

# DOVER'S FRONT LINE THEATRE




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## DICK WHITTAMORE

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FOUR PRIVATE BOXES, 500 seats in the stalls, circle and gallery; five bars (one at each level), a front bar and, entered from Northampton Street, a stage bar; all went to make up the Royal Hippodrome Theatre in Snargate Street, Dover, often affectionately called, in Cockney parlance, the "Dripping Bone". Built in 1790 it was one of the oldest theatres in the land and served the folk of Dover for over 150 years before its demise, destroyed by a German long-range shell, in September 1994.

A five-piece orchestra accompanied the various variety acts. The leader and first violin was Charlie Haynes who never missed a show although he lived at Kennington, near Ashford and travelled to Dover (which was a restricted area) each evening in an old car for the use of which he received a small petrol ration. Other musicians were Bob Page (piano), Harry Chandler (trumpet), Bill Delahaye (clarinet) and Mr Cooper (second violin). Unfortunately the theatre drummer left

at the outbreak of war and was never officially replaced. The drum kit was still there and another member of the orchestra would lean over and hit a cymbal or give a drum roll when called for. For a while, by kind permission of his Commanding Officer, Jack Rayfield, who in civilian life was Harry Roy's drummer, was allowed to play in the orchestra. Throughout the war the stage manager was Harry Spain. He, too, never missed a show and had been at the theatre for many years.

Secondary lighting at the theatre was by gas, so when the occasion arose that the main lighting failed, usherettes and staff had to stand on chairs, or be lifted up, to light the gas brackets which had no mantles, gave little illumination and were very noisy.

The war-time proprietor, the late H. R. Armstrong, took over the theatre in 1936. Despite all the dangers and difficulties of war, he kept the theatre's flag flying. Very few civilians from Dover's dwindling population, visited the dockside theatre and therefore the audiences were made up of members of H.M. Forces, some stationed locally, others just passing through on their way to or returning from the battlefields in Europe. I can also see Mr Armstrong, standing at the front of the blacked-out theatre, informing all that there were "seats in all parts". Also I can see him standing in the front stalls telling the audience that an air-raid or shelling warning had sounded and they could, if they wished, leave and take shelter in one of the many caves in the area. But hardly a soul ever moved. Well, would you have left the theatre knowing that the strip-tease dancer was on next? I wonder!

A very faithful staff often dodged bombs and shells and the constant threat of invasion to keep the theatre open. A few names worth mentioning of staff who worked all through up to the fatal day are: George Sidders, the cellarman and senior stage hand, Nobby Granger in the spotlight box and Mrs Hanson, the elderly chief cleaning lady who was a cripple but always

managed to get to work from her home in York Street. The usherettes and other staff frequently changed but their services were, nevertheless, greatly appreciated. I make my apologies to any I may have missed.

I started work at the "Hip" at the age of fourteen in August, 1939, as a page boy. Some may remember my ill-fitting pale blue uniform with lots of buttons and a greasy peaked cap. The first show I saw was a touring version of "The Ovaltinies". It was a promotion where a disc from a tin of Ovaltine would gain admission. The Ovaltinies took up a complete hour and mainly consisted of young budding actors with a finale singing the promotion song, "We are the Ovaltinies . . . ."

At the outbreak of the war the theatre closed for a few days whilst all windows were blacked out and neon signs disconnected so that no light was visible outside. It re-opened on 12th September with a visit from Robin Richmond with his electric organ in a appropriately named show, "Black Out the Blues!" Variety programmes followed and even two pantomimes were

KALA HARI, January 1943



presented that first Christmas of the war. **BABES IN THE WOOD** opened on Christmas Day (Yes, the "Hip" opened on Christmas Days during the war to entertain the many troops who had nowhere to go), and on 8th January 1940 **LITTLE BO-PEEP** played for six days with matinees. In May **SUZETTE TARRI** entertained. It was during that week that a lone Nazi raider dropped one of Dover's first bombs. It landed in the Wellington Dock behind the theatre, in the middle of **HENRI HILTON's** conjuring act — he carried on regardless!

The famous **PHYLLIS DIXEY** entertained in June and in August the lovely **GLORIA** demonstrated how young ladies of the future would disrobe by electricity! During this time Dunkirk took place, followed by the Battle of Britain with a lot of activity in the skies over Dover.

About this time it was decided to abandon the booking of seats as it was impossible to guarantee performances, so a continuous system was set up — come and go as you please. The summer of 1940 brought the first bombardment from German long-range guns but the Hippodrome carried on. On Monday, 9th September, the Hip had to close through failure of the electricity supply. It re-opened next day, but on Wednesday, the 11th, the sea front was badly bombed by hit and run raiders. The Grand Hotel, the Sussex Arms and several properties were hit and casualties were extensive — sixteen killed and twenty-three seriously injured. The theatre escaped damage but there was still no light and the show was abandoned for the week. I well remember, as a page boy, carrying **LEON CORTEZ's** bag to the station next morning.

After 21st September, 1940 Defence Regulations were made which restricted cinemas, theatres, clubs and restaurants. They were ordered to close by ten o'clock each evening and they were not permitted to re-open until half-an-hour before sunrise the next day. The local chief of police was also permitted to bring this forward to a nine o'clock closing if he thought this was necessary for public safety. The Hippo-

drome dutifully changed its houses from 6.30 and 8.50 to 6.00 and 8.00 p.m., and later in the war to 5.10 and 7.00 p.m. During most of the war the last buses used to leave no later than 9 o'clock.

There was no panto at Christmas 1940 but many good variety bills entertained. In April 1941 Sunday ENSA shows first came to Dover. These were arranged by NAAFI at prices of 3d, 6d and 1/-. One ENSA show I particularly remember was **THE GHOST TRAIN** which was written by Arnold Ridley (Godfrey of Dad's Army) and he played the rôle of the Station Master in a tense drama.

The Spring of 1941 brought Dover's 1000th alert and the theatre concentrated on strip shows for the forces. On 15th September 1941, **EVELYN LAYE** volunteered to play Dover and her £100 salary was donated to local charities. On 15th December **TED AND BARBARA ANDREWS** started. They were the parents of **JULIE ANDREWS** who had a baby with them which I believe was the well-known star of the future.

One week in October 1942 a shell burst in Northampton Street behind the theatre just as it was being cleared.

ROYAL <b>HIPPODROME</b> <small>Managing Director—H. R. Armstrong 1943 Telephone 999</small>	
<b>5.10 CONTINUOUS PERFORMANCE 7.0</b> <small>Week commencing Mon. Dec. 6</small>	
The Radio and Film Star <b>BABS DUDLEY</b> The Golden Voice and a Piano	
<b>RAY and RAYFORD</b> <small>Gay Deceiver &amp; the Nitwit</small>	<b>DeBEAR &amp; DuBRAY</b> <small>The Delightful Deceptionists</small>
The Fascinating Nude <b>:: GLORIA ::</b> <small>In her</small> Dance of the Seven Veils & Fan Dance	
<b>SYD BESSON</b> <small>Monarch of the Bells Marimba—Xylophonist</small>	<b>THE FIELD SISTERS</b> <small>Dancers—De-Luxe</small>
<b>JIM NOLAN</b> A Real Enemy of Gloom	
<small>Stalls 3/., 2/., 1/6 Circle 2/6 Box Seats 4/- Pit 1/- Gallery 8d.</small>	
<small>H. G. Wright, Manager, 196 High Street, Dover</small>	

A few slates were cracked, a window was broken and several shrapnel holes appeared in the side of the old building.

During 1942 the Assistant Manager, John Denton, resigned and I was made acting Assistant Manager and full Assistant Manager in January 1943. My duties included ordering the beers, wines and spirits from the brewers (we always over-ordered because supplies were always cut down), looking after the petty cash, keeping the bars supplied with cigarettes and spirits, banking, keeping books and paying the artistes on Saturday night, a practise commonly known in the profession as "the ghost walking".

Early in 1943 I had my eighteenth birthday and had to register for National Service. Mr Armstrong tried to get me deferred but it wasn't allowed and I became a BEVIN BOY at Snowdown Colliery in March 1943. I was not too unhappy about this as I was able to live at home and also carry on working at my beloved Hippodrome after my colliery shifts. Also in common with other civilians, I did one night's fire watching a week at the theatre, giving our regular night-watchman a night off each Saturday. I have to admit my fire watching consisted of sitting in the manager's office watching the electric fire all night! I was never called on but was on the premises if anything had happened. A few shells fell in the vicinity on some occasions but I was not disturbed.

One of the greatest shows ever to entertain Dover audiences appeared on Sunday, 19th December, 1943. It came about quite accidentally. A local army unit was to put on a Sunday show in aid of the R.A. Prisoners of War Fund, but the Lord's Day Observance Society intervened and the show had to be cancelled. This was given national press coverage and Tommy Trinder saw it and offered to bring a first class show to Dover that would not infringe any Sunday regulations. The show played to a packed house. Prices: Boxes at

25/- and 20/-, Stalls 4/-, 2/6d and 2/-, Circle 3/- Pit 1/6 and Gallery 1/-. The show, which handed over a nice fat cheque to the Prisoners of War Fund, ran for THREE HOURS and included TOMMY TRINDER, SONNIE HALE, TESSIE O'SHEA, DEREK ROY, CHERRY LIND, MORETON FRAZER and THE JERRY ALLEN TRIO with their wonder electric organ. Luckily for us it was a peaceful evening without enemy action.

On 18th January 1944 the last panto ever to play in Dover was CINDERELLA. With two matinees it played to record audiences during a quiet week almost free from the hazards of war. Even some civilians and children visited the old Hip and enjoyed traditional panto.

## THE CARPET BAGGERS' BALL



*The Crew of H.S.L. 186*

*request your company*

*at the Lord Warden Annexe,*

*on Thursday, 17th February, 1944*

*at 7.30 p.m.*

By kind permission of the C.O. and Entertainments Officer, H.S.L.'s Dover

One night early in 1944 a large stage carpet was stolen from the theatre. Police investigators discovered it cut into pieces and covering the floors in some of the RAF Crash Launches which were moored in the Wellington Dock behind the theatre. The Hippodrome manager did not prosecute but asked for compensation to the value of the carpet. The RAF lads tried stitching the carpet back together but it was not acceptable.

To raise the necessary cash they organised a ball to be held at the Lord Warden Hotel Annexe on Thursday, 17th February, 1944. So THE CARPET BAGGER'S BALL took place and the debt was cleared.

The organising committee had the nerve to send a Complimentary ticket to the Hippodrome Manager! He took it in good part — after all there was a war on!

I can recall a lady in black, who for a time frequented the Hippodrome Bars. It was rumoured she was a spy, some said she wore a swastika locket and there were others who swore they saw a light shining from her lodging house window at night. She never said much, but was she listening? However, one night she didn't show up and we never saw her again! I wonder?

"BEAUTY'S IN TOWN" attracted good houses during the weeks of 10th April and again on 21st August. In all this revue played Dover four times during 1943 and 1944.

In the week of 28th August three performances of a variety bill were interrupted by shellfire, and during the week of 11th September only two-and-a half performances were possible. At this time the Canadian Forces were marching up the French coast and capturing the long-range guns. The German gunners continued to bombard Dover by day and night in an attempt to get rid of their shells before capitulation. The bill that week (the last ever to play the Hip) included Renara (renowned pianist), Joe Peterson (the singing choir-boy), Frank E. West (comedian),

Rex Ashley, Sonia, Billy Barr and Lady, and the Six Dancing Diamonds. After the misfortune of that week it was decided to close the theatre for a week and re-open on Monday, 25th September when it was hoped that the threat of shelling would be over. A variety bill was booked and SANDY POWELL offered to appear on the Wednesday as a guest star. Alas, it was not to be. The theatre never re-opened. On Monday 25th September 1944, at approximately midday, Hitler dealt his final blow and the Hip was very badly damaged by one of the final shells from the long-range guns. This was all the more unfortunate because the very last shell to land in Dover left the Nazi gun on Tuesday, 26th September. It hit an umbrella shop just off the Market Square. The Hip was beaten by twenty-four hours!

The *Kent Messenger* in 1950, mourning the old theatre as it was being demolished to make way for dock extensions and road widening, said: "A former patron, Mr L. Mason, told a *Messenger* reporter, 'The bar under the stage had such a unique atmosphere that the finest war artistes of Britain and America, try as they did, could not get it down on paper. It defied English tradition and allowed artistes to come in wearing stage make-up and costumes to have a drink with civilians and servicemen from the audience.'"

After the theatre was so badly damaged in 1944, first-aid repairs were made, and the front street bar was re-opened. It so remained until the theatre was demolished and the site was cleared in 1950.

I would like to conclude by recalling one or two interesting items about the Hip:

The telephone number was, believe it or not, DOVER 999. Yes, it's true — if you wanted the police in those days you rang Dover 100!

THE DAMAGED 'ROYAL HIPPODROME' and adjacent buildings, looking up Snargate Street towards New Bridge



Whilst the theatre never closed during the early part of the war, in 1944, when things got really hectic, the powers that be enforced closure during shelling warnings.

Very often phone calls were received to ask members of certain MGB's and MTB's to return to their boats. To avoid fake calls, at the beginning of each day's programme, the officer of the day would ring and identify himself, then when we had a call we asked for identification. On two occasions we received a message that *ALL* servicemen were to return to their bases. This nearly emptied the theatre and the "turns" played to half-a-dozen or so civilians.

One evening, during the last interval, an usherette was stabbed in the "gods". An ex boy-friend ran up the gallery steps, stabbed the girl, then ran out and gave himself up near the clock tower on the sea front. The show continued whilst the usherette received treatment and awaited the ambulance. She wasn't badly hurt and returned to work within a few weeks.

On several occasions, unbeknown to the public, the show opened on Monday night with only two or three acts. However, others arrived, made a quick change, dashed up on to the stage and ensured continuity. This sort of thing happened when Dover was in the news after shelling attacks and artistes were very reluctant to play the nearest theatre to the enemy, and doctors' notes arrived cancelling contracts.

The theatre's agent, the Universal Variety Agency, of Haymarket, always managed to find substitutes.

**Theatre digs:** There were several in Dover where the acts stayed. Locations were in Chapel Place, the Shakespeare Chambers, the Esplanade, London Road and others. Some top-of-the-bill acts stayed at the Half-Way House on the Canterbury road, and others returned each night to their homes in London.

Variety artistes were very poorly paid.

A top-of-the-bill would earn £25 to £30, whilst supporting acts managed any sum from £10 to £20. Out of this they paid 10% to their booking agent, their digs, their travelling between theatres, their make-up and costume costs, "tips" and gratuities especially when one takes into account the weeks when they were "resting".

This is my story of Dover's Royal Hippodrome during those frightful war days, but, despite everything, they were some of the best days of my life and remain very clear in my memory to this day.

Recently, you may know, a plaque to the Hippodrome's memory has been installed on the wall of the Dover Gateway Hovortel, opposite the site where the theatre once proudly stood.

There is also a seat in the Granville Gardens commemorating the name of the war-time proprietor, the well-known H. R. Armstrong, and on my death I have

arranged for another seat, in my name, to be placed somewhere in Snargate Street, thus ensuring three focal points which will, I hope, remind future generations of Doverians, and others, of the important part played by the Royal Hippodrome Theatre in the life of the town from 1790 to 1944.

The unveiling of the plaque in Snargate St. *Left:* Dick Whittamore, *centre:* Cllr. Ray Allen, Dover Council Committee Chairman and *right:* Mrs 'Sandy' Peters of the Dover Hovortel.

