

The Little Theatre Guild



A Brief History **1946 - 2016**

by Michael Shipley

Introduction

When the National Committee decided to commission a history of the Little Theatre Guild to celebrate the 70th Anniversary, there was no one better qualified to perform this important task than Michael Shipley.

The history contains many notable events along the way and chronicles how the Guild has grown and evolved to become an important organisation in the world of amateur theatre. In a modern world where staging plays involves many new technical innovations and we are drawn into the digital world, the original objects of the Guild, as agreed at the inauguration meeting at the Waldorf Hotel, London on 18th May 1946 still hold good.

The Little Theatre Guild continues to promote close co-operation of the member theatres, working together for mutual benefit. Through membership of the Guild, theatres all over the UK have a unique opportunity to regularly network with their fellow members. They can access advice on a whole range of topics to assist with managing their own theatre and help is on hand through the structure of the National Committee, Regional Secretaries and local theatre LTG Reps.

The Little Theatre Guild is still growing and each year we manage to add to the membership numbers, this is testimony to the value that many theatres place on being part of a truly special organisation.

This history is a fascinating read and is full of milestones and memories. It catalogues events and issues from around the UK. It gives you a true understanding of how the Guild has evolved and is great potted history to have in this our 70th birthday year.

Our 70th Anniversary is a special occasion and will be celebrated 8th – 10th April 2016 at the National Conference to be held at the Crescent Theatre, Birmingham. Theatres large and small will come together over that weekend, not just to talk business, attend forums and workshops, but to toast the Little Theatre Guild and look forward to the next 70 years!

Andrew Lowrie
Chairman

The Little Theatre Guild

A brief history of 70 years

1946 to 2016

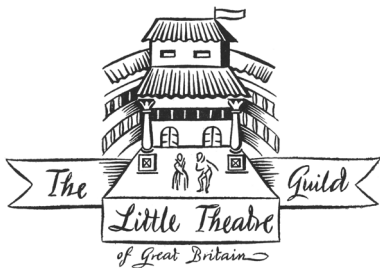
By Michael Shipley

The paperwork of the last 70 years has not been thrown away; it is there for some keen historian in the future to pore over. It may be getting damp, but for the moment I am going to leave it undisturbed. The following potted history has been put together purely from the Guild's Annual Reports going back to 1946/47, from Guild Newsletters, and of course from my own memories.

Foundation

Attempts in the late 1930s to form a movement of Little Theatres to serve their special practical and artistic needs came abruptly to an end with the outbreak of war. In 1945, when 'normal' life began to be resumed, the movers and shakers tried again - very successfully it now transpires. The inauguration took place at the Waldorf Hotel, London on **18th May 1946** with the following objects:

To promote closer co-operation between the little theatres constituting its membership, to act as a co-ordinating and representative body on behalf of the little theatres and generally to maintain and further the highest standards in the art of theatre as practised by the little theatres, and to assist in and encourage the establishment of other little theatres.



There were nine founder member theatres. Which of course means that there were at least nine keen theatre practitioners across the nation who had the foresight and drive both to create the Guild, and to keep it moving constantly forward in those early years. The names particularly of **Alfred Emmet** (Questors Theatre), **Norman Leaker** (Crescent Theatre, Birmingham), **John English** (Highbury Little Theatre), **L du Garde Peach** (Great Hucklow Village Players) and **Peter Trower** (People's Theatre, Newcastle) stand out - but not in the early Annual Reports. Everything was very democratically anonymous. The Chairmanship rotated between the member theatres, while Questors acted as Secretary. But the personalities

of these early pioneers clearly stand out when reading of the managerial topics being dealt with, and the artistic aspirations being promoted. In the first years, the Guild commissioned a new play, organized a script and library service, negotiated special royalty arrangements with leading agents, negotiated with HM Revenue to ease the collection of Entertainments Duty, and established contact with national and international bodies.

Growth

Membership of the Guild grew steadily - four theatres joined in the first year, then two more, and by **1951** there were seventeen members. The roll-call is impressive: Bolton Little Theatre, Bradford Civic Playhouse, Crescent Theatre, Crompton Stage Society, Great Hucklow Village Players, Highbury Theatre Centre, Halifax Thespians, Loft Theatre Leamington, Leicester Drama Society, Maddermarket Theatre Norwich, Newport Playgoers Society, People's Theatre Newcastle, Questors Theatre, Stockport Garrick, Tavistock Repertory Company (Tower Theatre), The Unnamed Society Manchester and Wigan Little Theatre. Three of these theatres no longer exist, three have left the Guild but are still happily ploughing on, and the rest hopefully will be celebrating the Guild's 70th anniversary at Crescent Theatre in April 2016. Clearly the Guild was serving a useful purpose for its members, and providing opportunities for social and educational interaction. The format established in 1946 - regular meetings at member theatres and helpful informative newsletters - continues relatively little changed to this day, which presumably means that it still works satisfactorily.

Snapshot:

Let us take a look at **1952**. Membership of the Guild was by now clearly confined to *Independent play-producing organizations controlling their own established theatres*. An applicant for membership must satisfy the Guild not only as to its status, but also as to its non-commercial character and general aims, and as to its artistic standards.

New applicants indeed had to be vouched for by two existing members, a lengthy process involving visits to productions, written reports, and considerable discussion. It could take many months for a new applicant to be considered, and the stringent tests applied by some assessors must have led to a few rejections! A trawl through the archives to discover unsuccessful applicants, however, would be counter-productive today. The important fact was that in the early years the artistic endeavours of the members were of the highest importance. One only has to read the lists of plays produced by member theatres, and look at the topics covered at conferences to appreciate this. In 1952,

conference topics included *The Actor's Study of his Part*, and *The Advantages and Disadvantages of an Elizabethan Stage*, with more mundane topics like *Budgetting the Show* and *Box Office Arrangements* relegated to group discussions.

The pattern of a conference was by now established. Delegates met on Saturday afternoon, often in a room provided by the local authority like a council chamber (!), to discuss Guild business and policy. In those days most delegates would arrive by train, and of course the services were frequent and punctual! There would be a civic tea for refreshment before dispersal to hotels. In the evening the delegates saw the host theatre's production, followed by a supper, and tours of the theatre and inspection of the stage, equipment and other facilities of the theatre. (Some theatres may have had a licensed bar, but serious drinking and useful chat went on in the hotel until the early hours.) The Sunday sessions included a critical discussion of the production seen on the previous evening, with an account of the history and working methods of the host theatre. This was followed by one or two speeches by guest lecturers, and group discussions, interrupted by a lunch, and concluding with afternoon tea before everyone made their (often) long way home.

"There can be no doubt about the value of such discussions", wrote Alfred Emmet as Secretary in 1952, "and their stimulating effect on all practitioners of the theatre. The stimulus of contact with large numbers of other little theatres doing the same sort of work in perhaps not quite the same way is great, and it is hoped that member theatres will increasingly take advantage of the opportunity by sending representatives from an ever-widening circle of their own members." He also noted: "The increase in rail fares is proving in some degree a deterrent to attendance at Guild meetings."

Artistic Standards

It is clear that over the coming years the tricky question of 'artistic standards' was very much on the minds of the leaders of the Guild. As membership grew, it became apparent that generally standards of presentation and choice of repertoire varied considerably over the country. Not every member wanted to concentrate on Shakespeare, Ibsen and Shaw, or had acting members and audiences that really enjoyed this area of the repertoire, and which had been part of the core inspiration of the founders of the Guild. I suppose that one can see a parallel in the work of the BBC which equally struggled to find a balance between 'culture' and the common taste as the years went on. The one constant in the Guild however would be the aspiration to attain the highest standards possible with whatever play one chose to present. "Every Little Theatre might

do well, once a year, to ask itself whether its artistic standards have been maintained as high as could be, and what steps could be taken to improve them". In 1959, the Annual Report states: "The policy of the Guild in admitting only those little theatres that fulfil its requirements in regard to status and artistic standards and are prepared to maintain high standards of play choice and production, ensures that all members have 'qualified' and co-operate in the life of the Guild. A rapid growth in membership per se is no part of the Guild's aim." The Guild then was definitely quite an exclusive club, and its members were proud of the fact.

New Writing

The presentation of New Plays however remained another constant theme in the early years (and indeed remains so today). Finding a new script worthy of production was as difficult in 1953 as it is today. Alfred Emmet summed up the problem: "The dreary fact is that probably 99 out of every 100 of these clamatory typescripts will never reach rehearsal, and 98 of them are probably not worth production by any standards." No amateur theatre could be expected then or now to undertake a serious sifting process. He advocated encouraging budding playwrights to join theatre groups so that they could get their work put on stage as a local product which an audience might take to. Failing this, Guild members were urged to recommend any new work they had found worthwhile. In 1960 it was reported that the by now 24 members of the Guild had that season between them presented nine new plays, organized two original play competitions, and one New Play Festival.

The Guild itself has tried commissioning new plays, running play-writing competitions for one-act plays and full-length plays, organizing the 40th anniversary New Plays Festival, promoting New Writing seminars, and joining national ventures like the BT Biennial, all with relatively minimal success.

Keith Thompson (Barn Theatre, Welwyn) in recent times regularly filled the pages of the Newsletter with news of new plays. It is perhaps only now, with the growth of self-expression in the arts, the proliferation of writers groups, and increasing localism in reaction to the electronic metropolitan dominance of popular culture that new writing is taking a regular place in the work done by many Guild members. The shape of new writing today is clearly different from that envisaged by the early Guild theatres, but surely its present growth would have pleased the founding spirits.

Attendance at Meetings

By 1954 the growing size of the Guild had raised a new problem for the enthusiastic founders – the failure of members to participate fully. "It should

be remembered that once admitted to membership each theatre is expected to do its best to maintain high standards of play choice and production and to contribute to the general life of the Guild”.

The Rules were amended laying down that a member theatre that failed to be represented at three consecutive meetings without a satisfactory explanation to the Guild should cease to be a member. But there are very few records of guilty members being struck off, despite the admonitory tone adopted by the secretaries in the annual reports. Tolerance reigned, and slackers were deemed to have resigned, even when the only evidence was failure to pay the annual membership fee and a total breakdown of communications. The rule still stands to this day, and for a few members is still honoured mostly by the breach! Failure to attend meetings, to learn and to network, is their loss; but even if membership benefits are limited to written communications, that is at least a small gain for the member theatres whose participation in Guild events is minimal.

Conferences however continued to draw large numbers of delegates – for example, in March 1961 at Talisman Theatre, Kenilworth 21 theatres (out of 24 member theatres) provided 80 delegates, a tally that would be highly respectable 50 years later!. The host theatre made ALL the arrangements, including the booking of the hotel(s), guest speakers, and the provision of all meals except for the now standard civic tea reception at the Town Hall. At Talisman, the theme of the conference was ‘The Work of Berthold Brecht’, with two guest speakers (Martin Esslin & Michael Mellinger), and excerpts from two plays provided by members of Crescent and Highbury Theatres. The play presented by Talisman was *Blood Wedding*. No wonder so many delegates attended!

Providing Technical Assistance

The Guild from the beginning has been advising its members on how to cope with the difficulties of running their theatres as a business, and in **1958** it reported a significant development on the question of local rates. At that time, the Scientific Societies Act 1843 was still in force, giving total exemption from rates to ‘scientific societies’. Loft Theatre, Leamington fought a test case to establish that the practice of drama was a ‘fine art’ within the meaning of the Act, a decision accepted by the Revenue. (A few years later Bradford Civic Playhouse established that film also was a fine art.) At the same time, however, the Rating and Valuation Act 1955 gave local authorities discretion to remit rates in full or in part for charities; as the new rating lists were established, it was clear that there was no standard across the country for dealing with Little Theatres. The Guild tried its best to advise

its members through this and other minefields. In 1959 it advised: “Any member still paying income tax has been recommended to seek legal opinion as to its position under the Recreational Charities Act 1958, as it is possible they may be able to claim repayment of income tax paid retrospectively for all years back to 1946-47, provided claims are made before 13th March 1960”.

There have been many similar legal topics considered by the Guild secretariat and at conference sessions since then. The practice of issuing Guild Letters (an early form of Newsletter and Grey Paper) grew steadily from the late 1950s, disseminating information, and for the exchange of views and information, ensuring continuous contact between members. However, in 1962, it was noted: “Very little information has been passed to the secretary for publication with the result that Guild Letters, which ought to be an important feature of the Guild’s functions, have not fulfilled their purpose. It is hoped that this matter will be remedied in the future, but the remedy lies in members’ own hands.”

Performing Rights

The difficulties experienced in obtaining performing rights to plays are nothing new. Back in the 50s, agents, hoping for West End or Broadway productions were unwilling to allow any other production; and managements were buying rights and sitting on plays, refusing to allow anyone else to produce them. The advice then, as now, was to challenge all such refusals, and to try to persuade agents to give sympathetic consideration to an application to perform to keep the best in theatre alive. The situation is not quite as rigid today, and thanks in some measure to efforts by the Guild from time to time to talk to the agents, the rights to most plays are rarely withheld, unless a theatre is in the immediate vicinity of London or a regional tour venue. The problems mainly arise now when keen theatres want to present a new play when the professional sector has not finished exploiting the play’s financial potential. The agents can obviously still make more money for their clients from a professional run than from a week’s amateur production.

LTG Representatives

It was only in **1958** that the Annual Report started to list the names and contact details of the LTG Representatives (then called Correspondents), and added to the list of plays produced a short resume of the highlights of the season. The duties of the LTG Rep were not outlined then in the Annual Report, but were clearly set out in a handbook. Until then, theatre secretaries had dealt with all communications to and from the Guild. The

appointment of a special LTG Rep at each theatre, preferably a member of the theatre's management committee, was clearly felt to be the most efficient way to involve the member theatre in the activities of the Guild, and to get the benefits of the Guild across to the general membership of each theatre.

To this day, the choice of the right person to fill this role is vital for the member theatre to maximize the value it gets from being a member of the Guild.

Another Snapshot

In the 1950s we had an Overseas Corresponding Member – Bulawayo Little Theatre, Southern Rhodesia. In 1958 they presented *Hamlet*, and reported: "This is believed to be the first time that *Hamlet* has been acted by an all-African cast. The opening performance was given on an open stretch of ground beneath a tree for a stage to an audience of some 300 African school-children." Sadly, by 1960 all contact with Bulawayo LT was lost.

Membership of other bodies

From the outset the Guild has been keen to be part of the wider world of drama. Its membership of (amongst others) the British Drama League, the Standing Conference of Drama Associations and IATA has enabled it to promote the best in drama at home and overseas. It relied largely on the efforts of Alfred Emmet (Questors), followed by Marjorie Havard (Caxton) and now **Anne Gilmour** (Questors), who all held important roles in IATA.

Getting the voice of the amateur movement heard at the Arts Council, however, was a different matter. The Annual Report of 1960 reported: "The Guild's effort to present evidence to the Arts Council Committee Report on the Housing of the Arts in the Provinces was turned down on the grounds that the committee was 'not concerned with the housing needs of amateurs', having considered that little theatres might provide centres for visiting professional companies."

Another Snapshot

In **1961** the Guild issued a Questionnaire to ascertain the extent of funding by local authorities given to member theatres in the various quests to raise money to improve, indeed to rebuild, their theatre buildings. The result was most encouraging. Sixteen theatres had received cash grants ranging from £5 to £10,000, producing a total of nearly £26,000; three theatres were receiving annual production grants; one theatre had obtained a loan of £30,000 repayable over 30 years. "It is heartening to see what response there has been in these days which are so often described as philistine and purely materialistic." Knowledge of what was happening across the country was always

of great assistance when pursuing a request for funding. Thirty years or so later, when the National Lottery was functioning strongly, the Guild was able to assist by collating the range of successful (and unsuccessful) applications.

Stagnation and Gloom?

In the early 60s the Annual Reports were not particularly upbeat about the state of the Guild. Membership was rather static, several years passing without the addition of any new members. Attendance at conferences was declining, the contribution of information to Guild Newsletters was minimal, and there was the familiar moan about the lack of younger people putting in an appearance at meetings. No doubt member theatres were struggling to retain their own audiences as television took an increasingly mesmeric hold on the population, but there was no sign that the artistic ventures across the country were dumbing down.

The three conferences in 1963/4 presented plays of historical merit (*Dandy Dick* at Masque Theatre, *Edward II* at Loft Theatre, and *Servant of Two Masters* at Caxton), with lively and appropriate lectures accompanying them. Attendances were growing and younger people were making their faces known and their views felt. "It is hardly possible to put too much stress on the question of Conferences since these are the only occasions for members to get together to fulfil the objects for which the Guild was created. An organization which concerns itself with a living matter such as theatre is hardly likely to succeed on the distribution of pieces of paper alone and the fact that Guild members have demonstrated fairly clearly their renewed interest in meeting each other is encouraging." In 1965, applications for membership were received from Southport, Bristol Arts, Chester, Nottingham and Bingley, so at last things were on the move again. With Wokingham arriving in **1966**, the Guild had reached **30 members**.

(I am reminded that the first conference I attended was in June 1965 at Questors Theatre, after my own theatre, Bolton, had hosted a conference in April 1965. I was hooked! This was the infamous occasion when after the performance the delegates were held back before supper while Alfred Emmet gave us an extended tour of the new building. By the time we all reached the Stanislavski Room where the planned sumptuous repast had been laid out for us, there was absolutely nothing left to eat. 'Hordes of hungry Questors' had descended on what they thought was their after show party!)



21st Birthday Celebrations

In March 1967 delegates assembled at Crescent Theatre, Birmingham (where else?) to celebrate. There was a big luncheon in Birmingham Town Hall on the Sunday, with prominent guests, and the presentation of Honorary Associate Memberships to Norman Leaker, Margaret Hancock, Alfred Emmet, John English and Peter Trower. Crescent presented *Antony and Cleopatra*, and also demonstrated on Sunday morning the flexibility of their newly built theatre by turning it into 'the round' almost before our very eyes! Of course, the theatre on Cumberland Street has now been demolished to make way for Crescent's present splendid home; but happy memories still remain!

Marjorie Havard and Robert Tebbett

As we move into the 1970s we increasingly see the influence on the Guild of **Marjorie Havard** (Caxton), by now its hard working secretary. The Annual Report became increasingly a Year Book recording the activities of the Guild members. The Guild newsletters became increasingly informative, as Marjorie busied herself with the activities of associated bodies, in particular IATA. As well as conferences, the Guild started to organize special projects, the first of which was a weekend drama course at The Midland Arts Centre in April 1973, dealing with 'The Actor/Director Relationship' under the leadership of Philip Hedley, with accommodation at Birmingham University. Gradually these special courses became a regular feature of Guild activity, but of course it meant an increasing work-load for the secretary, a load that Marjorie never complained about – she was in her element travelling around the country organizing and promoting the Guild. She was also assiduous in preparing Questionnaires for LTG Reps to complete, and in this way she built up a wealth of knowledge of the amateur theatre that was unrivalled in the country. Her contacts with IATA also meant that member theatres would regularly be asked to entertain visitors from abroad, particularly the USA, who were on fact-finding missions related to amateur theatre. By 1973 she had been invited to sit on the boards of both BTA and IATA.

As the Guild membership continued to increase in number, and its activities expanded, the duties of the treasurer ceased to be passed regularly around the member theatres, and found a permanent home with **Robert Tebbett** (Highbury). Robert presided over a steady growth in membership, and also unprecedented inflation. Turnover in 1973 was £414.90, but by **1980** had nearly doubled, but then so had the balance sheet assets, and the membership had reached **40**. Robert's oratorical skills were always a highlight of the AGM when he presented the annual accounts.

In recognition of the increasing work done by these two officers, the Guild introduced an honorarium for them in each year's accounts, which continued for many years. (The present arrangement is for officers to indent for their expenses, while National Committee members are all paid something towards their travel expenses for attending meetings.)

Another Snapshot

In **July 1976** nearly every member of the Guild sent a delegate to a 30th anniversary conference at Highbury Little Theatre, Sutton Coldfield. The theme was **Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow**. Sitting in the impressive Birmingham Council Chamber, delegates listened to Alfred Emmet and John English outline some of the history and achievements of the Guild to date. Marjorie Havard then took over, asking questions like **Why are you are member? What do you expect the Guild to do for you? What are you prepared to do for the Guild?**, emphasizing the enormous amount of voluntary work involved in running the Guild. After a civic tea, delegates then moved to the theatre to see *The Venetian Twins* followed by supper.

The Sunday morning session was extremely lively when dealing with the future. Maintaining standards, attracting new members to avoid looking like an 'old boys' club', providing practical sessions at conferences, reducing the length of the business meetings, less conferences and more training weekends, closer regional co-operation, more group sessions at conferences, reducing the expense of attending – these were the eight most important topics thrown up by the delegates in open discussion. It is clear that each one of these points was addressed over the following years, creating the shape of the Guild year that we enjoy today.

The Sunday afternoon session went on to consider **The Place of the Little Theatre in Community Arts**. Very prescient!

Organisation in the Regions

Within a year of the Highbury Conference, regional meetings began, with **Patricia Clough** (Bingley) leading the way, and **Ron Barber** (Crescent) following closely. In the South, the

London members began to get together, but it took a while for a volunteer to come forward to organize, but in 1979 **Ann Matthey** (SLTC) became the Southern Region organizer. One early feature of regional activity was the growth of touring and the exchange of productions between members. For a few years theatres from each region travelled with a production to Questors Theatre in Ealing for their adventurous English Amateur Theatre Week, playing in repertoire. But the main feature of regional activities soon became established as the provider of local one-day training courses on a wide variety of subjects, artistic and administrative, tapping into regional excellence, as well as experts at home theatres. As with national conferences, the most valuable outcomes usually came from the sharing of talents, knowledge and experience.

Another Snapshot

A happy piece from the pen of Marjorie Havard, describing the Conference at Southport in June **1978**: “Southport’s presentation of *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* with its enormous cast and fabulous costumes, delighted the audience and provided a talking point throughout the remainder of the weekend. After the performance, supper was served in the theatre auditorium, followed by a delightful midnight cabaret with Verso the Clown, a taste of true professional expertise.

A lively disco then provided opportunity to gyrate until 2:00am and those who still had energy left talked until 4:00am. Those who didn’t have enough exercise at the disco (or didn’t bother to go to bed!) joined Southport’s indefatigable LTGCs (Mike and Norma Rogerson) for a walk along the pier at first light, and then dragged themselves to tours of the theatre and backstage at second light. This did not conclude the physical output, as after morning coffee, the director of *Royal Hunt* collected all survivors for an active participation session based on the techniques adopted with the cast. The oldest and youngest scaled the Andes, and subsequently rolled in the aisles, experiencing fully the rigours which the cast had undergone during rehearsals.”

32 theatres sent a record number of delegates to this conference.

the sides as soon as I lay upon it. You’ve probably guessed – if I needed to get out of it, Donald had to be summoned from next door to pull me out. If I needed the bathroom I wouldn’t have dared go on my own anyway, especially after the police had chased up and down all the corridors banging on every door. There was a reported ‘man with a knife’ looking for someone in one of the bedrooms. They wondered why there was no reply from my room – fortunately Donald ‘the elegant gentleman’ was able to convince them that his wife was unable to get out of bed unaided! Only after opening the door to show them! Not a good start to my weekend having a row of policemen laughing their socks off!! A good story though and it did enhance my weekend and my story-telling!

Patricia Clough, Bingley LT

Modernising the Rules

In **1979** it was decided to modernize the rules of the Guild. It was agreed that the Chairman should be elected in his own right (instead of by rote from his/her theatre) and should serve for two years, after serving for two years as Vice Chairman. **Geoff Bennett** (Criterion) was the first Chairman under the new rule, with **Martin Bowley** (Questors) the first elected Vice Chairman. In 1983 the Annual General Meeting was separated from the conferences, and became in many respects a meeting especially for LTG Reps, dealing with Guild business.

In 1983 the regional secretaries formally joined the national committee, and the size and shape of this organizing body continued unchanged for many years until Marjorie Havard resigned as secretary. It met four times a year to deal with Guild business, usually under the constraints of time at national conferences and seminars. As the Guild grew, new ideas abounded, and were discussed, but the time for forward planning and putting these plans into operation was restricted. In 1985 it was decided that the committee needed to devote more time each year to Guild business, free from the limitations on time of a conference or AGM agenda. An invitation from **Michael Shipley** (then retiring Chairman) to take over his house in remote Cumbria for a weekend of concentrated discussion, and forward planning, not to mention personal bonding, was eagerly accepted. The tradition continues to this day, and has clearly contributed to the cohesion of the Guild management structure over the following years as membership and the enlarged work-load continued to increase.

Vignette

These weekends do help us to bond really well and one glimpses facets of friends which hitherto

Vignette

I believe it was my first conference as Chairman of the Guild in 1976 when Donald and I stayed at The Mount Pleasant Hotel in London which was situated opposite the M P Post Office!! The rooms were like cells (I believe they actually were in a previous life). If you booked a double room the adjoining door was left open. This was just as well because my bed was an iron oblong which was approx. 2’ 3” wide and the mattress sagged down between

were unknown! The shy become confident, the serious are suddenly full of joy and one lady, who always appeared to be the pinnacle of respectability, related stories that could only be described, at best, as surprising and risqué!

Margaret Mann, Southport Little Theatre

1980-1981: A Busy Year's Programme

10/12 October: National Conference @ **Stockport**

Garrick Theatre;

15 November: National Seminar @ **Leicester** Little Theatre;

November: Regional Meeting @ **Bingley** Little Theatre;

November: Regional Meeting @ **Studio** Theatre, Salisbury;

10 January: National Seminar @ **Crescent** Theatre;

January: Regional Meeting @ **Bradford** Playhouse;

February: Regional Meeting @ **Oast** Theatre, Tonbridge;

March: Regional Meeting @ **Bolton** Little Theatre;

27/29 March: National Conference @ **Progress** Theatre, Reading;

28 April: National Seminar @ **Leicester** Little Theatre;

26/28 June: National Conference @ **Dolman** Theatre,

Newport, Gwent;

July: Regional Meeting @ **Teddington** Theatre Club.

The invitations extended to non-member little theatres, particularly in the Southern Region, to attend regional meetings produced a positive flood of new applications for membership in 1981/2, bringing the total number of Guild members up to **52**. This resulted in an Annual Report 84 pages long, full of information.

By **1983** the number of Guild activities had been scaled down – was there too much going on for the theatres' members? Each region was now arranging its own annual regional conference, and seminars, while national conferences were reduced to two, with just one national seminar. One reason for this diversification was to enable the smaller little theatres to participate more fully in the life of the Guild; after all, hosting a national conference had been described as 'ordeal by hospitality', and beyond the capacity of some small, especially rural, theatres.

The experience of hosting a conference, large or small, usually left a host theatre exhausted, but infinitely the wiser and renewed. It drew in the scattered membership, usually brought about a thorough spring-clean, bonded the volunteers, and left the host theatre acutely aware that it was not alone in the world! Some theatres positively thrived on the experience, and were always ready to offer

their spaces for meetings. Other members resisted all blandishments, finding many excuses to avoid hosting even the smallest of Guild meetings. At least they could not say that they were never asked!



Improving the Image; Planned Expansion

During his years as Chairman, **Martin Bowley** persuasively argued that the Guild should actively pursue a positive policy of expansion, to draw into the fold as many as possible of the little theatre groups across the country which enjoyed the privileges and responsibilities of owning and controlling their own premises. In **1986-1987**, for its 40th anniversary, the Guild produced a new logo, and planned an ambitious national initiative.

The **New Plays Festival** ran from September 1986 to October 1987, and was sponsored principally by The Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. Member theatres were encouraged to present one or more new plays in their season, to encourage new writing, especially of plays that amateur companies could confidently tackle, and which perhaps needed casts larger than most professional companies could afford to hire. Original writing was the main theme, but premieres of foreign plays were also encouraged.

The Festival was launched officially on 13/14 February 1987 at the Queen Elizabeth Conference Centre, Westminster. Keynote speakers included Irving Wardle, Michael Billington, Clifford Williams, Olwen Wymark, Peter Whelan, Brian Burton, and Norman Holland. There was also a small Trades Exhibition. Delegates and observers attended from all corners of the country. The work of Marjorie Havard in organizing the event was prodigious.

What was the success nationwide? From a membership of 61 theatres, only 16 theatres participated in the scheme, presenting 20 new plays over the course of their seasons. The provision of a significant subsidy (from Carnegie and others) and the generous freedom from royalties given by the playwrights, were not enough to stir the imagination of those who ran the majority of the little theatres. There was also evidence that some LTG Reps were not actively promoting Guild initiatives in their theatres. (This was a feature of the later participation of the Guild in the BT Biennial

enterprise.) There were two reasons usually given for failure to participate – the new plays were not good enough for us, and our audiences would not like them! This was not the experience of those who did participate! You can lead the horses to the water but...

Irving Wardle in his opening address to the audience at the launch said: *There are people who say that (new writing) is all a question of public taste; that audiences have had enough of having their values and intelligence exercised when they have a night out; that they've swung back to following the pleasure principle – enough of the medicine, let's have some chocolate. I don't believe it. I believe that when work appears that really illuminates the world we're living in, work that adds something to our lives, then there will always be a public for it.*

Vignette

"The LTG was represented at the service of thanksgiving for Laurence Olivier in Westminster Abbey on 20th October 1989 by Brian Cooter of Lewes Theatre Club and LTG Vice Chairman. He was placed in the nave next to a non-stop Fisherman's Friend sucking Albert Finney, who explained that he had spent three weeks trying to shake off some bronchial congestion which he feared would affect his reading from Ecclesiastes."



THE LITTLE
THEATRE GUILD
OF GREAT
BRITAIN

The Birth of the official LTG Newsletter

The provision of information packed Guild Letters had until Summer 1987 been one of the arduous tasks of the secretary, and circulation was limited in effect to LTG Reps, who were expected to pass on news and information to their own theatres. **Michael Shipley** (Bolton) felt that the Guild needed a more chatty Newsletter which would appeal to a wider readership, who would be interested in news and views on amateur theatre in general, and the Guild in particular. After all, the Guild represented a special corner in the amateur world, which no other publication was addressing. He offered to take on the role of editor and producer, a role he still holds to this day!

This change was part of the re-organisation of the Guild committee at that time prompted by the election of Marjorie Havard to the position of Vice Chairman. **Ann Matthey** was elected as the new national secretary, and Marjorie continued her invaluable work as LTG PRO, a new, later official role.

The Newsletter was always intended as a service to member theatres, and their own members; it was, and is, meant to be a source of news and information of general interest, and to be mined for snippets to go into the newsletters of the theatres, if their editors so wished. (Which begs the question of whether these editors ever read it!). One item however, which invariably found its way into local newsletters was the annual **"Top of the Pops"** listing of the most popular choice of plays, and most frequently performed authors chosen by theatres. Now easily assembled by computer, the early lists were painstakingly put together from the printed Year Book. In 1986/7 *Pack of Lies* headed the list, with Hugh Whitmore tying with Alan Ayckbourn for leading playwright. (For most of the past 30 years, Shakespeare and Ayckbourn have vied for the position of most often performed playwright!) For the same year, 61 theatres presented 462 productions, selling about 466,000 seats to an average capacity of 73%, with over £1M in takings. (For 2014/15, thirty years later, the figures are: 110 members, who presented 941 productions of 618 different plays by 456 playwrights over the year. Not all theatres provided audience figures and capacity percentages; the 846 productions for which figures were given had total audiences of 618,074.) Impressive from any angle.

In 1989, Marjorie Havard, editing the Annual Report, commented: "Insufficient information is the PRO's bugbear! More theatres are urged to send their newsletters, forward planning, and future productions notices to the PRO, and in particular to notify her of any special occasions such as premieres of new plays, anniversaries, theatre developments etc." Now, isn't that a surprise! Another surprise: In the Newsletter, she wrote: "What is the problem? Your copy for the Annual Report was requested by 1st September. Only 40% of LTG Reps had responded before the postal strike. By 6th October nearly 20% were still outstanding, and your regional secretaries have been put to enormous extra trouble chasing up the slow responses. We want the report out before Christmas. If there are some embarrassing empty pages the contributors had better start preparing their excuses now!"

Marjorie was indefatigable – and in the autumn of 1988 she was presented with the Drama Magazine Amateur Theatre Award. "Dare we look forward to the day when a theatre will be named after her, like Geoffrey Whitworth? Surely no one since him has contributed so much to the movement." Then in 2006 she was made Honorary President of ITE.

Vignette

'I still recall attending with a certain amount of trepidation my first encounter with the LTG committee. It was the occasion of the 50th Anniversary and it had been suggested that our Youth Theatre should present at the Annual Conference in Leeds. Despite being respectably middle-aged I felt like a schoolboy as I was summoned into the committee room and stood before the gathered worthies rather like the small boy being asked 'When did you last see your father?' I made my pitch and was then dispatched from the noble presence to be informed later that our proposal had been approved. I don't think I took in very much about the members present except that they seemed to me very forbidding. I hope that members of our current committee are not perceived in the same way by those summoned before them but I suspect there is still some lingering awe in the system!'

Philip Bradley, People's Theatre, Newcastle

The BT Biennial

1991 was the year of the first BT Biennial. This was an exclusively LTG achievement – from getting the sponsorship from BT in the first place to encouraging the various member theatres to participate. What was created was **The Biggest World Premiere in Theatrical History**, with 50 theatres presenting John Godber's newest play specially commissioned by BT, **Happy Families**, between 12th and 28th October. BT paid for a series of master class workshops at its training college in Stone, unified art work for posters and publicity (and even T shirts which can occasionally be seen today back-stage, torn and paint-splattered), and also covered all royalties. The event did attract national publicity, enhancing the image of amateur theatre in general, and LTG members in particular, not to mention BT's commitment to the arts in the community. The BT Biennial was repeated in 1993 (with Peter Whelan's delightful comedy *Shakespeare Country*) but by now BT had widened the entry to all amateur theatre groups in the country. Chairman **John Sheppard** (Richmond Shakespeare Society) travelled the country seeing various productions, and encouraging new theatre groups to join the Guild.

The National Lottery

By **1995** the National Lottery was in full swing, and many member theatres, encouraged by national publicity, the Guild AGM and 50th Anniversary Conference and of course the Guild Newsletter, began to get their acts together to make bids. Some bids were modest, some

extremely ambitious; some were unsuccessful, but many more were very successful, the largest attracting funds for a feasibility study, which sometimes dashed all hopes, but often had a fruitful result. But there is no doubt that the arrival of the lottery enabled many members to modernize their buildings – indeed in several cases to rebuild entirely! Stoke-on-Trent Rep led the way, and after more than a year of negotiation and fund raising, they announced in April 1996 a grant of £765,000 for a brand new theatre. They were followed by Nomad Players, East Horsley. In spite of criticism in some papers that amateurs were 'stealing' money from the professionals whose grant aid was under attack, we cannot be blamed for joining them at the table of the lottery for the feast!

Many members were not unaware of certain risks. Some grandiose schemes if successful would have left them with new or revitalized buildings too large to find the manpower to run. By the end of 1997 it was reported that 55 members had made applications, and 14 had received positive results, with grants ranging from £1M plus down to £40,000. "The need for these large sums of money could be taken as evidence of how much members of the Guild have suffered over the past 25 years because of inflation, recessions, fluctuating audiences and changes to the whole pattern of recreational life. Very few theatres have been able to maintain and improve their buildings to anything like a necessary level. The Lottery grants have been described as jackpot winnings, and really every theatre getting a grant has been incredibly lucky. Ten years ago who would have believed we could have been in this position. It is a tribute to the skills of the people who run our theatres as their hobby." The final tally of successful bids was never established, but by January 1999 we knew that 22 theatres had been successful with their bids, 7 were awaiting news, 20 had had their bids rejected, while 3 had withdrawn. Another 20 theatres were still preparing their bids, but perhaps by then they were too late? "The existence of the Lottery fund has stimulated enormous activity which, whatever the outcome of the bids, has inevitably had a beneficial effect. The Guild itself is a livelier organization today, and the amateur movement will enter the Millennium with renewed vigour."

There is no doubt that the National Lottery did promote a massive amount of constructive re-thinking within member theatres. Even today, nearly twenty years later, the Newsletter continues to report regularly on ambitious schemes for the renovation of theatre buildings, coupled with fund-raising efforts to support these schemes. There can be few member theatres today that cannot proudly boast of renovations and new-builds which have significantly raised their impact in their local

communities, as well as improved the quality of their presentations.

Disability Issues, Legislation and Grey Papers

Linked to the National Lottery bonanza was the growing problem of **'Access for the Disabled'**. So many buildings in the Guild were totally without such access, and the rush was on to find funding to address the very expensive solutions that had to be found according to the law. The Newsletter starts to fill with advice and experiences from member theatres. And then there was **Health & Safety** and **Risk Assessment**. **Tom Williams** (Chesil Theatre, Winchester) and **Niall Monahan** (The Miller Centre, Caterham) became the LTG gurus on these topics, and regularly contributed useful articles to the Newsletter to assist member theatres in tackling the often contentious issues. In 2000 the **Protection of Children** became the latest hot topic! It wasn't long before the detail and proliferation of new legislation demanded a more concentrated approach if the Guild was going to be able to provide a useful service for its members, and so were created the **Grey Papers** which the Guild started to issue in addition to the Newsletters.

Eddie Redfern (Archway Theatre, Horley) started the ball rolling in August **2001** with *Children in the Theatre, Guidelines for Best Practice*, rapidly followed in the next couple of years by Grey Papers on Child Protection, the CRB, Model Conditions for Places of Entertainment, and writing Health & Safety Policies.

Grey Papers continue to be issued, and old ones revised or deleted, so that by 2016 a grand total of 25 has been reached. They are available on the Members' Section of website, easily available for those who can remember where to look!

Links with Shakespeare's Globe Theatre

It was thanks to **John Sheppard** (Richmond Shakespeare Society and Guild Chairman for three years) that we established early close links with the Globe Theatre on Bankside. John had met Patrick Spottiswood of the Globe team at a Southern Region seminar, and promptly volunteered as a Guide, even before the building we know and love today was built, and he maintained the Guild connection until his death.

The first official Guild visit was a Southern Region Meeting in June 1997, and plans quickly began to be formed for what we called 'The Globe/LTG Project' with the Director of Education Patrick Spottiswood. This would be a regular summer weekend seminar, combining education, practical tuition and of course a visit to the current production; one year for seniors, but most important, the other year for young people. **Rosemary Shaw** (Wharf Theatre, Devizes & Southern Region Secretary) undertook

most of the hard work of organizing these meetings, which rapidly became a highlight of the Guild year. The first visit was in September 1999, for a seminar on the topic of *Speaking and Performing Shakespeare*, and in 2001 the seminars became an annual event. Of course, one of the main attractions of the weekends was the availability of Bankside House providing student accommodation at very reasonable rates during the summer vacation. But early booking was essential to secure this; and early booking has not been a notable attribute of member theatres over the years, as every organizer of a Guild event will confirm.

LTG Script Service

Carl Hayhurst (Grand Theatre, Lancaster) as early as 1994 offered to set up a computerized Script service. Members were asked to do a stocktake of their scripts libraries, let Carl have the lists, so that using his computer he could find out which member had scripts to spare for particular plays, and put the parties in touch with each other. It had a slow start, and sadly never really took off. One problem was that actors preferred to work from clean scripts. The other main problem was that theatres remained ignorant of the service, despite frequent reminders of it in Newsletters. Carl still runs the service, but his lists are now considerably out of date. Hopefully it will be revived as the Guild members move heavily into revivals of play successes of yesteryear, but cannot easily find copies of old scripts in stock! Over to you!



Another Snapshot:

Looking at **1996** we see that **John Anderson** (SLTC) is Chairman, **Margaret Mann** (Southport LT) is Vice Chairman, **Barbara Watson** (Carlisle Green Room) has taken up her tenure as Secretary, **Patricia Clough** (Bingley LT) continues as Treasurer, **Marjorie Havard** is PRO, with **John Coppock** (Rugby Theatre), **Ann Matthey** (Oast Theatre) and **Brenda Nicholl** (Formby LT) the elected members, and **David Scottow** (North), **Margaret Whitehouse** (Midlands) and **Rosemary Shaw** (South) the regional secretaries. The Guild was **84** members strong.

The Chairman reported that the Guild had now

established a presence on the **internet**, and individual members were getting linked in. "It is vital that there is co-ordination of our activities in this direction to offer a useful force of information and data. The opportunities are endless and through the internet I believe we will at last be able to fulfil the dream of our founders in giving access to knowledge in a way beyond their wildest imagination", he wrote in his report.

61 theatres had attended the 50th Anniversary Conference at Leeds University.

(During this trawl through the archives, it has become increasingly apparent that committee membership has in many years been dominated by members of the Northern Region! In the Newsletter for August 1997 it was noted: "Any accusation that the Northern Mafia has taken over the Guild is strongly refuted!")

The LTG, the Internet & the Web Site

Individual members were quicker in the 90s to get on to the world-wide-web, but the Guild soon took up the challenge. It had a site in the mid 90s, and this was seriously tackled and brought up to date by **John Tappy** (Hayling Island) in 1998, and particularly after he became Guild Treasurer, the site was full of information and cross references to member theatres that he worked hard to refresh every year after the publication of the annual Year Book. It was quickly realized that keeping a web-site constantly relevant could become almost a full time job: and consequently the Guild site had its ups and downs, dependant as it was, and still is, on voluntary effort. Various willing volunteers took some of the load from John, but gradually the site began to look tired and was often out of date.

A new effort was made in 2013 to revitalize the site, spearheaded by **Kevin Spence** (Doncaster) and **Andrew Lowrie** (Crescent); professional consultants were engaged to re-design the site, and it went live in 2014 in the form that you see today. Its increasing use must tell us that it is serving the Guild well. In particular it is providing a window of opportunity for potential new members, as well as a display of much that is best in our part of the am-dram world in the UK.

"LTG Reps again were requested, no, urged, almost begged, to adopt a professional approach to their duties and in particular to respond promptly to all requests and to honour deadlines!" (from the Newsletter report on the AGM of May 1999)

The Millennium Conference

This was hosted by **Crescent Theatre, Birmingham** in June 2000. A new approach to conferences was tried out. Accommodation was secured at the adjacent hotels with extremely advantageous rates, including breakfast and free parking. The basic cost of the conference was fixed at £20, which included tickets to two different shows, all conference sessions, one free supper, and free coffee and tea throughout. For all other meals, delegates were free to sample the wide range of eateries at nearby Brindley Place. And the conference sessions were extremely wide ranging, to enable delegates to pick'n'mix as they pleased. A lot of the preliminary work for this ambitious event had been done by Ron Barber, but sadly he died just a few months before it took place.

Was this new approach what the delegates and members really wanted? Sadly it would appear not. Only 42 theatres (out of 89 members) supported the conference, sending just 111 delegates, far short of what the organizers anticipated. The experiment has not been repeated, as we have continued with the tried and tested format, albeit now on a reduced scale of only one National Conference each year, and a Regional Conference to supplement it. The Globe weekends continued in tandem until the year of the Olympics, and then they too began to suffer a decline in attendance. Clearly in the year of the 70th anniversary, this traditional format for Guild activity needs to be seriously reviewed. Might the answer lie with social media? The reasons that have been advanced are many:

*Our theatres are so busy being run by fewer people than ever that we cannot find the time to attend;

*The cost and stress of travel is too much to put up with unless you are retired;

*The cost of a weekend away is too high, when set against the value to be obtained from the conference.

Discuss!

The Emphasis on Youth Theatre

With the arrival on the committee of **Philip Bradley** (People's Theatre) as Vice Chairman in 1999, the Guild took an increasingly hard look on how it could encourage and possibly co-ordinate Youth Theatre activities across the membership, appointing Philip as Youth Co-ordinator. Many members of course had their Youth Theatre groups, some flourishing, some languishing. Some members had no youth activities at all. All members acknowledged however, that Youth Theatre was really vital for the long term survival of their theatres. Regional youth seminars were organized in 1999, and national funding was obtained for festivals of youth work, but getting youth leaders

together, even to respond to initiatives proved to be a very hard task. For the next 15 years the Guild has continued to try to provide assistance and encouragement for Youth Theatre groups, but has yet to find the right forum for this, as proposed meetings have regularly been cancelled for lack of support. Of course, it is possible to view the situation as one where youth groups are so busy that their theatres either do not need any guidance and fresh opportunities or cannot find the time and money to take advantage of them. There of course is the exception of the Globe Theatre youth weekends, which do appear to fill a useful place.

The Millennium Questionnaire

Only 65% of the membership responded: from these replies we ascertained that –

** There was total confusion on the question of Council Tax Relief, both at member theatres and obviously with Local Authorities, with no clear indication of whether mandatory or concessionary relief was being obtained;*

** Nearly all theatres found that apart from help with Lottery applications, contact with Regional Arts Boards was a waste of time;*

** A mere handful of theatres had established any meaningful relationship with their MP;*

** Provision for people with special needs was progressing very slowly.*

In general, the response to the questionnaire was not representative enough to give the Guild valuable statistics for its contribution to the Government Green Paper on Culture and Creativity.

But we did learn that:

** Some theatres were paying royalties as heavily as £10,000, while others got away with as little as £150;*

** 84% of members were registered charities;*

** 40% were registered for VAT;*

** 47% had a Studio or second performing space;*

** 83% had a website;*

Gradually since then the Guild has gathered its statistics from the increasingly detailed information requested for the Annual Reports.

Relationship Meetings and Regional Hubs

In 2000 it was decided to hold a sequence of 'Relationship Meetings' in various theatres across the regions, to meet not only LTG Reps, but also Chairmen, Secretaries and Treasurers, for a frank exchange of views about the value of membership of the Guild to its members theatres. There were six meetings in the Spring of 2001 alone. The comments made gave the national committee a mountain of information to mull over. One fact to emerge was the surprise of visiting Chairmen,

Secretaries and Treasurers to learn of the width of what the Guild was doing, and what it had to offer to members. A few were so ignorant that it was amazing that they had been persuaded to attend! They left the meetings duly enlightened. The most important result perhaps of these meetings was the start of the Grey Papers, particularly relating to Children in Performance and the Criminal Records Bureau, as well as a detailed submission (without statistics!) to the Government Green Paper on 'Culture and Creativity', prepared by Tom Williams.

There was also debate on whether the Guild should be re-branded: some thought that the name *Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain* was antiquated, emphasizing a quaintness of an era long gone, but on the whole most people thought that a new logo would be sufficient. It took another three years before one could be agreed, following a Guild-wide competition!



There was a second round of Relationship Meetings started in 2005, to which new Reps and new theatre personnel were very welcome; and of course more ideas were aired which helped the committee to plan ahead constructively. It emerged at one meeting for Youth Leaders that only 25% of the delegates had seen the LTG Newsletter, none had heard of the Globe Theatre events, and none knew the identity of their LTG Rep! Food for thought.

After a third round of meetings in 2010, it was decided to change the geographical boundaries of the regions to even out the allocation of theatres, and to rename the Midlands Region as the enlarged Central Region. It was also decided to create within and across the regions some 18 small 'hubs', to encourage mutual co-operation and possibly the exchange of productions. Some of these 'hubs' got off to a flying start, and are still active today. Some took more time to organize themselves, and some just fizzled out. A lot of the success or failure must have been due to geography – the theatres in dense urban areas and close proximity with significant competition seem to have done best, while those serving the rural areas found it hard to get together for a common interest. Of course, the presence of an active promoter made a big difference!

Five years later, the time has come round to repeat the Relationship Meetings; and to meet new LTG Reps and new Theatre Chairmen, Treasurers and Secretaries, as well as youth leaders.

Strengthening the Committee

In 2003 it was decided that the committee could usefully be enlarged by appointing in addition to a PRO, a National Liaison Officer, whose role would be to liaise with and to familiarize himself with, and indeed to work together with a variety of national theatre bodies. The ideal candidate for this role was of course **Tom Williams**, and he has been re-elected each year since then. The Guild has established most friendly relations with The Theatres Trust (whose current Director Mhora Samuel is a regular attendee at our conferences), with ABTT (the Association of British Theatre Technicians), with UK Theatre, and with the Theatres Safety Committee, upon which Tom sits as the representative for the amateur sector. With these close connections, we are able to circulate the latest technical information on theatre buildings and grants, safety alerts and requirements for best practice on stage, openings into the professional world, training courses, and theatre safety generally.

In addition, it was felt that the retiring chairman should retain his links with the committee by staying on for a further year, especially to enable him to complete any unfinished business he had stimulated.

This meant that any aspiring Chairman had to be prepared to allocate five years of his or her already busy life to the needs of the Guild. Quite a commitment! The Guild has been very lucky to be able to recruit such people, with **Niall Monaghan, Anne Gilmour, Steve Pratt, Eddie Redfern** and **Kevin Spence** filling the role with enormous energy.

Talking to Power!

In January 2005 the Guild was invited to give evidence to the Culture, Media and Sports Select Committee of the House of Commons. This was a first! The Committee was apparently greatly impressed by the amateur sector's contribution to the arts, and even more impressed by the statistics which by this time we could put forward. The Committee acknowledged the contribution made by the amateur sector to the economy and its purchasing power. "We will of course keep you informed of further developments and will continue to lobby the Arts Council and the powers that be on your behalf." Tom Williams was the co-ordinator of all our efforts. (The submission to the Parliamentary Committee was printed in the LTG Newsletter, Vol. 19 No. 2).

Tom also joined in making representations to the

National Planning Policy Framework discussions, when it appeared that no policies relating to culture, theatre and the arts were being included in the new approach to sustainable development.

As the decade progressed the Guild became more and more proactive on the topic of Child Protection. After all, we were strongly involved in Youth Theatre work as well as giving young people opportunities to appear on stage in Pantomimes and Musicals. Eddie Redfern (Archway Theatre) and Philip Bradley (People's) led the way, advising comprehensively on Child Protection, the CRB, Bodies of Persons Exemptions, and Children in Performance licensing. In December 2006 Eddie attended the first of a series of meetings with NSPCC, local education authorities, professionals and amateurs, to discuss the possibility of making significant changes to the Children in Entertainment legislation. He also made written contributions to the growing argument in *The Stage*.

In November 2007 Eddie went to the House of Lords as part of the NNCCE team making representations for change. By May 2009 he was able to report that the Government had decided to review the legislation, starting with a public consultation; and this was timely as reports were coming in to the Newsletter of theatres deciding not to use children aged under 16 in their productions because of the red-tape relating to chaperones and the licensing arrangements of Local Authorities. BBC Panorama got wind of the controversy, and went live in February 2010, with our Patron Sir Ian McKellen speaking at his persuasive best. Hopes for a positive result were significantly raised.

The following Thane Report for which Eddie had given evidence endorsed the Guild's view that the amateur sector should be removed from the licensing requirements, and was accepted by both sides of the house. Progress was quite swift under the new government, and the Vetting & Barring Scheme due to start in July was halted. Advisory and Study Groups were set up, keeping Eddie enormously busy attending meetings and reporting back to the Guild. The government issued its consultation paper on proposed changes to the legislation in Spring 2012, proposals which would simplify the legal and administrative position for children performing in amateur work.

Then in Autumn the Jimmy Savile scandal broke, and the whole question of protecting children in performance was thrown off balance. The prospect of obtaining immediate sensible reforming legislation just disappeared. Instead, reform took place piecemeal over the following three years, which the Guild covered most recently in Grey Paper No 25 in June 2015. The present situation for children in our theatres is much improved, even if not ideally resolved!

Vignette

"One thing that sticks in my memory is attending a Guild weekend at Questors. I was asked to chat to Sir Ian McKellen during the afternoon: after a few minutes I offered to buy him a drink but he said he would rather go into the park nearby for forty winks, which he did, and just lay down on a bench, covered his eyes and went to sleep!"

David Supper

Associate Membership

In 2006 it was decided to widen the scope of Guild Membership. There had from the beginning been Associate Membership for groups abroad (taken up over the years by Bulawayo LT, Dundalk International Festival, Sharon Players (Israel), Lisbon Players and recently Whangarei Theatre NZ) but it was felt that there were many theatre buildings in the UK that were being run by Not-for-Profit and charitable organizations, and being used by flourishing amateur groups otherwise without a home of their own. Both the managers of these buildings and the groups that regularly used them could benefit substantially from Associate Membership of the Guild, by attending meetings and seminars/workshops, and receiving the advice coming out regularly through the Grey Papers.

We have one such member, Hyde Festival Theatre, but the expected influx of new applicants has not materialised. Perhaps we have not been adventurous enough in our promotion!

Linked to this development was the gradual acceptance of reality, that with the growth in numbers it was no longer possible to uphold one of the founding principles of the Guild, namely the maintenance of certain artistic standards. The common factor that holds us all together is the control of our own buildings and the provision of what in effect is a community theatre. New applications are now processed rapidly once the basic legal conditions have been satisfied. No longer are applicants 'vetted' by a pre-joining visit; instead the committee tries to arrange an immediate visit to make the new member welcome, and to explain in detail how the Guild works. Some voices in the 'old guard' deprecated this development, but the enthusiasm of some new members, and the new blood that has started to flow into our activities has more than justified the change of emphasis.

Another Snapshot

"The Guild celebrated its **60th anniversary** at the annual conference at **Leicester Little Theatre** in April **2006**. It was a great gathering of 130 delegates, who all had lots to say and lots to learn from the various workshops and seminars

on offer. Such meetings are really what the Guild is all about – the mutual exchange of information and experience in the pursuit of the art of theatre at the community level. LTG Representatives and delegates return to their theatres to spread the news and knowledge gained, to do their own little bit at a personal level to keep the whole art of amateur theatre alive and thriving across the whole of the country." (from an article printed in the 60th birthday edition of *Amateur Stage*)

Membership of the Guild stood at **99** theatres.

"Our present audiences of respectable, elderly middle-class people are the swingers of 40 years ago, and they would seem now to be even more conservative and unadventurous in their tastes than their parents! And equally the active members of our theatres increasingly reflect this downturn in public dramatic taste. Interesting when you consider how many little theatres were founded 75 years or so ago to form an artistic alternative to the conservative drama favoured by our grandparents."
(from a comment in the Newsletter for January 2004)

New Initiatives

The National Committee entered an exciting new phase when **Steve Pratt** (Stockport Garrick) took up the Chairmanship. He started out by announcing that he wanted to look with a challenging eye on all aspects of how the Guild worked, and how it would look in the future, in ten years time. What should it be doing for its members then? The whole of the entertainment industry was changing rapidly with developments in technology and the internet. Ticket selling and marketing were his favourite subjects. He produced a paper for the committee setting out goals to be achieved by 2009, and committee meetings were all lively and stimulating. Not everything that Steve suggested was judged to be appropriate, but his challenging advocacy certainly made all matters under scrutiny the subject of intense debate. Topics like increasing the use of the internet, electronic surveys, emails, skyping committee meetings, training for LTG Reps, providing financial benefits to members and many more kept the committee on a steep learning curve! One enormous development, largely aided by **John Foreman** (Harborough Theatre) has been the growth of email communication within the Guild. The Rules of the Guild were amended to allow for email service of AGM Notices. As I write, only one LTG Rep has not yet embraced the technology.

Steve also opened up connections with the **Royal Shakespeare Company**, and we have since benefitted enormously as their outreach programmes like **Open Stages** over the last five

years have involved many member theatres very constructively, with Questors Theatre being adopted as their Southern area training venue.

Secretaries and Treasurers

Without a succession of admirable and hard working Secretaries and Treasurers the Guild could not have functioned for 70 years! Tribute has been paid above to Marjorie Havard, but those following her seldom received honours in the spotlights. We should remember **Ann Matthey, Barbara Watson** and now **Caroline Chapman**, who between them have held the Guild together for nearly 30 years, working unstintingly and travelling round the country to all the meetings, producing agendas and minutes, dealing with correspondence, and doing a myriad of tasks behind the scenes, as well usually as holding prominent roles at the same time in their own theatres.

Similarly we have commemorated Robert Tebbett, and should now mention long serving subsequent treasurers, **Patricia Clough, John Tappy** and **Brian Stoner** who have kept the finances of the Guild in fine shape.

Another Snapshot

The 2009 Conference and AGM took place at Crescent Theatre, with 123 delegates attending representing 58 theatres; however 15% of the membership remained totally silent! "It was a lively occasion, with delegates constantly moving around from event to event, and from performances to coffee/tea over the three days. With two shows, a cabaret, four seminars and an open forum as well as tours, the delegates certainly kept the hordes of friendly Crescent members busy. Their efficient organization was a marvel!"

Vignette

*"You certainly do see a variety of plays at LTG Conferences. Some are brilliant productions of great plays! Others fall short of either or both descriptions. In olden days of the Guild, it was common to see a conference choice of play appearing in the schedules of member theatres in the following few seasons, but today many plays are conspicuous by their absence! I am not aware of any theatre wishing to reprise **The Bus**, by Lukas Barfus, Crescent's offering in 2009. Promoted as 'A demonic trip into a cultivated wilderness', it was sufficiently chaotic in its writing, direction and acting to keep me in the civilization of the Crescent bar after the interval. A truly memorable event."*

Michael Shipley, Bolton Little Theatre

Getting Amateur Theatre on Television

In early 2010, Michael Shipley began discussions with an independent company Oxford Film and Television about a possible programme to put amateur theatre work honestly for once under the spotlight of popular television. This happily resulted in the "Stagestruck" programme for **Sky Arts** in 2012, and a good number of member theatres auditioned to take part, though sadly none managed to reach the final rounds! Bearing in mind that all our theatres are constantly busy presenting a full season of productions, the demands of the programme on the final contestants would have been almost impossible for most of us to fulfill. But the project got good amateur theatre sympathetically into the limelight which benefitted us all.

Then in August came the London Olympics. Individual members of several Guild theatres joined the team of 5,000 volunteers in the massively impressive opening ceremony.

We are looking forward next to a BBC Documentary covering the RSC Open Stages 2016 Midsummer Night's Dream project, in which four LTG members are participating. At long last the amateur sector is enjoying a healthy respect from the professionals!

The link with Shakespeare

Members of the Guild have always had a love affair with Shakespeare, and even as the Guild has progressively grown, Shakespeare has invariably been the most popular playwright presented by member theatres, challenged only by Alan Ayckbourn. In the 2015 Year Book there were 29 Shakespeare productions reported.

The traditions within the Guild were also featured prominently in Professor Michael Dobson's 2010 C U Press publication *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance*, giving us all an historical perspective on the work we do, and convincing us that we are part of a valuable tradition that is much older than we ever suspected.

Whatever the difficulties for actors, directors and indeed audiences, Shakespeare has been the foundation of so many of our activities. A spot survey of the years 2002 to 2007 revealed that 135 Guild productions had taken place over the whole country, in traditional auditoria, studios and in the open air. Altogether 27 plays of the canon were presented, the most popular, no surprise here, being *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But rarities like *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Love's Labour's Lost* were not overlooked. The training connection with Shakespeare's Globe on Bankside would not have been so popular without this fundamental love of the Bard.

Sir Ian McKellen

In November 2006 Sir Ian McKellen accepted our invitation to become our President/Patron. He promised at the start that he would be a 'hands on' man, and he has (subject to his heavy film and stage commitments) kept his promise to a degree we could hardly have expected! He has visited many of our theatres, sometimes at a moment's notice, attended conferences, and at every venue he has made a special point of reaching out both to the youth, but also to the old stalwarts. The many theatres that were able to experience the 'Gandalf effect' felt completely rejuvenated! He wrote: **The LTG is vigorously fulfilling its part in the nation's life, and I am proud to be a part in it.**

In 2015 he announced his resignation, and was made an Honorary Associate of the Guild, a quite inadequate expression of our gratitude. He will be a hard act to follow.

Vignette

I was very honoured to welcome Ian McKellen to his first Conference as Patron at The Questors, and again at my home theatre Stockport Garrick where he spent a day with us unveiling a Blue Plaque commemorating the place where the Stockport Garrick was founded. We were thrilled when his PA contacted us to say he had accepted our offer but had stipulated that the Plaque should say Ian McKellen not Sir Ian. This gave us a dilemma as the Plaque said neither. So we hastily arranged for a second Plaque to be made which was placed under the Blue Plaque and said "Unveiled by Ian McKellen Patron of the Little Theatre Guild on May 10th 2008".....We don't think he spotted our gaff.

Steve Pratt, Stockport Garrick Theatre

Conclusion

The Little Theatre Guild is a special organization as it links together in common interest the amateur theatre groups over the British Isles which have a unique feature – namely the ownership or exclusive control of their own premises, presenting a season of plays. No other organization attempts to do this. No other organization offers its members to the same degree the chance to meet regularly to pick each other's brains, to compare standards, to learn and to share. **Membership now stands at 110 theatres**, with 2 overseas members.

The question often asked by doubting members is 'What do we get out of the Guild?' The simplest answer of course would be to say that you get out of the Guild as much as you want to put in. The Guild has always been interactive, relying on personal contacts. The important thing is for each LTG Rep to engage as actively as possible in the work of the Guild so that his/her theatre obtains the maximum benefit.

In the end, however, it boils down to deciding how broad-minded a theatre wants to be. It is very easy to be self-contented and get on with putting on plays as we always used to do. But the outside world presses down upon us all remorselessly; the pace and variety of life seems to allow less and less time for younger people to devote to the hobby of amateur theatre. Yet theatres large and small still want to join the Guild because it is continuing to offer a valuable service particularly relevant to the problems of owning and managing one's own theatre.

With membership, however, comes a commitment to share and join in the national scene. This is why the Guild continues to emphasise that each member has to make a contribution to the life and welfare of the whole. After all, the benefits are mutual.

Michael Shipley

Bolton, December 2015



LTG Honorary Associates

Martin Bowley QC
Philip Bradley
John Brook
Patricia Clough
Carl Hayhurst
Margaret Mann
Ann Matthey
Sir Ian McKellen CH
Keith Morris
Bill Pearson
Michael Shipley
Peter Stansfield
Margaret Whitehouse
Tom Williams

The Questors Theatre, Ealing
People's Theatre, Newcastle upon Tyne
Halifax Thespians
Bingley Little Theatre
Lancaster Footlights Club
Southport Dramatic Club
Oast Theatre, Tonbridge
Retired Patron
Priory Theatre, Kenilworth
Nomad Players, East Horsley
Bolton Little Theatre
Bradford Civic Playhouse
Hall Green Little Theatre
Chesil Theatre, Winchester

Hon. Associates in Memoriam

John B Anderson
Geoff Bennett
Stella Birkett
C Austin Burnett
Frank Cooper Watson
Alfred Emmet OBE
John English MA OBE
Lilian Fletcher
Dr L du Garde Peach OBE
Margaret Hancock
Marjorie Havard
Norman Leaker MBE
Harold Mellor
Rosemary Shaw
Barbara Watson

South London Theatre
Criterion Theatre, Coventry
Bradford Civic Playhouse
Crescent Theatre, Birmingham
Leicester Little Theatre
The Questors Theatre, Ealing
Highbury Theatre Centre
Highbury Theatre Centre
Great Hucklow Village Players
Bradford Civic Playhouse
Caxton Players, Grimsby
Crescent Theatre, Birmingham
Tower Theatre, Islington
Wharf Theatre, Devizes
Carlisle Green Room Club



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CENTRAL REGION

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