

# **The Story of DAVENHAM PLAYERS from Chairman Bob Almquist**

Davenham is a village on the outskirts of the market town of Northwich and our history began during the Second World War. Today, Davenham Players feel fortunate to have had such hardworking predecessors farsighted enough to push through the purchase of our own theatre about 50 years ago. I cannot imagine how today we would raise enough money to pay for the place we now own.

Or did we really own it? Only few years ago, this was in doubt! But more about that later.

## **ORIGINS**

The group was originally founded as the Davenham Church Players in 1941. It seems to me that those times before the full impact of radio, TV and the internet, must have encouraged people to go out and make their own entertainment wherever they could and local theatres, both amateur and professional, flourished. Our recent archive research found that shows were well previewed and reviewed in local newspapers and played for over a week to full, appreciative audiences.



As the Church Players, members had to be Church members too and plays were performed in the Church Hall, just down the road from the current theatre. This situation continued for 20 years, but gradually the limitations of being a Church-run group began to make members think they should set themselves up as an independent organization and look for an alternative performance venue.

## **NEW HOME NEEDED**

A special subcommittee with a 'can do' attitude was set up to manage the project, leaving the main committee free to continue running productions and social activities. Unsurprisingly, there wasn't the cash to buy a property - a loan would have to be negotiated. Then, funds would have to be found to complete the acquisition, repay the loan and finance conversion of a building yet to be found into a theatre.

Much fundraising was needed. Members worked incredibly hard running jumble sales, fashion shows, collecting scrap metal, tins and of course with drama productions – almost anything to raise more cash! A successful "100 Club" in which 10 people collected £1.00 per week from 10 friends or acquaintances towards a draw was one the main fundraising schemes. A new Austin Mini (cost £500!) was the first main prize and the same amount was raised for the club.

While the Players were looking for a venue to acquire, by good fortune, two members, Peter Riley and Jim Edge, were having a drink in the Conservative Club just down the road from the Church Hall and happened to overhear that the club was closing and the premises, formerly a Church-run school, was to be sold. Our committee decided to approach the owners with the aim of purchasing the building.

## **WE BUY A THEATRE**

After negotiations settled the price, the sale of 59 Church Street was completed in 1969. At the

same time, the now independent drama group named **The Davenham Players** was registered with the Charity Commission as number 504475. A building and refitting programme then started, taking over five years to complete (and, some say, continues today!).

The main function room of the former club was converted into an auditorium with provision for lighting, sound, curtains and audience seating. Two large billiard tables that had occupied the room were removed and a new floor laid. Plans were laid to build audience toilets and a bar/foyer extension with scenery storage cellar underneath to the rear of the auditorium. The club steward's former two up two down living accommodation at the front became kitchen, dressing rooms and backstage storage. From the road, the frontage today still looks like a gardenless detached cottage.

Although the conversion work was not yet complete, the first production in the new theatre was Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* in 1972. Cast members who needed to make an entrance at the back of the auditorium did so via a stepladder up to a window opening in the back of the building! The formal opening of the theatre was carried out by David Edwards, General Manager of the Chester Gateway Theatre in the new bar extension, had to wait until 1975 during a run of *Semi-Detached* by David Turner.

### **OUR HOME – PLAYERS THEATRE, DAVENHAM**

The former schoolroom – now auditorium - has a flat floor. There is no raised stage. At one end of the rectangular area is the performance space with lighting rig above. The first two rows of audience seating are on the same level as the performers, but rows further back are raised on wooden dais units. When needed, the whole floor area can be made available for flat seating by removing these units.

The floor area has been put to maximum use in some of our trademark set designs. In Dennis Potter's *Blue Remembered Hills*, the audience walked into a forest glade surrounded by shrubs, across real turf laid on top of the floorboards. We made an arena with boxing ring centerpiece for *Trafford Tanzi* by Claire Luckham and a kitchen converted to a beach (barrowloads of sand were wheeled in every night) for Willy Russell's *Shirley Valentine*. The audience sat within Rene's café bar for *'Allo 'Allo* by Jeremy Croft & David Lloyd and in a country garden for *Humble Boy* by Charlotte Jones.

### **COMMUNITY PIECED TOGETHER**

An unusual opportunity arose in 2015 when we were approached with an unexpected request. Jan Johnson, the theatre's extremely supportive next-door neighbour with innate artistic talent, had the idea of involving village residents in a community mosaic – and it was going to be large. Jan's plan was to use help from professional mosaicists in designing the overall scheme and training local people in mosaic techniques. But why ask a drama club for help?

Well, we had enough space along the back wall of the theatre yard and a mosaic might look better than a blank brick wall – so yes to this. We could also offer space for the tutored courses in mosaic technique and subsequent workshops. Money was needed for professional support, equipment and materials and Jan suggested making an application to the Arts Council. Grant applications are never easy and doing this for the first time was a taxing experience. However,



the online application went in and we awaited the result. To our joy and surprise, we were accepted and a grant of almost £10,000 soon followed – Jan and her team were off at a gallop.

A satisfyingly large and diverse range of all ages came forward to, literally, 'do their bit' for the project. A feature of mosaic work is that it can be broken down into small segments in

which people of differing skills can participate. Taking a little longer than planned to complete, the various component panels were finished in time for a grand opening in a crowded theatre yard in September 2016 with local comedian John Bishop pulling the string to unveil the work of art in position on the back wall.

### **EXTENSION TENSION**

Now, remember I told you that the question of the theatre ownership had arisen – well here is what happened. Over the last decade, the group had been increasingly aware that our audience facilities were not up to 21st century standard, especially as regards toilets and disabled access throughout. We set our objectives for improvements to the premises and commissioned a Feasibility Study from an architect to look at options for achieving as many as possible. The architect's concept was discussed and agreed and detailed drawings submitted to the local authority planners.

Planning permission was granted, leaving just the small matter of the money. Initial estimates for the work were around £100K – that's a lot of play tickets and drinks from the bar to be sold. We needed some help and help came in the shape of our independent



accounts' examiner, Simon Batey, who had experience of applying for grants for community halls and offered to do the same for us. Briefly, it worked! By the middle of 2019, we were in position to commission our chosen builder to make a start in the theatre's closed season.

In the background there had been discussions with our Solicitor about the Land Registry – ordinarily a dry topic – but the Registry had no record of who owned our theatre. Probably the reason was that, at the time that we bought the theatre, there was no obligation to register non-domestic property. We needed to register the property in the names of the group's current Trustees – but who were they?

In our searches, documents were found showing that in 1969 the theatre had been sold and

transferred to four members acting as Trustees for Davenham Players. The problem was that none remained alive. The solicitor advised that new trustees could always be appointed, but to do that, the current trustees needed to authorise a handover. So, who were the current trustees and where was the current Deed of Trust?

The officers of the society searched. Former members were contacted for help. Advice was that the firm of solicitors who drew up the Deed of Trust would have a copy in their archives, which made sense. The solicitors searched, found several old documents but no current Deed of Trust. Panic stations. It's OUR theatre. Sold to us. But we had no current documentary proof of ownership. The Solicitor said that if there was no living trustee, then we might have to go to court. Fairly straightforward but no doubt expensive. A brainwave was needed.

What about the Charity Commission? Of course! The Charity Commission must be informed whenever a registered charity changes its constitution; and Trustees are named in the Constitution. They should have a copy. We asked and they did – a lifeline had been thrown to us. The Charity Commission sent their copy and we showed the Solicitor. He liked it and all was well again.

### **GOING UP**

With money in the bank and legal issues sorted, builders had started with the extension. Leaving open pits in the yard they took a fortnight's holiday! The Jazz Evening and the September play took place with the new foyer in place but not finished and nearly all the toilets working. Rehearsing in the middle of builders' mess had been worth it.



Now, months later, the ramp and stairs still lack a handrail (owing to COVID) but our new foyer and toilets are just what we needed. The old theatre bar remains only accessible by stairs and we have plans for a new ground floor bar in the yard – Extension Phase Two – but that's another story.

### **Bob Almquist**

Chairman Davenham Players