

Robin Hood Theatre Averham

The first 21 years

An account of the formation and early history of the Robin Hood Theatre
Written By Valerie Baker - Theatre Director

INTRODUCTION

The Robin Hood Theatre lies in the grounds of Averham Rectory, close to Sherwood Forest. It was designed by the Rev. Joseph Cyril Walker in 1913 and built by the village carpenter, Robert Lee, assisted by local voluntary labour.

The exterior was simple and functional, but the interior surprised and delighted all who entered it. The ample 3' high stage with a depth of 24' and a width of 16' was framed by an ornate proscenium arch painted in gold leaf, flanked by more beautiful plaster work. The handsome front drop tabs were of dark green velvet and the orchestra pit was surrounded by a heavy brass rail hung with curtains of the same material. The full name chosen for the theatre was the Robin Hood Opera House and these initials were inscribed on the proscenium arch.

Two small dressing rooms led off from either side of the stage, above which a fly floor and cat walk were constructed, while behind the stage an ample scene dock could also be used as an extra dressing room for large cast productions. The theatre had a seating capacity of 150. The first five rows were tip-up seats, upholstered in green velvet, "the Rev. Cyril Walker's stalls", the remainder consisting of Bentwood chairs.

A long succession of musical plays and pantomimes were performed, many of them written by the rector himself, followed over the years by thrillers and straight plays.

The Rev. Cyril Walker was a man of many parts. After the church his great passion was the theatre. His productions were meticulous since he had gained his experience with the Oxford University drama group and many of his close friends were professional actors. People came to the theatre to marvel at the amazing scenery, designed and painted entirely by the rector, who learnt this art from Edward Harker of London and the results, which sometimes took him a whole year to complete, could have graced any professional

stage. The theatre always played to capacity and was open for one month in the winter and one in summer.

Among his company were Jessie Bond, a former Gilbert and Sullivan leading lady and a young Newark schoolboy named Donald Wolfitt who was enthusiastic enough to cycle three miles on cold nights from Newark to attend rehearsals. He played small parts in several of the rector's pantomimes, once even the legs of the pantomime donkey, "all four of them", he proudly boasted later. One of the finest Shakespearean actors this country has ever produced, Sir Donald was knighted for his services to the British Theatre in 1957 but he never forgot his past and years later played a major role in the revival of this enchanting small theatre.

The Rev. Cyril Walker continued his activities through World War I and into World War II and many mourned his death in 1941. His company, "The Country Bumpkins", struggled bravely on without him for a further ten years, but in 1951 the Fire authorities refused to grant any further performance licences until the building had been rewired. No money was forthcoming for this work and in 1951 the theatre, in theatrical terms, became dark.

THE REVIVAL ~ STAGE 1

When Bishop Mark Way was appointed rector of Kelham and Averham in 1961 he was amazed to find at the bottom of his garden a beautiful, if somewhat derelict small theatre. The Bishop was quick to take action, something had to be done about the building or it would crumble away.

At that time my husband, Bernard, and I were living 16 miles further north in a rambling old Manor house at Gamston, near Retford. I had been working in the Retford Little Theatre in company with Gordon Kermode, a very talented actor and stage designer who had worked with Esme Church of the Bradford Little Theatre. One day Norman King, a well-known local playwright, sent us a press cutting describing the Robin Hood Theatre with the information that Bishop Mark Way was holding a public meeting to consider the future of the building and would welcome any memoranda on the subject. I met the Bishop and fell in love with the theatre, forlorn as it looked then, with paint peeling off the walls, chairs carelessly stacked at one end and a group of village children playing football in the auditorium. Later I took Gordon to see the building and we both decided to revive it as a live theatre.

The Bishop's meeting took place in the Robin Hood Theatre on February 9th, 1961. Parishioners from Kelham, Averham and Staythorpe crowded into the auditorium and a lively if somewhat stormy discussion took place. The villagers were naturally suspicious of the strangers who wished to gain control of the building over which they had acquired squatters rights for several years, but they had put forward no suggestions for its future use and there was no money available to carry out essential repairs. When it was announced that my husband and I would open an appeal fund with a donation of £300, and that when the hall was renovated, village functions could still be accommodated, the meeting -voted unanimously in favour of my being granted a seven year lease at £1 a year, the lessee being Bishop Mark Way.

From the row of outbuildings at the side of the theatre, the Bishop offered us the use of two sections, one as a scenery store and the other for conversion into a licensed coffee bar.

After that first meeting came many offers of help, the most notable from Ron Brown of Kelham. He offered to re-wire the whole building, free of charge, in his

spare time. The theatre owes him a tremendous debt of gratitude, for not only did he carry out the re-wiring but he also installed the stage lighting complete with switchboard and lighting dimmers. Once the essential work had been completed, Ron became chief electrician at the Robin Hood Theatre in charge of lighting, and still works in that capacity today.

It was estimated that £700, at least would be required, and the organisation of the appeal fund was set in motion. A board of directors was appointed to administer the fund and to run the business side of the theatre. The local representatives were Bishop Mark Way, Norman King, Richard Bostock, a local farmer, Alan Graham, a journalist, and George Bennett a business executive from Newark. From the Retford end came Gordon Kermode and his wife Wynn, Bernard and myself. George Bennett was elected chairman of the board, Bernard became the theatre treasurer, a post he held until we retired in 1977, Wynn Kermode was the first theatre secretary and Gordon and I became joint artistic directors.

The appeal fund went extremely well. Donations sometimes came in kind: Kitty Black gave handsome grey velvet curtains for the auditorium, George and Frances Bennett created the bar.

Sir Stuart Goodwin offered us £100 to be paid after our target had been reached and by July I was delighted to be able to claim this amount, and invite him to our opening ceremony. Although he was unable to be present, he sent us a further £100 to show his appreciation of the efficient way in which the appeal fund had been organised.

Sir Donald Wolfit had written straight away to wish us well and it was decided that we should ask him to be our theatre patron. He accepted the role most graciously, offering to give a Shakespearean recital with Lady Wolfit (Rosalind Iden) in aid of our fund.

The mammoth task of restoring the building began in March 1961. It was undertaken by a splendid band of voluntary workers, too numerous to mention by name, but without whose united efforts this project would never have succeeded.

The auditorium walls were rubbed down and covered in a dark red Regency stripe paper - mistake No. 1, as we discovered later. Owing to the expansion and contraction of the wooden walls the paper cracked

badly, so it was later replaced by dark red canvas which still exists today. The woodwork was painted pale grey to match the auditorium curtains. We decided to "lose" the ceiling by staining it black, a dangerous job as the scaffolding hired for the purpose swayed uncomfortably from side to side. Few helpers after completing one stint returned for a second dose, yet the job was done and the final effect was stunning. The beautiful proscenium arch was washed down with soap and water and the original gold leaf paint emerged shining as brightly as if it had been applied the day before. The auditorium floor was sanded and polished by a firm of floor experts, the only hired labour used, and all was now ready for the official opening.

The opening ceremony in July, 1961, was a magic and thrilling occasion. The official lease of the Robin Hood Theatre was signed on the stage by Bishop Mark Way and myself, and he accepted his rent for a year in advance, a brand new one pound note.

This was followed by the promised Shakespearean recital given by Sir Donald and Lady Wolfit which held us enthralled for two hours. After his curtain calls Sir Donald stepped forward and read an ode he had composed especially for the occasion.

*"Artistic creation they say knows no bounds,
Now a cleric named Walker who rode to the hounds,
Could preach a good sermon, and painted fine scenery,
Bethought him of Sherwood and also its greenery.*

*So he hired him a carpenter, splendid and good,
And built him a theatre, he called Robin Hood.
Then out from the village and town, harum-scarum,
Came actors and audience converging on Averham.*

*And on cold frosty nights before the moon set -
From the Saracen's Head came a horse wagonette,
Loaded with players all mighty and fine,
To play in his gay Christmas - time pantomime.*

*there was a boy in his teens who had quite a small part,
But was fired with ambition to practise the art,
The great art of acting of which he grew fond
Through the brilliant tuition of the great Jessie Bond.*

*'Tis many long years since he first trod these boards,
And many his failures and many rewards
He has seen since these evenings long, long, ago,
But of all the rewards none has e'er been so
Delicious as when in the play ALI BABA,
Having played Ali's donkey with hee-haw
and quaver his school mates called Bravo,
like so many parrots
And passed o'er the footlights a large bunch of of carrots!*

*But now once again here the drama holds sway,
Thanks to the forethought of good Bishop Way -
For it might have been all up, there wasn't a taker
To achieve restoration but Valerie Baker*

*So here's to the venture - good luck from my heart,
May amateurs learn here to practise their art
In memory of Walker and great Jessie Bond
Pleasing not only locals but also tout le monde. "*

The applause was thunderous. A theatre was reborn.

Before leaving us, Sir Donald presented the theatre with the set of black velvet curtains he had brought for this recital, which had travelled round the world with him. They are treasured and still in use today.

Next came the formation of the Robin Hood Theatre Company: auditions were to be held for all amateur productions, successful applicants would have their names added to an acting list, and there would be a rehearsal period of six weeks, giving a total of seventeen rehearsals for each production. The company was also to include back stage workers and set designers.

In October 1961, we chose for our first production THE EAGLE HAS TWO HEADS, Gordon Kermode and June Cresswell giving stunning performances in the leading roles. The set, designed by Gordon and built by the company, followed in the tradition of the Rev. Cyril Walker as it could have graced any professional stage. A standard had been set for all productions to follow.

We were fortunate that year to receive an offer from Gordon Hull, a photographer from Southwell, to become the official theatre photographer. Gordon gave generously of his time, photographing all productions and recitals until the end of 1976. His wife Pauline succeeded Wynn Kermode as theatre secretary and became my right hand helper, always willing to spend many days with me cleaning the theatre or getting dormitories ready for visiting students.

During the winter of 1961 plans were made for the future use of the theatre. I presented to the board the idea that the programme should have a festival flavour. All full length productions should run for one week, two presented by the Robin Hood Theatre Company and one each from two London-based drama schools, alternating with one-night recitals given by leading professional artists. The idea was approved and this pattern on an enlarged scale is still in use today.

The organisation necessary to implement this programme then had to be set up.

THE BUILDING OF AN AUDIENCE.

This was of vital importance as the remote country situation of the theatre meant that we could not rely on casual attenders. The first move was to form an audience supporters club, giving members priority booking for all shows and to circulate individual leaflet publicity, all under the direction of our efficient theatre secretary, Wynn Kermode. Alan Graham undertook the newspaper publicity and persuaded Norman Pride to open a box office in his music shop in Newark.

The backbone of the audience was later to come from party bookings.

Being on the Nottingham panel of speakers, I travelled the length and breadth of the country giving a talk entitled "The Robin Hood Theatre Story" to many clubs and organisations, every talk producing a block booking. These party bookings were handled by José King, who also organised delicious theatre suppers, thus making an evening at the Robin Hood Theatre a real "night out". The audience which had started at a modest 40% capacity by the end of our second season had risen to between 80% and 90%. Later many shows were over-subscribed.

The Social Committee

The Social Committee was founded by José King, the present Theatre Director, and the devoted work of this committee in organising a varied programme of social events, contributes enormously to the financial stability of the theatre.

One of the most popular side-lines is the theatre luncheon club which has its own annual subscription, meetings taking place about six times a year. A celebrity speaker is engaged and a buffet lunch served. Sybil Holden became the first secretary of the club and Connie Rodger succeeded José King as Chairman in 1977. Before the 1962 season opened the board decided to replace the Bentwood chairs with tip-up seats to match "the Rev. Cyril Walker's stalls". These were eventually acquired from a Bingo club in Stapleford, perhaps the only time in history when a theatre has opened as a Bingo club closes. The seats were screwed to the floor. For special village functions

these were unscrewed and taken into the bar. More willing helpers and strong arms needed!

The Drama Schools

The idea behind inviting the London drama schools to perform at Averham was two-fold. The experience gained by the students in performing outside their own schools is extremely valuable. It also provides them with a good shop window for their talent - directors from the surrounding professional theatres are always invited to these student performances.

Secondly, the Robin Hood Theatre could present to their audience young, lively performances by these fledglings of the theatrical profession. It is always interesting to talent spot and many of those youngsters are now stars in their own right: Simon Ward, Isla Blair, Jeremy Clyde, Christopher Neame, Christopher Timothy, Bryan Marshall, Angela Down and many more have made the grade, following in the footsteps of Donald Wolfitt, making their first public debut on the Averham stage.

The Central School of Speech and Drama, where I received my drama training, and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art were the first schools to be invited; two years later the Webber-Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art replaced R. A. D. A. Sets for the drama school productions were designed and built by the Robin Hood Theatre Company to save costs of transportation. For these first visits local residents provided hospitality for the students, but this was not really practical, and from 1963 on we housed them ourselves at Gamston Manor. Bernard bought the theatre a second-hand van and had it fitted with bench seats so that I could drive the company to and from the theatre. To save travelling expenses I also used to drive the van to London to pick up the students from the schools and then deposit them back at the end of their show. It was hard work but great fun.

In August the theatre was loaned to the Carlisle Repertory Company who brought two productions, ROAR LIKE A DOVE and ALL MY SONS. Both these sets were built by my son Johnny. The productions were excellent and two actors from Newark, Christopher Greatorex and Brian Poyser, now a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, were members of the company and provided added interest for the local audience.

The season closed with a riotous production of *SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER* with a brilliant design by John Griffin. Several actors from the village, including Arthur Beckett, who had been a member of the Rev. Cyril Walker's Company took part. Jack Currie and Pauline Hull, an ex-Central School student, gave excellent character performances as Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle, Brian Cast was Tony Lumpkin to the life, while Gordon Kermode and June Cresswell led the company as Young Marlowe and Kate Hardcastle.

On one occasion during this show a long power cut took place. A quick rush round the village in the interval produced candles for the players and the second half, performed by candlelight, had a magic of its own.

Now that the pattern of the theatre was set, there was little for the Board of Directors to do, so towards the end of this season they all resigned. Probably a theatre as small as Averham's is best run by a benevolent dictator and that policy has certainly produced excellent results.

This year saw the Opening of the new Nottingham Playhouse with John Neville, Frank Dunlop and Peter Ustinov as directors. A strong link was forged between the two theatres. I had built up a valuable furniture store, partly by attending auctions - sales were fun in those days: I once bought a 4-piece suite of Edwardian plush-covered furniture for £1. The Playhouse frequently borrowed our furniture and in return gave us the free run of their wardrobe. John Neville and his leading players gave several poetry recitals at the Robin Hood Theatre, two compiled by the present Playhouse director, Richard Digby-Day, and John always attended the drama school productions which led to several of the students becoming members of the Playhouse Company.

In 1963 the central heating boiler was renewed and the old chemical toilets at the back of the theatre were replaced with modern plumbing. The theatre toilets were also renovated, an improvement long overdue and much appreciated by the audience.

THE CAMBRIDGE FOOTLIGHTS

A popular addition to the programme in 1963 was the Cambridge Footlights. These teams of undergraduates became established favourites from their first show, *CAMBRIDGE CIRCUS* - not surprising as that company included John Cleese, Tim Brook-Taylor, Bill Oddie and Jo Kendall. The Footlights continued to visit Averham annually until 1976. Later

Footlighters included Germaine Greer, Clive James, Eric Idle, Julie Covington, Jonathan Lynn, Graham Garden, Simon Jones and Rob Buckman. Their show was always a sell-out.

Sir Donald and Lady Wolfit paid a visit to the theatre in July to see their old colleague, Rosalind Fuller in her enchanting one-woman show. On this occasion Sir Donald loaned the theatre a magnificent bust of himself by the artist and sculptor Sir Charles Wheeler, R. A. In his will Sir Donald stated that the bust was to remain in the theatre as long as I was the director, and if I left it was to be presented to the Garrick Club in London. On my retirement, with Lady Wolfit's permission, a copy of the bust was made and still graces the auditorium. A bust of myself by Robert Lyon, member of the Portrait Sculptors Society was presented to the theatre in 1980. Up until the end of 1966 all the work in the theatre, including cleaning and decorating, had been carried out by volunteers.

Stage I of the revival was now complete.

THE REVIVAL ~ STAGE 2

Early in 1967 the Church Commissioners made a survey of Averham Rectory and the outbuildings. In the architect's report the latter were condemned as unsafe and as no money was available for repairs, they were to be demolished. The theatre would thereby lose its scenery store and licensed bar. This was serious as it was the bar profits which largely helped to make the theatre financially secure. Mark Way invited me to a meeting at the Rectory when the matter was to be discussed. Kenneth Thompson, the Archdeacon of Newark, later Bishop of Sherwood, who had responsibility for church buildings, was in the chair. During the course of discussion I made a tentative suggestion that perhaps we might be allowed to purchase the theatre and outbuildings together with a piece of land to the rear which would make an excellent car park which we badly needed. Up till then parking was in a field opposite the theatre by courtesy of the farmer owner, not a very satisfactory arrangement as cars often got stuck on wet nights and sometimes cows would stray into the theatre grounds.

I was not hopeful of being taken seriously, but Mark Way and Kenneth Thompson gave me their full support. It was particularly generous of Mark Way for he would be saddled permanently with a theatre on his doorstep and he would also lose his vegetable garden. Kenneth Thompson said that he felt, in recognition of the excellent work done by the theatre, that the purchase price should be for the value of the land only. He carried through the difficult negotiations which led to my being offered the freehold of the theatre, the outbuildings and land for £1,000. When I informed Sir Donald Wolfit of this unexpected development he immediately offered to buy the freehold, an offer I gratefully accepted. As soon as the sale was completed Sir Donald vested the property in a trust, later registered with the Charity Commissioners. He then appointed three trustees - himself, the Bishop of Sherwood and myself.

Once again we faced the urgent need to raise more money, and this time a target of £5,000 was set. The appeal fund was efficiently organised by Philip Pedley, a solicitor from Mansfield; a splendid brochure was drawn up and he enlisted many helpers to collect donations.

Sir Donald and Lady Wolfit came up to launch the appeal at a public meeting in Newark. This time the major part of the money came from organisations. The

Pilgrim Trust contributed £1,000: the cost of new emergency lighting, a new safety curtain and front tabs was met by Nottinghamshire County Council, and the ever-generous Sir Stuart Goodwin sent us £500. Bernard and I had a much-needed furniture store erected at the rear of the theatre as our contribution. The fund quickly reached its target and major alterations were put into operation for the coming season.

Colin Stewart and Bernard undertook the mammoth job of raking the back half of the auditorium, thereby giving a clear view of the stage to the entire audience. Johnny Michael and Dennis Pepper were engaged as theatre builders and carried out the major alterations; the roof over the outbuildings was repaired, while the scenery store was enlarged to include a workshop with double doors to the rear.

The middle stable block was converted into dormitories to house visiting companies, mostly from the drama schools. Bunk beds were fitted in the bottom dormitory which could accommodate six girl students and the loft above housed eight boys. I attended innumerable sales and succeeded in purchasing beds for this dormitory, all in good condition, not one costing more than 7s. 6d. (35p in modern terms). Night storage heaters were installed and each dormitory had running water. All the visiting students really enjoyed themselves and voted it "camping in comfort".

It was now possible to enlarge the bar and provide double doors onto the courtyard, while a large kitchen was made out of the old paraffin storeroom. Coffee was served through a hatch to the bar and during the day it made an excellent dining room for the students. I persuaded Doris Commons who had once worked for us when our children were small to travel twenty miles on a moped to cook lunch for the students. Doris was later one of those employed by the theatre lunch club and on occasions provided suppers for the party bookings.

The courtyard connecting the theatre and bar was enclosed so that the audience could now pass from the auditorium to the bar under cover, a great advantage on wet nights. A box office counter was built into this small foyer and photographs of productions decorated the walls. On the stage right of the theatre there was enough room to construct

two good sized dressing rooms with basins and make-up lighting. A shower room was also provided.

The ever-active social committee had raised enough money to buy floor covering for the bar and foyer and once again our active team of voluntary helpers wielded their paint brushes to decorate the new rooms. All these alterations were complete for the spring opening of the theatre season in 1967.

During rehearsals for the company's end of season production I was asked by the B.B.C. to give a talk about the theatre on "Woman's Hour". We were becoming known nationally - and the programme recorded at the theatre included snippets of a rehearsal of *THE RIVALS*. Afterwards the B.B.C. technicians expressed their surprise at the talent of the company. During this production Sir Donald and Lady Wolfit came up to see the alterations and attend a performance. They were delighted with all the improvements to the building, and Sir Donald was also very pleased with the production.

During 1967 I lost my co-theatre director as Wynn and Gordon Kermode left the area to work in Leicestershire. During the years I had worked with him I had learnt a great deal from Gordon. His knowledge of all aspects of theatre and his great talent as a designer, actor and director had contributed enormously to the high standard of achievement which was now expected from the Robin Hood Theatre Company. Fortunately he did manage to rejoin us from time to time, but the sole burden of the day to day theatre running was now my responsibility.

On February 16, 1968, Sir Donald Wolfit died suddenly in the Royal Masonic Hospital, Hammersmith. It was a great shock as I had visited him on the previous day, when he was in good spirits and talked of an early return home. What a great actor was lost to the British theatre and what a wonderful friend and benefactor we had lost. A memorial service was held in Newark on February 28, when an impressive address was given by his friend and co-theatre trustee, Kenneth Thompson, the Bishop of Sherwood. After her husband's death, Lady Wolfit succeeded Sir Donald as theatre trustee. It seemed more important than ever now to justify the trust Sir Donald had placed in us.

In August 1968, the Cambridge Footlights were televised while playing at the theatre, a B.B.C.2 colour production. A crew of about forty technicians arrived, their vans filling the car park and their cameras overflowing the back of the auditorium. A special telephone system was installed, and prior to their

arrival, they arranged at their own cost to have the roof sprayed with a thick rubber solution to deaden the sound of rain should showers occur during the recording.

The show, *FLY BY NIGHT*, was directed and partly written by the now famous journalist, Clive James, while the cast included Julie Covington, Maggie Scott, Jonathan James More, Dai Davies, Pete Atkin and Rob Buckman. It was a great experience for us all to see the B.B.C. at work and to sit among the invited audience when the actual recording took place. It was a fascinating evening and we all became part of the show, warmed up by the producer, Phil Lewis.

Later in the year the theatre organisation joined the Midlands Arts Association. Mollie Stewart, the theatre secretary, and I attended a week-end conference in Birmingham. Their administrator, Peter Dean, became very interested in the Robin Hood Theatre and an article on our work was published in their quarterly bulletin.

In October Peter Dean organised a visit to the Robin Hood Theatre for some distinguished guests to the Midlands, including Nigel Abercrombie, regional Administrator for the Arts Council, Paul Channon, shadow Minister for the Arts, and his chairwoman of the Midland Arts Association. They were to arrive for the first performance of one of my most ambitious productions, *THE SEAGULL*. It was a cold, foggy night and I almost wished the weather might prevent their arrival, but Peter Dean delivered them all safely in time for curtain up. The show went very well and in spite of the cold and fog all the guests assured me the production and theatre had been well worth the journey.

In 1969, through the recommendation of Peter Dean, the theatre received its first ever grant from the Arts Council of Great Britain, £500 towards the cost of repairs. It was also the year when the Midlands Arts Association divided and the East Midlands Arts Association was formed. Recommended by Peter Dean, I was asked to serve on their executive committee and later became the first chairman of their drama panel.

By this time the immense amount of work required from the amateur team of designers and set builders was taking its toll of voluntary help. Fortunately, in Nottingham, attached to the College of Art, a school of theatre design had been formed by Pat Robertson, head of design at the Nottingham Playhouse, and Stephen Doncaster, a free-lance designer, both

personal friends of mine. I approached them with the idea that perhaps their students might be interested in adopting the Robin Hood Theatre as part of their practical training and they both approved the scheme enthusiastically.

For the past twelve years the students have been designing and building sets for most of the productions at the Robin Hood Theatre. Like the drama students, they use the dormitories. They have become one of the best stage design courses in the country and have produced some splendid sets and costumes for us. The plan works to the advantage of both organisations, the Robin Hood Theatre is most grateful to the design school staff for accompanying the students to Averham and supervising the set-building sessions. The students have a shop window for their talents and gain valuable practical experience. Later the stage design course became part of the Trent Polytechnic curriculum.

1969 posed another problem. John Smith, an art dealer with a shop in Southwell, had taken over the box-office from Norman Pride, but owing to pressure of work he felt he could no longer accommodate us. I spent several sleepless nights trying to find a solution, but suddenly the problem solved itself. Living in a small cottage in Easthorpe, Southwell, was a remarkable 74-year-old lady, Nellie Whitehead. Nan-Nan, as she was affectionately known by my family, had worked as our housekeeper for many years and moved from Gamston to Southwell with us. Shortly after the move she became ill with a septic foot, which tragically led to the amputation of her leg. Although she bore the operation with great courage, she was heart-broken that she could no longer work for us, so I asked her if she would like to run the theatre-box-office. From 1969 until 1976 Nan-Nan played a star role in the theatre organisation. She became known and loved by all the theatre's clients, many of who when calling at her cottage to collect their tickets would stay to have a chat. When Nan-Nan became ill again and had to leave her cottage, she was happy to know that her box-office had been handed over to Beckett's Music Shop in Southwell.

That season the Robin Hood Theatre contributed to the Southwell Festival - a Shakespearean recital compiled by Gordon Kermode and directed by myself, performed in the great hall of the Bishop's Manor. This production which proved a festival highlight also gave birth to the idea that the Robin Hood Theatre Company might sometimes go on tour.

In July 1970, the Nottingham Theatre Club were homeless. Their small theatre had been demolished

and their alternative accommodation in the Lace Market was not yet available. In order to raise funds for their new theatre they had decided to go on tour, and the Robin Hood Theatre invited them to bring their production of *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* to Averham. On the first night of the production there was a power failure, so the show was quickly transformed to the Rectory garden. Fortunately it was a beautiful balmy evening and all went well. After the first act just as the shades of night were falling, the power was restored and the company finished the play in the theatre. The profit for the evening amounted to over £100 and was given to the Nottingham Theatre Club building fund.

Our final presentation of the season, *THE CLANDESTINE MARRIAGE*, was an outstanding success. Ronald Parr, the Nottingham critic, wrote that Malcolm Wilson's performance as Lord Ogleby was the finest piece of comic acting he had seen on any amateur stage. The dress rehearsal was attended by the National Federation of Playgoers Societies who were holding their annual conference in Lincoln. The following day, when I attended their lunch, many of those who had been in our audience were astonished to hear that the Robin Hood Theatre Company was entirely amateur.

The first production in 1971 introduced a new note. I persuaded a Nottingham author, Michael Payne, to re-write a script he had written some years previously in collaboration with Neville Noylde for the Nottingham Theatre Club. This was a musical whodunit entitled *SUPPER WITH SATAN*, the score composed by a Southwell Minster schoolboy, Hugh Taylor, who later won a music scholarship to Cambridge University. Some years later *SUPPER WITH SATAN* was broadcast by the B.B.C. as a straight thriller.

As the years went by the Bingo hall seats became increasingly shabby. From the funds accumulated by the hard-working social committee we were able to purchase 150 new tip-up seats for the auditorium. In 1972, the East Midlands Arts Association gave the theatre an annual grant of £750 to be spent on building repairs.

During this year, Richard Gregson-Williams, the organiser of the Nottingham Festival, decided to use the Robin Hood Theatre as a festival venue. For this event an extra production was undertaken by our company, Moliere's *SCHOOL FOR WIVES*. This was stylishly produced by a guest director, Richard Carey.

Richard Gregson-Williams also used the theatre to present David Kossoff and Bernard Miles in their one-man shows, and a professional company in *THE HOLLOW CROWN*. The festival paid for a new set of black flats for the one-man shows, a useful addition to our stock.

By 1973 I began to feel the need of a salaried administrator. I also felt that, when the time came for me to retire, the theatre would need someone able to devote as much time to the day to day running of the theatre as I had done over the past thirteen years. I approached the East Midlands Arts Association for an increase in our grant for this purpose. The grant was increased to £2,000, and for the next three years all was well.

The season closed with our most ambitious production to date, Dylan Thomas' *UNDER MILK WOOD*, the cast of thirty-one being the largest seen on the Averham stage. For this production on the sound equipment was completely overhauled and new speakers were installed. Gordon Kermode made a welcome return to the Robin Hood stage in the exacting part of the Narrator and co-directed the play with myself. The student designer, Garry Williamson, later won a scholarship to the Slade School of Art, using his costume and set designs for *UNDER MILK WOOD* as his thesis.

In 1974 Terry McConnell became the first employee of the Robin Hood Theatre. The programme was enlarged and Terry introduced a schools drama festival, an idea revived some years later when José King became the theatre director.

Two original scripts were used this season. At my request, Michael Payne compiled a fascinating collage of the Victorian era, entitled *LOYAL SUBJECTS*, designed for touring with Gordon Kermode, Janet Brough, Nigel Kermode and June Cresswell, together with Nicholas Thorpe at the piano. The production opened at the Robin Hood Theatre with John Neville, who had succeeded Sir Donald Wolfit as a theatre patron, Lady Margaret Douglas-Home, and the author Michael Payne among the audience. This production was widely booked. We toured Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and as far afield as Burnham Market and Fakenham in Norfolk.

The second original work which closed that season was a delightful musical, *THE POTTERS OF POPLAR* by Helen Braham and Geoffrey Spittal of Nottingham. This production, complete with choreography and orchestra was directed by Terry McConnell.

During this year plans were discussed for the provision of a much needed supper room and also improvements to the existing toilets which, at the time, had only outside access. It was decided to incorporate a strip of waste land at the side of the kitchen for the supper room and to re-site the doors to the toilets so that they could be entered directly from the bar. This simple addition was designed by Gordon Kermode and constructed by Johnny Michael and Dennis Pepper. £2,000 was needed for this alteration, and we received a generous donation from the Nottinghamshire County Council Leisure Services of £1,500, the theatre making up the balance. Once again the voluntary helpers were responsible for the decorating, and the social committee raised the money to carpet the supper room. The new room was opened by Alderman Mrs. Anne Yates, Chairman of the County Council at which small ceremony she presented the cheque to me which I gratefully received on behalf of the theatre.

Terry McConnell left the Averham theatre at the end of 1974 and we were fortunate enough to be able to replace him with Jon Watson from the Nottingham Playhouse. Jon took over all secretarial and publicity work and also proved a great asset as an actor and director. His link with the professional theatre was very valuable - he was much loved and respected by all who worked with him.

In February, 1975, our much loved Trustee Kenneth Thompson, the Bishop of Sherwood, died. He was a tower of strength to me. I discussed many theatre problems with him and he always gave me sound and sensible advice. Without his initial generosity in persuading the Church Commissioners to sell the freehold of the theatre to us, I doubt if we would be in existence today. Kenneth Thompson's love of the theatre was well illustrated when at one of our annual dinners he read a poem he had composed for the occasion:

"I remember, I remember Averham long ago, The roof was more than suspect and let in rain and snow. In haughty tones I said to builders, 'Nail on the tiling new' 'You'll be lucky', they replied, 'What shall we nail it to?'"

I remember, I remember parking wasn't easy, The first man got the firm ground, the last one found it squeazy. However much you loved the show, you'd find your thoughts I guess, Were the rewing and the shouting and the muddy evening dress.

I remember, I remember Bishop Way's dilemma, His drive was blocked with members cars from morning to pip emma. I argued with dear Mark and said, "Your problem not acute is, For after all your bathroom's full of lots of RADA beauties!"

I remember, I remember standing in my pulpit Saying "We need outside help ", in came Sir Donald Wolfit. He took charge in his gracious way, he pleased both man and matron. He's gone to his eternal rest - thank God for him as patron.

And now we've got a gorgeous place With lovely things to see. We'll recognise if we are wise Our debt to Valerie And as I watch these splendid plays from raised up seats my joy Is that I'm closer now to heaven than when I was a boy."

We had lost a wonderful Trustee and we owed him a great deal.

At the suggestion of José King, Rosalind Wolfit and I invited Charles Dudley Hart, a solicitor from Newark to join us as the third trustee. This appointment was made with the full approval of the Bishop of Southwell.

A significant development took place in 1976, when the responsibility for Grant Aid was transferred from the East Midlands Arts Association to Nottinghamshire County Council.

Towards the end of 1976, my husband's health was beginning to fail. This made me feel the time had come to consider retirement. It is perhaps appropriate to mention here the immense amount of work Bernard put in as theatre treasurer. The accounts and balance sheets were always meticulously kept. I am sure these documents played a major part in securing grants for the theatre. His generosity to the Robin Hood Theatre took the form of a hidden subsidy. He was always willing to offer hospitality in our home to visiting artists and students. In the early days he presented the theatre with a canvas cyclorama and, as already mentioned a theatre van. The superb thunder sheet which hung at the back of the theatre was a gift from his works. It would not have been possible for me to continue in office without his help and loyal support.

I retired as director of the Robin Hood Theatre in 1977 but remained for the time being as a Theatre Trustee. In the original trust deed it was clearly stated that the trustees held overall responsibility for the theatre. I had no hesitation after consulting my fellow trustees in inviting José King to succeed me as the theatre director and it was good to be able to give tangible

recognition to her unselfish devotion to the Robin Hood Theatre. Her unique flair for organisation made her eminently suitable to fill this onerous position and I was most anxious, at this stage, to leave the Robin Hood Theatre with a secure future. I talked this problem over with the Chairman of the County Finance Committee. I offered the suggestion that it might be a good idea if the trusteeship of the Robin Hood Theatre was handed over to the Nottinghamshire County Council Leisure Services Committee and they responded most generously.

Within limits they would take responsibility for the fabric of the building. They would also supply a theatre treasurer and auditor. They would like the theatre to continue in its present successful form and hoped for the continued support of all voluntary workers. A management committee would be set up with a two-thirds majority given to workers from the Robin Hood Theatre. I then consulted my co-trustees about this proposition and they agreed unanimously that it would be an excellent transaction for the good of the theatre.

I asked the newly appointed theatre director, José King, for her approval. After a meeting with the County Council officials she gave her consent, and during my absence abroad she called a joint meeting of the theatre advisory panel and social committee to inform them of the proposition. At this meeting it was unanimously agreed that the negotiations should proceed, provided that arrangements were made for the future of the theatre, should the County wish to relinquish their trusteeship. The transaction was not as simple as I imagined it would be, owing to the fact that trusteeship of the Robin Hood Theatre was registered with the Charity Commissioners.

Long and tedious negotiations took place. Each side put their point of view - Charles Dudley Hart negotiating on behalf of the theatre. It was largely due to his patient and efficient persuasion that the deal finally went through and was signed in June 1980. The first theatre committee was then nominated:

As appointees of the Bishop of Southwell
José King
Charles Dudley Hart

As appointees of the trustees
Edith Anne Yates
Andrew Stutters
Stewart Maud
Evelyn Gray

Co-optive members from the theatre organisation

Ronald Brown

Denise Smith

Michiel Stevenson

Stephen Doncaster

Charles Dudley Hart became the first chairman of this management committee. Four meetings were to be held each year, with a quorum of four.

Part 4 of this revival had now begun.

José King has made a great success of her role as theatre director, and still has many problems to cope with. Jon Watson resigned in 1980 to take up an appointment at the Byre Theatre, St. Andrews, and was much missed by the Robin Hood Theatre. He was succeeded by Jenny Denton, who resigned in 1981 and she has recently been replaced by Glenis Rix.

The programme has been enlarged and includes an annual schools festival. Denise Smith has been succeeded by Margot Anderson as "Schools Officer". Matinees of puppet shows for schools are always included in the programme. A pre-Christmas production for all the family has proved a great attraction: the 1980 presentation was FOLLOW THE STAR, and in 1981 THE WIZARD OF OZ followed in the Rev. Cyril Walker's tradition with breath-taking sets and costumes.

The social committee is as active as ever.

Since the County Council took over the trusteeship the roof has been repaired, the kitchen partly re-equipped and a new lighting system, to be operated from the back of the auditorium, will shortly be installed. Renovation work is now necessary on the stable block of buildings which include the theatre dormitories. Only part of the cost of the work is born by the County, the rest comes from the theatre performances and bar profits together with donations from the social committee.

In conclusion the Robin Hood Theatre lives on as a non-political organisation, presenting a high standard of live entertainment to a very wide area. It is held together as from its re-birth by a dedicated band of voluntary workers who give freely of their time and talents to ensure that never again will the Robin Hood Theatre go dark.

Valerie Baker 1981

Visiting artists to the Robin Hood Theatre

Jill Balcon

Cecil Day Lewis

Osian Ellis

Rosalinde Fuller

Michael Dennison

Dulcie Gray

John Neville

Jeremy Taylor

Roger Whittaker

Anna Russell

Max Adrian

David Kossoff

Margaret Wolfit

Sir Donald Wolfit

Rosalind Iden

Joan Miller

Geraldine MeEwan

David Dodimead

Eithne Dunn

Richard Digby Day

Charles Lewson

William Fry

Sylvia Read

Ben Benison

Richard Carey

John Stuart Anderson

Sir Emyln Williams

Sir Bernard Miles

Ian Wallace

Cilli Wang

Hinge & Bracket

Robert Spencer

Jill Nott-Bower

Donald Adams

Anthony Hopkins

Judi Dench

Gabriel Woolff

Bill Homewood

Althea Gifford

Barry Foster

Judith Foster

Dilys Laye

Ciaran Maddon

Donald Swann

Margaret Rawlings

Karen Fernald

The Speiglers

Cambridge Buskers

Cantabile

Visiting companies to the Robin Hood Theatre

Nottingham Playhouse

Lincoln Theatre Royal

Carlisle Repertory Company

The E.M.M.A. Company

The Cambridge Footlights

The Cambridge Revue

The Oxford Revue "Radio Active"

The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art

The Central School of Speech & Drama

The Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art

The Nottingham Theatre Club

The Southwell Theatre Club

The Tonbridge Theatre Club

International Ballet Caravan

Intimate Opera

Polka Puppets

Clifford Heaps Puppets

The Lancaster Marionettes

The Mull Little Theatre

The Great Eastern Stage Company

The Orchard Theatre Company