

## Mrs Chris Ball on the History of Kirby Players.

**Editorial note.** The Second World War drew Kirby's social classes together through the ARP, Home Guard, WVS, Red Cross, British Legion and much else. Lacking a village cinema, amateur activities flourished; whist drives, dances, the Fruit and Vegetable Show and similar relaxations from the privations of the war were always well supported. The 10pm trudge to Western Boulevard for the last bus home took the shine off Leicester plays. Kirby had had an amateur operatic and dramatic society including Mr Kendall (snr), which put on a play in 1922, and several rather ad hoc plays were staged early in the war although there was no very suitable venue. The Free Church schoolroom had to be used for worship after the Church was bombed, leaving the Parish Hall in Main Street, Barwell Road school hall and the upper room of the Royal Oak, all rather small. Success of the plays led to the formation of a new amateur dramatic society, the Kirby Players, still going strong today. After the war, the village grew rapidly but the 1953 Coronation popularised television, perhaps making amateur entertainments seem rather old hat.

Mrs Ball has been delving into the Players' Minute Book and humorously recounted their early history, which is intertwined with that of the Community Centre, now called the Village Hall. Her account stopped in 1977 – perhaps the 30-year rule for State Papers shelters their later doings. Mrs Ball quoted numerous sums in Pounds, shillings (20s = £1) and pence (12d = 1s). Many costs seem laughably low, but incomes were lower still and most people were less affluent than now. Due to inflation, £1 then is worth more than £100 today, and a shilling at least a fiver. After the interval, members of the Players performed several short entertainments for our delight.

Any historical material, programmes, etc, on the Players or the Hall would be appreciated by the Players archivist, Eric Hassell, who can generally be contacted at the Library on Mondays and Wednesdays.

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Mrs Ball reminded us that minutes usually tell us what happened, but alas rarely why. In September 1944, 22 people decided to start a Drama Society. The inaugural meeting agreed an annual 5s subscription. At the Royal Oak (room fee 10s) in October, a constitution and standing orders were agreed. Fifty-seven applied for membership. It was decided to stage a play on 17 and 18 April 1945 at the Little Theatre, Leicester, and to arrange play readings. The Church schoolroom was booked for 12 - 14 April and John Ball was appointed Producer, at a fee of 15 guineas (£15.75p), for the comedy 'Tony draws a horse'. [The writer recalls the anatomical detail of adolescent Tony's drawing embarrassed his mother but not his father]. Insurance cost £30 and notepaper was ordered. Use of an experienced producer paid off, with takings £456; a donation of £85 went to Kirby British Legion and £183 to the Lord Mayor's British Legion Appeal. Excise Duty was £22.15.0 [presumably 5% of takings]. On 25 April it was agreed members must be over 16, and resident within the ecclesiastical parish [then including Leicester Forest East] except for a maximum of 12 Honorary Members. Play readings continued; 'Hawk Eyes' was given at Kirby, Glenfield and Desford Aerodrome [an RAF basic flying training unit].

In 1947 the 134 members had no House of their own. That year the Village Hall Committee purchased the site of the present Hall. The National Council of Social Services (NCSS) offered MAT Huts (what were they?) but no licence was forthcoming for purchase of timber. In 1947 the Players donated £50 to the Community Hall fund. The name settled to Community Centre [to qualify for Government grants]. Mr Trigger was appointed Musical Director for three 1-act presentations. Clifford Kendall formed an orchestra. On 15 March 1948, £6.10.0 was collected for a Mr Georg Blayer to buy a 'cello, but irritatingly the Minutes do not reveal the background of this contentious episode. The Community Centre committee requested the Players to take responsibility for provision of a stage in the new Centre.

Production of 'Pirates of Penzance', to run for a week, was discussed for the new Community Centre, whose opening date remained uncertain. A lighting switchboard was ordered in October for £150 and £457 was raised by subscription for Centre funds. A house party raised £57. 'The Late Christopher Bean' was staged. 'Major Barbara' at Leicester YMCA netted £149. Clifford Kendall offered £103. Two one-acters were also run. By January 1949 there were fears 'Pirates' would be lucky to break even; it was eventually performed in October or November 1949 for the Centre's opening (curiously, the exact date was not recorded). The Musical Section had 30 members and performed part songs from 'Merrie England' at Newbold Verdon. In July, a replacement main fuse box was awaited. It was agreed the Community Centre dressing rooms were only to be used by the Players; this caused later arguments. The chorus was strong and its ladies were to make their own costumes.

Mrs Doris Howard produced 'The Mikado' and Mr Trigger resigned. Lillian Dunkley agreed to obtain a conductor and took over as Musical Director. Her £30 fee caused dissension despite John Ball's 1945 precedent. By 1953 a junior group to the orchestra was mooted. At the sixth AGM there were 242 members. The chilly hall reduced attendance at 3 one-acters. In July 1951 permission came for a theatre

wardrobe on the balcony, and the Players bought 100 second-hand chairs from the City Council to save hire charges. In January 1953 the first Publicity Director was appointed, and it was reported the Producer wished not to hold auditions. Horace Webster's lorry brought the Free Church piano; the Players later bought a £20 second-hand piano for donation to the Community Centre. That March, Sir Robert Martin presented the County Drama Shield to Mfanwy Stevenson at the one act play festival. There was a bother about exemption from Entertainment Tax, payable when anyone concerned in an amateur production received payment – and should the 1954 'Babes in the Wood' panto sell ice cream?

By 1955, non-Kirby residents could become associate members. 'The Vagabond King' made a small loss. 1956 membership was down to 97, 42 with their subscriptions unpaid, and attendances were poor. In 1957 'The Mikado' in October was one of only three productions. 1958 was much more active. Mrs Marriott became a member in January 1959, but finding a Secretary required arm-twisting. Provision of new workshops was discussed and new lighting had to be obtained to meet regulations. There were two plays, two social evenings, and the musical 'Goodnight Vienna', despite a shortage of rehearsal accommodation. Mfanwy Stevenson put on 'The Heiress' although the panto had to be cancelled when the producer fell ill. In 1961 there were no members' evenings and in 1962 'Yeomen of the Guard' was cancelled through lack of enthusiasm, but the three-acter award was won.

In 1963 the one-act play won at the County Festival. The next year Pam Peckham died, and the quality of 'Red Riding Hood' caused squabbles. A projected open-air production at the Castle was turned down as too costly. £803 loaned by NCSS had to be repaid in 1965 to prevent the Community Centre being sold off; ownership was disputed but vested in the Parish Council. Ought there to be a licensed bar?

By 1967 things were looking up and 'Cinderella' made a good profit. It was decided to appoint a Public Relations Officer and make use of the radio station [the new BBC Radio Leicester]. A competition was held to design a logo. Could a second-hand prefabricated house be erected at the back of the Community Centre as a workshop? A November 1968 fund-raising show helped pay the costly gas heating bill. Mrs Marriott was pianist and members were entitled to priority bookings. In 1969 the Players marked their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary by a dinner dance. The first straight play for seven years was performed. In 1970 plans for a workshop at the rear came to nothing; the only quote received, £600, was too dear. And seat cushions were needed. Funds had to be raised. After argument, it was decided that any member had the right to be auditioned for parts. Half a dozen productions were being put on yearly but many members wanted a Gilbert and Sullivan opera, and were prepared to underwrite a loss. By 1971 the bank balance was down to £52, with £100 owing to suppliers. The Treasurer nobly underwrote the Players' debts.

They were short of back-stage helpers, but 'Patrons' for 50% extra subscription had their names on the programmes. 'The Pirates of Penzance' attracted new members – two couples in the cast announced their engagements! In 1972 VAT came in. In '73 the 108 members decided against G & S. 'Jack and the Beanstalk' in 1974 drew complaints of too many children on stage. 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' was followed by Old Time Music Hall in memory of dead members. Venues included the Towers Hospital, Braunstone, Leamington and Desford. In 1977 came 'Toad of Toad Hall' and the first programme request that 'Smoking in the auditorium should not be indulged'. New stage lighting cost £500.

In brief, after 1977 the Players were well established and presented a varied set of shows – with similar problems to the start at 1944, but with a home in the Village Hall. The Players constantly need to update, but retain their original aims: To develop an interest in drama and theatre and add to the social abilities of Kirby Muxloe and district.

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Arthur Lewis was the Police Sergeant in the 1949 opening performance of 'Pirates' and it became the Cricket Club dinner's custom for Tony Ball to sing, so we lifted our voices to his spirited rendering of the Policemen's Chorus. Mrs Ball's monologue followed, 'The country dog who came to town'; the rustic out-piddled all comers – for he was diabetic! Four ladies of the troupe then presented three musical comedy numbers. After a sketch 'The old couple', they returned in boas and fishnet tights for Moulin Rouge high-kicking.

The Players did 'Oliver' some years ago and it is to be their next production, but with a fresh treatment utilising the whole hall. As a taster, we had Mr Bumble's song 'Small boy for sale' and Oliver's riposte, with Music Hall 'Down at the old Bull and Bush' in conclusion.

The Local History Group expressed its thanks to the Players for a splendid evening.

J N Briggs, 24 November 2007