

NABS Origins

Recollections of Alice Dennes

It is quite often thought that the W.I. started the Nabs, probably because each year the County W.I. hold Drama and Choral festivals, and have done so for many years. Neatishead W.I. in the nineteen fifties and sixties took part in the Dramas section and were successful several times, putting on well acted sketches, and were well commended. Those taking part were of course W.I. members. Circumstances change, the passing years take their toll and members take up other interests.

After a year or so Lady Delia Peel suggested it might be fun to give a concert of selections from Gilbert and Sullivan. From this endeavour was born the Barton Choral Society.

About 1971-72, Frances Knowles was the Hon. Secretary of the Victory Hall. Several jobs needed doing in the hall, funds were low. Frances got together a band of women, a teenager or two, Noel Brandon-Jones and Larry Lamb. Later other men and women joined. An outstanding memory is of Larry Lamb dressed in tights and a tutu, prancing across the stage with Mrs Mann at the piano playing excerpts from Swan Lake. Another breathtaking occasion was when Mrs Ruby Deeprise (wife of the Headmaster), a well built person in the back row of the chorus, fell backwards down the steps. Gasps all round! Fortunately she wasn't hurt. All proceeds of these shows went to the Victory Hall as we had no expenses, just a few curtains draped around and the odd prop. We took to the road to entertain people in the Residential Home near Hickling, and also to Sydney House, Stalham. It was at the Stalham Home after the show, over a cup of coffee, the Matron asked the name of our concert party. We looked blankly at each other, till someone said "Well we are Neatishead and Barton people." We there and then decided to replace 'people' with 'Society' and became N.A.B.S.

After a while it was suggested we make a few flats. Wood was bought and calico with size. I suppose this was the first time we spent some of our takings and the need to improve, indeed make scenery. I remember my job was to paint size onto the stretched calico.

And so to December 1974, "Cinderella".

And the rest is history.

NABS History

The first entry in the historical record comes with the presentation by the N.A.B.S. Concert Party on Saturday December 28th and Monday December 30th 1974 of Cinderella, written and produced by Frances Knowles and featuring four people who are still members of NABS in 2010. In the archive are copies of the programme (at 2 pence each), press cuttings and a photograph of the whole cast.

NABS went on to produce Fool's Paradise on 24th and 25th April 1975, for which inflation had increased the cost of a programme to 3 pence and the number of 2009 members included had also increased to five.

The next production for which archive material exists was Sinbad the Sailor in January 1976, with the number of 2009 members mentioned in the programme rising to six.

On Thursday 5th February 1976, NABS held its inaugural meeting at the Victory Hall, when it was decided that the aims and objects of the society, which was to continue to be known as the Neatishead and Barton Society or more colloquially "The NABS", would be to "Enjoy ourselves and entertain the villages". The seventeen people present at that meeting became the inaugural members of NABS, of whom four were still members thirty years later in 2006. At that time, NABS finances stood at £71.2½, with the annual subscription set at 50p. There were plans for a concert for the British Legion on 26th March, which took place, and two, one act plays on 7th and 8th May. However, the record shows that it was not possible to produce the latter.

At the next meeting on 24th May 1976, plans were made for a play I'll Get My Man on 8th and 9th October and an appendix to the minutes put forward "Suggested Methods of Presenting a Play", proposing a formula that has largely been followed since. At this meeting concern was expressed about finding the best location to store scenery, still a live issue in 2006.

On 8th and 9th October 1976, I'll Get My Man was duly performed, with ticket prices set at 50p and a charge of 10p for programme and coffee. A party took place after the final performance "as is our usual custom", which it still is. The programme records the previous productions in December 1974, April 1975 and January 1976, and makes reference to NABS entertaining the Women's Institute at their Harvest Supper for the last four years, as well as the British Legion Dinner that year. Unfortunately no archive material is held for any of these shows.

Plans were made for a pantomime 5th to 8th January 1977, but there is no record that this took place, the next production recorded in the archives being Lord Arthur Savile's Crime in April 1977. At least that is what the programme of the next play in April 1978 claimed, but there is evidence that the play was actually performed on 19th to 21st May 1977. This was followed by Little Red Riding Hood on 4th to 7th January 1978 and There Goes the Bride on 27th to 29th April 1978.

In February 1978, Frances Knowles proposed "to stage a music hall type of entertainment for the villages at Victory Hall". The archive contains a programme for An Olde Tyme Music Hall presented by NABS and Friends on 19th and 20th May 1978, with another shortened version on October 6th and 7th. Money raised was for Victory Hall funds. There is no archive material for the second of these shows.

In January 1979, following the performance of Dick Whittington on 3rd to 6th, there came a suggestion that the next pantomime should include a matinee performance "that was well received". There followed a play: Suddenly at Home on 26th to 28th April 1979 and a variety show entitled Harvest Follies on 27th to 29th September 1979. The pantomime The Sleeping Princess performed on 3rd to 5th January 1980 included a Saturday matinee. Thus the pattern of pantomime in January or February, play in early summer and variety show in late summer or autumn became established.

Over the years the minutes record various improvements being made to the Victory Hall facilities, staging, scenery, lighting and curtains. At the meeting on 3rd June 1980, Alice Dennes "applied for the job of 'pressing the button' should automation ever come to the operation of curtains..." It hasn't come yet!

However, not everything seemed to be improving. In February 1981, David Gedge wrote, making an impassioned plea for higher standards of performance, better rehearsals and the inclusion of younger members. His letter was read out at the meeting on 11th February 1981, but "There were no comments."

The programme for Babes in the Wood, performed on 29th to 31st January 1981 included an advertisement for Ye Olde Saddlery restaurant, for which NABS received a donation of £5, but this seems to have been a one-off.

In July 1981, the Victory Hall Management Committee suggested that NABS convert the "ancient lavatory" behind the stage into a store room for "all stage extensions, props etc.", storage of which was becoming a problem.

The pattern of pantomime, play and variety show was interrupted in 1982 with a second play: Shock Tactics being performed on 7th to 9th October, following an earlier play: Wanted One Body on 6th to 8th May. The following year also saw a pantomime and two plays, but in 1984 the previous pattern returned.

By March 1984 in referring to the pantomime in January, David Gedge felt that the "production was good - in fact, the best we've done so far as it ought to be. We must always

get better at each panto." However, he urged NABS to "build on that to improve still further and learn to rehearse backstage activities before we open to the public!"

Many of the early productions ran at a loss or made only small profits. This was variously blamed on "having to change nights...due to the General Election", "increased expenses in hiring the Hall", "too many rehearsals in the hall", "this type of play was unsuitable to attract village people" and "affected by an event on television". However, others were more successful financially and the group had been able to support the Victory Hall financially and by provision of facilities or help with decoration etc.

In July 1984, "discussions took place regarding the formation of a 'Junior Nabs' section and in September it was decided to invite youngsters between 9 and 16 to express an interest in taking part in the next pantomime. For this production there was an idea of splitting the performances over two weeks, but this proved impractical and Robinson Crusoe was staged on 19th to 23rd February 1985.

In 1985 the play didn't take place until September and there was no variety show.

In 1986 the archive only records a pantomime in January and a play in June, but a request to put on a one act play at the W.I. Harvest Supper on Wednesday 22nd October was received, but in the first NABS Newsletter in April 1986 it was hoped to put on a variety show, possibly showing a shortened version to the W.I. Later it was suggested that W.I. entertainment should replace a variety show, confirmed in the August Newsletter. The W.I. clearly enjoyed the show, as they asked for another on 16th October the following year.

1987 saw another January pantomime and June play, with the July Newsletter confirming an extravaganza of a variety show from 15th to 17th October, th W.I. having a preview at their dinner on 14th October. The records show that the variety show took place, but there is no archive material for this or the previous entertainment for the W.I. the previous year.

In February 1988 NABS staged the pantomime Tom the Piper's Son, for which a wealth of archive material exists and in November the play The Happiest Days of Your Life was performed. Records show a variety show between the two, possibly in September, but there are no confirmatory dates or archive material.

Although NABS clearly owned some lighting equipment, records show that lights were hired in for many productions and in December 1988 it was proposed that a dimmer board be made and more lights purchased.

The pattern for 1989 was a pantomime in February, a play in May and a variety show on 9th to 11th November, but once again there is no archive material for the latter. There is also clear evidence that NABS provided "a marvellous evening's entertainment" at Leukaemia Research charity evening on Saturday 14th October, an additional performance of the variety show, but again there is no archive material.

From 1990 to 1993 a well documented pattern of February pantomime, May/June play and October variety show prevailed. On 6th August 1993 a Summer Spectacular performed exclusively by young people, aided and abetted by older NABS members was staged after a period of intensive rehearsals. This was followed the on 5th August 1994 by Bitsa This!! Bitsa That!! Both productions consisted on a play and a variety show. Meanwhile, in July 1994, in another departure from tradition, NABS staged the musical Salad Days in place of a play, with a variety show in December that year.

1995 had the usual pattern of February pantomime, May play and November variety show, but in addition there was a special performance on May 8th in the grounds of Beeston Hall as part of the V.E. Day 50th Anniversary celebrations. In August the young people performed a summer drama and also produced a Young Nabs Show at Christmas 1995. Quite a year!

The following year again had a February pantomime, a May play and a November variety show, but again with a contribution from Junior Nabs with Robin Should and a variety show on 3rd and 4th May.

1997, 1998 and 1999 continued the well tried formula of February pantomime, a play in May and a variety show in October. The 1999 play, Pygmalion, included a gala performance on the Saturday evening, offering the option of a champagne reception beforehand at the White Horse Inn. In October 1999 NABS celebrated 25 years of performances at the Victory Hall with a Silver Jubilee Variety Show in aid of the New Village Hall Fund.

2000 had just two productions: a pantomime in February and a play in November. The play was Way Upstream which involved building a boat as part of the set and a second gala performance with a champagne reception at the White Horse Inn took place on the Saturday night. In 2001 the pantomime in February and the play in June should have been followed by a variety show, I Can't Believe It's Not Christmas, in November, but it had to be cancelled because of a lack of support and commitment. 2002 saw a pantomime in February and a musical play, Me and My Girl, in October. In 2003 there was once again a pantomime in February followed by a play in September. In 2004 three productions were mounted: a pantomime in February, a play in May and a variety show in October. 2005 began with the usual February pantomime and this was followed by a play in July. In a new departure NABS mounted a performance in Barton Turf parish church in October. England Expects ... was a drama documentary depicting the life of Nelson in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar on 21st October.

2006 began with a traditional pantomime, Cinderella, in February, followed by a variety show in June entitled The Way We Were ...in memory of Hilary Dockerty who died in January after a long battle with cystic fibrosis. The show and a subsequent fund-raising party raised over £2,700 for the Papworth Hospital Cystic Fibrosis and Transplant Units. A play, Don't Dress for Dinner, was staged in October. 2007 began with a pantomime, Dick Whittington, in February and ended with a Christmas Show in December. A farce, Don't Lose the Place!, was performed in June 2008 and a pantomime, Aladdin, was mounted in December.

No productions were mounted in 2009, but this saw the closure and sale of the Victory Hall and the opening of the New Victory Hall in September. The new venue required infrastructure improvements to make it suitable for staging productions, for example new staging, lighting supports and curtain tracks, which meant that it was not possible to stage a production until February 2010, when Robin Hood, a pantomime written by Pat Gay, was performed to audiences totalling 300.