

Look Back in Pride

"It was a truly great night for the Playgoers. Before the curtain was due to rise, one looked around the crowded balcony and marvelled how the town's old home of drama has been brought back to a full and useful life by the vigour and enterprise of that fellowship in Workington who love the drama and want others to share the delight it gives them" Sixty years after these words were first written in the local press, Workington Playgoers' Club looks back with pride at their achievement. What would George John Smith, the London tailor's cutter who first built the theatre in 1866 have thought of our present building? The Pit has become the Stalls, the Horseshoe Balcony has had its arms removed since they extended from our present Circle right to the stage itself, and the Gallery is no longer there, thus reducing the original seating of 700 to our present capacity of 248. The original dressing rooms beneath the auditorium are used as storage, and the Mezzanine Bar and the state-of-the-art lighting box now fill the space that was revealed. Our premises extend behind the stage to Wilson Street. Workshops, wardrobe rooms, props and dressing rooms, modern as they are, still indicate the warren of Victorian buildings that Playgoers now owns. The Theatre Upstairs for rehearsals or club performances reveals its old oak beams and sloping roof so suitable for lighting. One hundred and thirty years after its first beginnings as The Lyceum, our Theatre Royal continues a noble tradition.

What a sense of satisfaction it must be to those men and women still with us today whose enthusiasm brought the club into being. Some of them had been members of the Dramatic Society of the Workington Iron and Steel Company. Some had met weekly in the Drama Class of the Workers' Educational Association meeting in St. Michael's Parish Room. Others had graced the boards of the Opera House as members of the Operatic Society. Their united love of drama brought them to that first public meeting at the Council Chamber in the Carnegie Library on December 5th 1935, when 120 people agreed to form Workington Playgoers' Club with an annual subscription of 5 shillings. The Theatre Royal was to be rented for six months of the year if the sum of £40 could be raised to put the premises in working order for the theatre had been closed for three years after its spell as a cinema from 1913 to 1932. At the end of 1935, Playgoers' Club was well and truly "Outward Bound" for rehearsals were launched for our first public production for April 1936. And what an opening night that was. Praise was heaped on the actors as they worked their magic on patrons who soon forgot the hard wooden seats. The honorary orchestra 2 violins, 2 flutes, 2 clarinets, 1 cello and 1 piano beguiled the time in the interval. Indeed one year later the press critic complained about the length of the intervals in "St Joan" when "there was no music to relieve the monotony of waiting"

The club was working harmoniously to higher things. Soon we were to enter the competitions of the British Drama League and the County Full Length Play Competition which we won on many occasions. The Cumberland Press reported that Workington Playgoers' Club was known throughout the North of England for the quality of our plays and the standard of production. We received accolades that we had managed to hire the original costumes of Sybil Thorndike's production of "St Joan" for ours in 1937 an excellence that is continued still by successive Wardrobe Committees. They now dress six productions annually as well as providing costumes for other events.

It is this unstinting loyalty of its members that is the bedrock of Workington Playgoers' Club. All of us give our time and energy freely because we are amateurs in the best tradition of serving the community for "the show must go on" People produce plays, people act in them and we regularly display our "House Full" notice. People build sets, dress them and light them and applause is still heard as the curtain rises on the opening night. People sell tickets and programmes although we do charge more than the one penny of 1935. People serve refreshments, coffee, at evening performances and every Saturday morning. People work hard to keep the building safe and attractive. But Workington Playgoers can only be kept going by the people who have come to support us over the years. The people of West Cumberland have been most loyal and appreciative for over half a century.

At the third public production the theatre critic quotes what he had heard when the club first opened, "Like most worthwhile things in Workington, it won't last" and he concludes, "There is nothing more certain than the club has come to stay" We have stayed for sixty glorious years. Happy Diamond Jubilee!

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