

The Georgian Theatre, Richmond

Report by Celia Chapple

Teesdale u3a members gathered at The Witham to hear Dave Palmer's well organised, light-hearted yet informative talk on the life of the oldest working theatre in its original form, the Georgian Theatre, Richmond.

Tryphosa, a determined, independent 18th century business woman, who championed the theatre by fundraising, married Samuel Butler, who was part of a 'travelling theatre' family. At the time, theatre was hidden in makeshift venues such as barns. The Theatre Act 1737 required all performances to be licensed by Lord Chancellor, London, which was practically impossible for outlying small thespian groups, who in response, went further 'underground'. Cleverly, musical and entertaining juggling and foolery continued to be advertised on play bills whilst disguising the odd theatrical utterance. The Theatrical Representation Act 1788 gave local magistrates the permission to grant licences for 60 days which encouraged these small theatres to seek stability and recognition. Due to this easing, Samuel approached Richmond magistrates and obtained a 20-year lease on a property on the corner of Friars Wynd and Victoria Road, where you find the theatre today. No outline exists of the original building but early play bills remain, stating traditional and modern plays were performed.

Two lucky escapes for the theatre occurred: the Great Fire of Richmond 1893, and another fire, caused by a dropped cigarette butt, left the theatre unscathed bar some internal damage. After World War II, David Brooks started fundraising for the theatre's restoration. 90% of the original structure remained although the internal stalls were found to be made of painted cardboard. Floor supports were rotten, possibly with insect infestation, and there were Public Access issues due to one Georgian entrance door. The fundraising was taken over by Lady Nancy Crathorne, wife of the local MP, who started a Charitable Trust.

The restoration has continued over years, and the theatre expanded to the building next door that had been estate agent and taxi businesses, adding a first floor to this new building. When it was re-opened in 1973 by the Princess of Kent, Catherine Worsley, the theatre continued with a varied traditional and modern programme, and the big names of theatre came - Timothy West, Yehudi Menuhin, Ken Dodd and Val Doonican all trod the Richmond boards.

The Millenium (2000 – 2019) saw further restoration necessary to meet modern fire regulation, Public Access for all, economical lighting and air systems, and even the repainting of the internal structure with the original shade of pale green. After the interruption of the COVID epidemic, funds came largely from the National Lottery Fund and performances from the likes of Ian McKellen (on his Birthday Tour). The Hamish Ogden Foundation and other Funds made this restoration possible too. It re-opened in 2021 with a reduced but more comfortable seating capacity of 154. The tradition of music and theatre continue today, from Shakespeare and Nell Gwyne, to Fleetwood Back and a popular annual pantomime.

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<https://teesdaleu3a.org.uk/>