

Romsey Local History Society

LTVAS Group

www.ltvas.org.uk



A Handful of Names from Pre-War Romsey Topsy-Turvy

Ray Metters

Abstract:

This article traces the development of amateur operatic societies and performances of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas (sometimes called Topsy-Turvy) in Romsey and elsewhere in south Hampshire in the early 20th century. It deals in detail with the careers of performers in the RAODS productions of G & S operettas from the founding of RAODs in 1935 to the 1950s, setting their participation in RAODS in the context of their wider careers.

This publication:

Romsey Local History Society; 4 March 2021

downloaded from: www.ltvas.org.uk

A Handful of Names from Pre-War Romsey Topsy-Turvy

Ray Metters

The late 19th century partnership between William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan eclipsed all other British musical theatre. There have been some, including Sir Malcolm Sargent, who believed that the operettas should have been billed as S & G rather than G & S and others who went further, believing that Sullivan demeaned himself by even continuing with the association. Yet, the general response from theatre-goers was enthusiastic. Amateur musical Thespians were so inspired by the new operettas that they formed local societies to replicate 'D'Oyly Carte' within a few years of the original performances. The mainly comic operatic material was judged as being 'manageable' for small British town theatres and even school stages. For instance, Downton School produced *Ruddigore* as early as 1898, only two years after the successful duo had finished their last work, *The Grand Duke*, while the first amateur adult attempts were active during the 1880s.

Hampshire and Wiltshire devotees of topsy-turvy land were not among the early movers. The Salisbury Amateur Operatic Society set the standard eventually among Romsey's neighbours, when pirates from Penance were seen romping across a Salisbury stage in 1909. Ringwood Musical and Dramatic Society was formed soon afterwards and presented *HMS Pinafore* in 1913, the year that the Winchester Amateur Operatic Society (WAOS) repeated the success of Salisbury's first operetta, only to be thwarted by heightening tensions in Europe within a year. There are, incidentally, newspaper references stating that the Winchester society was formed in 1901, twelve years before any show.

Romsey's response was initiated mainly by R T Bevan, the organist/choirmaster at Romsey Abbey prior to Charles Tryhorn's long tenure. The *Hampshire Advertiser* of 26 November 1921 reported that Mr Bevan had composed music for a comic opera named *The King's Dilemma* with Mr B S Toms providing the text. It was a project to raise funds in order to resuscitate the defunct Romsey Musical Society. This had existed since at least 1858. The opera was staged at the Town Hall shortly after the energetic organist and choirmaster had retired from his position at the abbey. In its laudatory comments, the same newspaper also reminded readers about the other 'wonderful success' at Romsey when Mr Bevan had directed *HMS Pinafore* a few years before.

This was in 1919 so this places Romsey's contribution in the chronological list of local societies. It was staged before Southampton's opening presentation of *Merrie England* in 1924 with that society's apparent uncertainty about a suitable name for its organisation. The original choice by the Southampton group was the Guild of the Above Bar Congregational Church, soon to be allocated another temporary name, the Southampton Above Bar Operatic and Dramatic Society. Southampton's first G & S production occurred later in 1927.

Ten years would pass before a new group of Romsey aspirants would emerge. They were determined to revive the earlier success of *HMS Pinafore* at the same venue in Romsey. Fortunately, Rosemary Richards, who has served the Romsey Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society (R.A.O.D.S. or 'RAODS') so well over

many years, has provided a programme of the 1931 production. It discloses full facts about the event devoted to raising funds for the local hospital. Many of the participants were also active members with RAODS when it introduced *The Mikado* to the town in 1935. The new society may not have created the first showing ever of G & S in the market town, but it certainly provided the framework to continue with regular annual performances once established in 1934. The Eastleigh Operatic and Musical Society followed shortly afterwards and would somehow manage to keep the Savoy operas alive during the period when RAODS decided to withdraw this material in 1954¹.

To launch operetta in Romsey town was obviously a mammoth task, probably only equalled by the ambitious quest almost fifty years later to secure the Plaza as the society's home. Vin Richards, who performed in the post-war operettas, was the prominent member as chairman. He worked tirelessly to achieve the dream of actually owning both a theatre and a storage space other than farmer, Geoffrey Wills' barn at Woodley. A near neighbour to Geoffrey Wills and a fellow poultry farmer at Crook Hill, Francis W Thorn, was another early member of RAODS and he was the stage manager in the 1935 production. The 1939 Register for Romsey confirms that he was one of several members linked to ARP defensive duties.

Romsey was favourably positioned in 1934 with well-developed transport systems in an age when cars were for the minority. Hence, there was every possibility of enticing seasoned performers from elsewhere to assist the new society. However, this could work the other way, as the transportation networks also enabled Romsey G & S enthusiasts to go for evenings away in neighbouring cities. The nagging question lingered: was there really a place for G & S at Romsey? The options were no doubt examined carefully by the determined founding members of RAODS, just as they would have been by similarly minded enthusiasts in Eastleigh. At least, the Romsey group had the advantage of being able to learn from the responses shown during the earlier experiments with *HMS Pinafore* at the Town Hall.

Romsey had not suffered the effects of economic depression to the extent of areas which had prompted hunger marches, but Romsey was, nevertheless, gripped by a degree of depression. Another challenge lay with newly created cinemas, including the town's Plaza with its attractive Art Deco styling. There was always the risk of the town's citizens being torn between a choice to visit the cinema or the operetta. The eventual decision of the founding members to go ahead was momentous and bold.

Gilbert and Sullivan operettas are obviously not cheap to produce. Extravagant costumes, a respectable orchestra, appropriate singers, and actors, are all essential prerequisites, and the almost prohibitive cost has to rely partly upon willing sponsors. The society would also have been subjected during these years to fees for performing rights. The 1939 local newspaper's report for *The Gondoliers* reveals the strain upon the society's funds which were bedevilled further by inadequate audience attendances for the earlier performances. It was most unfortunate for the organisation that the 1939 event had shown a substantial

¹ It would be interesting to compare the two societies regarding this aspect but it is beyond the scope of this article

increase regarding attendance, only to be blighted by almost six years of war. RAODS had circulated a positive advert for *The Gondoliers*, boasting around fifty participants and a larger orchestra comprising two dozen musicians; some amateur societies have functioned with fifteen orchestral members or even less.

A concert held at the Congregational Church Hall just before *The Gondoliers* might well have assisted the advertising during this successful evening. Stanley Wheatley (tenor) sang one of the operetta's favourites, 'Take a Pair of Sparkling Eyes'. He had performed with WAOS previously, as well as taking the tenor part for Romsey Abbey's impressive rendering of the *Messiah* in 1939 under the baton of the abbey's organist and choirmaster, C. G Tryhorn. Romsey could certainly boast of a tradition of trained singers. It had presented one acclaimed rendering of the *Messiah* as part of the abbey's festival of music as early as 1827.

It is interesting to note that Audrey Leach was also participating among the 'well-known artistes' at the church hall concert in 1939. She sang 'Still as the Night' by Carl Bohm. Audrey and her sister, Barbara, were reliable members of the early pre-war shows, including *The Mikado* in 1935, as well as forming part of the post-war reunion. The Leach family had moved from Ringwood where their father had created the drapery business. Frank G Leach contributed much during his life in Romsey, including his work on the hospital committee. He had also strengthened the tenor section at the 1939 *Messiah* concert while his daughters sang the contralto parts in the chorus.

One of the key personalities in the early musical performances by RAODS was William Jackson Byles, the son of Henry Byles, GP and Marian Jackson of Eccleshill, Yorkshire. His paternal grandfather had been the owner of a Yorkshire newspaper and his maternal grandfather, a well-known and popular composer in Yorkshire. William Jackson had retired from a profitable Yorkshire mill to become a professional musician and composer. It was appropriate that Henry and Marian should name their son William Jackson Byles as he soon displayed talent with the violin and progressed rapidly.

The *London Daily News* (28 January 1902) reported that Byles, aged 18, had won a money prize for his violin playing at the Royal College of Music. He also became acquainted with well-known musicians, including two born at Winchester to a house master at Winchester College, Arlingham J Toye. The 1911 census for Kensington registers William Byles as a visitor to a property inhabited by the Toye brothers. John Francis Toye, at 28 years of age, was already named as an author and musical critic, whereas his younger brother, Geoffrey, referred to his occupation as a composer and conductor. Geoffrey became distinguished for both talents and although he is remembered chiefly as a musical director at 'D'Oyly Carte', he also worked with Sadler's Wells Theatre in connection with his ballets before becoming Director at Covent Garden. His piano playing was of such a high standard that as a young man, he had accompanied Dame Nellie Melba's rival, the soprano, Louisa Tetrazinni.

Jackson Byles, who appeared on the census in 1911 as a violinist and conductor, was never able to match the fame of his two friends despite his competence. Neither did he achieve the distinction of his talented wife, whom he married at

Eastleigh in 1930 at a time that appeared to mark the end of her busy career. She would have been 35 and her husband ten years older. It is unknown whether Byles was in Hampshire before his marriage but he was certainly in Romsey by 1931. Rosemary Richards believes that he was employed at Southampton's Coliseum. The 1939 Register for Romsey describes William J Byles as a musician and musical director, married to singer and conductor, Doreen Byles.

The expertise of William Byles as a conductor certainly pleased the *Romsey Advertiser*, judging by the report on the 1939 presentation of *The Gondoliers* and summary of previous shows. Byles was one of those much-loved contributors capable of offering additional talents beyond his obvious forte. He certainly thrived on hard work, as he designed and painted the scenery for the 1939 production while assisting stalwart, Geoffrey Wills, with lighting. Newspaper excerpts printed in the week of 17 February 1939 are as follows:

Under the able baton of Mr W Jackson Byles, they gave delightful renderings and the sympathetic conducting of Mr Byles was a town (sic) of strength to both soloists and chorus alike.

Excellent scenery, lighting and orchestral accompaniments are by now synonymous with the productions of the Romsey society and they are again of a very high standard.

The maiden name of Doreen Byles was Kendall, a singer frequently billed in Hampshire newspapers with compliments such as 'the famous Southampton soprano' or 'the accomplished Southampton soprano'. Her later presence in Romsey is easy to understand as the town is no distance from her birthplace at Sholing, Southampton. Her family were musicians. An uncle, Norman, was a distinguished Exeter baritone, her mother a pianist, while her father was firmly rooted as a cellist with Southampton's Palace Theatre. The building was formerly on the site now occupied by *Southern Evening Echo*, before it was blitzed by the Luftwaffe in 1940. Sydney Kendall is named on the 1901 census for Southampton as a professor of music, which probably meant that he gave music lessons.

Doreen had already appeared in small charity concerts at the start of the Great War and made her real public début at the Palace Theatre in 1916, when she would have been 21. Her proud father was acclaimed in the *Hampshire Advertiser* dated 8 July 1916 as the longest serving member of the theatre's orchestra. His daughter's undoubted talent enabled her to progress after gaining major prizes in 1920. The *Hampshire Advertiser* reported on 28 January 1921 that Kendall had won the Salter's (Psalter?) scholarship as well as the City of London Corporation Scholarship and the Liza Lehmann Prize. Doreen studied under Sir Frederick Cowen and Liza Lehmann and started singing major roles while still a member of the Guildhall School of Music in 1922, for example, as a soloist that year in Mendelssohn's oratorio, *St Paul*.

During the 1920s, Doreen Kendall sang throughout England from Lincoln and Hull to the Cornish coast and across the southern country to Kent. Many of her appearances were in the Midlands. She was fortunate in most cases to be accompanied by Britain's most celebrated violinist of the day, Albert Sammons,

together with an emerging pianist, Jenny Hyman (Jane Alice Hyman). Time has erased all memory of Jenny Hyman and her sister Alice, a professional violinist, save for readers of historic newspapers. The same is not true of Sammons who stands among the world's historic greats, despite choosing to avoid tours abroad if possible, this favoured Kendall's career. Yet, no obvious explanation appears available for the creation of the Sammons, Kendall and Hyman partnership.

Doreen was again fortunate in the early years of her career to be able to sing with the eminent conductor, Sir Landon Ronald. Her busy engagements extended throughout the 1920s. Among her concert venues was London's splendid Aeolian Hall in Bond Street, the first visit being on 28 October 1922. Many of the musical giants - Sammons, Beecham, Henry Wood, Casals - performed at this famous hall which became the property of the BBC during the war. On this occasion, Doreen Kendall was joined by not only Sammons but one of England's finest tenors, John Coates. Indeed, it must have been a daunting moment for the youngster when she had to follow Coates immediately. A report starts:

*Miss Doreen Kendall's vocal recital on the 18th inst. at Aeolian Hall was interesting and enjoyable. These attributes were assured by the assistance of Mr John Coates who sang delightfully; but Miss Kendall is also a vocalist of distinction.*ⁱⁱ

Doreen Byles appeared in Romsey's first production of *The Mikado* as Katisha. She would have been around the age of 40. She was still contributing to RAO DS in the last performance before the war when she played the part of the Duchess of Plaza-Toro in *The Gondoliers*. These are contralto parts, far below in register to the soprano voice she had cultivated in her professional days. No doubt, she would have been a much-welcomed member to the society. It is likely that Doreen taught singing at Romsey and could introduce competent pupils for the pre-war G & S sessions. Her father is mentioned on the 1939 Register for Southampton, aged 68, but by then, as an unemployed musician. Whether his fingers were sufficiently free from arthritis to partake in the orchestra at Romsey will probably remain unknown.

It is rather unusual for an amateur organisation to benefit from the expertise of a professional singer such as Doreen Byles. However, it is likely that RAO DS launched two such singers in its first production. Yva Gordon, who sang the main soprano part Yum Yum for the Romsey society in 1935, was certainly singing professionally by 1938 as newspapers testify. She would have been 28 when RAO DS launched its *The Mikado* and it would be unusual for someone of that age with professional potential not to have trodden the professional platform. The 1939 Register for Southampton shows clearly that Yva Marie Gordon's only employment was as a singer. She was living with her parents in Portswood Road. Her most successful year was during a tour of England in 1941 with *Lilac Time*, a rather sentimental pastiche of Schubert's life, although perhaps, appropriate as escapism from anxieties engendered by war. Few English records have been located for the earlier years of this family but death certificates confirm that both parents died in Southampton.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in *Musical News and Herald*, vol 62-63, published in December 1922 and digitised in a Google e-book edition of 2008.

Yva Gordon continued to thrive after the war. *Lilac Time* may well have placed her name in the lights but BBC Radio's numerous slots for Yva propelled her into more serious music, especially a concert appearance at Wigmore Hall in 1953. There is an interesting revelation in the *Worthing Herald* (4 December, 1959) that Yva was born in France and educated at Rouen. However, another claim elsewhere that she had sung the part of Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro* at the Edinburgh Festival is a mistake, as records for the festival's past performances confirm. Unfortunately, chorus members are not recorded, so there is no chance of checking whether Yva possibly understudied the part as a chorus member.

The credentials for the first producer at RAODS were no less exemplary than those for the musical director and his wife. The man who produced the society's *The Mikado* at the Town Hall in 1935 was truly remarkable, not least of all on account of his many interests and accomplishments. His fondness for the classics, archaeology, love of music and theatre, his administrative ability and even flower growing (which earned him at least one prize) all distinguish him as that rare phenomenon, a truly 'Renaissance man'. His pursuits reflect a man who believed that past generations and other cultures have significance.

Arthur Moray Williams, OBE (MA) was born at Hendon, Middlesex, in 1878. A Cambridge graduate, he came to Hampshire in order to teach classics at Bedales, Petersfield. His wife, Mabel, was also a teacher. It was during the residency at Petersfield that his identical twin girls were born. Arthur became immersed in the early excavations of the Roman villa at Petersfield and produced papers on the discoveries in 1907. He was much respected as an authoritative, albeit amateur, archaeologist. He also indulged with equal passion in theatrical pastimes, thereby earning excellent reviews for performances in G & S productions with the Petersfield Amateur Operatic Society. He broadened his stagecraft further by engaging with the Fair Oak Players, a group which specialised in Shakespearean plays, often performed outdoors in stimulating surroundings.

One of Arthur's ideas brought variety to the Fair Oak group when he adapted an ancient Hindu text for drama. The chosen theme was *Shakuntala*, taken from the 5th century Sanskrit poet, Kalidasa. This was not entirely novel, as Schubert had sketched out an opera on the same theme for a librettist, although he would abandon the work by 1820. Moray Williams also acted in this highly successful play. Indeed, the appreciative *Chichester Observer* (6 August 1930) described him as 'one of the most talented members of the company'. Arthur was equally outstanding when exploiting the comic parts in G & S and had earned a considerable reputation. For instance, the *West Sussex Gazette* (6 January 1927) commented that unfortunately, the serious nature of *The Yeoman of the Guard*, allowed insufficient opportunities for Arthur 'to let himself go, but where he gets the chance he takes full advantage of it'. He couldn't resist filling one of the parts in the society's first presentation and chose the pompous Pooh Bah. He also continued as the producer.

Mr Moray Williams had already left his teaching post by 1921 to secure an administrative role with Hampshire County Council. His position was as 'Assistant Director' and the appointment seems to have been related to a move nearer to Romsey at Millbrook, Southampton, and thence to North Stoneham House. The

family were living at the latter premises when Moray Williams became linked with the first-ever performance by RAODS in 1935. It was a happy year all round, as his daughter, Ursula, married later in October. It was certainly a wise and ambitious venture by the society's committee to engage this man and he stayed with them for another year to produce *The Pirates of Penzance*. A move of house to Ringwood may have influenced his decision not to continue with drama at Romsey. During this time, Mr Moray Williams attended meetings and talks on numerous topics related to his work with the county, including medical matters. This increased as war approached, when his position by then, according to newspapers, was 'County Director and Secretary of the Red Cross'. His war preparation activities included visits to the Romsey Drill Hall.



Arthur Moray Williams with his daughter, Ursula

The talent in the Moray Williams' family continued to flow, especially regarding one of the twin daughters, the children's loved writer, Ursula Moray Williams. In later life, Mr Moray Williams moved to be nearer his famous daughter in Gloucester. Mabel, his wife and four years younger, died at Tewkesbury in 1954 but he survived until 1959. Arthur Moray Williams remained an active man, concentrating more on offering his archaeological expertise. He had even been summoned to a site near Coventry in the year of his death at Cheltenham. He was 82.

One of the greatest achievements of the first operetta at the Town Hall in 1935, was to win the approval from an influential member of the audience. According to the short history notes on the present-day web page of RAODS, the gentleman was so enthralled with the evening's entertainment, that he decided to build a new venue with RAODS in mind. The gentleman was Joseph John Crosfield, a man from Cheshire, who has sometimes been described as a garden designer and horticulturist but who made his wealth from

the work shown on all census records - the owner of a soap and chemical manufacturing business. Mr Crosfield had inherited this from his father in Cheshire. Fortunately for Romsey generally, for RAODS and the cause of Florence Nightingale, Mr Crosfield had moved to Embley Park during the 1920s when aged around 60. He also served the town as President of the Romsey and District Hospital.

The society was lucky to replace Mr Moray Williams with another talented producer. Leonard Ashton Sly, the son of a watchmaker, jeweller, and silversmith, was born in Salisbury in 1900. The family were active members of the old Salisbury Operatic

Society. In 1925, when Leonard Ashton played the part of Counsel for the Plaintiff in *Trial by Jury*, his father, Leonard John, appeared as a cellist in the orchestra, while his mother played the piano. Sadly, the older Leonard died shortly afterwards. Leonard Ashton Sly's versatility was obviously welcomed by the Salisbury society. He played the part of Grosvenor in the town's performance of *Patience* in 1932, as well as conducting many of the rehearsals and producing what was described as 'a well-written forward' in the programme (*Western Gazette*, 29 April 1932). He seemed to be unperturbed by sudden problems, for when Ronald Smart was



Leonard Sly and his son, Leonard Ashton Sly

unavailable for two performances during Romsey's *The Gondoliers* in 1939, the producer simply sang and acted the part instead. Ashton Sly had produced and participated in many G & S operettas elsewhere. One of the society's benefiting from Mr Sly's talents was the group at Petersfield which had been frequented earlier by Mr Moray Williams.

Mr Ashton Sly's name appeared in Welsh newspapers from 1937 until the war, in connection with G & S operettas and with concerts and drama, including pantomime. The 1939 Register indicates that he was working as a welfare officer and drama tutor for the Risca Urban District Council in Monmouthshire. He was attached to a branch of the Oxford House Educational Settlement, which had been created to allay deprivation. His particular remit lay with drama and several productions were provided for public viewing. Somehow, Leonard managed to cope with his Romsey commitments during these years.

The 1939 register indicates that Mr Ashton Sly was also attached to the Air Raid Precaution unit. Such duties were his second link to war activity, as the name Leonard Ashton Sly from the same birth address of 1 Endless Street, Salisbury, appears with the British Red Cross Society Volunteers during the years 1916-19. However, a West Buckland School attendance record claims that he attended the school between all of the years 1913-1918. Leonard would return again to this Devonshire establishment as an adult to produce Gilbert and Sullivan for the almost entire cast of males. He settled in his home city after the war, married late in life and remained in Salisbury until his death in 1975.

A leading baritone in both the pre-war and later productions was Ronald Smart who, in normal life, always appeared as a gentleman with a most dignified presence, even when astride a bicycle touring slowly around the town. The late Dottie Latham could spin a few yarns about Ron Smart, one being from her early singing lessons with him. Ron, like Caruso, recommended taking sherry before singing, 'It's good for the voice, you know', he explained to Dottie. 'Gosh! This

singing could be an expensive pastime then, Ron' she gasped, to which he replied: 'You must learn to sip, my dear.' Dottie also took part in the early post-war G & S operettas, as well as demonstrating her talent in many different roles since. Thomas Ronald Smart was born in Romsey in 1905 when his parents lived at Middlebridge Street, prior to a move to the lovely house in Abbey Water. He was named after his father. Unlike Ron's sister, Doris, with whom he lived for many years after his parents' deaths, he appears to have shown little interest in his father's tailor shop and chose banking for a living. However, there is no doubt that his greatest pleasure lay in music, which he could pursue even more passionately upon early retirement. Ron had studied with the choir master at Winchester Cathedral and was also a competent pianist. This proved useful when assisting at the Romsey stroke club with musical therapy. He also played the church organ on rare occasions. Fred Hooker was one person impressed with Ron's piano playing and remarked that his friend was sufficiently proficient to accompany his singing when practising.



Ron Smart in Monsieur Beaucaire



Ron as Mr Allworthy in Tom Jones

Mr Hooker, a survivor of the Great War who could recall many vivid and gruesome incidents about the conflict, was a well-known local piano tuner at Greatbridge Road. He was also a competent musician who preferred to linger after having tuned a piano, when he would demonstrate his pianistic skills. He simply loved the piano and would comment on its beauty: the black and white contrasting keyboard,

the polished natural wood, or the strings and general layout when this was exposed. He was also a regular church organist. Fred Hooker was always around wherever there was music and must have been associated with the early RAODS days, after moving from Winchester during the 1930s. He died in 1982.

Ronald Smart once commented that he would have hated to be with the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company as he would loathe being limited solely to the repertoire of G & S. He is not alone in this respect, especially with those who find patter songs particularly irksome. Ron escaped this routine by complementing his singing with oratorio, including at least one solo part at Basingstoke around 1950 when he sang the bass part in *Messiah*. He also sang at many concerts. He was an example of the reverse practice in which singers from a large society assist a smaller town struggling for soloists.

In 1938 and 1939, Ron Smart participated in the Winchester Amateur Operatic Society's experiments with new material. This was quite an achievement for Ron as he did not even have to serve any time in the chorus of this large company. He was selected immediately for a solo part in Edward German's *Tom Jones* and then took the leading part the following year in what is a rare work today, André Messager's *Monsieur Beaucaire*. The Winchester society was a prestigious musical group, trained for a number of years under the batons of one of Britain's great conductors, Sir Malcolm Sargent, and then by another legend, Sir Dan Godfrey, founder of the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra. Godfrey had only left the society two years before Ron's first appearance at Winchester. Yet, the new musical director was no less a figure than Sargent's old pupil, Robert Irving, who was born and who died at Winchester. He would soon establish his reputation as a world-famous conductor of ballet after a period with the BBC Scottish Orchestra. He conducted at Sadler's Wells and also with New York City Ballet.

The Winchester casting was a tribute to both Ron's acting and the quality of his voice at that time and it would have been so rewarding for him to have worked under such a talented director as Irving. During these years, Ron Smart continued with G & S solo parts at Romsey, forming what the *Romsey Advertiser* of Feb 17 1939 described as, 'an excellent stage companion to Sydney Egerton'.

Sydney Egerton was the principal tenor for most of the Romsey G & S productions. Egerton worked in his father's fish marketing business in Southampton. He also allowed ample time for singing, becoming one of the main singers for what was named during his attendance as The Southampton Above Bar Operatic and Dramatic Society. Egerton was an experienced performer by the time he had arrived at Romsey. He had started his Southampton appearances in 1927 with *The Gondoliers* and sang his final pre-war principal role in 1938 in *Merrie England*, the show chosen again by the Southampton company for the first post-war performance. The last appearance of Egerton with the Southampton group was in the 1952 production of *Cox and Box* which, of course, was not a G & S item but a creation by Burnand and Sullivan. Members in the early Romsey audiences have commented that Sydney Egerton suffered from an irritating speech disorder. Unfortunately, he was unable to control his stuttering during the dialogue, but all agreed that he compensated amply with an excellent singing voice.



Sidney Egerton, Stanley Painter, Frederick West & Leonard Ward in HMS Pinafore 1938.

Baritone, Pat Naylor, had hailed from Ryde, Isle of Wight. 'Pat' was the nickname for Mr Naylor. His birth was registered with the name Clement J Naylor, the name actually printed on the list of the society's officials. As with Leonard Ashton Sly, Naylor was the son of a watchmaker, but from the picturesque village of Brading near Ryde. He was employed as a cashier with a Romsey bank and settled in Southampton Road. An item in the *Romsey Advertiser* in 1939 had praised Naylor's singing at Romsey events. It started with the part of Pish Tush in *The Mikado* of 1935. Mr Naylor was also an important committee member and the society's first chairman. He possessed the same type of baritone voice as Mr Smart and it would be interesting to know how the society fared with the competition that may have existed between them in the other operettas yet to be researched.ⁱⁱⁱ Sadly, as with his father, Clement Naylor died young by today's standards, at 46 in 1952.

Pat Naylor's wedding to Betty Winship, another competent performer from Freemantle, Southampton, is mentioned in the *Romsey Advertiser* of 27 January 1939. According to another item in this paper, Mr Naylor did not sing any solo part in the 1939 version of *The Gondoliers* when the obvious role for him was filled by Ron Smart. The newspaper focused instead upon the newly married Mrs Naylor, exalting her courage and talents when substituting for a principal singer called Janet Hibberd (or possibly Hibbert). Miss Hibberd had become ill and unable to perform the soprano part of Cassilda. Betty Naylor only knew about the problem at 11 am on the morning of the performance. It is a testament to the strength of the Romsey participants that they were able to overcome two major blows so

ⁱⁱⁱ Researching facilities were unavailable when this article was constructed during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown of 2020

successfully, if we recall that Mr Sly had also been compelled to act as a substitute for Ron Smart during a couple of the Saturday shows.

Betty Naylor, as with Egerton and May McLachlan, another of the Romsey soloists, had all performed for Southampton's operatic group. Betty would soon turn to producing and was responsible for several plays in Romsey after the war. She moved eventually to Leominster, Herefordshire, where she continued her love affair with drama well into old age.^{iv} Nothing definite emerges, however, concerning Betty's other associates in *The Gondoliers*, Janet Hibberd and Dora Board. The latter had played the part of Tessa so delightfully for the large audience.

Another bank official and manager at Lloyds, Samuel Weatherhead, was appointed Honourable Treasurer. His daughter, Joan, a Red Cross Auxiliary in 1939, was also an official. Mr Weatherhead played the part of the Mikado in the first production of RAODS. Indeed, he had been one of the stars in the 1931 performance of *HMS Pinafore* when he had taken the role of Dick 'Dead Eye'. The press compliment informed that he 'is always to the fore in good work for Romsey'.

One of the Romsey singers, Leonard C Ward, had made an 'impressive entry' as the Grand Inquisitor, according to the local press in its report on *The Gondoliers*. He appears during the same year on the 1939 Register for Romsey as a chauffeur, electrician, and mechanic at Embley Park. He was also a special constable as part of his war service. His devotion to drama is revealed in the *Romsey Advertiser* (21 April 1939) when it states that Ward had produced the local boy scouts' revue for that year, even though he was unable to attend some nights, when Mr and Mrs Jackson Byles deputised.

G R Taylor played the part of Ko-Ko in *The Mikado*. He is an example of the 'gentleman' cricketer who preferred to remain as an amateur. Born at Havant, he demonstrated his prowess on the wicket at Lancing College. In 1935, he was



1939 G R Taylor middle front row

^{iv} Information from Rosemary Richards

chosen to represent Hampshire and during 1939 was elected as the county's captain. The 1939 Register shows George Taylor living at Brook in the New Forest, his profession being a solicitor. He had been married that year at Romsey Abbey with his father, Reverend B C Taylor, officiating. The bride was Sydney Florence Croxson who had been living at Brook. The *Portsmouth Evening News* of 8 September 1939 adds that the cricketing captain was employed as a Romsey solicitor and was about to join his territorial army unit. Rosemary Richards remembers George Taylor as a partner in Footner, Taylor and Lawrence and that Gerry Lawrence had also performed with RAODS during the post-war years.^v George Taylor served many years in his profession at Romsey and died in the town in 1986.

As the substantial crowd drifted away from The Crosfield Hall on that final night of *The Gondoliers* in 1939, perhaps whistling the attractive tunes or discussing the next likely show, who would have expected that the dark shadows of September would blight such optimism in the society and stultify prospects for almost six years? Yet grimmer fates awaited many citizens of Britain, Europe and indeed the wider world. By autumn, different tunes would be whistled or hummed, with titles more fitting for the awaiting cataclysm. The colourful happy scenes from *The Gondoliers*, including the exciting Cachucha dance, were already fading memories from a safer past and even the idea of a general such as the Duke of Plaza-Toro, who had led his regiment from behind because he found it less exciting, was no longer amusing.

When war duties finally ended and surviving members of RAODS could don their civilian clothes once more, they could return to rebuilding what had been lost to the society. One major absentee was the musical director, Mr Byles, who had passed away at Romsey in 1944. His wife would survive him for over thirty years before dying also at Romsey in 1978.

The new productions of the early post-war period did not endorse the optimism following the last production in 1939. The situation soon became dire as the chairman, Vincent Richards, outlined in his foreword for the souvenir programme of 1979 ('R.A.O.D.S. 100th Production'). After commenting on *The Pirates of Penzance*, staged in 1947, Vin remarked:

It was only five years later the policy of plays and operetta caused a financial crisis when three out of four productions lost a considerable sum of money and ate up the reserves and gave the society a large overdraft.

The three costly productions were not actually named but the drastic policy taken eventually to terminate Gilbert and Sullivan items indicates that they came from the list of operettas which featured after *The Pirates of Penzance*: namely, *The Mikado* (1948), *The Yeoman of the Guard* (1949), *Iolanthe* (1950) and *The Gondoliers* (1951). The chairman added:

^v George Rammell Taylor and Gerald Gascoigne Lawrence are mentioned as partners in *The London Gazette* of 21 January 1971

.... the Society decided reluctantly that it could no longer afford to stage the G & S operas as the cost of putting them on could not possibly be recouped even if every seat was sold. ^{vi}

Hence, ROADS looked for a money-spinner to offset its financial crisis and the first pantomime, *Aladdin*, appeared in January 1952. Yet, the society was tempted to consider another flirtation with operetta in 1954. Considering the grave problems, it is remarkable that the committee chose *Ruddigore*, or *Ruddygore*, as it had been called originally, thereby offending the purism of Victorians.

Ruddigore had always divided theatrical tastes and was probably considered the riskiest of the Savoy creations. It is worth remembering that the first night of *Ruddygore* in 1887 was accompanied by boos and hisses. Perhaps RAO DS should have followed the advice of the angry crowds of that night with their raucous shouts of 'Bring back the Mikado'. Gilbert and his musical maestro had responded to the unfavourable reception of *Ruddigore* by modifying the work, and even as late as 1921, Winchester-born Geoffrey Toye had felt obliged to re-write the overture. Although RAO DS had been founded with G & S in mind, it was clear that its members were not to be restricted to that genre. It was never named as a Gilbert and Sullivan Society and even in the first year another production had been included, *The Fourth Wall*. Hence, unburdened by any G & S tag, numerous alternative musical choices were available. The blow from *Ruddigore* was indeed so severe that the society would shy away from the Savoy operas for 40 years.

Many of the G & S cast from the pre-war days could adjust to pantomime including Ron Smart who, according to Vin Richards, thrived on clowning around. Rosemary recalls that Doreen Byles also took advantage of the opportunity. Apparently, Doreen thought it would be amusing to be the front legs of the pantomime cow in 'Jack and the Beanstalk'. Unfortunately, during one of the live performances, the cow meandered onstage only to receive the full impact from a stumble by one of the giant's henchmen, Vin Richards, as he crashed into the dutiful animal. Audience members who thought the incident was part of the comedy would have soon stifled any laughter once Doreen's injury became apparent. The accident had broken one of her legs. It is unlikely that Doreen would have been comforted by one person's summary of the moral from 'Jack and the Beanstalk': 'Not all bad moves turn out badly'.

This piece was stimulated by reading Phoebe Merrick's transcriptions of the 1939 editions of the *Romsey Advertiser*. Thanks are also extended to Rosemary Richards of RAO DS who filled in several gaps of this study.

vi According to Rosemary, one major concern lay with the exorbitant cost of the orchestra, now under the baton of Mr Tryhorn