

## DITCHLING



## PLAYERS

www.ditchlingplayers.co.uk Patrons: Richard Briers and Leon Sinden

## A View from the Chair

Quite a lot has happened since our last newsletter.

As many of you will know, we were forced to abandon our plans to stage *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* due to the producer, Barbara Evans, having to move house (and county!) much earlier than expected. We have been extremely fortunate in that the distinguished West End actress, Eileen Page, has stepped in with an offer to produce/direct *Ladies in Retirement* a gripping nineteenth-century murder thriller. Rehearsals are already underway!

In mid-July, the Players were invited to perform a short melodrama at the Westmeston Fair. Thanks to all who gallantly acted their hearts out, in the open air, against a noisy back drop from people practising bell ringing to a kilted gentleman warming up his bagpipes. Thanks also to Barbara Evans for directing the piece.

Many of you attended our Garden Party at Limberlost in August and will know what a great occasion it turned out to be. It was a wonderful way to mark the Players sixtieth birthday. The party also gave us the opportunity to re-enact the above-mentioned melodrama in a venue where the very amusing play could be heard. Once again, I would like to thank Delia, most sincerely, for allowing us the use of her splendid garden and the magnificent marquee.

Earlier this month, the Players sponsored a coffee morning for the Village Association and Nan Crofton, Pat Tattersell (the organisers) and I would like to thank everybody who supported the event and especially those people who helped run it and/or produced the superb range of cakes and other goodies on offer. If any of you feel able to assist in running the coffee morning next year, please let myself or Nan know. We would be very grateful for any help.

I am pleased to say that the new set, i.e. 'The Flats' are basically constructed and await sizing and painting very shortly (more about the flats elsewhere in this newsletter).

I am sure that you have heard of or seen *Salad Days* in Luke Holland's 'A Very English Village' series. It certainly gave us publicity being broadcast on a national network television station BBC4.

In Late January, we will be staging *Icicles Hang by the Wall*, a series of songs and sketches, in festive mood, compiled by Michael Legat and produced by Sonia Stock. It will be an entertaining programme and I hope that all of you will be able to attend.

Finally, our long serving President, Pam Grieve has stepped down. Pam felt that, due to her not being as fit as she would wish, she could not fully participate. At the Annual General Meeting in July, Ian Clayton was offered the post of President and was duly elected by the members present.

That's all for now

Peter Kirk

## Autumn Production

# Ladies in Retirement

Owing to the fact that our producer, Barbara Evans, has had to move house much earlier than expected we regret we have been forced to abandon our plans to stage *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* as our Autumn production.

However, we have been extremely fortunate in that the distinguished West End actress Eileen Page has stepped in with an offer to produce *Ladies in Retirement*, a gripping nineteenth-century murder thriller. Eileen has recently finished her acclaimed one-woman show *Eleanor of Aquitaine* at the Jermyn Street Theatre (right) – Members may remember that she gave the play its first try-out here in Ditchling in 1998.



Notice being short, there was no time for auditions but casting was straightforward and the main roles are taken by Dee Grainger, Sonia Stock, Nan Crofton, Sara Fisher, Julie Davey, Maxime Dudeney and Bob Greenyer. Lucie Broadbent Smith, Joan Dowling and June Loadsmen supply wardrobe, Sue Hanna is Stage Manager, Ian Clayton is designing the set whilst the job of prompting falls to Liz Heasman.

NB See 'Dates for your Diary' on p8 for revised dates of this performance.

**The authors of *Ladies in Retirement* at the Richmond Theatre make one mistake. They describe the play as a 'thriller'. It is instead a very fine study of four lonely women cooped up in a still-lonelier mansion.**

(contemporary review)

### USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

Chairman	Peter Kirk	01273 843227
Secretary	Elizabeth Heasman	01273 846346
Treasurer	Pat Tattersell	01273 844868
Membership	Yanda Mills	01273 843344

## Old Set...New Set

### THE OLD SET

In 1962, it was decided that the time had come for the Players to invest in a new set. The old one had always been stored in the loft at the top of Hoadleys, now Chestertons, where it was just chucked in all over the floor in the all too familiar attitude of 'now the fun is over lets get home to lunch'. Although perhaps understandable when you remember it all had to be lugged across the High Street come wind or snow.

The hunt was then on to find a workshop where we could make and store the new set. Eventually, Ethel Noakes, the Secretary of the Players at the time, approached Mrs Duke Turner of Cotterlings, opposite the War memorial. She had a large hut in her garden which had been used as a playroom in the past but was mostly filled with old furniture now and she was willing to let us use it.

Austin Pruden installed electricity points and lighting. John Grinstead carried out some necessary structural repairs and an appeal went out in the Newsletter for people to contribute any old tools – some of which can still be found in the bottom of the present tool box! There were, of course, no cordless tools in those days and almost the height of technical advancement was an Archimedes screwdriver presented to Ian Clayton on his retirement as Chairman.

The hut was in a fairly wild part of the garden and nettles were quite a hazard as were some of the overhanging trees. On one occasion when Michael Hinde was up a tree pruning some of the branches he warned off young Philip Rickard from watching him from below, only just too late as the branch he was standing on gave way and they all landed in a heap. However, after a visit to hospital it was established that no harm had befallen young Philip. Jill Rickard's house (no connection with the present occupiers) was a great asset as it could be reached with a leap over the stream for cups of tea and other refreshment. Pamela Greive's professional experience was invaluable in guiding us in how a proper set should be made, sorting out the right kind of canvas and all the ironmongery and showing us how to tighten it with size.

Funds were pretty short and we had to economise wherever possible, the whole set costing the vast sum of £110. The price of seats was a mere 5/- (25p) and the total takings of a whole production were only about £60. The set was built to the curious height of 9ft 2in. which allowed us to fix a 2in. strip to wedge it to the ceiling of the old village hall stage. The French braces were limited to an 18in. long base as there was only 20in. wing space stage left. Special pieces had to be made to fit against the sloping roof at the sides. Water was obtained from an outside tap some thirty yards up the garden.



'The hut was in a fairly wild part of the garden and nettles were quite a hazard as were some of the overhanging trees.'

Painting on the size was carried out on trestles outside where the nettles were a bit of a hazard if one was not careful. When it rained we could just get a flat inside, but you had to finish off getting wet whilst reaching through the door. To quote from the Newsletter of November 1963, 'On a recent Sunday afternoon "Phase one" of the new set took its first stroll down West Street to the village hall, to be turned into "Mr Hardcastle's House". The workshop bods were delighted to see it go, as congestion had been something shocking, with a ping pong table in use for canvassing, there was hardly any floor space left, and primed flats had to be stood all round the room to dry. The next piece needed was always in an inaccessible corner behind a wall of damp canvas and nothing could be moved until something else had been moved first.

One worker tied himself and a door flat up in electric cable; another backed the fire flat against the wall and backed himself behind it, while three other people propped up large pieces and cried for rescue'.

We were fortunate that the hut was high enough to enable us to store the flats, as there was no room in the old hall. However, it took eight people two hours to cart the set up to the hall. It was at one time considered too heavy a job for the ladies but this was somewhat disproved when Ewan and Alison Clayton, aged seven and six, could manage a one-foot flat between them! The set was first used for *She Stoops to Conquer* in November 1963 – forty-two years ago. In 2005, it was decided that the time had come ...

### THE NEW SET

We have been fortunate in having the use of an open barn belonging to Archers at Wivelsfield which has enabled Peter Kirk, John Heasman and myself to work over the last few months building a new set of flats to a height of 3750 mm. At this height we will no longer have to add the top stripping which always takes so long and complicates the design of sets. We have made some thirty flats, including three doors, which is one better than before and will save having to hang bead curtains over gaps between flats as in the past.

Because of the height we have extra cleats to tie the flats together and we have gone the whole hog and bought proper tie-off cleats so you will no longer scratch yourself on those horrid screws when tying off. I thought that we ought to get up to date and use metric sizes but have come unstuck when it comes to drawing. At a scale of  $\frac{3}{8}$ in. to the foot a plan of our stage just fits nicely onto a sheet of A3 paper –but they do not make metric scale rules to an equivalent scale. They are either 1:20 or 1:50 whilst the equivalent would be 1:30. To get reasonably accurate site lines I need to use as large a scale as possible, so have ended up translating all my metric flats into imperial sizes!

The old door reveals had woodworm in them so they have been dumped and new ones made. All the new flats have been treated against woodworm. Meanwhile, we

have been dismantling the old and redundant flats from the village hall and some of the better ones have gone to a local school. It only requires Doug Tetersell and his trailer to cart them all over to the hall and we are set for the next forty-two years.

Ian Clayton



'We have been fortunate in having the use of an open barn belonging to Archers at Wivelsfield.'



Ian Clayton in familiar work mode on the village hall stage

# Celebrating 60 glorious years of the Players

MARK GALE



A POSH marquee, a saucy melodrama, sparkling wine and a toothsome birthday cake, were just some of the ingredients at a garden party celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Ditchling Players. The event was held in the village at the home of one of the members, Delia Wesley, whose daughter was married during the same weekend, and who generously made the marquee available as well as her garden.

It was a nostalgic occasion as the President of the dramatic society, Pam Grieve, who joined the Players in 1960, resigned from office because of ill health and was succeeded by another long-serving member, Ian Clayton. In a tribute to his predecessor the new President said she had been an apprentice stage manager at the Kew Theatre for a year.

As well as stage managing, Pamela had produced plays and written some as well, notably *The Ditchling Lamp*. Her stage adaptation of *Alice Through the Looking Glass* was also remembered. A real trooper, she had made the company's first set of canvas flats that had done service for some 42 years and also had a hand in the design of the village hall stage.

'We owe her a great deal for everything that she has done for the Players down the years' said Mr Clayton, who added that Miss Grieve had agreed to become a Vice President.

Ian Clayton first became associated with the Players in 1949 and has acted in more than 50 shows with them. He has been designing sets regularly for the company since 1966.

Recalling that the society had come into being in 1945, he said the first President had been Hilary Pepler, a world-renowned expert on mime who had also been involved in the early television transmissions from Alexandra Palace.

Leon Sinden (Sir Donald's brother) had been a founder member and served on the first committee. He too had later gone legit but used to return to Ditchling whenever resting and after about three weeks intensive rehearsal would put on a show. 'And woe betide anyone who upstaged him.'

Richard Briers was another professional who descended on the village and caused a stir with his production of *Othello*. His cast was a blend of young actors from RADA and members of Ditchling Players. Martha Kearney was another name to hit the headlines. She appeared as a youngster in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and graduated to BBC2's *Newsnight*.

During the afternoon further memories were generated by an exhibition of photographs from the Clayton archive of past productions; there was a buffet and a melodrama *Unhand Me Squire!* caused much trepidation and no little unbridled merriment.

Sixty years on the Players still know how to party as well as put on shows.



## A Very English Village

**The second film in Luke Holland's five-part series for BBC4 on life in Ditchling featured our production of *Salad Days*. Here we interview the film maker himself**

**Ditchling Players Newsletter:** I understand you were born in Paraguay and have been something of a globetrotter for most of your life. What induced you to settle in Ditchling?

**Luke Holland:** I was actually born in Shropshire but spent my formative years in the jungles of Eastern Paraguay where my parents were members of the Christian community, the Bruderhof. Actually my wife made an unarguable case for the move to Ditchling whilst we were living in North London. As you say, I was globetrotting the world while she was struggling to bring up two small boys in inner-city London. We went straight from Doc Martens to green wellies.

**DPN:** What makes Ditchling 'a very English village'?

**LH:** It's both an archetype of rural England with all the ingredients that make up that essence to be found here. But it's also atypical in that one is seeing a kind of urbanisation of village mentalities (a nice phrase coined by my commissioning editor!). You could say it's Hampstead dumped into the Sussex countryside. The title of the series 'A Very English Village' hints at a paradox between urban and rural – the drift from the city (I'm part of it) means that the character of the village is changing, as indeed is England. The series is an attempt to document this change.

**DPN:** Why did you choose to devote a whole 50-minute programme to Ditchling Players and do you think *Salad Days* taught you anything new about the village?

**LH:** The project demanded choices. Sometimes these were made during filming, sometimes during editing. The strongest stories assert themselves. I thought the *Salad Days* story with its rehearsals and other activities might provide a narrative spine to a film about another aspect of



Luke Holland

village life. I did think of weaving in the proceedings of the Ditchling Horticultural Society but the *Salad Days* material was so rich and so strong that the 50 minutes were quickly used up. There were tough choices to focus on – the series was always intended as stand-alone episodes, all very different. Here, a lighter tone was introduced as a counterpoint to the weightier issues elsewhere.

Actually, the film can be read at many levels. Firstly, one sees the astonishing quality, professional direction and dedication of the cast. Perhaps, bearing in mind the age of many of the participants one might view the film as an exercise in how to use one's retirement productively! As the film's commentary suggests the Players' choice to put on *Salad Days* could be read as escapism from a new Dark Age rather as its success in the 50s may have reflected escape from the terrors of the Cold War.

**DPN:** Were you satisfied with the end product and did the BBC give you a free rein?

**LH:** My ambition was to surprise myself and my neighbours – in the process of filming I learnt an enormous amount about the village and my neighbours to whom I am indebted for allowing me to subject them to the indignity of films interrogations and letting me into their lives.

When, in the first episode *Going for the Kill* Gary Lee told me

## Our Retiring President

To many of our members Pamela Grieve is someone who they might have seen taking the chair at the AGM whilst the new chairman is voted in. Alas, her health no longer enables her to carry out even that duty and reluctantly she has felt she should resign. However, she has in the past been one of the most influential members of the Players, putting in far more than her pennyworth.

She never had ambitions of going on the stage but was desperately interested in the theatre and became an apprentice stage manager at the Kew Theatre in London. However, she found she could not manage the high ladder work.

She came to the village in 1958 and was soon involved with the Reel Club for whom she wrote *The Smugglers Opera*. The Reel Club was started by the young set of Ditchling doing Scottish dancing but developed into a permanent club serving light refreshments in what is now the Quakers Meeting House.

By 1960 she was on the committee of the Players and persuading us that we needed a decent set. In those days the set was a motley collection of bits and pieces which was thrown on the floor of the attic of Hoadleys (Chestertons of today) and carted back and forth for the performances. With Pam's guidance and drive we built a proper set of flats which you can read about elsewhere in this newsletter. 'Happy indeed is the drama group that includes among its rank a resident dramatist' wrote Mark Gale in 1964 about *The Good Days to Come* a tense play

which Pamela wrote about Balkan politics. Happy indeed were some of her other dramatic outputs - *The Ditchling Lamp* in 1962 in collaboration with the Reel Club and then in 1969 her adaptation of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

When the Players decided to put on *Alice*, to quote the Mid Sussex Times again, 'The search for a suitable script proved a major problem. Those in print were designed for children and it seemed that professional companies made their own adaptations. It was here that Pamela Grieve lent her talents – the script she produced was no disappointment and it took into consideration the severe limitation of the Ditchling stage'. The Middy goes on to quote Pamela on the reasons for doing it; 'the seeds were sown with "I remember Mama" – the play contained a medium sized part for a small girl. In some respects this is when Martha Kearney was "discovered"'. The naturalness of Martha made her a popular choice, and it was known she was an unstinting worker'.

Although she did produce *The Cresta Run* in 1967, she was for many years the Queen of the backstage, doing her stint as Chairman in 1972. So, when the new hall was built she was able to steer the hall committee into giving us one of the best village hall stages in Mid Sussex. She was elected a Vice President in 1976 and finally became our President in 1981 where she has always been a voice of reason in the background. Thank you, Pamela – the Players owe you a great deal.

Ian Clayton

(from p6)

what to do with my camera I sensed a collective sigh of relief that at least one interviewee had spoken for the many!

I have been hugely gratified by an overwhelmingly positive endorsement. Film making can be intrusive and film makers normally retreat to a safe distance. For me, there was no hiding place so the enthusiastic local acceptance comes as a great relief.

On the question of being given a free rein, it's a fact that the Director often absorbs the credit when things go well and the flak when they go badly. BUT, it is a team effort. Making films so close to home sets its own challenges and the role of my collaborators was, at least in part, to drive a wedge between me and my neighbours. One needs a degree of distance and objectivity in any project of this nature and perhaps the off-screen relationships with my friends and village neighbours risked compromising this. My Editor

Ted Roberts, to whom I am especially indebted, has, like Executive Producer Edward Mirzoeff, a long and distinguished track-record in British documentary film making. Ted has received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Royal Television Society. Sarah Hue was another key ally who got to know the village through her many visits but also through her immersion in the 508 hours of footage!

My previous BBC Storyville film *More Than a Life* was about my brother Peter's struggle with Myeloma, a rare form of bone marrow cancer. It taught me that it was possible to make a film very close to home, but which also had wider, even universal significance. Ditchling offered another 'domestic', albeit slightly broader canvas. Time will tell if the villagers ultimately forgive (as my family have done) the inevitable intrusions and indiscretions, that the process of film making sometimes demands.

## DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

15th October	Members booking morning	27th to 30th November	
17th October	Tickets on sale	& 2nd to 4th December	Wivelsfield Little Theatre
18th October	January Production Auditions		present <i>The Nativity</i> by Angela
23rd to 26th November	Autumn Production, <i>Ladies in Retirement</i> , by Edward Percy and Reginald Denham.		Black at Wivelsfield Parish Church at 7.30pm.
	Ditchling Village Hall 8pm.		Tickets available from the Box Office on 01444 471237 (not suitable for children younger than top primary).

## MEMBERS' BOOKING MORNING

Members booking morning for *Ladies in Retirement* will be Saturday 15th October from 9am onwards at the office of Clifford Dann, as usual.

May I please ask for volunteers to man the 'ticket booth'?

I am quite willing to be there for the first shift, which normally is the busiest but would like an assistant please?

Also please let me have offers for the other one hour stints.

Thank you

Peter Kirk

## APPEAL FOR PROPS

Can anyone help us with the following props for our autumn production *Ladies in Retirement*.

- Chaise Longue
- Nautical Telescope
- Chinese Mandarin
- Old metal cash box

We do look after items that are loaned. If you are able to help, please ring Liz Gee on 01444 258513

## RENEWED ACQUAINTANCE

If you read my piece about building the old set you will see that we used to leap across the stream for refreshment with Jill Rickard (née Wisden). As a result of seeing me in

'A Very English Village' Jill rang me up out of the blue for old times sake, from her home in Oxfordshire.

Ian Clayton