

# *All Our Yesterday's*

The following article came from the magazine **COUNTRY LIFE** issue dated 27<sup>TH</sup> December 1924, which has just come to light.

## **THE BARN THEATRE, OXTED**

Oxted and Limpsfield form a pleasant residential centre beneath the Downs, which has, since the Middle Ages, possessed an individuality. In architecture, in which this is best expressed, it takes the form of timber construction, a form that has been peculiarly well continued into the present century. As a result these two villages are exceptionally picturesque, and the community sense is strongly developed among its residents.

One of the forms taken by their common activity was the formation of several dramatic societies, whose exertions were so successful that it was felt after a time that they should aspire to more permanent and less chilling accommodation than village halls. Mrs Whitmore, a leading member of one of the societies approached Sir Ernest Benn, the well known publisher, and Mr Lewis Fry, both residents at Oxted, who took the matter up with enthusiasm. The scheme for building a theatre was, from the outset, connected with the fate of an old barn at Limpsfield. At this juncture the architects, Messrs Matthew and Ridley, who had already converted a barn into a hall at West Hoathly in Sussex, were consulted. Limpsfield barn was bought for £70 and a beginning was made with the Oxted Theatre. Two dramatic societies united to give a first performance, "The School for Scandal" and "As you Like It" in the new building last spring.

No better form for a theatre in such surroundings could be imagined. Barns have been connected with the drama from very early times and have given a generic name to the profession in general. It remained to adapt the structure to its new role. Trial has proved the success with which this has been done, and the plan shows the simplicity which careful consideration of the problem evolved. Recently a simple barn theatre has been built for (Mr Maseneld at Boars Inn), where another community has earned world-wide celebrity.

From outside, the building presents agreeable sweeps of roof, Sussex antique sand-faced tiles being mixed with the tiles of the old barn to the extent of about 40 per cent. As the weight of the roof is taken by the timber posts, the walls, of Burgess Hill bricks, needed to be only 11ins thick and hollow, the upper half of the walls being of elm weather boarding. The windows are steel casements in oak frames with lead lights.

At the entrance end two external flights of steps conduct to the gallery, at the back of which is a scenery store in the slope of the roof over the entrance. The strong lines of these help the design not a little. It had been intended to have a projecting timber and wattle porch in the centre

of this end but it was eliminated, with a gain in simplicity and, of course economy of costs.

The total expense of the building, including the purchase of the barn, but excluding stage lighting and seating came to £3,300. It is extremely doubtful whether a hall of such size, let alone of such charm, could be built exclusively of new materials at such small cost.

The interior is simply the old barn with new limewashed brick walls. The main posts and the studding above them are original, but the tie-beams are new, since the old ones were not long enough by 2ft to span the required width of the auditorium. The brick bases of the posts, too, are higher than were their counterparts, as the height of the proscenium opening necessitated a slightly increased altitude. Some apprehension was felt as to the acoustics of the barn. To evade the risk of air traps in the roofs of the aisles, the studding of the walls below the clerestory was therefore left unfilled. Whether as result of this or not, every word spoken can be heard. The necessity for the floor being used for dances precluded any ramping of the auditorium, and demanded a specially good form of flooring, but the gallery at the back is steeply ramped, and the stage has a 3in fall to the front.

The "business end" of the theatre is constructed on modern principles, the stage being approachable from the audience by a broad flight of oak steps. This is rendered possible by the elimination of footlights. The lighting system was the peculiar care of Mr Fitt, a resident, who controls that element at Covent Garden Opera House. Spaces for stowing flats between acts are provided along the side walls of the wings. In the middle of the back wall are double folding doors communicating with a passage leading straight to the stage door beyond. These can, if necessary, be folded right back, and the far door be opened, giving a glimpse of the downs at the back. The two central leaves of the main door are constantly used as practicable doors for performances, surrounded by painted flats. Although there are no flies proper, and thus no means of raising and lowering flats or drops for changes of scene, there is ample space for battens or flood lights above the proscenium opening, and for rings of bulbs to give top lighting between the fly strips.

The dressing-rooms lie either side of the passage at the back of the stage, and could accommodate a maximum of sixty performers between them. The effective proscenium curtain is the work of Mr Lewis Fry. It is of canvas dyed blue and stencilled with red and gold figures. The floor covering is secured in an ingenious manner by a zigzag arrangement of cord and eyes, so that it can be pulled taut over its whole width, but be instantly loosed when it is required to remove it.

There are several such instances of careful thought in this building. All concerned deserve congratulation, especially the foreman of Messrs. James Bodle, the contractors, to whom the admirable treatment of both timber and brick is largely due; and the architects for a most ingenious and pleasing structure.