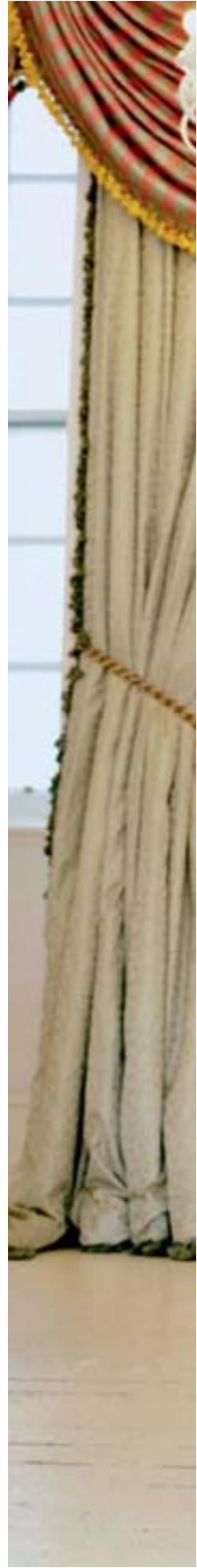


Jane Asher has found success as an actress and entrepreneur, and has not been out of work since she was a child. But 30 years on, the world still sees her as Paul McCartney's girlfriend. Garth Pearce talks to the definitive 'Beatles girl'

JANE ASHER HAS BEEN AN ACTRESS for most of her 61 years, having appeared in her first film, *Mandy*, when she was just six. She has written books, launched her own cake-decorating company and is married to the artist and cartoonist Gerald Scarfe. But she is still more famous for what she did not do: become the wife of Paul McCartney.

Asher was the girl who epitomised the Sixties. She had long red hair, a full fringe, big eye make-up, slim, long legs and a pouty smile. She starred in the films of the day – from the innocent *The Greengage Summer* to *Alfie* – became friends with Michael Caine and Terence Stamp and was a major player in *Swinging London*.

Most important of all, she was a Beatle girlfriend. All these years later, it is the five-year romance with McCartney, between the ages of 17 and 22, which tantalisingly and, for her, agonisingly, remains in the collective memory. "I can do nothing about that," she shrugs. "It is just the way it is." ►





‘However much we think we remember about it, the Sixties, in general, were a much more innocent time’

◀ Asher does not say this in an aggressive way. In fact, she's pleasant and good company when we meet near her home in Chelsea. She's also in remarkable shape: slim, with pale skin, reddish hair, very blue eyes and unmistakable as the girl she once was, simply older.

She has never talked about her long-ago romance. "It is not something I felt comfortable about then – or now," she says. "In my view, it was a brief interlude. I have been with Gerald since 1971, which is getting on for 40 years. So it is fair to talk about him. He has been the most important part of my life, we have had three children together and a life shared. But the Sixties were an extraordinary time for me, in every way."

It was a time when class barriers were breaking down. Asher was middle-class. She had a famous psychiatrist father, Richard (he was the first to identify Munchausen's syndrome) and her mother, Margaret, was a classical music teacher at the Guildhall School of Drama and Music. Margaret even taught Beatles producer George Martin, long before he started working with the band.

For the working-class Liverpoolian Paul McCartney, who met Asher when she was in a VIP area backstage after a Beatles show, it was an eye-opener. There was a time, during 1964, when he virtually moved into the Ashers' London home. Because he ran a business, Mr Asher's telephone number was in the book, so they were inundated with calls from fans.

McCartney wrote songs with his new girlfriend in

mind. *Here, There and Everywhere* is one of them. He even handed one of his cast-offs, *A World Without Love*, to her musician brother, Peter, half of the duo Peter and Gordon. It became their biggest hit.

These were heady days, during which the pop star and actress became one of Britain's best-known couples. "I was in my teens and twenties and it was a time of great promise," says Asher. "There was all that peace and love, too. We were full of optimism, even if it was misplaced. You realise, in maturity, that nothing ever changes, with the balance of misery and happiness staying the same for ever."

Her memories, then, are tinged with a sense of realism. Is she disappointed that nothing, in her view, has changed? "I was very busy and concentrated on that at the time," she says. "I did not think too much about living through history. It is only now, in retrospect, that I realise it was a time of such hope."

"I remember being terrified of the atom bomb and the prospects of another world war. I think that made us more determined to enjoy ourselves and live for the moment. The horrible truth is that the nuclear deterrent probably did have an effect and brought us all to our senses. You learn so much growing up."

"I was also so innocent. I remember the day when I learnt about homosexuality, for example. I was in my early teens, doing *Alice in Wonderland* at the Oxford Playhouse and one of the actors, playing the White Knight, forgot his lines. He said: 'Oh, bugger.' Then he looked up at me and said: 'Sorry, Jane.'

"I thought: 'Oh, that's interesting. What is he trying to hide?' I tried to look up the word in the dictionary, but it wasn't there. So I asked my older brother, Peter. He got very embarrassed and said 'It means homosexual.'

"It led to a conversation about it, and that is how I learnt. Thank God the young are far more educated today. However much we think we remember about it, the Sixties, in general, were a much more innocent time. It was a time of discovery, not instant knowledge."

There is a suspicion that, for Asher, the later years of the decade were fairly traumatic. After he and Asher split up McCartney had a fling with a writer, Francie Schwartz. Then he met American Linda Eastman and married her on March 12, 1969. There was a backlash at the time from those who thought he should have wed that nice Jane Asher.

As magazines of the day reported, she was the "nicest Beatle girl". There is also, looking back, a guileless and a more supportive style of reporting. *Fabulous Magazine* breathlessly captioned a photograph of Asher as follows: "When a gorgeous man like Michael Caine and a lovely girl like Jane Asher get together, on a film like *Alfie*, one can imagine it is worth seeing."

In *Vogue* in July, 1964, she is again trumpeted as a Beatle Girl, wearing "blue forget-me-nots on a very short dress of Liberty cotton, with puff sleeves sliced and tied with ribbons, £9.15s from Simpsons". ▶



Above, an English rose in June 1964. Right, Asher with boyfriend Paul McCartney in June 1965

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◀ There's also a photograph of her in "white collar, black chiffon, breaking into pleats at the skirt, by Marlborough dresses, seven and a half guineas, Peter Robinson, Oxford Circus".

Her early roles came in TV series that became a byword for the Sixties: *Dixon of Dock Green*, *Dr Finlay's Casebook*, *The Saint*. "Oh, the Sixties were comparatively easy so far as my career was concerned," she recalls. "It was dealing with the Seventies which could have been a problem. It was the end of the one important decade and the start of another, more uncertain one."

But Asher saw it through, seamlessly. On screen, she was playing Jane Seymour in the series of the year, *Henry VIII and His Six Wives* and a memorable ghostly

'I enjoyed a wonderful home life, with very supportive parents and my luck has continued, in a way, with Gerald'

thriller, *The Stone Tape*. Away from it, she had met Gerald Scarfe and a new chapter began.

"We met, of all places, at a Labour Party conference," she says. "When the magazine *Private Eye* was in financial trouble, they asked certain actors for money. I sent £100. They invited me to a 10th anniversary party which, as a joke, was held on the fringe of the Labour Party conference in Brighton.

"Gerald was there as another contributor. The trade union man, Clive Jenkins, introduced us. Was it love at first sight? Certainly, attraction at first sight. I was

aware of his work and he was of mine." They became lovers and she had their first child, Katie –

who is currently relaunching her career as an actress – in April, 1974. So how does she feel today about being a single mother ahead of her time?

"There were some complications," she says, tactfully. Scarfe was married with a daughter, Araminta.

"We were married by the time we had our sons [Alexander, 24, and Rory, 22]. I can, quite honestly, see the strengths in both arguments – whether to marry or not. I think it is how people get through their lives which is most important. Are they happy? Or not?"

Jane with husband Gerald. They have been together since 1971

Since it's the second time Asher has mentioned happiness, how has she fared herself? "First of all, I never wanted any child of mine to be a child actor," she replies. "I remember working away from home and I did not like it very much. But I had a wonderful home life, with very supportive parents. That was pure luck. I always think that those of us lucky enough to have that will be better prepared for life.

"My luck has continued, in a way, with Gerald. Relationships and marriages are so tricky and constantly moving. But we've had a good life together. I have also had a middle range of fame as an actress, which has been useful. I have been comfortable with that.

"It goes without saying, though, that acting is a mad way to earn a living. It's full of lots of mad people, nutters and alcoholics. They are in the best place because showbusiness, broadly, is very accepting of difference. We are a funny bunch and that teaches you tolerance."

Asher has been able to continue her acting career into her fifties and sixties, while running her company, Jane Asher Party Cakes, that she founded in 1990. But after regular spots on single episodes of everything from *Miss Marple* and *Crossroads*, to being a regular in *Holby City*, she is enjoying a resurgence.

She is in her first major film since *Paris By Night* in 1988. It is a British black comedy, *Death at a Funeral*, directed by Frank Oz, whose earlier films include *The Muppets* and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*.

The film follows the comic twists when two brothers (played by Matthew Macfadyen and Rupert Graves) become locked in a family dispute after the death of their father. Asher plays the widow, Sandra, who controls her sons and the situation during the mayhem.

She is also currently playing the Queen, in what will be one of next year's most lavish television series. Called *The Palace*, it is a parallel story of royalty – rather like the American series, *West Wing*, is to the real President and White House. There are imagined dramas, family disputes and jealousies. "ITV has built Buckingham Palace in Lithuania!" she says.

"My story is that I was a society model, who marries the King. There is a big drama in the first episode and I am widowed. I am no longer the Queen, so my son – one of four children – takes over. As Queen I always enjoyed being Queen Bee, so I do not like the change."

She had been clothes shopping for her role. "It is all Armani and Bruce Oldfield," she says. "They are all a bit grown-up for me, but the Royals dress in a certain way."

She has a figure which will take off-the-peg. "I can eat what I want to, which is very annoying for others to hear," she says. "I remember at school, teachers saying: 'If you eat that rubbish, Jane, you will be fat at 25.' Then it was: 'Wait until you have a baby.' After that, it was the threat of the menopause. But, so far, it has been fine."

But even Jane Asher cannot stop the ageing process. "I have gone from playing the young bird, to wife, young mother, to old mum and now to widows," she says cheerfully. "I am a widow in *Death at a Funeral*, a widow in *Holby City* and now a widow in *The Palace*. It will be a grandmother next!" ■

Death at a Funeral is released on September 28



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