



## *Memories of Guildford Opera at Forty from a Founder Member*

### *The first ten years*



As “The Emmanuel Players” performing Gilbert and Sullivan at The Emmanuel Church, Stoughton under the direction of Roger Hoare (the then curate), the group was disbanded when he moved away. However, the thirty-three strong team built up over the years decided they would like to continue. Following several meetings in Rita and Ken Rowland’s bungalow, the offer of the use of Kaye Hall, Bellfields with the appearance on the scene of a very young and enthusiastic Musical Director, John



Avery, The Guildford Amateur Operatic Society was born. Shortly joined by Chris Bedloe from the BBC as Stage Director plans were soon afoot for the first performance of *Patience*. A committee headed by Ray France (Chairman) with some names still familiar today, Ken Rowland, (Treasurer), Rita Rowland (Secretary), Daphne Hamilton (our rehearsal accompanist for over 20 years) Pauline Read, Derek Redgwell (scenery construction and design) and Jennie Cousins. The Kaye Hall had a boiler on the stage and no emergency exit lighting; Ray, Derek John and Chris spent many hours in putting things to rights. Derek built some of the scenery in his garage or on stage. A very talented painter was recruited for backcloths.



The photograph on the left is of John with his recruited musicians from his School Musical Department and musicians from the BBC Orchestra with which he quite often played. *Trial by Jury* and *HMS Pinafore* swiftly followed on and ‘Sold Out’ notices for performances from Tuesday to Saturday (including matinées) meant GAOS was playing to capacity audiences of nearly 1,200!

One evening at 9 o’ clock John and Chris came to see Rita and Ken saying that they would like to perform *The Merry Widow* at The Civic Hall! At four o’ clock in the morning the decision was made to put this proposition to the committee and members, and it was very enthusiastically received. With only £14 in the Bank the following year was the biggest fund-raising marathon - newspapers could be sold to raise funds - when you see the recycling going on now you can imagine how far our net went when we were being paid for them! Numerous Jumble Sales at the Corn Exchange, now the Police Station, Woodbridge Road - Fund-raising Concerts, - the list was endless. Rita, (having had to buy a new sewing machine), with a team of ladies made the costumes. The uniforms, swords etc. had to be hired from Fox’s, the then famous professional costumiers in London - quite a thrill having hampers with their name on delivered to your door.

The scenery for the Civic Hall had to be tailor made. Derek, subsequently joined by Roger Keen, who was able to offer the facility of building the set in a Barn and Stable Yard in

Worplesdon. Tall flats had to be made and erected to make “wings” for exits and entrances. Steps, balcony rails etc were painted in the open air by the members including their offspring on week-ends – happy memories of families enjoying each other’s company and sharing the picnics! Demolition dumps were sourced for wood, bent nails were straightened, everybody’s garage gave up tins of paint for scenery (no fire proofing in those days). Drapes from the BBC were borrowed. Get-in was from the front of the building (no stage door), scenery was built, painted and assembled on stage, and the crew many of whom were also the cast worked into the early hours of the morning to be ready for Technical and Dress Rehearsals on the Tuesday. T & J Photographers staying to one o’clock in the morning to take photos at the dress rehearsal as the nearest they could get to the stage was from the side balconies, the front seats being favourites of the punters and booked on performance nights. The sewing machine was put to use again helping to make the curtain to enclose the orchestra pit and the first conductor’s stand was designed, made and used for many years.



Thumb-biting time, new on the block, faithful friends from Kaye Hall supported the company and the classic Lehar musical “The Merry Widow” invited the curiosity of a wider audience, which came to the loyal and reliable number of 2,700 for quite a few years. Oddly enough, the takings for that first performance were £2,700, which meant GAOC was in business.



At this time Captain Mike Lane, conductor of the WRAC Band being a member of John’s choir at St. Peters, suggested that the Band and the company could join forces to raise funds at a “Festival of Light” Concert at The Civic Hall. The proceeds from the first Concert would be a fund-raiser for the company but thereafter the proceeds would be shared jointly with the Royal Army Benevolent Fund. Thus the partnership began. The concerts were always sold out and the company, under the baton of John Avery, combined with Mike Lane and the WRAC Staff Band provided a repertoire including Tchaikovsky’s 1812 with pyrotechnics, in the style of the Last Night of the Proms to name a few. Captain Lynette Hopkin, OBE took over from Mike and ended under the baton of Captain Ena Foster when the band was sadly disbanded. Many members of the band joined the orchestra in the pit for the company’s productions over the years.

Photographs from these first ten years follow at the end of the article.

*After the first ten years coming of age 18th birthday and onward*

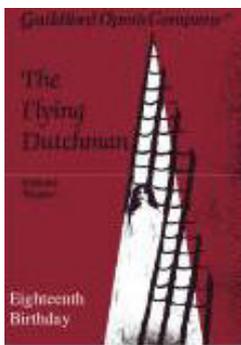
This gave a further introduction to a wonderful repertoire of music from composers Puccini, Gounod, Wagner, Donizetti, to name but a few. Learning the music and having the opportunity of performing operas on stage in costume with a large orchestra was a great thrill. Most of the members up to then having either gone to see or listen to them.



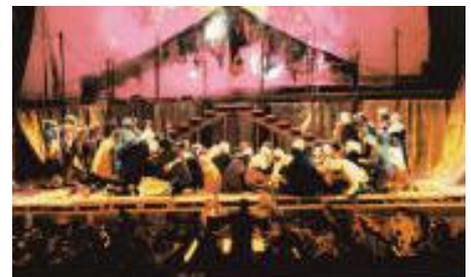
Following all the excitement and hard work of staging from scratch two operas at the Civic Hall in its tenth year, the lighter Lionel Monkton musical *The Arcadians* was chosen to start the next fifteen years. Beautifully costumed including the original *My Fair Lady* Ascot costumes from the London production.

As previously mentioned, all the scenery from the very beginning had to be tailor-made for the Civic Hall stage as it only consisted of the wide but narrow stage with a high choir stall

above it with proscenium arches on each side. With very little room off stage the cast quite often would be lined up down the stairs from the dressing rooms to make an entry, as archive photos show. Set designs for scenery by Hubert Ford took on another dimension with the staging of *The Tales of Hoffmann*. With three levels of set, starting and ending as it did in the depths of a wine cellar it was a great challenge for the stage crew including David Keane who had joined the team by now. With three levels to set up and lighting (which had to be hidden from the audience by a specially made red velvet pelmet of incredible width made for the purpose, and subsequently hired out to other users at The Civic Hall) this was always carried out by the company members and the crew often worked on into the early hours of the morning to have it ready for a technical and dress rehearsal on Tuesday night before first performance on the Wednesday. Most productions included a matinée, so with two performances and the “Get out” again at the end of the week, meant all hands on deck as it does today at The Electric Theatre. However, the adrenalin was flowing and the after-show party usually went on to the early hours, and sometimes breakfast was served! All scenery was taken in and out through the front doors of the building there being no scenery door at the side of the stage, one of the advantages at The Electric Theatre. It is worth mentioning that this site was where for seventeen years all our scenery was made in the shell of the building.



A shed was erected inside to protect items from the elements and birds). When it was subsequently decided to build The Electric Theatre the company moved to the Rodborough Buildings now home to the ACM and to Wetherspoons.



For the Eighteenth Birthday, the resident Musical Director for all those years, John Avery was invited to put forward his choice which was Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*. David Edwards, Glyndebourne Staff Director, applied to stage direct. The tall girls loved him as he put them all on front of stage (on their knees mind you) making the shape of the prow of the ship.

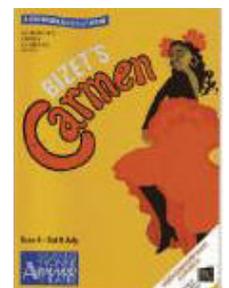
Sadly our then President Lt. Col. Mike Lane, OBE, never saw this production, having died just before the performance. His address in the programme carried his congratulations after being associated with the company from 1971; its progress in that time was unbelievable, and *The Flying Dutchman* was a work of gigantic proportions and a major undertaking. His experience of 40 years of music left him with no hesitation in saying that the company were the most professional amateur group he had met and long might they continue as a great musical asset to Guildford.



*Orpheus in the Underworld* swiftly followed; the Queen Bee costume made by Kristina Benjafield is still being hired out today, and the grapes used by Bacchus are still used for props on stage and library displays. *Turandot*, whose red dress had a train running down the whole flight of steps in another fabulous set with beautifully painted Chinese screens by a local artist and her team come to mind.



So to our 21st Birthday, when *Die Fledermaus* was chosen to celebrate this milestone, played to over 3,000 in the audience. and GOC was privileged to win the coveted NODA Opera Award. The first change of venue in 1994 found the company performing *The Savoyards* (a compilation of the Gilbert and Sullivan story and music) at The Ben Travers Theatre, Godalming, and back to The Civic



for *The Yeomen of The Guard*. The painting of The Houses of Parliament is still talked about today. *Carmen* came next, always a firm favourite with members and the audience alike. For its third outing GOC were offered the opportunity to perform at The Yvonne Arnaud Theatre in the summer. This venue opened up a completely new world for the company. Although still in charge of construction and erection of scenery, the team had to work within the parameters of professional permitted time schedules with the theatre staff (no working into the early hours and official breaks being insisted upon). The orchestra pit was a novelty; with the width of the Civic Hall this had always been expandable, but three rows of seating had to be taken out to accommodate the musicians at the Yvonne Arnaud. The dressing rooms were surprisingly small for the cast as was the then seating capacity of 500 for the audience. Performing in a real live theatre was truly atmospheric and a wonderful experience.

The twenty-fifth anniversary culminated in the second performance of / *Pagliacci* and *Cavalleria Rusticana* at The Civic Hall when the company once again won the prestigious NODA Opera Award.



*The toast is "Forty years" and many more to come!*

Photographs of musical directors and stage directors together with a summary of some of the shows we have done with them are included at the end of the article. In addition to the shows, smaller productions over the years also contributed to the variety of genre the company has performed. Fund-raising for the Royal Surrey Hospital, Rita Rowland devised and directed *A Dickens of an Evening* covering the outstanding amount of music composed during Charles Dickens' lifetime and his story lines used in more recent musicals. For this we were accompanied by the Cornhill Brass Band and sponsored by The Cornhill Insurance Company. June Bronhill, the well known Australian soprano, commissioned the company for a Sunday evening to accompany her in arias from various operas and operettas.

Jennie Cousins directed our first opera at The Electric Theatre *Dido and Aeneas* and latterly the Cole Porter Concert *Anything Goes*. Previously, Patricia Cousins directed *The Savoyards* at The Ben Travers Theatre, Oliver Parker devised *A Night at the Opera* concert in the Marble Hall, Clandon House, with proceeds being shared with The National Trust.

When Kevin John joined us as Musical Director, he devised programmes for several tours round the local villages to promote the company and raise funds, including the very enjoyable concert in the theatre at Henley-on Thames.

The company's services were also very much in demand for weddings, several for members at the time. A concert, raising funds for The Great Ormond Street Hospital, was arranged. Chris Findlay conducting the local Chichester Youth orchestra. Great fun was had decorating floats, dressing in costume, travelling from Guildford Technical College, down the High Street to Shalford Park distributing leaflets for the current show and collecting money for Rotary Funds. Bill Bellerby, our then current President, on one occasion sitting on a throne dressed right royally. Trips out with The Town Crier, father and son, over the years. One spectacular occasion for the first *Carmen*, when the riders in the Company rode their horses down the High Street and the Surrey Advertiser publishing photos taken



under Tunsgate Arch. Patron's evenings held one year in a beautiful room in the old building of The Royal Grammar School, when Fiona Campbell, a professional soprano from Scottish Opera, who subsequently sung the lead role in *Nabucco*, entertained. Also at the Guildhall with refreshments upstairs, surrounded by the mayoral regalia, Mark Stone making his début singing from the dock in the old law courts at Guildford House. he still remembers! Wonderful that he still comes and supports the company now as he is very much in demand in the opera circles. Jan Barklem and Cleveland Williams (performing a concert at Holy Trinity to raise funds for GOC). Cleveland went on to The Berlin Opera company.

We also remember Marilyn Vincent's introduction to the Chilworth Friary, singing *The Messiah* from scratch, performing in the garden with Yehudi Menuhin School of Music, Christmas Concert and enjoying the wonderful atmosphere of the beautiful Friary building used by the monks. Another history lesson when we sung the wonderful Fauré Requiem at St. Mary's Church, West Horsley and if remembered rightly where a part of Sir Walter Raleigh is buried or nearby!

While in the neighbourhood a big "thank-you" to Jody Coe, who continues to do so and over the years has opened her doors to any amount of fund-raising events, splendid cuisine and hosting the after show parties, (not to mention introducing us to Mary Forey who, following the disbandment of Kent Opera, taught at Burpham School and making arrangements for us to rehearse there), boarding the principals during the week of the show and chauffeuring them around, not forgetting the rest of the willing team who have since come on board and also contribute their time and commitment to fund-raising so essential and important to provide the high standard of production that the company has become known for.

At The Electric Theatre since 1997 the company has now performed 15 productions. Performing in a bijou intimate theatre has brought new challenges for the set designers led by Roland Couvela and the stage directors having to deal with the logistics of getting a chorus of thirty on stage fronted up by the principals for the particular production. Members who have only known the theatre as "home" will remember that at the beginning grand pianos were used on stage but now with a lot of time and commitment from the musical directors making adaptations to scores it has meant that an orchestra of twelve can be accommodated in the pit. Many thanks to Sue Barnard and her theatre staff, front of house and on the technical side who have made the company very welcome.

Having built such a wonderful foundation, which did nearly falter at the turn of the millennium, but the family spirit of the company working as a team brought us through. The company has enjoyed in the last few years the support of so many up and coming young stars, good teamwork behind the scenes in all departments, not forgetting the commitment of our musical and stage directors.

It has been great fun looking back and feeling very privileged and proud to say that I have sung in all the productions since the company started in our bungalow. With the inspiration, encouragement in those early days of a few talented, hardworking enthusiasts who had the faith and vision for the future did any of us think then that the company would accomplish so much and reach a Ruby Anniversary!

Happy 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Guildford Opera Company!

Rita Rowland

The cutting of the Anniversary cake that took place before the performance on the last night of Verdi's Otello, Saturday 12th November 2011



Pippa Davis, our Chairperson, in charge of the cake cutting, with Rita Rowland one of the devoted founder members of the company and author of this article.

