

... Christmas Greetings ... Christmas Greetings ... Christmas Greetings ... Christmas Greetings ... Christmas Greetings ... Christmas Greetings ...

Glitter and glamour for a kingsized birthday

FAMOUS pantomimes over the years have been a feature of the King's Theatre in Edinburgh, which is celebrating its 80th anniversary this December.

The theatre was built by a firm of building contractors, W. S. Cruikshank and Son, of Edinburgh, on the site of a fruit market and grain store, and the opening performance was on December 8, 1906 with the pantomime *Cinderella*. How fitting that *Cinderella* should be the choice for 1986.

Pantomime at the King's has always been a brilliant affair, with such talents as those of Tommy Lorne, the popular Scottish comic, Tom Cable, another Scot, Will Hay, Jewel and Warriss, Gene Gerrard and Douglas Byng.

In more recent days the panto stars have been Harry Gordon, Jack Radcliffe, Jimmy Logan, Stanley Baxter, Alec Finlay and, this season, Rikki Fulton.

In its busy lifetime the Edinburgh King's has had three owners - first, the Cruikshank building company, then Howard and Wyndham Ltd. of Edinburgh, then the Edinburgh District Council since 1969.

Today, refurbished at a cost of £1,200,000, it has 1,330 seats, all brand new and handsomely upholstered in rose red.

The Edinburgh King's, so beloved of many touring actors, is back to its original Edwardian splendour, all glitter and glamour, just as it must have looked that December evening in 1906 when Phyllis Dare and a little-known Dorothy Ward stepped on to its stage for the very first performance.

As Edinburgh's grand old King's Theatre celebrates its 80th anniversary GORDON IRVING looks back on an exciting and eventful history

That Saturday night, in 1906, Phyllis Dare, already a pin-up girl of the Edwardian era, was *Cinders*, and Dan Rolyat and John Humphries were the principal comedians, the Baron and his wife Daisy.

"Tomatoes were thrown at the artists and kippers were sent down wires on to the stage."

Humphries' catch-phrase "What will the Robinsons think!" became a talking-point in Edinburgh homes and on the streets.

Dorothy Ward, who is celebrating her 97th birthday next April, was Gaston the Equerry, understudying the Principal Boy, and stepping into the breach when the latter took ill.

It was a turning point in her career for little Dorothy from Wolverhampton. In 1905 she had earned thirty bob a week as Third Girl in *Bluebeard* at the

Alexandra in Birmingham. By the time she was 20 she was commanding £200 a week, lovely money for the early days of this century.

For me, the King's has many memories. I've known it ever since, in student days at Edinburgh. I stood in the queue for "the Gods" and saw the late Elisabeth Bergner pass by to enter the stage-door for the first-night of J. M. Barrie's last play, *The Boy David*. That was the night Barrie, nervous about reaction, stayed in his room at the Calonian Hotel rather than coming to the theatre.

The King's audiences loved the funny men from Glasgow and the West, and none more so than Dave Willis, the wee comedian with the black moustache who used to sing about "growing more like Hitler every day."

Second-house Saturday performances were the rowdy ones - student nights. Even in the years before World War Two, in the late 1930s, German students stood up in a theatre box and shouted insults at Dave Willis as he parodied the fuhrer with his Hitler song.

Edinburgh King's audiences, on student nights, lost all the expected gentility of the capital city. Tomatoes were

thrown at the artists, and kippers were sent down wires on to the stage.

When the stage illusionist with the medical gimmick, Dr Walford Bodie, claimed to cure illnesses, it was the students, again, who caused a riot.

Musical comedy, light comedy, drama and grand opera all featured at the King's. In September 1907 A. Stewart Cruikshank introduced "high-class vaudeville" along with several short films on the "King's Bioscope", at prices ranging from fourpence to a guinea.

The sensation of 1912 was the Drury Lane racing drama *The Whip*, with an express train in one scene and four race horses pelting along on treadmills in another.

Sir Henry Irving liked The King's.

"Chorus girls were paid £1 a week and suffragettes made impromptu speeches during performances"

So did Wilkie Bard, Stanley Lupino, Will Fyffe, George Robey, Sybil Thordike, Matheson Lang, and, in more recent times, Stewart Granger with Jean Simmons, Jack Hawkins and Paul Robeson.

In its earlier days variety acts came north from England to the theatre at Tollcross, Edinburgh.

Different days, indeed! Back in 1896 Edinburgh had some of the worst slums



JIMMY JEWEL of Jewel and Warriss who are well known at the theatre.



RIKKI FULTON - appearing in this year's pantomime, *Cinderella*.



DOROTHY WARD - became an overnight star when she stepped in to play principal boy when the original actress fell ill.



Veteran actor DOUGLAS BYNG appeared regularly in panto at The King's

in Europe. Whisky was 3s 6d a bottle! Chorus girls were paid £1 a week, and suffragettes made impromptu speeches during performances, throwing pamphlets from the boxes.

Hard days, great days - we salute the King's at Edinburgh as we recall that

very first pantomime, opening with an elaborate winter forest scene which became transformed under a fairy wand into a beautiful spring glade - with REAL rabbits grazing on the slopes.

Happy anniversary, King's Theatre, Edinburgh...