

A Brief History of the Guild

We think that there was amateur drama in Charing before World War II but it was not until December 1946 that the Reverend Peter Birkett formed the Charing Guild of Players. Six days later, on Christmas Eve, they performed a Pageant of the Nativity.

Surprisingly there is no record of any further activity until six years later when in December 1952 *Quiet Weekend* was performed in the Village Hall. Over the next five years there were another five productions, all in the Village Hall.

On 28th April 1958 the national press reported that the parishioners of Charing had erected a new theatre under the North Downs. In 1956 the vicar, the Reverend Patrick Lury, with parishioners and Guild members had paid £100 for a seventeenth century tithe barn in High Halden. Its fine old timbers were lovingly dismantled and rebuilt over a period of two years on a site adjoining Charing Church. The site itself has an ancient history. It was given by King Egbert to the Diocese of Canterbury between 664 and 673, taken away by Offa King of Mercia, restored to the Diocese by King Coenulf in 799, given to King Henry VIII by Archbishop Cranmer and granted into private ownership by King Charles I in 1629. The Church Barn, as it is known, is in fact Charing's church hall and has been described as one of the loveliest in the country.

The Guild's first production in the Barn, in May 1958, was Christopher Fry's *The Lady's Not For Burning*. The author visited the Barn during rehearsals. From then on the Guild has produced plays every year, a total by now of well over a hundred.

The Guild scrapbooks, with photographs and programmes, make interesting reading and are displayed at performances. The close relationship between the Guild and the Church came about through the interest of our Charing vicars in drama. This still continues; the present vicar, Brian Chalmers, is both actor and producer. The Barn belongs to the Church and is home to the Guild who have contributed in time and money to its upkeep and improvement over the years.

Activities

We produce three plays each year for four nights from Wednesday to Saturday in November, February and May. Rehearsals are held in the Barn on Mondays and Thursdays during the preceding eight to ten weeks. The public can buy tickets in Charing Library two weeks prior to performances, Members and Friends by post two weeks before that. During the summer months Monday night is Guild night; the backstage area, costumes and props are put in order and the grass and garden area around the Barn is cut and trimmed.

There is a great deal more to producing plays than is seen by our audiences. They see the actors - the "butterflies" of the organisation without whom we would be nothing - but there are many other activities which are essential to a Guild production. In the early part of our year plays are chosen by the Reading Committee - dedicated readers who get through dozens of plays before choosing three within the capabilities of our actors and stage. Each play is selected with a producer in mind who takes responsibility from the first read through, attended by those available for an acting part, to the first night when the stage manager takes over. Producers choose their support team of set designer, stage manager, prompt, props, costumes, sound, lighting and effects.

In the early weeks of preparation the actors rehearse in the main hall of the Barn while a team of set builders and painters are at work on stage. Publicity is under way and tickets and programmes are being prepared. The play runs from Wednesday to Saturday and then, in the following week, the set is dismantled, props and costumes are returned and we're on to the next one!

The Guild is run by a committee of eleven members elected at the Annual General Meeting in July; other committee members can be co-opted as needed. Our year runs from 1st June.