

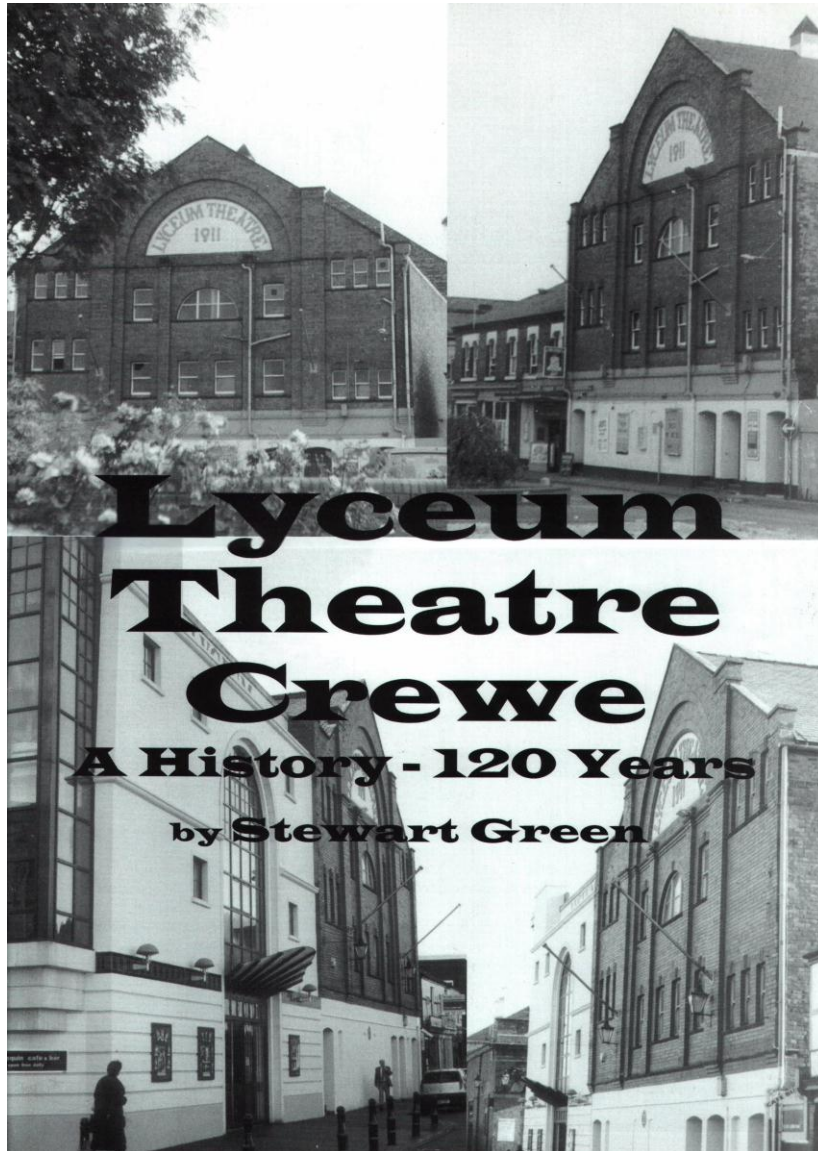
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# LYCEUM THEATRE, CREWE.

## A HISTORY

by Stewart Green  
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The following pages relate to the history of one of the last remaining institutions of the leisure industry from the 1800's in Crewe.

Crewe as a town did not exist in 1830; it was only the introduction of the works by the Grand Junction railway that made Crewe into the town it has become. In 1840 the company decided to build its new works on the site currently owned by the Railway age, Safeway, B and Q and MFI. By 1842 Irish Navvies had been brought to Crewe to help with the construction of the railway system and the new works that had been re-located from Liverpool. In 1843 the structure was ready to produce the first of many notable steam engines in the town. The name Crewe will be forever associated with the railway industry, mainly because it is a halfway point for many journeys between the North of the Country and the South of England.

“Oh Mr Porter, what shall I do? I want to go to Birmingham and they're taking me on to Crewe”. The first line of an old music hall song not only shows the importance of the town but also the connection between Crewe and the entertainment industry. Many of the stars of those old music hall shows would

literally end up in Crewe. G.H. Elliott (The Chocolate coloured Coon), Sid Field (Comedian), Flotsam and Jetsam (Comic Singers), Florrie Forde ("Down at the Old Bull and Bush"), Dick Henderson (Comedian), Hetty King (Male impersonator "All the Nice Girls Love a Sailor"), Old Mother Riley (Arthur Lucan), Frank Randle (Comedian), and Randolph Sutton ("On Mother Kelly's doorstep") all found their way onto the stage of the theatre. Some like the comedian Frank Randle have been re created in "Music hall" shows by modern day artists like John Inman, the star of "Are you being served". In 1957 John started his full time career in the theatre with Crewe repertory. He started making scenery for the repertory company's plays before making the odd appearance on the stage as an actor. In 1997 when he returned to Crewe he brought back to life the character created by Frank Randle, the "Old Hiker", an act John has performed since he was asked to appear on the BBC Television programme "The Good old days".

This book covers the first 120 years of the theatre, looking at various productions and memories through the eyes of the newspapers and the odd recollection of stories from previous workers at the theatre. One story I have not been able to put a date to, is about an elephant. It probably happened in December 1952 and 1953 when the Robert Brothers Circus came to the theatre, but as the story has been related to me by many people who cannot put a date to the event I will include it in this section filed under "Unknown date".

The theatre's stage is made of Australian Oak one of the hardest woods around. This made it an idea surface to put on Circus animals like lions and tigers. These shows also had the occasional elephant on stage. Once a year the theatre technicians had to use props under the stage to reinforce the floor allowing the elephants to stand on it in relative safety. Although the stage was now secure they didn't upgrade the walkway between the stage and the stage door, just outside the main switch room. Every night an elephant appeared on stage and every night the animal would miss a weak spot in the flooring just before the stage entrance. Except the last night of this particular weeks run of the circus. While taking the elephant off the stage for the last night's performance the animal put its foot through the floor. After the Circus had departed Crewe the broken part of the floor was repaired. The following year the elephant returned to the theatre this time with a little baby in tow. They say that "Elephants never forget", this point was proved when the keepers led the animal into the theatre. When it reached the spot where it had fallen through the previous year it stopped and would go no further. Despite the use of hooks, temptations like food and general encouragement the animal refused to perform on the stage. That night just the baby elephant appeared in the Circus with the larger animal preferring to stay outside.

With a Grade two listed building status a thriving theatre club and the support of theatre visitors from the whole of South Cheshire it is time to look back at the history of a unique institution "The Lyceum Theatre, Crewe".

The word Lyceum comes from the Greek word for "An institution dedicated to instruction in literature and philosophy". Originally built as a Gymnasium, sacred to the God Apollo Lycius (God of Prophecy, Song and Music, Son of Zeus the King of the Gods). The first known Lyceum was just outside the city of Athens and was famous for being the place where Aristotle (Greek Philosopher 384- 322BC) and his successors taught philosophy. In 1834 the Lyceum Theatre in Wellington Street, Strand, London opened with an operatic production. The theatre became famous as being the cultural home of Sir Henry Irving (The first theatrical Knight), who managed the theatre from 1878 to 1902.

The history of the Lyceum, Crewe starts a little later in 1881 with the conversion of the Chapel in Heath Street.

In the late 1800's an influx of people moved into the area to work in the railway industry. Many of the new townsfolk wished to continue to worship their own religions in the area. In 1845 Christ Church was built to house the increasing amount of people crowding into the old St Michael's. In 1852 the first Roman Catholic Church in the area had been built in Heath Street. In 1876 the Church closed down as we will find out later to move to a larger building, leaving the site available for the construction of the first permanent, purpose built theatre in the town.

It would be unfair at this point to its founder if I didn't start with a bit about his history.

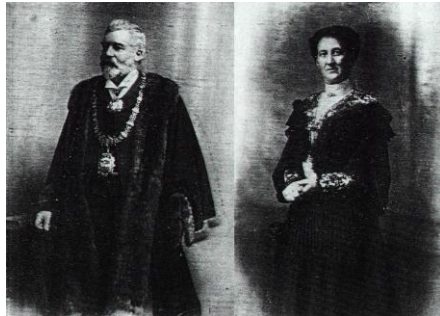
## **1867 Pre - Opening**

In 1867 Mr Henry Taylor moved into the Crewe area where he was to stage the first "Amateur dramatic" performance in the town. He was a native of Manchester and spent his youth in the city before taking up commercial pursuits. Mr Taylor then travelled to Vancouver's Island, the Hawaiian Islands, Chile and Peru, until early 1867 when he came to Crewe, having accepted a situation in the correspondence office of the Locomotive Department under Mr Ramsbottom, his immediate chief being

Mr J.A. Jackson. He then went to the account's office, working for Mr Wadsworth, and soon afterwards commenced business in the premises vacated by Mr E.W. Askey, printer and stationer, in Mill Street. He re named it the Caxton Printing works and moved the business to High Street from where we can only assume that he printed the programmes and posters for the local theatre and entertainment venues in the town. The profits from this venture were to help him start work on giving Crewe a permanent place of entertainment, a theatre. Previously the town had to rely on the various halls in the area and public houses supplying live entertainment, talks and meeting places. At the time the main venue for the town was the Town Hall (On the 23 June 1929 a fire destroyed the building. In February 1971 the Mechanics Institute and the Town Hall were demolished to make way for the new library in the centre of the town.). Here the townsfolk of Crewe were entertained by the D' Oyley Carte operatic company and later by speakers including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle the creator of "Sherlock Holmes" who delivered a speech on "Death and the hereafter" in 1919.

On the 14- 15 October 1876 The Town Hall presented a "Freak show" while on the 17- 18 October 1884 Miss Millie Christine was presented. She had 2 heads, four arms and one body. She was a singing "Nightingale" and a favourite with the Princess of Wales who gave her a brooch.

Other venues in the town were the "Co operative building", "The Oak Farm Hotel", in Oak Street, "The Adelphi", "The Engine", "The Vine" and "The Express" public houses.



Henry and Mrs Taylor

### **NEW 1881- The Opening**

With the obvious success of the Town Hall, Mr Henry Taylor decided to try out a new venue in the town. For this he needed a building that would not cost too much or better still he could rent for a short period of time to see if a theatre was a viable proposition for the town.

In a way God stepped in..... As the popularity of the Roman Catholic Church was growing in the town, a new venue to hold its services was needed to replace the 1852 building in Heath Street. This turned out to be a new purpose built church, St Mary's on the corner of Delamere Street and what is now St Mary's Street. The church did not move directly into this new building but took up temporary residence in the Schoolrooms also in St Mary's Street finally moving into the new church in 1891.

In 1876, St Mary's in Heath Street was acquired by Mr Thomas Cliff of Crewe Gates Farm. He also owned the land next to the building and agreed in 1881 to rent the site to Mr Taylor for a one-year period.

In 1881 Mr Henry Taylor converted the old chapel in Heath Street into a theatre. With the conversion complete he opened "The Lyceum Theatre" on the 26 December 1881 with the play "A Wonderful Woman" written by Charles Mathews along with the Pantomime "Aladdin and his Wonderful Scamp". Both productions were performed by Mr Stanley Ward's Dramatic Company who continued to perform productions until the 30th January 1882.

The opening was recorded thus in the Crewe Guardian. – "The curtain rose on the first production to the National Anthem, sang as song and chorus by Miss Kate Read and the dramatic corps. This was well received, and the next item was the reading, by Mr Stanley Warde, of the following lines on the occasion of the opening:-

Lyceum! Ancient, honourable name:  
 Illustrious and Renowned from age to age!  
 First on Ilissus' banks, of classic fame,  
 (The favourite haunt of many a Grecian sage)  
 The name was uttered by a gladstome throng.  
 Within the walls was martial justice done;  
 And worship offered to the God of Song,  
 Divine Apollo, Monarch of the Sun!

Lyceum! In Victorian age, the name  
 A household word becomes on Thames' banks;  
 The hope of Shakespeare's plays and Irving's fame,  
 Among the theatres the first it ranks.  
 Well-chosen is the name this new house bears;  
 It omens great success; Its favoured most;-  
 The stamp of Stirling worth it ever bears –  
 "Never behind", now Crewe again can boast,  
 Here once Religion held her soleman away;  
 Hence she departed to a statelier fame.  
 Art follows now; and with benignant ray,  
 Illuminates the darksome void again.  
 Handmaid of Faith! Though in thy glorious name.  
 For many a dark and graceless deed be done,  
 Nought on the stage shall cause the blush of same.  
 To spoil the triumphs which art has won.  
 "The drama's laws the drama's patrons give".  
 Thus legislators should our patrons be;  
 "To hold the mirror up", truce actors live;  
 Attend all men, and here your portrait are.  
 We live, through not to pander, yet to please;  
 And your applause must greatly guide our choices,  
 May judgement guide, and may indulgence ease  
 Our work of winning every heart and voice.

Charles Mathews comedy "A Wonderful Woman", was then presented and that in a way which gave much satisfaction. As the acting was as a whole on a high level, it would be invidious to particularize".

The first season continued with Henry Taylor staging a variety of productions ending with the show "Our Boys" by H. John Byron, which was performed by Mr W Duck's Company. After the final performance on the 3rd of June 1882, Mr Henry Taylor went on stage and thanked the patrons for their support and hoped to see them soon, even though it was not a financial success. He also thanked his staff for their help with this new venture. Special mention was made of the scenic painters Frank Biggs and Philip Lovett. This was not the end of the Roman Catholic Church as a venue as on the 4<sup>th</sup> September 1882 Season two opened.

Season three saw the first changes in the theatre with Henry Taylor resigning as manager of the Lyceum and his place was taken by Mr John Levey, who continued to run the venture until November 1883. John Levey went back to staging the odd Pantomime at the Town Hall while Henry Taylor stepped back as manager running very occasional productions at the original venue.

When the building finally closed Mr Taylor and the "Crewe Lyceum Theatre Buildings Company" (Formed in February 1885) decided to build their own purpose built theatre in the town.

Between 1885 and 1887 Henry Taylor had decided to stage productions at the Town Hall and the smaller Lyceum theatre to bring in more money for this new venture. With the formation of the new company the next phase of the history of the Lyceum theatre was just about to start.

### **1885 The First New Building**

On the 21 February 1885 "The Crewe Lyceum Theatre Buildings Company (Ltd)" was formed. The company published an advertisement in the paper announcing that Mr Henry Taylor had joined with Mr Thomas Cliffe the owner of the land, Dr William E.W. Vaughan of Haslington, Mr Joseph Astley of the Swan Hotel and other local businessmen to invest in a new larger theatre on the site of the original Lyceum in Heath Street. With 2,000 shares at a cost of £5 each the total capital of the company amounted to £10,000 of which £8,500 was to be used to fund the whole project. The new building would hold 1,500 seats and was twice the size of the original Chapel with the new stage area being the same size as the whole of the original theatre.

With Orchestra Stall, Circle, Pit Stall, Pit, Gallery and even Private boxes the theatre was open for business with tickets being sold at Mr Taylor's Caxton Printing Works in High Street. The new entrance to the circle was off Market Street with an overall design of the theatre by Alfred Derbyshire, Esq., AJBA. joining with Mr George Cawdery who designed the stage area and Mr Charles Brew who designed the "Act drop" (Possibly back cloth).

On the 21 November 1887 G.R. Sims and Henry Pettitt opened the new "Lyceum Theatre" with a production of "In the Ranks". This production was performed by Messrs Miller and Elliston's company with the patronage on the first night by the Mayor of Crewe, Alderman F.W. Webb and other members and officials of the Council. Tickets for the season started at 6d and went up to 3 shillings for an orchestra stall seat.

Mr Henry Taylor was made manager of the theatre with part of his contract being that one performance each year would be set-aside for a benefit evening just for him. In the early years this would be one of the current shows but later they would become a variety show put together for his benefit only.

During the first full years performances in 1888 props for the various productions included real boats and water for the play "Saved from the street" (12- 17 Mar 1888) while "The still alarm" (1- 6 Apr 1889) included a fire engine and horses on stage.

One of the performances in 1889 saw the first production by the Crewe Dramatic Society on the stage of the Lyceum. The production on the 11th to the 13th of February was called "The World". Their second play at the theatre was called "Smike" on the 20- 22 November 1890. Based on the story of Nicholas Nickleby by Charles Dickens it was the penultimate production by the society under this name. The plays "Chiselling" and "Faith and Falsehood" (7- 9 Mar 1892) were the last time that the society appeared on stage under the name of Crewe Dramatic Society. By 1897 they changed their name and again appeared at the theatre, more about that later.

When 1891 arrived it saw the introduction of a new facility to the theatre; an Eddison Phonograph (record player to you and me) was demonstrated on stage during the production of "The Dangers of London" (12- 17 January 1891).

On the 14 April 1891 girl dancers from Crewe were given the chance to take to the stage of the Lyceum for the pantomime "Robinson Crusoe". Auditions for the production took place at 1pm with the show being performed during the week of the 20- 25 April along with members of Mr Sidney Cooper's Company.



Plans for new room at back of theatre.

In May 1893 the theatre was closed for the management to enlarge the facilities and to decorate the building. It re-opened in August with "False Evidence" by Mr J.W Hemming's Company along with Miss Clara St Clair.

The box office until now had been at Mr Taylor's Caxton's printing company in High street. In February 1895 the Company moved to new premises in Exchange street, Crewe.

In May 1896 changes had been made to the theatre committee with theatre proprietor Mr Edward Darby of 172 Falcon Road, Battersea, taking over as manager and leaseholder of the Lyceum, with Mr Henry Taylor being retained as business manager. As Mr Darby now owned the theatre a "Farewell Benefit to Mr Henry Taylor" had been arranged on the 22 April 1896, this proved to be a bit premature.

On the 5- 6 February 1897 the first performance took place by the newly named Crewe Dramatic and Comedy Company. "The Miser of Shoreditch" by Thomas Peckete Prest was performed under the company's presidency of Mr Wallace Lumb Esq J.P. Other members of the companies management committee included George Follise (Secretary), Mr J Whitehouse (Stage Carpenter), Charles Townley (General Stage Manager), Walter Whitwell (Deputy Manager) and Louis Townley.

The management structure of the theatre changed again on the 30 July 1898 as Mr Henry Taylor re-purchased the lease of the Lyceum after agreeing to give Mr Edward Darby £300 for the "Goodwill and connection to the theatre". It was agreed to pay the money to Mr Darby in two payments, the first of one hundred pounds on the 23 of July when an agreement for the sale had been signed at the offices of Messrs Lovell, Son and Pitfield of 3 Grays Inn Square, London (The Vendor's Solicitors), with the rest of the money, (£200) being paid to him on the 28 July 1898.

At the start of the new season in August 1898, Henry Taylor returned to his old job as manager and lessee of the theatre with one of his first jobs being the upgrade of the building. This included the

introduction of a new heating system to the theatre on the 24 December 1898. The announcement in the newspapers reported that, "During inclement weather the theatre is heated by "Messrs Langfields Patent Hot air apparatus".

The 20 December 1898 saw a benefit production for Mr Henry Taylor with the top of the bill for the performance at the Lyceum being comedian George Robey. He was being paid at the time £100 a week to appear in the forthcoming pantomime at Manchester by Mr Pitt Hardacre.

1899 saw more investment in the theatre with a new entrance being built next to Miss Tomlinson's restaurant.

On the 8- 13 April 1901 the theatre presented "His Majesty's Guest" one of the well-known productions by Fred Karno's Company. This former plumber from the West Country originally called Fred Westcott went on to become one of the most successful of all the touring managers in the Country. At one time he had 20 shows on the road at the same time. In 1907 Charlie Chaplin joined the company followed in 1910 by Arthur Stanley Jefferson a comedian from a Scottish boarder town called Ulverston. Fred Karno took them on his London tours and eventually to America in late 1910 where Arthur changed his name to Stan Laurel and became part of the Laurel and Hardy film comedy duo. In 1913 Fred Karno purchased a holiday resort in the Thames called "The Karsino" on Taggs Island. This was the end of his company as the resort was a flop and closed in 1926. With his touring company Fred made his final appearance at Crewe on the 12- 17 Mar 1934. Both Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel were to make appearances at the theatre in 1904 and 1907 respectively but not with the Fred Karno Company as you will find out later.

The 9th of June 1902 saw the first films to be shown at the theatre. Using the "Eddison Pictures and Raymond's viva graph" they showed scenes of "Crewe workmen turning out at dinner time".

On the 10 January 1903 the Crewe Chronicle announced that it was the 21st anniversary of the original theatre and a banquet had been arranged in celebration of Mr Taylor's years as manager of the Lyceum. The event was held at the Crewe Arms Hotel on the 17th of February, with speeches from the Mayor of Crewe Councillor, J.H. Moore (who also presided over the event), Dr Hodgson and Alderman Mc Neill (ex Mayor). The event was enjoyed by all who attended from Aldermen, Councillors, County and Borough Magistrates, leading townsmen and tradesmen, Borough officials and many others. The famous actor Mr Edward Compton even sent his apologies.

"Dear Sirs. I regret I cannot be present at the banquet to Mr Henry Taylor on the 17th inst; but he knows I shall be with him in spirit, and that no one wishes him well more sincerely and says 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant' more heartily than yours very truly, Edward Compton (Address, South Kensington)".

The evening in part had been organised by Mr W.Ross-Cattanach and Mr G.E. Morgan who arranged for a Queen Anne Silver tea and coffee service (Supplied by Mr C.W. Moody's establishment) to be presented to Mr Taylor by Dr Hodgson.

Previous to this event on the 9 February 1903 a play called "The 10.30 Down Express" had been performed at the theatre. Props for the play included a railway engine built specially for the production by Vinning and Sons.

On the 9th of November 1903 Mr Henry Taylor became Mayor of Crewe. Mr Taylor combined his work as manager of the theatre with the responsibilities of his Mayoral duties.

A picture of Mr and Mrs Henry Taylor as Mayor and Mayoress of Crewe was published in Eardleys almanac and was at the time of publishing the original history of the theatre by Stewart Green to have been of Henry's wife Margaret. However while researching other information it has since been discovered that the lady in the photograph of Mrs H Taylor is in fact the second wife of Henry Taylor a lady called Selina and that Margaret Taylor had unfortunately died on the 24 December 1901 after a short illness resulting from a crash.

Selina Emma Orme was from Hartshorne, Derbyshire and in 1903 between February and March Henry Taylor married Selina E Orme (.b. 1857) at Ashby De La Zouch.

No-one in the family can tell us how they met it is likely that Henry was visiting the Buxton Opera House or relatives in the area and thus a friendship was started. It was also likely that because Henry had been proposed as Mayor that he needed a consort and so Selina became a quick replacement for the late Margaret Taylor. The Marriage and the year of office for both Henry and his new wife Selina, was very successful with a number of engagements that put them both firmly in the public eye.

In 1904 as his Mayoral year came to a close Henry Taylor booked a show from the Duke of York's theatre in London that probably brought production of "Sherlock Holmes" written by Arthur Conan Doyle and the actor William Gillette. Gillette had starred in his own production as it made its first tour around the country. On the 2 July 1903 Charlie Chaplin joined the cast at the Pavilion Theatre in London as the pageboy "Billy". The Sherlock Holmes Mystery play was called "The Strange case of



Miss Faulkner" was advertised at the various theatres as just "Sherlock Holmes". It was taken to London where it became a big hit. In July 1904 Mr H.A. Sainsbury took over from William Gillette as the Great Detective taking the production on tour to the South of England, the Midlands, the North, and Scotland before returning to London.



Charlie Chaplin as Billy

In 1904 after 13 shows in London along with William Gillette as Sherlock Holmes, Charlie Chaplin again went on tour. This time the production was organised by Blackburn Theatre owner Harry Korke who had bought the name (Charles Fordham's Duke of York's theatre production) and the rights to the play from the London Theatre. The play appeared in Crewe on the 19 -24 February 1906 as the penultimate week's performance, with the Theatre Royal Rochdale enjoying the final appearance of Charlie Chaplin as "Billy" on the 3 March 1906.

During a performance of the play "The Betrayed, or what men called Love" on the 28 April 1905 each lady in the audience was presented with a "Special photographic souvenir of the event".

On the 4- 9 November 1907 Stan Laurel appeared at the theatre. He was part of a touring company who were performing the pantomime "Sleeping Beauty". He appeared under his original name of Arthur Stanley Jefferson and was at the time one of the cast of the production organised by Mr and Mrs H.B. Levy and J.E. Cardwell's Juvenile Pantomime Company. He had joined the company earlier in the year as an assistant stage manager and progressed to staff bearer. By the end of the tour in April 1908 he had taken over the role of first comedian from "Wee Georgie Wood" the child star that never grew any higher than four feet, nine inches, also in the cast at Crewe.

By August 1908 Mr Henry Taylor had sold his shares in the Lyceum Theatre to Mr H Dudley Bennett of the Shakespeare theatre, London. During the summer break he had re fitted the interior and had increased the number of boxes available in the auditorium. The predominating colours of the auditorium were red, white and gold. With clusters of electric jets, the effect was very picturesque. Two large bars were added one upstairs in the circle and the other downstairs. They were both fitted with the best upholstery. The walls of the rooms were in 'Dutch' style with some very handsome decorations. The increased number of enlarged boxes were decorated with beautiful rich tapestries adorning them. The first show of the season was performed under the name Lyceum Theatre with the title changing to the OPERA HOUSE on the 3rd of August 1908.

### **1908 The "Opera House".**

One of the first season's plays of the newly named theatre was "Charlie's Aunt" in which the writer Brandon Thomas appeared as a member of the cast of his own play written in 1892.

On the 19th of September 1909 the Foden Motor works brass band from Sandbach made their first appearance on the Opera House stage. Formed only nine years ago on the 18 May 1900 this show turned out to be their first and last appearance on the stage of the original theatre as on the 11 March 1910 a fire broke out under the stage totally destroying the building.

The fire started after the final curtain of the pantomime "Dick Whittington" which was being staged by the Dan Thomas Company. The cast had left the theatre at about 11.15pm leaving manager Mr Ambrose Fischer to lock up. That night he had brought his wife and children along to see the pantomime. After locking most of the building at about 12 o' clock he was about to leave for the night when he went round the theatre for his usual final checks. When he got to the pit stalls he could smell

burning. He rushed to the stage door and noticed smoke issuing from within the dressing rooms below the theatre stage.

Mr Fischer's first reaction was to rush over the road to the fire station, situated in Earl Street only a few yards away from theatre to raise the alarm. He then rushed back into the theatre to try and save what was left of the Opera House. As he moved onto the stage he was overcome by smoke only to be recovered by the firemen who made an appearance just in time to rescue Mr Ambrose Fischer. A moment later flames rushed across the stage engulfing the spot where the manager had lain just seconds before.

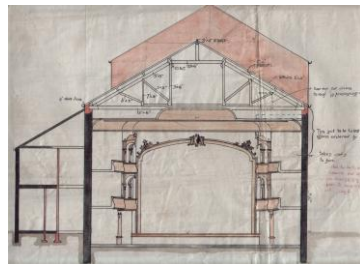
With assistance from the N.W. Railway Fire brigade and help from Captain Thistlethwaite of the Nantwich Fire brigade who had noticed the flames from six miles away they managed to contain the fire within the outer walls of the theatre, but it was too late to save the actual building. Reports say that the flames could be seen within a twenty-mile radius. By two thirty almost 100 onlookers saw the fire at its fiercest and by six o' clock the next morning the fire was under control.

It was thought that the fire had been caused by a smouldering cigarette in one of the dressing rooms on the east side of the theatre under the stage. Pictures of the fire at the time were taken by the local photographer who sold them. In the early 1900's this was the only way that a photograph of an event was available to the general public, as the newspapers had not yet developed a way of putting a photograph onto its pages. At any local event the photographer would take a number of pictures and would have them on sale as postcards that day or the following day if delayed. So far I know of five different pictures of the fire.

Not only did the fire cause financial difficulties for Mr Dudley Bennett but it also caused the Dan Thomas Company to fold as they had been uninsured during their time at the theatre and lost their costumes, props, scenery and even the musicians instruments to the fire.



On the 25 May 1910 after a short illness the founder of the Lyceum in Crewe, Henry Taylor died at the age of 68. As this sad occasion happened it closed the first chapter in the life of the theatre and the final chapter in the life of the person who had the vision to put the building into the centre of Crewe. It then heralded a new opportunity to start again.



Plans for New Theatre.

## 1911 THE NEW THEATRE

With less than two years in Crewe Mr H.G. Dudley Bennett decided that the town was a viable proposition and decided to build a new theatre on the original site of the Opera House.



Within two months of the fire plans had been drawn by Mr Albert Winstanley of 49 Deansgate, Manchester, who sent them for approval to the Council in May 1910. Work started soon after and nineteen months after the loss of the Lyceum a new building had been erected. This new theatre had a stage measuring 56 feet by 32 feet and a proscenium arch of 29 feet by 24 feet. The stage was set for new productions and was officially opened by the eminent actor Mr Edward Compton and the Mayor of Crewe Councillor Jervis.

The Crewe and Nantwich Guardian wrote at the time;

“After an overture by the strong and well balanced orchestra, the Mayor, wearing his chain of office, appearing before the footlights, in company with Mr Dudley Bennett, and formally declared the theatre opened. Prolonged applause greeted the announcement and then the vast audience rose and sang the National Anthem. The play then commenced and at once aroused the rapt interest of the audience, which was maintained throughout the three acts. The staging was complete. The scenery and dresses were new, and so well did the artistes sustain their parts that it was difficult to credit the fact that they appeared in their roles for the first time. Mr Edward Compton, who had previously been seen in Crewe in Sheridan's plays, and notably in “The School for Scandal”, in which he played Charles Surface, and also in plays of the character of “David Garrick”, stands in the front rank of his profession, and, judging by the frequent outbursts of applause on Monday evening, he fully maintained his high reputation in the part of Hugh Trevor”.

The Guardian then went on to report what had happened at the end of the production “All for Her”;- “At the conclusion of the play Mr Compton briefly addresses the audience “Will you permit me” he remarked, “to thank you with all my heart for the brilliant reception you have accorded to-night to our first performance of “All for Her”. Everyone was new to his or her part, including myself, and everyone, and especially your humble servant, is intensely pleased and gratified with the exceptionally favourable verdict that a representative Crewe audience has passed on the play and the players (Applause.). And now, if I may be allowed, let me congratulate you the architect, Mr Winstanley, on your really charming and beautiful new theatre. (Applause) I knew the old theatre and its old manager, Mr Taylor, was an old respected and valued friend of mine, and I am quite sure that had he been happily spared to us, he, who loved the drama so well, would have rejoiced to see in his beloved Crewe, so completely worthy a Temple of Thespis. Your present manager, Mr Dudley Bennett I also know well and admire and esteem highly. I knew him as a mere boy. I have admired him as a mere man, and I have always esteemed him as a mere manager. He may not be ineptly compared to-night to the captain of a freshly launched vessel, the good ship New Theatre, starting on a series of weekly voyages with a differently attractive port in view each trip, weighing anchor from your good town he is bound to sail away with a good Crew(e) . (Laughter) What he really wants is a good list of passengers. The bill of fare, you may rest assured, will be always the best presentable, and, goodness knows, the fares themselves could not be more reasonable. Fill up his boat then week after week, crowd his cabins, and swarm his decks, and so enable him, at the end of each year to sail smoothly into the harbour of success (Applause) I felt it my bounden duty to say these few poor words, and so with my renewed thanks for your kindness to me personally, I wish a kind good-night to all” (Applause).

Mr Charles Howard became the resident manager of the “New Theatre” a building described at the time as having an auditorium decorated along the circle, boxes and gallery fronts using ornate plaster work by Messrs Alberty of 1 Oxford Street, Manchester. The gallery can be entered by a four foot inside staircase and can seat between 600 and 700 people. The ceiling of the auditorium is topped off by a “Sunburner” ventilation system built by Messrs Alberty of 1 Oxford Street, Manchester.

The first show continued from the 4- 9 September 1911 written by Palgrave Simpson and Herman Merivale, it was “All for Her” and was performed by Mr Edward Compton's own Company with Miss Mary Forbes in the cast.

During the first season Foden's Brass Band put on a benefit concert for the Crewe Cottage Hospital on the 15th of October 1911. Followed two months later by the Magician “Chung Ling Soo” (11- 16 Dec 1911). Born William E Robinson in America the name Chung Ling Soo means “Extra Good Luck”, however it was an unlucky day when he appeared at the Wood Green Empire for his last performance. While trying to catch a bullet on a plate he was killed on the 23 March 1918 when the trick went wrong. Paul Daniels a collector of Magic memorabilia had a poster of the act and re created the “Defying Bullets” trick in November 1982 for his television programme with the man who fired one of the bullets on that fateful night. Paul had discovered that the man who had fired one of the guns on that night was alive and was at the time living in Sheffield. Jack Grossman (Aged 81 at the time of the programme) agreed to appear on the programme and fire the gun, this time at Paul Daniels. The trick involved firing two bullets at the magician from separate guns, the trick was to catch them both on a plate. In the 1918 performance one of the mechanisms on one of the guns broke and a bullet punctured the Magicians

lung. Chung Ling Soo ordered the curtain to fall and was taken to hospital where he died the following day. The only mishap during Paul's performance in 1982 was that the director failed to capture the moment for the television audience and they had to do the trick again.

The following year the first "Boxing and Wrestling evening" took place on the 21 December 1912 with top of the bill, Bob Berry of Wigan the World Middleweight wrestling champion.

On the 24- 29 Mar 1913 the first film was shown at the New Theatre "Les Miserables" was put on by the Jury Imperial Pictures Ltd Company and was possibly a French film made by Pathe in 1911.

1914 saw the outbreak of the First World War and from the 4th of August until December the regular production of shows were cancelled due to the uncertainty of cast members. By January 1915 things were as near back to normal as it could be with a war going on.

The next big film at the theatre was "Birth of a Nation" on the 29 May to the 3 June 1916. It was produced by D.W. Griffiths and was the highest grossing film at the time. The quarter page front cover advert for the production announced that it had first been shown at the Dury Lane, London for a total of 8 months. The cast included 18,000 people, 5,000 horses and a symphony orchestra of 36 people. The film itself was released on the 3 March 1915 in New York and was based on the book "The Clansman" by Thomas Dixon. It told of the Civil war in America from the point of view of a white Southern American family. The story focused on the rape by a black man of a white woman played by Lillian Gish. In America it had caused outrage at the way that the black man had been portrayed in the film. Not only were all the Negro's played by white actors "Blacked up" but it showed the mistreatment of them by the Ku Klux Klan a group of white men who in the film were treated as the heroes. I don't know if it got the same reaction in Crewe as it did in America but the film was only on for a week (29 May - 3 June 1916).

A new era started on the 10- 15 December 1917 when the theatre saw its first X rated production. This show was "Ghosts" by Hendrik Ibsen (1828- 1906) where the age of the audience was restricted to adults over 16 only.

The 1920's saw the first appearance of Randolph Sutton the comedian known for the song "On Mother Kelly's Door Step". He was performing in the show "The Dream Girl" a review by Joe Morrison's company on the 28 November to the 3 December 1921. One disappointment in his career was that there is no recording of "On Mother Kelly's Doorstep" made by Mr Sutton. It was only when Danny La Rue made his own recording in November 1968 that people were able to purchase a popular version of this music hall song.

The Sandbach based Foden Motor Works Brass Band again appeared on the stage of the Crewe Theatre on the 8th of March 1925, this time with a new conductor the great Fred Mortimer who brought along his two sons Harry and Rex, who were playing in the band at the time.

A new "Unit Automatic Exchange" was installed by the telephone department of the Post office in Crewe allowing more phone numbers to be used in the area. On the 2 November 1929 the phone number for the theatre changed to Crewe 2007, it had previously been Crewe 7.

In 1932 a regular visitor to the "New Theatre" Will Dalton's company, brought a show called "This is Variety". It included a new comedian called Jimmy Jewel who later found fame and fortune with his cousin Ben Warriss in a double act and in a television show called "Nearest and Dearest", with Hilda Baker. Jimmy would later return with his own company J.A.J Productions on the 8- 13 May 1933 in a show called "All for Money".

In June 1933 Mr H.G. Dudley Bennett sold the "New theatre" to Mr Terence Byron the owner of a number of repertory companies as well as the Hippodrome, Mexborough and the Empire, Dewsbury. Mr Byron had visited the theatre before in his previous career as a comedian on the 5 - 10 November 1923 in the production "Simple Simon's Baby" by Carlton Wallace. He had also brought his own production company to the theatre on the 13-18 January 1930 with the play "The Burglar?".

With general manager Mr Percy Leonard and resident manager Mr Reginald Collins they put on their first show on the 7- 12 August 1933. This show was a variety evening and included an act called "The Crazy Gang". I can only assume that this was the same band of double acts that had been performing at the London Palladium from March 1933. However, according to various biographies, they were not allowed to use the name outside of the George Black organisation and didn't call themselves "The Crazy Gang" until 1937. According to his biography "My Crazy Life" Bud Flanagan, who along with Chesney Allen, Nervo and Knox, Naughton and Gold, and "Monsewer" Eddie Gray, toured with the "Crazy gang" in 1933? Known as a favourite with the Queen the group of comedians appeared in many of the Royal variety shows as well as making films like "O-Kay for sound" (1937) "Alf's button afloat" (1938) "The frozen limits" (1939) and "Gasbags" in 1940.

On the 30 August - 4 November 1933 the male impersonator Hetty King visited the theatre. She is best remembered for the song "All the Nice Girls love a Sailor".

1934 saw one of the greatest Music hall acts on the stage, Robb Wilton who along with his wife Florence Palmer appeared in his show "The Argyle Broadcasting Company" on the 22- 27 January. He was famous for the sketches "The Fire Chief" and "The Police Sergeant" as well as the phrase "The Day War Broke out" a line that came from the sketch "The Home Guard" which he did during the Second World War.

Hilda Baker returned with her catch phrase "She knows you know" in an "All star Variety" show on the 3- 8 September 1934.

The same year saw another great of the music hall in Crewe the Australian singer Florie Forde, she was famous for the song "Down at the Old Bull and Bush" (8- 13 October 1934).

January 1935 saw the first of many possible appearances by the Northern comedian Frank Randle. Not being the most reliable man in the history of variety Frank would always turn up at the theatre on time, from that moment it was a game of chance to see if he actually went on stage. At this point in his career Frank was partial to a little drop of the alcoholic stuff. If he had too much he would not appear on stage and his understudy would go on. If he had very little to drink then he would perform the best evenings entertainment in the North of England. Crewe had both, the non-appearance and the brilliant Frank Randle. Also on the bill with Frank was a gentleman called, Saxson Brown the World's strongest man. As a publicity stunt for the show Saxson Brown pulled a Crosville bus up Catholic Bank in Crewe with his teeth.

The 19- 24 August 1935 saw the return of the "Argyle broadcasting company" to the stage of the theatre. This stage show starring Robb Wilton was based on a radio show format and was the perfect opportunity for the BBC to make a test transmission from the theatre.

Looking back at the history of the theatre makes you appreciate some of the new discoveries that appeared at Crewe. One of these made an appearance on the 16- 21 March 1936 alongside "Flotsam and Jepsan" a well-known double act that did topical songs. His name was Arthur Haynes who was later to be a big hit in army shows on Radio and have his own TV programme on ITV.

The BBC broadcast a live radio show from the theatre on the 18 February 1937. The programme was opened with a speech from Lady Barlow (of Sandbach). This was followed by a broadcast of the variety show that appeared that week at the theatre and featured acts "The Four Hillbillies" and "Jack Warman" (BBC Comedian). The BBC also broadcast a show on the 10 March called "Cavalcade of Variety" with the "Seven De Guise Seymours".

In 1938 and 1939 the BBC continued broadcasting from the theatre despite a change of general manager at the New Theatre. Mr John Walshaw took over from Mr W.E. Fraser as resident manager in September of 1938 and ran the New Theatre on behalf of Terence Byron Ltd, which in turn, was being run by Mrs Patricia Terence Byron. The actual date of this change of ownership of the company is uncertain but a programme from July 1937 suggests Mrs Terence Byron took over prior to this date.

The reason for this change is not quite clear but it is suspected that her husband Terence had died at around this time. A few years later in 1947 she changed her name to Patricia Byron-Thomson.

1939 saw another change to the name of the theatre from "The New Theatre Crewe" to "Crewe New Theatre".

The 3rd of September 1939 saw the Second World War declared and the theatre closing for two weeks. This happened with all entertainment establishments at the time as the government decided that it was too dangerous to have a lot of people in the same place in case the building was bombed. However when the government re considered the position that morale was more important than the possibility of many people being killed, the theatre re opened with comedian Sandy Daw in a revue called "Why be Serious" on the 18- 23 September 1939.

The BBC returned to the theatre in 1940 when they made the first broadcast of a northern theatre to the troops in France on the 17th of January. The show was "Arcadian Follies" starring Harry Korris (Comedian).

Within a month of the broadcast the stage manager of the theatre Mr William T Myers had died at the age of 63. He had been the stage manager since 1932 and continued working until his death after a short illness in February.

The war year of 1940 didn't see a loss of celebrities, with Betty Driver, Sid Field, Issy Bonn and G.H. Elliott (The Chocolate Coloured Coon) all making appearances on the stage of the theatre.

On the 25 January 1941 the theatre change its name back from "Crewe New Theatre" to "New Theatre Crewe".

The war years not only brought variety to the theatre but also a change in attitudes with shows like "Hi Diddle Diddle" (6 - 11 April 1942) which saw the first of four appearances by Christabel Leighton-Porter who played the Original "Jane". "Jane" was a cartoon character that appeared in the Daily Mirror

newspaper and was known for losing her clothes for the good of her Country. This was in essence a strip show without the ladies in the cast actually showing anything of their "naughty bits".

1944 saw the return of weekly rep with Harry Hanson's Court players performing for 47 weeks from the 22 May 1944 to the 14 April 1945.

A well-known comedienne and singer called Jill Summers appeared on the 11 to 16 June 1945. She would later return to the theatre along with Paul Raymond's Company in various shows including "Holiday Hit Parade" on the 6 - 11 April 1953. Jill is best remembered in ITV's "Coronation Street" playing the part of Phyllis Pearce. This first show had Jill as part of a double act with her brother Tom F Moss (a Singing Tenor).

The 30 March 1946 saw a change of title to "Crewe Theatre". It also saw a change of manager in October 1946 due to the death of the previous titleholder John Walshaw. The man who took over, had from 1943 been running the Theatre Royal, Castleford he was called Mr Walter A Powell.

In 1947 Patricia Byron -Thomson brought her own repertory company to Crewe making the theatre its regular home. Previously the theatre company had been called "Mr Terence Byron's Company" but with changes mentioned earlier Mrs Patricia Byron -Thomson now had closer links with the Crewe company and brought twenty four plays to the town including "Ten Little Niggers", "Double Door", "Murder on the Second floor" and "Pygmalion".

In 1949 another first for the theatre "Ice Fantasia" was performed on a real Ice rink. The show was brought in by Michael Sullivan and William Roberts who on the 27 June- 2 July erected the Vic Templar Ice Rink for the performance.

1951 saw the first appearance of the Royal South African Circus an event that will be remembered by those who were at the theatre on that fateful day. Mr Tommy Ellis a trainee with the Circus tripped over his trousers while in the lion's cage and was mauled by a lion called "Satan". The event happened during the Wednesday performance (on the 10 January 1951). While talking to Alan Hayes a lighting technician at the time he gave me this account of the event; -

"Normally Carl Fisher was the lion tamer in the show with Tommy Ellis as his trainee. Carl used to use a pencil to keep the lions in check instead of the usual whip and it was with the pencil that Carl was able to get the lion off Tommy. While the Circus was in the theatre someone had to look after the lions 24 hours a day making sure they were kept away from the public while they were not on stage. This was the job of Tommy Ellis who was with the Circus training to be a lion tamer. On the 10th January Tommy asked if he could do the children's matinee performance. Everything went well until he took a step backwards and tripped over his trousers. The lions went straight for him and ripped a hole in the side of his face. Immediately they brought down the curtain and Carl Fisher went into the cage and literally opened the jaws of the lion's mouth before frightening it away from Tommy. Carl then beckoned the stage crew to get the injured man out of the cage before the lion could attack him again. He was then rushed to the Crewe Memorial hospital where he was treated for a fractured jaw and bad lacerations. Later in the run of the Circus's season Tommy returned to the company".

Another new manager was installed in the theatre in 1951. Mr Aubrey E Story took up his position in February.

1951 also saw the first named appearance of Miss "Yvonne" Hilda Nevitt on the 12 - 17 March in a show called "Ballet Montmatre". Previously this thirteen year old dancer from Crewe had appeared in a talent show staged by the theatre, when she was only 4 years old singing "Yankee Doodle Dandy". In later years Yvonne would appear in many shows at the theatre including the times when she had formed her own dance troop the "Yvonne School of dancing". They became regular performers, supplying the dancers in pantomimes and shows at the theatre.

The 5- 10 November 1951 saw the first show put on by the Crewe Corporation who had started a Drama Festival in the town. As part of this they had decided to get together all the local drama groups in the area to stage a play "The Admirable Crichton" by J.M. Barrie.

The 21 June 1952 saw Paul Raymond presenting the Four Aces at the theatre. He was later to put on "Nude" shows at the theatre including "We strip tonight" with Jane of the Daily Mirror and Comedienne Jill Summers (Almost a Lady).

Another change of manager in September 1952 as Mr Ross Jones took over.

By May 1953 local businessman Mr Cyril Tew had been appointed as manager of Crewe Theatre taking over from Ross Jones who had gone to Accrington to run the theatre there.

The first beauty contest took place at the theatre on the 13 May 1953 with the final of "Miss Crewe".

The winner was Miss Thelma Davies of 272 Alton Street, Crewe.

The change in what was acceptable in the theatre during the war continued in 1954 when Phyllis Dixey the greatest 'Nude' appeared at the theatre with her husband Jack Tracy in her own review "Peek A Boo" on the 8- 13 February. This show consisted of naked women in what were called "tableau", a

single girl or group of women in a picture. They were however not allowed to move and when in the early days of this type of show the theatre could be shut down if a woman even moved a hand they would put a blue light on the stage which would soften the edges of the girls thus allowing a small amount of movement to allow for the cold. This light was later to be taken up by the film industry in the term "Blue Movie" used to describe a nude film.

1954 also saw the first signs of the theatre in trouble. Falling numbers caused by the new medium of television and the lack of money for entertainment caused by the war years called for drastic measures. During the holidays the theatre hired a touring speaker van to publicise the week's events. This was not enough to bring the public back to the theatre. In December Mrs Patricia Byron- Thomson owner of the company announced that unless more people visited the venue it would be forced to close.

The actor Mr Monte Vane Tempest, who until recently had been appearing in Harry Hanson's Court Players, the resident repertory company at the theatre, died suddenly on the 29th of December 1954. He had become ill during the season and was taken into the Crewe Memorial hospital where his death was announced at the age of 62.



Monty Vane Tempest

Even with popular plays from the Harry Hanson Court players, 1955 didn't get any better and eventually the theatre was forced to close.

On the 21 July 1955 Patricia Byron-Thomson and the management of the theatre decided to shut down the shows at the end of the following week. With "A Bed for two" by Cederick Richards the curtain finally came down on the Crewe Theatre on the 30 July that year.

### **1955 The Council Takes Over.**

The Council moved in with "Beside the Seaside" by Leslie Sands on the 1st to the 6th of August 1955 fulfilling the Harry Hanson contract with the theatre by letting them continue to produce shows.

The Council's decision to invest in the theatre site would make good sense even if the venue failed as a going concern the property could be demolished to make way for a prime town centre shop. On the 3rd September 1955 the Council took over the lease of the building at a rental of £30 per week giving it a more permanent hold on the Heath Street site.

On the 5 November Harry Hanson took his "Players" out of the theatre after they were unable to come to an agreement with the Council as far as terms were concerned for a new season of plays.

Unable to keep the theatre going under their own direction the Council decided the best thing to do was to let someone else rent the theatre from them.

After many applications Mr Walter Armitage Owen a well-known writer and theatre owner took over the lease of the theatre in 1956. The theatre closed in April to be renovated by the Council and Mr Armitage Owen who re-opened the "New Theatre" as he called it with a performance by his Manchester Repertory Company of the play "While Parents Sleep" (by Anthony Kimmins) on the 25 - 29 September 1956.

The opening ceremony on the first night of this new season was conducted by the well-known entertainer Jack Train the man who "was" Colonel Chinstrap in the Second World War radio programme ITMA. During his visit to the town of Crewe, Jack was also asked to sign the visitor's book at the Town Hall.





Jack Train Signing Visitors Book

The new owner appointed Mr Earnest Walter-Palfreyman as manager of the theatre. This 42 year old, man had previously been in charge of the Queen's Theatre, Rhyl and the Palace Theatre, Mansfield. His term of office was full of problems including the pantomime season, during which the lady who was playing the part of Dandini in "Cinderella" pulled out due to personal reasons. At a days notice Yvonne Nevitt took her part. As mentioned earlier she had appeared at the theatre as a dancer and was at the time working with her dance troop "The Yvonne School of Dancing". Yvonne had been asked to take on the part of Dandini when the show was first cast, but declined the invitation due to her commitment to the dance troupe that were on stage in the Pantomime. The production went on stage with another actress taking the role on the 24th of December. Things were going well until the final night of the first weeks run on the 29 December when the actress playing Dandini decided to leave the company. With New Year's Eve falling between the end of the first week and the start of the second week of the show, it was not until the Monday morning that Yvonne was asked to take over the part. The matinee performance was at 2pm on the same day, giving this young 19 year old only a few hours to learn the lines. Luckily she had been at rehearsals and knew the moves, ad-libbing her way through the first performance getting more and more confident as the days went on.

January 1957 saw another staff change with Mr J.H. Walker taking over as manager.

The biggest show in the history of the theatre started on Monday morning the 6 May. By the 11th of May at 11 pm Mr Sandy Strickland had played the piano non-stop for a total of 133 hours as he tried to break the world non-stop piano playing record. The public had been admitted throughout the whole performance starting with just a small amount in the audience but as interest grew more and more visited the player until on the Saturday night some 20,000 people had been to see his attempt to beat the World Record. By the end of the week the theatre was unfortunately unable to admit all those who wanted to see the end of the attempt, as there wasn't enough room inside. Pictures at the time showed a mass of people outside the theatre all trying to see the final few minutes of the performance, many of which had to be turned away.

Not even Mr Strickland's attempt could save the theatre from its future. With falling receipts the theatre was forced to close on the 6 July 1957.

On the 3rd of August 1957 Mr Armitage Owen re opened the theatre with Wrestling. He continued to use this form of entertainment to keep money coming into the "New Theatre".

The 5 October 1957 saw a return of a repertory company to the theatre with the London Players performing various plays. This company included the young John Inman who not only designed the sets but also performed in many productions giving the reviewer at the Crewe Chronicle many things to commend. "Thanks are due to John Inman who designs the excellent sets for this type of middle class plays the company is giving us at present. He has an interesting way with colour experiments and neither over-dresses nor underdressed his stage. His drawing rooms are artistic without being "Arty". This week he steps in front of the footlights to play the part of Hugo Birch. A fine actor, he never for a moment forgot the handicap of time on his limbs and his senses (28 Oct - 2 Nov 1957 Spiders Web)".



**John Inman on his return to the theatre**

The London Players were unable to attract the public back to the Crewe theatre despite very good reviews. At the end of the pantomime "Snow White" on the 4 January 1958, Mr Armitage Owen closed the theatre. He asked the Council to release him early from his contract as he was losing money hand over fist.

On the 10th of March 1958 the Folk Theatre under the management of Bob Mitchell took over the lease putting on productions with its own repertory company. Among its cast was 21-year-old Glenda

Jackson who at the time didn't seem to show any of the Oscar winning performances she is known for. She did however find a future husband in the shape of fellow actor Roy Hodges. After sharing a flat together above a pub in Crewe they married on the 2 August 1958.

1958 saw the introduction of Hot pot suppers and coffee mornings. This idea was to try and bring back the public within the walls of the theatre hoping they would then return to see the shows being performed on stage.

As 1959 approached the theatre was still losing money and closed in March. On the 6 June Bob Mitchell had vacated the building and apart from a one off performance of "Aladdin" by the Yvonne School of Dancing on the 19- 24 December 1959, the theatre was in darkness.

The Council again took over the building and re instated Mr Cyril Tew to run the venue as manager of the newly formed Crewe Theatre Ltd in 1960.

Under the title of the "New Theatre, Crewe" the theatre opened with a Gang show followed by a variety show that should have starred the Kay sisters. Unfortunately Shan Kay was rushed to hospital the Sunday before the performance with acute appendicitis. Was this a taste of the luck that was to come? With a mixture of different variety shows with both popular artists and newcomers like Frankie Howard who on the 13- 18 March 1961 joined Archie Andrews to "Educate" the management and Patrons of the theatre. This new look didn't see any improvement in the theatre's patronage, nor did a change in management to Mr Tony Lester. The theatre was again forced to close on the 6 May 1961.

In August 1961 John Gordon took over the lease and turned it into a Bingo Hall with occasional variety shows including Gene Vincent on the 16 November 1961.

On the 26 of March 1962 The Crewe County Grammar School Old Students Association Amateur Operatic Society performed their annual production at the theatre. This year the production was "The New Moon".

By May 1962 Mr Gordon had decided to leave the theatre. In an article in the newspaper it stated that the "New Moon" production that had taken over the theatre for a week had allowed the usual Bingo players to try other venues in the area. Once they had left they never returned. With his contract still having a few months to run he kept putting on bingo and variety shows until the 14 July when he held his last bingo night.

Apart from a Talent contest with "Emile Ford and the Checkmates" and the local societies productions, the only events at the theatre were a broadcast by the BBC Northern Orchestra and a talk by gardening expert Percy Thrower.

By 1964 the theatre was again under the ownership of the Borough Council who were about to start the next phase of running the building, the formation of "The Crewe Theatre Trust Ltd" under the Chairmanship of Councillor James Golding. This trust was part run by the Council and part run by local interested individuals who would oversee the running of the theatre. On the 6 August the Trust was officially launched and among the appointments made was that of a Theatre Director to run the shows. On the 23 of November Mr Julian Oldfield was appointed to the post of Artistic Director and started work at what was now called the "Crewe Civic Theatre". Among the new measures he brought in was the introduction of a new "Young Playgoers Club" and "Adult Playgoers Club". He also introduced "Theatre courses for teenagers" as he wanted to encourage new members of the public to see the shows that were being put on at the time.

1965 saw the formation of the Crewe Repertory Company and a return to the theatre of plays as well as variety shows. One of the variety acts on the stage included a return visit from Gene Vincent on the 6th of April 1965.

The theatre announced in April that "Coronation Street" writer John Pennington had been approached to write a play about Crewe life. This would then be performed by the Repertory company on the stage of the Crewe Theatre. By the 24 July 1965 the play had been finished and was ready for Mr Julian Oldfield to discuss the performance dates for the production. It was never performed.

1965 saw audiences again at a low point and if it hadn't been for a stray black and white dog that appeared in the auditorium of the theatre during a concert by Screaming Lord Sutch (20 April 1965) the audience attending the performance would have been only 94 people. The stray was removed at the interval by theatre staff who presented the dog to repertory cast member Jeremy Goodwin who would look after the animal until its owner could be found.

1966 didn't look any better. The Repertory season was cut short due to a "Lack of interest" and even the introduction of a caravan in the square selling tickets didn't improve the situation by much. By October the audience had risen by only 10 %.

On the 1- 5 November 1966 the theatre presented the Repertory premier of the play "The Savage Parade" by Anthony Shaffer. A London television company had seen the production and showed an interest in filming the play, but again nothing came of this.

If the theatre had been able to see into the future it would not have gone down the path that it took. Julian Oldfield even appeared on "Late night Line" a BBC TV programme discussing the difficulties of attracting an audience.


The 1967 repertory company was about to get an actor that would go on to better things including the film "Raiders of the Lost Ark". Paul Freeman (The villain in Raiders of the Lost Ark) appeared in the production of "The Merchant of Venice" as "Shylock" (14- 18 Feb 1967) while the actor Peter John was given top billing during the season with various plays being billed as Peter John in.....

1967 also saw the world premier of "Taken down with evidence" by James J. Carey. It had originally been booked for the 3- 7 October but was replaced at short notice by the play "Boeing- Boeing" possibly because it was not quite ready. The play was re arranged for the 28 November to the 2 December 1967 once the production was ready for performance.

The introduction of a "Meet the cast" day did nothing to improve audiences but was a hit with those who attended. This event involved the audience staying behind after the show to discuss the production with the producer and members of the cast. In the 1990's this was again re introduced as part of a Theatre Club events list. Michael V Gazzo held the first of these evenings on the 17 October 1967 after the first night of "A Hatful of Rain" a play about the effects of taking drugs.

When 1968 arrived it saw more changes to the theatre starting in March when Julian Oldfield left to run a new theatre in Chester, called "The Gateway". His place as Artistic Director was taken by Ted Craig who was at the time the Associate director of Crewe Theatre. Ted also took over as manager until August 1968 when Michael Quine was appointed to the post.

On the 26 May 1968 the Theatre Trust held a "Friendly Festival" to raise funds to decorate the dressing rooms. The show included local pop group "The Scorpions" and 14 year old Kathy Jones from Crewe, who had appeared in various television talent shows and in 1974 she joined the regular cast of "Coronation Street" as Tricia Hopkins the daughter of Vera Hopkins played by Kathy Staff.

With the appointment of new manager Michael Quine on the 1st of August, he decided to introduce a new look to the publicity. This included the introduction of the  (Crewe Theatre) logo, first used to publicise the opera "Tom Jones" (14- 21 Sept 1968).

In the 1968/ 69 season Richard Beckinsale and Judy Loe joined the theatre's repertory company. Richard and Judy met for the first time while working on this seasons productions and started to form a relationship after spending their first scene in bed for the production "All in Good Time" (22- 26 Oct 1966). Although Richard was already married to Margaret with a one-year-old daughter Samantha (Later to star in "London's Burning") this relationship was at an end. While at Crewe, Richard and Judy became the best of friends and after leaving Crewe they married after his divorce from Margaret. In 1973 they had a child Kate who again became an actress starring in 1997 as "Emma" on ITV. Also in that Seasons Company was an Australian actress called Judy Nunn who went on to star in the Australian soap "Home and Away" as Ailsa Stewart.



**Richard Beckinsale and Judy Lowe**

Another premier production for the theatre happened on the 3- 8 February 1969 when the Crewe Repertory company presented the first British performance of "The Ham Funeral" by Patrick White with both Richard Beckinsale and Judy Loe in the cast.

Crewe's Repertory Company were becoming quite friendly, as mentioned above two members of the cast were later to go on and get married. On the 22 February 1969 two of this season's company did tie the knot. Valerie Georgeson and Alan Meadows were married by the theatre Chaplain the Reverend David Johnson of Christchurch.

On the 25 - 29 February 1969 the theatre presented a show written by Margaret Ollernshaw a member of this year's repertory company, called "The Railway Borough" it was about life in the town of Crewe. By May 1969 the Theatre Trust had applied to the Council to lease buildings next to the theatre allowing them space to open an office and rehearsal room.

By the start of the next season Linda Bellingham had joined the company promoting herself at every opportunity including jumping for joy in the town centre for the newspapers. It also saw a change to the facilities within the building. A new bar and catering area were installed as well as an intercom system to the dressing rooms, which had also been decorated.

On the 28 January 1970 the space next to the foyer of the theatre was turned into another performance area, "The Brook Studio" named after Alan Brook a long serving member of the Crewe Council who was interested in the theatre. This space would supply various free shows for the public and concerts by local artists. The first of these events was a play called "The Signal man's Apprentice" by Brian Phelan. The "Studio" proved so popular that the initial weeks run of the show was extended to two weeks until the 7 February 1970.



Brook studio

By the end of the 1969 / 70 season (30 April) Michael Quine (Theatre manager) had left the theatre to take up a job as the general manager of the Dundee Repertory Company.

By August 1970 Mr Sidney Fisher became the new theatre manager. Back in October 1969 Mr Fisher, a former teacher, had been the carpenter at Crewe Theatre. Since then he had been to the Adeline Genee Theatre in East Grinstead, progressing up the ladder to management level.

Ted Craig (Artistic Director) started putting on extra shows using the Crewe Repertory Company at outside venues. The first show outside Crewe at the Town Hall in Sandbach was as a fundraiser for the "Sandbach Players" a local amateur dramatics society. This production on the 9 November 1970 was "The Promise" by Aleksel Arbuzov and was to be performed later at the Brook Studio theatre in Crewe on the 11- 21 November 1970.

By February 1971 Ted Craig had decided to leave the theatre as Artistic director. He went to the Connaught Theatre, Worthing where he again met up with Judy Nunn (Australian Actress) in their repertory company. His place as artistic director was taken by Mr Philip Anthony an actor who had appeared in "The Avengers" television programme.

The financial problems at the theatre were rearing their head again with the management asking the local Council for a larger grant than last year. Alderman Harold Shaw said that the ratepayers of Crewe didn't need the theatre as it was being subsidised at a rate of about £600 a week.

Another change of management occurred in August when Mr Michael Donald took over as theatre manager with yet another change in that position in 1972 as David Edwards took over.

The year also saw the first "star name" to headline the pantomime. Although various touring pantomimes had appeared with "Named artists" this was the first time Crewe theatre had a star of Television, Radio and Films in its own production. The star was Danny Ross an actor who is best remembered for the role of Alfie Hall in "The Clitheroe Kid" on BBC Radio. At the end of October Danny appeared at the theatre for the press call and was featured talking about the pantomime in December, a show that was very entertaining and also turned out to be eventful. During the pantomime things didn't go smoothly on the 19th of December, the opening matinee of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" as part of the scenery fell onto the stage nearly hitting young members of the Yvonne school of dancing. The pantomime was a great financial success and the following year Danny Ross returned again to headline the show, this time with "Cinderella".

By March of 1973 Philip Anthony had decided to leave the theatre as artistic director with Charles Savage taking over the position. Charles also brought with him his wife Carmen Du Sautoy who joined the repertory company. In 1974 Carmen was in the James Bond film "The Man with the Golden Gun" as Saida a belly dancer from whose belly button 007 gets a squashed golden bullet. She was also to star in a Granada Television programme called "Lost Empires" which was filmed at the Lyceum, Crewe in 1985.



Carmen Du Sautoy © Crewe Chronicle

By the end of the first season of repertory in March 1973 the theatre had enough finance to do some improvements to the building. The refurbishment included new carpets in the auditorium and brass chandeliers (with amber bowls). The box office which was run at the time by Mrs Eve Moore was also moved to the far end of the foyer, and allowed the ticket buying public to queue in a longer line before they went out into the street.

On the 23 October 1973 the theatre became one of only five venues in the North to present the National Theatre in "Measure to Measure" by William Shakespeare. Jonathan Miller the star of "Beyond the fringe" produced the production.

The repertory season didn't escape drama itself as during the run of "Jane Eyre" the actress Phillipa Howell was taken to hospital with an appendix attack. While the actress Eirene Beck had even worse luck as while she was in the production "A Taste of Honey" she became ill with a cold and had to be replaced. Once she had recovered from this and was back in work for the production of "Victorian Music hall" she was then involved in a car accident and spent the week in hospital.

1974 saw the first theft reported to the local newspapers. The coffin that Count Dracula sleeps in during the production of "Count Dracula" (22 Jan - 2 Feb 1974) was stolen from outside the stage door of the theatre. No, this was not a new dressing room for the cast made as part of the improvements to the building but a prop for the production adapted by Ted Tiller from the Bram Stoker novel. The coffin was later found propped up near the Cemetery in Crewe.



Dracula in Rehearsal © Crewe Chronicle

1974 saw yet another world premier in the shape of "A Comedy of Good Intentions" by Arnold Rattenbury (19- 23 Feb 1974). It also saw the first joint venture of the theatre with the "Gateway theatre" in Chester. The production of "Billy Liar" (29 Oct - 9 Nov 1974) was directed by Julian Oldfield who in 1964 had been the manager at Crewe Theatre before moving to the same position within the "Gatehouse". The production included members of both repertory companies and technicians from each theatre.

The building was now 63 years old and was showing its age. Mr David Edwards General Manager of Crewe Theatre along with the Crewe Chronicle launched a new appeal to raise funds to replace the seats in the auditorium. The £30,000 appeal was launched on the 31 October and by the end of the evening it had raised £1,000.

The start of 1975 saw a price increase in the repertory season's plays with tickets ranging from 45p to 70p with 15p for the old aged.

The theatre still seemed to be having problems with money. One way of getting back some of the costs of the pantomime and plays in the season was to open up other departments in the theatre. These included the Wardrobe department where members of the public and local dramatic societies could hire the costumes for parties or productions. Nichola Hughes was put in charge of the department with one of her first tasks being to design and make costumes for a new production "Bride of Dracula". The success after they had retrieved the missing coffin of "Count Dracula" last year, prompted the actor who had played the title role, Charles Mc Keown to write a sequel and this was premiered on the 4 - 14 February 1975 with Liz Norman as Countess Dracula.

February was also a month of possible changes in theatre personnel. In mid February the main technicians appeared before the local court on drugs charges. Props, Stage Manager, Assistant Stage Manager, Deputy Stage Manager and the Lighting technician were all fined £25 for smoking cannabis in their flats in the Crewe area between the 1st October 1974 and the 9 January 1975. By November all but two of the above stage technicians were not mentioned in the programme.

During March 1975 money from the theatre fund was being spent making even more improvements to the building. This presented the company with a problem where to perform the plays while the stage was closed. One solution was to go into the community. The first of these was a production at the Nantwich Civic Hall of "Treasure Island". The success of this led in August to the formation of the "Crewe Theatre Project" led by Peter Cooper who would put Crewe theatre productions into Market Drayton, Oswastry, Keele, and Chester with plays like "Slag" by David Hare.

Unfortunately the success of this was not seen by theatre manager David Edwards who in July left to follow in the footsteps of Julian Oldfield, to become theatre manager of the Gateway Theatre in



Chester. His place was taken by Jon Nicholls a 27 year old who for the last six years had been working in Australia.

1975 saw the council taking a more active role in the theatre with the appointment of a Borough Entertainment's Manager. The job was given to Keith Noble who at the time was running the Nantwich Civic Hall. His job was to fund big named shows and entertainment that he, on behalf of the Council would put into either the Civic Hall or as in the case of Harry Secombe, at Crewe Theatre.

By August 1975 the new repertory company was announced. It included two stars of the future, Lindsay Duncan (G.B.H and A Year in Provence.) and the Duke of Norfolk's daughter, Marsha Fitzalan (The New Statesman).

The year was rounded off by yet another resignation that of artistic director Charles Savage, whose place was taken in January 1976 by David Sumner.

By July David had discovered that the previous management had unfortunately decided that they no longer needed any memories of previous productions. To this end they had thrown out all the old posters, programmes, photographs and anything else connected with the theatre's past.

By a stroke of luck theatre technician Adrian Redmond discovered some old posters among the rubbish he and other technicians were throwing out during a clear out in the building. They were discovered 70 feet above the stage and included one that advertised an artist "Making a woman disappear before your eyes".

Sometime in 1976 Keith Noble (Council Entertainment's Manager) took over as the manager of the theatre. His contract was only for three months to help the Council find a new permanent manager after the resignation of Jon Nicholls. However he stayed with the theatre until August 1979.

1977 saw the return of the variety "Talent show" with two "Hail Variety" productions organised by the local Cheshire Junior Chamber of Commerce. The first was on stage on the 27 March 1977 and the following and last show organised by the Chamber on the 7 May 1978. Both shows were hosted by Terry Broomhall and local shop owner John Flatley who ran the Organ Centre in Edleston Road. Guest comedian for the second show was theatre manager Keith Noble.

The Repertory company up and till now had been presenting the majority of shows performed at the theatre. Keith Noble decided to fill the rest of the schedule with guest stars and one night stands to compliment the repertory season. Celebrities and up and coming stars like Tom O Connor, Paul Daniels and Ken Dodd continued to draw the audiences but at the theatre management's AGM they announced a loss of £3,977 on the year even though they had taken £9,456 more than last year in grants and box office receipts.

## 1978 The Lyceum



Lyceum Theatre facade

A new marketing manager called Colin Jessop was brought in to look after the theatre in 1978. While assessing the future publicity of the theatre his first job was to change the name to "THE LYCEUM". On one occasion when he was walking past the theatre he happened to look up and see "Lyceum Theatre 1911". After enquiring why the name was not being used he decided to change the publicity from Crewe Theatre to the more general "Lyceum Theatre" to reflect the joining of Crewe and Nantwich Councils and the view that the theatre belonged to everyone not just those in Crewe. The new name for this building was used for the first time on the 6 July 1978 when the advert in the Chronicle advertised a Theatre Festival (27 Aug - 2 Sept 1978). This was put on to encourage the public back into the Lyceum. With celebrity concerts and the production "The Hollow Crown", performed by the Repertory company the festival also included a "Story time" for youngsters. The festival was a great success short term, however long term it was not as successful as the management would have liked. Audiences failed to increase for other shows at the Lyceum, putting doubts into the minds of the management about what the public wanted. Plans were drawn up to try and find out what the public thought of the theatre.

A survey was commissioned and the results were published; --

80 % of the public questioned knew nothing about the theatre and

15% considered the theatre to be better entertainment than the television.

With this information to hand the management could now look towards the future. They obviously needed to invest in publicity to change the 80% who knew nothing about the theatre into a new audience for the Lyceum. One suggestion was investment in the outside of the building making it more noticeable. By August 1978 the theatre had sent in plans for a new look to the inside and outside of the building including a revamp of the facade with a cover over the pathway to the entrance hall. The Council decided that there was not enough money or patrons to the theatre to make it worthwhile spending taxpayers cash on improvements to the building so the plans were dropped.

Snow hit the theatre's pantomime at the end of 1978 and January 1979 with performances having to be cancelled due to both audience and cast members being unable to get into the town for the production of "Aladdin". Snow drifts cut off the whole of Crewe and the North West area making the Lyceum take the decision to extend the run of the show until the 27 January so that those who had cancelled tickets could attend a later performance.

With no agreement for the revamp of the theatre and a change of manager to Mr Leslie Parker-Davies in August 1979 the theatre suffered another blow in October of that year when the theatre received the news that the Arts Council of Great Britain was looking at a National cutback in grants. They had decided to withdraw its help to a large number of local and national theatres by April of 1980, one of which was the Lyceum.

Manpower Services and the theatre had joined together in November 1978 to form a new company called "Rolling Stock", they were to perform and write local plays for the community. During 1979 they compiled stories and personalities for a production called "Crewe Cuttings" which they premiered on the 9 October 1979 at Crewe library before taking it on tour to Alsager, Winsford and Chester. By November 1979 David Sumner decided that someone else should have a go at being artistic director and resigned. He stayed with the company until a replacement had been appointed. This turned out to be his number two Jack Carr who held the position on a temporary contract.

1980 saw the start of the end for the Crewe Repertory Company, as the theatre could not afford to keep employing the actors, build the sets and put on the productions. With this financial constraint more and more companies were being brought in to perform at the theatre. Many of these productions included well-known names among there cast these included Deborah Watling (Same time next Year - 17- 22 Mar 1980), and Richard Todd (This Happy Breed - 28 April- 3 May 1980).

David Sumner's replacement appeared in July 1980 in the shape of New Zealand born actor Roy Patrick.

Rumours in 1979 and 1980 about the withdrawal of the Arts Council grant came true in February 1981 when they announced that a number of grants were being withheld at the end of the financial year. This included the Lyceum Theatre. Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council decided to donate £60,000 to help in the short term with the finances of the theatre. In May the County Council also helped out with the shortfall by giving a further grant of £20,000.

Another theatre in the same trouble was the "Theatre Gwynedd" in Bangor. They benefited from the Lyceum who staged "Shut your eyes and think of England" a touring production by the repertory company which they performed to help the theatre through their difficulties.

With financial assistance Crewe theatre decided to install a new lighting board at a cost of £12,000 a new bar in the ground area, and started various renovations including the fixing of the "Sun Burner" in the roof of the auditorium, which had not worked for many years.

1982 started off badly with the Arts Council again turning down the grant application from the theatre. Things went from bad to worse with a national cutback in Council assistance by the Government leading to the decision by Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council to cut back the grant that they give to the theatre from £126,000 to £40,000 for the 1982-3 season.

To help with the costs of running the theatre it was decided to turn itself into a cinema as well as putting on plays. It started showing various films, the first of which was "The Song remains the same" starring the pop group Led Zeppelin. Other films included "Superman the movie", "Elephant Man" and "Confessions of a Window cleaner".

The management also decided to take one of its productions on tour. "Having a Ball" starring Susan Penhalligon and Peter Cleall started well, getting good revues but halfway through the tour it started to lose money due to various theatres being unable to fill all the seats. With this and the financial problems caused by the touring company the production was brought back to Crewe after one of the theatres on the tour cancelled its week's performances. The 9th of October saw the final night of the production "Having a ball" at the Lyceum. At the end of the evening with debts of £61,687 Mr James Golding Chairman of the Crewe Theatre Trust went on stage and announced the closure of the theatre. He also thanked everyone for their support.

This was not the end for the cast of "Having a ball" as they already had venues booked for the tour and the company decided to break away from the theatre and complete the contract themselves. Speaking to Susan Penhalligon in March 2000 she remembers nothing of the closure of the theatre or the problems with the tour. Susan also told me of one of those coincidences that happen. The Christmas before she returned to the Lyceum Theatre in the play "Murder in the Vicarage" (13- 18 Mar 2000) she met the director of the 1982 production, Roy Patrick. He told her that he still had some photographs of the original show "Having a ball" and asked if she would like them. The following night he turned up with a 4 foot cut out of Susan that they had used in the theatre to publicise the show.

In December 1982 Mr Alan Brook the secretary of the Theatre Trust started a "Save the Theatre Fund". Unfortunately by the New Year Mr Brook had been killed in a road accident.

By February 1983 the Theatre Trust had been put into liquidation.

The Council still owned the Lyceum and allowed local groups to use the building while they decided on its future.

In July 1983 Mr Barrie Stacey a London theatre owner agreed to take over and moved in. He put on a mixture of plays, films and one night shows. By August the theatre again started to become involved with the community when they held open auditions for the pantomime or Christmas production "The Wizard of Oz" and a musical, "The Sound of Music". Under the direction of Alexander Bridge auditions were held at the theatre on the 24th of August where members of the cast were picked for both productions. The pantomime starred "Yana" as Glenda the good fairy. Yana was well known in the theatrical world. She had appeared in Tommy Steele's first pantomime in 1958, "Cinderella" at the Coliseum theatre in London's West End.

The community involvement of the theatre continued in October 1983 with the start of the "Lyceum Theatre Children's Workshop". These were under the direction of choreographer Mr Norman Walters and took place between 11am and 1 pm every Saturday until the 5th of December.

On the 6th of November 1983 the theatre started a 'Keep fit' class. These were held every second Sunday between 3pm and 5pm.

December 1983 saw the introduction of a "Lyceum Theatre Christmas Token". For the theatre patron this Christmas present idea entitled the recipient to book six shows for a £12 token or three shows for a £6 token. Looking back on this offer I am not sure if the occasional visitor to the theatre would have got his money's worth out of the voucher as by July 1984 Barry Stacey had sold the lease to Mr Stephen Wischhusen of the Garrick House Theatre Company, thus ending another chapter of the theatre's history.

Before we close this chapter let's look at a few of the events that happened during this final few months. On Boxing Day 1983 two Canadian Honey bears escaped or were let out of their cages just outside the theatre. Rita and Daley were being used for the "Wizard of Oz" production and were on loan from Gandy's Circus. They were later found in the area, Rita stayed in her cage while Daley went in search of his favourite food Polo mints and was discovered on one of the Market stalls munching away. Mr Graham Tottle their trainer said that the public were in no danger, presumably unless they refused to give Daley their last Polo.

In January 1984 television and TV Times Astrologer Russell Grant made an appearance at the theatre to sign his new book "Your Year ahead 1984". This could explain why Barry Stacey sold the theatre if he had been told what was to come. However with sell out concerts by Showaddywaddy and Syd Lawrence this was unlikely. Things were looking better. The Lyceum Theatre Club was again becoming popular and on the 12th of March the theatre Wardrobe department opened to the public enabling them to hire costumes for fancy dress or theatre productions.

Mr Stacey also launched the "Lyceum Times" a free newspaper telling the public about forthcoming productions and included interviews with cast and crew from the theatre.



Issue 1. / Issue 2. (© Lyceum Theatre)

In April Don MacLean (Comedian - Crackerjack), Edmund Hockridge (Singer) and Russell Grant took part in a variety Gala in aid of the Lyceum Restoration Fund. In June the production of "The Sound of Music" took place with local singers actors and stage crew specially formed for this production.

By June however Barry Stacey found himself in trouble and threatened to close the theatre. He had asked the Council for a bridging loan and had been turned down.

In July Mr Stacey announced he had lost £15,000 in the last 8 months and informed the Council that he had handed over the lease of the theatre to Garrick house, part of the Nell Gwynne Theatre Company based in Hereford. This was not a good move as at the same time the Nell Gwynne Company went into liquidation owing £100,000 in debts. Mr Wischhusen manager of the theatre pointed out that this didn't affect the position of Crewe's Lyceum. However "Run for Your Wife", "Jesus Christ Superstar", "Night must Fall", "Syd Lawrence and his Orchestra", and "Jess Conrad and the Roly Poly's" were all cancelled between August and November 1984.

1985 was a much better year, which started with Granada television using the theatre for its forthcoming production "Lost Empires". The Lyceum Theatre took the part of the "Palace of Varieties" in the South Lancashire town of Burrington. On stage were Uncle Nick and his nephew Richard Herncastle played by John Castle and in an early television appearance, Colin Firth. The scenes filmed were of Magician Ganga Dun's (Uncle Nick) act and scenes in the auditorium while an investigation took place following the murder of an acrobat backstage. Also appearing at Crewe for the production were Alfred Marks and Pamela Stephenson as Lily Farris and her manager Otto Mergen. The production scenes at Crewe of J.B. Priesley's book were shown on ITV on the 28th November 1986 as episode 6 of a seven-week series. Also in the cast at Crewe was James Cosmo as the Inspector. Making an appearance in other episodes were Carmen Du Sautoy as Julie Blane the "French maid" or straight person to Tommy Beamish a rude comedian, played by Brian Glover. The cast of the production included Sir Lawrence Olivier in what was to be his last television appearance. Dispute it being the last appearance of Sir Lawrence Olivier the programme has never been repeated outside the Granada Television area.

### **1987 (150 years of railways in Crewe)**

Celebrations of 150 years of railways in Crewe and 76 years of the rebuilt theatre didn't change the fortunes of the Lyceum. A feature on "Down your way" with Brian Johnston and a recording of Ken Dodd's new radio series "Palace of Laughter" kept the theatre in the media but the Lyceum increasingly turned towards films to fill its schedule.

On the 4th of July the theatre staged "Born of Steam" a gala concert in celebration of the history of Crewe. However even this production had its problems with members of the public complaining that all the best seats had been given free to sponsors of the event and VIP's before the box office had been opened.

1990 saw the first threat to the theatre in many years. The Apollo cinema chain re opened the "Majestic" cinema in High Street, Crewe which had until recently been the "Surewin Bingo Hall". By turning the building into a three-screen multiplex it threatened the dominating season of films at the Lyceum. Mr Wischhusen applied to the Council for a grant to help overcome the threat only to be turned down.

By October 1990 the Council were in secret talks with "Century Theatre Ltd" that were looking for a new home after plans to develop a new 500 seat theatre in the Lake District had collapsed. The Century Theatre Company was based in Keswick at the Blue Box Theatre in the Lakeside, Cumbria. Originally built as a mobile theatre in 1952 it was constructed on its present site in 1974 where it has stayed ever since. With a seating capacity of 225 it still provides successful repertory seasons for the locals and visitors to the district. With its companies success it was decided to have a touring arm for the theatre. Supported by the Arts Council they formed the Century Theatre Company and looked for a venue to base operations. With an offer they couldn't refuse they decided that Crewe would be ideal as it had its own theatre and was at the junction of both rail and motorway networks going north and south.

As talks with Century Theatre had not included Garrick House or Steve Wischhusen he felt annoyed at the proposals to let the Century Theatre Company have a purpose built set of offices next to the theatre and for the company to premier their productions at the Lyceum before they took them on tour.

By November "Garrick House" announced that it had decided to leave Crewe at the end of January 1991. Their parting gesture was to lodge a complaint with the local government ombudsman charging the Crewe Council with trying to force them out of the theatre in favour of installing "Century Theatre" in the building making them managers of the Lyceum. The Council however denied the allegations stating that Century would not be running the theatre but as a separate organisation who would only use the Lyceum for productions and not as managers of the building. By July the Ombudsman decided not to pursue the matter.

### **1991 The Council run the theatre.**

With the departure of Garrick House the Council's Leisure and Services department took over the running of the theatre. They appointed Cliff Stansfield from Shavington Leisure Centre to run the Lyceum on a temporary basis so that they could assess the potential of the theatre or until another company could be found to run the building. With growing audiences the decision was taken to continue running the theatre on a permanent basis.

The Council appointed the company "Levitt Bernstein Associates" to look into the future of the theatre. Their recommendation was to spend £3.1 million to renovate the building possibly closing for a year to carry out the alterations and improvements.

By July Century Theatre were inspecting the site where their new offices were being built ready for the company to have a permanent home in Crewe. In September 1991 they produced their first production "The Importance of Being Earnest" in the Lyceum, moving into the offices and rehearsal rooms next to the theatre in May 1992 after being housed in other premises within the borough while they prepared for this first show.

Following on from recommendations by "Levitt Bernstein Associates" a plan of action was drawn up by Mike Houlston (Deputy Chief Executive), who presented it to the Council on the 31 October 1991. The plans included a two-phase facelift for the theatre. Phase one was a £125,500 improvement to the interior of the auditorium, £50,000 to re decorate, £30,000 for new sound and lighting equipment. £20,000 on the back stage and dressing rooms, with £75,000 being spent on 200 new seats for the gallery. Phase two would include £50,000 on improving the outside of the theatre and £350,000 to improve the front of house facilities as well as constructing a new gallery access above the building rather than from the street as has happened since it was constructed in 1911.

December 1991 saw the end of an era. With the Council running the theatre they were unable to put together their own pantomime and called in the professionals in the shape of Dave Lee and Pantoni Productions who decided to use their own dancers and hire individual cast members rather than use the Yvonne School of Dancing. The Crewe based school had been involved with the pantomimes since the 1950's putting on productions even when the theatre was officially closed making sure that the public of Crewe could enjoy continuous Christmas shows at the Lyceum. This first Council run production starred Jack Wilde from the film version of "Oliver" as Muddles in the show "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs".



Snow White 1992 (Photo © Lyceum Theatre, Crewe)

The first phase of the renovations started in June 1992. The first job was to rip out the auditorium and see what was underneath. They discovered that it was made of concrete with old railway sleepers on which the seats were positioned. These had to be replaced as the seats had been moved so often that the wood was starting to break up. Another problem with the building were the Ghosts who according to the workmen kept an eye on their progress and even hindered the work by closing doors that had been wedged open. They solved this by putting up a notice apologising to the ghosts for the noise and inconvenience that the workmen were causing within the building.

The theatre re opened on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of September with two open days giving the public an opportunity to inspect the work.

The December pantomime starred Brenda Cowling (You rang M'Lord) and included Crewe's first Australian soap star Kate Gorman (not including Judy Nunn who became a star in the "Home and Away" Soap when she returned to Australia) in the cast of "Mother Goose", Kate had appeared in the popular Australian Soap "Neighbours" as Sue Parker, in the Pantomime she played the part of Jack.

September 1993 saw another change this time with the "Century Theatre Company" and not the Lyceum. They decided to change their name to English Touring theatre and opened with "Hamlet" by William Shakespeare. They included two stars in the production Eleanor Bron and Alan Cummings.

Alan won the best actor award for his performance at the TMA Awards the following year, 1994.

In December the best bit of publicity was lost on the theatre as it closed in January 1994 for work to start on re developing the front of house area and cafe's. This was the surprise appearance of Michael Aspel on stage on the 11 December to say "Tonight ... Bob Carolgees.... This is your life". Cameras had



been set up around the stage with the story that they were doing a feature on pantomimes across the Country. Peggy Mount, Liza Goddard, Frederick Pyne and Lynette Mc Morrough were in on the surprise and during the final curtain call the surprise was sprung, not only for Bob Carolgees, but after a short interval the audience of the pantomime “Puss in Boots” were invited to stay for the recording of the show which took place on the stage of the theatre.

The television coverage was of little use to the Lyceum as in January the whole of the front of house, cafe, bar area and management offices along with the rest of Heath Street towards the Hill Street corner, were demolished to make way for a new extension. This new building will give access to the upper gallery area and more space for a bar on each level as well as a much better environment to meet before and after the productions. The enlarged area will also be used for small concerts and meetings.

On the 7 April 1994 the Council advertised for a new General Manager for the theatre. With this new look the Council had decided that they needed a more experienced theatre manager to run the Lyceum. Many people from theatre staff to members of the public were puzzled why the theatre needed anyone else except Cliff Stansfield who had put the theatre back on the map.

At £22,000 per annum Alan Lord was appointed to the post of General Manager after an interview on the 28th of April 1994 with Cliff Stansfield taking the role of Theatre Manager.

In May they launched a “Name a Seat” scheme followed by a sponsorship deal with local firms who had various parts of the new building named after them. The Manweb gallery, the Rolls Royce suite, the Wellcome Circle and the launch of the Wellcome card, which entitles the holder to get, discount on tickets were all introduced.

On the 13 November the theatre held another open day this time things were not quite ready from the rebuilding as the builders were still putting the finishing touches to the bars and other areas of the extension.

By the 20th of November everything was in place for a Gala evening with Jimmy Tarbuck hosting the entertainment. Other stars in the gala included Dame Hilda Bracket, Bob Carolgees, Lynette McMorrough, Peggy Mount and Wayne Sleep.



Poster 20 November 1994

By 1996 things were back to normal. The management were being put under pressure after the yearly audit showed that the theatre had a £140,000 shortfall on the expected return. The Council decided to cut the budget by £220,000 on last year's expenditure. When March came the losses on the theatre were nearing £500,000 on the season.

On the 17th of March Alan Lord resigned at a meeting between him and the Council. In a statement Alan stated that he had left because there was a “Clear conflict between his professional and artistic ambitions and the Council's need to control expenditure”. The first time the staff at the theatre knew what was going on was when Alan returned to the theatre, cleared his desk and left the building.

By June Cliff Stansfield was officially returned as manager of the theatre. The theatre instantly picked up with Ken Dodd using the building as part of a feature for a Granada Television programme called N.W.A. (North West Arts) all about his favourite theatres. Two months later he returned with a private show at which he recorded his performance for release on a video called “Live Laughter tour”. With the theatre putting on shows like “The Canterbury tales” selling to nearly full houses every night, the future looked bright for the Lyceum.

On the 12 November the theatre had its first Royal visit. This was from Princess Margaret who officially opened the new extension. While in the building she also met the cast of “Dracula or How's your blood Count” a comedy starring Leslie Grantham and Vicky Michelle.



Princess Margaret opens Theatre

1997 started with new ideas for giving value to the patron, a party rate, student discount stand by tickets, and the re launch of the Wellcome card calling it the “Lyceum Theatre Club” were offered to

boost sales of tickets. The theatre club now included special events and talks given by members of the various theatre companies. By October the Theatre club was officially launched with the first talk being given by Dennis Waterman on the 4th of November after the second night of "Killing Time" which also starred Glynis Barber.

September had seen the launch of what was to become a popular event at the theatre a "Lunch time concerts season" The first of these by the "Free Trade Winds" (Musicians from the Halle orchestra), followed closely on the heels of another launch that of "Artreach" a community project to display pictures by local artists on the walls of the new building. The first artist to be featured was Melanie Young whose exhibition was entitled "Telling tales". By 1998 the walls of the downstairs bar area were being filled with a "Community Gallery" another chance for local groups and organisations to show what they are doing.

January 1998 saw the results of the Christmas production "Peter Pan". It was one of the most successful shows in the Country averaging 95 % for every performance. During the four weeks of the show 31,000 people had seen it.

This run of good luck came to an abrupt end when in May 1998 with less than a week before it was due to go on stage "Bronte, the Musical" was cancelled. The Redgrave theatre that ran the show starring Ruth Madoc had gone into receivership and the plug had been pulled on the tour. This not only meant that the theatre had to return all the ticket money but it also lost out on the money it had paid to get the show as well as all the publicity it had done for the production.

By July the theatre was playing to an average of 440 seats out of 690 available for each performance.

The theatre was described by the London based Theatre Managers association as one of the healthiest in the Country. By September the theatre announced a loss of £300,000.

In April 1999 Christopher Wren, along with the management of the theatre, staged "Bugsy Malone" (7-10 Apr 1999). This was a children's production based on the Alan Parker film. It involved local musicians and cast in what was a critical success but not a financial one with the show only just breaking even.

The lunchtime concerts continued as well as artwork appearing in the gallery spaces in the extension. A healthy theatre club was growing and with wonderful productions playing to full houses it was amazing that the Council then took the step of transferring Cliff Stansfield, manager of the Lyceum to another department within Leisure services. He had since 1991 been the face of the theatre and although he would still have connections with the running of the Lyceum this would make way for Jane Ashcroft to take the theatre into the year 2000. On the 25 May 1999 Jane took up her appointment and Cliff cleared out his desk at the theatre for the last time.

The move by the Leisure services department of the Council did not meet with approval from members of the public or the theatre staff many of whom resigned in August to take up posts in Cardiff, "The New Vic" in Staffordshire and the new rival to the Lyceum, "The Regent" in Hanley. This was a converted cinema that was able to put on West End shows in the heart of Staffordshire, about fifteen minutes from the centre of Crewe. By September the Council were asking for an investigation into why Mr Stansfield had been moved and into the loss of the whole technical department of the theatre. The results were never published, but internally everything worked out for those concerned.

The shows continued to be a success partly due to the influence of Cliff Stansfield who continued to give advice and helped put together the shows. With more and more big names arriving at the theatre its future looked good, however not everything went smoothly.

A planned open day on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of September 2000 didn't attract many visitors due to a national petrol strike. The 2000-1 Pantomime also changed hands with Lee Dean productions pulling out of the bidding to stage the show due to personnel reasons. The Christmas pantomimes had been produced by Lee Dean since December 1993 (Dec '93- Jan '94 Season).

In December 1999 Christopher Wren (.b. 3 July 1947 .d. 12 Dec 1999) the producer of "Bugsy Malone" and the 1998-9 Christmas show "Dick Whittington", died after a short illness. His death left a gap in the theatre, not only for the Pantomime but also a planned follow up to "Bugsy Malone" had to be cancelled.

The 2000-1 pantomime "Aladdin" was staged by Charles Vance productions along with actor Hugo Myatt. In December 2001 Charles brought in Keith Harris and Orville to help raise the standard of production, putting Crewe back at the top of the pantomime tree with "Cinderella".



**2001-2 Pantomime with Orville, Ann Marie Davies and Keith Harris.**

During 2001 Cliff Stansfield took early retirement from the Leisure services department of the Council, paving the way for Jane Ashcroft to show what she could do for the public in Crewe.

The following seasons continue to prove that Crewe can attract the best touring companies in Britain with the theatre playing to full houses on many occasions.

### **A LACK OF INTEREST AND A NEW COUNCIL**

However a lack of interest from Jane Ashcroft and the movement of her and various members of staff to other departments in the area when Cheshire East took over the running of the theatre in 2009 meant that the shows being put into the theatre were not as good as they could have been and as profits were put in-front of quality the repertory season was changed from Charles Vance's Company to one that produced the worst plays in the theatres history having had a lack of rehearsals and a very low budget. These changes made it easier for those members of the Council who wanted to get rid of the theatre to propose putting up the theatre for an outside company to run it and this was put out to tender with HQ Theatres winning the competition, beating 58 inquiries and 3 formal bids (1 being HQ Theatres).

Based in Covent Garden they currently owned nine theatres including two in Southend on Sea and took over the Lyceum on the 2 January 2013 after the pantomime.

HQ Theatres and its pantomime arm QUDOS Entertainment a company who were to take over staging the yearly Pantomime bringing big names to the show.

HQ Theatres promised to bring big names to the theatre with West End productions like the "39 Steps" but in their first season none of this materialised and by 2014-5 the company had decided that instead of plays being staged for a week they would only put them on for a couple of days and would fill the rest of the season with one night stands.

Many of the productions also appeared at the Regent Theatre in Hanley and the Buxton Opera House, something previous owners would not allow as it was direct competition with the Lyceum taking away the Staffordshire and Derbyshire audiences from Crewe and so making it harder to fill seats.

Big names were booked by manager Alistair Armit with many of the new comedians coming to the town including Jack Dee and Paul Merton.

In November 2013 Alistair Armit had been replaced by Gordon Miller as the new Lyceum Theatre Director.

Gordon had been at the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse Theatres during the time the city was the European City of Culture but his background was in Civic Hall like venues and the Barbican Centre in London and the Frantic Assembly as well as being a programmer for the Ambassador Theatre Group which own the Regent Theatre in Hanley among others.

Looking back at over 120 years of productions I did feel more than most, a sense of belonging to the theatre and I have grown up over the years of research being able to experience the joy of starting the theatre, the disappointment at the loss of the building to the fire of 1910, feeling pity for the musicians and the company who lost everything to the flames; being able to rejoice in the rebuilding of one of the most beautiful theatres in the Country with its lovely mouldings round the circle and gallery areas and a proscenium arch that compliments all the shows performed within its space; a sunburner in the roof to keep it cool in the summer, one of only three working examples in the country. Then the sadness again at the loss of patrons and the closure of the theatre on many occasions; to the joy when the Council and Cliff Stansfield took over the theatre again and it was reborn into what I can only describe as my second home during that period.

Now with new owners there is a sense of loss as the theatre doesn't feel as though it belongs to the people of the area anymore and that shows are being staged for the occasional visitor to the Lyceum rather than the seasoned veteran who came to 50% of the shows and who felt a part of the building, with many friendships being forged between staff and patrons and groups coming together to meet each other informally at the theatre to enjoy a show, play or get together as part of the "Theatre Experience".

Some Councillors over the years, as the history has shown would rather close the doors on the theatre than pay out ratepayer's money to keep it going or subsidise outside companies to run it.

If you wanted proof the theatre is a necessary part of community life then all you have to do is talk to those who were in the Theatre club or the long serving front of house staff to realise that the Lyceum is not just a building; it has a magic of its own. The child who sees their first pantomime, the adult who is rushed to hospital with laughter pains after seeing a good comedy or spending the night in the theatre with Ken Dodd. The sadness as Romeo and Juliet both die on stage and the joy as they both get up and take their curtain call. All of this is worth every penny spent on the theatre.

Luckily with Grade 2 listed building status the theatre cannot be knocked down. It will survive in one form or another for I hope the next 120 years.

Today when you visit the theatre there is one sentence you will find appropriate to the theatre. It shows that the theatre is a place of entertainment with a sense of fun.

It is written in the proscenium arch, on the fire curtain at the bottom. From William Shakespeare's play "Hamlet", Act 4 - Scene 3.

**"For Thine Especial Safety"**

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