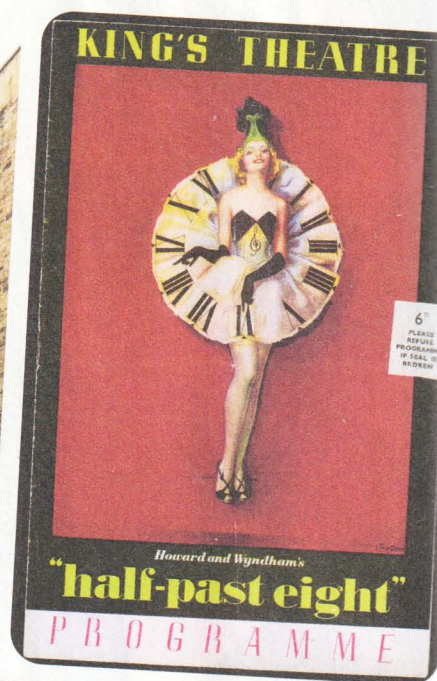


One of many programmes from the People's Archive.



Renovation is underway in the auditorium.

Spotlight On The People's Theatre

Janey Swanson shines a light on a rich theatrical history.

Message In A Bottle

During the ongoing redevelopment of the King's Theatre, photographer and historian Mike Hume discovered a glass bottle inside the ornate plaster crown overlooking the stage.

It contained a list – dated October, 1906 – of the draughtsmen, architects, plasterers, journeymen and apprentices who worked on the theatre during its construction. “This special trinket honours the local people who built the King’s,” Mike says.

“For nearly 120 years, it’s been silently bearing witness to the countless famous faces and Edinburgh community performers who have graced the King’s stage.”

THERE’S no shortage of recognition for the actors and actresses who have starred in theatres across the UK over the years.

At the King's Theatre in Edinburgh, the People's Archive shines the spotlight on those who worked behind the scenes, played in the orchestra, appeared in amateur productions and even took their seat in the audience.

“The People's Archive

celebrates Edinburgh's rich theatre history,” Abby Pendlebury, heritage engagement manager at Capital Theatres explains.

“When it opened in 1906, the King's was referred to as the People's Theatre.

“This project tells the stories of the people, not just the stars.”

The People's Archive offers online access to programmes, photographs, playbills, press articles, autographs and film reels

from the King's archives.

These were donated by employees, performers, musicians and members of the public. Some were also found during the current major redevelopment.

“With over 3,000 digitised items, The People's Archive enables users to immerse themselves in the history of the King's,” Abby continues.

“The People's Archive also holds fascinating case studies and oral histories featuring people who

worked and performed at the King's, in both professional and community or amateur productions.”

The massive job of digitising the archive's items, collecting and transcribing oral histories and researching case studies has been carried out by a small but dedicated team of volunteers.

“Our twenty-four volunteers have brought the People's Archive to life,” Abby says.

“They have undertaken in-depth research into a diverse range of subjects, from genealogy to costume design, and discovered so many amazing stories, fascinating people and showstopping shows.

“Without the People's Archive, these were at risk of being forgotten.”

People's Archive volunteer Ruth Bowman uncovered the story of Bethia Cassie, a cleaner at the King's who became a lighting technician which was very unusual at the time.

“I came across Bethia Cassie in a 1937 newspaper article about women with unique jobs,” Ruth says.

“After much searching, I found Bethia had started working as a ‘duster’ at the King's in 1917.

“She appears to have been quickly promoted to operating the theatre's spotlight.

“This was perhaps because so many of the city's men were fighting in World War I.”

Ruth discovered that, when the King's lighting

technician died suddenly, Bethia found herself in charge of the lighting switchboard.

“Bethia and her husband, who was a manual worker, had two young children,” Ruth continues.

“Her parents lived nearby so maybe her mother helped out with childcare as Bethia would have worked long hours, late into the evening.

“Bethia appears to have been good at her job – and also a woman who knew how to get her own way.

“One story she tells in the original newspaper article concerns an actress who refused to sign autographs.

“Bethia was a keen autograph collector and gave the actress's maid her autograph book along with the warning that, if it didn't come back signed, the actress would be blacked out on stage that night!”

Ruth also researched family trees for Bethia's parents, husband, siblings and children.

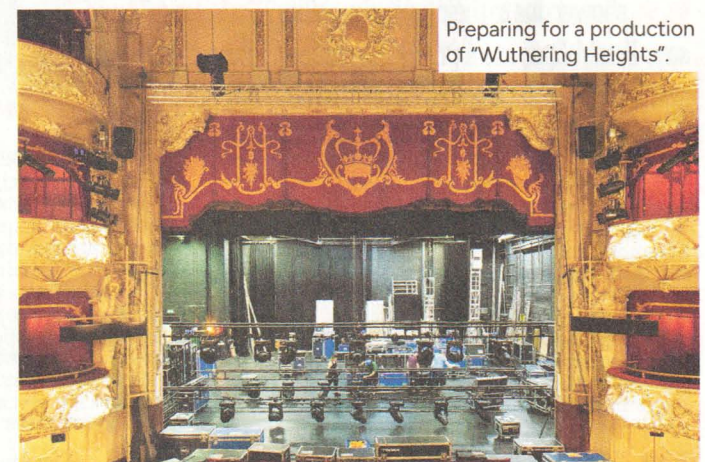
“It was so exciting to uncover all this information about Bethia,” Ruth says.

“Thanks to my genealogy research, I met Bethia's great-nephew and his wife and was able to share my findings with them, which was incredibly rewarding. I just wish we could find Bethia's autograph book.”

Ruth is now researching two musicians with close links to the King's Theatre.

“Douglas Wilcox was the musical director at the King's from 1909 until 1936,” Ruth says.

Researcher Ruth chats to Olive Macmillan.



Preparing for a production of “Wuthering Heights”.

“He was very popular with performers and musicians and at the end of every panto run, received gifts from the cast and even the occasional audience member.”

Ruth's second research subject is violinist and conductor Felix Gates.

“Felix organised the Sunday evening concerts at the King's which started on the theatre's opening weekend and were very contentious as they were held on the Sabbath but were not religious,” she explains.

“Despite the uproar, these concerts were very popular and featured world-renowned soloists.”

Ruth has discovered that Felix left Edinburgh at the end of 1910 for a post at Melbourne University, appears to have swapped music for antiques dealing in the 1920s and died in Tangiers in 1951.

“I'm looking into why Felix was in Tangiers,” Ruth says.

“My research is taking me all over the world – and uncovering so many fascinating stories on the way.”



Mike Hume and John Robb found a bottle in the plaster crown.



The bottle containing the list of names.