

Amateur dramatics in Welford-on-Avon

Introduction: a village that put on plays

For seventy-five years Welford-on-Avon had its own theatre company. The Welford-on-Avon Amateur Dramatic Society was founded at a public meeting in the Memorial Hall on 12 January 1928 and gave its last performance in March 2003 (61/01; 61/05 loose note; 61/09). In between it played before a royal duke, won county drama certificates, competed at festivals, filled the village hall for three nights at a time, and argued, in minute after minute, about money, men and the electric kettle.

The story can be told in unusual detail because two large runs of the Society's own papers survive in the Welford and Weston Local History Society archive. Folder 61 holds the minute books, from the founding meeting of 1928 through the 1930s, the post-war revival of 1946–48 and the busy seasons of 1950–56, together with the Secretary's working papers and two short modern histories (61/01–61/09). Folder 62 holds the Society's scrapbook, lettered "Scrap Book 1936 to 1969", which pastes up posters, programmes, press photographs and almost every newspaper review from November 1937 to May 1970 (62/01). Between them they name several hundred players, producers and helpers. Other folders add a royal programme, pantomime memories, carnival committees and oral history.

This essay follows the Society through five phases: the founding years of 1928–35; the Swinnock era and the royal visit of 1938; the post-war heyday of 1946–62; the revival of 1965–70; and the long last chapter that ended in 2003. Citations give the archive folder and item, as in 62/01, followed by the scrapbook or minute-book page where that helps.

Before the Society

Village drama in this corner of Warwickshire did not begin in 1928. The mummers' play, with its King George, Doctor and Beelzebub, was still remembered in the district around 1910. A correspondent to the Evesham Journal reported meeting "the youngest member of the last troupe of Mummers at Alderminster", who could recall only the Doctor's lines (23/45). No Welford version has been found, but Alderminster is only a few miles away.

The archive is thin for Welford's own entertainments before the 1920s. What it does show is a village used to dressing up for its great days. The maypole celebrations, concerts at fêtes and, later, the carnival tableaux all needed costumes, rehearsals and people willing to stand up in front of their neighbours. When the Society was barely three months old, in April 1928, the ladies were already being asked to sew "dresses for the performance of a Masque for the Maypole Celebrations on Empire Day" (61/01, 5 April 1928). Drama and the maypole belonged to the same world.

The Memorial Hall was the other precondition. Opened in December 1923 as the village's war memorial, it gave the village a hall with a small stage at the back (23/97–107; 61/09). Almost every production in this essay was given there. Reporters called it the Village Hall, the War Memorial Hall and, in 1938, simply "the hut" (62/01 p.82).

Founding the Society, 1928–1935

The Society was born out of a lecture. On 12 January 1928 the Welford and Weston Village Community Council called a public meeting in the Memorial Hall "for the purpose of considering the formation of an Amateur Dramatic Society in the Village". The Rector, the Rev. A. J. Davis, took the chair, and Leo Baker of Chipping Campden spoke on "the Present and Future Life of Dramatic Art in England" (61/01).

Baker's argument was the idealistic one of the Little Theatre movement. Real drama, he said, "was being strangled by commercial speculation", and if it was to survive as "an uplifting force" it would be through small bands of players in towns and villages "devoting themselves to the study and production of good plays". He proposed a small committee of management, an entrance subscription of 2s 6d, and groups of members each studying a different play. Forty-six people enrolled that night. Mr E. H. Fenton, a newcomer to the village, was persuaded to act as manager under Baker's occasional supervision (61/01).

A second meeting on 21 January elected the first officers: Mrs A. J. Davis, the Rector's wife, as President; Leo Baker as Director; Fenton as Producer; and H. M. Woodward as Secretary and Treasurer. Fenton was given "a free hand in selection of play and choosing of cast", and he ruled that non-acting members should not watch rehearsals (61/01). Woodward, whose full name was Holtham Mills Woodward, was already collecting the village's history and later served the fête and Jubilee committees (50/40; 60/03).

Things moved quickly. The first performances, "two short pieces", were given on 27 and 28 March 1928 and made a small profit. By April the chairman had to ask members not to give way to "signs of jealousy over the allotment of parts", since it was "impossible to include everyone". The Society joined the British Drama League for a guinea, chiefly for its library of plays (61/01, 5 April 1928).

The first season

The first year was ambitious. Fenton's report to the first Annual General Meeting, on 28 January 1929, recorded J. M. Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton*, "a really good play" that "had been very well performed", and three one-act plays in November 1928. *The Admirable Crichton* was taken to Mickleton, where it lost money, "but the experience gained had fully compensated for it" (61/01). By September 1929 the President could speak of the Society's "success in the competition at Cheltenham" as one "of which they had a right to be proud" (61/01).

Two certificates from the Warwickshire Rural Community Council's drama contests hung on the hall wall in 1938. One, dated 1929, was an award of merit. The other, dated 1931, carried a gold star for the best performance in the county (62/01 p.82; 07/07). For a society barely three years old, that was a remarkable record.

Money and producers

The minutes are frank about the strain. The accounts for 1928 showed a balance of £2 9s 3½d, much of it in entertainment tax stamps. A production in late 1928 lost £1 5s 11d, and an electric lighting bill of about nine shillings was still to come (61/01, 14 January 1929).

Members debated cheaper seats at 8d or 9d and reductions for families. The Secretary explained the dilemma that would dog the Society for decades. New plays paid royalties, while old plays without royalties needed expensive period costumes. His answer was a ladies' working party and a permanent wardrobe.

Fenton could not carry on as producer for long. In October 1928 and again in January 1929 he asked to be relieved, and was talked into supervising a committee instead. By February 1930 the Society decided to pay a professional. Mr A. W. Warner, who had already helped with the January 1930 performances, was engaged at 7s 6d for every rehearsal he attended (61/01, 26 February 1930). Miss D. Serjeantson took over as Secretary and Treasurer, the start of nearly twenty years in office (61/04, July 1950). That summer the members planned an outdoor performance on the Rectory lawn on Whit Monday, 9 June 1930, with part of it repeated at the August fête (61/01).

The low point came in October 1930. Mrs Davis resigned as President, and the meeting decided "it was not necessary to have a president". There was "a balance of only 19/2 in the funds", too little to pay anyone. The members fell back on short plays they could produce themselves: *The Bishop's Candlesticks*, *The Rest Cure* and *The Prize Pigeon* (61/01). A year later the Society had recovered. April's performances had left £1 10s 7½d, new members had joined, and Miss Wood had agreed to produce again (61/01, 3 October 1931).

The members of these years were Welford's own: the Misses Hancox, Mabel Basson, the Bryans, Matthews, Harveys, Collinses and Wilsons. Several of the names recur for the next forty years.

Pantomimes and the wider village

The Society was not the only source of theatre. In 1934 the Welford-on-Avon Methodist Sunday School staged the pantomime *Aladdin*, with twelve scenes, twenty-seven named parts and sixteen "Chinese boys and girls", nearly all children from village families. Stanley Bennett played Aladdin and Billie Kerr the Widow Twankey. The handwritten producers' names include Mabel Basson, a Society member, and Hubert D. Parriss of Maypole House (03/12).

Parriss was remembered decades later. Jane Fisher (christened Nancy), writing her memories for the Local History Society, recalled the shopkeeper "Hubert at the Maypole": "he was a frustrated actor and every year, produced a pantomime in the Memorial Hall" (49/21). Her list of the hall's pleasures was simply "Dances, Hubert's pantomime" (49/22). She also remembered being driven out after dark to glimpse the Prince of Wales, who had seen twenty minutes of a play after opening the new Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford in 1932 (49/22). Welford's amateurs always played in the shadow of the most famous theatre in England, a few miles up the river.

The Swinnock years and the royal visit, 1936–1939

The second minute book opens in the spring of 1936 with an uncomfortable letter. Mrs Wilson, the chairman, had written to W. J. Matthews of Tenby House asking for his resignation. He replied on 1 May 1936 that "as this would appear to be a solution to the problem of getting another producer, I willingly tender my resignation" (61/02). The new producer was William Ewes Swinnock of The Retreat, and he would shape the Society for the next twenty years.

Yellow Sands, 1936

Swinnock's first big production was Eden and Adelaide Phillpotts's Devon comedy *Yellow Sands* in the autumn of 1936. The minutes show how hand-made it was. New copies of the play were too dear, so the Secretary hunted for second-hand ones and then had typed copies made cheaply by a Miss Davies. Bob Wright bound them. Chairs were borrowed from neighbours, and S. L. Atkin of The Boat Cottage helped paint the scenery (61/02).

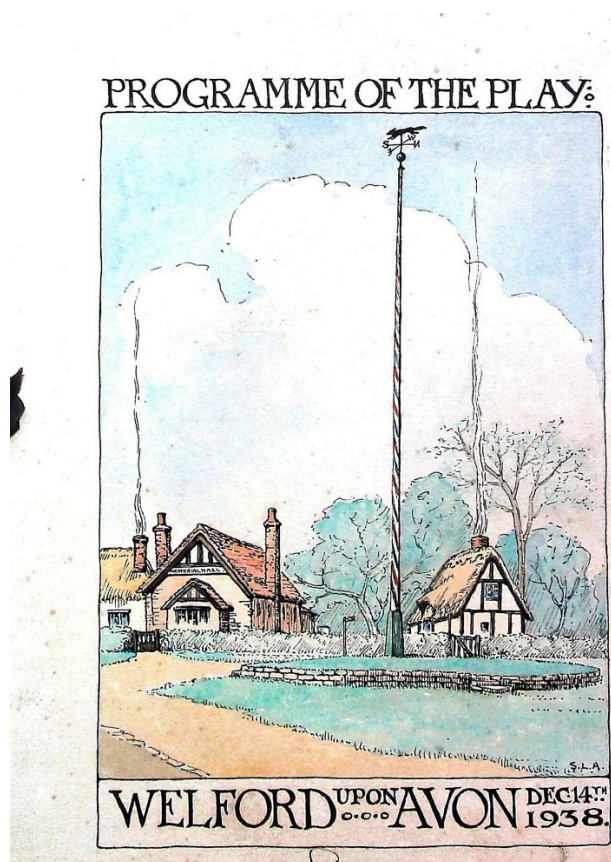
Someone who had come down from London to see it wrote a long letter of criticism, which Swinnock thought worth reading aloud and copying into the minute book. The writer praised H. E. Churchill as "the wise ne'er-do-well, Dick Varwell, with his ragged coat & philosopher's mind", L. Matthews as "the rather pathetic young communist", and R. Wright as "a dignified lawyer, happily of the real rather than the stage variety". The scenery was "excellent". The sea scene "gave an illusion of space to a small stage", and the scene shifters produced the second set "with amazing speed apparently from nowhere — there was obviously no room for it behind the scenes". The only real fault was that some players were not word-perfect (61/02, January 1937).

Artistic success did not pay the bills. *Yellow Sands* made "a serious loss", and a suggestion to raise funds with a concert was turned down (61/02). By September 1937 the Society did not have enough members to cast *If Four Walls Told*. Swinnock agreed to produce one more winter play but warned that the Society "must look out for another Producer for the Spring Play" (61/02). That winter play was Norman MacOwan's *The New Tenant*, given in November 1937 on a Saturday and the following Monday (62/01 p.92).

The accounts for 1937–38 show the scale of the operation. Total receipts were £32 19s 0d. Hall hire cost £4 13s 6d, and royalties and books were the largest outgoings. The Society ended the season with £7 11s 8½d, which it moved into the Post Office Savings Bank. There were just eleven subscribing members (61/02).

She Passed Through Lorraine

The play that made the Society's name was Lionel Hale's *She Passed Through Lorraine*. It is set in a farmhouse in Lorraine in October 1436, five years after the burning of Joan of Arc, when a girl seeking shelter claims to be Joan herself (62/01 pp.84, 88). Swinnock produced it in the spring of 1938. By May the members were deciding where to store "the dresses from the last production", which Miss Serjeantson offered to keep in a tin trunk lent by A. Collins (61/02, 3 May 1938). The production was then chosen for a royal occasion. Prince George, Duke of Kent, the King's younger brother, was Vice-Patron of the National Council of Social Service. On Wednesday 13 December 1938 he toured rural Warwickshire with the county's Rural Community Council. He opened a village hall at Fillongley, visited a playing field at Barford and a handicraft show at Wellesbourne, took tea at Stratford, came to Welford "to see a village play", and finished at Alcester (62/01 p.85). The printed invitation and advance notices gave the date as 7 December, so the tour was evidently put back a week (62/01)



The hand-painted programme presented to the Duke of Kent, showing the maypole and cottages. The Duke signed it "George" (62/01 p.87; copy postcard 03/11).

The Stratford-upon-Avon Herald sent a writer who signed himself G.Q.J. His report of 23 December 1938 is the finest single description of the Society in the archive. He found the maypole in fog, children gazing at "the hut", and four new garden seats that nobody was allowed to sit on. As he put it, "you don't receive the King's brother in your village hall after

tea every Wednesday evening". The Duke watched the play, and the company then repeated it in full for the public later the same evening (62/01 pp.82, 90; 07/07).

G.Q.J. was most struck by Swinnock. He had been producer for five years, had designed the scenery and supervised its building, and on the night was "stage-manager, sound effects, prompter and electrician" as well. The cast were real villagers from Welford or Dorsington. The men ranged "from farm worker to insurance agent", and the women from teaching to shop work in Stratford. The Society gave two productions a year and limited itself to £10 for each (62/01 p.82).



The company round the refectory table in the fifteenth-century farmhouse set. The scenery was designed by Swinnock and painted by the cast, and the ladies made the costumes (62/01 p.89).

The Duke left the Memorial Hall with H. C. Setten, chairman of the Parish Council (62/01 p.91). He was presented with a hand-drawn and hand-lettered programme. Its cover shows the maypole with cottages behind, and its inside, in careful italic, lists the cast.

"She Passed Through Lorraine."

A Comedy by
Lionel Hale.

Characters:—

Blanche. — G.D. Serjeantson.
Second Cousin Marie. — M. Basson.
Robert. — H. Churchill.
Father Michael. — P. Matthews.
Pierre. — V. Matthews.
Simon. — C. Howell.
Edite. — M. Booth.
Nicholas. — R. Wright.
Joan. — I. Churchill.
Giles. — A. Collins.
Blaise. — W. Langston.
Maid. — B. Jakeman.

Scene.

A Farmhouse in Lorraine
on the outskirts of the little
village of Blenod-les-Toul,
near Vancouleurs.

Time,
An October afternoon
in the Year 1436..

Produced by
W.E. Swinnock.

The inside of the royal programme. The cast were D. Serjeantson, M. Basson, H. Churchill, P. Matthews, V. Matthews, C. Howell, M. Booth, R. Wright, I. Churchill, A. Collins, W. Langston and B. Jakeman, produced by W. E. Swinnock (62/01 p.88).

The signed programme still survives with the scrapbook, and a modern talk records that it used to be shown on a table at the back of the hall (62/01 p.86; 61/09). Robert Wright played Nicholas, and his eulogy adds that "it is believed that the Duke only stayed for the first half" (11/54). Twelve years later a newspaper column still recalled that the Duke "had attended a performance and commended the players" (62/01 p.72). He was killed in an air crash in 1942 (61/09).

The sources do not agree on every detail. The handmade programme is dated 14 December, a day after the visit, and the typed and painted programmes give two of the minor parts to different actresses (62/01 pp.84, 88). One modern summary in the archive says the royal play was *Yellow Sands*. The Herald, the programmes and the minute book all show it was *She Passed Through Lorraine* (61/02 summary; 62/01 p.82).

When was the Society founded?

The royal visit fixed the Society's place in village memory, and memory later blurred its beginnings. The scrapbook cover says 1936, the date its press cuttings begin. The 1947 revival notice said the Society was founded "17 or 18 years ago", and a 1950 column called it "now 30 years old" (62/01 pp.1, 72, 80). A modern history gives 1921 (61/09). The minute book settles the question: the founding meeting was held on 12 January 1928 (61/01).

The war ended everything. *She Passed Through Lorraine* was the last production before 1939, and the Society did not meet again until 1946 (62/01 p.80; 61/03).

The post-war heyday, 1946–1962

Starting again

The first meeting since 1939 was held at The Hollies, Mrs Wilson's house, on 24 September 1946. Thirteen people came. Swinnock suggested that they might "wind up the old Society and start afresh", but the members decided to carry on and use the pre-war funds "to give the necessary start in post war activities" (61/03). In November he proposed a sensible apprenticeship. Experienced actors would tackle three-act plays, while newcomers would start with one-act plays "suitable for W.I. etc". The first choice, *Lady Hard to Please*, turned out to be out of print, and the Secretary wrote to Foyle's for second-hand copies (61/03).

The play that finally relaunched the Society was Jan Stewer's West Country comedy *Barnet's Folly*. It was "universally acclaimed" by the reading committee in August 1947 and by December had made "a good profit" (61/03). One newspaper headlined its review "Successful Revival by Welford Amateurs" and named Dorothy Serjeantson and May Wilson as founder members still on stage (62/01 p.80). The production was repeated at the Jubilee Hall, Clifford Chambers, at the invitation of the W.I. there. A similar invitation from Salford Priors had to be refused "owing to transport difficulties" (61/03; 62/01 p.80). Mrs Churchill reported that several schoolchildren wanted to join, and a junior branch was proposed (61/03, December 1947).

Jerome K. Jerome's *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* followed in April 1948, with a small profit. The Society joined the Citizen House Library, which lent sets of plays, and set up reading circles (61/03; 62/01 p.79). The typed rules of about 1949 fixed the financial year, kept the subscription at 2s 6d, and allowed the producer to recast any part after three missed rehearsals. Rule 4 limited new members to those living "within a radius of 2½ miles of Welford Maypole" (61/03; 62/01 p.76). In 1955 it was relaxed to "residents in Welford & surrounding villages" (61/05, July 1955).

A company with a reputation

The next twelve years were the Society's golden age. It usually gave two or three full-length plays a season, each on a Friday and Saturday, and later from Thursday to Saturday. The scrapbook records nearly thirty productions between 1948 and 1960 (62/01). The choice was the standard repertoire of the post-war amateur stage: drawing-room comedies by Kenneth Horne and Esther McCracken, Priestley's time plays, Ben Travers's farces, Rattigan's *Flare Path* and thrillers by Agatha Christie. There were few classics, and the critics occasionally said so.

The producers changed, but the core was remarkably stable. Swinnock produced most of the plays up to 1950, including *The Middle Watch*, *Quiet Week End* and a post-war *Yellow Sands* that later reviewers held up as the Society's benchmark (62/01 pp.57, 64, 74, 77). Robert S. Black, who also designed and painted scenery, produced *George and Margaret*, *Flare Path* and *Quiet Wedding*. Duncan Blyth, Bert Doherty, Jim Dayer-Smith and Marjorie Holman followed. By July 1952 the Society could "boast of 5 Producers" (61/05).

Behind the scenes, Charles Howell was stage carpenter for three decades, and in December 1952 the minutes recorded a special vote of thanks calling him the mainstay of the Society (61/05; 62/01). Dorrington Kirk's sets were praised in almost every review. Tom Holman was stage manager and treasurer, and Edwin Bolton managed front of house. Duncan Blyth had been actor-manager of the Crescent Theatre, Birmingham, and a B.B.C. broadcaster. His obituary says the benefit of that experience was "freely given to amateur dramatists" in Welford, where he was the Society's secretary (63/09).



Esther McCracken's Quiet Week End, produced by W. E. Swinnock in December 1950, on its cottage set with beamed ceiling and lattice windows (62/01 p.70).

Money, equipment and the café

The minutes of the 1950s are full of practical life. In 1949–50 the Society bought a public address system for £25 and a hand truck, and still finished the year with £36. Its amplifier was soon in demand, for the school's May Day dancing and for crowning the Carnival Queen. Members agreed to lend it in the village for two guineas, with a member always going with it (61/04, July 1950). Miss Serjeantson retired as treasurer that summer after "nearly 20 years", and the Society opened its first bank account (61/04).

The Society also gave its own money to the village. It guaranteed £10 towards central heating for the Memorial Hall in 1950, and in 1958–59 gave the proceeds of *The White Sheep of the Family* and *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* to the Memorial Hall Improvement Fund (61/04; 62/01 pp.6, 9). It sent £3 3s to the 1953 flood appeal and £2 2s to the Church Fête (61/05).

From 1952 nearly every meeting was held at the Maypole Café, "by kind permission of Mr and Mrs Lait". Mrs Lait also let the Society rehearse there for a small charge to cover lights

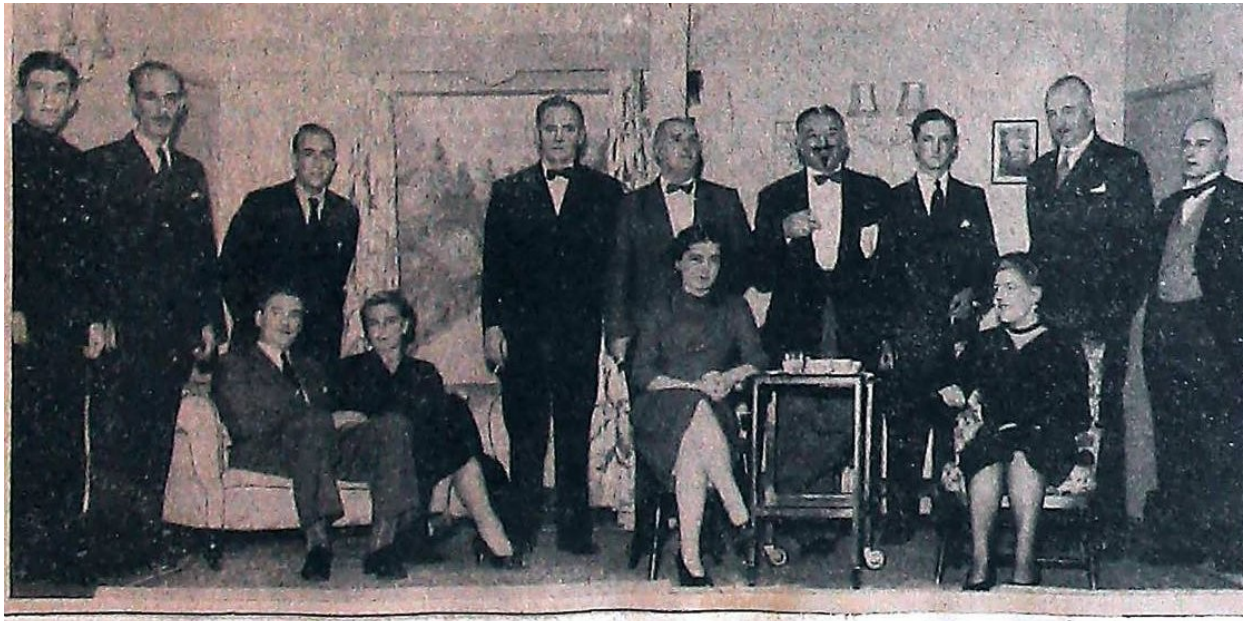
(61/05). The minutes record a long-running search for an electric kettle, because the cup of tea was "of vital need to the members while final rehearsals were in progress" (61/05, August 1952). They also record arrangements with the Stratford Blue Bus company for a late bus home after performances. Posters for *The Artist's Murder* and *The Man from the Ministry* advertised a bus to Stratford after each show (61/05; 62/01 pp.48, 51).

Not everything went smoothly. In 1951–52 the Stratford Herald ignored the Society's invitations to review, and the members moved their printing to another firm and talked of a boycott (61/06; 61/05, July 1952). In 1953 the Hon. Secretary, E. Bolton, resigned with a sharp letter observing that the Society "hardly needs a Secretary" because the producers and treasurer did everything (61/05). Membership reached 52 in 1953, and members worried that there were too few parts to go round (61/05). Yet the Society was always short of men. In 1955 and 1956 it declined to enter the Henley festival "owing to shortage of men actors" (61/05).

Festivals and touring

From 1951 the Society entered the one-act drama festival run by the Henley-in-Arden Town Improvement Committee. Its first entry, Stanley Houghton's *The Dear Departed*, was chosen "out of a hat" because none of the three one-act plays had been rehearsed, and it came second of eight (61/06; 62/01 p.66). In 1952 *The Bishop's Candlesticks* came third (62/01 p.55). In 1954 the Society played the first act of *See How They Run*. The adjudicator awarded it 76 marks out of 100 and criticised "unnecessary masking", and Marjorie Holman won the cup for the best individual performance (61/06; 62/01 p.35). Miss Wood argued in 1952 that "competition was not consistent with art", but the members voted in 1953 that festivals did "much to raise the standard of performance" (61/05).

The Society also took its plays on the road. *Quiet Week End* went to the Garrison Theatre at the Royal Engineers camp at Long Marston in December 1950 and to Henley in January 1951 (61/04). *George and Margaret* was repeated at Henley, where, as one columnist noted, "there is a miniature theatre" but "no society" (62/01 p.72). Other members performed at Wellesbourne R.A.F. Station and for the Church Diocesan Festival (61/06). For the Festival of Britain in 1951 the Rector asked the Society to help with a play in a marquee, and the members agreed to assist (61/04, January 1951).



The cast of Agatha Christie's Black Coffee, produced by Bert Doherty in November 1957. Ten of the thirteen players were men, "that most precious commodity in amateur dramatics" (62/01 p.16).

The critics

The scrapbook's reviews, most signed D.B.D. or H.R.S., give the Society's productions a vivid afterlife. In *Black Coffee* Bert Doherty played the murder victim and held "an upright sitting position for over a quarter of an hour in full view of the audience" (62/01 p.16). One review of *Tons of Money* reported standing room only, another called it "by no means one of the society's best", and a third was headlined "Welford Players Aim Too High" (62/01 p.13). In *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* in 1959 a geranium watered with the villain's poison "slowly wilted, much to everyone's amusement" (62/01 p.5).

The critics also saw the threat to come. Reviewing *Jane Steps Out* in November 1958, D.B.D. noticed a thinner Friday audience and asked whether the Society was "becoming a television casualty" (62/01 p.7). Mary Green, née Weatherhead, still remembered the production in a 2018 interview; she was probably the Mary Weatherhead who played Jane (48/45; 62/01 p.8).



Poster for The White Sheep of the Family, March 1958, with tickets at 3s 6d and 1s 9d from the Maypole Café and all proceeds to the Memorial Hall Improvement Fund (62/01 p.9).

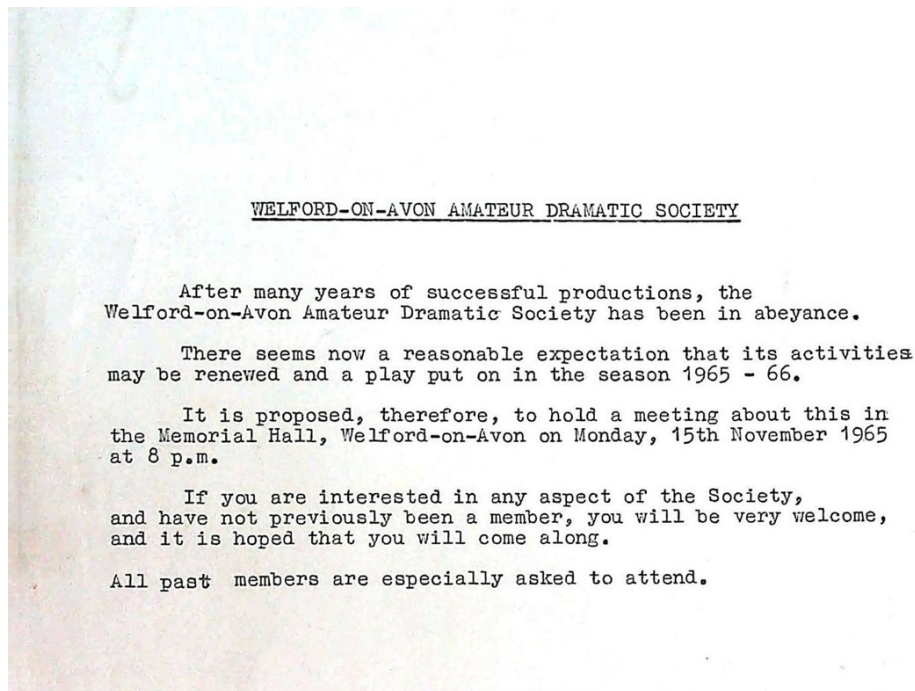
By March 1959 the parish magazine carried an appeal: "Our old-established Amateur Dramatic Society is urgently needing more members" (11/14). Marjorie Holman's production of *The Bride and the Bachelor* in November 1960 was a warm success, ending with each player kissing the bride at the curtain call (62/01 p.3). It is the last production in the scrapbook's main sequence. A review of 1966 says the Society had then been "off-stage" for four years, so it fell silent in about 1962 (62/01 p.95).

Revival and the last chapter, 1965–2003

Bringing it back

In the autumn of 1965 a typed circular went round the village. "After many years of successful productions," it began, "the Welford-on-Avon Amateur Dramatic Society has been

in abeyance. There seems now a reasonable expectation that its activities may be renewed and a play put on in the season 1965–66." A meeting was called in the Memorial Hall for Monday 15 November 1965, and "all past members are especially asked to attend" (62/01 p.100).



The circular calling the meeting of 15 November 1965 that brought the Society back to life (62/01 p.100).

The revival brought a change of guard. At a meeting on 17 February 1966 Bob Wright gave up the chairmanship he had held for most of the years since 1950. Tom Holman wrote from The Croft on 25 February that the meeting had thanked him unanimously for his long service and elected him an Honorary Member. Wright replied that he was pleased "the steering is in your hands" and saw no reason why the revived Society should not get going (62/01 pp.102–103, 107). His own life was a roll-call of village service. He was Clerk to the Parish Council, a Memorial Hall trustee and an official of the British Legion, the Festival of Britain and the Coronation committees (11/54).

The first production, William Douglas Home's *The Reluctant Debutante*, opened in April 1966 under Jim Dayer-Smith. The review was headed "Amateurs make come-back after four years off-stage" (62/01 pp.93–95). It was followed in November 1966 by Jack Popplewell's comedy *Busybody*, produced by Mary Norris, with Lola Newbery as an office cleaner turned detective (62/01 p.101; 01/51). Kenneth Horne's *Trial and Error* came in 1967, produced by Lola Newbery. One critic welcomed back Mary Wells as "a face from the golden age of Welford drama". Another noted that the Society had "done well to produce three plays in just over a year, finding, apparently, little difficulty in attracting new acting talent" (62/01 p.98).

A new company, 1966–1970

The late 1960s brought new names: the Biggarts, Ewart Harper, Keith McKelvie, Miriam Hanks, Peggie Hickson and Peter Russell. Women now produced most of the plays. Joan

Biggart directed Leslie Sands's thriller *Intent to Murder*, which one reviewer called "one of the best things the society has done since their heyday, when they were at the forefront of amateur groups in this area" (62/01 p.104). Mary Norris produced the ghost play *The Peaceful Inn* in March 1968. In November 1968 she and Peter Russell revived *The White Sheep of the Family* ten years after the first production, and a critic called it "their best production for several years" (62/01 pp.96, 106). Val Ford directed *Fish out of Water* in April 1969 (62/01 p.97).

The scrapbook ends in May 1970 with *East Lynne*, the Victorian melodrama, produced by Peggie Hickson. Margery Palin played the piano by candlelight, and one critic enjoyed it while another complained that several of the cast "needed continuous prompting" (62/01 p.101; 61/09). By then the Society was a fixture again. The new Welford and Weston Local History Society, founded in December 1969, arranged its meetings so as not to clash with the Dramatic Society's dates, and considered joining "the efforts of the Dramatic Society in enlarging the Memorial Hall" (37/01–04, 1969–73).

The later decades

After 1970 the archive becomes much thinner, because no later scrapbook or minute book has survived in it. The Society was active in 1977, when it presented A. A. Milne's *Mr Pimm Passes By* on 26–28 May as part of Welford and Weston's Silver Jubilee celebrations (03/14). In 1987 it staged Richard Harris's cricket comedy *Outside Edge*.



The cast and crew of Outside Edge on the cricket pavilion set, 1987. A later list names twenty people, including Kathleen and Dick Bird, Alan Smart, Brad and Ann Plimmer and Rosemary Hale (61/07; 61/075; 61/09).

Outside Edge produced the Society's last newspaper controversy. The Herald's critic, "B Sharp", praised the performance but described the villagers of fifty years before as "penniless farm labourers". Two angry letters followed. A "Penniless Peasant" pointed to Welford's smallholders and benefactors. A "Disgruntled Welfordian" listed the village's three bakers, three signalmen and businessmen who caught the train to Birmingham from Milcote Halt (01/52). The play had at least reminded the village how much it cared about its past.

The Society went on supporting the Memorial Hall. In 1988 it gave £140 to the hall funds, and Bob Wright gave £100 (60/07). It also played its part in village life beyond the stage. When Welford planted trees for "Plant a Tree in '73", the dramatic society helped pay for the ten trees in Headland Road that brought the village total to sixty, alongside the W.I., the Young Wives and the Over 60s (13/09, Herald, 1 February 1974). An older resident, recalling the Memorial Hall for the Local History Society, listed its activities as the W.I., the Youth Club, the Saturday night dance and the "drama Society" (38/01-03).

The end came quietly. On 30 November 2022 the Local History Society noted that "Alan Smart informed us that the Am. Dram. Society stopped performing in March 2003" (61/05).

Alan Smart had been in the front row of the *Outside Edge* photograph sixteen years earlier (61/09).

Conclusion: what the Society meant

The Welford-on-Avon Amateur Dramatic Society began with Leo Baker's high hopes for "good plays" as "an uplifting force", and it never quite lost them. It started with Barrie and festival entries, and it won county certificates in its first four years. At its height it played Priestley and Rattigan to a hall that held about ninety people, and it sent one-act plays to compete at Henley. For most of its life, though, it was something more ordinary and more valuable. It was a way for farm workers, teachers, shop assistants, insurance agents, retired officers and newcomers to spend winter evenings together and give the village three nights out.

Three things stand out from the papers. The first is how much work fell on a few people. Swinnock in 1938 was producer, designer, stage manager, prompter and electrician at once. Charles Howell built sets for thirty years, and Dorothy Serjeantson kept the books for twenty. The second is how closely the Society's life was tied to the Memorial Hall. It rehearsed and played there, bought equipment for it, gave money to heat and improve it, and lent its amplifier to the carnival. The third is how fragile it always was. It lacked money in 1930, members in 1937, men throughout the 1950s and an audience once television arrived. Twice it stopped, and twice it was brought back.

The royal visit of 1938 remains the Society's most famous evening, and rightly so. Yet the archive suggests a better measure of its achievement. For three generations Welford people saw their neighbours become butlers, murderers, vicars, French maids and Joan of Arc on a tiny stage at the back of the village hall, and enjoyed it. As the reviewer of *The Bride and the Bachelor* wrote in 1960, "the basic secret of its success lay in the complete charm of the performance" (62/01 p.3).

Known productions

The table lists every production the archive dates, with its producer where known. Most come from the scrapbook (62/01), which has almost no material for 1928–36 or after 1970.

Date	Play	Producer	Source
Mar 1928	Two short pieces (first performances)	E. H. Fenton	61/01
1928	The Admirable Crichton (J. M. Barrie); also at Mickleton	E. H. Fenton	61/01
Nov 1928	Three one-act plays	E. H. Fenton	61/01
Jan 1930	Two plays	A. W. Warner and others	61/01
Autumn 1936	Yellow Sands (Phillpotts)	W. E. Swinnock	61/02
Nov 1937	The New Tenant (MacOwan)	W. E. Swinnock	62/01 p.92
1938; 13 Dec 1938	She Passed Through Lorraine (Hale), before the Duke of Kent	W. E. Swinnock	62/01 pp.82–91
1947–48	Barnet's Folly (Stewer); also at Clifford Chambers	W. E. Swinnock	61/03; 62/01 pp.80–81

Apr 1948	The Passing of the Third Floor Back (Jerome)	W. E. Swinnock	62/01 p.79
Late 1940s	If Four Walls Told (Percy); Yellow Sands	W. E. Swinnock	62/01 pp.77–78
Jan 1949	Dangerous Corner (Priestley)	Duncan Blyth	62/01 p.75
Nov 1949	The Middle Watch (Hay and King-Hall)	W. E. Swinnock	62/01 p.74
Jan 1950	I Have Been Here Before (Priestley)	W. E. Swinnock	62/01 p.73
Mar–Apr 1950	George and Margaret (Savory)	Robert S. Black	62/01 pp.71–72
Dec 1950	Quiet Week End (McCracken); also Long Marston and Henley	W. E. Swinnock	62/01 pp.64–70
Nov 1951	The Dear Departed, Right of Search, Wurzel Flummery	Rushton, Black, Blyth	62/01 pp.61–63
Mar 1952	The Barton Mystery (Hackett)	W. E. Swinnock	62/01 pp.58–60
Apr 1952	Flare Path (Rattigan)	Robert Black	62/01 p.57
Nov 1952	The Artist's Murder (Cary); The Bishop's Candlesticks at Henley	Swinnock; Black	62/01 pp.51–56
Apr 1953	The Man from the Ministry (Bingham)	Robert Black	62/01 pp.48–50
Nov 1953	Rookery Nook (Travers)	W. E. Swinnock	62/01 pp.44–47
Feb 1954	Agatha Christie mystery (now And Then There Were None)	Bert Doherty	62/01 pp.40–43
Apr 1954	Quiet Wedding (McCracken)	Robert S. Black	62/01 pp.36–39
Oct 1954	See How They Run (King)	Bert Doherty	62/01 pp.33–35
Jan 1955	Love in a Mist (Horne)	W. E. Swinnock	62/01 pp.26–28
Mar 1955	Count Your Blessings (Jeans)	Jim Dayer-Smith	62/01 pp.29–32
Oct 1955	Bonaventure (Hastings)	Bert Doherty	62/01 pp.22–25
Spring 1956	Fools Rush In (Horne)	Jim Dayer-Smith	62/01 pp.20–21
Nov 1956	The Paper Chain (Cary and Butler)	Jim Dayer-Smith	62/01 pp.17–19
Mar 1957	Tons of Money (Evans and Valentine)	Bert Doherty	62/01 pp.11–13
Nov 1957	Black Coffee (Christie)	Bert Doherty	62/01 pp.14–16
Mar 1958	The White Sheep of the Family (Peach and Hay)	Jim Dayer-Smith	62/01 pp.9–10
Nov 1958	Jane Steps Out (Horne)	Jim Dayer-Smith	62/01 pp.7–8
Oct 1959	The Two Mrs. Carrolls (Vale)	Marjorie Holman	62/01 pp.5–6
Nov 1960	The Bride and the Bachelor (Millar)	Marjorie Holman	62/01 pp.3–4
Apr 1966	The Reluctant Debutante (Douglas Home)	Jim Dayer-Smith	62/01 pp.93–95
Nov 1966	Busybody (Popplewell)	Mary Norris	62/01 p.101
1967	Trial and Error (Horne)	Lola Newbery	62/01 pp.98–99
c.1967–69	Intent to Murder (Sands)	Joan Biggart	62/01 pp.104–105
Mar 1968	The Peaceful Inn (Ogden)	Mary Norris	62/01 p.106
Nov 1968	The White Sheep of the Family	Peter Russell and Mary Norris	62/01 p.96
Apr 1969	Fish out of Water (Benham)	Val Ford	62/01 p.97
May 1970	East Lynne (Burton)	Peggie Hickson	62/01 p.101

May 1977	Mr Pimm Passes By (Milne)	not recorded	03/14
1987	Outside Edge (Harris)	not recorded	61/07; 61/09; 01/52
Mar 2003	Last performance	not recorded	61/05

Sources

- 61/01: minute book 1928–1931 (founding meeting, first seasons).
- 61/02: minute book 1936–1938, 1937–38 accounts, rules, letters, 1938 Herald cutting.
- 61/03 and 61/04: minute books 1946–1948 and 1950–1951, with rules and members' lists.
- 61/05 and 61/06: minute book 1952–1956 and Secretary's papers 1951–1955, including Henley festival papers and the 2022 note on the 2003 closure.
- 61/07, 61/075 and 61/09: Outside Edge photograph and cast lists (1987); modern histories of the Society.
- 62/01: the Society's scrapbook, 1937–1970, with programmes, posters, photographs and reviews. Scrapbook page N is PDF page N+113.
- 03/11, 03/12, 03/14: royal programme postcard; Methodist Sunday School Aladdin (1934); Silver Jubilee programme (1977).
- 07/07 and 24/15: transcripts and notes on the 1938 royal visit.
- 11/14 and 11/54: parish magazine, March 1959; eulogy for Robert (Bob) Wright.
- 13/09, 37/01–04, 38/01–03, 60/03, 60/07: village organisations, Local History Society minutes, Memorial Hall accounts.
- 23/45 and 23/97–107: Evesham Journal Notes and Queries on mummers; Memorial Hall opening, 1923.
- 48/45, 49/21, 49/22: oral history and memoirs (Mary Green; Jane Fisher).
- 50/40, 63/09, 01/51, 01/52: H. M. Woodward; Duncan Blyth obituary; Busybody review; Outside Edge letters (1987).