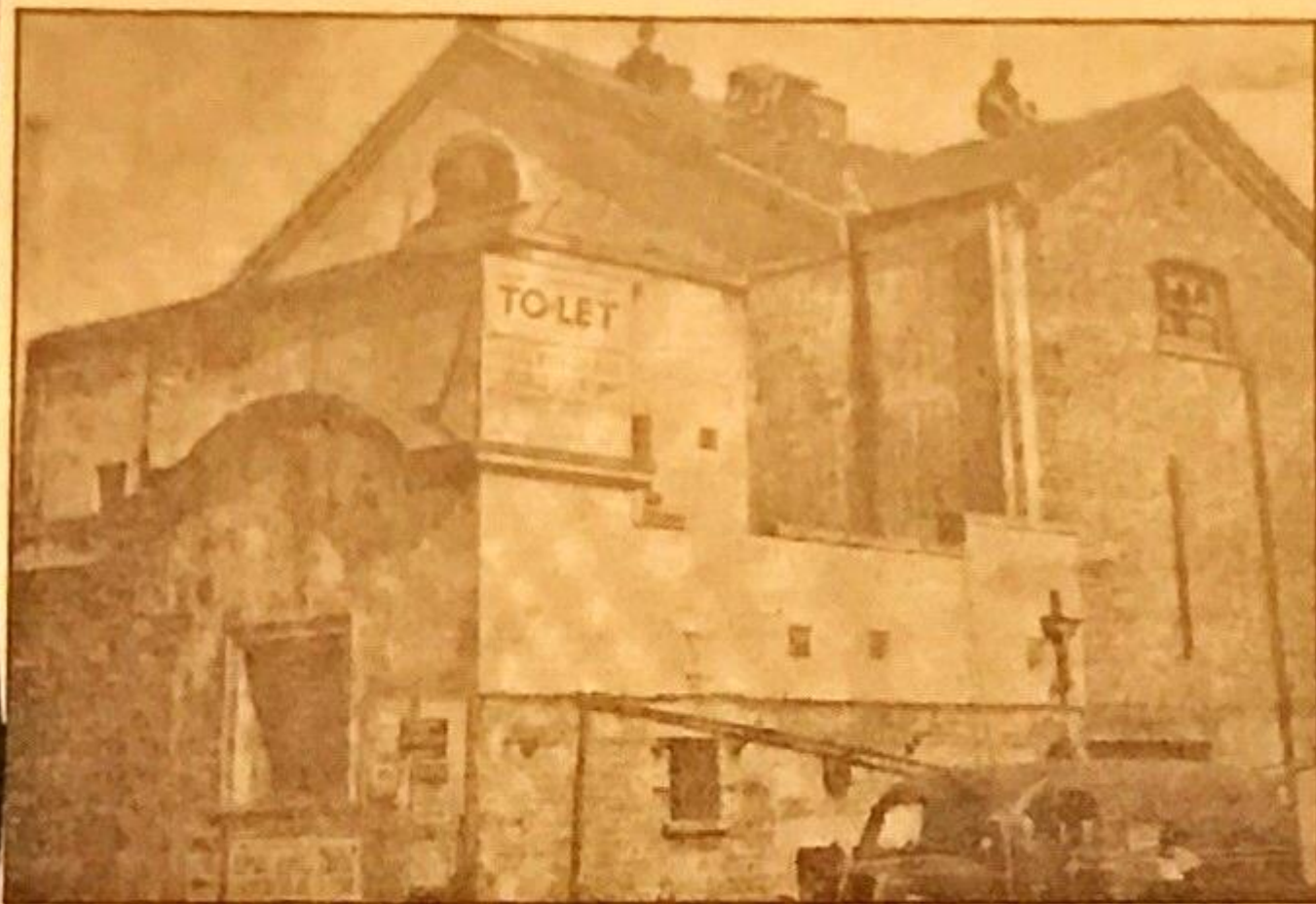


The changing face of theatre



GOODBYE: The old Empire Theatre in 1961 before being demolished

A PHOTOGRAPH of a forlorn looking Empire Theatre published by the Essex Chronicle in July 1961 has raised the curtain on the town's professional and amateur dramatic past.

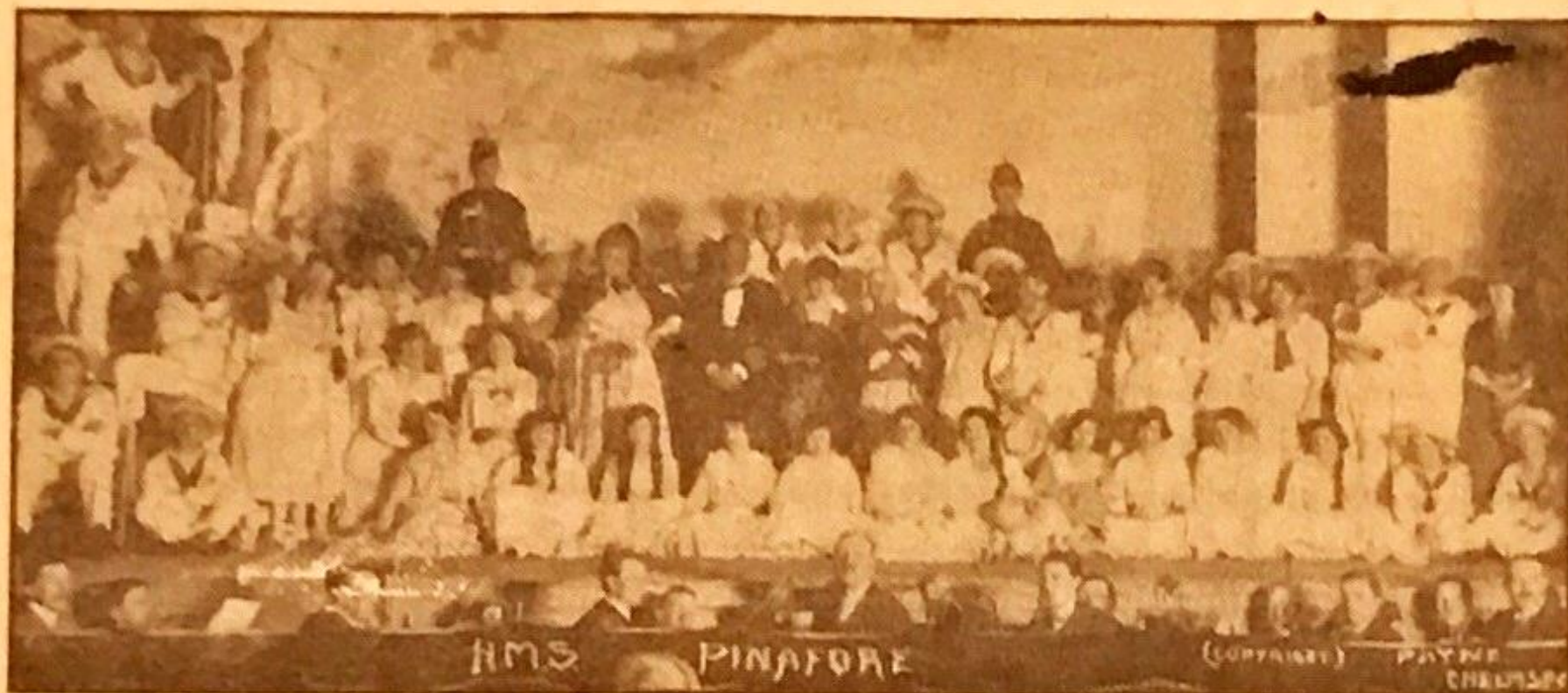
There were workmen on its roof demolishing the old music hall, moving our caption writer to lament the passing of yet another famous Chelmsford landmark.

It had hosted a variety of plays and musicals, including the first production of the newly formed Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society (CAODS).

By all accounts, HMS Pinafore, staged in April 1921, was a great success, receiving ecstatic reviews. The society went on to stage musicals annually.

Chelmsford was considered to be one of the most enthusiastic

and amateur dramatics shows



theatre-going towns in England.

Peter Smith, president of Chelmsford Young Generation, said: "It had its own theatre, on the site of Marks & Spencer.

"Nearby there were gardens leading down to the riverside which, lit by lamps, gave the appearance of a mini Vauxhall.

"It all sounds very elegant and civilised but, as often seems to be the case, the planners decided to improve the town.

"The theatre was demolished and New London Road was built."

The end of the century saw the advent of amateur theatre.

It soon grew in popularity and

before long Gilbert and Sullivan and other similar operas were being performed.

Chelmsford Theatre Association, founded in 1957, investigated premises for conversion, notably the Empire Theatre, which had been fire damaged.

Chelmsford council allowed an experimental season to open in September 1962 at its new Assembly Hall that blossomed into the Civic Theatre.

The Civic Theatre was the last of its kind in the country to present a fortnightly rep, ending in 2007 a much-loved British tradition of professional theatre.

There is also the lively Old Court theatre in Springfield Road, launched by the Chelmsford Theatre Workshop in 1969, run by members and volunteers.