

## Teesdale U 3A

The topic at the October meeting was the history and restoration of the Darlington Hippodrome and Lynda Winstanley, its Director, was the speaker.

Many years ago Lynda replied to an advert in the local newspaper for a theatre usherette. Lynda got the job and then began her long association with the Darlington Hippodrome. The New Hippodrome and Palace Theatre of Varieties was opened in September 1907. There were 2 performances with 2000 people attending each and Miss Marie Loftus 'the greatest of all comediennes' was top of the bill. It has been suggested that the real star was Signor Rino Pepi who had put the programme together and this marked the opening of his third theatre. Signor Pepi was a Florentine who made his name as a quick-change artist. He had performed in front of European Royalty including Queen Victoria who had presented him with a diamond scarf pin. His wife was Countess de Rossetti. Pepi developed a chain of theatres including the Darlington Hippodrome. In 1917 he arranged for Anna Pavlova the internationally known ballerina to perform. Hundreds turned out to watch her but unfortunately Pepi was not one of them as following an illness he died on the same day. He had however been a key person in the development of the theatre. He even had his own flat on the premises.

The siting of the theatre near the railway station was particularly important as this gave convenient access to travellers and especially the wealthy ones who would enter the theatre by the main entrance after a short journey from the station. The public entrance was at the rear. In the late 1950s there was a distinct possibility that the Hippodrome would be demolished and in order to keep it open the Darlington Operatic Society bought it and later sold it to the Council at a loss but that ensured the theatre remained open. The theatre was run by the Council for many years until it became clear that substantial capital investment would be needed to meet modern requirements. The Council decided to seek funding for a major restoration programme and eventually significant funding was obtained including £5m from the Heritage Lottery. The total cost of restoration was in fact £13.7m.

The Hippodrome was reopened in November 2017 having been beautifully restored, following original plans and descriptions where available. The 'haystack' ventilation feature was restored, a new seating scheme was installed, and the interior decor was designed to replicate that which was used at the time of the original opening. Several properties adjacent to the theatre were purchased and the theatre complex now includes the Catherine Cookson Heritage Gallery, a pantomime gallery, a young persons' gallery, theatre Hullabaloo for young audiences, rehearsal and café facilities and a lift.

This was a fascinating talk delivered by an enthusiastic and influential supporter of the Hippodrome and very relevant to the Witham where future developments are currently being looked at. The vote of thanks was given by Lusia McAnna.

The speaker at the next meeting on Thursday 22nd November will be Bernard Hope on 'Eddie Chapman: the Durham Man who became a Wartime Spy and British Double Agent'. For further information about U3A contact Ian Reid tel: 01833 631304

Ian Reid