

## Finchley Youth Hall retrospective

Reminiscences from Tony and Myrtle Batchelor, home now in Vormark, Denmark

All over the country in the 1950s, drama festivals were very important. In North London, one of the best was the Finchley one specifically for youth. Around 1953/4 the DF venue was changed to our new FYT The only sure record I can find for one of them is from a collection of programmes auctioned on eBay 19<sup>th</sup> February 2012 where one of the 60 is listed as FINCHLEY 'YOUTH DRAMA FESTIVAL 1953'

<http://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/collection-60-1950s-theatre-242344680>

The information is no longer on eBay but on a website listing auction prices. Question – was that the first Finchley DF at FYH or the last before moving to FYH? I have not yet convinced myself one way or the other! Maybe someone has a copy to give us?

Just a snippet - in 1955 Northside School N12 had an entry and the adjudicators remarked that one of the boys was very promising. He was one of my cousins, David White, living in Lodge Lane with his family including his brother Arthur. Myrtle, Ted and I suggested that they should join the Incognito Theatre in Friern Barnet where we also worked for a few years.

In 1965 David got his first professional role at the Bromley Rep and changed his professional name to David Jason - <http://www.televisionheaven.co.uk/davidjason.htm>

(Also search for David John White at <http://www.myheritage.com/site-family-tree-180433662/batchelor> )

(In 2009 Incognito Theatre held a Gala dinner where David as patron was guest of honour <https://picasaweb.google.com/114170158385762346056/SirDavidJasonGalaDinner#>)

My wife (Myrtle nee Webb) and I were members of the Finchley Council of Youth in the 1950s and were part of the team of three who equipped the stage after the builder completed the basic structure in 1953. For several years we worked on the Finchley Youth Drama Festival and I was responsible for the upkeep of the theatre. (I also did some maintenance of the back hall that was mainly concerned with table tennis.)

A further strong connection is that Eric Burton (the Youth Officer then who arranged for the stage to be built) was godfather to our first son.

At a FCoY meeting soon after I joined it Eric announced that the FYH was having a stage built and he would like some volunteers to help Ted Brandon to equip it; Ted as a backstage man in his working life and also as a member of Incogs.

## History

The Primitive Methodists had moved in 1905 to a prime location on the now bustling High Road. There they built a chapel 'roughcast in a Gothic style'. By the mid-twentieth century it had become a secular building, then a Youth Hall; now it's Finchley Youth Theatre – and a Polling Station.

In 1913 Arthur Thomas Webb became the chapel organist and was married there in March 1918 to Daisy Miriam Brown. Before their marriage, Arthur lived in Finchley and Daisy in Kentish Town. In 1918 they set up house in his parents' house in Durham Road until they rented their own in the same road.

Later his parents moved to West Finchley where they bought a house and land (the old kitchen garden) on the Brent Estate to setup up a nursery and landscape gardening business to take advantage of the need of the new residents. Webb's Nursery that was later known as Hamilton Nurseries. Arthur and Daisy moved to a new house in Summerlee Avenue where their daughter

Myrtle Eva was born in 1932. When his parents died, the new family moved to the house in Hamilton Way and Myrtle was married from there in 1953. We started our married life in a flat in Etchingam Park Road and in 1954 moved to a flat in Long Lane. That flat was part of a house at the lowest point of the lane and more than once we had flood water almost up to our front door!

In that flat we made the window curtains for the hall in exchange for the grand piano from FYH! (The piano was getting battered by its continual lifting on and off the new stage so was a liability.)

In 1958 we built our own house on the Hamilton Nursery land so our two boys had the advantage of grandparents living at the bottom of our drive! Our good friend Alderman Wilmot helped with the legal and planning arrangements needed.

### **Various cuttings (will appear in the FoFYC website archive together with photos)**

#### **Finchley youth theatre**

LBB recent website - The youth theatre is a friendly, supportive environment and we welcome all young people in Barnet who want to explore the creative arts. There is no need to have prior experience and we only ask that individuals call before hand to book a place on one of the courses in drama, dance, film or circus.

#### **Proposed Youth Centre**

FBC Education minutes 1946-1948 page 96 - excerpt

MCC draft agreement approved that W H Perry et al should take over the old chapel for youth service purposes.

#### **Youth on the map**

Finchley Press 6<sup>th</sup> November 1953 - cutting

Opening of the "telescopic" stage at East Finchley on Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> October 1953

#### **Finchley youth show the way**

Catholic Herald 12<sup>th</sup> November 1954 page 7 - *When Chris Chataway dropped in at the Finchley Youth Hall last week he saw the great scope and variety of the work done for and by the youth of the borough.*

*The stands were representative of the youth clubs, and in the religious section the Catholic stall showed a crib as the centre of Catholic family life.*

*Photographs, some lent by THE CATHOLIC HERALD, showed many youth activities-from actors in the Wembley pageant and partakers in the road safety campaign, to an Aylesford pilgrimage, and wedding photographs.*

*The exhibition was visited by the Mayor and Mayoress of Finchley, and Councilor Hartigan, chairman of the Finchley Education Committee.*

21<sup>st</sup> April 2009

Liz Sacre, email - *The one window still present in the theatre is the stained glass window at the front of the building, which is usually covered by a black curtain. We have installed curtains across the back (at the furthest end from the street) and two pairs of curtains to provide wing space. We now have a sprung dance floor, a wall of mirrors and air conditioning in the room at the back, which is solely used for dance and movement classes.*

*We have a membership of 120 and deliver dance and drama classes to mainstream young people (11 – 19) and young people with a learning and/or physical disability (11 – 25). We also offer special holiday activities. Our latest production was West Side Story, which had a cast of 54.*

*It is a delightful building and one of which people become very fond.*

20th July 2010

*Hendon and Finchley Times - A YOUTH theatre in East Finchley is hoping to become a focal point for young people across the borough after a recent relaunch.*

*The newly refurbished Finchley Youth Theatre underwent a facelift at the start of the year and staff believe the venue is ready to become a base for budding stage talent to blossom.*

*The building in High Road, which is a converted Methodist Church, features a dance hall, theatre performance area and a computer room for young people to use.*

*Liz Sacre, a team leader at the theatre, said they were focused on increasing their presence in the community.*

*She said: "We are on the high street so we need this building to be open. Young people are encouraged to come in here and use the facilities.*

*"We also want to make sure it is more in use by community groups so everybody feels involved, although it is the young people who will get first use.*

*"Our aim is to have young people come here to see good quality theatre. Primarily we want to offer young people the chance to be involved in work which is directed and produced by professionals, but equally we want them working on projects that are directed by themselves and supported by professionals.*

*"Part of our move is to empower young people through using the building to best effect."*

*The theatre hosts shows all through the year and performance art workshops are planned throughout the summer.*

*But alongside productions, the theatre also offers access to support services for young people and puts those in need in touch with partner organisations in the borough.*

*Ms Sacre said: "What has been created is a space where young people can drop in during the day and receive information and guidance.*

*"We didn't just want it to be a drama and dance space, we wanted to open it up and make it a welcoming and accessible space whatever their issues."*

Monday 31st January 2011

*Hendon and Finchley Times - PARENTS and children from Finchley Youth Theatre demonstrated against planned cuts to services at two protests in one week.*

*On Tuesday, January 25, more than 25 people rallied outside the theatre in High Road, East Finchley, while yesterday, several families also joined hundreds of angry protesters for the mass rally against local and national cuts.*

*The march had been organised by Barnet Alliance for Public Services and went from Finchley Central Tube station to Artsdepot, in Nether Street, North Finchley.*

*Barnet Council plans to reorganise youth support in order to save £1.65 million from the children's service budget, which could mean the theatre loses staff and programmes would be cut.*

*The centre provides drama, dance, music and singing sessions for young people between 11 and 25, including those with learning disabilities.*

*It boasts a theatre with stage lighting and sound equipment, a dance studio and a common room with computers.*

*Catherine Atkinson's son Francis, 18, was the theatre's youth spokesman last year and her daughter, Jennifer, 15, attends weekly dance and drama sessions.*

*Mrs Atkinson, 53, said: "Jenny has complex learning difficulties and health needs and this is the only place where she feels welcome, safe and included.*

*"Our children need regular classes, they need the routine – it would save the council nothing because we'll end up needing mental health services instead."*

*Parents are also concerned there is not another centre in the area which could provide similar classes for children with learning difficulties.*

*Mrs Atkinson, who lives with her daughter and husband David, in Bedford Road, East Finchley, said: "My Jenny would have to be at home with me every day of the week for the rest of her life.*

*"But what sort of a life is that? In today's civilised society we should be providing a quality of life that's worth living for our children – and this theatre provides that."*

*Councillor Andrew Harper, deputy leader of the Barnet Council and cabinet member for education, children and families, said: "The proposals to change the way we run the Finchley Youth Theatre, which we have been consulting on, will allow us to deliver sessions in a more targeted way, using a flexible workforce alongside our voluntary sector partners."*

10<sup>th</sup> October 2012

*Liz Sacre - Some of you may remember Friends of Finchley Youth Theatre. The Friends has not been active for the last few years; it is an independent charity that was formed to raise the profile of FYT, apply for grants to supplement equipment and support the service. The Trustees have decided to re-launch the Friends and are seeking people who would be interested in getting involved and people who are able to take a leading role in the new group. There is a meeting at FYT on Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> November, 7.30 – 9.00pm, which will be led by Ruth Mulandi (the outgoing Chair) and Roger Chapman (East Finchley Development Trust). I have attached the agenda here. Time has been set aside for a discussion about the Friends and its importance during this period of restructure and cuts. After this the new Friends of Finchley Youth Theatre will be constituted.*

*I should know more about the council's plans in a few weeks. I am aware that an organisation has approached the council under the Community Right to Challenge. The Community Right to Challenge means that organisations can bid to take over council services and councils are obliged to take these bids seriously. A group would need to prove that they could deliver the service as it stands (rather than take over and immediately change everything). It is possible, now that one bid has come in, that others will follow. For this reason, I feel it's very important to have the Friends of Finchley Youth Theatre up and running – who can advocate for the service and the specialist areas of work that take place here.*

27<sup>th</sup> October 2012

*Ruth Mulandi - In terms of the FoFYT I should explain that it has been in existence for some years. It was originally set up in 1995/96. So the constitution I sent you is the one from when it was set up. I got involved in the early 2000s when there was an attempt to revitalise the Friends but we found at the time that there wasn't much appetite for it. This has changed and there are a lot of local people and groups who are keen to get involved and support FYT in these times of great change at the council. At the meeting in early November myself and other trustees will be handing over to new ones. It remains to be seen if the new trustees want to review the constitution and whether they will*

*retain the membership as it is currently set up – it hasn't worked so far. When I was involved we did a big push in getting members and there wasn't much interest. So the new Trustees may change the approach. What I am very sure about is that the new trustee will be very keen for you to be involved in the Friends in some way! ---- To link you up to the new 'generation', I am cc'ing Roger Chapman, one of the main organisers of the November meeting, into this email, and I'll make sure that you receive future updates.*

### **Community right to challenge**

The right to allow community groups to bid to run a local service.

The community right to challenge will allow voluntary and community groups, charities, parish councils, and local and fire and rescue authority staff to bid to run local authority services where they believe they can do so differently and better. This may be a whole service or part of a service.

Groups need to submit a written expression of interest. Authorities must consider and respond to expressions of interest which, if accepted, will trigger a procurement exercise for that service. The challenging body will then participate, alongside others.

The community right to challenge came into force on 27 June 2012.

### **References to some of above (will appear in the FoFYC website archive)**

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=22510>

Primitive Methodists registered a building at Finchley common from 1854 until 1866. (fn. 57) A Primitive Methodist chapel opened in East End Road in 1872, (fn. 58) moved to no. 142 High Road in 1905, (fn. 59) and closed between 1939 and 1949. (fn. 60)

[http://www.times-series.co.uk/news/8282269.Theatre\\_aims\\_to\\_offer\\_base\\_for\\_youth\\_talent\\_in\\_the\\_borough/](http://www.times-series.co.uk/news/8282269.Theatre_aims_to_offer_base_for_youth_talent_in_the_borough/)

[http://www.times-series.co.uk/news/8822826.Families\\_protest\\_against\\_planned\\_cuts\\_to\\_youth\\_theatre/](http://www.times-series.co.uk/news/8822826.Families_protest_against_planned_cuts_to_youth_theatre/)

<http://archive.catholicherald.co.uk/article/12th-november-1954/7/finchley-youth-show-the-way>

[http://www.stmarys-eastfinchley.co.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2&Itemid=2](http://www.stmarys-eastfinchley.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2&Itemid=2)

[http://www.stmarys-eastfinchley.co.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=13%3Aa-visit-to-st-marys&catid=1%3Aarticles&Itemid=2](http://www.stmarys-eastfinchley.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13%3Aa-visit-to-st-marys&catid=1%3Aarticles&Itemid=2)

<http://archive.catholicherald.co.uk/page/13th-november-1959/7>

Rosary Pageant <http://archive.catholicherald.co.uk/article/6th-july-1962/5/stars-will-help-rosary-pageant>

**1991 fire mentioned <http://www.the-archer.co.uk/archive/2011/2011MarArcher.pdf>**

**Photos (will appear in the FoFYC website photo archive)**

Taken by Tony in the 1950s so about 60 years old. Camera Canon IIIa copy of Leica

**Finchley Mummers** - moved from a church hall to use our hall for its better staging. This play (My Three Angels) used the possibilities of the cyclorama and the gantry.

**Lourdes Players** – moved from various halls for the better staging before they moved in to their purpose built stage in the new parish hall 1959 (opened Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> November). That stage was copied from the FYT design but with a proscenium arch that moved back and forth in one piece to give a clearer floor space in the hall when not in use as a full stage. The lighting and sound control was in a room above the front entrance accessed through the window above the doors that was in the shape of a cross.

In Muswell Hill the same builders built a new hall for St Peter-Le Poer. They included an extending stage using the same system but the church made a private subcontract with me for an extending proscenium etc.

The LPs disbanded around the 1970s but the stage is still there although the hall has been extended.

**Drama Festivals** – various DF performances including St Joan and a young dancer. Good views of the cyclorama. Also the original folding chairs with ticket numbers!