

From Orchard to Arts Centre

In late 1892 what is now number 59 Thames Street was sold to Horace Spencer Dove, a surveyor auctioneer and estate agent. The property had previously been part of a house and shop complex and to accommodate the sale the shop owner had moved his family into the rooms over the shop.

Mr. Dove was obviously not a man to waste time for by the Spring of 1893 a new grand entrance had been created and a great hall had been built in the garden at the rear of the property. On Wednesday 10th May the Sunbury Assembly Rooms celebrated a 'Grand Opening Night' with the special engagement of Mr. Charles Collette, a popular comedian. The entertainment was entitled 'Collette at Home' and was noted to have been previously given at Marlborough House before their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales and a large party of royal guests.

The Sunbury Assembly Rooms were licensed for Music and Dancing and Stage Plays. Reports in the local press of the time show that both amateur and professional shows were staged on the premises, together with meetings of many local bodies and the occasional auction until 1910. The next available edition of Kelly's Directory (1912) no longer listed the Assembly Rooms but instead listed the 'Sunbury Picture Theatre (William Clark, Proprietor)'. The Assembly Rooms had become a cinema, showing silent films.

Electricity had not come to Sunbury when the cinema started and it would appear that the projector must have used 'limelight' a piece of lime heated in an oxy-hydrogen flame. For some unknown reason by 1914 the name had been changed to the 'Magnet Picture Palace', but at the end of 1916 there was no application for renewal of the Cinema Licence.

At some time between 1916 and 1921 the building was being used as a printing works by a Mr Childs. The company name included 'Ewell' and this name was to stay with the building for the next fifty years. In 1921, the Copley family moved into the building and lived in the upstairs rooms. Mr Copley ran the company then known as the Ewell Manufacturing Company Limited, which manufactured foil or silver paper.

Metal foil was laminated onto tobacco packaging, largely being sent overseas, particularly to South Africa. The production of packing paper in 1929 was estimated to be sufficient for between eight and ten million packets of tea or tobacco products a week. The company boasted of its ability to supply any sudden demands from stock, with delivery in London being within a couple of hours of a telephone call.

During the Second World War the Company's experience in handling aluminium foil made it ideal for the manufacture of the radar decoy material 'window'. This consisted of strips of aluminium foil. These strips were dropped from aircraft to sink slowly to the ground. Radar was unable to distinguish between the 'window' and aircraft. The secrecy of this activity was such that a Ministry security guard was posted at the factory, somewhat to the disgust of Mr Copley who protested that his staff was loyal and trustworthy.

Ewell Manufacturing continued in business until 1973 when the factory was closed, the machinery removed and the building was sold to the Council, reportedly for £70,000.

The Council had hoped to develop the building as a public meeting place, as it was when opened in 1893 but the cost of renovation was beyond its resources. In October 1975 a working party was set up to examine possible uses of 59 Thames Street. Invited interested organisations were invited to discuss the matter and possibly take over the building. The arts groups of Sunbury and Shepperton took up the challenge under the umbrella of the 'Sunbury and Shepperton Arts Association'. A new company was formed- 'The Riverside Arts Centre' to take up the challenge. The Company was limited by guarantee, and applied for Charity status, which was granted. In September 1977 the Mayor Councillor Fox presented the keys of 59 Thames Street to Tom Williams- the first Chairman of the Company. The 100+ spectators who witnessed the event followed Tom inside to view the building. The building they beheld was a damp, dirty, derelict shell. Old pipes littered the walls and thick black greasy deposits soiled the unwary. Underfoot was a layer of debris and various bolts, where machines had been bolted down, stuck up through the floor. Not surprisingly some felt the task ahead too ambitious. Clearing the building was a long process, made worse by the lack of electricity and gas. Nevertheless a team of volunteers, working every Saturday, each Sunday morning and some evenings began the long haul. Fund raising became very important, materials were needed and it was inevitable that some jobs would have to be done professionally.

Shepperton Players gave £2,000 from their funds, the Arts Association donated £800 and the Sunbury Art Group gave £100. Evenings of poetry and music events were held in a local pub, coffee mornings were run by individuals and parties of members got together for compass dinners. A major appeal was made in May 1978 to the directors of local companies for support for the Centre. John Coleman, Chairman of Gresham Lion Ltd., led the way with a gift of £1000 from his trust fund and this was followed by a gift of fire extinguishers from Resuscitators (Marine) Limited,

glasses for the bar from Ravenhead and glass and plastic goods from Airfix Plastics Limited.

The first event was held in the hall on Sunday 18th December 1977 when a Christmas concert was given by Shepperton Singers and Shepperton Players. Readings and carols were enjoyed in the cold hall, lit by oil lamps with old carpets on the rough concrete floor. Hot punch was served from a camping gas stove to keep the cold at bay and the glow of the oil lamps added to the festive atmosphere.

The building work spanned a wide range of activities from demolition to drain laying and from rewiring to rendering. Gradually sections of the building were finished sufficiently for use. An electricity supply was installed by volunteers and connected, free of charge, by Southern Electric. Massive walls had to be built around the hall and stage. The stage floor some 30 ft wide by 40ft deep was constructed on wooden joists which were obtained from demolition work at Kings College, London.

By 1982, the Committee felt that sufficient work had been completed for an official opening ceremony. This event took place on 21st April 1982. The main hall was packed to capacity for this occasion as Spelthorne's Mayor Councillor Peter Rinaldi unveiled a plaque to mark the special day. The Mayor described the transformation as "a triumph of voluntary work" and recalled the appalling condition of the building when it was taken over in 1977.

More money was still needed to buy materials and services, and much work still needed to be done by the volunteers but gradually areas of the building were being finished and the facilities were being developed to give Sunbury a unique and versatile Centre for the Arts.

In 1993 a grand event was held to celebrate centenary of the original opening of the Assembly Rooms. The assembled company enjoyed a Victorian dinner and a performance of a one act play that had previously been performed at the Assembly Rooms in 1893. In a hundred years the building had come full circle and was once again playing its part as a centre for the Arts and a meeting place in the village of Sunbury.

Development of these facilities has never really stopped, thanks to the enthusiastic efforts of the Centre's volunteers.

With this enthusiasm it was not really surprising that when Barclays Bank closed in April 2000, a number of members proposed that the Arts Centre should acquire the building to provide a second hall and additional accommodation. The proposal was put to Spelthorne Borough Council with a business plan. The Council agreed to purchase the building and hold it for 18 months to give RAC time to raise money to purchase it from the

Council. At the same time they offered a grant of £100,000 towards the project if RAC was able to meet the deadline. The purchase was completed on 31/10/2003.

Based on information written by Eric Champion and from 'Orchard to Art Centre' by Pat Champion and David de Jersey with permission.