

Hamble Players History

Formed in 1946/1947 – called the Hamble Dramatic Society. First production was WHILE THE SUN SHINES followed by FLAREPATH, THE WIND AND THE RAIN and finally ACACIA AVENUE.

The producer in those days was Mary Goodhand (Sister at the Airfield hospital just adjoining the old ATA block). The cast was mainly drawn from students of the Training Division of AST. A behind-the-scenes stalwart was Fred Keeping the village taxi driver.

Rehearsals were held in the backroom (now the lounge) of the Victory. Rehearsals were also held in the old Rectory. All scenery (like today) was made and erected by the cast. Often furniture had to be lugged by hand through the village to the old Memorial Hall.

On occasions, the Hamble Players (as they later became known) did joint performances with the Folland Amateur Dramatic Society at the Folland Aircraft Theatre.

It was around this time that the Hamble Players began to build a first rate reputation for doing comedies and farces, something we still take pride in today.

Stuart Jacobs, who I had the pleasure of personally knowing, arrived on the scene as actor/director. It is was Stu who was responsible for maintaining and improving the standards of productions and establishing the foundations for the artistic success the Hamble Players enjoy today.



The above photograph is of a play performed by the Hamble Players in the early 60s, some time before I joined. I do recognise a number of the actors and had the good fortune to work with them. Those I can identify are, 2nd from left, Barbara Waite (Ev's daughter, later to become Barbara Warde)

Next to her Ken Harris, a leading light in those days, Roy Purkis, who went on to become a professional actor, Grace Warde (short dark-haired lady almost central) and finally Stu himself on the far right. The others I do not know. I have no idea what the play was but by the embarrassed and uncomfortable look on the actors' faces Stu was giving one of his curtain speeches! Sadly Stu died of lung cancer in 1967.

It was during the sixties that Hamble Players did performances for the boys of HMS Mercury, a local maritime training college. We always presented our first night performance for the boys in their theatre before performing for the rest of the week in the Memorial hall. Imagine what it was like to put up a set for one night and then take it down and rebuild it for the

performances in the hall. Sadly Mercury has long since been closed down.

The rehearsal hut we used was situated at the back of the hall and consisted of a dilapidated old wooden building, very draughty and damp, with a very confined space for acting. At least it was our own! It took many years and a great deal of work to get the building we have now, thanks to the interest and backing of the local council at the time. Like the previous building it will always be known affectionately to the Players as 'the hut'.

The Memorial hall used to be much smaller with a tiny stage about half the size of the present one. The stage was very narrow and there was no forestage. The communal dressing rooms were behind the stage and consisted of a long narrow draughty room with the ladies changing at one end and the gents at the other. Access to this room from outside was by what can only be described as a rickety wooden ladder. When renovations were later carried out the wall between the changing room and the stage was knocked down to increase the depth of the stage by some ten feet. Later a forestage was added to give the far more generous space we enjoy today.

In those days it was all about making do with what you had and improvising. I can remember a particular eventful night in the seventies during a miners strike. We were told that there would be a power cut during one of our performances. The question was, should we risk performing that night or play safe and cancel. We decided to carry on as normal. Sure enough, half way through the first act the dreaded power cut materialised, completely blacking out the hall and stage. The audience had been warned that this might happen and were prepared for what ensued. We had positioned two cars alongside the hall, which had double doors on either side in line with the stage. When the blackout occurred the doors were flung open and the headlights of both cars were played onto the stage. We had to run the engines but this did not detract from the action on stage. All the taped sound effects, and there were unfortunately many in this particular

production, had to be done back stage by the crew improvising with whatever was to hand. The lights finally were restored and we received one of the biggest ovations from the audience that I have ever experienced at the Memorial Hall.

Stuart Jacobs



I joined the Hamble Players in September 1965, along with Sarah (later to become my wife) and we both immediately fell under the spell of Stu. My first production experiencing Stu's direction was a play called Black Tulip. Apart from being such an enthusiastic and brilliant director he was a wonderful human being who did much to make us feel at home and valuable members of a talented team. Although at the time he was suffering from lung cancer his energy and passion for the theatre was boundless. This readily communicated itself to us and we always gave one hundred percent for Stu. It was Stu who established the 'no prompt' rule at performances, something which has worked incredibly well over the years and is still maintained today. I know of no other group that would perform without a prompt in the wings!

Stu had a unique relationship with Hampshire playwright, Falkland Cary and it was due to their friendship that the Hamble Players were able to preview some of the author's plays before they went on to be performed on the professional stage, such plays as Train Fever and Proof of the Poison. Amongst Falkland Cary's greatest successes were Sailor Beware and Watch it Sailor. Both were performed at Hamble. They both became smash hits in the West End.

Another performance I remember well was Under Milk Wood when we had to perform in the hall during major renovations.

The rear wall to the hall had been almost completely demolished and only a very large sheet of tarpaulin separated the audience and the actors from the elements. Yet somehow we did it thanks to the power of endurance of both audience and actors. Those were the days!

In 1972 we performed for the first time at the Nuffield Theatre, taking over a booking relinquished by another group. The play was Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. We acquitted ourselves well, laying the foundation for future visits, although it was some years before we performed there again. The Nuffield has now become too expensive to hire and so we try and perform once a year instead at The Point, Eastleigh.

My mind goes back to the days when we always did a matinee performance on a Saturday afternoon before an invited audience of senior citizens, the Golden Age Club etc. They used to donate biscuits for the interval and we provided the teas. The cast used come front of stage during the interval and serve teas in full make-up. The audience loved it. I can remember once when an ambulance had to be called for one of the patrons who had felt dizzy during the performance of a comedy. We carried on regardless while the ambulance men did their stuff at the rear of the hall. We did not get many laughs, the audience being far more entertained by what was going on at the other end of the hall. The patient did recover and was able to watch the rest of the show. Then there was the lady who sat in the front row with her two dogs.... Shortly after that we decided to abandon the matinee performances and to have an invited audience on a Monday evening instead

Passed Successes have included participating and winning various play festivals, gaining a number of best production awards by the now defunct Southampton Theatre Guild, winning a BBC televised acting competition, and more recently receiving on a regular basis numerous nominations for the prestigious Curtain Call Awards acknowledging the many talents of the Players.

More about the television competition 'Support Your Local Theatre'. This involved amateur drama groups from within the

BBC Television South Area. Groups were invited to write a short piece of no more than six minutes in length. The storyline had to involve a stuffed parrot, a blancmange, a duck caller and a pedal bin. Peter Dobson wrote the script for our entry, which was finally short-listed for performance at the BBC Studios where the Terminus Station used to be. The show was recorded before an invited audience and involved us competing against two other groups. It was a proud moment for the Hamble Players when it was announced that we had won. It is a moment that the cast, Peter Dobson, Margaret Bridgland, Sarah Fisk and myself will always treasure. And we have a video of the whole event to prove it!

We were very pleased when Dulcie Gray agreed to become a patron of Hamble Players back in the eighties. Although she never actually managed to attend our performances, being a very busy actress, she gave us a lot of support and encouragement.

In the past the Players have successfully tackled and performed many challenging plays such as Othello, Under Milk Wood, The Dresser, The Lion in Winter and more recently Journeys End. We used to put on an Old Time Music Hall every summer with some of the proceeds being donated to the village carnival fund. Often as not we also took part in the carnival procession with our own float.

I could not close this potted history of Hamble Players without mentioning and paying tribute to our much loved President and Treasurer, Eveline Wakeford who reached her 95th birthday earlier this year. Eveline has associations with the Players going back to those very early days in the 60s and in spite of her mature years played a very active part in the group. Apart from being an excellent Treasurer, Eveline could be seen organising the 'front of house' team at every production. Woe betides anyone who does not pull his or her weight!



We now have an active membership of over forty people who with their various talents will, I am sure, perpetuate the fine traditions of the Players and maintain the high standards that have made us one of the leading amateur groups in the region.

It has been my privilege to have been a member of Hamble Players for some 45 years and I have many happy memories of times past. I recall the many people, both actors and those backstage, who I worked with and shared such wonderful theatrical experiences during my years as a Hamble Player.

Alan Fisk