

Ludlow *Heritage*



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N E W S

FREE

Ludlow Theatre:
Mill Street

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Ludlow Theatre: Mill Street



Richard Hurlock

The first of two theatres on the site made an appearance in the press in 1775 when a correspondent wrote, 'I was particularly pleased on paying a visit to Ludlow to find a very elegant theatre lately built, and luckily the comedians were in Town....The plays I saw here were as well and as naturally represented as ever happened in town.'¹ It is unclear whether it ever sustained a permanent Repertory Company. In the 19th century it was to house seasonal visits over the racing season and otherwise seems to have been used for auctions and other non-theatrical events including distilling.

The land of Shakespeare has had a troubled history with the theatre, banned under the Commonwealth and restricted to the royal protection of just two at the beginning of the Restoration. Their proliferation required a Licensing Act in 1737 restricting drama to patent theatres, and everything else, music, pantomime, snatches of play were left outside this charmed circle. A later series of royal patents opened up more of the provinces to proper drama, but the term 'Theatre Royal' in Ludlow does not seem to have appeared before the nineteenth century, and the early play lists are a mishmash of acts and songs rather than full-length plays. In 1843, the Theatres Act removed the patent monopoly, thus permitting other theatres to present drama.

Probably the earliest remaining theatre building is the Georgian Theatre, Richmond, Yorkshire, built in 1788, a severe barn-like building with none of the later decorated façade that we have come to associate with such activities. A nearer example is the Malthouse at Oswestry, built around 1819, slightly more decorative but still devoid of excess embellishment. The Ludlow theatre, with its 'plain exterior' was probably along these lines.

Prior to the construction of this building the town was visited by bands of strolling players with varying degrees of respectability, and of course there is the famous historical first performance of Milton's 'Comus' of 1631 within the Castle.



THEATRE ROYAL RICHMOND, YORKSHIRE, and below interior



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The Hon. John Byng² paid a visit in June/July 1784 and 'seeing a crowd at a door and enquiring the cause, were told that it was a theatre, and that the play was just begun; in we sallied, took our place in the boxes, amidst a numerous and well-dress'd audience, and were sufficiently amused, though it lasted too late. From a communicative neighbour I learn'd the history of their play house; and particularly that Mrs Siddons³ made her first appearance here in Leonora in 'The Padlock', with great applause. Some of the performers play'd with judgement and spirit....the company consists of 28 persons, including the band and perform 3 times a week; and the gay men of the place subscribe £1:1/- for a transferable ticket for 20 nights. This kept us up too late and spoil'd our supper, for we did not get home till ½ past eleven o'clock.'

Henry James visiting Ludlow in 1877 also alluded to Mrs Siddons, knowing her niece Fanny Kemble and Adelaide Sartoris, Sarah's sister. However, he claims that Sarah appeared in Ludlow in 1803 for three consecutive nights on 15th-17th August, playing the role of Desdemona with husband William as Iago.⁴

It is possible to compare the rates of 1784 with those of seven years earlier when an advertisement 'at the desire of Miss Hall of Downton' announced that on 13th August 1777 'will be presented a favourite comedy 'The Wonder a Woman keeps a Secret' followed by the celebrated dance called 'The Drunken Peasant' and the farce 'Bon Ton or High Life above Stairs'. Boxes 3/- Pit 2/- Gallery 1/-.

The theatre was profitable enough to merit a rebuild in 1806⁵ 'that has a plain exterior but neat within. The Worcester Company perform every year during the race week and once in three years make a stay of two months.'⁶

In 1806, as part of a whistle stop tour, Edmund Kean appeared to play Sir Giles Overreach.⁷ Celebrated as much for his Shakespearean roles as his tumultuous private life, his last words were apparently 'Dying is easy, comedy is hard'. The deal for his appearance was a full theatre, pre-booked, and the prices were still those of 1784.

The theatre continued into the nineteenth century with fluctuating and ultimately declining fortunes. The following snippets plot its progress:

1845 Eddowes⁸, Wednesday 25th June. 'The Ludlow Theatre will be open during the race week for a limited season with a talented London company under the management of Mr Charles Poole.'

1846 Eddowes, Wednesday 17th June. 'This place of amusement opened for a short season on Wednesday evening last under the experienced management of Mr Charles Poole. The general talent and respectability of the company is highly spoken of.'

1847 the General Advertiser, 6th October. 'This place of amusement which has been so well and respectably conducted by Mr James Rogers (b. 1817 Birmingham) and his talented company, closed on Friday. We understand the enterprising manager has reaped the fruits of his labours in a long and highly successful season of of

upwards of 3 months.'

A later edition continues, 'Our Theatrical campaign is coming to a close and a more prosperous one we do not remember, owing to the indefatigable exertions and high respectability, both in public and private, of our talented manager Mr James Rogers....The boxes have nightly been filled with all the beauty of the neighbourhood and town.... Mr & Mrs Rogers... have held high positions in the first theatres of the kingdom. Mr W.H.Stephens specialises in old men, Mr C. Henderson as a low comedian, Mrs C.Seaton in Broad Farce. Miss E.G.Scott is pretty and ladylike. The troop is now bound for Hereford.'

1848 Hereford Times, 25th July. John Coleman, comedian, had to write to the paper protesting that he hsd not dislocated the shoulder of Miss Le Batt during the production of the farce 'The Blue Jackets', and attached a letter from Dr. John Southern as proof to deter a wave of malicious gossip.

1855 Eddowes, 30th May. 'On 9th June 1855 at the Feathers Hotel, five o'clock in the evening and subject to such conditions of sale as will then be produced, all that extensive building situate in Ludlow now and for fifty years past, used and known as the Ludlow Theatre with fixtures and appurtenances thereto belonging. This building may be let as hitherto for theatrical performances or for a trifling outlay into a commodious dwelling house.'

1855 Shrewsbury Chronicle, Friday June 15th. 'We have much pleasure in announcing this place of amusement will be opened on 26th inst. By Mr Clifford of the

theatres Shrewsbury, Worcester & Coventry. The company is of the most respectable and talented order.'

1856 'A Strolling Player's Reminiscences of Ludlow' published 1882.⁹ The author states that at the Theatre Royal it was the custom to perform 3 nights a week, Monday, Wednesday and Friday...a fact which afforded us intense satisfaction. The theatre had not been open for a considerable period and the inhabitants seemed to regard us as a special dispensation from providence to awaken them from their normal state of lethargy'. Funds as ever were a problem and the shifts to which an insolvent company were put. 'I can call to mind no place out of the scores I have visited professionally so fraught with peculiar experiences and pleasant personal reminiscences as the dull, picturesque, old-fashioned town of Ludlow. The town was beautiful but 'associated with bad business', but the inhabitants were so jovial and generous...that we could afford to suffer a little pecuniarily'. On market day the town slightly roused itself from 12.30 to 12.31. 'The Vicar of Ludford was a principal supporter and the theatre held 300 at most. After a week the company was broke and pooled their effects to pawn but...Oh my prophetic soul, my uncle, alas the sign of the three balls was unknown to Ludlow' resulting in a lengthy trip to Hereford to raise money.

Another reminiscence in 1908¹⁰ recalled sixty years earlier when 'The Reader, the Rev. Robert Meyrick who always read prayers on Sunday morning, an oriental scholar who could read Persian,

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was a regular patron of the theatre and usually occupied a box in the tumble-down theatre at the foot of Mill Street.

1859 Shrewsbury Chronicle, Friday April 15th. 'This place of amusement has been open for some days past, under the management of Mr Benson. But little success has attended the efforts of the company selected by that gentleman; and this perhaps is a fair testimony of the discrimination of the inhabitants of Ludlow.'

1864 The theatre was owned by Corporal Partridge (bookseller and printer 1817-1879).

1866 The finances were looking up with a large and influential audience, better than the last fifteen years, increased with the patronage of Mayor Francis Southern Esq. Performances included 'Daughter of the Regiment' and 'My Wife's Dentist'!

1869 the manager was Alfred Walmisley, 'comedian of great ability'. By November the standard was questionable.¹¹ 'The third of a series of concerts for the people took place, the audience was very fair'. The entertainment included the comic song 'Out on the Spree' and the less amusing 'Let me like a Soldier Fall'. Matters concluded

with 'the laughable, side-splitting negro burlesque entitled 'The Darkey Soldiers' in which the donkey joey was introduced on stage, and, panicked by proceedings, then remained immovable.'

1870 A place of intellectual amusement. Managers Messrs Fisher and Charles King, the latter a first class pantomimist.

1872 Shrewsbury Chronicle, April 5th. 'Judging from the rather scanty audiences, the drama seems to be on the decline in Ludlow' following a week of ballet and drama under the management of Messrs Beaumont, Kelly and Horace Towers. In the same year the theatre was being rented by the town's amateur dramatic club with proceeds going to the soup kitchen fund.

1879 By his will¹², 11th October, the owner, Corporal Edward John Partridge left the theatre to his son, Charles Adam Partridge, with all its contents. A bookseller, stationer and printer, employing three men and three boys, he seems to have been quite wealthy. Clearly Charles felt little inclination to bankroll the theatre and by 1881 had sold the property to a Mr Butcher.

Further reports and advertisements start to decline and



THE MALTHOUSE, WILLOW STREET, OSWESTRY (no longer a theatre)

by 1881 the building was doomed to redevelopment. In February 1881 Henry Gray, resident at Maryvale, protested to the Town Council against the resolution permitting Mr Butcher to extend his building 'about to be erected on the site of the old Theatre in Mill Street' which he alleged would seriously damage his property. The Council suggested that Mr Grosvenor (architect and builder) meet with him to settle things amicably. By 13th April the General Purposes Committee reported that an amicable arrangement had been made

between Mr Gray and Mr Butcher relative to the building of cottages on the site of the old theatre.

By November 9th the old venue had clearly gone and Eddowes wrote 'Mr Stanley Warde's theatrical company have been performing during the week at the Assembly Rooms. The company is a good 'all-round one' and deserves better support than they have received here.'

The theatre had not quite survived 100 years and was later resurrected in temporary accommodation in Galdeford.

¹ Shrewsbury Chronicle Saturday 26th August 1775.

² Hon. John Byng, 5th Viscount Torrington, 1742-1843. Torrington Diaries ed. 1934.

³ Sarah Siddons 1755-1831. Born in Brecon, daughter of actor and theatre owner Roger Kemble. After a bad start at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane in 1774, she spent the next six years working in the provinces, especially Bristol and Bath, and became a protégé of David Garrick. In 1782 she returned to Drury Lane which became her spiritual and acting home. She occasionally appeared elsewhere, formally retiring in 1812.

⁴ John Ruskin, Henry James and the Shropshire Lads' Cynthia Gamble.

⁵ Salopian Journal, 30th April 1806, p.3 Col. 5.

⁶ W. Felton, 'A Description of the Town of Ludlow' 1812.

⁷ A New Way to Pay Old Debts', Philip Massinger 1625.

⁸ Eddowes Journal and General Advertiser for Shropshire and the Principality of Wales, November 1st.

⁹ Eddowes, November 1st.

¹⁰ The Advertiser, January 25th 1908.

¹¹ The Wellington Journal and Shrewsbury News, November 13th 1869.

¹² Shropshire Archives 2990/4

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THE JUBILEE GARDEN: *an update.*

In 2012, the Society bought the land that will soon become the Jubilee Garden. Situated by the Reader's House and the East window of St Laurence's Church, this plot had been the subject of a decade-long battle with developers. When it was saved with the help of a loan from a generous benefactor, it was agreed that part of the land would be used for a new almshouse, with the remainder being bought by the Civic Society which raised £112,000 in local donations.

Time marched on and it took a further four years for the new almshouse to be built, but by the end of 2016 the Society had gained possession of the site, and we were able to start the process of turning it into a garden for the public to enjoy.

This is not as simple an undertaking as it might appear. The site is bounded on two sides by ancient walls that had not been maintained for many years and needed to be made safe before the public could be allowed in. The archaeological importance of the area meant that we could not dig down any further without expensive surveys, and so (unusually for a garden) we would have to build the garden upwards and not downwards. And, to cap it all, the only access was via the narrow alleyway from the Buttercross to the Church.

The idea of the garden design was to create a low-maintenance, walled area of tranquillity in the heart of the busy town, which will be open to the public during daylight hours. It will be locked at night to protect the privacy of the neighbouring almshouse, and to stop it from being used for inappropriate nocturnal activities!

Sadly, the initial quotes we received to do all of this were far more than we could afford – many tens of thousands of pounds. Having raised so much money from the generosity of town residents in order to buy the land, we now had to look further afield for funding, and also to think of ways to reduce the costs to something more manageable.

By doing much of the work ourselves – by which I really mean the Chairman managing it all, as well as doing much of it personally – we have cut the total cost of the project down to around £20,000. We have applied to charitable trusts across the

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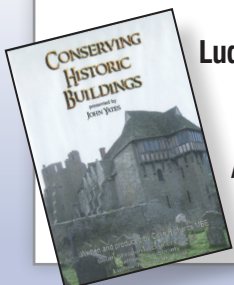
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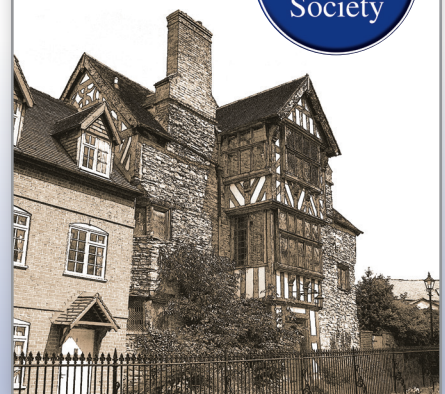
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country, and have received grants from the Wyfold Charitable Trust, the Millichope Foundation, the Hardingham Trust and the Alan Evans Memorial Trust. Coupled with generous donations received from local residents, this has raised about £15,000 towards our total, which has allowed good progress to be made this year.

So far, we have brought in about 30 tons of material – bag by bag through the alleyway and along Church Walk. Wall repairs, ground-formation, drainage, concreting and paving are all now complete. The centrepiece will be the old mill-wheel from Hockey's Mill which sat for many years under the Buttercross, and the Town Council have gifted it to the garden where it will form a circular stone table.

The beds have been made and are now filled ready for planting, and the outline of the garden is visibly taking shape. Some of the planting will be dedicated to the memory of Nicki Lewis-Smith – the talented garden designer whose vision for the garden was such an inspiration, and who sadly passed away earlier this year. (see tribute alongside)

Construction will finish this year, at which point the garden will be opened to the public, albeit in its bare initial state. Planting will start this autumn, and run through until Spring/Summer 2018, when we expect to organise a grand opening to thank all those who have helped over the last 15 years to save this crucial plot of land. We hope that Society members, residents and tourists alike will be able to enjoy the peace and setting of Ludlow's newest public garden.



Footnote

Although fundraising has gone well, we have not yet reached our target. Any further donations members wish to make would be very gratefully received, and can be sent to the Treasurer at The Reader's House, Church Walk, Ludlow SY8 1AL.

NICKI LEWIS-SMITH

Ludlow Civic Society was very sad to hear the news of the death of Nicki Lewis-Smith on March 1st this year at the age of sixty. Nicki was not only an important contributor to the gardens of Ludlow through her work for many people in the town, but she very generously drew up the first design for the Jubilee Garden. In the event this plan could not be implemented, but she nevertheless offered us her help in the future if it was needed.

Nicki first tended a couple of gardens in Ludlow in 2001 when she was working at Pukka Palace in Craven Arms. In June that year she decided to become self-employed. She started off with a bike called Beryl, to which she strapped a basket of tools. It featured her business name, 'Ludlow's Caring Gardener' and her phone number. A huge response meant that she soon upgraded to a car, with twenty-three gardens to tend.

In 2005, with her horticultural knowledge and feel for her chosen profession, she was ready to branch out into garden design. She also soon passed her RHS exams at Pershore College, and took further studies at the HEC in Cheltenham where she won Senior Tutor's prize two years in a row as well as her diploma (Hons). For the 2007 Shrewsbury Flower Show she won Silver Gilt and Best Newcomer Design prizes. One of the show's judges, the award-winning garden designer and Gardener's World presenter, Chris Beardshaw, asked if she would design further show gardens, but she explained that her large client base came first and needed her attention and dedication. She created in all forty-four gardens, not only in Shropshire but courtyard gardens in London, larger gardens in the Wirral and Crosby, Liverpool, across the border in Wales and down to East Sussex. She also designed the Fair Trade flower bed outside the Castle. In recent times she was invited to become a member of the prestigious Chartered Institute of Horticulture – the only professional body for horticulturists.

Nicki was also a talented writer, photographer and draughtswoman. We always looked forward to her occasional online blogs, beautifully illustrated with stunning photographs, and we very much appreciated her meticulously drawn plans for the rotation of our vegetable crops. She was also a contributor to the Ludlow Ledger where she wrote a highly popular gardening column. She was an all-weather gardener, appearing in the pouring rain in her rain hat and boots, and her great gift was her sensitive approach, not just to the plants in the garden, but to the birds and insects that also lived there. She refused to cut down dead seed heads in the winter because they might provide homes for good insects and she was always the first to notice rare visiting birds.

In September last year Nicki became gravely ill with pancreatitis. With her husband, Les, beside her, she fought the disease with strength and courage for many months, but finally succumbed in the spring. It is impossible to go into the garden where she planted and tended so many growing things without feeling that she is still there.



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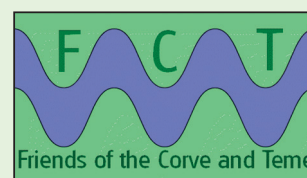
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COMMITTEE *News*

CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

I note with some surprise that this is my second edition of Winter Notes encompassing some successes, failure and ongoing struggles. The chief blow has been the decision by the LPA to permit the Rocks Green supermarket development. Time will tell how many of the developer's promises for a golden era of local retail and employment this will bring.

More pleasant to report that our survey of street lights, highlighting the ugly, inappropriate or inadequate, carried out by John Farley and Roy Thwaites was concluded. An enormous amount of work resulted in a meeting with the Council lighting officers who confirmed that a plan was being prepared, taking in our concerns and giving us a future input in selecting the style of light in the Conservation Areas. This being the Council, however, we are talking several years.

The good news continues with the Jubilee Garden where the hard landscaping has been completed and planting and nature can now take their course. This rolling progress has been made possible with the very generous donations of several of our members as well as some of Ludlow's citizens who might like to consider joining the Society, where they would be most welcome. News and information continues to be available on our website, wonderfully maintained by Anthony Shuster.

The struggle to repair the cobbles grinds on. Shropshire Council has earmarked £10,000 to kick-start the project whilst the utilities which have caused much of the damage now seem to have suffered amnesia regarding their earlier indications of involvement ...one step forward etc!

The showman, Phineas Barnum stated 'Always leave them wanting more' so I end with news of two wine and nibbles venues. Contrary to anything else you have heard, this year's Christmas Drinks will be at St Laurence's Church from 6.00 on Friday 15th December, where we hope to echo and even improve on last year's success. The second event will be at the Jubilee Garden in the spring or early summer to celebrate the official opening and thank our benefactors. We shall try to pick the one dry day!

Richard Hurlock



TALKS AND EVENTS

Once again, a big thank you to all those members who attended the various talks and events which took place in our last season. All our talks take place at the Methodist Church in Broad Street and start at 7 pm, except for our popular Christmas Party on 15th December which will take place again at St Laurence's Church. Please note the change of date.

We started this season with a fascinating talk on 13th September by Emma Stuart, Senior Curator of Books and Manuscripts at the Royal Library in Windsor Castle. This was followed by a talk on Thomas Telford and his Shropshire Legacy by the well-known local lecturer, Dorothy Nicolle. Our Autumn season ends with Ed Bennis talking about Humphrey Repton on 8th November. Don't forget the Christmas Party on 15th December.

Speakers already lined up for 2018 include Deborah Moggach, Tim Bridges, David Bruce and Alan Powers.



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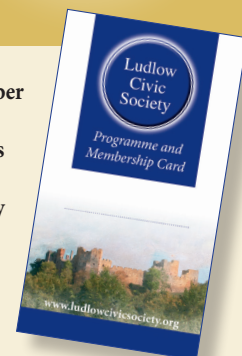




LUDLOW CIVIC SOCIETY

MEMBERSHIP

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The Membership Year, beginning 1st September 2017 was preceded by furious activity earlier in the year on the part of the Talks and Events Secretary booking the guest speakers for the coming year. Then the Membership Secretary organises the printing of the Members' Programme Cards and letters inviting renewal of membership. Finally, all the letters and programmes are sent out to the entire membership by an enthusiastic team of 'envelope stuffers' and thus the Members are set up for the following year, which began this year on 13th September.

The Membership are becoming used to receiving emails each month giving publicity to the forthcoming talk, and we urge you to look also at our website www.ludlowcivicsociety.org for more information about the talks and events. Our trip to the Arts and Crafts house Pennycroft was a great success, and we are arranging a trip next spring to Compton Verney for the Eric Ravilious exhibition coming there.

Despite the rising costs of printing, postage and general administration, we have agreed not to raise the annual membership fee from £13 and joint membership £24.50 which it has been for some ten years. However, the entrance fee for the Wednesday evening talks will now be £3 for members and £5 for non-members.

We are grateful to all our members for your continuing support, in particular those of you who have set up standing orders and signed Gift Aid declarations. We hope more members will consider these choices if they have not done so to date.

Jane Hunt

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