

A Brief History of The Riverside Arts Centre Premises, Sunbury on Thames.

By H. L. Brooking

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In 1848 the Parish map of Sunbury shows the site to be an orchard devoid of any buildings. The site was leased to a Robert Charsley but owned by Thomas Thompson who owned Thames Bank house, now Monksbridge. Eastwards of the orchard was the home and shop of a linen draper William Thomas Collins, he was a tenant; the owner of the house being William Spencer Dove. William Collins had a son also named William Thomas. In 1856 the Collins father and son purchased a piece of land "*being part of an orchard and the other part a kitchen garden situate by and being on the north side of the High Street or road formerly called Kempton Street but now commonly called Thames Street...abutting towards the north on a slip of ground called Rope Walk....and southon the said Street called Thames Street.*" This part of Rope Walk is now called Saxonbury Avenue.

On this land was erected, probably soon after 1856, a new building for Collins the drapers. On the O.S. map of c.1865 it appears as basically the sum of two buildings we now know as numbers 59 and 61 Thames Street, though house numbers were not allocated here till much later. It is probable the Collins's house was the eastern part of this building and their shop the western part.

William Thomas Collins senior died in 1878, and although a well off man the division of his estate between his second wife and five children resulted in William Thomas Collins junior inheriting the business together with a significant debt. At about this time, maybe because of the financial situation, there were considerable changes in the family's holdings including the lease of part of the site to three brothers Ashby. This became a bank named Ashby Thomas and Co. This lease did not last long, in 1892 there is a record of the sale by its owner (George Gurney) of a business "*now called Sunbury Bank.*"

Also in 1892 the property nowadays recognised as numbers 59 and 61 and land north of the bank was sold by Gurney to William Haslett of Woking; and by 1894 the linen draper is listed in Kelly's Directory as William Haslett. Then later in 1892 Haslett sold what is now no. 59 Thames Street to Horace Spencer Dove, this sale included the piece of land north of the bank. Dove was an auctioneer in partnership with a William Gough who in 1891 was listed as a retired Surveyor and Land Agent. These two partners effected the conversion of number 59 into The Assembly Rooms, completed by the spring of 1893.

In the Surrey Comet of 22nd April 1893 there appears a notice of application for a Licence as follows:

I, HORACE SPENCER DOVE of St Michaels, Sunbury, Middlesex, do hereby give notice that I intend to apply under the provisions of the Statute 6 and 7 Vic c68 and the Local Government Act 1888 for a TEMPORARY LICENCE for STAGE PLAYS to be carried on within the house or premises situated in Thames Street, in the Parish Of Sunbury, known by the name of Assembly Rooms, now in my occupation as Owner. And I further give notice that such application will be made at the Meeting Of the Licensing Committee of the County Council of Middlesex, to be held on the 27th day of April instant.

Dated this 17th Of April 1893

HORACE SPENCER

DOVE

In the same edition of the Surrey Comet the following was an entry as follows.

SUNBURY

The New Assembly Rooms; one of the greatest needs of this charming riverside resort has now been supplied by the erection of commodious and convenient assembly-rooms which are announced to be opened next Wednesday evening. There is a pretty little theatre, containing all the requisite fittings, and the stage has been constructed by one of the best carpenters in London. The premises have been fully licensed by the Middlesex County Council. Mr Charles Collette, of Haymarket fame, is advertised to give the opening performance on Wednesday. Mr Collette has had the honour of appearing before H.R.H. The Prince of Wales and many other distinguished personages, and we are warranted in saying that the performance at the new assembly-rooms will be the best that has been witnessed in Sunbury, and it ought to attract a crowded audience of residents in the Thames Valley. Particulars are advertised.



A rather modern view of the building showing “Assembly Rooms” carved over the doorway: probably still there behind the Arts Centre name.

The "Lock to Lock Times, in the edition of 27th May 1893 contained a review which read.

The pleasant little riparian village of Sunbury has recently thanks to the enterprise of Messrs Gough and Dove, become possessed of a hall which will play a prominent part in the future life of the village. This hall, which will seat 300 comfortably, was opened by the well known comedian, Charles Collette, who paid the directorate the high compliment of saying that it was the best hall of its size that he had ever played in. The stage measures 23 ft by 15 ft and is fitted with a handsome silk plush curtain and a very elegant proscenium. There is also a grand piano by Collard and Collard, and there are dressing rooms for ladies and gentlemen, while the fire hydrant arrangements comprise all the latest improvements. The floor is covered end to end in matting, so that it shall be kept in the best of good order for winter dances, cinderellas, and such like, though, as it has been fully licensed by the Middlesex County Council, there will, no doubt, be a great demand for the hall for private theatricals, which are very fashionable in the neighbourhood.

The "cinderellas" referred to were dance parties where the guests were invited until 12 midnight. Most of the advertised events were stage plays brought down from one of the London theatres for a one or two night run. However concerts of music, dance and amateur theatricals were also staged. The rooms were also used for meetings of organisations such as The Primrose League.

In 1895 some early meetings of the newly established Sunbury Urban District Council were held at the Assembly Rooms until the Council took the lease of Church Villa later in 1895.

The Stage play licence was renewed annually until 1900 but from 1902 onwards the stage plays were infrequent and subject to temporary licences: one day only in 1902 and only two days in 1905. The music and dancing licence was however renewed annually until 1910.

Sometimes the Assembly Rooms were used for auctions of furniture etc.

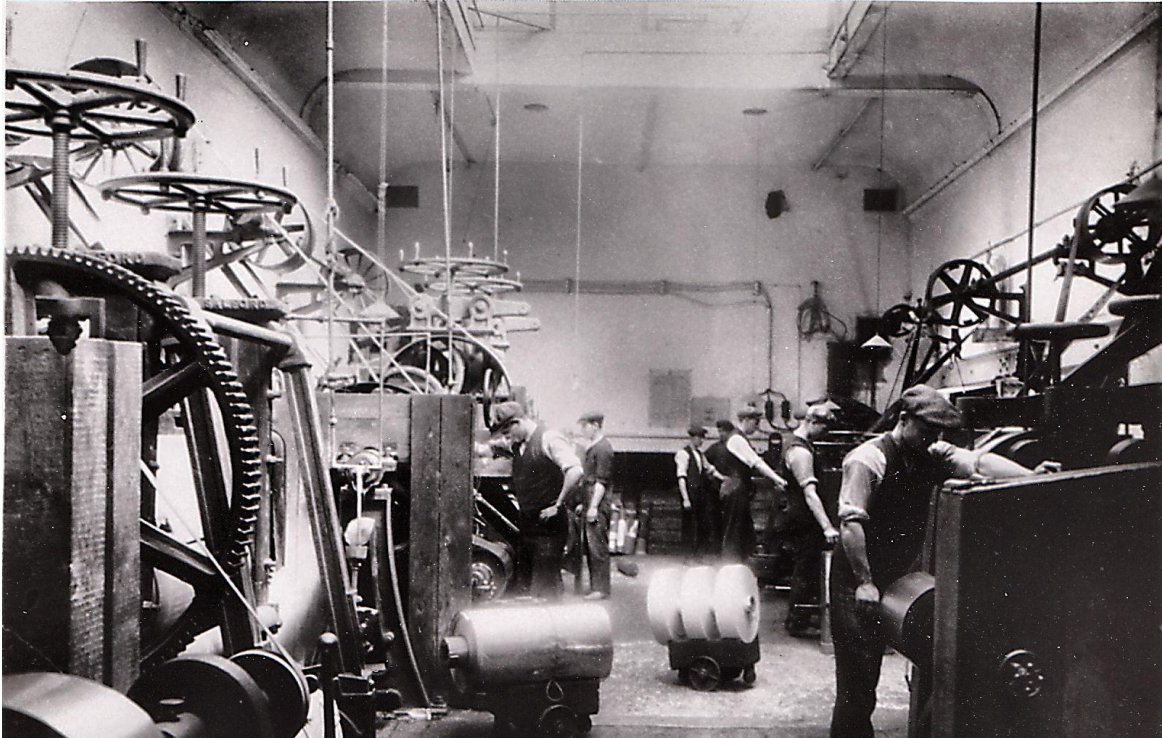
In November 1899 the new parish room (St. Mary's Church Hall) was opened and may have presented some competition to the Assembly Rooms, perhaps taking away some of their functions.

Kelly's Directory for 1912 no longer listed the Assembly Rooms, instead the property is listed as "Sunbury Picture Theatre; (William Clark, proprietor) Thames Street." The rooms had been converted into a cinema showing silent films. As there was no electricity in Sunbury at that time the projector must have used limelight. Kelly's Directory in fact does not mention the use of electricity in Sunbury until 1926, not having mentioned it in 1922. By 1914 Clark was not the proprietor, J Bourne and C McDougall were listed as proprietors of "The Magnet Picture Palace".

The cinema is no longer listed in Kelly's in 1917, and by 1922 the use had definitely changed, in fact between 1916 and 1921 the building was being used by a Mr. Childs as a printing works. (*Editor's note.- It is not known if this was a relative of Samuel Childs, inventor of the nightlight, vide journal no. 68 Spring 2012*). The firm was known by some such name as the Ewell Printing Works. In 1921 a Mr. Copley moved his family into the upstairs room and ran the business as "The Ewell Manufacturing Company". This was in the business of making silver paper. Metal foil was laminated onto paper and used for packing tea and tobacco, much of the production being exported overseas. The printing works had now moved into premises in the yard where it remained for some years before moving away.

In 1922 the premises were sold to a Mr. Frank Wrigley of Woodcote, Sunbury but management remained with Mr. Copley.

The foil business expanded into manufacture of tinfoil, aluminium foil and lead foil. The production of packing paper in 1929 was estimated to be sufficient for between eight and ten million packets of tea or tobacco a week; and the company claimed to be able to supply any sudden demand from stock, with delivery to London within two hours of a phone call.



The above photograph from 1929 shows the north end of the hall with a flat wall where the present proscenium arch is. The picture shows rolls of foil on the floor and some of the production machinery.

During the second World War the company's expertise in foil production made it ideal for the manufacture of radar decoy "Window" which consists of strips of aluminium foil the length of which has been cut to half the wavelength of the radar system that one is trying to confuse. When hit by the radar, such lengths of metal re-radiate the signal. Opposing defences would find it almost impossible to pick out real aircraft from the echoes from the chaff.

The use of aluminium foil continued to increase after the second World War, being used in many packaging applications where protection from moisture and air was required. Many of these uses later utilised plastics and so eventually the foil market began to shrink. Mr. Copley retired in 1963 and the business continued in the hands of Mr Wrigley till his death in about 1969: the business was then under the control of a Mr. Slater until his death in about 1971. In 1973 his widow sold the premises to the Sunbury Urban District Council who hoped to develop the building as a public meeting place, but in 1974 the S.U.D.C. was replaced by the Spelthorne Borough Council and it was this body that was faced with developing a use for the property. They soon decided that renovation was beyond their means and invited interested organisations to discuss the use of the premises with them; letters to various groups going out in October 1975, inviting them to a meeting in November of that year.

At this point it is worth explaining the background of the two groups which concern us here. Sunbury Arts Association had been formed in c.1967 as an umbrella organisation linking together the various artistic groups that existed at that time: e.g. Sunbury Art Group, Manor Players, Sunbury Operatic, Sunbury Poetry Group. One of their first achievements was a Festival of the Arts held in the spring of 1968.

Shepperton Players had existed for many years (reborn September 1956) putting on plays in Shepperton Village Hall and together with Shepperton Singers joined the Sunbury Arts Association after the first festival. Because of this influx of non-Sunbury groups the

name was changed to Sunbury and Shepperton Arts Association. The next festival was held four years later in 1972 and included plays, opera, an art exhibition and many other events.

At the close of the November 1975 meeting the S.S.A.A. and the Shepperton Players agreed to join forces in an application for the premises. At a council meeting in March 1976 the proposals put before the Recreation and Amenities Committee were a) use the building as a community centre run by the council, b) to let the Vicarage Angling Club use the premises as their clubhouse, and c) let the Sunbury and Shepperton Arts Association convert it into an Arts Centre. There was an overwhelming vote in favour of the S.S.A.A. converting and using the building. To implement this plan a limited company was formed named The Riverside Arts Centre. Full members of the company were required to guarantee the sum of £10 against the possibility of the demise of the company, but associate members were accepted without liability. The management of the company was in the hands of its officers together with a representative of each group affiliated to it.

Negotiation of the lease was protracted and it was felt it would not be complete until April 1978 so the Council granted an operating licence from October 1st. 1977 so that work on clearing the premises could begin then. By that date all the machinery in the building had been removed and basically there was an empty space from end to end. Old pipes and conduit littered the walls and thick black greasy deposits stained the unwary; a relic of fifty years of engineering. Underfoot there was a layer of debris together with various fastenings sticking up from the floor, where machines had been bolted down.



The building with all machinery removed, prior to conversion work commencing

Even while cleaning up was in progress groups made use of the cold, damp, premises. Shepperton Players built their pantomime scenery there and the first event in the hall was on 17th. December 1977 when a Christmas concert of readings and carols was enjoyed in the cold hall lit by oil lamps.

There followed years of fund raising and hard physical labour to transform the building into a fine arts centre able to host plays, concerts, meetings of the participating groups and all the many activities that the centre now gives a home to. The construction of an orchestra pit, stage, green rooms etc was undertaken. Later the bank building was acquired and assimilated into the plan. A great deal of work was done by volunteer labour, but some specialist tasks had to awarded to contractors.



Left, volunteers at work converting the building to an Arts Centre, circa 1979



Riverside Arts Centre 2012