

Links: routes; settlers/incomers; rebellion; travelling actors; theatres

1. 1905: A travelling theatre arrives in South Street and confronts the Town Council

Source: "Edwardian Farnham" by Ewbank Smith (retired Clerk to Farnham Town Council). (Page 100)

"With cool effrontery some miserable mountebank by the name of Arthur West opened up what he called 'The Royalty Theatre' under [the Council's] very noses in South Street without their permission. West opened 11 September with a play called *The Zingara Queen* to a full house. The 'Theatre' was a wooden-sided building, 28 feet by 8 and a half, with a canvas roof; it held 300 people. Its fire risk was increased by thirty gas lights. The Councillors were astonished. West had violated bye-law No. 93 by not submitting a planning application; under No. 11, he had erected a building constructed of materials contrary to requirements, and he had omitted to seek a licence under section 11 of the Theatres Act 1843. Right under their very noses!

They marched him before the bench, of course, where West was fined 5/- for having no licence, and 20/- for not complying with the bye-laws. It was thought that this rough treatment would cause West to fold his tents and silently steal away. He didn't. For one thing, as Cass remarked at the November meeting, the publicity had boosted trade and the Royalty Theatre was still very much in business. West even sent in a memorial signed by twenty-nine of his patrons praying that he may be allowed to remain. The Councillors gave him 10 days to get out. And this he did."

(Page 136)

"...A Mr. George King was refused a lease of Council-owned land in South Street for a portable theatre...."

2. 1939: A travelling band of actors arrive in Castle Street and settle in a barn, later to become the Castle Theatre.

Sources: The Redgrave Brochure 1974 and 'Exits and Entrances' by Audrey Henderson 1982

".....war had broken out in Europe.....In 1939 the English Classical Players who had been touring Germany with a Shakespeare repertoire, crossed the Channel to Southampton and, on their way to London, stopped off in Farnham. They had discovered the empty barn just off Castle Street and decided it was the perfect place to open a theatre." (*Exits and Entrances*)

"Late one evening in September 1939, a large grey van arrived in Farnham's Castle Street and parked for the night. The next morning, Laurence Ray and his English Classical Players were directed to a Mr. Charles Borelli, who showed them an early 16th century barn-like structure just off Castle Street. Its early history was obscure, but in recent times it had seen use a roller-skating rink, fruit drink factory, dancing school, cinema and army bath-house.

Delighted by the chance of having a permanent base, the players set to work to transform the premises to a theatre. Aided by Jack Figg, a local builder, the floor was raked, old cinema seats set up and a stage laid out at ground level. As the building could not possibly come within the necessary licensing laws for a public place of entertainment it had to operate as a club, and by the opening there were 300 members.

On 5 December 1939, the Farnham Playhouse raised its curtain for the first time with *You Never Can Tell* by Bernard Shaw..... The Theatre re-opened in October 1941. The

English Classical players at The Farnham Playhouse became The Farnham Repertory Company at The Castle Theatre..." (*Redgrave Brochure*)

3. 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....."

4. 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..."

Note: Sir Michael Redgrave wanted the theatre named after the whole Redgrave family, not just after himself.

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