

# **This is the main text from a booklet published by Mr PA James in 1959!**

## **Foreword**

We are often asked how the Rosemere Amateur Operatic Society started, from whence it acquired its name and how it has managed to maintain its unbroken sequence of productions for thirty-two years.

It all started in 1927, at "Rosemere", the residence of Mr. and Mrs. R. C. Whitfield, whose musical interests had gained them a number of friends of similar taste and some talent. When I was privileged to join this band, having had a little experience of operatic work, the idea was conceived of using this material in the production of a Gilbert and Sullivan opera. Accordingly, we produced TRIAL BY JURY as part of a concert. The story of how this humble beginning developed into the formation of an operatic society, taking its name from the house of its birth, has been briefly outlined in this short history. Its purpose is to provide our many members, past and present, with a permanent record of achievements in which they have all played leading parts, in whatever capacity their service has been given, and to recall the many happy experiences shared in the life of the Society. Having gained so many friends and keen supporters of all our activities, we feel that to them also, the story of the Society will re-awaken many happy memories of the productions and of those taking part.

As the last night of our current production will be the 250th performance by the Society, this publication is in the nature of a commemoration of that event and a testimonial to all who have made this achievement possible.

To provide a record showing clearly the development of the Society, the History has been divided into three parts, namely: Part One - Pre-War Period; Part Two -War Period; and Part Three -Post-War Period. It will be noted that although our success has been much enhanced by the reputations of individual members, some of which have been made through their association with us, no names have been included in this resume of our activities, although individual records have been listed. This was inevitable, as so many talented people have given their services to the Society that it is impossible to refer to them specifically and in proportion to their worth without the risk of giving some offence, however unintentional. Thus, I have referred by name only to my Joint Founder Members, without whose early interest, hard work and hospitality the Society could not have functioned.

It is a source of much gratification and some pride to know that membership of the Society has been so much more than the meeting together for the production of operas. So many members have become close friends, and we have all tried to share not only in our pleasures but also in each other's troubles and difficulties. Looking back, it is the knowledge that to so many to whom I have had the honour of leadership, life has been made fuller and brighter, that has been the inspiration which has made my life's hobby so worth-while.

April 1959.

P. A. JAMES

Producer & Musical Director.

## Part One 1927-1939

*“Must have a beginning, you know!” - THE MIKADO*

One of the earliest recollections of the Society's activities is that of erecting scenery at the Albert Place School. After our initial rendering of TRIAL BY JURY, which had fired our enthusiasm for further effort, we were engaged upon a production of THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE for which, on grounds of economy, we had made the costumes and painted the scenery. The latter was executed on long sheets of paper pinned to a wooden framework so fitted that it would stand firmly on the platform, and without any wall fixtures as these were forbidden in the school. The difficulty of pinning up a fresh scene under such conditions during a short interval can well be imagined.

Looking back on this first performance of a full-length opera one can but imagine how crude our efforts must have appeared. Our talent was good in parts but woefully inadequate, and the few gifted ones had to work hard not only to fill the principal parts but also to strengthen the chorus work. Even so, in those early days an enthusiasm and good spirit was born which has been with us ever since. By request, we gave further performances of THE PIRATES at the Bolton Lads' Club, which became our permanent home for about fifteen years. During that time we were able to contribute over £1,100 to the funds and to help in many ways towards the general improvement of the Club.

*“Tripping hither, tripping thither” - IOLANTHE*

Our next production, in our new headquarters, was THE GONDOLIERS, for which we again made all the costumes and scenery at a total cost of approximately Five Pounds. When compared with present hire charges this can hardly be credited. Following a week's performance of the opera we were invited to take it on tour, giving in all nine performances on stages large and small. Thus we learned our first lessons in stagecraft and adaptability, particularly in the manipulation of a too-large gondola on a too-small stage. Nevertheless, these early experiences were very enjoyable, and it was this production which really started our career as a Society.

This was followed by PATIENCE, and again, after our main presentation, we went on tour with performances at the Eagley Lads' Club, St. Anne's School, Turton and Walkden Town Hall. Our visit to the Turton School was rather unique as, there being no power installation, we were forced to run the stage lights from a series of car batteries, but with good effect and to the amazement of the villagers. Our two performances at Walkden in aid of the Blind were also exceptional in that a large Welfare Committee entrusted with the sale of tickets failed to co-operate, and this was the only occasion in our long history when we played to empty house.

*“How necessary it is to travel with a full band” - THE GONDOLIERS*

It was during the run of PATIENCE that we first acquired the services of an orchestra, having previously relied upon piano accompaniment. A few local amateurs gladly offered their services and we naturally welcomed any offers of help, but this brought its own problems. We recall the case of a young lady who came with her violin and much enthusiasm but refused to tune in with the other players on the plea that she always tuned up at home so knew that she was right.

From this early start our orchestra was built up to an efficient combination and during the past years has been strengthened by the addition of many talented players. Their interest, knowledge and skill has been a great encouragement and has played a large part in our rendering of the operas.

*“Oh, the happy days of doing” - YEOMEN OF THE GUARD*

In the following eight years prior to the outbreak of the Second World War we continued our activities with performances of THE MIKADO (twice), TRIAL & H.M.S. PINAFORE (twice), THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD, RUDDIGORE, THE GONDOLIERS, IOLANTHE, PATIENCE and PRINCESS IDA, gaining experience and new members with each production.

Looking back on these early efforts we can recall only a few particular incidents worth noting as, in general, in spite of our inexperience, the shows ran very smoothly. We were gradually building not only a keen and talented membership but a supporting public, mainly lovers of the Savoy Operas, many of whom have continued their valued support for a long number of years.

*“Here’s a state of things” - THE MIKADO*

During the RUDDIGORE production a glass roof-skylight fell into the hall as we were about to start the opening performance, fortunately without serious injury to the members of the audience. Also, on one of the nights of this production, one of the “picture” doors jammed during the blackout change, and in order to free it the flat was wrenched away from its neighbour. When the lights came on a large gap between the flats was observed. This would have been less noticeable if left alone, but some keen members of the stage-staff endeavoured to pull the flats together oblivious to the fact that their hands were visible to the audience in the half-light, thus giving added verisimilitude to the Ghost Scene.

*“What may you be at now?” - THE SORCERER*

In one of the MIKADO productions we had trouble with the opening curtain. This was of the roll-up type, being a canvas rolled on a heavy beam, which required considerable strength to lift. On this occasion it was raised half-way when it caught on a projecting nail which stopped further progress. Meanwhile, the men’s chorus had plunged into their opening number with its appropriate action of alternate men kneeling and rising during the chorus. As the audience could only view waist-high, the effect of seeing legs and pantaloons continually changing places to the strains of “If you want to know who we are” was somewhat ludicrous.

In 1936 and 1937 we were invited to give special extra performances of IOLANTHE and THE MIKADO respectively at the Bolton Little Theatre in aid of the Personal Service League. To accommodate the orchestra it was necessary to take up the front rows of seats in the auditorium. In the following year we staged our annual production of TRIAL & PINAFORE at the Little Theatre, which was quite successful, but as the accommodation was not adapted for the large cast of an operatic society this experiment was not repeated.

*“All in all since that fond meeting” - IOLANTHE*

During this pre-war period when we were consolidating as a Society the social side was not neglected, nor did we restrict our activities to an annual production. The services of our members were much in demand for concerts both at the Club and elsewhere. About this time we commenced our connection with the Manchester Branch of the Gilbert & Sullivan Society, with which we have been closely associated ever since. Visits to our productions have been a regular feature of their programme for many years, and we, in turn, have visited the Branch frequently to entertain with selections from the operas. We also paid many visits to the D’Oyly Carte productions and to other amateur shows. Socials, an Annual Dance (at which the members’ cabaret was always a feature) and summer outings, formed a part of our social programme designed to bind the members together into a happy little community.

**“A source of innocent merriment” - THE MIKADO**

In July, 1939, we issued the first number of the Society’s magazine-THE ROSEMERIAN-containing reports on activities, instructive articles, news, cartoons, competitions, etc., which proved to be very popular. Unfortunately, although a second number was issued after the outbreak of hostilities, further publication had to be deferred until after the war. This was resumed in 1947, and a further six numbers of the magazine were issued, but in 1951 it was necessary to suspend publication owing to the work involved during our many operatic productions.

## Part Two.... 1940 -1946

*“From war’s alarms, Oh give me shelter” - RUDDIGORE*

In September 1939, at the outbreak of war, in common with all other societies, we were concerned as to whether it would be possible to continue. The immediate reaction was against such a possibility, especially as we had lost one or two of our members drafted to the forces. However, as most of our male members were engaged upon essential war work locally it was decided to endeavour to continue in order to play our small part in maintaining the general morale and in providing necessary recreation to our hard-working members. Accordingly, early in 1940 we produced THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE (endeavouring to be undaunted by numerous air-raid warnings during the performances), and so avoided a break in the continuity of our annual productions which have continued unbroken throughout the years.

The productions during the war years, seven in all, were not without many difficulties, and reflected the greatest credit on all concerned. Few there were who were not fully employed on war-work or in connection with the many voluntary services, yet all found time to rehearse and perform when required. Most of our men were working overtime, some during alternate weeks, so we never knew whom to expect at rehearsals. Sometimes only the tenors appeared, sometimes only the basses, or perhaps a mixture of both, but fortunately all managed to make an appearance for the actual shows which were not too ill-balanced in spite of rehearsal difficulties.

*“This spot is suited quite for it” - PRINCESS IDA*

Following THE PIRATES, we gave three further productions at the Lads’ Club, namely, IOLANTHE, YEOMEN and MIKADO. Then, in 1943, conditions at the Club were found to be unsuitable and we moved our place of performance to the Parochial Hall, Astley Bridge. The many advantages of these commodious premises were soon apparent, and we quickly adopted it as the home of the Society for rehearsals and performances. During our long stay there we have so far given twenty-one full productions in the Hall, and have had the most willing co-operation of all concerned. On our part, we have been able to give both financial and active assistance in increasing and maintaining the facilities, including the provision of the sunken orchestra pit, the enlargement of the stage, lighting replacements and improved seating accommodation, all of which have increased the comfort and efficiency not only of our productions but of the many other entertainments held at the Hall.

During the remaining war years we gave three shows at the Parochial Hall, RUDDIGORE, THE GONDOLIERS and TRIAL & PINAFORE. As a result of these productions we were able to donate large contributions to the Mayor’s Comforts Fund and the Bolton Royal Infirmary Appeal. On 1st May 1948, representatives of the Society attended the unveiling of the plaque at the Infirmary to commemorate this appeal on which the name of the Society is inscribed.

*“It certainly entertained the gapers” - RUDDIGORE*

It was during this period, at one of the performances of THE GONDOLIERS, that the Society suffered its only emergency during a performance, when the member taking the part of the Duke of Plaza-Toro was taken ill during the interval. The Musical Director had to surrender his baton to his pianist and take over the Ducal part for the remainder of that and the succeeding performances. That we survived this crisis was due to the remarkable co-operation and encouragement of the cast, and, of course, to the allowances made by our audiences. We have indeed been fortunate that during thirty-one years this is the only occasion when such an emergency has arisen during a performance.

*“Bearded by these puny mortals” - IOLANTHE*

The D’Oyly Carte Opera Company, which had disbanded at the outbreak of war, was reformed and paid a visit to Bolton in 1943, when a number of our members had the interesting experience of assisting the Company as “extras”, acting as soldiers, banner-bearers, etc. This gave us a close insight into the niceties of the professional production and an appreciation of the excellent team spirit prevailing in the Company.

### Part Three. 1947:1958

“Two and twenty now he’s rising” - THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE

With the ending of hostilities we settled down to a long and happy succession of successful shows. New members were recruited and we launched this phase of our history with our twenty-first production- UTOPIA LIMITED, the Gilbert & Sullivan opera so seldom performed on account of its large cast.

This was followed in 1948 with three productions, YEOMEN, MIKADO and MERRIE ENGLAND. The first two operas were given in succeeding weeks by special permission as a celebration of our twenty-first birthday as a society, and as a result of this effort we were able to donate the sum of £220 to the Bolton, Leigh & District Deaf & Dumb Society, In connection with this production it is, perhaps, appropriate to quote a few extracts from a humorous article which appeared in the local newspaper and which was reproduced in the Society’s magazine by permission of the Editor:

“The Rosemere Society gave ‘The Yeomen of the Guard’ last week and ‘The Mikado’ this week-a strenuous undertaking, but one that has several good points. Firstly, it draws the crowds twice over, and, secondly, it almost solves that bogy of all amateur societies -casting. The principals in ‘The Yeomen’ were the chorus in ‘The Mikado’ and the big noises in the latter made up the supporting cast of the former. Thus, there is a minimum of heartburning and a maximum of effort. Of course, to do this, the chorus must be good, and we’ll admit here and now that the Rosemere bevy of beauty is both pretty and tuneful - the men are just tuneful!

There’s a homely sort of atmosphere about these ‘do’s - I like the interval where in the refreshment room I leant against Ko-Ko while I scoffed pasties, eyed with admiration Yum-Yum while I drank tea and airily chatted with several Japanese nobles. Nearly everyone in the audience knows the actors and actresses personally. There were one or two that I wouldn’t mind knowing myself. I mentioned a winsome little lady in particular to a gentleman with whom I was sharing a cream cake.

‘Right’, he smiled, ‘I’ll introduce you.’

‘You know her well, then?’ I asked.

‘I won’t say that’ he answered, ‘but I’m married to her.’

From which you will gather that the famous librettist hadn’t a monopoly of wisecracks.”

Our birthday celebrations took other forms, including an enjoyable Fancy Dress Dance.

The MERRIE ENGLAND production was our first departure from our old love - the Gilbert & Sullivan operas. It gave ample scope for good singing, both for principals and chorus and, with a larger cast than is usual with the Savoy Operas, created a new interest. The members greatly enjoyed the experience and the production was received most favourably both by the public and the Press.

“*Every season has its cheer*” - RUDDIGORE

At Christmas of that year we paid our first visit by invitation to Salford Royal Hospital to entertain the patients. During a six-hour visit we gave half-hour concerts in all the wards. Our reception by patients and staff was so appreciative that the members felt well rewarded for the very tiring efforts demanded. For many years thereafter we repeated this visit each Christmas, usually on Boxing Day, and became the Official Christmas Entertainers at the Hospital. On one occasion we gave a costume performance of TRIAL BY JURY in the out-patients’ department, to the delight of the sitting patients, one of whom laughed so much at the antics of judge and jury that the staff feared for his stitches!

Twenty happy Rosemere members, coming home from Salford Royal,

Twenty songs they sang so sweetly, yet they revelled in the toil.

We recall the Christmas story, how the Three Wise Men of old

Brought their gifts to show their glory, myrrh and frankincense and gold.

Ever since that happy feast Christians celebrate by bringing

Gifts to demonstrate their love, and by festivals of singing.

Each of us has gifts bestowed for the use of those in need;

Those who have the gift of song have a splendid gift indeed!

And to use it in this manner, cheering up the sick and ill

With the Christmas note of gladness, brings a blessing and a thrill.

While we have this happy memory, let's remember life consists

Of remembering our blessings and distributing our gifts.

*"This sort of thing takes a deal of training" - RUDDIGORE*

TRIAL BY JURY had now become our stock item and the basis of many of our miscellaneous concerts which we were still giving in various places. As it was necessary to travel by coach to take the full company for performance of this opera we had special Judge and jury boxes made which would fold up for convenience in the boot of the coach. By this means we took the opera far afield, to Eccles, Manchester, Liverpool and, nearer home, to Bolton School, where we set up our properties on stages large and small. Such outings were always enjoyable and provided social and instructive evenings for the members.

Following the next production, IOLANTHE, we again broke fresh ground with TOM JONES, the other popular Edward German opera, and once more the large cast revelled in the ample opportunities afforded both for acting and singing.

*"You cannot show too much respect"- MIKADO*

In 1951 we produced PRINCESS IDA and MERRIE ENGLAND. The latter was a special revival as part of Bolton's "Festival of Britain" celebrations. When we look back, in the future, we shall remember the performances of these two operas, so different in form and execution, with much pleasure and gratification. In connection with each there was one outstanding event which will always be memorable. At one of the performances of PRINCESS IDA our audience was composed of blind people from Bolton and district, with a large party from the Deaf & Dumb Society, all of whom were our guests. For this special performance a public address system was installed in the Hall, and throughout the performance a running commentary was given in appropriate places in order to explain the settings, costumes and actions to the audience. This was done as unobtrusively as possible and was found to be very effective. Somewhat to our surprise we found that this audience was not only one of the most receptive and appreciative we had experienced, but quite obviously were able to follow the action of the opera

without difficulty. They were quick to appreciate the shafts of Gilbertian wit in the dialogue, so much so that in the fast Act we were able to dispense with much of the prepared commentary. This had its effect on the players, who were inspired to give one of their best performances. The excellent behaviour of this audience, both during the performance and at the intervals, when most of them visited the adjoining room for refreshments, will always be a happy memory to our members and helpers. We undertook this experiment with some trepidation, not knowing whether it had ever been attempted before with a Gilbert & Sullivan opera, but were delighted to find it so successful in execution and in the obvious pleasure given to the audience.

*“Now to the banquet we press” - THE SORCERER*

The outstanding event in connection with the MERRIE ENGLAND revival was the Dinner Dance given to ail the members and helpers out of the proceeds of the production. The following is an extract from some verses published in “The Rosemerian” to commemorate the occasion:

On the Seventh of November in Nineteen Fifty-One,  
The Rosemere Operatic met to celebrate with fun,  
Its ‘Merrie England” Dinner Dance, a much planned-for affair  
By the ladies, with appointments made for fittings and for hair;  
The menfolk, too, ‘tis understood, had had their anxious times,  
Determining by diet how their suits would fit their lines.  
And so they all foregathered at the Bolton Aspin Hall,  
In finery resplendent as befitting such a ball.  
With unaccustomed promptitude they all sat down to dinner,  
Which proved beyond a shade of doubt to be a certain winner.  
Tomato soup was followed by some turkey-lavish wedges,  
With all the main etceteras-of stuffing and three vegs.  
There were lovely creamed potatoes, juicy carrots, kidney beans,  
Followed by a sweet of pineapple immersed in icy creams.  
With coffee, cheese and biscuits, and celery to taste,  
By that time those so tightly laced were straining at the waist.  
To “liquidate” these “assets” the wine was flowing “free”  
With Sauterne, Hock and Green Chartreuse and Brandy named ‘Cherry’,  
While Port and Sherry were supplied to drink the sundry toasts,  
And everyone was happy-for Everyone were ‘Hosts.’

*“Such a thing was never heard of” ‘- THE GONDOLIERS*

In the following year, 1952, the Society celebrated its Silver Jubilee with another ambitious programme for which special permission was granted by Miss Bridget D’Oyly Carte. This took the form of ten performances - five of THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE and five of PATIENCE, the operas being performed on alternate nights with a different set of principals in each opera. As in the case of our previous presentation of two operas together, the outstanding feature was the willingness of the principals to alternate between principal and chorus parts, thus providing further evidence of the excellent team spirit prevailing.

*“A nice dilemma we have here” - TRIAL BY JURY*

Our foremost problem has always been the selection of an opera for performance which would be suitable in scope and attraction both to the members and audience. With this in view the guiding principle has been to select a show which can readily be cast from the talent available. Having built up our reputation and achieved whatever success has been extended to us by our performances of the Gilbert & Sullivan operas, we have, nevertheless, given much consideration to other possibilities, and at this time had already performed the two outstanding German operas. One difficulty in departing from the well-known and popular Savoy Operas lay in selecting an alternative which would provide sufficient scope for our talent. As an experiment, in 1953 we produced THE ROSE OF PERSIA. With music by Sullivan and with a large cast this proved to be an interesting and instructive venture to which our members readily responded. Being the first production of this opera in the North for many years, it was a new and refreshing experience for everyone, though hardly comparable in attraction with the better-known works. Those who took part can look back with some pride in the knowledge that their performance of this difficult opera was so effective.

*“Oh, to be wafted away” - PATIENCE*

In succeeding years we reverted to our old favourites with THE GONDOLIERS and IOLANTHE, and followed these with a presentation of COX & BOX with THE SORCERER in 1955. This was a special production in aid of the Spastic Appeal Fund, and we were not only able to donate £ 100 to that fund but in THE SORCERER we found new delights in a somewhat unknown and seldom performed opera. Also, the staging tested to the full the ingenuity of our efficient stage staff. The finale of the opera calls for the practical use of a trap-door. We had the door but not the trap! However, by trial and error in adjustment a pulley arrangement was devised which proved highly satisfactory, and it was found possible to deposit the “Sorcerer” into the lower regions without mishap. Another memorable performance.

By popular request, a revival of TOM JONES followed, to be succeeded by further productions of PRINCESS IDA, TRIAL & PINAFORE and RUDDIGORE, all of which were well up to the accepted standard and were performed with delight by the members and to the approbation of our supporters.

*“With vigour unshaken this step shall be taken” - RUDDIGORE*

And so to our latest venture, into the realms of Grand Opera. For many years we had been pressed to attempt this medium and when the opportunity arose to give a short production it was decided to attempt a rendering of CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA. We soon found that this was very different and considerably more difficult than light opera, but the members delighted in mastering the intricate chorus work, in particular, the well-known “Easter Hymn.” As for the principals, no praise is too high for the excellent manner in which they undertook, studied and performed their parts. Not the least successful feature in the staging of the opera was the organ accompaniment and choir specially recorded by our members and synchronised with the stage chorus work. We gave three performances of the opera which was voted by everyone to be one of our highest achievements. It certainly enhanced our reputation for versatility.

*“Carefully on tiptoe stealing” - H.M.S. PINAFORE*

In paying tribute to all who have assisted the Society, whether in an acting or non-acting capacity,

before or behind the scenes, and have thus contributed towards the team-work, we must not forget our audiences who, throughout the years, have been really splendid in their continued support and appreciation. There have, of course, been times when we (and particularly the rest of the audience) have suffered from the disturbing influence of late arrivals. That this is a prevailing weakness with some folk was emphasised by these verses, published under the title "Late Corners" many years ago in the Gilbert & Sullivan journal, and quoted by permission of the author..

"In silhouette against the lighted stage,

The cynosure of disapproving eyes,

From their respectable obscurity,

To shameful notoriety they rise.

Half-blinded by the dark they stumble on,

Intent on finding the appointed seat,

Amidst the groans of well-conducted men,

Wincing beneath the pain of trodden feet.

At last they're settled down! We can relax

And give our minds unto the play once more,

Alas! We spoke too soon, there's a mistake,

They booked for PATIENCE-this is PINAFORE!"

"It was managed by a job-and a good job too! " - TRIAL BY JURY

In this short history brief reference has been made to the difficulties arising in staging the operas. That so few incidents have occurred throughout the years is due to the excellent work of those "Behind the scenes" -our stage, wardrobe and property staffs, who have spared no effort to ensure that no important detail has been overlooked. Special praise is due to the ladies and gentlemen who have so consistently organised the Make-up, not only for their skill but for the cheerful spirit which has always prevailed in that department. The hour before a performance is a particularly trying one for everyone taking part, for some perhaps more than others, but nevertheless the happy atmosphere of the make-up room which always "bubbles with wit and good humour" has done much to restore calmness and inspire confidence. To all our other helpers, and particularly to the kitchen staff who have looked after our needs not only at the shows-when their work has been most arduous-but throughout the year during rehearsal time, the Society owes a great debt of gratitude. They can be assured that their services have been much appreciated.

In conclusion, to those who have been with us for many years and shared in the enjoyment of good music and humour in the company of kindred spirits all imbued with the same interests, there must be many happy memories. Some may recall their first show as their particular thrill, others a "first-night", a particularly happy production or a final performance on a special occasion. Others will look back with special pleasure on the many enjoyable rehearsals when lasting friendships have been made and cemented. We have sung many choruses from the operas but none more appropriate than this:

"Then let the throng our joy advance

With laughing song and merry dance."