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Unexpected Georgian theatre: the case of Arundel, West Sussex

Countering an old prevailing notion that British theatre was in the doldrums between the end of the Restoration and late Victorian eras, recent historians of the Georgian period, such as Angie Sandhu, Gillian Russell, and David Francis in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832* (2014), have argued instead that the late eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth saw extraordinary growth in British theatre activity and in entertainments that involved public exhibition and display. This article aims to explore evidence for this proposition by focusing on what might at first sight seem an unlikely exemplar, the rural town of Arundel, lying between Brighton to the east and Chichester to the west just off the south coast of England in the South Downs. During the period under consideration, it had a relatively small population, numbering roughly 2,000, and might therefore have been considered an unusual place in which to build and run a theatre. Yet, for a span of a little more than 25 years that bridged the reigns of George III and George IV, Arundel boasted a theatre reputation said to rival for a moment those of its more prominent coastal neighbours. Whilst not being artistically innovative, Arundel's Georgian theatre can be seen as emblematic of a thriving if intermittent Georgian theatre scene beyond the country's main urban centres. This is an under-researched area in the theatre history of this period, and by offering an empirical case study at local level, the article aims to trace the social and economic contexts in which such theatre enterprises operated.

Since the re-opening of the theatres after the Civil War the century before, diverse forms of theatrical performance had flourished. Itinerant groups of players – still legally vagabonds until the late 1780s and often denied Church burial – toured, on foot or by horse and carriage, performing for a few days at a time in makeshift, 'fit up' theatres before moving on to avoid facing fines imposed by local magistrates. Some troupes brought booths with them to inn yards or played off carts, some played in inns, halls, or sheds, or – probably the most popular of all – in barns (from whence the term barnstorming). Such troupes have become familiar through characters like Vincent Crummles in the Dickens's novel *Nicholas Nickleby*.

The routes these troupes traversed laid the ground for the circuits or walks, as they were sometimes known, which were increasingly attractive to enterprising managers following a change in the law in 1788 that meant a band of actors could now generally, with the exceptions of London, Oxford, and Cambridge, play in one location for up to 60 nights (Ranger, 'The Rivals' 219), (Ranger, *Two Managers* 9). This change, however, also encouraged the building of permanent theatres, and by the turn of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century, many major towns and even large villages had a theatre, frequently in a converted mill or malthouse or in a purpose-built construction.

At this time, Arundel was probably at the height of its prosperity (Baggs and Warne; Hudson). Dominated by its castle, which dates back to the Norman conquest and overlooks the important communication and transportation artery, the River Arun, it was, and remains, the seat of the Dukes of Norfolk, one of the most powerful families in the realm.¹ Owning most of the surrounding Arun Valley, the family was a major source of employment not just in the town but for the area's farms and villages. Lying at the crossroads of key rural economies - sheep, corn, cattle, and woodland – Arundel served as the market hub for the valley, and people would congregate there for trade, political activity, and leisure pursuits. With the agricultural revolution driven by land enclosure in full swing, the town's commerce flourished during the eighteenth century as the Dukes of Norfolk paid increasing attention to their castle and its domain. Charles, the 11th Duke, who inherited the title in 1786, placed great emphasis on developing Arundel and as a result earned the nickname the Architectural Duke. A Whig who supported the arts, Charles became known for his entertaining, and the town enjoyed an influx of people associated with his patronage during the 'season', the spring and summer months when the social elite went out to play.

Gradually the town, including the castle, was extensively rebuilt as befitted a thriving rural timber port enjoying an increase in the tonnage of ships allowed and able to navigate to the town. The completion of the Wey and Arun canal in 1816 elevated Arundel's status to a bonding port, with a customs house and bonding pond, protected and regulated by the tax authorities. The port reached its zenith in the early 1820s before being overtaken by nearby Littlehampton and going into severe decline by the 1840s with the arrival of the railways.

The earliest evidence of theatrical activity in Arundel I have come across places it, undated, in the middle of the eighteenth century, sometime close to (by implication) but before May 1758. This is the date given by playwright James Boaden in his 1827 biography, *The Memoirs of Mrs Siddons*, when he makes mention of *Theodosius or the Force of Love* (a popular seventeenth-century tragedy by Nathaniel Lee) being performed in Arundel in May 1758. Referring to the central role in the play, Boaden writes: 'Varanes by Mr P. who will strive, as far as possible, to support the character of this fiery Persian Prince, in which he was so admired and applauded at Hastings, Arundel, Petworth, Midworth, Lewes etc' (Boaden 15). I can find no other references to a theatre or theatrical performance in Arundel in this period, nor to the identity of Mr P. Most likely, Mr P appeared in a temporary theatre in Arundel, which may have been situated in the yard of the Crown Inn, now one of the town's car parks, lying behind the High Street where the inn was located until it closed in 1875.

The Crown Inn, dating from the late sixteenth century, was one of Arundel's most important coaching inns. A daily postal coach from Brighton to Portsmouth arrived in Arundel about noon, and from the other direction, it arrived about an hour later. It seems the Crown Inn was associated with the Whig faction in Parliament, whereas on the other side of the High Street, up the hill towards the castle, could be found the George Inn, which was seen as more of a Tory haunt. During elections, when both inns hosted candidates at hustings with free punch and wine, they became places of theatrical entertainment.

The yard of the Crown Inn may have been used by a troupe under the management of Henry Thornton, which visited the town in 1791 (*Two Managers* 21). He must have liked what he found. On 23 April 1792, the *Hampshire Chronicle* reported: 'The Arundel theatrical corps are to open their next campaign in a new theatre, which is now erecting by Thornton.' The *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* of the same date carried a similar item, though it elevated Thornton by calling him Generalissimo. Mary Theresa Odell mentions a barn theatre in Arundel at this time (25) while other sources mention the yard at the Angel Inn as the possible theatre space used by Thornton in 1791, a reference that comes from William Douglass, who continued the work of James Winston, the recorder of Britain's theatres during the Georgian period. Local historians, however, have not been able to trace this inn, and it was most likely a misnamed reference to the Crown Inn.

As to Thornton's new theatre, evidence from James Winston suggests that it was located less than 200 yards from the Crown Inn where No. 5 Maltravers Street stands (now a residential building, after a period as a bakery in the early nineteenth century). Thornton's belief in Arundel as a theatrical venue must have been confirmed because in 1807 he closed his theatre in Maltravers Street and built a bigger one opposite.

Maltravers Street, which runs off the High Street away from the castle, formed part of the road from Arundel to Chichester, and was probably a turnpike road because of its situation. It was in one of Arundel's principal residential areas. It had been the location of the town market – hence its previous name of Old Market Street - before the market moved to Town Square in the High Street in the late 1750s, a move which released the land for other uses, in this case the building of a theatre.

Thornton, who came from Suffolk, was already a well-known provincial theatre manager when he arrived in Arundel. He trained as a lawyer at Middle Temple but in his early 20s was seen leading a 'band of dramatic desperadoes' in Somerset; he then appeared in a Midlands company, and within a few years had become a prompter in Portsmouth, something like a cross between a stage manager and a company manager with many different responsibilities (Ranger, *Two Managers* 2–5). His marriage also brought him theatrical connections: Elizabeth Pritchard was the daughter of a provincial theatre manager and herself an actor, and had a brother and sister also actors and at least two other brothers who were intermittently involved in the theatre.

The core of a Georgian theatre company was often the extended family of the manager – much like the Crummles family in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Ranger details the main features of such a troupe and of Thornton's in particular (*Two Managers* 53–129). To the family core was added a number of other married teams together with some of their children as well as single people as required. To the regular members were added visiting performers, some for a season, others – the better known and more expensive – for a few nights only and often billed as 'at great expense'. The actors, who were responsible for their costumes and props, played stock types (such as young lover, villain, old cuckold, tragic heroine), and youngsters also danced and sang. The average pay in Thornton's company was said to be about 1

guinea a week (based on the Bank of England Inflation Calculator this is very roughly equivalent to £130 in 2020). This was supplemented by takings from charity benefits held for particular actors. This average salary was lower than most in the south-east, and many started at this level, but was higher than in the south-west and higher, too, than that of Thornton's rival, Thomas Collins, who lost actors to Thornton for this reason. Orchestras accompanying the performances were often very small (numbering maybe six players) - more like a band - and these were frequently hired locally. Thornton also employed a scene builder and painter, who travelled from one theatre to another; in addition, sometimes local artists and/or carpenters would be taken on for a limited task. The play repertoire was ad hoc and traditional, based on past and present successes emanating from London. Sometimes nobility, leading figures, and groups of individuals might request the staging of particular pieces. Thornton bought texts from managers of the patent theatres, and new plays from the capital usually took about four months to reach the provinces. Revivals were more popular, including versions of plays by William Shakespeare, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, or Oliver Goldsmith, sentimental and Gothic dramas, farces, comedies, a few worthy tragedies, operettas, and various interludes. This was before the era of the long run of a single play, and a bill of fare would look more like a modern variety show, including at least a couple of plays and additional songs or turns, sometimes given a local flavour, changed perhaps for each performance in a turnover that fitted and encouraged companies to offer a series of only brief visits to provincial theatres. Creators of the works being performed were rarely credited.

As well as having to meet the costs of the company (including salaries, heating, lighting, and maintaining the theatres throughout the year), the manager would need to ensure there were adequate lodgings available on the circuit, often courtesy of local shopkeepers, with possibly special arrangements for visiting stars. Letting the theatres when not in use for the company's performances would help defray the manager's costs; this might involve storage of goods, other public events, such as lectures and demonstrations, or auctions.

A manager like Thornton would establish a theatrical walk or circuit through repetition of visits, keeping to a set pattern of times and locations, and might enlarge it and/or purchase venues or a whole circuit from a retiring manager.

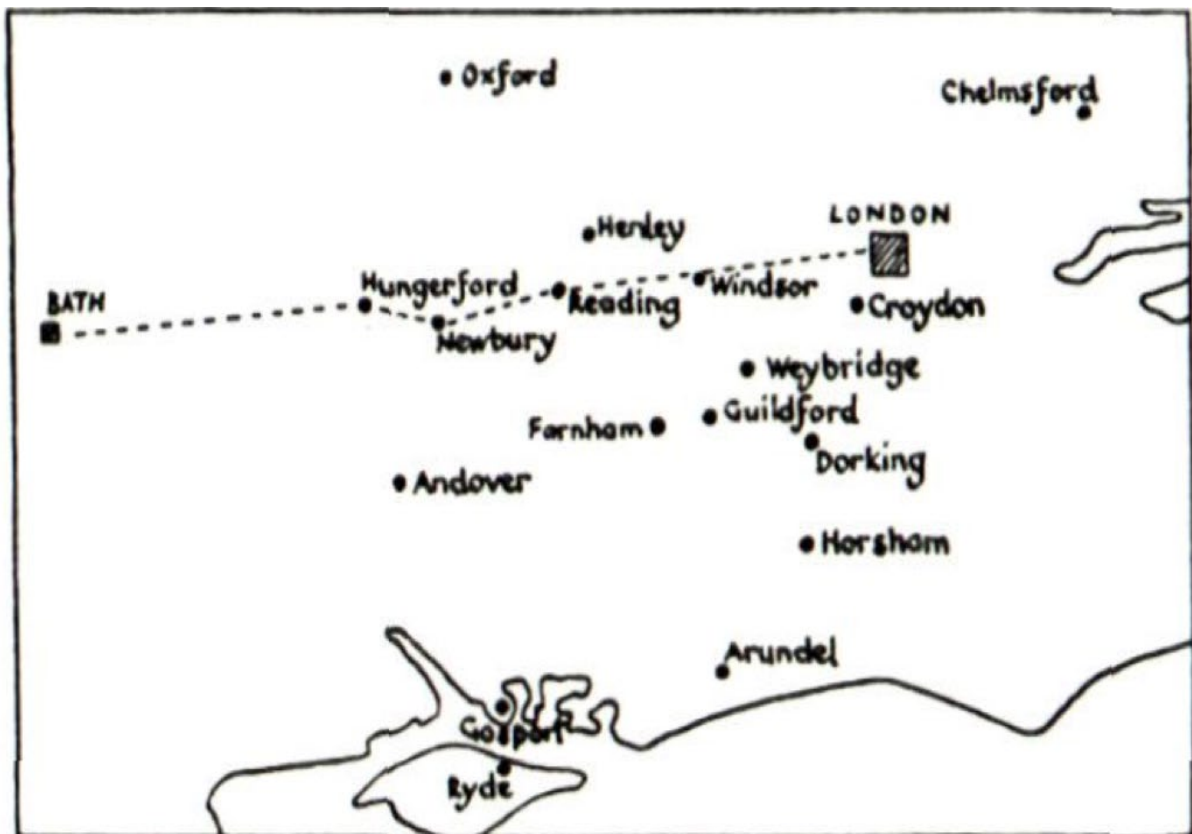


Figure 1. Map of Thornton's circuit

(*'The Rivals'* 221 © Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society)

It is not clear if Thornton started or acquired his circuit but he added to it and bought or leased properties used by coaching companies along the circuit route for use as overnight rests for his actors and other company members. The majority of his theatres were about 30 miles apart and ran along three of the principal coach routes in the area: the London-to-Chichester road, the London-to-Portsmouth road, and the London-to-Bath road (shown in Figure 1 by the dotted line). He tended to try out a new location in temporary premises (e. g. a barn) and if it worked out to his satisfaction, he would open a permanent theatre. By the time he tried Arundel, he had established himself in Newbury, Reading, Andover, Henley, Farnham, Dorking, Guildford, and Horsham. He was also to run theatres in Essex and on the Isle of Wight.

Thornton knew this part of the south-east well and was aware of the success of the theatre in nearby Worthing, which was run by Thomas Trotter, who later would take over the theatre in Arundel. In 1791, the year Thornton first came to Arundel, Thornton's company

also played at Gosport in Hampshire, which became one of his key venues, virtually a headquarters, and also at Windsor, where he played before the king. Gosport was some 40 miles from Arundel but a coach ran to Fareham nearby, and from Arundel a coach could take you to London northwards via Horsham. In 1792, the year Thornton erected his first theatre in Arundel, a new theatre was opened on a more promising site in nearby Chichester under the management of his main rival Thomas Collins, who also had a theatre in Southampton. Maybe this Chichester venture helped stimulate Thornton into action.

There are records of Thornton's company performing in Arundel in 1795 and 1797, and presumably his actors also performed there in other years that decade. The 1795 visit is noted in the memoirs of an actor in the company called Edward Cape Everard, who describes his life on the road with Thornton:

As Mr Thornton now was manager of no less than sixteen theatres, I went with him from here, Cowes in Hampshire, to Arundel in Sussex, to Reading in Berkshire, to Guildford in Surrey, and Chelmsford in Essex. In these five different counties, in five weeks, at the races or assizes, I played every night, and had to travel on the Sunday; this maybe called playing, 'tis true, but I found it working, and hard working too. (Everard 146)

One of the performances in 1797 is captured in a playbill, seemingly the oldest to have survived from Arundel (Figure 2).

BY DESIRE.

FOR THE BENEFIT OF

Mr & Mrs Aickin

On TUESDAY the 18th of *July*, 1797,
Will be performed a celebrated Comedy called

The R A G E:

O R, A

Son with Two Fathers.

Gingham,	Mr. HATTON,
Darley,	Mr. BATEMAN,
The Hon. Henry Savage,	Mr. AICKIN,
Sir George Gauntlet,	Mr. SWINDAL,
Flush,	Mr. CROSS,
Signior Cyguet,	Mr. DUNN,
Ready,	Mr. PARSONS,
And Sir Paul Perpetual	Mr. OWENS,
Mrs. Darley,	Mrs. THORNTON,
Clara,	Miss E. THORNTON,
Maid,	Mrs. FARQUHAR,
And Lady Sarah Savage,	Mrs. AICKIN,

End of the Play, an Interlude (*Never Acted Here*) called

The Adopted Child.

Le Sage,	Mr. SWINDAL,
Sir Bertrand,	Mr. BATEMAN,
Reccord,	Mr. OWENS,
Michael,	Mr. AICKIN,
The Adopted Child,	Miss CROSS,
And Nell,	Mrs. AICKIN,

After which the COMIC SONG of

The TINKER, by Mr. HATTON.

To which will be added a Musical Entertainment call'd The

HIGHLAND REEL.

Mc. Gilpin,	Mr. OWENS,
Sandy,	Mrs. AICKIN,
Charley,	Mr. AICKIN,
Capt. Daff,	Mr. BATEMAN,
Sergeant Jack,	Mr. SWINDAL,
Crowdy,	Mr. CROSS,
Laird of Col,	Mr. DUNN,
And Shely,	Mr. HATTON,
Jenny,	Mrs. SWINDAL,
And Moggy Mc. Gilpin,	Miss E. THORNTON,

The Whole to conclude with a Song in CHARACTER of an

ARUNDEL VOLUNTEER,

By Mrs. AICKIN.

** THE BAND WILL ATTEND.

TICKETS to be had of Mr. AICKIN at Mrs. PARLET'S; at the Norfolk Arms, Crown,
King's Arms, &c. &c.

*Mr. AICKIN begs Leave to assure the Ladies and Gentlemen of Arundel, and its Vicinity,
that the above Pieces have been got up with Care and Attention, and humbly hopes for the Honor*

Figure 2. Playbill for 18 July 1797

(© West Sussex Records Office MP/962)

It shows that Mr (and presumably Mrs) Aickin of the company were staying with Mrs Parlet (wife of the butcher) in Arundel, that the troupe included two members of Thornton's family, and that the entertainment was, typically for the time, very mixed (with creators not

named). The 'celebrated comedy' *The Rage, or a Son with Two Fathers* (by Frederick Reynolds) is followed by *The Adopted Child* (by Samuel Birch), an Interlude ('never acted here'), a comic song of *The Tinker* (by Charles Dibdin), a musical entertainment *The Highland Reel* (by John O'Keefe), and finishing with a song *An Arundel Volunteer* (probably an adaptation of one of the many volunteer songs popular at the time of increased military recruitment).

This last item may give a clue as to why Thornton persisted with Arundel. From 1794, when Parliament responded to the threat of French invasion by calling upon the gentry to form volunteer militia, there was a massive and speedy rise in the number of volunteers, reaching more than 50,000 in 1797, the year of the playbill. There were, as a consequence, many volunteer songs but more importantly, a growth in the potential audience for theatre. Outside London, the military was always a key element in a theatre audience, and during the Napoleonic wars all kinds of entertainment burgeoned. The building of a barracks at Crossbush just outside Arundel was ordered in 1794 and was certainly in existence by 1800, and new barracks were built in 1804 in response to renewed threats of invasion. Mobilisation was understandably heaviest in the south-east – the frontline in any probable invasion - and Sussex became quite heavily militarised, not just by barracks, but by storehouses and armouries and depots for munitions. In 1796, the year before the performance advertised in the playbill, the Arundel volunteers were entertained to dinner at the castle, which gave the song additional contemporary resonance.

It looks as though in 1800, or soon thereafter, when Arundel had been established as a fashionable rendezvous for nobility and gentry as well as for the many young officers waiting to serve in France, Thornton decided to rebuild the theatre at 5 Maltravers Street, as he was to do with his theatres in Reading, Andover, and Newbury. In each case he replaced one that had been used as a testing ground for several seasons to gauge the reliability of continuing patronage. All were notably compact, which helped him fill the theatres.

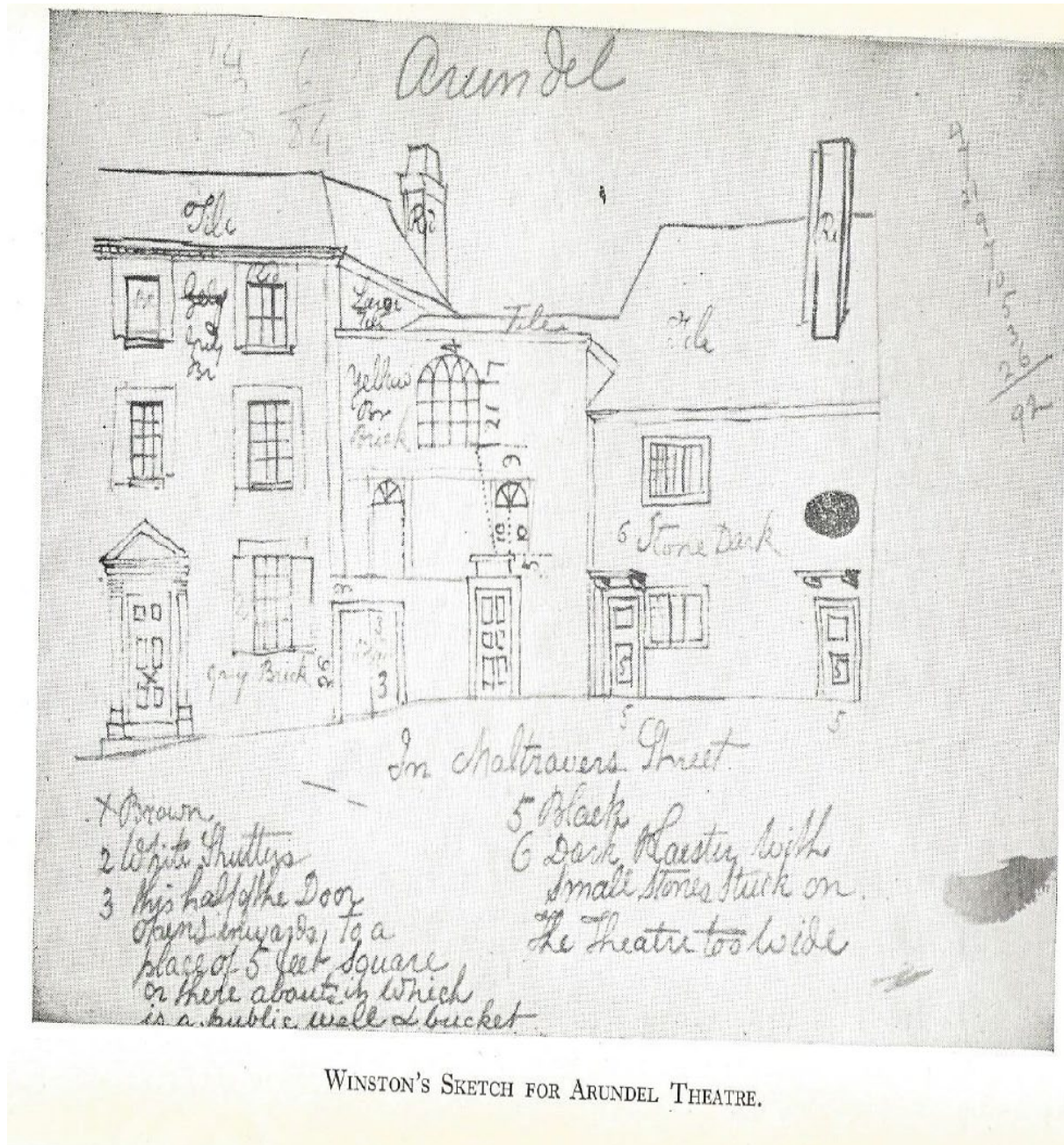


Figure 3. James Winston's sketch of Arundel Theatre at No. 5 Maltravers Street from his notes held at Harvard University (*Theatre Notebook* 1, no. 7, Spring 1947: 98-9)

A contemporary sketch drawn by James Winston, the actor, manager, and artist who travelled Britain drawing and recording theatre buildings, shows the rebuilt theatre (Figure 3). The building to the left, marked as being in 'Grey Brick' is clearly No. 3 Maltravers Street

(still standing), while the other two buildings have been rebuilt. The sketch shows the oddly-shaped central building (where No. 5 now stands) with an undecorated entrance door, above which is a large window. It is topped by a slate roof. The central building or façade, which may be jutting out, is said to be of yellow brick with a large central arched window at third floor height; below it, either side, are two narrower, portrait shaped windows arched at the top, and directly below them two doors. On the left is a double door, the right-hand portion of which is said to 'open inwards to a place of five feet square or thereabouts which is a public well and bucket'. It is likely the available space extended backwards beyond the limits of the current house at No. 5 to a yard at the back. There are no descriptions of the interior, but presumably it was of standard Georgian design for rural theatres, familiar from Richmond's Theatre Royal in Yorkshire (built 1788), with a thrust stage surrounded by galleries in a horse-shoe shape, a pit, and possibly boxes as well, and seating around 150 people.

A diary entry by John Tompkins, a future Mayor of Arundel, for Tuesday, 19 November 19 1801 notes the presence of 'the Players at Arundel.' For the following day, he writes that he saw *Speed the Plough*, the comedy by Thomas Morton that became a standard following its debut in London just a few years before in 1798 and introduced the character of the stereotypical (and unseen) prig, Mrs Grundy (Tompkins 47). It is also thought that Christopher Lee Sugg, a celebrated ventriloquist, appeared in Thornton's Arundel theatre in the early 1800s, which shows that Thornton used the building when his company was not playing there.

Things seemed to be going well for Thornton, if an item carried on 12 March 1804 in the *Hampshire Telegraph* is accurate: 'The indefatigable Thornton is playing all the new pieces at the Arundel Theatre, with great success.' The winter seasons in Arundel, which corresponded with the local gentry's occupation of their townhouses, were now said to rival Brighton's and one historian recounted that 'Brighton as a residence was considered dull in comparison' (Eustace 232). Thornton's success over several years was such that he decided to take another gamble, perhaps to expand seating capacity and potential income. He crossed the road and built a new theatre.

In 1807, Thornton came to an arrangement with Joseph Hinde, the freeholder of a malthouse and surrounding land in Maltravers Street, to convert the building into a theatre, which Thornton would lease each year for a season. Built at what is now 18 Maltravers Street, the theatre's design was said to be modelled on the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane (*Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, 12 Dec. 1807). The Arundel theatre was very much smaller, however. The London theatre opened in 1794, then the largest theatre in Europe with a seating capacity of more than 3,500. Perhaps this description simply meant that the new theatre did not follow the horse-shoe design of country playhouses like Richmond and Thornton's theatre at No. 5 Maltravers Street but placed the stage end on with the audience in front of it rather than surrounding it on three sides. The façade of the Arundel building, which was wider than at No. 5, was made of plain brick and looked like a private house. The entrance, stage door, and scene door were in Maltravers Street, with the dressing rooms and stage nearest to the street and the audience, possibly up to 350 with pit, gallery, and boxes, seated at the rear using the upward slope of the land at the site to facilitate the auditorium and increased seating capacity. At the back was a domestic apartment for the manager. A visitor later described the theatre as a 'small but neat structure whose interior is sufficiently convenient' (Cromwell 36). The theatre was lit by oil footlights, which a few years later set fire to one of the proscenium doors (Ranger, *Two Managers* 115).

The Duke, the so-called Architectural Duke, was consulted about the exterior design of the theatre, which had to fit in with his taste. Consequently, the rear wall of the theatre, which came close to the castle, was given a Gothic makeover to achieve a unified look with the refurbished castle. Diarist John Tompkins, whose mother lived at 16 Maltravers Street, writes on 5 October, 1807: 'This year the New Theatre at Arundel adjoining my Mother's house was erected' (50). According to Tompkins, the conversion cost £1,300 (very roughly equivalent to £122,250 today), not very expensive for a theatre (the 1794 Drury Lane cost around £160,000 (around £21-£22 million today) but still quite a lot for Thornton (52). The only ticket prices that have come to light are included on a later playbill (for 1833, Figure 9), which lists the following prices: for the first show of the evening (doors open at seven, performance to be given at half-past) boxes cost 3s. (around £17 today), the pit 2s., and the

gallery 1s. For the second show (at 9.15), boxes cost 2s., the pit 1s., and the gallery 6d. Children in arms were double price in all parts of the theatre.²

On 7 December 1807, the new theatre was opened with a performance by a former child prodigy William Betty, dubbed the Young Roscius, who was now a fading star, aged just 16. Only a few years earlier, Master Betty had become a national celebrity, the focus of what was called 'bettymania', outshining and out-earning the leading players of the day. After his voice broke and exhaustion set in, he toured the country, riding on his fame. He played Arundel for Thornton for three nights under the patronage of the Duke of Norfolk, drawing, it was claimed by the *Hampshire Telegraph & Sussex Chronicle* (12 Dec. 1807), an audience of 'rank and taste' from a 20-mile radius to see the wonder, not all of whom could get into the theatre. It is not clear what he performed but it may have been a series of extracts similar to the show he delivered for Thornton two years earlier at Thornton's Gosport theatre. This was a mix of Gothic melodrama - Earl Osmond in Mathew Lewis' *The Castle Spectre*, Achmet in John Brown's *Barbarossa*, Romaldi in Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery* - and Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as perhaps one of his most famous roles, Shakespeare's Hamlet.

It is also not clear how many seasons Thornton ran the theatre. After 1808, it housed a Worthing-based company under the management of Thomas Trotter, although Thornton is still listed as manager in 1812 and he may have leased it to Trotter. Mrs Thornton died in 1816 and Thornton declined quite quickly. On his death in 1818 he did not bequeath the Arundel theatre to his successors, who took on his circuit, so presumably he must already have dispensed with the Arundel theatre by then.

Thomas Trotter, almost 30 years younger than Thornton, was already an actor by the age of 15, and was soon running a company in Kent and Sussex, and from 1802 one in Worthing. In 1807, the year Thornton opened his theatre in Arundel, Trotter leased the Theatre Royal in Brighton and opened a permanent theatre in Worthing, which became the centre of his operations, and he lived next door. He retired in 1824, possibly due to ill health. A reference in *The Monthly Mirror* (Oct. 1810, 317) to Trotter's company in 1810 praises the troupe and says that it plays in Worthing three nights of the week and on the others, it appears in

Littlehampton or Arundel. The article takes a swipe at the Duke of Norfolk, who, it says, is fond of waddling into London theatres at half price but affords Trotter's company no patronage.

BY DESIRE OF THE
Officers of the Bedford Regt.
The Last Night but Two.
 Theatre, Arundel.

Mr. I. P. Harley's
BENEFIT.

On *Saturday Evening, December 7, 1811,*
 Their Majesties' Servants will perform the Comedy of the

WONDER
 A Woman Keeps a Secret!

Don Felix, Mr. TROTTER.	Colonel Briton, Mr. BROWNE.
Don Pedro, Mr. MOORE.	Don Lopez, Mr. JERVIS.
Gibby, Mr. BLANDFORD.	Frederick, Mr. WHITE.
Vasquez, Mr. FORSTEL.	Alguazil, Mr. DEACON.
Lissardo, Mr. I. P. HARLEY.	
Donna Violante, Mrs. TROTTER.	
Donna Isabella, Miss FLEMMING. Luis, Mrs. MOORE.	
Flora, Miss BARRY.	

In the course of the Evening, Mr. I. P. HARLEY will introduce the following

New Comic Songs:
 'John Hobbs and Jane Carter,'
 FROM "ANY THING NEW."
 By Desire, "SLY REYNARD THE FOX."
 'What will Mrs. Grundy Say,'
 From *Harlequin Bang Up!*
 And, the Unfortunate and Comic Rambles of
 'Poor Jerry Blossom,'
 IN HIS JOURNEY FROM YORKSHIRE TO ARUNDEL,
A Wooden Shoe Dance by Mr. Jervis.
 'When I was at home in my Father's Mud Edifice,'
 BY MR. PERKINS.

To which will be added, the Musical Farce of The

Bee Hive;
 OR, LOTS OF FUN.

Captain Merton, (first time) Mr. TROTTER	Joey, Mr. MOORE.
Captain Rattan, Mr. BLANDFORD.	Barnaby Mingle, Mr. I. P. HARLEY.
Emily, Miss FLEMMING.	
Cecily, Miss BARRY.	Mrs. Mingle, Mrs. FLEMMING.

By Permission of the Commanding Officer, the Band of the
 Regiment will attend the Theatre, and play several Select Pieces.
 Tickets to be had at the usual places, of Mrs. Dalton, and of Mr. I. P. Harley at
 the Theatre.

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Figure 4. Playbill for 7 December 1811

(© British Library Board; Playbills Collection 270, item 509)

A playbill has survived for an Arundel performance on 7 December 1811 (Figure 4) of *The Wonder, Or a Woman Keeps a Secret* by Susanna Centlivre (not named on the playbill), a popular play from the early 1700s set in Lisbon which tells of two romantic intrigues; Trotter played the male lead Don Felix. The playbill reveals another military connection in that the performance was a benefit for a member of Trotter's Worthing company, held under patronage of the Bedford Regiment. It was the usual mixed fare: it included the new comic songs: 'John Hobbs and Jane Carter', 'What Will Mrs Grundy Say' (a reference to the character from *Speed the Plough* which Arundel had seen a few years before), and 'Poor Jerry Blossom'; A Wooden Shoe Dance by Mr Jervis (in his journey from Yorkshire to Arundel, presumably a clog dance item), 'When I was at home in my Father's Mud Edifice', and a musical farce, *The Bee Hive, or, Lots of Fun* (by John Millingen). By permission of the commanding officer, the band of the regiment would attend the theatre, and play several 'select pieces.'

In 1815, on 14 June, during the expansive (and expensive) Arundel celebrations for the 600th anniversary of the signing of Magna Carta, which were centred on the recently refurbished castle, the Duke and his entourage visited the theatre to see a farce and Richard Cumberland's comedy *The Wheel of Fortune*. The Duke died later that year and was succeeded by the 12th Duke, known as the Grumpy Duke.

In 1823, the Arundel theatre opened under a new manager, William Evans Burton, who two years before, with his wife, had joined Trotter's company. Trotter was on the point of retiring and probably was glad to hand on the running of the Arundel theatre. At the same time, Burton leased Trotter's Worthing theatre, which suggests that Burton was trying to make economies of scale as Trotter had done, with productions appearing at both venues. Playbills for Burton's opening year advertise a group of three performances in March. The first was 'By desire of the friends of TR Kemp, Esq', meaning Thomas Reed Kemp, the property developer remembered as the architect of Brighton's Kemp Town, who the month before had been elected Whig Member of Parliament for Arundel. This performance comprised 'Poor Gentleman' by George Colman the Younger, and 'The Broken Sword or, the Dumb Boy' by William Dimond. The second and third performances, for which the playbills

are now lost, were benefits for actors and included Hannah Cowley's *Belle's Stratagem* as well as the better-known *Beaux' Stratagem* by George Farquhar (Odell 26).

Burton made his London debut seven years later, and in 1834, he went to the US, where he managed two theatres in New York, renaming one after himself, led a travelling company, and wrote several plays, as well as several humorous books. Burton's company at Arundel were all members of Trotter's Worthing company, and when they appeared in Arundel in 1825, they had stayed together after Trotter's retirement. The 1825 season, however, does not seem to have gone too well, according to a contemporary report in the *Oxford University and City Herald* (2 Apr. 1825), which says that Mrs Cartwright, the wife of a clergyman residing in Arundel, 'bespoke a play at the Arundel Theatre, who had a bad season.'

In 1827, another child prodigy, Clara Fisher aged 15, appeared in Arundel; in the wake of Master Betty's fame, this was still the era of infant phenomena, captured sharply again by Dickens in his descriptions of the Crummles troupe. Children formed a significant part of the theatre industry and could appear even as toddlers. That same year, Fisher and her family emigrated to the US and she made her New York debut. There is, however, some uncertainty as to the date of her appearance in Arundel; Peter Davey's Notebooks (MSS vol. 22), which are in places hard to decipher, say Clara Fisher appeared in Arundel in February 1817. This would have preceded her London debut by ten months. Davey also says she appeared in Arundel under Burton's management, and he did not take over until 1823. It seems more likely that Fisher's appearance came in 1827 when Fisher was at the end of her UK career. Her acting career lasted for 72 years, and in her later life, having been seen as the most successful child actor of her day, she was dubbed 'the oldest living actress' by *The New York Times* (13 Nov. 1898).

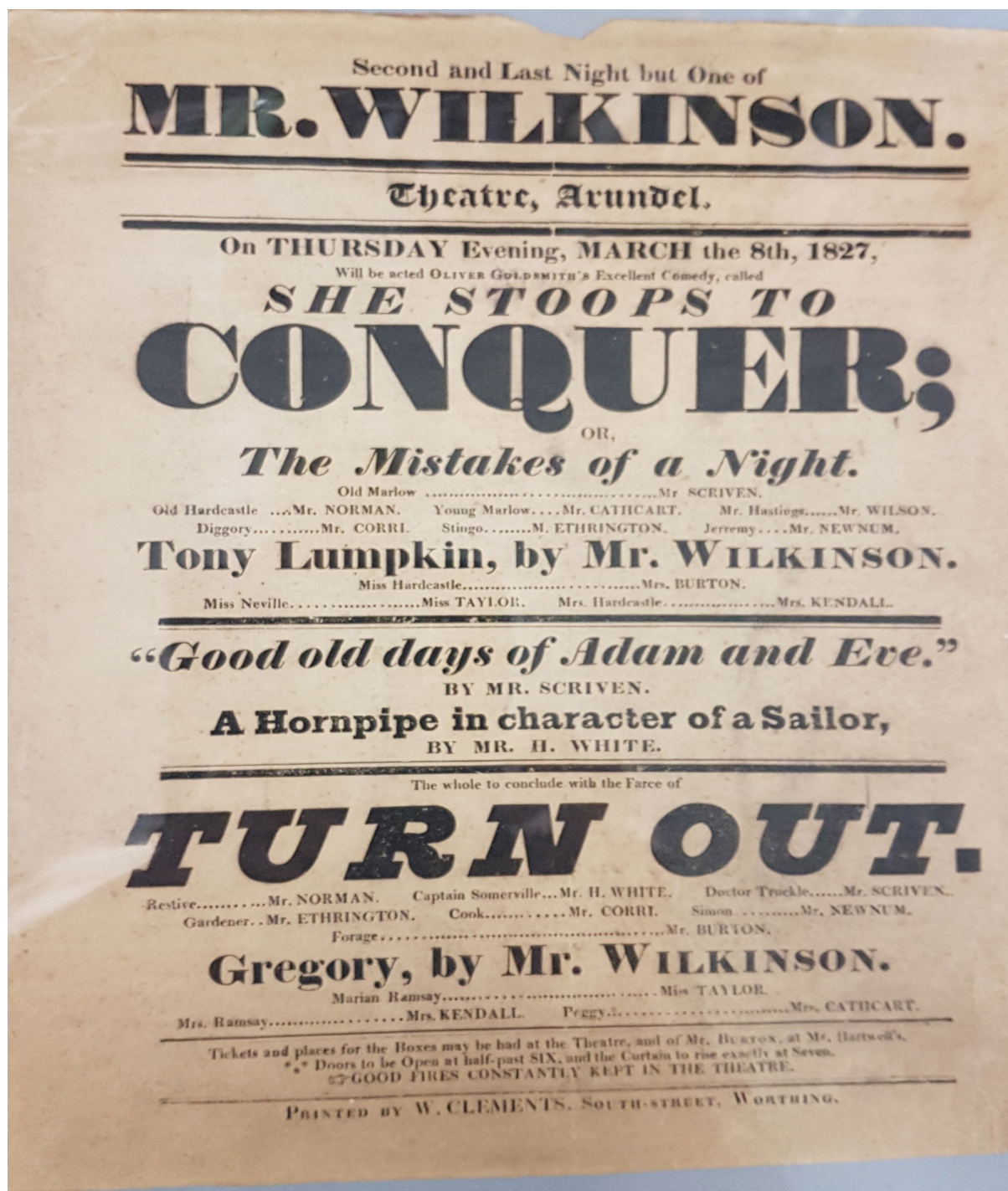


Figure 5. Playbill for 8 March 1827

(Odell 27)

Another surviving playbill (Figure 5) shows that in March 1827, a Mr Wilkinson takes top spot in a classic, Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (Odell 27). The Burtons are still present, playing on this bill. Tickets could be bought from Burton, implying he was still the manager, and a contemporary theatre manual written by an actor listed Burton as the

Arundel manager this year (Rede 12). The playbill promises 'Good fires constantly kept in the theatre', clearly a desirable feature.

By 1828, the theatre had passed to another member of Trotter's Worthing company, Mr Chaplin, who, with his wife, son, eldest daughter, and two further daughters, became the lessees. In their opening year, they presented yet another child phenomenon, the 'Musical and Dramatic Prodigy' Master James Burke. Chaplin took the theatre for a short season the following year, according to the *Sussex Advertiser* (13 Apr. 1829). A playbill says the company was from the Theatre Royal Brighton and that Master Burke was returning for three nights only (Figure 6).

THEATRE, ARUNDEL.

BY PERMISSION OF THE WORSHIPFUL THE MAYOR.

MR. CHAPLIN,

Impressed with a grateful sense of the kind and liberal Patronage with which he has heretofore been favored, has the honor to make known that he has taken the ARUNDEL THEATRE, and intends opening it for a short Season, on

TUESDAY EVENING, APRIL 7th, 1829,

With a Company chiefly selected from the Theatre Royal, Brighton.

During the Season, much Novelty will be produced; the Orchestra, in particular, will be very superior to that of former Seasons; and Mr. CHAPLIN will labour, by every effort in his power, to merit that support which he will assiduously endeavour to gain. He has much satisfaction in announcing that the celebrated Musical and Dramatic Prodigy,

Master BURKE,

Whose efforts in Arundel were so highly appreciated last Season, will appear in a variety of his most Popular Characters,

POSITIVELY FOR THREE NIGHTS ONLY.

On Tuesday Evening, April 7th, 1829,

Will be Performed Home's celebrated Tragedy of

DOUGLAS;

Or, the Noble Shepherd.

Lord Randolph.....Mr. VAUGHAN, (from the Theatre Royal, Norwich.)
 Glensalvon.....Mr. FAUCIT, (from the Theatre Royal, Brighton.)
 Old Norval.....Mr. STRICKLAND, (from the Theatre Royal, Brighton.)
 1st Officer...Mr. NEWNUM. 2nd Officer...Mr. WOOLF.

Young Norval, by - - - Master BURKE.

Lady Randolph.....Mrs. G. RENAUD, (from the Theatre Royal, Brighton.)
 Anna...Miss CHAPLIN, her first appearance these four years.

End of the Tragedy, the Comic Duet of

THE FENCING TAILORS,

As sung nightly with universal applause
 By Mr. STRICKLAND and Mr. G. RENAUD.
 From the Theatre Royal, Brighton, his 1st. appearance.

In the course of the Evening,
 MASTER BURKE will sing a new Imitative Song, illustrative of a

LADIES' BOARDING SCHOOL PLAY;

Or, Breaking up for Christmas Holidays!

In which he will give Characteristic Imitations of the Governess,—the Parents,—the French Teacher, appointed Directress of the Play,—Little Girl, as *Prologue*.—Lisping Girl, as *Hamlet*.—Frightened Little Girl, as *Macbeth*.—Screaming Little Girl, in *Castle Spectre*.—Whining Little Girl, as *Richard*.—*True Style of Speaking Shakespeare*.—illustrated by the French Teacher, &c.

After which, the favourite Farce, called

Raising the Wind;

Or, HOW TO LIVE CHEAP!!!

Jeremy Diddler.....Mr. CHAPLIN, his 1st appearance these four years.
 Old Plainway.....Mr. STRICKLAND. Sam.....Mr. G. RENAUD.
 Fainwood...Mr. W. BURTON, his first appearance.
 Richard.....Mr. WOOLF. George.....Mr. NEWNUM. John.....Mr. JAMES.
 Miss Laurocia Durable.....Mrs. G. RENAUD.
 Peggy.....Miss HUGHES, (from the Theatre Royal, York.)

Master BURKE will lead the Band in the Overture to Tancredi.

MONSIEUR AMBROSE,
 From the Academie Royale de Musique at Paris, will preside in the Orchestra.

To conclude with a favourite Imitative Piece (never acted here) entitled A

Day after the Fair!

Fidget, (an old retired Stock Broker) Mr. BROMLEY, (Master Burke's Dramatic Tutor.)
 Clod, (a Yorkshireman, his Servant) Mr. G. RENAUD. Master BURKE!!
 Jerry, his Servant.....Master BURKE!!
 Sam Wax, a Coffer.....Master BURKE!!
 Sarah Squall, an old Ballad Singer.....Master BURKE!!!
 Timothy Thump'em, a Drummer.....Master BURKE!!!!
 Mademoiselle Dupleino, a Bravura Singer.....Master BURKE!!!!
 Octavius Moonshine.....Master BURKE!!!!
 Polly, Servant at the Cottage, assuming the characters of Sukey Scrub, a Washerwoman, and Madame Maypole,
 a Manageress, Mrs. G. RENAUD.

Figure 6. Playbill for 7 April 1829

(Brighton Playbill Collection © The Keep, ref. BSH, Box 8)

Burke, who played the Young Norval in a Romantic blank verse tragedy, *Douglas*, by John Home, was accompanied by actors listed as being with other theatre companies: the Theatre Royal, Norwich, and three from the Theatre Royal, Brighton. The orchestra, says the

playbill, would be 'very superior to that of former Seasons' and Monsieur Ambrose from the Academie Royale du Musique, Paris would preside, all of which suggests the theatre may be struggling and is trying to reassure its potential customers.

Two more playbills survive from the same season, showing similar fare to what has already been seen as the staple diet of this theatre (Figures 7 and 8).

THEATRE, ARUNDEL.

MR. GREGORY

Having been received on Tuesday Evening with every mark of approbation, will appear for this night only in the character of SIR EDWARD MORTIMER, in the Play of the

IRON CHEST.

After which the celebrated Farce, never acted here, called the

SCHEMING LIEUTENANT.

On **THURSDAY EVENING, April 30th, 1829,**

Will be performed Colman's Musical Play of the

Iron Chest

Sir Edward Mortimer - Mr. GREGORY.

Fitzharding.....Mr. W. BURTON.	Wilford.....Mr. CHAPLIN.	
Adam Winterton.....Mr. STRICKLAND.	Rawbold.....Mr. JONES.	Sampson.....Mr. G. RENAUD.
Armstrong.....Mr. FAUCIT.	Orson.....Mr. VAUGHAN.	First Robber.....Mr. JAMES.
Hugo.....Mr. NEWNUM	
Helen.....Miss POOLE.	Barbara.....Miss CHAPLIN.	Judith.....Mrs G. RENAUD.
Blanch.....Miss HUGHES.	

End of the Play

A COMIC SONG BY MR. G. RENAUD.

A COMIC SONG BY MR. STRICKLAND.

The whole to conclude with the celebrated Farce called the

SCHEMING

Lieutenant;

OR,

ST. PATRICK'S DAY.

Lieutenant O'Conner.....Mr. CHAPLIN.	Doctor Rosy.....Mr. G. RENAUD.	
Justice Credulous.....Mr. STRICKLAND.	Serjeant Trounce.....Mr. VAUGHAN	
Corporal Flint.....Mr. NEWNAM.	Simon.....Mr. W. BURTON.	
Lauretta.....Miss POOLE.	Mrs Bridget.....Mrs G. RENAUD.	

Figure 7. Playbill for 30 April 1829

THEATRE, ARUNDEL.

LAST NIGHT BUT ONE.

FOR THE BENEFIT OF
Mr. & Mrs. G. Renaud.

On which occasion will be produced a
NEW BALLET DANCE,
And the highly Popular Melo Drama (never acted here) called the
Serjeant's Wife.

On **TUESDAY EVENING, May 26, 1829,**
Will be performed the Fashionable Comedy of the
**BELLE'S
Stratagem.**

Doricourt...Mr. CHAPLIN.
HardyMr. STRICKLAND. Sir George Touchwood.....Mr. FAUCIT FlutterMr. G. RENAUD
Saville.....Mr. VAUGHAN Courtall.....Mr. NEWNUM
Sergeant.....Mr. JAMES Dick.....Mr. W. BURTON
Letitia Hardy.....Miss POOLE Mrs. Racket.....Mrs. G. RENAUD Lady Frances Touchwood.....Miss HUGHES
Miss Ogle.....Miss CHAPLIN

In the course of the Evening, a new Comic Song called
"THE MONUMENT AND ST. PAUL'S,"
BY MR. G. RENAUD.
The Comic Song of
"I NEVER SAYS NOTHING TO NOBODY,"
BY MR. STRICKLAND.

And a new Ballet of Action, (1st time here,) called
**LITTLE
Red Riding Hood;**
Or, a Visit to Grandmother !

Wolf.....Mr. VAUGHAN Lubin.....Mr. G. RENAUD
Old Man.....Mr. NEWNUM Florio.....Master CHAPLIN Grandmother.....Mr. W. BURTON
Little Red Riding Hood.....Miss CHAPLIN Kate.....Miss HUGHES
Flora.....Miss M. CHAPLIN Alice.....Miss E. CHAPLIN Jane.....Miss H. CHAPLIN
Helen.....Mrs. G. RENAUD, who will introduce the celebrated Scotch Dance of
"The Blue Bonnets over the Border."
GRAND FINALE.

SHAWL DANCE,
BY MRS. G. RENAUD AND HER PUPILS.

After which, Mr. G. RENAUD will sing
"A BUNDLE OF CONUNDRUMS,"
In the character of Billy Black.

The whole to conclude with the highly popular new melo drama, played upwards of 50 nights at the Theatres Royal Covent
Garden and English Opera, called the
SERJEANT'S WIFE.

Old Cartouch.....Mr. STRICKLAND Serjeant Frederick Cartouch.....Mr. FAUCIT
Serjeant Louis.....Mr. JAMES Serjeant George.....Mr. NEWNUM Denms.....Mr. VAUGHAN
Gaspard.....Mr. W. BURTON Robin.....Mr. G. RENAUD
Lissette.....Miss POOLE Margot.....Mrs G. RENAUD

Tickets to be had of Mr. G. Renaud, at Miss Glossop's, St Mary's Gate Inn.
Places for the Boxes to be taken daily at the Theatre from 11 to 2. A Private Box to be had nightly, on application
to Mr. Chaplin.

Figure 8. Playbill for 26 May 1829

In the 1830s, the theatre seems to have been operating intermittently, and included what may have been theatrical events but were not of the theatre; for example the *Sussex*

Advertiser (26 Apr. 1830) reported a lecture series given by schoolteacher Robert Goodacre on 'astronomy and astronomical geography'; the introductory address was reported as being 'well attended by most of the respectable inhabitants' and the first lecture 'was also well attended', evidence of a growing trend towards promoting educational improvement.

Theatre, Arundel.

THE MANAGER has the honour to announce most respectfully to the Nobility, Gentry, and the Public of Arundel, Littlehampton and their Vicinities, that he has, at a great expense, engaged for

TWO NIGHTS ONLY,
MISS

SHIRREFF

First Singer of the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden.

Mr. HODGES is proud to say, that he will have the pleasure of introducing into Arundel the most successful and one of the best Singers England has ever produced.

On Thursday, August 8, 1833,
Will be performed the very favourite Entertainment called The

**BEGGAR'S
OPERA**

Peachum..... Mr. C. WEBB—Lockit..... Mr. MELLON—Fitch..... Mr. H. WEBB
Crook Finger Jack .. Mr. SEAMAN—Mat O' the 'Mint .. Mr. WHITE—Jimmy Twitcher... Mr. DALE
Captain Macheath (with all the original Songs, &c.) Mr. HODGES
Mrs. Peachum..... Mrs. CHURCH

Polly Peachum, Miss SHIRREFF
Lacy Locket, Miss GROSETTE—Jenny Diver, Miss BENTZ—Sukoy Tawdry, Mrs. BARKER

IN THE COURSE OF THE OPERA

"Can Love be Controlled," Miss Shirreff.
"I LIKE A SHIP," MISS SHIRREFF.
"O! Ponder Well," Miss Shirreff.
"CEASE YOUR FUNNING,"
MISS SHIRREFF.
"WHY HOW NOW MADAM FLIRT,"
MISS SHIRREFF AND MISS GROSETTE.
"Hither Dear Husband," Miss Shirreff & Miss Grosette
MISS SHIRREFF
Will also Sing all the other Songs, Duets, &c. belonging to the Opera.
In Act 2---A Hornpipe in Fetters, by Mr. Seaman.

A NEW COMIC SONG BY MR. H. WEBB.
A PAS SEUL BY MISS BENTZ.

The whole to conclude with the very favourite Melo-Dramatic Opera of

**GUY
MANNERING**

OR, THE GIPSY'S PROPHECY.

Col. Mannering .. Mr. WHITE—Dandy Dinmont .. Mr. MELLON—Henry Bertram... Mr. HODGES
Dirk Hatteraik .. Mr. C. WEBB—Dominic Sampson... Mr. H. WEBB
Gilbert Glossin..... Mr. SEAMAN—Jock Jakes .. Mr. DALE—Sebastian..... Mr. WILSON
Julia Mannering, Miss GROSETTE—Flora, Miss BENTZ—Mrs. M-Candlish, Mrs. BARKER
Meg Merrilies..... Mrs. CHURCH

Lucy Bertram, Miss Shirreff,
Who will Sing all the Original Songs, Duets, &c. and introduce several New Songs.

Doors to be open at Seven, and the performance to begin at Half-Past Seven.
Notwithstanding the great attraction of the above celebrated Lady, the Prices will remain the same, viz.
Boxes 3s. Pit 2s. and Gallery 1s.—Second Price ¼ past Nine o'Clock. Boxes 2s. Pit 1s. and Gallery 6d.
Children in arms DOUBLE PRICE to all parts of the house.
Places to be Taken at the Theatre, or of Mr. Hodges, at Mr. Hartwell's, between the hours of Ten and Four.

HACKMAN, PRINTER, CHICHESTER.

Figure 9. Playbill for 8 August 1833

(Arundel Museum, Arc Unit/cupboard 1/shelf 2 © Arundel Museum)

The last performance at the Arundel theatre for which there is evidence (Figure 9) occurred in 1833, on April 8, with a standard of the time, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, featuring a star from Covent Garden, the opera singer Jane Shirreff reprising her role as Polly Peachum, among other parts. The theatre now seems to be leased by Mr Hodges, playing Macheath, who brings Shirreff to town and handles the tickets. In 1834, local miller Charles New demolished the theatre (though remains of the sidewalls could be seen flanking the garden) and built a house on the site of the stage which the Duke bought and leased to tenants (Ranger, *Two Managers* 201; n13).

Generally, theatre circuits were in decline at this time – the Richmond Theatre, Yorkshire, for instance, faded from 1830 on. The Napoleonic wars were over and the military audience had shrunk. The economic recession of the 1820s undermined the prosperity of the average theatregoer, and, as seen in the report of the astronomy lecture series in Arundel, there was a new spirit of seriousness in the air, alongside a moral and religious earnestness among the merchant and middle classes. The establishment of cultural, scientific, and philosophical institutions, and an increase in evening classes and home pursuits (such as singing, playing musical instruments, and reading novels), provided competition for the theatre.

Perhaps, in the case of the Arundel theatre, it was too small to make a healthy income and attract top names. Chichester to the west and Worthing and Brighton to the east were more populous and their theatres had larger seating capacities and survived longer than Arundel's. Maybe the 12th and 13th Dukes did not extend the kind of patronage that would have been required to keep the theatre open in a place like Arundel, the commercial fortunes of which were diminishing, as seen in the continuing rise of Littlehampton as a port, and in 1832 a parallel loss in political status when boundary reform reduced Arundel's representation from two Members of Parliament to one.

After the closure of the theatre, entertainments in the town were to be found in a spacious room over the Norfolk Arms inn situated in the High Street next to the castle and in the new town hall in Maltravers Street, which was built in 1834-5, exactly the moment when the

theatre closed. The old town hall had been demolished in 1757 to make way for the new market square. It was here, for example, that the African American actor Ira Aldridge appeared in 1846. It was not until the 1970s, however, that Arundel had a permanent theatre again when the Priory Playhouse in the London Road was created out of a former priory building, opposite what would have been the back wall of Henry Thornton's theatre at No. 18 Maltravers Street. The annual arts festival in Arundel keeps alive the legacy of Thornton and his Georgian successors through productions at the Priory Playhouse by its resident group, the Arundel Players, as well as through open-air productions in the castle grounds, and productions in a variety of venues by the Drip Action company, which has its own base in the newly refurbished Victoria Institute a few streets away.

Notes:

¹ A Duke of Norfolk has, for example, held the title of Earl Marshal, a hereditary royal position, since 1672. Major responsibilities include the organising of key state ceremonies, such as the monarch's coronation and state funerals.

² Comparisons of income between the 21st century and the Georgian period are difficult to make, but one indication from the Poor Laws Commissioners in 1834 (as shown on the AFamilyStory website) suggests that the average family wage (income earned by husband, wife and children) was around 16s per week, or £105 today; the average for an individual labourer was around 10s per week, or £68.

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Biog:

Colin Chambers, a former journalist and theatre critic, was Literary Manager of the Royal Shakespeare Company (1981–97), and since 2014 has been Emeritus Professor of Drama at Kingston University, UK. He has written extensively on the theatre, *This article is based on a talk he gave at Arundel Town Hall, 25 August 2021 as part of the Arundel Festival Words and Music programme.*