



Links with the past: The act-drop of Settle Market Place, top, painted in 1853 by local actor Edmund Handby. Above, the market place as it is today. Right, retired Settle clergyman the Rev James Metcalfe, Edmund Handby's grandson.

Pictures: Bruce Rollinson.

Rare find sets scene for 'music hall' renovation

Andrew Robinson

A RARE piece of theatre history has been uncovered during preparations for the renovation of a Yorkshire community hall.

The fragile hand-painted "act-drop", designed to drop in front of the stage between acts, was gathering dust in the rafters at Victoria Hall in Settle, north of Skipton.

Victoria Hall, built in 1853, was one of the first purpose-built music halls in the UK.

It is probably the oldest such building still in use and is believed to be one of only five surviving which still have an act-drop mechanism as opposed to curtains.

The picture on this one, showing Settle market place in the 1820s, is still clear, although it was painted in

1862. The artist was a local decorator and keen amateur actor called Edmund Handby.

His grandson, the Rev James Metcalfe, a retired Settle clergyman, unfurled the drop in a ceremony on Saturday.

The trustees of the hall are raising funds for a major refurbishment and are hoping to restore the act-drop. They have asked an expert to inspect it to see if it can be

made strong enough to take the wear and tear of being used in earnest.

Margaret Barker, secretary of a Settle theatre group which uses the hall - and a member of the trust which runs the building - said yesterday: "We did know it was there but it must be 20 years since anyone looked at it and we did not know what condition it was in. In fact it is in surprisingly

good condition. It is dirty, and tearing in places, and it will be a tricky renovation, because it was painted in temper, so you can't just wash it, but the picture is still recognisable and of some historic interest in itself."

Some fund-raising is still necessary but the trustees are expecting to be able to start the renovation and extension works on the hall in June.