

MARCHAM PLAYERS

The Early Days and Before

On October 6th 1973, over a cup of coffee in Sue Whiting's house, she and Christine Whild decided something should be done to liven the village up a bit. It was decided to try to get together enough people to put on an evening of variety and drama – an exercise at which we now know Christine excels. As amateur dramatics had always been a favourite hobby of mine, I was a very willing recruit. A one-act comedy called "A Fishy Business" by Margaret Wood was chosen to provide the second half of the programme. The cast included Victor Whild, Tina Hobin, Ken and Jean Page, me and Adrian and Felicity Rayson as a pair of snogging teenagers. It was produced by Jean Hazard. The performance took place on 1st December 1973. The whole evening was very well received by an enthusiastic audience and the money raised went towards providing some more comfortable chairs for the Institute to replace the back-breaking, unstackable, wooden existing ones. We were able to provide the first twenty of the red plastic chairs.

The following year Christine was asked to organise an entertainment for the Harvest Supper and this was the mini-melodrama "Unhand me, Squire or Much Ado about Sweet Fanny Adams" by Richard Tydeman. After this we decided to form ourselves into a proper dramatic society, to call ourselves Marcham Players and to put on a full length play - "Bonaventure" by Charlotte Hastings. Marcham Players was launched.

During the incumbency of Mr. Palmer (1924 - 1950) drama had flourished in the village. Mr. Palmer was himself an excellent actor, very keen and active in this sphere – in fact people used to say he had missed his vocation! As well as putting on regular one-act plays in the village he found time to make some very professional scenery flats and was also a member of the Abbey Players in Abingdon. Mrs. Palmer did not take part in the drama but was an excellent Vicar's wife, a very saintly woman diminutive in stature, who when driving their old Morris car had to peer through the steering wheel. During the mid - 1920s a friend called Hugh Chesterman lived in the vicarage with the family. He was also very keen on drama and together he and Mr. Palmer wrote a play called "The Passing of the Third Floor Back" and it was published. Now in my youth I'm sure I read this play. It is no longer in French's list, but it would be most interesting to get hold of a copy.

One of the veterans from Mr. Palmer's days who was still going strong in 1974 was Hilda Palmer (no relation). Although by then finding it difficult to learn lines, she gamely took part in "Unhand me, Squire" as Granny. She had to faint and be carted off stage - always a risky business in amateur dramatics! She also had a cameo, non-speaking part years later in the film "Yellow Peril".

For the 1975 production of "Bonaventure", Mr. Palmer's flats were used. The canvas was patched up and painted to represent the Great Hall of a convent in East Anglia. Of course we had no funds to start with, so those most involved had to pay licence fees and buy materials for scenery and costumes etc. from their own pockets and hope our takings would eventually cover them. We had to make do with what we had, no hiring of proper lighting equipment from Lancelyn Lighting!

We were fortunate in that a drama group which had packed up. handed on their home-made lighting to us. There were some footlights and several 500 watt bulbs in huge white



enamel shades, nick-named "dustbin lids" by today's bright young technicians, who nevertheless do not scorn to use them where appropriate. The Ex-servicemen had two spot lights which they kindly allowed us to use and for this first production Josca's school lent us some extra lights through the auspices of Jean Hazard, who starred in the play.

We suffered a severe blow during the reconstruction of the back premises of the Hall in 1977 when all Mr. Palmer's beautifully made flats were carted off to the tip. To compensate in some measure, we were given the timber folding screen which had been removed from the Hall with which to construct new ones but it was not ideal. It was hard work knocking the sections to pieces to start with, and when a 10 foot high x 3 foot wide flat was complete it needed two strong men to manoeuvre it, whereas Mr. Palmer's flats could be handled by me alone. The original stage had been built with a pronounced rake, i.e. the back of the stage was about 6 inches higher than the front. This meant that anything at all rounded that was dropped on the stage inevitably rolled down into the audience. It is still not quite level today, which can make for an awkward junction between the side and back walls of a box set.

The two rooms behind the stage (perhaps originally male and female dressing rooms?) were knocked into one to make a large room for a playgroup. This made access to either side of the stage possible but removed the segregation of the sexes – a situation which, in the expressed opinion of Victor Whild, added to the enjoyment of our activities!

As Marcham Players began to flourish, so we became more professional in our requirements, resulting in such tours de force as "We'll Meet Again". We have come a long way, but I look back with nostalgia to those early days of improvisation on a shoestring.

JANET FRERE Originally written for the Millenium edition.

Come and join us for a play reading (and a glass of wine!) on Friday 22 April at 7.30pm in the Board Room at Manor Farm. All the fun of acting without the worry of leaning lines!

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MARCHAM CRICKET CLUB

The results of the continuing programme of field maintenance tend to become more apparent in the weeks approaching the playing season. In this context some readers will no doubt have noticed that the square and outfield are shaping up well.

As a reminder, please note that the Oxfordshire Cricket Association Season opens on 30th April 2005; Marcham 1st XI is at home to visitors Horley and the 2nd XI is away to Kennington 2nd XI.

Please kindly contact Terry Whittaker (391317) or Graham Hill (391415) for details of Nets, playing or umpiring on behalf of the Club. Also, please remember, spectators are always welcome.

CSB

