

**Back Then...
Up on Evelyn
Street Railway
Bridge, Old
Town -
September
1975**



The Swindon Society Newsletter - January 2024



**... And More
Recently -
December
2023**



Welcome to the January Newsletter

Hello and welcome to the January newsletter.

A brand new year is upon us. We hope it's not too late to wish everyone a very Happy New Year and all the best for 2024.

Tonight, we have a presentation entitled Wiltshire Follies by Jonathan Holt. This is something a bit different as we are spreading our wings a little wider than just Swindon this time. Nevertheless, this promises to be a very enlightening evening with details of hidden architectural gems in our home county. Enjoy!

You may have noticed that this newsletter is a few pages less than usual, this was to save me a little time over the Christmas period. However, it will be back to the normal size next month so I will need your stories and memories to fill up our pages! Come on everyone... get writing!

You can reach us on either of these:

- me - angie.phillips@ntlworld.com
- or - info@theswindonsociety.co.uk

Our Christmas Party - 13th December 2023



Once again we held our Christmas party in place of our December presentation and it proved to be a very enjoyable evening all round.

Andy started off the evening by welcoming everyone to the party.

He then informed us that, despite the many hours he had spent putting together a slide show of images to roll along on the big screen throughout the evening, the equipment on the night had once again let us down so there were no images. What a rotten shame.

Never mind, we had plenty up our sleeves to keep everyone occupied - and I think it worked!

As in previous years, the committee had laid out the usual sausage rolls, cheese and pineapple,



snacks, nuts and mince pies on the buffet table, and there was a plentiful supply of wine, beer and soft drinks at the back of the hall - thanks to Gina for organising these by the way.



Answer sheets and pens had been laid out on the tables in readiness for the quiz that Kevin Leakey had prepared. There were quite a few pictures showing sections of well-known buildings around Swindon, and we had to name the buildings, or the streets in which they stood.



There was another quiz too. We had to guess the committee member from a baby

photo, and this was much harder than it sounds!

We all had our heads down trying to think of an answer to every question.

Then it was time for the raffle - Diane and Jennie did their usual stint at the front calling out the numbers, and each winner went up to choose a prize.



I got lucky and won a prize - I chose a box of luxury crackers - very nice!

All in all, the quizzes were challenging, we had festive music playing the whole time, and the conversation flowed continuously. I think it is fair to say that a good time was had by all.



Thank you all for coming along and making our party so special.

*Angie Phillips
December 2023*

Swindon Theatre News From 1924

With so much negative talk revolving around the town centre and Swindon in general, it came as a pleasant surprise (to me at least), that a new theatre for the town is still on the agenda, although according to the council, it's 'early stages', so I won't get too excited just yet! The proposed site for the new theatre is currently occupied by the bus station, demolition of which largely depends on the completion of the much-anticipated bus boulevard currently under construction.

Will this mean the demise of the Wyvern Theatre? Apparently not as the intention at the moment is to keep it as a 'performing space'. I'm sure there are plenty of people out there who would agree that Swindon deserves a theatre that is once again large enough to attract big name acts and West End shows to the town, as was the case during the heyday of Swindon's long-lost theatre, The Empire.

One hundred years ago in January 1924 the Empire Theatre was in the headlines. It's then owner, Alfred Manners announced plans to have the theatre refurbished. Major works would see the auditorium completely demolished and rebuilt creating seating for up to 1,000 persons. In addition to the auditorium various other changes were announced including a new foyer, booking office and improvements to the stage and dressing rooms. At the insistence of Alfred Manners, Swindon building firm A J Colbourne were

contracted to carry out the work which was due to commence after the Easter holidays with a completion date just four months later; they didn't hang around in those days!

The grand re-opening was on Saturday 16th August 1924; a performance of the hit musical 'Hey Presto', a show that had been popular in London's theatre-land was shown.

Due to ill health Alfred Manners sold the theatre in 1925. He died at the relatively young age of 59 years the following year.

The Empire like so many other theatres was subjected to mixed fortunes for the remainder of its existence; live performances were often mediocre and by the 1950s the theatre's days were numbered. The Empire closed for good in 1955 and was put on the market. Demolition, followed by re-development, came a few years later. I would imagine that Alfred Manners must have been turning in his grave!

In 2024 it will be 65 years since The Empire Theatre disappeared from the Swindon skyline, for good. Hopefully the proposed new theatre won't be joining the list of buildings that didn't progress beyond artistic impressions or a computer-generated 3D model. Meanwhile here are some newspaper snippets from 1924.

Chris Prew - January 2024

4-NORTH WILTS HERALD, FRIDAY, AUGUST 8, 1924.

"Tis not in mortals to command success, but we'll do more—deserve it."—Addison.

Telephone—92 Swindon. Telephone—Manners, Theatre, Swindon.

The Empire Theatre, Swindon.

Booking Office Open at the Theatre, 9.30 to 1.0, 5.30 to 10 Saturdays, 9.30 to 1, 2 to 4, 5 to 10 on and after Monday, August 11th.

SPECIAL GRAND RE-OPENING on SATURDAY, AUGUST 16th, at 2.30 p.m.

Doors Open at 1.45. EVENINGS at 6.45 and 8.50. FOR SEVEN NIGHTS.

AND TWO SPECIAL MATINEES on August 16th and 23rd, at 2.30

By the WINDSOR THEATRE AND PATHEFRANCE (LONDON) and Mrs. T. S. MANNERS, J.P.S. The SWINDON AMUSEMENTS CO. LTD., 2, VICTORIA STREET, SWINDON, WILTS. S.W. 1. 1924. All Rights Reserved. No. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100.

Do not fail to bring or send the Children to see MASKELYNE'S MAGICAL MUSICAL ENTERTAINMENT.

<p>CLIVE MASKELYNE</p> <p>STEPHANIE STEPHENS</p> <p>DENNIS BROGAN :: JAN BLENDISE</p>	<p style="font-size: small;">Presenting</p> <p>Maskelyne's Original London Company</p> <p style="font-size: x-large; font-weight: bold;">HEY PRESTO!</p> <p style="font-size: small;">An Amusical Mystical Extravaganza. In 20 Acts. An Ideal Family Entertainment.</p>	<p>FREDERIC CULPITT</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MYSTICAL HAIRS :: CLARE HEYTER</p> <p>TOM HEATHFIELD</p>
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Doors Open: 1st House, 6.30. Second House, 8.45.

PRICES OF ADMISSION (including Entertainment Tax):—

<p>GRAND CIRCLE</p> <p>2/4</p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">(BOOKABLE)</p>	<p>ORCHESTRA STALLS</p> <p>2/4</p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">(BOOKABLE)</p>	<p>STALLS</p> <p>1/3</p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">(BOOKABLE)</p>	<p>CIRCLE 6d.</p> <p>8d.</p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">(BOOKABLE)</p>
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Private Boxes (limited to Four Patrons, 1 £/- (NO EARLY BOOKS).

Great Western Railway Late Train Service.

To Chipson, Ogbourne, Marlborough, Savernake, Ludgershall and Tidworth. From Swindon G.W. at 10.47 p.m., and Swindon Town 11 p.m. To Purton and Milney, Saturdays only, at 11.30 p.m. To Kemble and Stroud, at 11.12 p.m. daily. To Wootton Bassett, Dauntsey, Chippenham, Corsham, &c. at 9.30 p.m. week days.

Swindon Motor Charabanc Company's Cars.

Leave Theatre every evening after 1st and 2nd House to Wroughton, Finesart, Moreton, Stratton, Kingsclay, Marlborough, via Chipson and Ogbourne.

Thursdays, after 1st House, to Marlborough, via Chipson and Ogbourne.

Thursdays, after 1st House, to Stratton, Highworth, Fairford and Lechlade.

Saturdays, after 1st and 2nd House to Stratton and Highworth, Lechlade and Fairford (or Once Nightly Performances).

The B. T. & C. Co's Late Motor Bus Service

Marlborough, Late Theatre 'Bus, every Wednesday

Faringdon, Late Theatre 'Bus, every Thursday and Saturday

Wootton Bassett, Late Theatre 'Bus every Saturday

Highworth, via Stratton St. Margaret, Late Theatre 'Bus, every Saturday

After the Second or Once-Nightly Performances.

Blunsdon, via Kingsdown, Nightly, after the First House at 9.0 p.m.

Highworth, via Stratton St. Margaret, Nightly, after the First House.

Highworth, via Kingsdown, Nightly, after the First House.

Children under 12 Half-price in all parts, including Houses, but not Saturday Evening and Bank Holiday Performances.

Seats Booked by 'Phone or Telegram must be claimed 15 minutes before each performance

THE CENTRAL GARAGE (SWINDON) IS ALWAYS OPEN FOR THE PARKING OF CARS & CYCLES

Week commencing August 25th :—

"APRIL SHOWERS"

TWICE NIGHTLY at 6.45 and 8.50
AN ALL STAR CAST !! SEE FUTURE BILLS !!

A REAL FAMILY MUSICAL COMEDY ENTERTAINMENT

UP-TO-DATE THEATRE.

The Proposed Alterations to the Empire.

ELABORATE SCHEME.

In the course of a few months Swindon will possess one of the finest theatres in the province. It will be remembered that Mr. Alfred Manners announced his decision to re-model the Empire Theatre and the plans have been prepared by Messrs. Sprague and Barton, a well-known firm of theatre architects, of London. The present auditorium will be entirely demolished, and two new circles formed of concrete and steel put in, enabling the removal of the old obstructive columns. The alterations will not only give an increased seating accommodation of upwards of 1,000 persons, but also a clear and uninterrupted view of the stage from all parts. The latest comfortable tip-up seats and heavy carpeting will be provided to all parts of the house. An up-to-date operating chamber for two machines, with a separate re-winding room, is also being provided right away from the auditorium.

Novel Design.

There will be a grand entrance crush room at the corner of Princes Street and Groundwell Road, from whence easy and direct access is obtained to the stalls, dress, or grand circle, whichever Mr. Manners decides to name it, and to the boxes. This apartment will be of novel design, with marble mosaic floors and marble staircase leading to the dress or grand circle.

The pay and booking office will be of Honduras mahogany, and other elaborate and brass furnishing to work in harmony with the general scheme of re-decoration. The family circle pay-box and entrance will be adjoining the main stage door entrance in Clarence Street, Mr. Alfred Manners having carefully re-arranged this in consequence of the opening up of Groundwell Road. For the further convenience and comfort of patrons he is having erected a handsome iron and glass shelter extending to the kerb from the main entrance and continuing around Groundwell Road. A new scheme of decoration will be carried out in the auditorium and other parts in free renaissance, the colouring being in soft French grey with Rose Du Barri draperies, carpets, &c.

The electric lighting will form part of the general scheme and in harmony with the whole effect. A new system of low pressure hot water heating will be installed together with a system of ventilation so regulated to produce a comfortable and even temperature at all seasons.

Retiring and Cloak Rooms.

Improvements will be made to the stage and dressing rooms, and work will be carried out to totally eradicate all draughts. Excellent retiring and cloak rooms are being provided to all parts of the house. The refreshment rooms for the convenience of patrons will be quite separate from the auditorium, but within easy access.

Mr. Alfred Manners has insisted upon the contract for the re-construction and alterations to be entirely carried out by Mr. A. J. Colbourne, of Swindon. According to present arrangements the theatre will be closed down directly after the Easter holidays, and it is hoped to re-open on August Bank Holiday.

AUGUST 8, 1924.

SWINDON'S THEATRE.

Most Comfortable House in the West.

The reconstructed Swindon Empire Theatre will re-open towards the end of next week, and then will be disclosed to the patrons of this popular place of amusement, the drastic alterations made at the instance of Mr. Alfred Manners.

Practically the whole interior and much of the exterior has been scrapped. The old circle has been replaced with two circles which gracefully sweep across the auditorium and a view of the stage can be obtained from every seat in the house. The old seats in the cheaper parts of the theatre have also been cleared out, spring tip-up seats being substituted. Pillars, which blocked a vision of the stage have also been removed. A new stage floor has been laid and a new system of electric light installed. From the dome of the theatre hangs a four tier chandelier of about sixty electric lights, and above the dome is a huge electric fan and two others are situated on either side of the building near the roof.

Comfortable Seats.

The grand circle floor is carpeted in grey, and the seats are upholstered in velvet with mahogany arm rests. The seats have recoil springs so that they rise automatically when not in use. Similar treatment has also been given to the stalls and orchestra stalls. The circle is covered with cork linoleum and the tip-up seats follow the scheme elsewhere in the house.

The staircases are carpeted, a new system of central heating has been installed with radiators of the latest pattern. Corners which seemed to produce draughts, have been rounded off and the draught from the stage has been cut off by an ingenious system of boarding. These alterations, coupled with the restful and delightful scheme of decorations throughout the house makes the theatre one of which any town could be proud.

It should also be mentioned that "early doors" at the theatre have also been relegated to the limbo of the past for it is now possible to book one's seat for any part of the house.



Central Library, Regent Circus
Swindon SN1 1QG

Tel: (01793) 463238
Email: localstudies@swindon.gov.uk
Website: www.swindon.gov.uk/localstudies
Gallery: www.flickr.com/swindonlocal

Opening Hours

Mon: By appointment only
Tues: 10am to 4.00pm
Wed: 10am to 4.00pm
Sat: 10am to 1.00pm



Swindon Society Meeting 14th February 2024

Swindon's Interwar Railway Artists by Phil Garrahan

Fairly recently, Philip Garrahan completed an MA dissertation about two well-known Swindon painters, Leslie Cole (1910 - 1976) and Hubert Cook (1901 - 1966).

These two men worked at the GWR and were among the many who took adult educational classes and subsequently prospered as artists.

Philip's focus was on their depictions of industrial life and work in the 1920s and 1930s. Sounds like we are in for a treat!

HOPE TO SEE YOU THERE!

Last Month's Swindon Quiz - A Difference of Opinion!



We asked - who knows the reason for the existence of the mound situated just behind Ferndale Road and Harcourt Road. Well, we have a slight differing of information for the answer:

We thought the answer was that it was created during the late 60s and early 70s when major drainage work on Regent and Bridge Streets was taking place. The hill was supposedly created

from the spoil by moving it along the path of the former canal, which is where the Western Flyer runs now. However, John Stooke's eyewitness account suggests that the council and the local water board built a huge interceptor sewer from Whitehouse Road to Rodbourne Road right through the Rodbourne/Ferndale Rec. He thinks he was about 10 at the time so it must have been around 1957. He used to watch the huge earth moving machines dump the spoil here.

Conflicting information. Maybe it is a bit of both? Anyone else have an opinion?

info@theswindonsociety.co.uk

Newport Street Garage - Circa 1977



The Empire Theatre - Date Unknown (Possibly c.1916)

