

Happy Birthday New Theatre! 75 on 26th February.

The story of the New Theatre is worthy of appearing on its own stage. It's a mystery, tragedy, comedy, triumph, and a cast of characters which includes Harry Drinkwater the publican's son and Vera...

survive the coming of the cinemas in 1910. In 1913 Charles died. His son Stanley was only 17, but he had a vision. He declared his theatre would be "the most luxurious and comfortable house of entertainment in England".

The first theatre

A 'Mr Barnett and his company' got leave from the University to put on theatrical events in 1836, in a New Theatre, very close to where our present version stands. The smartest entrance, which led to the boxes, was off Magdalen St; the others on Victoria Court and Red Lion Square, where the stage was set.

The most luxurious theatre in England In 1933 Drinkwater's theatre was demolished, and work started on Stanley's new Art Deco design. It was just a year and a day it was opening its doors again, a feat of coordination and hard work.

Visiting players came often in the 1860's and 70's, as did music hall acts, and many other delights. One amateur in the newly formed am dram scene was a man named Harry Drinkwater. In 1878 he took part in a very successful show, and it gave him a love of theatre.

Stanley's work paid off. Oxford became a big player on the theatre circuit. It hosted national companies, and shows like The Mousetrap came here even though the audience capacity of its predecessor. It even had a record for a record.

New New Theatre

An enlightened Vice Chancellor of the University, Benjamin Jowett, had seen his students act and felt Oxford was a home for dramatic arts. He was concerned for the safety of the new theatre, and it just wasn't big enough.

Stanley finally relinquished the reins in 1915, aged 70. His son John faced a difficult task, as television was on the up and theatres everywhere were struggling. By 1922 things were just too tough and the family sold up.

In 1886 a New Theatre was opened. It seated 1000 and was designed by an architect named HGW Drinkwater. He became one of the Managing Directors of his new Theatre, while continuing to build Oxfordshire pubs and churches.

The chain of takeovers started. Paul and Nita Gregg retook the reins. The Apollo Theatre was sold to SFX, which merged with Clear Channel and the Apollo became the New Theatre once again in 2002.

Fire!

It must have been having a resident architect when the theatre caught fire in 1892. About 11pm on a dark March night a loud cracking was heard and the fire brigade was summoned. Unfortunately all the hydrants were frozen and the fire was under control only after 100 gallons of water had been put out.

All the changes of management in the last 30 years has resulted in a scattered archive. If you have old brochures, memories or photos do get in touch, and any by its 100th birthday we'll have filled in the gaps!

The present day

The theatre now continues to entertain just as it always did, with opera, ballet, musicals, comedians and spirit mediums. Auditions are now being held for The Stage Experience, where children get the chance to act on that huge stage. Let's hope, like Drinkwater, it gives them a love of theatre in general, and the New Theatre in particular.

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www.dailyinfo.co.uk Next issue Sat 28th February Deadline: 10am, Fri 27th February

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THEATRE REVIEW Never have I ever... Ever

Odeon George St (0871 2244 007) THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON (12A)

At the Burton Taylor Studio on Sat February 28th See Theatre listings, below.

Odeon George St (0871 2244 007) THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON (12A)

THEATRE LISTINGS Burton Taylor Studio on Sat February 28th

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THEATRE LISTINGS Burton Taylor Studio on Sat February 28th

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THEATRE REVIEW Eticquette "A theatrical experience just for the two of you"

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