

COMMUNITY PLAY RESEARCH (11)

THE REDGRAVE THEATRE

Arthur J Sullivan

“.....Why he visited Farnham is not known but his military links and possibly exploring the district in his early youth may provide a clue. His ‘Idyll’ was first performed publicly at the Redgrave Theatre in March 1978.” [See R8 Brightwells]

The 1960s: A new theatre is proposed – The Redgrave name causes problems

Source: *‘Exits and Entrances’* devised and compiled by Audrey Henderson

“Act II: *‘Not so much a ghost as an enduring spirit’* [This section was written as if by this spirit of theatre called ‘Rotca’ - ‘Actor’ spelling reversed]

“But once it was decided to build a new theatre there were as many schemes afoot to retain the Castle as there were to remove to the Redgrave. Rotca could hardly believe a founder member when she was on holiday in Austria shopping for presents and mentioned in passing that she was from Farnham, the Tyrolean assistant exclaimed: ‘ Ah, zat is the town with the famous little theatre’.....”

“Rotca deplored all the fuss over the name of the new theatre. Like most members of his profession he takes little part in politics and did not care if someone’s daughter did march about carrying banners and shouting polemic slogans. She was, he knew, a marvellous actress.....” [See R 1]

1974: (The Redgrave Brochure – The new building)

“Plans for a new home for the Castle Theatre started in June in 1967. Farnham Urban District Council provided Brightwell House, stables, outhouses and a small garden.....The house itself was not especially distinguished, but was a listed building.....When the final plans were agreed, Phase 1 ...was put in hand and consisted of strengthening the fabric of Brightwell House and re-roofing the main building....Phase 2: completion of the structural foundations, walls and roof of the auditorium, workshops, dressing rooms and foyer....Phase 3 to be completed to allow rehearsals to start in the new theatre and opening performance at the end of 1974.....The intimacy of the Castle Theatre has been retained....”

“Sir Michael Redgrave laid a ‘time capsule’ under the foundations.....”

1981: History of the Redgrave Theatre by Peter Bentley-Stephens, *Cavalcade* Programme

“The architect was Frank Rutter and the cost of the £260,000 was enthusiastically raised by the people of Farnham, and the theatre opened in May 1974 with Shakespeare’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’.

‘Exits and Entrances’ page 19

Princess Margaret is pictured arriving at the Redgrave for the First Night of the new theatre’s opening production ‘Romeo and Juliet’ with Mr. John Draper, chairman of the Theatre Trust.

Page 24 Princess Alexandra is pictured being presented with a bouquet at the Gala Night of ‘Cavalcade’ – a community production which had national recognition and was filmed for BBC TV.

1988: Hansard 7 March

53: Mrs. Virginia Bottomley

To ask the Minister for the Arts whether he plans to visit the Redgrave Theatre, Farnham

Mr. Luce

I enjoyed my visit to the Redgrave Theatre on 27 February, this year and I am very impressed by the way that theatre is run.

Mrs. Bottomley

My right hon. Friend's visit to the Farnham theatre was greatly appreciated. Is he aware that it is the most active repertory theatre in the country and was open 359 days last year and gave 419 performance? Is he aware that for the second time running it has won an award for new sponsors? What steps is he taking to draw the attention of other regional arts organisations the example set by the Farnham theatre, particularly in responding to his business incentive scheme?

Mr. Luce

My hon. Friend is right. The Redgrave theatre is a model. It raised 67 per cent of all its resources from the private sector, largely through the box office, but also through sponsorship. There is a true partnership there between the public and private sectors. My hon. friend is right to say that it is the most prolific in productivity of all the repertory theatres in Britain and that it has received business sponsorship incentive scheme awards over the last two or three years. It is a very fine model for other theatres.

1998

Source: *Guildford Magazine (2008) by Sue Mapp*

"...with a national decline in the repertory formula and a change of management at the theatre, the output switched to a mix of stage and screen imports that proved expensive and unappealing to audiences.

In 1996, both the Arts Council and Surrey County Council withdrew funding. Consequently Waverley, which now owned the new theatre, burnt its fingers on what some thought an ill-judged £40,000 rescue plan. But the scheme failed and, in 1998, the council closed the place down. A decade later, the seating remains, but the rest is silence."

2006: The boarded-up Redgrave is used by Winterwatch, temporary home for vagrants –one of whom encounters 'Rotca'

Source: personal story (Anne Cooper)

"In 2006, I was taking photographs of Listed Grade II Brightwell House, to monitor the condition of the Brightwell House and Redgrave buildings, when I was approached by an old man, clearly one of the Winterwatch residents as he smelt heavily of alcohol. In a thick Glaswegian accent he asked me boldly if I was from the Council. When I said no, that I was a local resident taking pictures because I was concerned over the state of the buildings, he was overwhelmed with relief and asked me if I knew it was to be demolished by the Council and that it had once been a theatre. He begged me to come with him inside the building to see a board on which were the names of all the famous actors who had performed in the theatre.

Overcoming some apprehension, I waited while he rang the bell on the security door until a Winterwatch manageress appeared. He explained, 'This lady wants to see the names of the

actors on the board' and I was duly invited in upstairs. After having been told about the appalling condition of the floor below, which was out of bounds to residents, locked and secured because of water-rotted floors and vandalism and after I had seen the board of well-known actors' names, I left, thanking them both profusely.

Anxious to finish the film in my camera, I returned to take more pictures around the corner by the modern Redgrave and after a few minutes was interrupted again by my Glaswegian friend. He spoke emotionally about the Redgrave family. 'They are a wonderful family', he said, 'Wonderful actors and so kind – they were so good to me and did so much for people like me'. He told me how Vanessa Redgrave had personally helped him when he was down on his luck in London and how he would never forget her kindness. And the acting ...and the theatre... how could the council pull all this down instead of honouring the memory of this wonderful family.... What a crime..." [See R1]

Following the closure of the Redgrave Theatre in 1998 and indications that the Farnham Health Centre was looking to move its location from Brightwells, Waverley Borough Council worked on a Planning Brief to developers interested in the regeneration of "East Street". The townspeople felt that East Street Woolmead buildings needed replacing and the site of the demolished cinema had become an eyesore. But, the ideas put forward in the Council's brief in 2001, focussed intensively on its own land at Brightwells and the proposals that were finally accepted in 2003 did not contain the Woolmead.

A series of planning applications submitted for the East Street Regeneration contained several large blocks of flats, an 8 screen cinema and many shops, no theatre, no tennis courts, and eventually, no bowling green. Almost 6,000 objections were received to the final application on the grounds that the development was too large and unsuitable for a historic market town. The loss of the community leisure facilities was also a cause for much protest. The Tennis Club are due to be removed to Riverside –a polluted site once occupied by the old Gas Holders. The members of the Bowling Club were threatened with eviction and they left, frightened and upset in 2006. Their clubhouse was demolished in 2009. The Council finally approved the plans in 2008, but due to financial difficulties the developer has not been able to start work and after 10 years, the future of the development is uncertain. [See R12]

The Listed Building Consent planning application for the demolition of the modern theatre buildings and the Change of Use application for Brightwell House for two restaurants, three times, received more than half the number of the total objections to the main plan. Farnham people resented the loss of their own theatre building.

The Farnham Theatre Association (FTA) was founded late in 2005 to carry on the campaign begun by Ian Mullins of the new Farnham Repertory Company in the years 2000 – 2005 , to save the Redgrave, or to have it adequately replaced.

Documentation on the Redgrave Theatre and pictures are held by the Farnham Theatre Association at 4, Nutshell Lane, Farnham Museum and the Surrey History Centre at Woking and in the records of The Theatre Museum and also by The Theatres Trust.

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