

Vesta was billed as the “Great Little Tilley” and as the “Pocket Sims Reeves”, imitating the famous Victorian tenor Sims Reeves, who performed Elijah at the Worcester Festival in 1848; her cross dressing act caused confusion for Vesta’s audience. They were unsure whether they were watching a boy or a girl. To clear up the confusion, it is said that Harry Ball decided on the name Vesta as she was “a bright spark”, like the matches; and the name stuck – she was known as Vesta for the rest of her life by friends and family alike.



Vesta took her cross-dressing very seriously. She played very close attention to detail, even to the point of wearing men’s underwear to give her clothes the right line, and becoming a fashion icon for men. Her songs including “Burlington Bertie” played on men’s vulnerability and vanity. It was remarked that “Instead of merging her own personality into that of the character, she brought her wits to bear on him critically ... we had to see them, ourselves, not as we could see them in real life, but as they were when viewed through a clever woman’s eyes” (Disher). Vesta’s act was notoriously clean: whilst her contemporary Marie Lloyd was known for her suggestive lyrics, Vesta wanted music hall to be inviting for families.

She married Walter de Frece, the son of music hall owner Henry de Frece in 1890. By this time, Vesta was the highest paid woman in Britain, and cracked the notoriously tricky American scene completing six successful tours in the States the same year.

After a Royal Command performance in 1912, a high point in the development of music hall theatre, Vesta retired and Walter looked to move in to Conservative politics.

When war was declared in 1914 Vesta was 50. The war brought a new lease of life for her and her husband and she embraced a new public role performing frequently for charities and for wounded soldiers. She performed her most well-known song of the time, “Jolly good luck to the girl who loves a soldier”, in soldier’s uniform with a full backpack – still with attention to detail, Vesta felt that the stuffed alternative was too light and did not swing authentically. Her other popular songs included ‘The Army of Today’s All Right’ and ‘Six Days’ Leave’.

Her performances are said to have culminated by encouraging young men to come on stage to sign up and those who didn’t were presented with a white feather for cowardice.



“We don’t want to lose you but we think you ought to go”

“I’m a bit of a Blighty one”



Following the war, Vesta Tilley became Lady de Frece on Walter’s knighthood in 1919, for his services rehabilitating soldiers. Walter was elected MP for Ashton under Lyne, at which point Vesta decided to retire, for good. When she made her final performance at the Coliseum, London in 1920, it is alleged that over 2 million people had signed the “People’s Tribute” to her and she received a 40 minute standing ovation.

In 1932, the couple retired to Monte Carlo, where Walter died the following year. Vesta continued to live in Monte Carlo, but died on a visit to London on the 16 September 1957. She is buried at Putney Vale cemetery.

“The Army of Today’s All Right”

“Jolly good luck to the girl who loves a soldier”



Her father William was instrumental in Vesta’s future success. Although trained as a china gilder and apprenticed to one of the best firms in the city, William exhibited a talent for reinvention and the stage. He was born the son of William Ball, a butcher, but in the course of his life he was variously known as Powles, a family name from Brecon in South Wales, and he eventually settled on the stage name of “Harry Ball”.

Harry Ball has been described as an ‘enterprising extrovert’ and a ‘considerable musician’, and he made the most of his talents appearing on stage as an ‘Irish tramp musician’: dancing, singing and playing the piccolo in the small theatres of Worcester. He then broadened his career in the burgeoning music halls, becoming a chairman of first, the Theatre Royal in Gloucester and then moving to Nottingham.

Matilda Alice turned professional aged 5, when she started to tour. Up to this point she has been performing locally. Initially working on stage with her father Harry Ball, by the age of 8, having added cross-dressing to her routine, she became the sole supporter for her family and was managed by her father.



## The Vesta Tilley Collection

The Vesta Tilley Collection is owned by Worcestershire County Council’s Archive and Archaeology Service. It contains Vesta’s personal collection of mementoes, scrapbooks, photographs, newspaper cuttings, play bills, reviews, fan letters, as well as some items of stage clothing. The collection was originally sold at auction in 1952 but was acquired by the County Council in 2003 with assistance from the V&A Purchase Fund.

The archive is available for public research at WAAS, The Hive, Worcester, WR1 3PD. Please check our website for opening times and be sure to ring in advance. The collection reference number is 899:1400.

The Vesta Tilley Society can be contacted at: [www.vestatilly.kk5.org](http://www.vestatilly.kk5.org)

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## About Worcestershire World War One Hundred

Cultural and heritage organisations from across Worcestershire have come together to commemorate the 100th anniversary of World War One with an outstanding 4 year programme of events and activities under the banner Worcestershire World War One Hundred. The programme, which received the largest Heritage Lottery Fund Grant outside of London for a project commemorating the First World War, will commemorate the role Worcestershire played in World War One and tell the stories of Worcestershire people, their involvement with and personal legacy from the War.

### Worcestershire World War One Hundred

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World War One Worcestershire



## Vesta Tilley Trail



## Who was Vesta Tilley?

Vesta Tilley became known during the First World War as “England’s Greatest Recruiting Sergeant”. A successful music hall actress from childhood, her combination of wit, charm and nationalism made her a favourite with men and women alike. She was particularly popular with women as she was successful and independent.

Vesta (1864–1952) was born Matilda Alice Powles 13 May 1864 in Commandery Street, Worcester the daughter of William Henry Powles and his wife Matilda. She was the second of 13 children. Her childhood backdrop was poverty although both her parents worked; her father as a china gilder and her mother as a dressmaker. They lived in the crowded, over-populated streets surrounding the Worcester workhouse at Tallow Hill and her story is one of triumph over adversity.





1 TALLOW HILL

Vesta’s father William was born in Tallow Hill in 1841. The son of William Ball, a butcher in St Martin’s Street, the Ball family lived in this area and it is here that William Henry, later to take the name of William Henry Powles was born. The Powles name is believed to have come from Vesta’s paternal grandmother and the family originated from Brecon in South Wales.

On 19 August 1862, Vesta’s parents married at the chapel at Whittington. William, aged 21 was still living in Tallow Hill and working as a china glazier, he married Vesta’s mother Matilda Broughton, believed to be working as a dressmaker, also aged 21

The Worcester Poor Law Union workhouse at Tallow Hill was built in the late C18th and its presence dominated the character of the area. Originally built for 200 inmates and serving several people in out-relief for £1,677 per year, the number of impoverished people in the area more than doubled by the mid-C19th.

The remains of the C19th extension to the workhouse can be seen in the board room block dated 1895.



St Peter’s church

2 THE BLOCKHOUSE

Vesta was the second of 13 children: Amy, Elizabeth, Maud and Henry were all born in Worcester. The family was typical of the large families living in the Blockhouse.

The Blockhouse was an area of multi-occupancy: back to back houses, basic sanitation and high infant mortality. Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, “Woodbine Willie” was called to work in the area to bring spiritual relief to the poor and destitute. The houses were demolished in the slum clearances of the 1950s. Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy’s church, St Paul’s still stands in the area.

Learn more about the Blockhouse and Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy in our other heritage trail, “Woodbine Willie”.



Vesta Tilley aged 9

3 WYLD’S LANE

Vesta was born 13th May 1864 on Beaver Row, a little street off Commandery Street.

The street names in this area changed several times. In 1741, it was known as Union Lane, probably taking its name from the Poor Law Union Farm but in 1779 it was known as Commandery Lane. In 1829 it was known as Wild’s Lane and then in 1840 as Commandery Street.

By 1871, the family had moved to 48 Commandery Street, another block of back to back houses on what is now the corner of Vincent Road and the old Garibaldi Pub on Wyld’s Lane.

Wyld’s Lane was well-known as the home to many glove makers in Worcester. Such light industry could be carried out at home, and Matilda, Vesta’s mother brought in dress making.

By the time Vesta was born, her maternal grandmother was widowed and living next door to her parents. In common with many people in the area she was claiming out relief from the workhouse at Tallow Hill.

In 1893, the number of destitute had increased, and the Union opened cottage homes on the north side of Wyld’s Lane for the care of children.

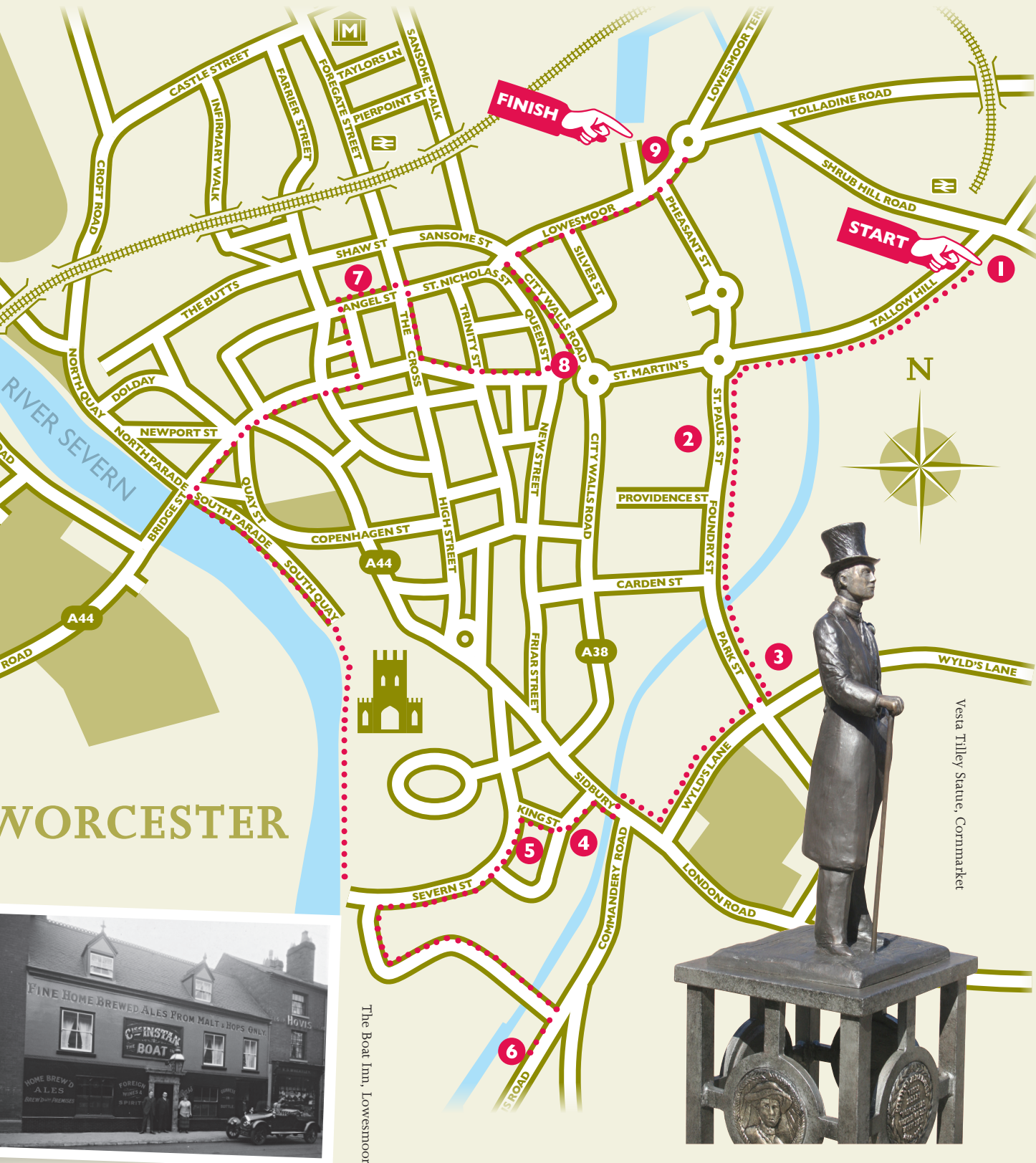
# The Vesta Tilley Trail

4 ST. PETER’S CHURCH

Vesta was baptised Matilda Alice Powles in St Peter’s church on 4th September 1864.

The new church of 1838, replaced an earlier medieval church on the site that had been continually occupied as a place of worship since the C10th. The C19th church that replaced it was recorded as a large, brick built room but it was so badly built that within twenty years of construction, the roof was on the point of collapse. It would have been in this precarious state when Vesta was baptised.

The church was demolished in 1976, following a period of disuse. It is now marked by a blue plaque in the grounds of the Worcester Royal Porcelain museum.



## WORCESTER

5 WORCESTER ROYAL PORCELAIN MUSEUM

In her autobiography, Vesta recalled her father working at the Worcester Royal Porcelain factory on one of the large presentation sets given to Queen Victoria.

William Ball was apprenticed as a china gilder and glazier to William Henry Kerr in 1857.

Under William Henry Kerr, and his fellow Irishman Richard Binns, the Chamberlain & Co. Porcelain Works in Severn Street underwent tremendous technological advancement. At this time, the firm was well-known for its talented team and produced very high quality work. This would have been an exciting and prestigious place to work for Vesta’s father.

Worcester Royal Porcelain ceased production in 2008. At its height, the company employed over 1,000 people.



The Boat Inn, Lowesmoor



The Theatre Royal, Angel Street

6 DIGLIS BASIN

Vesta’s maternal grandparents lived and worked in this area and her grandfather Samuel is listed in the census as a sailmaker.

The trade directories dating between 1790 and 1860 show the Broughtons as makers of sailcloth, tarpaulin and oil sheet.

Canal traffic opened at Diglis Basin in 1815. The basin enabled craft from the River Severn to access the Worcester and Birmingham Canal: at this point the canal is 14 feet wide to accommodate the larger river craft in the basin. The locks from here up to Birmingham were constructed at a more economical 7ft wide.

In the 1920s, one of the major users of the canal was the Cadbury Company moving materials between Bournville and Worcester when the company occupied the Blackpole Munitions site.

7 THEATRE ROYAL

Vesta’s father William Ball, was attracted to performing. He used a stage name ‘Harry Ball’ and was billed as a “tramp musician” and Worcester offered him many potential venues.

During the C19th there was a boom in the number of theatres. The large number of people migrating into the towns and cities for employment in the industrial revolution were in need of entertainment and diversion.

In the middle of the C19th, the Theatre Royal had been recently renamed from the Angel Street Theatre. After several fires, possibly owing to the naked flames used on the stage lights, a new theatre owned by Arthur Lloyd, a successful music hall performer turned proprietor, was opened in 1878. JW Austin, who composed many of Vesta’s songs, was a conductor at the Theatre Royal.

In 1903, Sir Arthur Carlton re-opened the Theatre Royal, which had been demolished for improvements. Sir Arthur also owed the Scala, the Empire Hall in Foregate Street and also the Public Hall, which he often leased out.



Public Hall, Cornmarket

8 PUBLIC HALL CORNMARKE

In 1913, Vesta gave her last public performance in Worcester at the Public Hall and her statue commemorates her association with the theatre.

The variety of theatres in Worcester at the time catered for a wide number of artistic tastes, none more so than at the Public Hall, which was actually two halls: in the 1890s, the principal hall hosted Edward Elgar on the organ and conducting his own compositions. The Festival Choral Society sang with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Ivor Atkins.

The second hall was the stage for livelier, cheaper entertainment. During Vesta’s childhood, Jenny Lind “The Swedish Nightingale” performed here and raised money for the Infirmary. Sims Reeves returned to Worcester following his successful performances at the 1848 Worcester Festival. Reeves, was the most well-known English operatic, oratorio and ballad tenor singer at the time.

At the height of its popularity, the Public Hall could hold up to 900 people, but it fell into disuse and was demolished in 1969.



The New Worcester Concert Hall, Lowesmoor

9 NAVIGATION INN & THE ALHAMBRA

In the 1860s, when Vesta’s father was performing, there were two music halls in Lowesmoor: The Navigation Inn and The Alhambra. These two music halls were pivotal in Vesta’s development on the stage. She would have seen her father performing on the piccolo and violin here. Whilst still very young, she would play both music halls calling herself the “Pocket Sims Reeves”, demonstrating her versatility on stage, singing and appearing dressed as a man.

The Navigation Inn stood at the eastern gate of the wharf until 1860 when it was demolished and resurrected as the New Concert Hall – this is the building that you can see now, largely unchanged from the outside and now known as the Vesta Tilley Centre.

The Alhambra Music Hall, which was owned by Henry de Frece, sat between the gates of the wharf and the Rainbow Hill Bridge over the canal. The competition for audiences between the two venues led to a resurgence in the popularity of the Alhambra. In later life, Vesta would marry Henry de Frece’s son, Walter becoming Lord and Lady De Frece.

From here, you may walk back to Tallow Hill along the canal towpath or down Pheasant Street, where you started.