A Glamorous, Star-Spangled Story

The King's, Edinburgh, Celebrates Its Golden Jubilee

PROUD BOAST—EVERY OUTSTANDING STAGE PERSONALITY IN 50 YEARS HAS PLAYED HERE

FIFTY years ago, on the evening of Saturday, December 8, 1906, all the hansom cabs in Edinburgh seemed to be converging on Tollcross. On the cable cars, which, earlier on, had brought the crowds home from Easter Road, where Hibernians beat Greenock Morton; from Tynecastle, where Hearts' reserves drew with St Mirren; and from Goldenacre, where Heriot's F.P. were beaten by Glasgow Academicals, it was "standing room only."

Under the fitful glow of the street gas lamps crowds stood outside the King's Theatre watching men and women, in full evening dress, alighting from the cabs. Round the corner, the last of the queue for the gallery was vanishing up the stairs. Some of them, no doubt, had been expecting on the admission charge to Easter Road, and, for a similar expenditure, were about to spend three happy hours watching "Cinderella," the pantomime which will celebrate the golden jubilee.

Scotland's Finest

The bustle, and the atmosphere of excitement, were in keeping with an occasion of some importance—the opening performance at the new theatre, "without exception, the finest building of its kind in Scotland."

It was a claim with some substance. From the point of amenity alone, the building was warmly welcomed. On the site, facing the street, had stood a grain store, the Covent Garden Fruit Store, a licensed grocer's shop, and a picture framing shop. Behind were factory premises, with a towering chimney stalk dominating the district. Because of the congested nature of the area the chimney had to be taken down brick by brick. Watching the steeplejacks throwing down the first bricks was Mr A. Stewart Cruikshank, of Messrs W. S. Cruikshank & Son, Lower Gilmore Place, who had the contract to build the theatre.

He did not dream that one day he would become chairman and managing director of Howard and Wyndham, the impresarios of the King's Theatre, and of a chain of theatres throughout the British Isles.

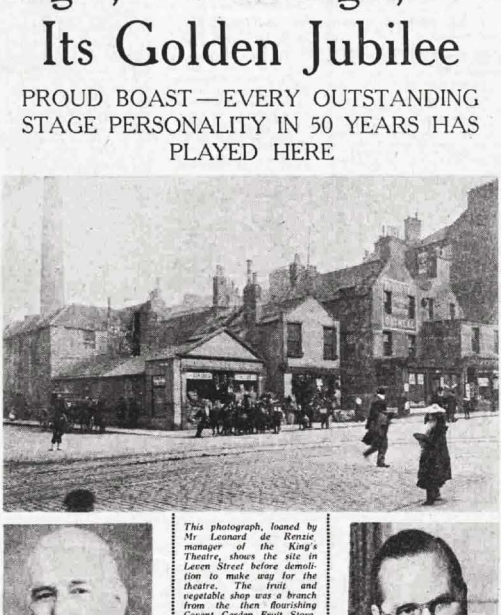
Stage-Door Johnnies

When booking opened for the show, the "Evening News" reported that "the police had to regulate the crowd clamouring for tickets at Mr Pentland's office."

Mr Cruikshank had assembled a company of leading artists for the pantomime, among them Mr Dan Rolyat, an established actor, whose stage name was a reversal of his surname; John Humphries, and a 16-year-old girl, Phyllis Dare, whose striking features, long golden hair, and warm personality had shot her into stardom.

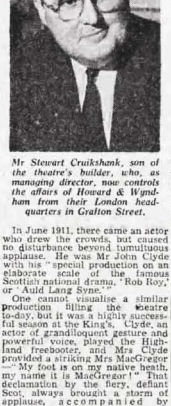
Rolyat played the Baron, Humphries his exuberant wife, and Phyllis Dare was in the title role. In small print down the programme was the name Dorothy Ward, playing an equerry.

Among those in Mr A. Stewart Cruikshank's company that night was a little boy, George A. Scott, now publicity manager of Howard & Wyndham at their London headquarters. He recalls that the "stage-door Johnnies," with their flowers, boxes of chocolates, and invitations to dinner, thronged the narrow alley at the side of the theatre, but they had more success with the chorus girls than with the principals. The girls of the chorus in those days merely had to stand around, sing, and look pretty, and did comparatively well on £1 a week. In these competitive days they have to be highly trained.



This photograph, loaned by Mr Leonard de Renzie manager of the King's Theatre, shows the site in Leven Street before demolition to make way for the theatre. The fruit and vegetable shop was a branch from the then flourishing Covent Garden Fruit Store, of Leith.

The late Mr A. Stewart Cruikshank, who built the theatre, ultimately became chairman and managing director of Howard & Wyndham, proprietors of leading theatres throughout the United Kingdom.



Mr Stewart Cruikshank, son of the theatre's builder, who, as managing director, now controls the affairs of Howard & Wyndham from their London headquarters in Grafton Street.

Still On Staff

Behind the scenes during the pantomime was a young apprentice joiner, George Trotter, who had helped to build the stage. George joined the theatre staff and got the job of pushing tame rabbits through holes in the scenery. The rabbits learned their role so well that, in George's words, "They practically did the act themselves."

Now an energetic 67, George is still on the theatre staff and, in his time has seen all the stars. Not unnaturally, he is a trifle blase where theatricals are concerned. Who, in his opinion, is the greatest among all the stars who have appeared at the King's? To that question George had an immediate and emphatic answer: "Sybil Thorndike! The best actress, and a real lady. She never passed you by, no matter who you were in the theatre."

To that verdict Thomas Leadbetter, the halfkeeper (the title of the man who officiates at the stage-door), nodded approval. Tom was in the gallery on the opening night, and joined the staff in 1924. Nowadays, he has no trouble with "stage-door Johnnies," or exuberant girls. The stars of to-day can stroll along Princes Street without being recognised.

Mobbing Of Pauline

Mr Leadbetter and Mr Andrew D. Stuart, who was manager of the King's from 1926 to 1941, and is now general manager of William Mutrie & Son, theatrical costumiers and scenic contractors, Bell's Brae, Edinburgh, recall one of the most exciting nights at the stage door.

It concerned Pauline Frederick, the American actress of the silent film days. The crowds at the stage-door and in the street were the biggest ever seen. Mr Stuart had the task of escorting Miss Frederick to her car, and it was an ordeal he did not relish.

One night, the crowd became so hysterical that the manager had a sleeve of his coat torn away by admirers trying to touch Miss Frederick. How many in the throng noticed that the greatest dramatic film star of her day was much smaller than she appeared on the screen or stage?

It was an early and unexpected development in the business world that brought the builder into a much closer association with the King's than he anticipated. Mr A. Stewart Cruikshank, twhose son, Mr Stewart Cruikshank, is now managing director of Howard & Wyndham) took over control of the theatre, acting as director and, later, as managing director of the private company which operated its affairs and guided it to success.

An Uncanny Flair

Those who doubted the wisdom of this venture into an unfamiliar sphere by a member of a leading building firm were soon silenced. Mr A. Stewart Cruikshank lost no time in displaying an uncanny flair for things theatrical. He had, it was realised, an eye quick to see unsuspected talent.

By September 1928 Mr A. Stewart Cruikshank became such an influential personality in the entertainment business that he was appointed managing director of Howard & Wyndham, and the King's Theatre was acquired by that comoine on the same date.

Becoming chairman and managing director of the firm in February 1945, he held that office until his death in a road accident near his home in Ravelston Dykes in 1949.

It is the proud boast of the King's management that practically every outstanding star of the past 50 years has played there. Most of them have "stayed the course"; others, after a brief but lucrative spell in the bright lights, faded out.

Lafayette

One whose flamboyant act brought crowded houses was the illusionist, "The Great Lafayette," making his first appearance in Edinburgh at the King's in 1908. Two years later, Lafayette was burned to death in the fire which broke out on the stage of the Empire Theatre.

His funeral to Piershill Cemetery brought out thousands to line the streets. It was, beyond a doubt, the most spectacular funeral procession of all time in Edinburgh. Weeping Negroes, members of the cast, escorted the hearse and the many flower-laden carriages.

In February 1909, Dr Walford Bodie caused a sensation. Bodie claimed to be a miracle man. The stage was crowded with ouija boards and electrical gadgets. After the comic interludes, during which volunteers from the audience were "hypnotised" or "shocked" into ungainly poses, there was a healing session.

No complaint, however severe, seemed to be beyond Bodie's powers. He was a supreme showman. The hall and the lame came hobbling across the stage and, after Bodie had done with them, walked off at a sprightly pace. The medical students, however, were not impressed, and they crowded the gallery to vent their displeasure.

money, as so many in the theatrical profession are tempted to do when earning large salaries, but when the occasion arose, he could be as generous with his money as he was with his encores.

Mr Andrew Stuart recalls that Sir Harry was a knowledgeable, well-read man, and the pair had many an interesting argument on social theories, and other subjects.

'. . . And That!'

The year 1914, which marked the passing of an era, brought, among others, Lillie Langtry, H. B. Irving, and Martin Harvey, three players whose artistry always created a stir. Clarice Mayne and "That" were at the King's in 1915 when word came that the "Dandy Ninth" were on their way to France.

Mr George Scott remembers how the singer, then at the height of her fame, was taken aback by the sudden disappearance of the audience. Their equally speedy return after cheering the Territorials on their way somewhat mollified the star.

And here is the story behind the billing of her talented pianist husband as "That." The couple had had a slight tiff before coming on stage one night. Clarice, in a moment of pique, and, with a finger pointed at her husband, announced: "I will now sing . . . accompanied by—That!" There was a roar of laughter that the couple decided that "That" was the very thing for the bill.

Bernhardt

There were crowded houses when, in 1916, Sarah Bernhardt appeared in a dramatic sketch, "From the Theatre to the Field of Honour." Although then over 70, and handicapped by an artificial leg, Bernhardt electrified her audiences. She not only played a week, and insisted on cash payment in daily instalments.

In small print on a bill in 1916 occurred the name Will Fyffe. He was to return to more prominent billing and a much bigger salary.

The post-war years brought a procession of artists who were to become popular favourites — Tommy Lorne, Tom Cable, and Harry Gordon among them.

The introduction of the summer shows in 1935 brought the public fancy, and Dave Willis, two years later, played for 12 weeks. During the war years, however, the "Half-Past Eight" shows, with Willis at the height of his popularity, ran for as long as 28 weeks.

'Boy David' Record

Space does not permit anything like adequate reference to many famous artists who have appeared behind the King's footlights. The list approaches 500. A few of the names must suffice — Charles Hawtrey, Lilian Braithwaite, Ellen Terry, Irene and Violet Vanbrugh, Henry Ainley, Anna Pavlova, Matheson Lang, Ivor Novello, Laurence Olivier, Marie Tempest, Gladys Cooper, Fay Compton, Alice Delysia, Owen Nares, George Formby, and Tommy Handley.

The record drawings at the King's came from the 16 performances of Barrie's "The Boy David," with Elizabeth Bergner, in November 1939. The two postponements created a record volume of work for the manager and booking staff. London's taste was not that of Edinburgh, and the play failed to appeal when it went South.

Fivefold Costs

And what about the prospects for the theatre world to-day? Patrons who regret the dearth of musical shows are perhaps not aware that production costs are five times what they were pre-war. An ordinary play costs three times as much.

When the King's opened, a chorus girl's costume cost from £2 to £4, now it ranges from £15 to £30. A principal's costume, then from £10 to £20, is now from £50 to £100. Some costumes may be worn only for a few minutes. One short scene in "Mother Goose" pantomime not long ago meant an expenditure of over £1000 for the chorus alone.

On top of that is Entertainments Duty, the bugbear of all promoters. It often makes the difference between the financial success or failure of a show. These are difficult times for the theatre as a whole. What lies ahead no one can say, but, hoping for the best, "the show goes on."

J. R. J.

In June 1911, there came an actor who drew the crowds, but caused no disturbance beyond tumultuous applause. He was Mr John Clyde with his "special production on an elaborate scale of the famous Scottish national drama, 'Rob Roy,' or 'Auld Lang Syne.'"

One cannot visualise a similar production filling the theatre to-day, but it was a highly successful season at the King's. Clyde, an actor of grandiloquent gesture and powerful voice, played the Highland freebooter, and Mrs Clyde provided a striking Mrs MacGregor —"My foot is on my native heath, my name it is MacGregor!" That proclamation by the fiery, defiant Scot, always brought a storm of applause, accompanied by whistling and cheering from the gallery. Theatre audiences of those days had no inhibitions.

In November 1911, the curtain went up on a fairly new performer, Florrie Forde, who popularised the song of the moment, "Kelly from the Isle of Man." It was a twice-nightly show, and Florrie, a warm-hearted, jovial performer, endeared herself to the patrons.

He Was Sensitive

Those who had had thoughts of opening the King's as "a Shakespearean theatre" had, no doubt, changed their views by that time.

"Wee George Wood, the Boy Wonder, in Old and New Successes," came to the King's in October 1912. Those who came in contact with this diminutive artist quickly realised that he was sensitive about his physical peculiarities. He maintained an appearance of indifference, but there were indications that, despite his cheerfulness, he could easily be upset by a thoughtless, chance remark.

How many remember Mr and Mrs Graham Moffat in "Bunty Pulls the Strings" and "A Scrape o' the Pen"? Those performers showed all the Scottish school toured the country and provided many a happy evening with their homely offerings. They presented "A Scrape o' the Pen" at the King's on February 1915, and proved a popular attraction.

Hard-Working Harry

In October of the same year Harry Lauder, then firmly established, headed a variety programme. He was then developing the technique of his friendly conversation with the audience in between his songs, and found the interludes much to the liking of the customers.

No one worked harder to please the public than this great Scottish comedian, and it was "jackets off and sleeves up" when Harry was at rehearsal. Every intonation, every movement, received meticulous study.

There have been a lot of stories of Sir Harry Lauder's Scottish prudence. Sir Harry did not waste