

3 Harrogate Theatre

Walk 2: The Heart of Harrogate Town walk



Towards the end of the 1890s, businessman William Peacock and his company could see the potential for Harrogate having a custom-built theatre. He acquired a promising site in central Harrogate at the junction of today's Oxford Street and Cheltenham Parade.

Peacock commissioned architect Frank Tugwell to design a theatre with a seating capacity for 1,300, over three levels. The internal design was largely in green, and the elaborate plasterwork was lavishly embellished with gold leaf, the plush seating being in turquoise blue. The 71 feet wide stage had a depth of 28 feet and plenty of accommodation for the management and actors, to say nothing of a cafe and cloakroom. Harrogate's new theatre was opened by the Mayoress, Mrs. James Myrtle, on 11 January 1900.

Managing Director Peacock did not establish a repertory theatre but brought in professional companies with established reputations. The first to appear was Philip Sefton's Company, with their production of the musical comedy, "The Lady Philosopher".

This changed in 1933, when Peacock decided that changing public taste called for the creation of a permanent repertory theatre in the town. Thus were

born the "White Rose Players", who formed the very heart of theatrical life in Harrogate.

British theatrical life suffered from declining audiences during the inter- and post- war years, and particularly after the arrival of 'the talkies', and later the new television services which were attracting mass audiences. Things came to a crisis in August 1955, when the theatre was forced into closure, and the wonderful White Rose Players disbanded. The theatre was then leased to the newly formed 'Harrogate [White Rose] Theatre Trust' which had been set up by local people devoted to the cause of live theatre in the town.

In 1972 came a major scheme of refurbishment designed by Roderick Ham, which saw seating capacity reduced to 476, largely by removing the second-tier balcony. Despite further crises in the mid-1980's, the reborn Harrogate Theatre survived and thrived into our own times, the annual pantomimes in particular being widely celebrated.