

Leslie Howard.



Leslie started life as Leslie Steiner, son of a Hungarian-Jewish father, Ferdinand (Frank) Steiner, who came to England as an emigre and became a British subject, and Lilian Blumberg, daughter of Charles Blumberg, a barrister. She married Frank against her parent's wishes. After the birth of Leslie in 1893, the young couple went to Vienna, where they spent the next few years. As the middle class Blumbergs became reconciled to the marriage, Frank and Lilian moved back to England, and settled in London. Leslie was encouraged in amateur acting by his mother, but on his father's insistence took a steady and safe job as a bank clerk. With World War I he joined the cavalry - despite having never ridden a horse before - and was soon sent to the Front. Invalided out after the Somme in 1916, and suffering from shell-shock, he met and married Ruth Martin and took to the stage. His son, Ronald was born in 1918. By the time of the birth of his daughter, Leslie Ruth Howard, he was making a name for himself in America. A Broadway success, in 1928 he returned to London to star with Tallulah Bankhead in 'Her Cardboard Lover,' and to put on 'Berkeley Square' which he then took to America, where it had great success. Howard now decided to invest in a home in England and bought, sight unseen, Stowe Maries a property about an hours drive from London. It was to be his English home for the next fifteen years.

In the late Twenties and early Thirties, Hollywood was eager to recruit stage actors for the Talkies, and Leslie chose the role of the young alcoholic lead in the film *Outward Bound* as his first starring role. From 1930-39 Leslie commuted between England and Hollywood, and between stage and screen. One of his most successful plays was *The Petrified Forest*, which gave a considerable role to one Humphrey Bogart. When the play was made into a film, Bogart's role was going to be given to Edward G. Robinson - as Bogart was an unknown at the time. Leslie sent a telegram to the studio which basically said, no Bogart, no Howard, and Bogart was given the role. He always acknowledged Leslie Howard as giving him his real start in his career, and he and Lauren Bacall called their daughter Leslie Howard Bogart, in his honour. On the outbreak of the Second World War, he returned to England as quickly as possible to 'do his bit'. He became one of the leading propagandists for the allied cause, making films such as *Pimpernel Smith*, *The First of the Few*, *The 49th Parallel* and *The Gentle Sex* which he directed. In 1943, the civilian plane in which Leslie Howard was flying from neutral Portugal, he had been giving seminars in Spain and Portugal to help the British cause, was shot down by German fighters. The plane fell into the sea and has never been found. The mystery as to why a clearly marked civilian plane, which under international agreement observed by both sides should have been safe from all attack, was shot down has never been satisfactorily solved. Ronald Howard's theory was that the Germans were targetting his father - due to his lampooning them in film, him being part Jewish, and, as they believed, a British agent. Declassified papers relating to the circumstances of his death were inexplicably resealed until 2025.