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## Amateur Theatre Networks in the Archive

[{figure1}]

At present, pre-twentieth century British amateur theatre is documented in a series of microhistories. On the one hand there are numerous clubs and societies that have chronicled their own histories back to the nineteenth century. These are often written as part of an anniversary celebration, such as those of the Oxford University Dramatic Society (OUDS) (Carpenter 1985) and the Winchester Dramatic Society (Rake 2014). On the other hand there are microhistories written by scholars concentrating on amateur theatrical activities in particular environments. Mary Isbell has carried out considerable research on shipboard theatricals (2013), Derek Forbes has published work on theatricals in India during the British Empire (2008) and Sybil Rosenfeld's seminal book, Temples of Thespis (1978), investigated elite private theatricals in country and town houses, laying the foundation for subsequent studies by Janine Haugen (2014), Gillian Russell (2007) and Judith Hawley (2014). These are but a few examples. Although this plethora of microhistories offer fascinating insights into different forms of amateur theatre in the nineteenth century or earlier, they each lack an understanding of their relationship to one another.

This deficiency could be ascribed to an absence of archival evidence to suggest the connectedness of amateur theatrical pursuits in this period. The yield from any given archive might be best described as Carolyn Steedman's 'mad fragmentations': materials that 'no one intended to preserve' that simply ended up there (2001: 68). More often than not a researcher may find a lone amateur theatrical playbill inserted into a personal scrapbook or diary, or amongst a box of playbills that are otherwise related to the activity of a professional performance venue. Where larger items or collections of amateur theatrical materials exist, they would usually evidence the events of a particular society, group or location. The archive of the Cambridge University Amateur Dramatic Club (ADC), held by Cambridge University Library, primarily records the business of this society alone and shows few links to a wider amateur theatrical world (Amateur Dramatic Club). Similarly, a scrapbook of playbills and watercolours held in the private collection of James

Scarlett, 9th Baron Abinger, relate exclusively to the theatricals of Sir Percy Florence Shelley and his social circle performed at Boscombe Manor in Dorset (Boscombe Theatre). Although a scrapbook in the V&A's Theatre and Performance Collection records private theatricals at Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire, as well as events at Hams Hall near Birmingham and Middleton Park in Oxfordshire, these entertainments seem to be related simply by local societal and familial ties (Leigh Family Scrapbook).

The scarcity of evidence to indicate points of connectivity between different amateur theatrical sites and events is likely why Michael Dobson surmised that the pre-twentieth century amateur stage had no choice but to look to the profession for inspiration. In the introductory chapter to his book, Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History, Dobson writes that whereas:

Olivier knew about Irving, and Irving about Garrick, for instance, most of the non-professional casts I will be writing about knew little if anything of their amateur predecessors' existence or styles of playing, but produced the performances they did largely in imitation of or reaction against the professional productions of their own times. (2011: 8).

Dobson makes the assumption that amateur theatre makers lacked an awareness of one another, which on the face of it might appear to be the case. After all, the first umbrella organisation for amateur theatre was not formed until 1899.[{note}]<sup>1</sup> It was only in 2012, when I first accessed the Canterbury Old Stagers archive, that I discovered ample evidence to suggest otherwise.

### **Discovering the Canterbury Old Stagers**

In 1898 William Gerald Elliot published the book Amateur Clubs and Actors -- a volume which accounts for the vast array of amateur theatrical activity taking place in the mid- to late-nineteenth century (1898). In Elliot's book there are chapters on the most prominent amateur theatrical endeavours

of the period, including the Greek plays at Cambridge and Oxford, the performances of the OUDS and Cambridge ADC, the popularity of amateur acting at Eton College, the activities of British amateurs performing overseas and the craze for country house private theatricals. Amongst these institutions of nineteenth century amateur performance there were also chapters on two elite amateur theatrical societies that roused my curiosity -- one of which was the Canterbury Old Stagers.

The author of the chapter on the Canterbury Old Stagers was William Yardley, a cricketer who turned his hand to acting and playwriting for the society. He explains how on 10 August 1841 and the two consecutive days 'a notable cricket match was played at Canterbury between Kent and England' (1898: 283). Yardley estimates that the event attracted almost 5000 spectators and it was deemed so great a success that it was proposed that there should be 'an annual meeting at Canterbury, with the pleasant object in view of combining cricket by day with theatricals at night' (284). This suggestion came from the Honourable Frederick Ponsonby, a cricketer who was also 'celebrated ... for his love of the drama and his histrionic prowess as an amateur' (284). In the autumn of 1842 he gathered together 'a remarkably strong "posse" of amateur actors' from high society and the Old Stagers performed their first season (284) (fig. 2). Since then, the Old Stagers have performed as part of Canterbury Cricket Week every year, with the exception of the duration of the first and second world wars, and they now claim to be not only the oldest surviving amateur dramatic society in the country, but in the world ('OS History').<sup>2</sup>

On finding that the Canterbury Old Stagers maintained an archive, housed at Canterbury Cathedral, I followed my initial curiosity and arranged to see it. The collection is made up of numerous personal acting books belonging to members of the Old Stagers from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; a volume containing an early history of the society; an album of programmes, prologues and epilogues; a series of albums and candidates' books relating to the Windsor Strollers society;<sup>3</sup> and, last but not least, thirteen huge chronological scrapbooks containing over 170 years' worth of theatrical ephemera (Records). As the first of these scrapbooks was laid before me and I began to turn its cumbersome pages my

jaw dropped. Little did I expect that day to be consulting a collection that would transform our understanding of British amateur theatre history.

The collection provides a fascinating insight into multiple aspects of an amateur theatre organisation across a significant period of time. The series of scrapbooks records each of the society's productions from its foundation through to today with a whole array of materials - including playbills, programmes, sketches, photographs and newspaper cuttings. There are also meeting minutes, telegrams, letters, financial reports, and an assortment of other items logging the society's activities, all of which are beautifully preserved. The collection's richness is a testament to the dedication of its first custodian, the Honourable Spencer Ponsonby, who had 'the Books and Archives' of the society entrusted to his care for at least sixty-five years, from 1850 until his death in 1915 (Yardley 1898: 285).<sup>[note]</sup><sup>4</sup>

But it was not these materials that took my breath away when I first consulted the Canterbury Old Stagers' archive. As well as recording the society's activities, from the outset Ponsonby had used the scrapbooks as a repository for ephemera relating to the extensive theatrical endeavours of its members beyond Canterbury Cricket Week. To warrant this material's inclusion, Ponsonby often noted 'OS' alongside the names of society members on each item that was entered into the albums. As a result, the collection contains ephemera from amateur theatrical entertainments by other societies and groups in town halls, public theatres, mechanics' institutes, private houses, onboard ships, at the universities and more, from all over Britain and beyond. Page by page, dots could be joined between multiple amateur theatrical sites, events and personnel, and a vast interrelated network could gradually be exposed.

The Old Stagers' archive links the society to amateur dramatic activities at Oxford and Cambridge. Playbills of performances of the OUDS first appear in 1886, when Arthur Bouchier was elected as a member of the Old Stagers, a year after he had founded the university society. From then onwards there are numerous others inserted into the albums with Bouchier listed in the cast.<sup>[note]</sup><sup>5</sup> Likewise, there are playbills from the Cambridge ADC in the scrapbook volumes. This society was founded in 1855, after a campaign against the university's authorities led by Francis Cowley Burnand,

a student who would go on to become a prolific professional playwright. In its early years, the society admitted Oxford students and graduates as honorary members, one of whom was Quintin Twiss, a well-known amateur performer and an active member of the Canterbury Old Stagers. The first of Cambridge ADC's playbills to be inserted into the Old Stagers' scrapbooks are from 1857, when Twiss joined the University society, and photographs follow in 1858 (fig. 3). Burnand explains that this was the start of a short-lived 'star system', where other experienced amateurs joined their ranks (Burnand 1880: 167).

The scrapbooks also contain playbills linking the private theatricals at Stoneleigh Abbey, Middleton Park and Hams Hall to the Canterbury Old Stagers (fig. 4). Edward Chandos Leigh, a barrister, was the driving force behind the theatricals at Stoneleigh and was another active member of the Canterbury Old Stagers. So too was his brother, the Reverend James Wentworth Leigh, who discusses his family's theatrical pursuits in his memoirs. He writes:

the family company has been moved from one stage to another with various homes, according as the young people grew up. Originally at Stoneleigh Abbey, it was transferred to Adlestrop, thence to Lord Norton's house at Hams, then to Lady Jersey's at Middleton. So that when I went up to Cambridge it was not unnatural that I should join the A.D.C. (Leigh 1921: 24).

There he became a regular acting member, often playing female roles. Lord Norton's eldest son, James Adderley, also performed in these family theatricals and would go on to establish the forerunner to the OUDS, the Philothespian Club, in 1880, and to become a member of the Old Stagers. Unexpectedly, the private theatricals at these three properties, that had at first appeared to be localised, are revealed to be part of this much larger amateur theatrical network, with links to both the Old Stagers and the two university dramatic societies.

In fact, although the archive uncovered the material traces of dozens of elite amateur theatrical events that had otherwise escaped my attention, almost all of the 'mad fragmentations' that I had found in archives elsewhere

had a presence within this collection (Steedman 2001: 68). The Old Stagers' archive made tangible Leonore Davidoff's understanding of how nineteenth century high society organised itself, which she proposes 'resembled a vast pyramid of interlocking spiders' webs', that at each level 'had a sense of community as deep as any of Bethnal Green's although the relatives, friends and neighbours might be scattered from County Cork to Essex, Sutherland to Dorset' (1973: 31). The collection includes playbills to document events taking place across the length and breadth of Britain, from Moore Abbey in Kildare to Swakeleys House and Hampton Court Palace near London (fig. 5), from Bessborough House in Kilkenny to Dalby Hall in Leicestershire, and from Croxteth Hall near Liverpool to the home of Sir Percy Florence Shelley in Bournemouth (fig. 6). Despite their geographical distance, these events are connected through hosts, participants and audiences, suggesting that amateur theatricals had a significant role to play in forging and maintaining these interlocking networks of tight, dispersed, elite and exclusive communities and consequently in upholding the power structures of British society.

## Notes

1 Members of the organisation decided to drop the word 'amateur' from its name in 1925. It remains in operation today as the National Operatic and Dramatic Association (NODA).

2 Although for the moment they hold the title for the longest-surviving amateur dramatic society in Britain, there is much work yet to be done before they can rightly make this claim. For a comprehensive history of the society see Richard Ritchie's The Old Stagers: Canterbury, Cricket and Theatricals (2015).

3 Founded in 1857, the Windsor Strollers were the sister society of the Old Stagers. When the society folded c.1937 its archive was saved.

4 The Hon. Spencer Ponsonby (later Ponsonby-Fane) was the son of the fourth Earl of Bessborough. He was the Comptroller of the Lord Chamberlain's Office from 1857 to 1901 and was therefore responsible for the Examiner of Plays, the enforcement of censorship, and the licensing of theatres.

5 Bouchier would go on to have a successful career as a professional actor and theatre manager after first appearing on the London stage in 1889.

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## Captions

Figure 1. Frontispiece of the second Old Stagers album. Records of the Old Stagers, CCA-U449 1/2. Reproduced courtesy of the Chapter of Canterbury and the Canterbury Old Stagers.

Figure 2. Taken in Canterbury in 1867, this is the first group photograph of the Old Stagers to be found in the scrapbook albums. The photograph includes Edward Chandos Leigh (second from the left), Spencer Ponsonby (third from the right) and Quintin Twiss (second from the right). Records of the Old Stagers, CCA-U449 1/3. Reproduced courtesy of the Chapter of Canterbury and the Canterbury Old Stagers.

Figure 3. Photograph of Quintin Twiss as Jerry Ominous and James Wentworth Leigh as Leoni in John Maddison-Morton's A Thumping Legacy, performed by the Cambridge ADC in November 1858. Records of the Old Stagers, CCA-U449 1/2. Reproduced courtesy of the Chapter of Canterbury and the Canterbury Old Stagers.

Figure 4. Playbill for theatricals at Hams Hall, January 1864, with 'OS' marked alongside the printed name of the Hon. Edward Chandos Leigh. Records of the

Old Stagers, CCA-U449 1/3. Reproduced courtesy of the Chapter of Canterbury and the Canterbury Old Stagers.

Figure 5. A watercolour sketch of the theatre at Swakeleys House, Ickenham, by Colonel Warne. Records of the Old Stagers, CCA-U449 1/3. Reproduced courtesy of the Chapter of Canterbury and the Canterbury Old Stagers.

Figure 6. Playbill for Sir Percy Florence Shelley's theatricals at Boscombe Manor, with 'OS' marked alongside the printed name of Edward Samuel Evans Hartopp. Records of the Old Stagers, CCA-U449 1/3. Reproduced courtesy of the Chapter of Canterbury and the Canterbury Old Stagers.