

Sarratt Local History Society

Ian Scleater on 'The History of Watford Palace Theatre.'

Amazingly, The Palace Theatre is alive and well in its hundred and first year! For sixty four years of those years our speaker, Ian Scleater, attended performances, directed musical productions and was eventually asked to join the Board of Directors of The Palace Theatre, Watford, so who better to beguile us with the story of that theatre's past? His work on the history is all the more precious as there are, he discovered, no official archives kept by the theatre itself.

Until the 'Palace' was built in 1908, public entertainment in Watford was given in 'portable' booths erected in open spaces around the town. More 'refined' recitals were given at the Clarendon Hall. Early in the 19th Century music-hall acts were all the rage but were mostly performed in pubs. So the respectable, middle-class Watford folk decided to build their own 'proper' theatre. The Watford Hippodrome Co. was set up for the purpose but who they were and what they spent remains a mystery. The chosen site was a redundant Clutterbuck malting house, previously a prison for Napoleonic soldiers and prior to that a residence belonging to one Charles Moore whose Pyramidal Mausoleum built in 1781, remained intact till 1931!

Throughout the last century the theatre was constantly remodelled. An orchestra pit was added, the seating improved, lighting altered etc. Used by both amateur and professional performers, its proximity to London attracted the most successful thespians of their day. If you have heard of them they probably appeared there, from Marie Lloyd, Gracie Fields, Stanley Holloway and Donald Wolfitt through to Helen Mirren, Lenny Henry, Stephen Fry et al. Anna Neagle once described it as the most beautiful theatre she had ever performed in.

From 1927 the theatre belonged to Watford Borough Council, but by the early '90s they wished to return it to private ownership. A registered trust was set up and with a Lottery grant, an East England Arts Grant and a huge anonymous donation, the old theatre was rebuilt under the watchful eyes of English Heritage and the theatre's loyal devotees. It is now a 'state of the art' performance space but retains much of its original elegance. And thanks to people like Ian Scleater, we can continue to enjoy this much loved local 'institution'. **Angela Colman**