Cary Grant". Grant's third wife, Betsy Drake, reputedly claimed he was bisexual. In 1942 Grant took US citizenship and officially changed his name to Cary Grant, the witnesses being Scott and Horn.

After the war Grant resumed his regular visits to Bristol. In April 1946 he lunched at The Grand Hotel, visited the British Aeroplane Company works at Filton, and visited his mother now at 13 Howard Road, Westbury Park. In August 1947 he returned to see his mother and his old school and journeyed by car through many parts of the city" (*Western Daily Press* 13 August 1947). His visits continued regularly through the 1960s and into the 1970s.



Cary Grant at the Avon Gorge Hotel, Clifton, Bristol, 18/1/1972 - his 68th birthday (Mirrorpix)

His mother Elsie, now 87, moved to The Chesterfield Nursing Home in 1963 where she died ten years later in January 1973, a few days before her 96th birthday. She was buried alongside her husband in Canford Cemetery. There were only four mourners, including Grant, on a cold and rainy day.

In 1975 Grant unveiled a plaque at the United Nations building at Bristol Basin, New York, so named as the land was constructed on tons of wartime rubble from the Bristol blitz. Peter Heap, Deputy Head of British Information Services, himself a Bristolian, spoke to Grant about their home city and noted how sentimental Grant was about Bristol saying, "It was clear that his feelings about Bristol far exceeded his feelings about England".



Statue by Graham Ibbeson

Photo: Bristol City Council

Grant died 29th November 1986 aged 82. Randolph Scott died three months later. In December 2001 a bronze statue of Grant by Graham Ibbeson was unveiled in Millennium Square, Bristol, by his widow Barbara Jaynes.

Celebrity biographer Darwin Porter claimed Grant had enduring affairs with Randolph Scott and aviation tycoon and film producer [Howard Hughes](#), and that he also bedded Marlon Brando, Gary Cooper, playwrights Clifford Odets and Moss Hart, and the composer Cole Porter. *[Ed: critics have questioned the credibility of some of Porter's claims]*. Gay playwright Arthur Laurents said Grant was "at best bisexual".

In 2015 Jennifer Grant (Cary's daughter by his fourth wife [Dyan Cannon](#)) wrote in a memoir "Dad somewhat enjoyed being called gay. He said it made women want to prove the assertion wrong". However she is adamant he was not gay: "Dad was charming, and he had great friendships, but he wasn't flirtatious with men I never got that hint. Perhaps earlier in his life he had an affair [with a man]. I'll never know, but if he did, fantastic. I hope he enjoyed it."

Grant himself said "If someone wants to call me gay, what can I do about it? I think it's probably been said about every man who's been known to do well with women. I don't let that sort of thing bother me. What matters to me is that I know who I am".

Perhaps the last word should be left to Cary Grant. Meeting Roy Hudd and Peter Noone, stars of the 1971 Bristol Hippodrome panto *Dick Whittington* backstage, Grant was asked what he thought of the production's dodgy scenery which looked like "a bent picture". Enigmatically Grant replied "That's the story of my life".

Jonathan Rowe 2023

Books:

Scott Eyman: Cary Grant – A Brilliant Disguise (2020)

Maureen Donaldson: An Affair To Remember – My Life With Cary Grant (1989)

Jennifer Grant: Good Stuff – A Reminiscence Of My Father, Cary Grant (2011)

Website links:

Gay Influence: [Cary Grant & Randolph Scott](#)

Elisa Rolle: [Queer Places – Cary Grant](#)

Alan Royle: [Cary Grant – The Loves in His Life](#)

Peter Sheridan: [Why Cary Grant was happy to be called gay](#) Daily Express 30/4/2011

Pierre Montiel: [Legendary Cary Grant](#). The [Early Years](#) section has some interesting photos of Grant's early life.

[What Hollywood film star Cary Grant did in Bristol exactly 50 years ago](#) Bristol Post 18/1/2022.