

NOSTALGIA

Recreation Hall was place to be seen



Performers on stage at Leavesden Hospital Recreation Hall c1940s. Picture: Leavesden Hospital History Association.



Leavesden Hospital Recreation Hall in 1937. Picture: Leavesden Hospital History Association

by **Martin T Brooks**

OUR stone age ancestors might have been the first humans to take part in a theatrical performance when they recreated the adventures of their last hunt in front of a camp fire (the stage) while other members of the clan (the audience) looked on in amazement at the animated gestures being used by the storyteller (the actor) while standing in front of a crudely drawn picture on the cave wall behind them (the backdrop). Without any real developed forms of oral or written communication, this type of visual storytelling could have been how they first passed along their history, heritage and beliefs to others.

The theatre, as we know it today, was born in Athens, Greece around 700BC where it became a recognised institution and played a significant part in all the cultural, political and religious aspects of society. Greek theatre was more than the performance of religious rituals but was its own art form whereby experienced performers told a variety of stories to bring a vision (theama in Greek) of them to life for the audience, most of whom could not read or write. A place for seeing such visions was accordingly named a theatron, or theatre as we would refer to it today.

The theatre of ancient Rome came about in the 4th Century BC when Rome went from a monarchy to a republic, bringing theatre to the masses with such diverse types of live performances as street theatre, acrobatics, dancing (mostly in the nude), wrestling (most likely as fake as it is now) and situation comedies.

To ensure the actors could be seen, the Romans introduced the first purpose-built stages. One such theatre and stage was located within the walled city of Verulamium, now St Albans, and is claimed to be the only example of its kind, being a theatre with a stage rather than an amphitheatre.

By the middle of the 1500s, there were a small number of playhouses, pubs and inns in London which offered music and song to entice visitors, along with many travelling troupes of actors who would pitch up anywhere to perform and earn their keep. This all came to an end in 1572 when

the Mayor of the Corporation of London banned all play readings so as not to “attract crowds of strangers” and hopefully stem the tide of the plague that was devastating Europe at that time. Three years later he would expel all the travelling performers from the city. Is any of this sounding a bit too familiar?

This wasn't all bad as it prompted the construction of large and profitable public theatres outside the jurisdiction of London, which proved a real boom to the economy of those areas.

The Red Lion, built in 1567, was the first purpose-built Elizabethan playhouse (a venue for performing plays and which is exposed to the elements) constructed in England by John Williams in the garden of a farmhouse located in Whitechapel, but it had a short life as it was too far from central London for audiences to visit during winter months.

Lucky for us, we do not have to brave the weather or travel too far these days to visit a theatre (a venue to watch plays, musical performances and public ceremonies) and to see local talent take to the stage and entertain us in a variety of ways.

In 1891, the Leavesden Asylum's management committee realised that recreation in the form of music and live performances would not only be therapeutic for the patients, but a benefit to staff, so the hospital's Recreation Hall was built. With its vaulted ceiling, exposed wooden beams, hanging lights, polished wood flooring, capacity to seat more than 300 people and a stage, it was the biggest theatre in the area at the time as the Henderson Hall in Abbots Langley and the Watford Palace Theatre would not be in operation until 1902. This would have indeed been the place to be, or to be seen during its early days.

The hall hosted many an event over its time including a performance of the Mikado by the Abbots Langley Gilbert and Sullivan Society, discos (where apparently many a romantic connection was made), appearances by local and national entertainers and of course the ever-popular hospital Panto which starred members of the local community and hospital staff.

All the world is indeed a stage and I hope we can all get back to treading the boards soon.



Leavesden Hospital Recreation Hall in 1937. Picture: Leavesden Hospital History Association



Verulamium Theatre in 2020. Picture: Gorhambury Estate