

# BEYOND THE GRAVES

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## THEATRICALS IN RYDE

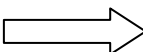
### "Treading the Boards"

The **Theatre Royal** in St. Thomas's Square was the most well-known venue in the town for both professional and amateur productions. Season ticket prices in 1860 were about 2½ guineas in the Dress Circle and the Upper Boxes cost 25s or 35s.

The second theatre on the site opened on Boxing Day 1870, the programme included a pantomime called *'The Humble Bee and the Orange Tree'*.



Victorian programme covers were often very decorative.



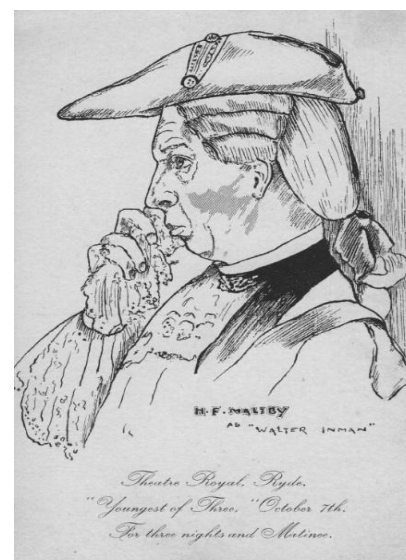
Miss Ada Ward was a popular singer and actress (pictured left) performing at Ryde, fresh from her second World Tour.

The Programme opens up to list forthcoming events, including Mr Boughton's Benefit. Under the patronage of the IW Rifle Volunteers it featured the great drama *'Drink'*. This was followed a few days later by a laughable farce called *'Fortune's Frolic.'*

Another Theatre Royal programme gives details on Harry Benet bringing his Company to the Theatre Royal for six days one January to perform *'Cinderella'*. He boasted a *'Brilliant Cast'* with *'Eleven Gorgeous Scenes'*. It also featured Speciality Act Lester & Lewis the Crazy Comics; Billy Wooley, noted as *'Ninepence short of a Shilling'*; Eileen Barber, Ballerina, and the superb Vaudeville Act, Caro & Reco.

Pictured right is a postcard advertising Mr Maltby's appearance as Walter Inman, in *'Youngest of Three'* at the Theatre Royal, for three nights and a matinee.

Sources: undated programmes & postcard from Roy Brinton Collection, RSHG Archive; photo of Ada Ward from Wikipedia



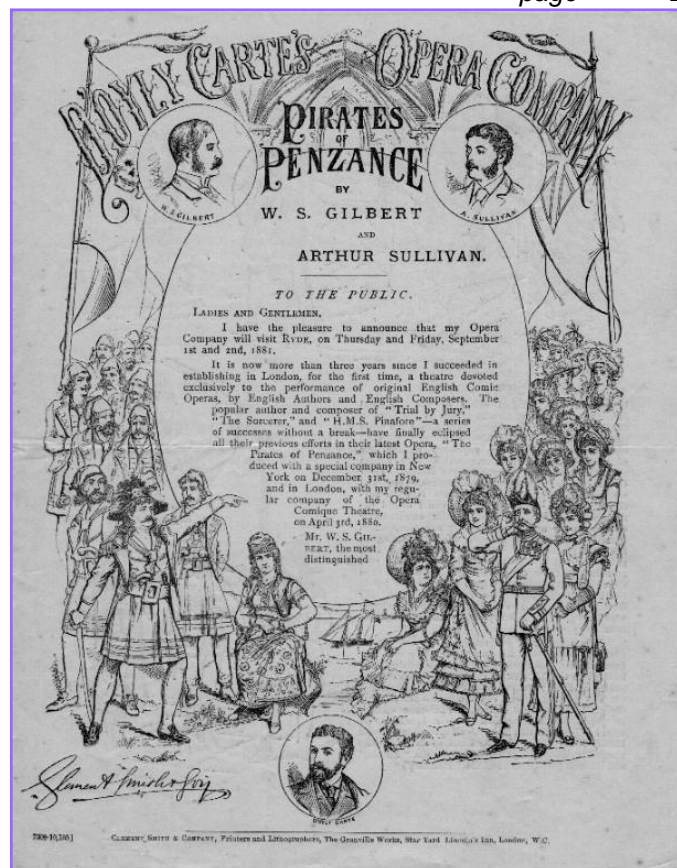
The **D'Oyly Carte's Opera Company** appeared at the Theatre Royal on Thursday and Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1881 performing '**Pirates of Penzance.**'

[Source: Roy Brinton Collection, RSHG Archive]

A few years later, in 1899, their advert in the 'Vectis' magazine for performances on 7<sup>th</sup> August and the following five nights, stressed the '*Company will not visit any other town on the Island this season*'. There was a Special Late Train leaving St. John's Road 20 minutes after the Thursday performance.

**Seymour Hicks** was a colourful character to tread the boards at the Theatre Royal. In the early 1890's the Touring Company he was with found it was double booked. Hicks, aged 19, 'volunteered' to bring a scratch company to Ryde to put on a nautical drama in 12 scenes. Things started badly, most of the resident staff at the Theatre were unavailable and the scenery failed to arrive.

The big finale was to be the rescue of the heroine from a steamer by lifeboat. Hicks and a fellow actor went down to the shore to find a skiff and with no-one to ask, they 'borrowed' one. Other scenery was cobbled together. The



play began on time, started well, then went downhill. A mock fight got out of hand with Hicks' character having to strike a superior officer. The audience was yelling as they rang down the curtain, only for Hicks to be faced by the local policeman wanting to arrest him for the theft of the boat. Luckily the policeman allowed Hicks to try to finish the play [making an interim arrest of the drunken comedian] and accepted his explanation.

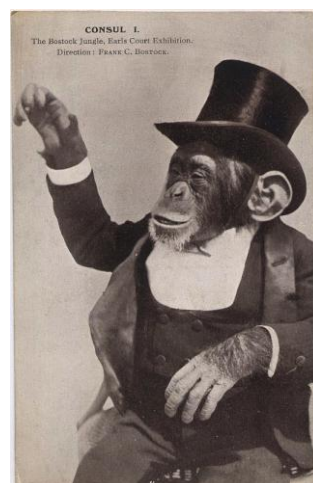
However the lifeboat scene was less than impressive, with cat-calls from the audience as they could see the wheels under the skiff that the swinging canavs 'waves' failed to hide. Hicks later said it had been a terrible night, '*one I had dreamed of, but the like of which I have never encountered*'.

[Sources: 'Hampshire Magazine' 1992: Postcard of Seymour Hicks from Ann Barrett Collection]

The **Wood Family** had a long theatrical connection with the Island. In 1911 Joe Wood purchased the lease of the Theatre Royal. One milestone was the visit of Princess Beatrice and other members of the royal family on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1912 to see '**The Walls of Jericho**' by a London company. Many big names appeared, maybe for a week-long run or just a flying matinee. Entertainments were varied, from Jack Buchanan, Fay Compton and Ernest Shackleton [of Antarctic fame] to '**Consul, the almost human chimp**' and Dr Brodie, the bloodless surgeon. Silent movies were popular, often included with live acts.


In 1919 the IW Observer announced that Mr Wood had booked '**The Ten Demobilised Tommies**' (a fine treat) and also Cicely Courtneidge for the end of May after her Paris performances. The Theatre Royal changed hands in 1926, but Sadie's husband, Horace Terry Wood, soon purchased Shanklin Pier Theatre to continue the family tradition.

[Sources: IW Weekly Post, Stage Talk with John Hannam, 9 April 1976; IW Observer 26 November 1919; Photo of Consul, anunnaturalhistory.tumblr.com]



**Edward Barnett** died at Chapman House, George Street, Ryde, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1858, in his 86<sup>th</sup> year. He had been well respected in the town, for upwards of 50 years as a theatrical manager. In the census of 1851 he was recorded as lodging at Exeter, a 78 year old Artiste, with his actress wife, some 20 years his junior. No doubt they were touring, maybe performing as one of the characters that he was remembered for – Sir Peter Teazle or Sir Anthony Absolute.

In October 1853 the IW Observer reported on Mr Barnett's farewell benefit at the Theatre Royal, when the house was crowded. Later in the month Mrs Barnett had her benefit. Actors and actresses were often allowed to have benefit performances, where they had the box office takings as a welcome addition to their wages. After Barnett's death his widow, Frances, remained in the town, running Union House in Pier Street as a Lodging House. She died in Southsea in 1870. [Sources: IW Observer 15 & 22 Oct 1853, 10 April 1858; Hampshire Telegraph 16 Feb 1870]



**THEATRE ROYAL, RYDE.**  
**MR. BARNETT'S FAREWELL SEASON**, and last year of Mrs. Barnett appearing on the Ryde Stage.  
**MRS. BARNETT** begs most respectfully to announce to the Nobility, Gentry, and Inhabitants of Ryde and its environs that her **BENEFIT** will take place on Monday next, October 24, 1853, and on Wednesday the performances will be under the patronage of  
**COLONEL VERNON HARCOURT, M.P.,**  
 AND  
**THE LADY CATHERINE HARCOURT,**  
 Being the last time of Mrs. Barnett's appearance on the Ryde stage, and the termination of Mr. Barnett's management.  
 For particulars, see Bills of the Day.  
 Tickets and Places for the Boxes may be secured at the Theatre from 10 to 4.

The Theatre Royal was still going strong in the 1930s

#### **BILLY MERSON AT THE THEATRE ROYAL**

Billy Merson and his company appeared at a flying matinee in the Theatre Royal on Thursday, and presented a show which was worthy of much better support than it actually received. A music hall and pantomime star for twenty-five years, Billy Merson has appeared before the King and Queen on five occasions. He sang several of the numbers that made him famous including "Yack-i-hick-i-doola" and "Senorita", and in addition he appeared in several clever concerted turns with other members of the company.

**Report on Billy Merson's Matinee.**  
**IW Times 19 Sep 1935**

**Billy Merson**, an English music hall performer and songwriter, began his career while working in a lace-making factory and doing shows in the evenings. It was some time before he could make a living from his stage work. "For five or six years on the stage, I survived on a salary hardly enough to keep body and soul together", he said. As a comedian Merson was often paired with George Formby Senior. Songs he wrote include "The Photo of the Girl I Left Behind", and "The Spaniard That Blighted My Life", which also became one of Al Jolson's first hits.

[Source: info & photo from Wikipedia]



**The Victoria Rooms** in Lind Street should not be forgotten as they were also a very popular theatrical venue.

Mr Wooddin the mimical celebrity gave his popular entertainment '**A Cabinet of Curiosities**' at the Victoria Rooms on Monday evening to a good audience. [IW Observer 7 Sep 1861]

'**The Amusing Gentlemen of Colour**' gave a morning and evening performance at the Victoria Rooms on Wednesday. There were about 60 present at the morning performance: in the evening the hall was crowded. The entertainment passed off very well indeed. [IW Observer 14 June 1862]

In 1905 a theatre-goer wrote to the County Press. He had booked tickets for an 8 pm performance and travelled by motor bus, which '*took us for a country ride*', finally arriving just before 9 pm, commenting '*if this is the state of things at the present time, I tremble for the future*'. [IW County Press 26 August 1905]



Not all productions were by professional companies as Ryde had many excellent Amateur Companies as well as productions put on by the local gentry in their big houses during the season. In 1894 Colonel and Mrs Craddock gave an 'At Home' in the garden of their residence, The Castle. W.S. Gilbert's fairy tale '**Creatures of Impulse**' was performed *al fresco*. The summer house was converted into a very passable stage inn, the 'Three Pigeons'. A large stand was erected in front of the stage so everyone could witness the performance in comfort. The whimsicality of the plot greatly amused the audience, which included Prince Henry of Battenberg. He left after the National Anthem was sung, and before refreshments were served in the huge marquee. Later the pupils of Mdle. Lyons performed graceful serpentine dances. [Source: IW Observer 26 July 1894]

### RYDE AMATEUR DRAMATIC SOCIETY

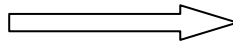


In 1908 the Ryde Amateur Dramatic Society performed '**His Excellency the Governor**', a farcical romance. Mr Percy Chiverton was the lead, and a strong cast included Mr S. Parnell, Miss Daisy Harvey and Mr C. Fowler.

Miss Florence Stainer was their usual leading lady, but on this occasion Miss Nellie Turtle was taking the chief role.

[Source: IW Observer 5 December 1908; Ryde Amateur Dramatic Society postcard - Ann Barrett Collection]

Programme for a Charity Amateur Entertainment from the Roy Brinton Collection RSHG Archive



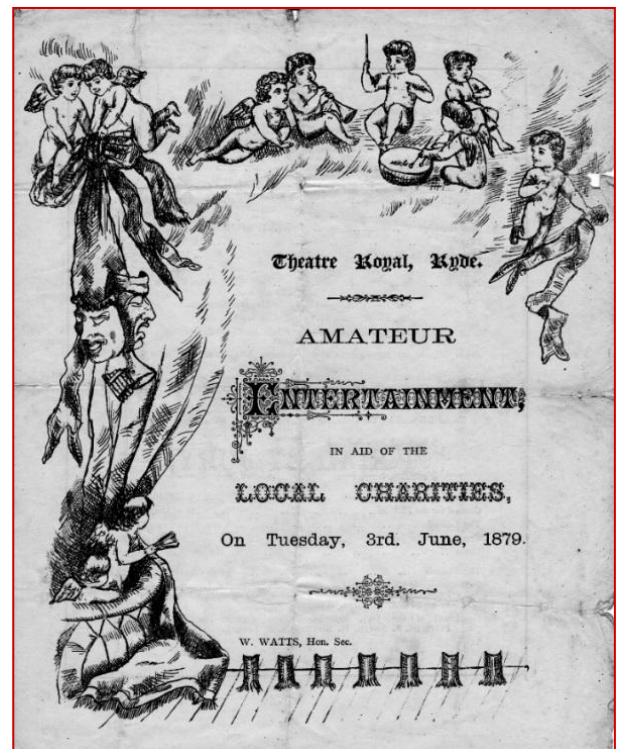
### THE BELLEVUE PLAYERS

The Bellevue Palyers first took to the stage in 1946, under Madelaine Pleninger, meeting in a room over the Bellevue Garage in Ryde to rehearse their first play, '**Poison Pen**'. For more than 40 years they performed at the Esplanade Pavilion. The IW Times reported on their Comedy Thriller '**To Kill a Cat**', [plus a cat named 'Toots'], which provided good Easter entertainment in 1962. They moved to Ryde Theatre in 1991 with Oscar Wilde's '**Lord Saville's Crime**'. [Source: Details from Bellevue Players Programmes RSHG Archive]

**Other Island Companies** played in the town. The Sandown Amateur Society brought their production of '**The Quaker Girl**', a highly successful Musical Comedy, to the Scala Theatre. An undated flyer recommended booking early to avoid disappointment. [Source: Flyer- Roy Brinton Collection RSHG Archive]

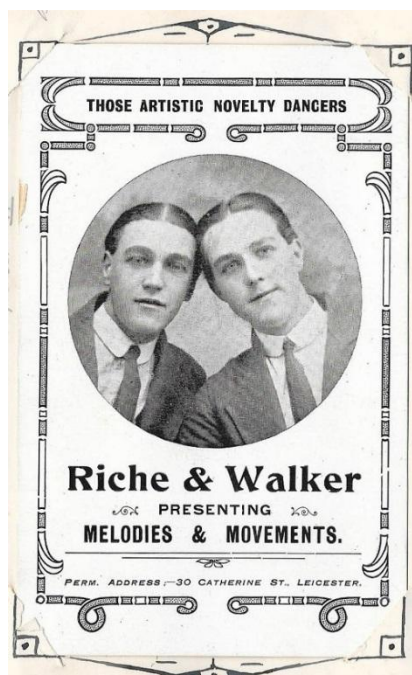


In 1931 the boys of Ryde Grammar School presented '**Vice Versa**', a farce in two acts, at the Esplanade Pavilion. It was preceded by a short French Sketch, '**La Farce de Paquin Fils**'. Programmes cost 2d, in aid of the North East Wight Boy Scout Association and other local Charities. [Source: programme- Roy Brinton Collection RSHG Archive]

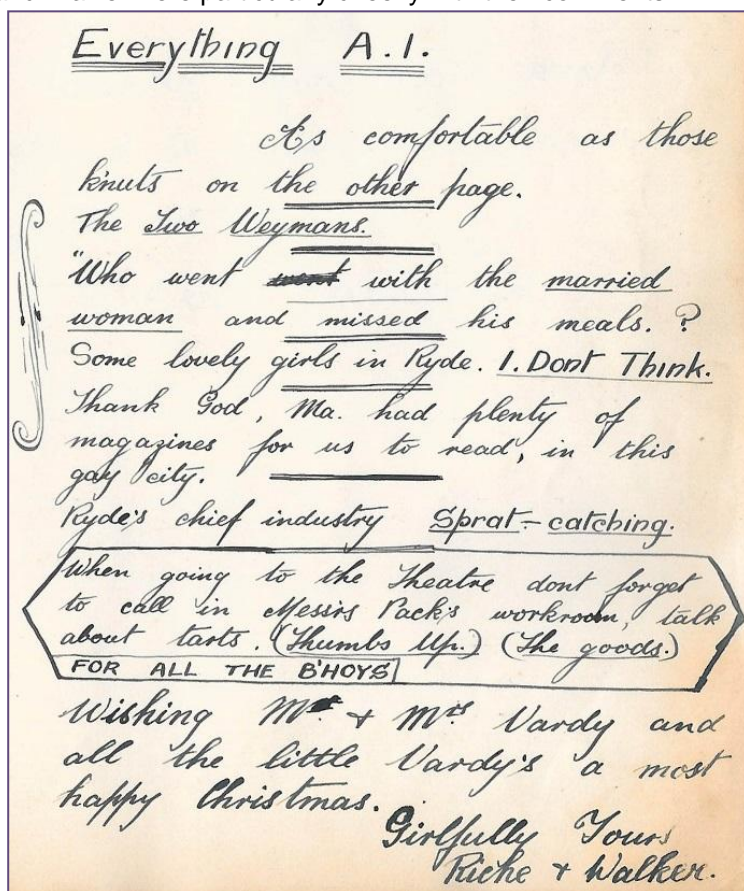


All the visiting artistes needed accommodation while they were appearing in the various Ryde venues. Mrs Vardy in Nelson Street provided a home from home, if her visitors book is anything to go by. Some visited several times and called her 'Ma'. In 1908 the Paragon Bioscope No 1 Company signed her book, including 'XVVM H I' the Chinese Conjuror and 'Little Willie' the Ventrilloquist.

One or two performers pasted in photographs. Riche and Walker were particularly cheeky with their comments.



The Riche & Walker entry in Mrs Vardy's Visitors Book, together with their postcard. [Roy Brinton Collection, RSHG Archive]



When the 'Two Hussars' Company stayed in January 1901 their entry was outlined in black. 'Spent a most mournful week, being the week of our Beloved Queen's Demise'.

## ENTERTAINMENTS AT THE PIER PAVILION



At the Pier Pavilion on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday there will be nightly entertainments by the Non Parteils, the 'Costume Concert Party'. On Thursday, Friday and Saturday Mr Alfred Capper, the famous thought-reader, will give entertainment which Mr Punch himself described as 'Cappertal'.

[IW Observer 3 July 1909]

Miss Floyd Ariston, composer and operatic soprano, has taken up dancing and is the inventor of a new dance 'Tango Tommy' which she will bring to the Pier Pavilion next week. She has taken the stately minuet and adapted its graceful motions to the Spanish Carmen dance and the Argentine Tango. The dance created a sensation in London.

[IW Observer 6 Sep 1913]

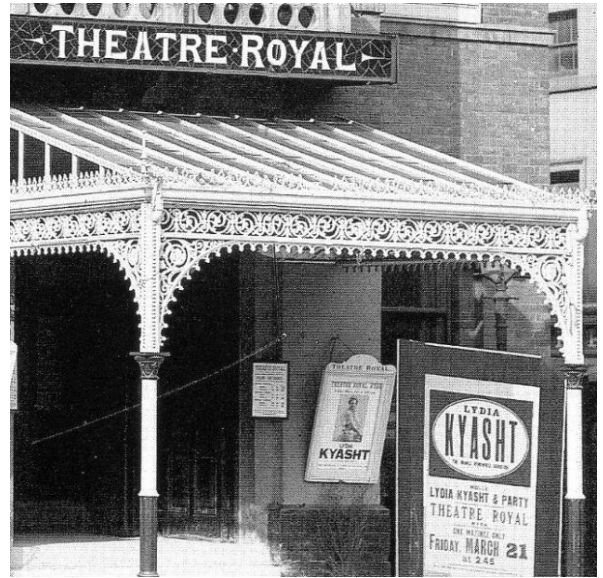
[Picture source: Ballroom Tango Illustration 1914 from Wikipedia]



### Lydia Kyasht

Born in St. Petersburg in 1885 Lydia graduated from the Imperial Ballet School in 1902. After periods with famous ballet companies she settled in London and founded her own ballet school and later a company which toured England and Europe, including Ryde.

The entrance to the Theatre Royal with posters for Lydia Kyasht's forthcoming performance [Ann Barret Collection]



Photograph of Lydia Kyasht [Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery].



**More Ballet...** Ryde Theatre scores again on November 19, 20 and 21, when the wonderful Vienna Festival Ballet comes to town with its spectacular production of **'Sleeping Beauty'**. These performances were advertised, as part of the Company's World Tour. [Islander Magazine, November 1992]

### AND FINALLY - WE ALL LOVE A BIT OF PANTO - OH YES WE DO! - HE'S BEHIND YOU! - OH! NO! HE ISN'T!

Pantomimes are a favourite with everyone. In 1944 Nesta Meech presented **'Babes in the Wood'** at the Commodore, in aid of the Mayor of Ryde's Appeal. This was for the Prisoners of War Parcel Fund. Nesta Meech took the part of Maid Marion, with Jose Wellspring as the Fairy Queen. The music was provided by Eddie Morris and his Band.



In 1972 the Young Vectis Players performed **'Sleeping Beauty'** at the Esplanade Pavilion. In the season, June to September, the Show of Shows at the same venue had two changes of programme, while the Sunday Show boasted famous guest artistes.

**'Aladdin'** was put on in 1975 by the Ryde High School Dramatic Society. This Society branched out into a varied repertoire.



Later in 1975 they performed **'Charley's Aunt'** and the following year it was **'The Ghost Train'** by Arnold Ridley [Private Godfrey in 'Dad's Army']. Havenstreet Railway loaned some props.



[Sources: Islander Magazine 1972; Programmes from RSHG Archive; woods & castle-clipartfest.com; magic lamp- clipart-library.com; charley's aunt image from wikipedia ]