

Times Past

Spotlight on Chelmsford's first purpose-built theatre

IN EARLIER times companies of strolling theatre players journeyed to different towns where they performed in playhouses, assembly rooms, or in barns. Any theatre props needed in their productions were usually made by hired local craftsmen and artists. Sometimes players from the local drama groups were also taken on.

These theatre companies not only performed in front of public audiences but were invited to the large houses of local landowners where they would perform or advise on theatricals held there.

Thorndon Hall, home of the Petre family, was one such place and to this came the theatre company managed by Henry Thornton. An Essex man, born in the north of the county, Thornton had been a strolling player in his earlier years.

The circuit route travelled by his company stretched from its most easterly point at Chelmsford to as far west as Oxford. Plays written by Richard Sheridan, John Colman, Matthew Gregory Lewis and William Shakespeare were performed to full houses.

Thornton's Company was good enough to attract leading actors and actresses from the great London theatres such as Drury Lane to perform in the plays it put on.

In August 1790, after a successful two weeks of theatrical performances in a hired assembly room, Thornton announced his intention to build a permanent theatre in the town.

For one William Clachar - newspaper proprietor, printer, bookseller, insurance agent, auctioneer and property developer -

By Olivia Lee

it was an opportunity too good to miss. With available suitable land on which to build a theatre used for only a short period during each year by Thornton's company he could hire it out for concerts, lectures and meetings as well as use it for a profitable auction business.

Redevelopment venture

A Scot, Clachar had arrived in the town in 1763. Well-travelled and with a keen interest in the arts, and the theatre in particular, he and his contemporaries had begun buying land and old property along and to the north of the High Street - in New Street - and to the west, along Duke Street. Many of the Georgian buildings still standing are the result of this redevelopment venture.

For many years, up until 1795, Clachar was proprietor and printer of this newspaper, then called the Chelmsford Chronicle.

Its premises in the High Street were almost opposite The Old Black Boy inn which then stood at the corner of Springfield Lane.

Since the front end of the premises were not wide enough for his printing works an out-building had been put up to house these at the rear. Behind this was a wide area of land which led to the banks of the River Can. It was here, in what is the present day Marks and Spencer's service yard, that the town's first purpose-built theatre was opened in 1792 - in time for Henry Thornton's theatre company to stage its annual season of performances in the town.

Most playhouse buildings were wooden constructions, lit by candles and oil lamps that could be a potential fire hazard - many more years were to pass before lighting by gas came into use.

Clachar's theatre was built using bricks made in the local brickyards; 30ft (9.09 metres) wide by 66ft (20 metres) long it

was reached by a yard, re-named Theatre Yard, down past the bookselling premises.

The interior decorations were created by local artist, William Johnson, who went on to demonstrate his artistic skills as a much appreciated painter of theatre scenery.

Wet weather

Outside, and beyond, attractive gardens were set out by the river. On fine evenings, with lighting provided by lanterns hanging in the trees, patrons could enjoy dancing out of doors. A disadvantage of this setting was that when wet weather caused flooding the audience would stay away, although the play still went

ahead!

The theatre's opening season coincided not only with the Races held on Galleywood Common but also with an Assize Week and a Flower Feast held at the Shire Hall.

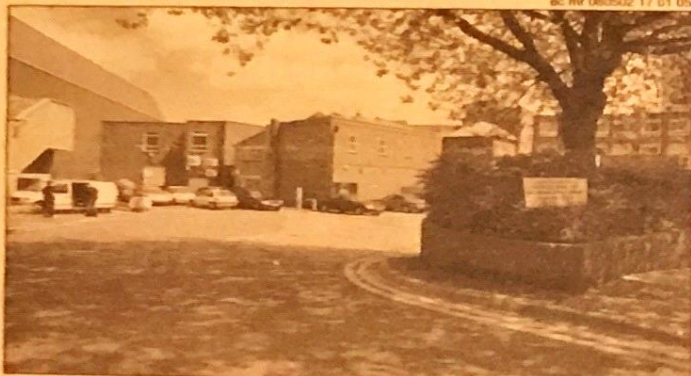
Its theatre patronage included members of the Petre family, businessmen, innkeepers, publicans and great numbers of service personnel barracked in and around the town. During the Races the theatre was open every evening, except Sunday, with additional matinee performances on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday - hard work for the performers and backstage hands!

Many of the Company's players established regular lodgings

in the town, including Henry Thornton himself.

In March 1816 he made his last return to Chelmsford to settle in retirement, leaving his son-in-law Robert Kelham and Edward Barnett to continue running the Company. When he died he was buried in the churchyard of St Mary's - now the Cathedral. With the passing of time his grave has become lost but somewhere in a quiet corner of the Cathedral grounds lie the remains of a now-forgotten Georgian theatre manager.

As for Clachar's Theatre, it remained in use for a number of years more until it was finally closed in 1837 and the building was demolished.



CLACHAR'S THEATRE: The town's first theatre was built on land in what is now Marks & Spencer's service yard next to the River Can.

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