

A Personal Memory of the Sinodun Players Amateur Dramatic Society. 1948 – 2008.

(Dedicated to Mrs. 'C' and all those who have laboured long and with love for the Players.)

*N.B. The idea for this 'history' is that a record be made of the inception of the Society. Although various publications have been written about different aspects of the Players, a complete history of the early days has not previously been attempted. There are now many members who do not know of this time and who may find something of interest among these various reminiscences. Although I have always maintained my contact with the Players when I was pursuing my own career elsewhere, there are a lot of gaps in my personal memories, and of necessity, this is a composite work. I am deeply indebted to Jan Castle, Jennifer Thompson and Christina Eke, for their own memories, dates and details, some of which I had forgotten, in their own publications about the Sinodun Players.*

### The Early Days

Although Wallingford had seen other Amateur Dramatic Societies come and go, it was not until the evening of January 8<sup>th</sup> 1948 when Frances Curtis called a meeting at the Brightwell Village Hall, that the Wallingford area came to know an enduring group calling themselves The Sinodun Players. This title, chosen after the Norse name for the range of hills slightly to the North of the villages of Brightwell cum Sotwell, was suggested, to include the whole area and not just the village, or Wallingford.

The Curtis family had settled at Slade End Farm, at the Eastern end of the village, ten years earlier in the September of 1938, after William Curtis's market garden at Heath Row Farm had been requisitioned to make way for further extensions to London Aerodrome. This would eventually become known as the world famous Heathrow Airport. Before her marriage, Frances Nellie Hind, had been a member of the famous Gaiety Theatre in London - the George Edwards Gaiety Girls. Such was their distinguished beauty and charm that, previously, many from this historic theatre had married into the aristocracy and gentry of England. Frances Curtis was not typical of what would have been expected from this background. In stature, she was a small, slight woman with short grey hair, invariably dressed in a skirt and jumper, of muted colours, and often with a favourite silk scarf round her neck. She was a warm and caring character who inspired a great deal of affection. Always full of energy and always busy, but never too occupied to hinder her abiding interest in people. Apart from being a member of the Womens Institute, the Mothers Union, and the Red Cross, she was also a Governor of Brightwell's Church School. She had a great social conscience and played an important role in the life of the village. Like many who are small in stature, she compensated with a dynamism and an indomitable strength which made her a natural leader and served her admirably for her future role. She was kind, thoughtful and generous, but she also possessed a character of great determination and indefatigable perseverance. Thoroughly feminine but with a 'will of iron.' Following the busy war years on her husband's farm the 'call of the theatre' soon proved too strong for Frances Curtis to resist and now that normality had returned to the village, she realised her talent was to encourage others, of similar enthusiasms, with her passion and love of the stage. Her idea was of founding a local drama group.

Responding to *the call*, twenty-seven people attended the Village Hall Meeting. Not all of them were aspiring actors, although two new members had been Professionals before their retirement. Jerald Reed, though elderly and frail, possessed the stentorian tones and clipped enunciation associated with the Grand Classical Tradition exemplified by Sir Henry Irving., Herbert Beerbohm Tree, and Harley Granville-Barker. He and his wife Eva continued for many years, playing with great authority, whatever came their way. Their daughter also joined the mixed company, of housewives, a bank manager, an electrician, school master, pharmacist, and shop keepers. All coalesced into a working group and prepared themselves for their first production in April. Very soon, others joined them and the Players were firmly established as the new Amateur Drama Company in the area. Sir Leslie Frederic Scott, previously Lord Chief Justice of England, had recently retired to the Red House in Sotwell. Theatre being among his many interests, he was easily persuaded to become the first President of the Sinodun Players.

He also was the founder of the Society for the Preservation of Rural England, vigorously defending the rights of countrymen against the encroachment of farmers and others who were abusing the ancient Rights of Way. In order that this should become of National concern, he not only used his position and influence, but was often seen, armed with wire cutters, roaming the local footpaths in search of offending barbed-wire obstacles.

Where there is no doubt that Frances Curtis was entirely responsible for the foundation of the Players. It is sometimes not appreciated, that she also ensured that everything was done to preserve its continuation. She not only used her own resources to finance the Players during those early years, but she also made use of her many contacts within the Theatre world, as well as opening her own home, the beautiful and spacious Georgian farmhouse at Slade End in order that the Sinodun Players may have a permanent place in which to meet.

Her husband, the long suffering, generous and hospitable Mr. William James (Jim) Curtis, soon to be known affectionately as 'Gov.' often took refuge in the farm office during the evenings of the winter months when the house was invaded by the Players, but only after he had built an enormous log fire in the open grate of the Drawing Room which had now become the Societies Club Room. Coats were strewn over the long tables in the stone flagged entrance hall, with no-one bothering to knock on the front door as it was 'open house' to all members. For the initial productions, their son John was co-opted by Mrs. 'C' as she was now known, to design and paint the scenery. Though he was primarily a farmer, his Pantomime sets have rarely been equalled. On one occasion he was also dragged, much against his will, into actually appearing on stage, but this was to be the first and the last time that he submitted to his mothers pleadings. The fourth member of the household was the mother of Mrs. Curtis, a Mrs. Fanny Hind known by the endearing title as 'Gran.' This redoubtable old lady became an enduring supporter of the Players, and many times we were coerced into her bed-sitting room and regaled with a selection of *strong drink* which she had secreted in her walk-in closet and which would have rivalled a five star hotel. On one occasion, following a Garden Party, a well known and highly respected schoolmaster who had imbibed a little too liberally, due to 'Gran's' largess, was later found lying full length in a ditch lustily singing 'The Yeomen of England' - his previous offering during the afternoons entertainment. Although it was a large house, at rehearsal times, especially for Pantomime, we seemed to take over the whole house with our various dance routines, devised by Edna Shepherd, in the clubroom, with singing in the music room and readings in both the library and dining room. There were also many occasions when we invaded the large farmhouse kitchen. Ultimately the farmyard barns themselves were commandeered into the service of the Players.

The Attics were the set of rooms at the top of Slade End House, where the extensive and varied wardrobe was stored. Here also was the workroom, known as *gossips glory hole* where several helpers sat behind their whirring sewing machines on the trestle tables, which also served for cutting out materials. The place was always crammed with half made and completed costumes plus all the paraphernalia necessary for the creation of this finery. Pins were strewn over the floor, having been used for fittings and which scratched painfully when still attaching sleeves to tunics – or even worse, if still pinning together the legs of britches! This *hive of industry* and the good humour of the sewing team always made a visit to the attics a welcome break from the intensive rehearsals below. We also were able to get an idea of what we would be wearing on stage and how we would be able to handle the costumes. There was also a special smell – not at all unpleasant but unidentifiable. A mixture of musty military uniforms, of which there were many, and of the new bales of exotic materials which Mrs. 'C' had bought from the theatrical suppliers in London. On a couple of occasions she asked me to accompany her to Soho where she seemed to know everybody in that fascinating area of theatre-land. A lot of these costumiers and suppliers have now gone, but in those days, all round Berwick Street and Broadwick Street, it was an 'Aladdin's cave' of theatrical delights. We were always greeted with hugs and kisses and after long reminiscences, came away with masses of fabrics and ornaments which she had visualised for the next productions costumes. Another of her tremendous talents was her unerring eye for what would look most effective whether it was for a straight play, for a Masque, or for Pantomime. She instinctively knew what was *right* and even if the detail was not always authentic, it always created the right impression.

## Pantomime

*Cinderella* was chosen as the first Pantomime to open in the Brightwell Village Hall in 1949. There was a truly bravura performance, from Mrs. 'C' as Prince Charming, with all the traditional thigh slapping on a pair of fabulous legs. She was, after all, a Gaiety Girl !!!! Although her voice was not strong and had a slight tremolo, she was the epitome of all that could be desired in a Principal Boy. Jean King was her Cinderella with Sid Turley as a bright-eyed Buttons. John Curtis had fabricated a Proscenium Arch of wood and canvas with small orange lights on the top of pillars either side of the minute stage, with curtains made of dark green Hessian. The scenery, the costumes, the lights – all were the elements of sheer magic, and what was to become the long tradition of the Players Pantomimes, was established.

The particularly English tradition had long been part of the post-Christmas ritual. For those living in the Wallingford area, this normally meant a visit to the beautiful Art Deco, New Theatre, Oxford or for the very fortunate, a complete day out to London, to see one of the shows which had been re-established after the war. Competing with the famous Palladium Pantomimes were the Bertram Mills Circus at Olympia and the new innovation of the Pantomime on Ice. A spectacular and lavish extravaganza, including all the elements of burlesque, music, colour and fantasy, with the added ingredient of ice skating. Against all this competition, Mrs. 'C' and the Players may well have been thought foolhardy to venture into this theatrical contest. Notwithstanding the rivalry of other amateur groups in the area, the Sinodun Players Pantomimes went from strength to strength, succeeding beyond anything which had been envisaged. The audiences grew and came in their droves. Very soon it was necessary to have a two full weeks of performances, and even when squeezing in three shows on the Saturdays, the hall was invariably fully booked. All the traditional elements were faithfully included. Local topical incidents were used within the dialogue and when specially mentioned, the names of visiting groups always received a loud cheer. It was a family affair and this was enormously appreciated by the whole of the audience. Within the town, Ruby May Prince, the wife of a local nurseryman, ran a Ballet School for young aspiring dancers. Although they had their own *showcase* they had been invited to participate in the Players Pantomimes and subsequently became an integral part of the shows. Their *fairy ballets* nearly always heralded the *transformation scene* which Mrs. 'C' regarded as essential to the *fantasy* of Pantomime. Whilst it may also sound cynical, their various family members and friends also helped to sell tickets and swell the audience. The Box Office for all the Players shows, was in Chadd's Tobacconist and Sweet Shop just off the Market Square, with Eunice Chadd firmly in command of the ticket sales.

It is difficult to know exactly what it was which endeared these pantomimes of the Players to such a large and varied audience. The same faithful aficionados would 'turn up' year after year and never miss these evenings. Both old and young found humour and enchantment, and returned regularly to see the latest which the Players had to offer.

Following Mrs. 'C's starring role as The Prince. The next few years saw Jean King making the Principal Boy her own preserve. This was the perfect vehicle for her. She had a strong face, with a voice to match. She radiated virility and more essential than anything else for a *britches* part, she possessed the most wonderful legs which went up to her armpits! Although she sometimes took part in the various Garden Party entertainments, her *forte* was for Pantomime and as so often happens, she became type cast and rarely appeared in anything else. For those who remember, she personified the very best Principal Boy the Society has ever seen.

Sometimes, when a performer entered on stage, it became apparent that we had our 'fans' as you would hear their names whispered.. Not very helpful to the characterisation of the role they was playing, but very satisfying to the ego, nonetheless!

Heroes were cheered and Villains were hissed. The Good Fairy came on from Stage Right and the Evil Magician from Stage Left. The Comics threw their custard pies and the audience howled with laughter. The technicians created magic and fantasy and the musicians set the

scene with their melodies and effects. However, not only were the audiences entertained by the surprises on stage. The cast also entered into the spirit of anarchy with a vengeance and often included unscripted elements into the show. On one occasion in *Goody Two Shoes* the chorus were all looking into the wings, expecting the entrance of the two 'funny men' only to have them creep up behind them from the opposite side. The next few lines were unheard due to the general hilarity among the cast. All most unprofessional, but great fun! Another occasion, when Denis Wood was playing Dame, he petted the cow's muzzle and was rewarded with a blast of talcum powder from a bicycle pump hidden in one nostril. Again, the cast were helpless with laughter, and which was fully echoed by the audience. It was an enchanting time – as in the words used in all the Players Christmas shows for the past sixty years. 'Pantomime! Pantomime! What a thrill: what a time! When all the world its cares can leave, in the land of make believe. On it goes, so sublime – It's entertainments greatest show. So! Long live Pantomime!

### The Garden Parties

As there had been no Village Fetes, as such, since before the war, Mrs. 'C' decided that in order to advertise the newly formed Sinodun Players, this tradition should be revived, and where better to hold it than in her extensive and very beautiful garden. The first of these was held in the summer of 1949. 'Gov.' had been prevailed upon to supply his farm workers to spend the days prior to the event preparing the grounds of this lovely house. On the appointed day, with hot sunshine streaming through the leaves of the trees, visitors were greeted at the front gate which was decorated for the occasion with gaily coloured bunting. They were then directed to where under the shade of the two enormous Cedars and a variety of other trees, were set up *Dunking for the Apple*, *Shove Halfpenny*, a *Punch and Judy*, a *Treasure Hunt*, plus a miscellany of other stalls and entertainments ranged throughout the garden., all manned by members of the Society in a variety of costumes. The tennis court had been despoiled by large bales of straw forming the area for the *Bowling for the Pig* (also supplied by the generous 'Gov.'). This was always tremendously popular with everyone – man and boy (and including a fair number of the fairer sex) taking their chances with the bowls and skittles and always being at the centre of a large crowd. Beginning the afternoon, was the *Children's Fancy Dress Competition*, for which I had persuaded my mother to make me a costume. Nothing daunted by the fact that there were only a few hours in which to create this, I was launched forth as a 'street arab.' Because my *original Morocco* slippers were far too large, all I could manage during the parade was a slow shuffle. However, this characterisation, though entirely unconscious, won me the second prize, awarded by the well known actress of the time, Beatrix Lehman. She lived nearby, at the Coach House, Little Wittenham, and had been invited by Mrs. 'C' to be the Guest of Honour and to open the Fete. Having seen the Six One Act Plays the previous year, then been enthralled by the Pantomime *Cinderella*, and now singled out by a 'real actress,' I was 'hooked' and was immediately invited to join the Sinodun Players as its youngest member. Following the prize giving, tea was served in the Rose Garden, centred round a sundial, immediately outside the doors at the rear of the house and adjacent to the kitchen. Whereas the front of the building was covered in a profuse Virginia Creeper, at the back there was an ancient and beautiful wisteria climbing up the walls with heavy clusters of purple and deeply scented blossom. This lovely situation provided a few calm moments of refreshment away from the hurly burley taking place in the rest of the garden. In the early evening, after the heat of the day, the Entertainment began with everyone seated around on the grass, as a *Masque*, including dialogue and the dancing of a Pavan, a Gavotte or a Minuet – according to the scene – was performed.

This became an established tradition and were always *costume* pieces, centring round music and movement, even if the action also included comedy. Invariably, these *divertissement* were very well received and became a popular part of the whole day. On one later occasion, a bawdy element of comedy was unforeseen, when John Atwell who was playing *Comus*, had not realised that his costume would not include any form of interior support within his tights, and inadvertently became the 'star' of the show, when *show* he did, leaving nothing to the imagination! Although somewhat discomfited, he displayed true professionalism and continued with the greatest aplomb.

Later, in the evenings, lights appeared in the trees, augmented by floodlights from the top of the bay window, for the general dancing which was to end this afternoon of festivity. Following a long and arduous day for the members, this was the time when they were able to relax and enjoy themselves, which they often did with great abandon. "*When the wine is in, the wits are out*" On various occasions, the Players exhibited their stamina – especially after visiting 'Gran's' room in order to bid this delightful and endearing old lady "goodnight" and ending up, yet again, with a glass in hand!

One summer, I think of 1952, the weather had been terrible and as the day of the *Garden Party* approached, the continuous rain made cancellation inevitable. This was accepted by all except by Mrs.'C' who was not used to be beaten by mere rain storms. We had been rehearsing a *Pierrot* show for the entertainment, and she was determined that this would go ahead. Nothing daunted, on the morning of the *Party* we moved all the sign posts, directing towards the entrance of the farmyard, spread enormous amounts of straw over the mud and puddles, and converted the two enormous 18<sup>th</sup> century barns into a temporary fair ground and acting area. Despite the heavy rain continuing throughout the entire afternoon, which provoked much witticism about the occasion becoming a "Fate" rather than a "Fête," the day was a resounding success. Whether this was due to a resurgence of the 'war-time spirit of solidarity in the face of adversity,' we shall never know, but this event was talked of for many years to come as a *highlight* in the Players existence.

Either 'Gov.' had precognition of what might happen or Mrs.'C' had persuaded him that there was no alternative, for when we arrived to move in, these working barns were empty of the farm machines which were normally stored there. It has generally been recognized just how much the Society owes to Frances Curtis, however, without the continuous support, encouragement and assistance from her husband, her efforts would have been fruitless. As can be seen from his great generosity and his patient compliance in all these situations, the Players are also deeply indebted to William James Curtis.

On with the Motley

*Ambrose Applejohn's Adventure* remains a blurred memory of Yodel accents and Farmers smocks, and did not make a great impression on my hunger for glitter and fantasy. The following year my interest was revived with *Aladdin*, with Mrs.'C' directing and in which Jean King played her first Principal Boy. The Finale Scene, when the curtains opened upon the outside of the Royal Palace with all its windows lit, remains as an enduring magical moment! Although this had taken place in the Brightwell Village Hall – to packed houses, it was time to make a move into Wallingford from where most of the audience came. The Masonic Hall became the main performing venue for the next twenty-nine years.

The Masonic Hall was the largest public meeting place in Wallingford. Situated in Goldsmith's Lane and built in the garden of what had been one of the large and gracious houses to one side of the Kinecroft, the hall itself possessed a small stage within a Proscenium Arch with an 18 foot opening onto a stage 25 feet wide by 12 feet deep. To this could be added a 6 foot deep apron extension, used mainly for Pantomime and productions requiring a larger acting area. There were no Theatre facilities, and the Players rigged Front Tabs and lighting bars for each individual show. Eventually, after running shows for several years under extremely restricted stage circumstances, permission was given for the Society to install two steel beams - running with the sightlines, to facilitate the fixing of flats. In turn, these were modified to allow for a grid to be built under the low ceiling. Whereas, previously we had to make do with sliding flats on and off stage for each scene change, this latest innovation enabled the flying of cloths. Great excitement greeted this professional aspect for the first pantomime to use it. However, it was soon discovered that although great care had been given to achieving the correct *deads* for each cloth, during the night, the hemp lines had stretched! Before each subsequent performance, we had to arrive earlier than expected in order to realign each of the hanging cloths, ready for that evenings show.

The lighting, to say the least, was primitive, with the first lamps having been made with bulbs being fixed in the bottom of square biscuit tins. These, together with a row of footlights had been transferred from the shows in the village hall. There was always an element of surprise regarding the colour of the light we would see, due to the gels taped on to the front of the boxes, often melting with the heat of the lamp! Philip Chadd, our chief and only electrician (albeit totally amateur) spent much of the 'fix up' period, wiring individual lamps for the show, until one day he had the bright idea of fabricating a lighting bar holding six lamps, for the Front of House. A most sophisticated solution! He also devised a dimming system – although this often failed or fused the entire lighting board. On one occasion, this caused a complete blackout right in the middle of a Pantomime Finale. Nothing daunted the pianist, Edna Kiddie, kept on playing and the cast kept on singing – to great applause at the end!

'Professionalism' was a watchword constantly on the lips of Mrs. 'C' and such was her eye for detail that on the nights of the shows, we had a full compliment of usherettes, who, armed with torches, showed the members of the audience to their seats. Having first had their tickets checked at the door by Eunice Chadd or Ada Lay, they were escorted to the auditorium by Elsie King, Ella Frewin and the Hammond sisters, who also sold the programmes. The quality of these programmes was always regarded by Mrs. 'C' as important as the show itself, and great care was given to ensure that every detail was as she wished. She always maintained, *an evening at the theatre was a 'total' experience*, and the welcome at the door, and the quality of the programme was as important as the production itself. This tradition of striving for excellence was quickly instilled into us, in everything which we did, and accounted greatly for the enviable reputation which the Players soon achieved.

The original wooden chairs were gradually replaced with the luxury of two hundred canvas seated, tubular, stacking chairs which had to be stored away after each production. Following an exhausting evening and after the audience had gone home, the actors and helpers, completed this unwelcome task by crawling under the stage into a very dusty and cobwebbed area. The whole stage had to be *struck* with everything packed away. The un-written rule was that this should be done, before the end of show party, for the cast and helpers, in the bar area, with the final *get out* on the following morning. Costumes, furniture and flats were then returned to Slade End for storage. It was a mark of the Players stamina, that they had sufficient energy to want to *party* after such a gruelling production, but this was essential in order to *wind down* following the emotional and physical stress of a period of protracted rehearsals, culminating in exhausting performances. Normally, the party was part of the largesse which Gov. Curtis lavished upon the Players over those first years, although on one occasion in 1960 when Kitten played Aladdin, her husband John Ellison played host, as a mark of his appreciation to the Society.

If the stage at the Masonic Hall left a great deal to be desired, the Dressing Room facilities were worse. Both mens and womens dressing rooms were at the top of a flight of stairs with the mirrors and lights perched precariously on top of the gas stoves. These rooms were really the kitchens serving the hall for Masonic functions. Not only was there very little space in which to manoeuvre, but the omni-present smell of gas, mixed with grease paint did nothing to calm first night nerves.

Apart from theatrical productions, the hall was used by local societies for their dances. The Players always held a spectacular Ball, usually a *Costume* occasion, following a theme which provided the basis for the Cabaret entertainment. One year the inspiration was London, with a twelve foot high Eros, painted on a softboard cut-out, creating a backdrop for Piccadilly Circus. The flower sellers and the costermongers of Covent Garden, providing a miscellany of all the old traditional songs associated with that area. Another year it was a Caledonian theme, when half a dozen of us had been cajoled into spending weeks under the relentless tuition of enthusiastic member and Scotsman Guy Severn, learning the skills of Highland Dance. Accompanied, on the night, with Bagpipes, we gave a fine exhibition of Scottish dance and then led the general company with swirling kilts into a combination of reels and hard drinking. These were all immensely popular events and gave the members of the Society another opportunity of *letting down their hair* in a more relaxed atmosphere.

These were the years in which the Players were establishing themselves as one of the major Amateur Drama groups in the area, and we are grateful for the regular use of the Masonic Hall at this crucial period of our formation. Despite the difficulties of mounting productions within a space not designed or equipped for theatrical productions, the hospitality and assistance provided by the Wallingford Masons contributed to our years with them as an extremely happy and satisfying period. Only on one occasion, during our time there, did we have to cancel a performance, and that was when thick snow blocked the entrance from Goldsmith's Lane making it impossible for anyone to get in. This time, even Mrs. 'C' had to admit defeat!!!

The Annual Dinners were yet another of the social occasions when the Players could get together, taking place at various venues including the George Hotel, The Boat House and the Kingfisher at Shillingford. These were purely social events for the members to all meet together at one time, and in one place, and in which to enjoy themselves without any pressures of learning lines, sewing costumes, or painting scenery. On two occasions, in the early 1960's, during the Whitsun bank holidays, we also got together for a Bar-B-Q in the Garden at Sotwell Manor. Denis and I spent the previous day putting stage flood lights in the trees (with great discussions as to which 'gells' would look most effective) and building the fireplace, whilst the 'girls' started the preparations for the food – and, more importantly – the drink. A general invitation was made and Players turned up, some bringing guests, so it was a very mixed and congenial gathering. Fortunately, as occasionally happens, the weather was perfect. Hot, dry days blending into a warm balmy evenings. The garden looked magical, the atmosphere was relaxed and everyone replete. Sausages, hamburgers, rolls and salads had been consumed with relish. The trifles and sweets had been a tremendous success, and the wine had 'flowed' to great satisfaction. At the end of one evening, a very attractive and vivacious young lady said to me, what a marvellous party it was, and did I know who was the host. As I had thought of it as a 'Players Occasion,' for once *modesty* prevented me from answering immediately. I responded by asking who she and her friends had come with, only to be told "Oh, we were passing and saw there was a party, so we just came in"!!!! So much for their 'spontaneity' - I only regret that I couldn't think of a suitable, impromptu reply. Only afterwards, I thought 'All advertising is good advertising, so why not this occasion?' At least, this demonstrated our 'human side' rather than being thought intense theatrical luvvies.

#### Scene Changes

When a play was performed, the Masonic Hall was usually booked for an entire week. This also applied to the Pantomime, however, very soon the popularity of this annual event was so great that this was extended to two weeks, sometimes with three performances on the Saturday in order to cater for the demand for tickets. Although of necessity, because of lack of time, some of the pantomime scenery was prefabricated outside of the hall, and even on occasions some painting was started, but this was always completed when on stage. Sometimes, the very brief time for preparation, necessitated painting cloths on the floor of the hall during the day and even when rehearsals were taking place in the evenings. On the odd occasion when 'doubling up' – designing and acting in panto, many times, during painting it would be necessary to stop in order to rehearse, then rush back to finish what I was doing. All quite frenetic, if not schizophrenic! On other occasions, it was a case of competing with the cast when painting final details on stage whilst the rehearsal was going on around me. Those taking part were always warned "not to touch anything. It may still be wet!" Such was the pressure of time that there was one occasion, when John Curtis was still designing and painting, that he did not complete the Finale set for *Sleeping Beauty* until the final performance! Every evening we saw a little more added to the backcloth until on the Saturday, a fountain with silver glitter as the water spray, graced the palace scene.

Sets for plays were always constructed and painted *in situ* on stage. At the beginning, these sets were rather basic, with no sketches or model to aid the actors. We were merely told where an entrance or window would be. Only later, did a model become the standard procedure – although, because we were attempting to use the flats which were available, the sets were sometimes subject to slight variation! In the earlier days, the flats were constructed of canvas stretched over a wooden framework. Although these were light and easily manoeuvrable, the disadvantages of vibrating walls soon made the use of fibreboard, and

then, hardboard, a much better alternative. As we had no workshop or paint studio, it meant that everything which would be needed, had to be transported to the hall. This mainly relied upon everyone, who was working on construction, bringing their own tools and brushes. It was amazing that everyone returned home afterwards with everything which they had brought! The constrictions of space, materials, money and, mainly time, promoted much ingenuity in the design and construction of sets. Not everything was of a standard comparable with most of the settings of today, but given the conditions under which we were working, we could be proud of what was achieved.

### Touring

Although the first *Nativity Play* under the direction of Mrs. Curtis had taken place at St. Agatha's Church in Brightwell, with Mary (May) Taylor as the Virgin and Mrs. Warner Allen (previously a professional opera singer) taking the part of the Archangel Gabriel, such was the interest by the local clergy that subsequently the Players were invited to take these plays into their churches. Following the pre-Christmas carol singing around the village, during the next few weeks, we boarded a Tappins coach and, loaded down with costumes and props, headed off to Cholsey, Didcot, North Morton, Wantage, Aston Tirrold, and Blewbury. On one occasion, we also had to adapt ourselves to the lovely but tiny church in Kennington, which did not permit a great deal of movement. These events were enormously popular with our audiences, and as well as being ambassadors for the society they were also great fun for those taking part. Mrs. 'C' herself, was a dedicated and active Anglican, and like so many within the Theatrical Profession, the Christian religion was an important part of her life. For a time, these Nativities became a significant ritual for us with various changes of cast, although Pat Napper continued as a wonderful Gabriel, with huge, glittering wings towering above his head. As I discovered on a later occasion, the only way to retain one's balance was to lean forward at an alarming angle. As he was positioned on top of a rostrum above the other actors, this *necessity* became a very effective aid to characterization.

In addition to these Church Outings we also were soon asked to supply the *entertainments* in the form of short costume plays, at the nearby village fetes and garden parties. Many times we were called at very short notice to learn and rehearse something which Mrs. 'C' had devised and which was to be presented in one of the local villages. As these, obviously, took place in the open air, on more than one occasion, when a rainstorm struck, the drama had to be peremptorily cut short in order to obey the diktat "save the costumes." On one occasion at Aston Tirrold with Mrs. 'C' playing Queen Elizabeth I, in magnificent finery, no sooner had she started her Armada speech, than it started to rain heavily, ignoring the *lese majeste*, she was interrupted by Bob Fisher as Sir Francis Drake – as he put it – 'that we should retire because of the inclemency of the weather !!!!' It rather ruined the illusion of her regal posture when seen huddling with rest of us under a convenient tarpaulin. However, the 'costumes were saved.'

The *Variety Shows* which were much in demand throughout the area, were normally just that – a variety of different acts, songs, dances, comedy etc., Sometimes, excerpts from previous Players productions were included especially suitable abstracts from other Reviews, Burlesques and Music Halls. This Miscellany, often improvised only a few days before but never the less always *slick* and expertly delivered, were immensely popular with our audiences and much in demand.. These tours included Purley, Faringdon, Streatley and on one occasion to Shurlock Row, at the invitation of 'Gov's' brother – Henry Curtis. These Touring Visits were always enjoyed by all concerned and there are many wonderful memories of the tremendous hospitality we received. Not always were these events without occasional minor problems. At one venue, the Players were faced with having to negotiate a huge ornamental jardinière which occupied a large part of the small stage! Resourceful as ever, this was adroitly incorporated as part of the action, to great effect!

Only occasionally did we take an entire production 'on tour' the logistics of scenery and all that was required made this too difficult. However, on the occasion of one of these rare exceptions at the Fairmile Hospital, where we were performing the pantomime *Babes in the Wood* in 1965, in front of the patients, there was more *drama* off stage than on when a member of the audience took a dislike to what was happening and charged into the back of

one of the actors! And we thought that we did this for fun!!!

Other demands made upon our time and talents, in addition to the plays which were now in regular production, were the visits to other venues with our *Reviews*. These had started in quite a modest way – and then, like Topsy, ‘grew’ !!! Soon, we were again climbing aboard one of Tom Tappins’ coaches, often with Bill Tappin driving, and with costumes and props, making our way through the countryside to various village halls where the welcome was always wonderful even though the dressing room space often meant all ‘mucking in together’. No false modesty was possible where we all zipped each other up during quick changes. By this time we had become an Ensemble, and took everything in our stride as all Good Troupers should. There were no temperaments because there were no ‘stars’! We had all taken to heart the notice posted up in the attics at Slade End. “*There are no small parts – only small actors*” We accepted, gratefully any ‘crumbs’ which were swept our way. One day playing a principal role and the next, sweeping out the auditorium.

Although I had joined the Society in order to study scene design, this was a time when men were in short supply and boys were nonexistent. After assisting John to paint scenery and making props, then helping do odd jobs in the Bull Croft, I was suddenly drafted into a Nativity Play which proved my undoing. From then on I was used on stage as a series of attendants upon various principal characters. If ever a ‘boy’ was needed, I was given the role! My ‘theatrical career’ had taken a new direction! Much later, from 1959 – 1965, although I was acting in twelve of the nineteen productions during this period, I still managed to design, construct and paint ten of them.

On one occasion in the 1950’s we were invited to perform excerpts from *Midsummer Nights Dream* in the garden behind the George Hotel (now part of the car park entrance) and again, in the

70’s we performed other Shakespeare ‘snippets’ in the courtyard. The garden of Castle Priory was another favoured venue, (possibly due to the convenient proximity of the Row Barge where the cast, in costume, mixed with the bemused customers.) Here, where the lawn sweeps down to the river from this gracious house frontage, in 1974, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* was attended by the then President of the Society, Dame Agatha Christie. This world famous author, play-writer and creator of the phenomenal Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, had a house – Winterbrook House in the Reading Road - and was a frequent visitor to the town. Upon the death in 1950 of Sir Leslie, Dame Agatha had been invited to fill this vacancy and was the Guest of Honour at the Garden Party of 1952. Dressed in a flowing gown of flowered organza and a large brimmed straw hat she looked more like a favourite aunt rather than the celebrity she was, going round each of the stalls and chatting with everyone. She remained in close contact with us during the twenty-five years of her Presidency, which included, attending one of her own Plays - *Peril at End House* with Bob Fisher portraying the famous Detective. *Twelfth Night* was to be the last time she was able to attend a Sinodun Players production, before her death two years later.

#### Pageants and Festivals

The after effects of the war were to finally be put to rest in 1951 with the Festival of Britain. The Sinodun Player contribution to the towns festivities was a *Masque* in the castle grounds. As this was to depict a Medieval episode of history, this meant fabricating numerous shields, weapons and armour of the period. Weeks were spent, in hot sunshine on the lawns at Slade End Farm, under the tutelage of John Curtis, making shields and helmets of chicken wire and papier mache. Then painting with an undercoat of dark grey and finishing off with aluminium paint. The large but docile Mastiff which always accompanied John wherever he was working, ended up with ‘silver’ claws – much to the scorn of Mrs ‘C’, who dismissed us all as “*silly b’s.*” When not moulding wet paper or painting, we were set to knitting ‘chain mail’ out of thick string on large wooden needles. John ‘A’ seemed particularly adept and finished two balaclavas to our every one! No hands were idle but to ensure that our time was not wasted on mere physical activity, ‘lines’ were rehearsed until word perfect. Not only was there no end to our talent, but also to our dedication!!!!

A small natural amphitheatre crossed the driveway from the High Street gateway, on the East side of the castle keep mound. Here was performed the medieval history of the Empress Matilda's escape from Oxford with Audrey Gayfer as the Matilda. She wound her way round the mound pathway until met by Bob Fisher, playing Brien Fitzcount, Constable of Wallingford Castle, who was to give her sanctuary. The heavy shade from the overhanging trees gave a stillness and anxiety to the atmosphere, and although historically she would have arrived in the middle of winter having escaped from Oxford Castle across the ice, the present air of gloom and menace was entirely appropriate on this occasion. There were three performances and between the matinee and evening shows on the Saturday, in the heat of that afternoon, we informally paraded around the town in costume in order to advertise this event.

The 1953 Coronation Year took us to the river. A masque was written, with Audrey Gayfer this time playing Good Queen Bess, arriving by barge from downstream, rowed by members of the Wallingford Rowing Club, at the boathouse landing, to the immediate North of Wallingford bridge. The audience were arranged on the Crowmarsh bank of the river and saw a splendid show, although it is doubtful whether they heard much, due to the rather primitive sound equipment which was then available.

1955 was the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the granting of a Royal Charter to the Borough of Wallingford by King Henry II. We are fortunate in possessing a film made by a local physician, Dr. Charles Wilkinson who recorded much of the preparation and some of the performance of this major town event in the grounds of the castle. The B.B.C programme *Out and About* visited this *Pageant* which depicted various events of importance during the town's colourful and historic past. Mrs. 'C' was invited to oversee this huge production, where not only all the members of the Players and their now considerable resources and expert knowledge, were to be used to the full, but the cast was to be augmented by other amateur drama groups and anyone from the town who might be interested in dressing up and taking part. A large area was reserved for the acting arena, with stands built for the audience facing the castle mound as a 'backdrop.' This time, the production opened with a Victorian twenty-first Birthday Party held at the Castle Mansion (demolished in the 1950's) with the progression going back into history including the brief visit to the town by William of Orange, the valiant surrender of the castle by the Royalist Colonel Blagge and finishing with a Viking raid upon the Saxon settlement. A both dramatic and poignant ending was achieved with the lights slowly fading upon the live camp fire which flicked and then died.

#### Peregrinations

On two occasions, a *Nativity Play* was performed on a farm cart in the Wallingford Market Square. The first such occasion, used one of 'Gov.' Curtis's large flat trailers, which we converted into a Medieval Pageant as the 'stage' on which the action was to take place in front of a standing audience in the square. As this was before the time of radio mikes, it had been decided to 'dub' the voices of the actors over loudspeakers around the square. The voices being synchronised by others in a first floor room over Lloyds bank. As it had been impossible to have a rehearsal in such a public spot, the first two nights were not as successful as they could have been. However on the final night, everything went as planned, and all was well. Several years later, Harold Simmons suggested to Denis and myself that we should recreate this previous 'triumph' directed by Mrs 'C.' By the time the discussions were finished as to how this was to take place, we had decided that this time, we would not only use the idea of the Medieval Pageant but also to have Mary arriving on a donkey, the Three Kings, on Horses, and the Shepherds being accompanied by sheep! Not content with a farm cart as a stage, we would use the whole square, with everyone coming in at different entrances and involving the whole of the audience. D.W.Griffiths and Cecil B. De Mille would *eat their hearts out!!!!*

Rehearsals had taken place in the new coach park of Tappin's Garage, off St John's Road, during a series of freezing winter evenings. Lighting was by kind permission of Bill Tappin who turned on the coach lights, and those who were not acting took refuge against the bitter cold in the warmth of the empty coaches. The horses and the donkey arrived, causing a slight

problem in that, as they were unused to one another, they had to be kept well apart. The snorting, stamping and shying kept the handlers busy, whilst the Kings forgetting any attempt at assuming regal demeanour, spent all their energy and concentration in just maintaining their seats. Sheep had posed another problem, so it was decided to do without this attempt at realism and make do with a couple of sheep dogs instead! In order to combat the intense cold and to be able to wear heavy winter clothing underneath, as well as looking authentic, costumes also needed to be voluminous. Rehearsals progressed and despite the logistics of a large cast including *children and animals*, everything started to 'come together.' A large cart was prepared, to be positioned in front of the Town Hall, Lighting was set up – augmented by a powerful Aldis Lamp, loaned to us for the occasion by the R.A.F. Benson, and fixed high up on the top of Field and Hawkins, opposite the Town Hall and we were all prepared to 'go.' At the very last minute, it was noticed that the War Memorial caused a deep shadow over the whole acting area. The great advantage of having a stage on wheels meant that it only required pulling the cart a few feet to the right, and all was well. Jose Wood, whose advanced pregnancy was thought to add authenticity to the role of Mary, would be accompanied by Denis as Joseph. He had been a little nervous on Jose's behalf, having to ride in her condition. In the event, all went well and both actors and audience responded wonderfully to all the challenges!

A further occasion which saw the Players dressing in Mediaeval costume, was during the Dorchester Abbey Arts Festival in 1963 when all the local drama groups were asked to present a specific excerpt in *Four Thousand Years of History*. The Players were given the Arrival of St. Birinus, Apostle of the West Saxons, in 634 A.D., and the sponsorship by King Oswald of Northumbria for the conversion and baptism of Cynegils, King of Wessex, which established Dorchester as the centre of Christianity for much of the South of England. A large, high rostrum at the West end of the Church provided the main stage upon which the impressive action took place. We made the most of the large space with the grand gestures needed in such an enormous building. Following the ceremony of Baptism and a brief scene depicting Birinus's mission and the passing of time, the actors 'double up' as pall bearers, shrouded in voluminous black robes to effect this disguise, when carrying an effigy of the now dead Archbishop the whole length of the Abbey Church. Unfortunately, his episcopally gloved hands had not been properly secured and half way through the procession, an arm swung down into the face of one of the bearers. Nothing daunted, it was firmly replaced without a falter in the slow pacing. After the show, we were extremely pleased to hear some of the very complimentary comments from the audience, as to how very "professional" the Players were and that their contribution "stood out" among the rest! Not good for our 'humility' but wonderful for our egos! These excursions certainly proved the versatility of the Society in those early days.

Although the Players had become a very close knit group – achieving a sort of affinity and rapport which is the aspiration and mark of every competent repertory company, there were also those who were not actually members, although their regular and frequent presence almost gave them 'honorary' status. Among these was Lindsay Evans. He was the town photographer who lived and had his studio in Castle street and who was to be seen at every wedding, civic occasion, every event worth recording, and who was a regular and welcomed visitor to all Sinodun Players productions. His gentle manner, his unruly grey hair and rather ill kempt clothing always seemed to portray the man himself. He was what is known as one of nature's gentlemen, charming, courteous and friendly – as well as being a superb photographer. As he was a lifelong bachelor, he was well known in all the many hostelrys throughout the town, and welcomed in all of them where he rarely had to buy himself a drink. However much he consumed he never failed to remain the perfect gentleman – in fact, it was 'common folk lore' that it was then that he always took his very best photographs. The early records of the Players shows all bear his name plate.

Another 'regular' was Frank Dibb – theatre critic for the Oxford Mail. Formerly he had been a member of the Donald Wolfitt Company, which he continued to emulate in his manner and dress. Often he would be seen striding round Oxford, caped coat flowing, mane of white hair escaping from under a large brimmed slouch hat, with a bulging and dilapidated briefcase under his left arm, whilst clutching in his right hand, a shillelagh cane. Although we welcomed

his visits, he was a stern critic and we learned much from his comments. When he was pleased, he was also lavish with his praise and many times we were fortunate in enjoying his high favour. He, like Lindsay, was one of those fabled 'characters' that no longer seem to add colour to the world in which we live, and are therefore all the poorer.

#### Change of Direction

The establishment of the U.K.A.E.A. brought an influx of new people to the area and the society suddenly found itself with an enlarged membership. Many had joined from other amateur drama groups throughout the British Isles and brought with them a wealth of experience and enthusiasm. Until now the Society had been the unquestioned hegemony of Frances Curtis. Inevitably, this caused a certain amount of conflict where various individuals wanted the opportunity of putting their ideas into practice and to mount productions of their own. The friction increased when Mrs.'C' resisted this move to emancipation, who regarded it as an undermining of her own authority and a lack of confidence in her ability. That this was never intended, was not understood by her at the time, and only gradually did she come to accept this.

At the Annual General Meeting of the Players in the St. Leonard's Church Hall in 1960, these views were clearly and forcibly expressed. After much discussion, the general feeling within the meeting was that Mrs.'C' whilst retaining her position and unassailable right to be the Society's principal director, she should make available the opportunity to others who wished to direct some of the future productions. This has previously been incorrectly referred to in other publications about the Players as a 'Palace Revolution.'

It had never been suggested or proposed that Mrs. Curtis should be replaced. Not only did everyone fully appreciate that due to her unstinting and generous patronage to the Society, the debt owed to her was far too great to be ignored, but even more important, she was tremendously admired and held in the greatest affection by the majority of the members. After bearing the responsibility of the Society for twelve years it was extremely unfortunate that she was not been able to appreciate the advantages to both herself and the Society, of sharing the obligation of some of the Players productions. By having other people assume some of the hard work she would be relieved of the increasing burden, and the Society would gain with different Producers seeing things with *new eyes*. (In those days they were still called Producers) Although Mrs.'C' still retained amazing energy, time was passing, and making the same demands upon her as on us all !!!

Fortunately, this crisis passed and Frances Curtis soon realised that her position within the Society had not altered. She continued to direct the workings of the Players, although now with the assistance of others, and with a greater participation of the committee members than had previously been the custom. She was a *born* director, having a clear vision of what was required and the patience to achieve her objective. Some of her productions still remain among the most outstanding within the history of the Society. However, other Directors were beginning to make their mark within the Society, albeit, under her *eagle eye*. Once, when invited to a rehearsal of the *Glass Menagerie* directed by Patrick Williams, she was both interested and attentive until at the end, we overheard her say, sotto voce "Ah, *that is how you Direct, I never knew.*" We who had received the benefit of her incredible talent during the past years, were fully appreciative of this intended irony - even though we pretended not to hear!!!

Although the Society had entered into a new period of emancipation, it also suffered by the lack of 'centralisation.' Throughout the history of the Theatre, 'greatness' has only ever been achieved when under the directorship of one visionary. Theatre by committee just does not seem to work towards anything other than acceptable. The genius of a Kean, an Irving, a Baylis or a Devine is necessary to inspire and cajole beyond the capabilities of mere actors. Frances Curtis may not have been of this calibre, but she certainly made us aspire to heights greater than those we thought ourselves capable. Many within the Society will forever be in her debt for the foundations of theatrical technique which she had instilled into us. Not content with her own talent, she also invited Professional teachers for intensive weekends of instruction in Movement and Interpretation, Voice Production and Elocution and Characterisation and Make-

up, plus a whole variety of related subjects which proved both fascinating and invaluable. Subsequently, other directors were able to build on these foundations and they, in their turn, were gratified to have the satisfaction of some excellent productions.

One of those who became a regular visitor to Slade End was John Morley whose more famous actor brother Robert, and subsequently his designer nephew Sheridan are well known in theatre circles. John was a Drama Tutor 'par excellence' and from him we learned more in a week-end than many students in full time drama courses. On various occasions he used our members for demonstration classes of movement and music, at other venues. Following one of these, on one occasion, during a hot summers evening, we impulsively decided to stop off at the new Wallingford swimming pool, on our way home and have a swim. Failing any swimming gear or false modesty, nothing daunted we shed all our clothes and jumped into the water – only to quickly get out again. It was *cold!* Just as well the local constabulary was not in evidence, otherwise we could all have been arrested for *indecently, disturbing the peace*, and heaven knows what else. As it was, we immediately recovered, and scrambled into the river – which was considerably warmer, and restored a certain amount of satisfaction to the gentlemen of the company, whose *masculinity* had been seriously undermined by the cold swimming pool! This was probably the only time in the history of the company, when its members performed in public entirely naked.

In addition to the invitations to Professional Instructors, the Society had also been affiliated to the National Amateur Drama League and in 1960 I was asked by Mrs 'C' to represent her and the Players at the National Conference at the Shaftsbury Hotel, London. This was to be the occasion of my first introduction to Peter Hall who was then a director at Stratford. Little did I think then, that I should be working with him many years later at Glyndebourne. Apart from the most interesting meetings that weekend, a visit to the famous amateur Tower Theatre, Canonbury had been arranged, to see Marlow's little performed *The Jew of Malta*, with a further visit the following evening to the Aldwich, the new London home of the Shakespeare Company. We saw *Troilus and Cressida* with Dorothy Tutin, Max Adrian, and Michael Horden. . Actually it was a star studied cast but these were the actors who as a star stuck novice I remember speaking to during the reception after the show.

It was during this period that Francis Curtis accepted the invitation on behalf of the Players, to host a performance by the famous Welsh actor Emyln Williams who was touring the country with his rendition of Charles Dickens. All the facilities of the Society were put to use at the Masonic Hall where the performances of this stunning virtuoso occasion were played to packed audiences. Whether or not this great actor had been impressed with his reception from the area, he later bought a property in Sotwell where he entertained others from the theatre world. It was not uncommon, on a Sunday morning, to encounter him taking a stroll around the village in the company of Dirk Bogarde, Richard Burton or other of his illustrious friends.

With the establishment of the Players as one of the leading amateur drama societies in the area, we soon received invitations from other local societies to attend their performances, and when occasionally in need of an enlarged cast, we were also invited to join them. Notably, at the beautiful Unicorn Theatre in the medieval abbey buildings for the magnificent production of *King Lear*, directed by Alan Kitchen, when Denis and I took part, and then again for the Restoration comedy, *The Country Wife*, with the Players Pat Cree in the title role. Subsequently, I also played Henry in *Man for all Seasons*, directed by Isabel Craston, but this was at the old Abingdon Corn Exchange. These cast interchanges between our Societies opened a new aspect to our own vision of Drama and helped prevent the parochialism which so often affects small groups. It is always important that members should see what is happening elsewhere and the current Drama Festivals play an essential role which should never be ignored or overlooked by any amateur society.

By the same measure, visits to professional productions remain a constant inspiration of what can be achieved (and sometimes, 'not') by all, in the non commercial theatre. On many occasions, during the 1960's, a group of us would 'take off' for Stratford or Oxford, or elsewhere, and saw some memorable productions which have now become part of Theatrical

History. The Stratford *Jew of Malta* which was magnificent and a revelation, and David Warner's *Hamlet* – which was not! The Zeffirelli *Romeo and Juliet* at the Old Vic, with John Stride and Judi Dench – which became the definitive Shakespeare, The Frank Hauser directorship at the Oxford Playhouse which produced Barbara Jefford in *The Lady's not for Burning*, Dirk Bogarde in *Jezebel*, Zia Mohyeddin in *Passage to India*, and Judy Dench in *The Promise*, as well as Michael MacLiammoir's *Importance of Being Oscar* in 1963, were all stunning levels of British Theatre which inspired and enthused all who saw them. However we were not so conceited that we ignored other local amateur societies, and we all supported each other whenever possible by attending each others productions. Our nearest 'rival' at that time, was the Barn Theatre, Didcot where, on one occasion, we saw a memorable production of *The Teahouse of the August Moon*. It was a very atmospheric production with very clever scenery, which transformed the exterior to the interior of the Teahouse. We were all very impressed, until the final scene, when very slowly the whole set began to disintegrate. Even the total dedication of the actors, who continued to ignore the flats collapsing upon them, could not prevent the hilarity among the audience. The tremendous applause at the final curtain was as much for their tenacity in the face of calamity, as for the show. We were heartened that, in our common dedication to 'live theatre,' we were not the only ones who had experienced such disasters – even if not quite so spectacular!

#### Perambulations

Following the death of 'Granny' Hind in 1965 at the age of eighty-nine, Gov. Curtis decided to retire and Slade End Farm was sold. They then took up residence in a large house in Wallingford where the attics were again used to house some of her collection of costumes, and where we continued to make props. The rest of the Sinodun Players Wardrobe was then briefly stored at Little Wittenham Manor, the home of the Ellison's who had become members of the Society soon after moving into the area. John had the distinction of being the youngest barrister in England, whilst his wife Kitten who had been a professional actress, became an invaluable asset during her time with the Players. This continued, until they decided to sell their lovely house (which I had helped them decorate) and move to the Bahamas. The wardrobe was then moved to one of the original buildings of the Old St Mary's Hospital in 1968, thanks to the Administrator, Vernon Chesworth, another long standing and devoted member of the players. Although having distinguished himself in various classic roles, this accomplished and versatile actor will long be remembered as a superlative '*Carabosse*' in the 1952 Pantomime *Sleeping Beauty*. It was then that Christina Eke took over as wardrobe mistress, undertaking the thankless task of cataloguing the entire collection. It was while making this inventory, that she realised that many of the costumes could never possibly be used by modern actors. Victorian dresses, and first world war uniforms, which were far too small, were sold to eager collectors. As was a collection of Britannia metal pen holders – probably donated from a local Bank, and a few swords which would not have been permitted on stage. The sale of all these items, which otherwise would have been thrown away, helped raise much needed funds and satisfied the wardrobe mistress's antipathy of waste. After the various vicissitudes of the wardrobe finding temporary homes in the cottages in St. Leonard's Lane and at the Gardener's Arms, Crowmarsh, during the intervening years since Slade End, the urgency of a permanent home again became apparent.

Now that Slade End was no longer available, a home for the masses of scenery which had been accumulated, also needed to be found. Tim Wilder, one of our most talented actors, came to the rescue with the offer of the Old Malt House at St. Lucien's Wharf. Although the ground floor had been used by Wilders Garage in which to store tractors and farm equipment, the floor of the upper level, under the roof of this enormous and ancient building, had not been used for over a hundred years. The accumulated straw, from when it was a working Malt House, plus chaff, dirt, leaves and the droppings from generations of pigeons over the intervening years, meant that there was, without exaggeration, at least 12 inches of debris to be cleared. Nothing daunted, Denis, Jose and I set to. There were no skips or containers into which to tip all this rubbish and the only solution was to pile it all up at the far end of the loft. By the time we had finished it was difficult to distinguish ourselves, filthy dirty, from the enormous pile of detritus, which we had created. That was the easy part!

In clearing this tremendous amount of debris, we had discovered that in many places the floor had rotted with, sometimes, large holes which needed to be covered. Even the remaining floor did not appear too solid and so we reinforced all of these numerous places with discarded boards from scenery flats. This not only solved the problem of the floor but also reduced the amount of materials to be stored!

We had no hoists and this floor was reached by two ladders, the second leading up from an intermediate platform about ten feet from the ground. Eventually we devised a rope and pulley over one of the roof beams, to assist with the lifting of flats etc., but initially, everything had to be manhandled, first to the platform and then twisted round at a left hand 90 degree angle, to be pulled up to the upper floor level. It all sounds quite easy, if a little *Heath Robinson*, however, from eighteen feet high and with a very unstable floor, initially it was a scary proposition. After a very short time, any nervousness disappeared with the familiarity of both the height and the task in hand, and we were soon running backwards and forwards with the 'abandon of innocents.'

Even though we now had a weatherproof storage area, we were still without the workshop and studio facilities which were required for pre-show fabrication. Various venues were pressed into service, with the Army Cadet Drill Hall, on one occasion, being used to paint cloths. The preparation for Pantomime was always a problem. Not only was this the show for which a large variety of scene changes were required, but it also took place in the middle of winter. On one occasion, with a foot of snow on the ground, trestles were erected in the garden of Sotwell Manor for the construction of *silhouetted* flats (the first time this had ever been done) before negotiating them through a small door into my barn for painting. Another year, in order to paint the Panto cloths, the set workers had to negotiate the 'foot and mouth' dip at John Vellacott's barn in Cholsey. Not for the first time, it was so cold that the water-paint, once again, froze in the cans. That these dilemmas were 'taken in the stride' of the Players workforce, was a demonstration of their complete dedication and stamina.

Although working in these rather extreme conditions occasioned much merriment among the workers, it became increasingly obvious that this could not continue indefinitely. Not only was it necessary for somewhere in which to build and paint sets, to store the growing wardrobe and props department, but also for the Players to have a permanent base in which to meet and rehearse. The Barn Theatre in Didcot had their home in a prefabricated building which had been a wartime restaurant, and the Abingdon Players owned a small house in the centre of that town. For the Sinodun Players, there was no alternative but to have everything scattered round the area and to hire a venue in which to meet. In 1963 the Players rented St. Leonard's Church Hall and for the next four years this became the centre of the Players activities. Then, because of a proposed rent increase which was unaffordable by the Society, once again, a new home had to be found. For the next fifteen years the Players endured a peripatetic existence, during which time numerous different venues were used to house the Players activities. Due to the hospitality of the towns Quakers, their exquisite and unaltered 18<sup>th</sup> century Friends Meeting House in Castle Street was occasionally used for rehearsals. Incidentally, it also provided an authentic background for the publicity photographs used for the Societies production of Henry Miller's *The Crucible* in 1972. A 'first production' of Christina Eke – wardrobe mistress turned director. Later, the large panelled room with a small stage at the rear of St Mary's Church House also was used until 1969. In addition to rehearsals, this location in the Market Square also provided a very useful and practical venue for fund raising occasions such as coffee mornings, bazaars and rummage sales etc.,. On several occasions the Players were also welcomed by the St John's Ambulance Brigade in their hall in St. George's Road. Not only did their presence during the Corn Exchange performances provide comfort and practical first aid assistance to both the company and the audiences, but their help in providing their hall for our use, will always be greatly appreciated. Unfortunately, due to financial restrictions, they are no longer seen during the Sinodun Players productions – they are sadly missed. St. John's School also provided a venue for occasional rehearsals, as well as supplying their schoolchildren for one of the Christmas *Punchbowl*s. Here, it was, where Tony Barr-Taylor distinguished himself as a superlative storyteller by enthralling everyone present with his armchair reading of *The Night Before Christmas*. Out of occasions such as

these, also came the idea for the formation of the Young Sinodun Players.

During one period the Players continued peregrinations took them to a converted barn behind the Walnut Tree near Cholsey station, which was pressed into service for rehearsals. This was at the invitation of an enthusiastic member of the Society, Debbie Cox. Here also, several memorable after-the-show parties took place, in addition to a highly successful fundraising barbecue, in aid of the Players. Another Pub. Which came to the rescue during this period, was the *Gardener's Arms* at Crowmarsh, at the kind invitation of Tony Hume, but this time, it was only for the storage of wardrobe in the apple store and the props in what had been, the stable. Unfortunately, due to the damp mud floor and the depredations of mice and squirrels, this proved not ideal for the preservation of the delicate papier mache props. Another Apple Store to offer emergency wardrobe, was that of Paul Chilton, among his orchards on the Sinodun Hills. A fragrant, if dark and chilly place, the access to which was along a long (often muddy) track. Unfortunately, this also proved not an ideal location, even though we were extremely grateful for this temporary home, due to the previous wardrobe location in St. Leonard's Lane cottages, now being restored as housing. In the 1980's, the Players did return, briefly, to their 'roots' in the old village hall of Brightwell cum Sotwell. The Haldane Stewart Memorial Hall and the house in front which served as meeting rooms and accommodation for the caretaker Tom Hammond, had long been sold – the 'new' village hall being located in what had been the Victorian Church School. The house and original wooden hall was now the property of the Players members Gordon and Christine Spenser. Their offer of the use of the hall meant that once again, rehearsals and set building were able to be accomplished in the same place where the Society had begun 40 years earlier.

Highlights – Inspiration – Lessons!

The interest generated by Tony BT at St. John's School undoubtedly suggested the idea that there was a wealth of young talent and interest which should be encouraged and used by the Players. This, in turn would propagate younger members within the Society as well as generating educated theatre audiences for the future. So too, the idea for acquiring the Corn Exchange building and converting it into a theatre and home for the Players, was inspired by the long felt frustration and need of a permanent base. However, rarely, I believe, can the Society claim credit for being the inspiration of a spontaneous audience reaction which took everybody by surprise. It was *The Vigil* in 1962, directed by Denis which set a precedent which has never been repeated. The story of the play takes place in a courtroom where the Gardener of Gethsemane is on trial for 'bodysnatching.' If he is innocent, the basis for the Christian Faith remains intact. If he is guilty, Christianity would be a fraud. The audience is the jury, with the final prosecution and defence speeches made directly to them, and the end of the play being a darkened stage for the audience to consider their verdict. The finale was an empty stage with a gradually brightening sunrise on the backcloth accompanied by a distant singing of the Easter hymn 'Jesus Christ is Risen Today' It was an accolade to our acting and the conviction of our audience that they all, spontaneously rose to their feet and stood for several minutes before calling back the cast with their applause. We were as much moved by this totally unexpected reaction to the production, as they were by what we had presented – not as a *religious play* but purely as *drama*. I think we all learned much, that evening, about the power of *theatre*.

In order that memories do not become too *rose coloured tinted* it is well to remember that not always did everything turn out as hoped or expected. Although I have an abiding recollection of Sue Butcher singing 'Vilia' round a gypsy camp fire, in a production of *Cinderella*, and also as a superb *Antigone*, I also remember when in *She Must Kill Tony* she not only missed a cue and did not appear on stage, but she also argued that she was not due on for "*pages*" - then she suddenly froze, cried "*Oh my God*" and dashed for her entrance. A lesson to all that, even when not in the spotlight, 'concentration' is needed at all times. Another unexpected incident was when Bob Fisher sat down rather more heavily than the chair could stand and ended up in a heap on the floor. Excellent actor that he was, he remained in character as the crusty admiral, cursed, got up and, for good measure, kicked the remains of the wreckage! Forgetting lines is always an actors nightmare, and in the early 1950's *The Winslow Boy*, during Tim Wilder's cross questioning, in his role as the barrister, he was given

the wrong answer. He never even blinked or moved a muscle but only repeated the question – very slowly, and thereby brought the play back on to line with – this time - the right response. This production also saw John A, who was playing the protagonist's elder brother, who fell and had to be rushed to hospital with a dislocated shoulder. The local Newspaper headlines read 'Actor Injured – Can he perform tonight?' During the performance, Rattigan's dialogue said "Hello Desmond, how are you? You're not looking too well." Desmond replied "Am I not? I've strained my shoulder"! Applause and laughter greeted John together with comments from his fellow thespians that "was this not taking realism too far?" Mrs. 'C' herself was not above causing general mirth (even if unintended) among the cast, as when during one variety show, she was very concerned about the chorus being dressed correctly for a scene taking place in Holland against a backdrop of tulips and windmills. As they made their way to the stage, we all heard her shouting from the depths of the wardrobe "Make sure all the girls are wearing their Dutch Caps" When her unfortunate slip of the tongue was pointed out, like Victoria, Mrs. 'C' was not amused – but we, very much, were!

Not all 'disasters' were so joyful, as when during a total blackout during a *Music Hall* due to the town's electricity supply failing (not the fault of our electrician this time!) Mrs. 'C' pushed on the Quartette. Jose Child, 'Topsy' Simmons, myself and Fred Heyworth, all dressed in faultless Victorian finery and clutching lighted candles, to sing our ballads à cappella. Fortunately, our programme lasted longer than the blackout. On one other occasion during a Pantomime *get out* Sid Turley was on stage when an unsecured lighting bar fell, concussing him, so that he also had to be rushed to hospital. He was soon released with cuts and bruises, and the wry remark that "it was a good job, that he had such a hard head"!!!! Having been witness to these various little 'hiccups' it was not so amusing when during the first Market Square Nativity Play, the Archangel Gabriel was struck with food poisoning and ended up so weak that the wings had to be discarded and even then one of the Pageant corner poles, was necessary in order to remain upright. It was said that even under makeup he looked pale! What one does for one's art !!!

#### Temperaments and Tantrums

No account of 'Theatricals' would be complete without recalling various occasions when tempers would become a little frayed and 'minor explosions' would occur. To be absolutely honest, I can remember this happening very rarely. Either we were too preoccupied with the job in hand, or we then respected the fact that we were in the Curtis's home. However, I do recall that a certain young lady was at the centre of three separate *contre temps*. The first occasion was when she objected to the colour I had chosen for one of her dresses in the 1963 *Importance of Being Earnest*. In addition to playing Algernon to John A's Ernest, I was also designing this production. Bearing in mind the characters of the *Dramatis Personae*, I had suggested 'crimson with black braid and feathers' for Lady Bracknell's first entrance, with Cecily in 'pink and pale green,' and Gwendolyn in 'sand with chocolate trimmings' – very smart and very sophisticated. Although the others were very happy with my choice, when Gwendolyn saw what I had chosen, she abandoned her characterisation and screamed "I'm not wearing that shit colour." The archive photographs show that she did! It was also in this production in which John A. covered himself in glory, when in response to the question about his birthplace, he emphatically proclaimed "Brighton, Lady Bracknell, is a seashore residence." He never lived this down! Thence, whenever Brighton was mentioned, inevitably, everyone would cry "Ah yes, the seashore residence"!!!! In the years following, at a Bar B Que, hosted at Cedarwood, the Johnstone home, 'Gwendolyn' again displayed a certain wilfulness, when due to a slight disagreement, another young lady was pushed into the swimming pool. It would seem that this same 'victim' had a penchant for the water, for on another occasion, following a Players dinner at the Boathouse, she was again involved in a clash of temperaments with the same person, and ended up in the river. The 1959 *Waiting for Gillian* saw these two protagonists, together in the same production. Our 'victim' playing the heroine, and her 'bête noire' the slatternly waitress in a 'Greasy Spoon.' In the event, it was the latter who demonstrated her superb talent as a character actress and won many of the plaudits of the play. Time has had a certain softening effect upon this mainstay actress of the Players – although she still displays a very forceful turn of phrase when the occasion demands!

The only other time I have a very clear memory of tempers becoming very ragged, was during the preparation of a Pantomime when despite exhaustive consultation as to what would be required in the way of 'props,' and much time had been devoted to ensuring that everything was ready for use, Mrs. 'C' suddenly decided at the Dress Rehearsal, that she wanted a bucket, with which to milk the cow! Not only that, but it had to be a wooden bucket – not easily obtainable, at night, in Wallingford!!!! Having *stormed out* of the Masonic Hall and striding past the Fire Station, the designer was persuaded by a very diplomatic envoy, *coasting* along beside him in her car, to return to an apologetic Producer – chastened by his uncharacteristic display of temper, he set to work and produced the required bucket. So much for 'theatrical temperament,' 'pathetic pride,' and 'pointless gestures.'

The last occasion that I recall when personalities clashed was more recently, when during a rehearsal, the leading lady objected to the designers presence. This experienced and talented actress claimed that "he made her nervous." Possibly, he was unsympathetic to the situation, which led to an unfortunate exchange of 'words' and her 'walking out.' That evening, there was certainly more *drama* off stage than the script required. Subsequently, mutual respect and accord was re-established and happily, they remain the best of friends.

Whereas it is understandable, and perhaps, even excusable, that on these occasions of extreme tension, *tantrums* should occur, and thereby provide a *safety valve* for the actor, this sort of behaviour is totally unprofessional and should not be indulged to the detriment of others. Everyone involved in a Production is working under the same pressures and *self indulgence* has no place in the Theatre. Fortunately, in the main, The Players have an enviable reputation for avoiding overt demonstrations of *theatrical temperament*.

#### A Home at last

The various vicissitudes affecting the Players during this peripatetic existence were finally resolved at a meeting in the old Church School in Benson Lane, Crowmarsh, where it was decided to explore the possibilities of purchasing a property in order that the Society should have a permanent home. After viewing many venues in the centre of town, which the sub-committee, elected for this purpose, considered unsuitable, eventually in 1975, this long sought after aspiration was accomplished by the players buying the Corn Exchange in the Wallingford Market Square. A team set to work on possible designs under the enthusiastic leadership of Denis Wood, and the Society, motivated by John Warburton, set about a massive fund raising in order to make this dream a reality.

One of the grandest buildings to be used by the Players, as a dressing room during the Nativity Plays in the Square and for both rehearsals and performance, was the lovely and historic seventeenth century Town Hall in the Market Place. In the late 1970's as part of the Societies Fund Raising on behalf of the Corn Exchange Theatre, a series of one act plays were performed here. On another memorable evening, a beautifully costumed *Edwardian Soiree* took place. The producer wanted the costumes to be in *soft shades* which she described as *weak tea and coffee*. The ever obliging wardrobe mistress, the most talented Therèse Lewis, set to work and literally dyed the required dresses with tea and coffee, in order to achieve the perfect result. An added bonus was the delicate fragrance which wafted towards the audience. It was such an enchanting occasion that all those present, both performers and audience, were extremely reluctant to leave and bring the evening to a close.

In 1978 during the evening of 9th December, Patrick Williams hosted Sir Peter Hall, Director of the National Theatre, at the official opening Ceremony of the completed Corn Exchange Theatre.

In the early 1980's, the garden and coach house behind the Corn Exchange were acquired by the Players for the construction of much needed rehearsal and storage space. Within these extensions a proper Wardrobe was planned. However, it was not long before this outgrew the

space afforded and Jan Castle, our current Wardrobe Mistress and Guardian of this Treasure Trove, negotiated with Ken Lester for storage space in his Hither Croft warehouse. This eternal problem of never enough space, which affects every theatre in the country, still remains to be resolved.

Trevor Twentyman. Sotwell Manor. 1943 - 1996

Addendum. Address given at the funeral of Frances Curtis in Brightwell Parish Church, June 1983

‘One man in his time plays many parts’ - As you like it. Act II Scene 7

Others are more qualified than I to speak of the multiplicity of interests which occupied Frances Curtis during her time in Brightwell-cum-Sotwell. Her work with the Red Cross and the W.R.V.S. Her untiring devotion to committee work and to school management meetings. However, it was her overriding passion for the theatre which led her to the founding the Sinodun Players which ensures her memory in Wallingford. I, among many, had our lives indelibly changed through her influence. The first production of Cinderella in the village hall and the subsequent meeting with her opened up new vistas and new loves which have remained unassailable ever since. Her contagious enthusiasm, the untiring giving of herself and her incredible talent were the hallmark of Mrs. ‘C’ as she was soon to be known. For she was indisputedly a ‘professional’ and somehow whatever she touched became enhanced with her distinctive polish.

Despite her involvement in numerous activities in the area, for much of the time she WAS the Sinodun Players and under her guidance the society blossomed and flourished. The Slade End garden parties have now become synonymous with legend. ‘Tentative’ pantomimes and ‘sit coms’ matured into some of the most outstanding productions of any comparable society. All the while she guided and cajoled, making her home ‘open house’ for everyone within the Society, funding and supporting every venture, always eager to explore new venues and fresh experiences. The Festival of Britain, the Coronation and the anniversary of the granting of Wallingford’s Charter, all provided opportunities of pageants which today would seem impossible to stage, yet it never occurred to her to hesitate. Each success was only surpassed by the following triumph, whether the location was the castle grounds, the river, a local church or a neighbourhood garden, her interpretation of ‘all the world’s a stage’ was to be exploited to the full and often resulted in her directing a cast of hundreds. Together with all the attendant problems and difficulties, yet always, she remained fully in command.

But what about Mrs. ‘C’ herself? I have one favourite memory of her. Not the dynamic producer rushing about, or the wardrobe mistress always with a mouth full of pins, not the motherly figure ever watchful, ever ready with encouragement and understanding help. For me, I shall always remember a slight, grey haired figure in skirt and jumper with a silk scarf round her shoulders, being reluctantly dragged on stage following the last performance of a show. It was always the same, it was what we always expected, it was what we wanted and it always concluded with her saying that we had been ‘such a lovely audience.’

That was the face she presented to the world. In her husband, ‘the Gov’ she had a devoted partner and his forbearance and support enabled her to lavish hospitality on a scale we have not seen since. Her mother, ‘Gran’ was a further source of delight. When they were gone her own light was somehow dimmed and the end of a ‘golden era’ was in sight. Like so many others in the profession she possessed an inner faith which was to stand her in good stead through the various personal sorrows she was to endure. The strength of this belief was far more than the regular churchgoing which was her practice, and never was this better demonstrated than in the reverence and sensitivity of her presentation of the Nativity Plays for which she became justly, and widely acknowledged. They were, for her, an offering of worship and a revelation of her own uninhibited faith. Through her instinct and her art these experiences were often a source of inspiration for many. I remember a dear old nun from St Mary’s Convent at Wantage coming up with tears in her eyes and a blessing on her lips ‘for the beauty and holiness’ that we had been inspired to portray. It was not only professional

expertise that had guided the directors hand. It was also a deep and abiding personal faith.

No doubt there are many stories, many anecdotes and many memories. Some, we all share, and there will be others which we privately hold dear. Rightly we mourn her passing, but the abiding memories can not be of sorrow. She lived a full life, giving out far more than we can individually appreciate. Heaven is now probably being reappraised by that eagle eye, in order to improve its style by her own inimitable touch! There was never any false reticence, neither was there any challenge too great.

Her move, to be with her family in Dorset, was a loss to us, her larger family, which has never been refilled. We are fortunate in having had her with us for so long. For benefiting so richly from her vitality, her generosity and her affection. We remember her, for her warmth and devotion with much gratitude and similar affection. In our time we may have been a 'lovely audience' but to the many whose lives she enriched through her own, she will always remain a 'lovely lady.'