

MATCHAM'S MASTERPIECE, The story of the Grand Theatre, Blackpool

By Blackpool theatre historian Barry Band

THE Grand is the only Victorian theatre in Blackpool to survive largely as it was built and holds a major place in the resort's heritage. A 15-year renovation programme by the Grand Theatre Trust is due to be completed in 2007 with redecoration, recarpeting and reseating in the theatre's original colours.

The Grand is one of the theatres designed by Frank Matcham, whose work came in for renewed praise early in 2004 when the restoration of two of his famous London theatres was completed. But whereas the cost of reinstating the huge Coliseum was stated to have been £40 million, and the Hackney Empire £15 million, I estimate it will have cost no more than £3 million to restore the Grand.

About a million pounds has come from Heritage Lottery grants. A similar amount has come from donations by the Friends of the Grand together with the local public's contributions to a series of appeals. In 2004 the Sam Lee Appeal, in tribute to the Theatre Trust's late chairman, was launched for £500,000 to finance the final phase.

The Grand was opened on July 23, 1894, by the independent showman Thomas Sergenson. It was bought by the Blackpool Tower Company in 1909 and operated until 1972, when the company planned to demolish it to make way for a department store. A campaign by the Friends of the Grand saved it and the theatre was reopened by the Grand Theatre Trust on March 23, 1981, with a Royal Performance in the presence of Prince Charles being held on May 29.

Heritage success

The importance of the Grand and the scale of the Friends' achievement in saving it was made clear when the Matcham Society held their annual general meeting in the theatre in June, 2004.

The society's president, John Earl, in an address delivered for him by vice president David Wilmore, said the saving of the Grand in 1973 was the first major success in what became a national movement to halt the loss of historic theatres in Britain. He also pointed out that the Grand was a Listed Building Grade 2*. The "star" was all important because only six per cent of Grade 2 buildings had this distinction.

Throughout its history "Matcham's Masterpiece," as it was dubbed by the publicity-wise Sergenson, has presided over some sweeping changes in the Blackpool entertainment arena, brought about by the impact of the Talkies, television and the decline in home tourism. The Grand story has triumph and tragedy in equal measure and on its stage have walked several "knights and dames" of the legitimate theatre from Ellen Terry and Herbert Beerbohm Tree in the early days to Richardson, Gielgud, Coward, Redgrave, Evans and Ashcroft in the mid-20th century, to Anthony Quayle and Antony Sher in more recent times.

The Grand has also had its lighter side, with summer season variety dating back to 1940 and a famous series of comedy plays in the 1950s and 1960s featuring stars like Thora Hird, Arthur Askey, Hylda Baker, Freddie Frinton and Jack Douglas, while in more recent summer seasons the format has swung back to variety. So in this respect the Grand is really two theatres - offering a popular summer programme for visitors and a wide ranging programme of music, drama and dance for the remainder of the year.

A Victorian entrepreneur

Thomas Sergenson was born in Leyland, Lancashire, in 1852. He moved to Blackpool in the 1870s and was employed at the public baths on Hygiene Terrace, on the promenade just south of Church Street. The site was earmarked by Dr W. H. Cocker's Lane Ends Development Company for the Prince of Wales complex of a theatre, baths and a shopping arcade. Sergenson must have impressed Cocker as a competent person and was soon appointed treasurer of the company. At about the same time, the entrepreneurial Cocker, who was Mayor of Blackpool after the resort's incorporation as a borough in 1876, became a director of the Blackpool Winter Gardens Company Ltd., after selling that young company his estate at the top of Victoria Street. A national economic slump hit both the Winter Gardens (1878) and the Prince of Wales (1879) and the first actor-manager of the Prince of Wales couldn't pay the rent. The company offered it to Sergenson. He declined. The following year another actor-manager gave up the task and Sergenson accepted the directors' offer of a lease rent-free until he made a profit.

At the age of 27 - with no experience of the theatre - Sergenson began his career as the people's showman with a policy of low comedy, popular music and favourite melodramas. Before long he also leased another unwanted hall, the Theatre Royal, in the Yates's Wine Lodge building in Talbot Square. Sergenson found himself in competition with the Winter Gardens Company, which was now chaired by W. H. Cocker.

Sergenson apparently made good profits from his rented theatres and other ventures. Local newspaper items indicated that he had three or four theatrical companies "on the road." In 1887 he was prosperous enough to buy some old property and land at the corner of Church Street and Queen Anne Street (now Corporation Street) and a sign went up stating that work would start on building "the Grand Theatre and Opera House" in November, 1888.

His plan, however, shook some life into the Winter Gardens Company, without a manager and affected by a poor season. It wouldn't have taken much imagination to see lone wolf Sergenson, with two rented theatres and a new one in prospect, as a serious threat. The Gardens directors took action and started to build the first Opera House. Sergenson shelved his plan rather than get involved in a race to open a theatre.

Instead, he built several shops on the Church Street frontage with a mortgage of £6,000 provided by Viscount Cross and a month after the Opera House opened in June, 1889, he launched *The Grand Circus* on the vacant plot, engaging Ohmy's Circus for the first season. Ohmy was a daring aerial artist named Joseph Smith, whose exploits made crowds gasp: "Oh, my."

Different circuses were engaged each summer but with work nearing completion on the Blackpool Tower, with its proposed purpose-built circus, Sergenson closed his "big top" in September, 1893, and work began on architect Frank Matcham's magnificent Grand Theatre, to Sergenson's brief of "The best, prettiest and cosiest theatre possible." Incredibly it was completed in nine months at a cost of £20,000 - a huge fortune in those days - and even before the curtain went up on July 23, 1894, Sergenson's had cleverly dubbed it "Matcham's Masterpiece." The Press duly adopted the description. Sergenson was a master of publicity. As a Blackpool councillor he was chairman of the town's Advertising Committee for several years.

Going into competition with the well established Opera House, he needed a top class line-up of shows. Boldly, Sergenson booked some of the most famous and most expensive names of the day. For the opening week he presented Wilson Barrett and his Company in four plays, beginning with *Hamlet*.

On the opening night the cream of the area's civic and business life, including other entertainment managers such as George Harrop of the Tower and William Holland of the Winter Gardens, were present in the flower-decked theatre. The champagne flowed. The perfumed programmes were printed on silk. One of them has survived and is framed in the theatre.

Actor's praise

As for the performance, the crowded house rose and applauded Wilson Barrett on his first entrance, reported the Gazette-News, and when he was allowed to continue "the audience listened in hushed silence and the acoustic qualities of the theatre were such that the melancholy Dane's soliloquies were perfectly heard in every part of the house." At curtainfall the actor delivered a fulsome congratulation of Blackpool and of the new theatre - "I have never yet spoken in any theatre with more ease and comfort than in this building tonight."

Sergenson became, overnight, one of the north's top managers. He placed adverts proclaiming the Grand "the handsomest, safest, most comfortable, largest and best appointed theatre in the town" and carried the line "Described by the Press as the prettiest theatre in the kingdom" (a slogan he himself had coined).

Sergenson's opening season of shows included W. S. Penley in the smash hit farce *Charley's Aunt*, which was still running at London's Globe Theatre; a week by the Carl Rosa Opera Company, and a week by Herbert Beerbohm Tree and his Company, whose repertoire included a Saturday evening performance of *Hamlet*.

Two different Hamlets in one season was good going for any theatre! Tree, who was second only to Henry Irving in the London dramatic hierarchy, said in a curtain speech: "I can assure you there are not many theatres in the provinces, or even London, that are better appointed or better managed."

But perhaps the most important show for Sergenson's financial future was the September week's visit of the sensation of the London season, the musical comedy *A Gaiety Girl*, produced by George Edwardes, the Irish impresario who dominated the English musical theatre with his shows at the Gaiety Theatre and Daly's Theatre. *A Gaiety Girl* did tremendous business at the Grand and Sergenson emerged with an agreement to have first choice of the Edwardes shows - and in those days London shows were quickly sent on tour, often with top stars.

After his brilliant opening season Sergenson set about consolidating the Grand's reputation in 1895, in the face of stern competition from the Opera House. His major coup was in attracting the legendary Kendals (Madge Kendal and her husband W. H. Kendal) in their repertoire of light comedies, in September. Wilson Barrett made two visits in 1895, the second being at Christmas with his new dramatic success *The Sign Of The Cross*, after an American tour.

With regular visits by Barrett, the Kendals, W. S. Penley, Edward Terry and other top names, the Grand seemed to have the advantage over the Opera House until the turn of the century, when the rival theatre's new general manager, John. R. Huddleston, began to poach some of Sergenson's regular stars.

Great names

But the Grand Theatre's success under Sergenson was undoubted and in the years 1900 to 1909, when he sold the theatre to the Blackpool Tower Company, he presented great names like Sarah Bernhardt (for just one matinee!), Ellen Terry, Mrs (Lillie) Langtry, Charles Wyndham, Beerbohm Tree, George Alexander and Dan Leno (in a musical comedy) as well as the George Edwardes musical successes. The most famous among them was *The Merry Widow*, at Easter 1908, and several later visits. However, winter business was rather thin and the Grand began to stage variety shows from November to February, hitting business at the Palace Theatre, which was owned by the wealthy Tower Company. This could have been the reason why the Tower bought the Grand, although Sergenson wrung a steep price from them. It was £47,500, more than had been speculated in the local Press.

The purchase, just before Christmas, 1909, brought a new dimension to the competition with the Opera House, for the Tower and the Winter Gardens Company (owners of the Opera House) were already fierce rivals in the field of Sunday concerts. The Tower general manager, George W. Harrop, wasted no time in closing the Grand for a thorough refurbishment and it reopened on March 21, 1910, under the management of Percy Harrop, the top man's brother.

The first show was the London musical success *The Dollar Princess* but the Opera House struck back by presenting an even bigger, newer London success, *The Arcadians*, the same week. After the summer season the Tower Company closed the Grand for the winter, leaving the Opera House to take the risk of uncertain winter business.

The refurbishment of the Grand included structural changes, mainly in the stalls, where the fixed seating was increased from 100 to 300 by scrapping the low-priced "pit" standing area. The fresh new Grand brought a firm reaction from the Winter Gardens Company. They completely rebuilt the Opera House in the winter of 1910-11.

The Grand's policy of closing for four months in the winter (apart from Christmas) continued until 1917, due to the prospect of good business from the large number of Army personnel in the area, and the increase in tourism due to the resort's safe location.

At Easter, 1917, the Grand Theatre presented one of the biggest successes of the era, the musical *The Maid Of The Mountains*, and it made half a dozen very profitable visits in four years. In September, 1919, it broke the box office record with its original stars, Jose Collins and Leonard Mackay.

Major refurbishment

After 1917 the Tower Company began to open the Grand all year round and, in common with all entertainments venues, the theatre enjoyed three boom years. In 1920 the Tower Company decided to refurbish the Grand and closed at the end of October for a four-month refit which included the enlargement of the foyer and a new staircase to the dress circle. The auditorium was given a new look with the lavish use of gold leaf and colour, mainly blue. The exterior stonework was cleaned and the dome was regilded.

The boom years faded in 1921 and films were screened in several off-season weeks - but because of the lack of a projection box the theatre used a back-projection system; the projectors were in a specially built room behind the back wall of the stage area and the film was projected through a hatch and onto the back of the screen.

Stage highlights of the 1920s included several visits by the handsome actor Matheson Lang, a 1923 revival of *The Merry Widow* starring Evelyn Laye and Carl Brisson, a couple of visits by the outrageous American actress Tallulah Bankhead, a 1923 revue that featured three up-and-coming stars, Cicely Courtneidge, Jack Hulbert and Bobby Howes, and a host of American musicals; *No No Nanette* in 1925, *Rose Marie* in 1926, and two Gershwin hits, *Lady Be Good* and *Oh Kay*.

In April, 1929, the theatre had the huge attraction of Gracie Fields starring in a revue titled *The Show's The Thing* immediately prior to London. Gracie was given an ecstatic write-up in the Gazette: "What a reception they gave her . . . Miss Fields responded by proving herself better than ever; a brilliant versatile artiste, a fine singer, a clever actress, a marvellous mimic and, above all, possessed of the rarest of gifts - the gift that has made Chaplin supreme in another sphere - the power to stir an audience to the very depth of emotion one minute and to make it hold its side in uncontrollable mirth the next."

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s the fierce competition between the Grand and the Opera House often resulted in similar types of shows playing at both theatres. Then, in 1928, came the news that the Blackpool Tower Company and the Blackpool Winter Gardens Company were to merge. It was actually a take-over by the Tower, who bought up all the Winter Gardens shares and continued to run it as a separate company. The management planned to eliminate the clash of similar shows by making the Grand a playhouse while the Opera House received most of the musical shows.

Tough decisions

However, no sooner had the policy begun than the entertainment industry was shaken by the arrival, in 1929, of talking pictures, which caused a severe slump in audiences for live entertainment, forcing the Tower Company to make hard decisions. The Winter Gardens Pavilion was converted to show talkies, the Opera House stayed open for live shows and the Grand Theatre was given a dual role of cinema and theatre as the owners steered a cautious path through the Depression. A large sign went up: The Grand Talkies. And from 1931 films were shown for up to 34 weeks of the year with live shows holding the stage in the peak summer holiday weeks. But the Grand was never a combined cine-variety house.

The theatre's diminished role was relieved by the occasional visits of major stage stars - Gertrude Lawrence and Douglas Fairbanks Jnr were there in September 1934; Lupino Lane played there in his great musical success *Me And My Girl* just two weeks before it opened in London in 1936; and the theatre became the only Blackpool venue of Gracie Fields' Blackpool visits, heading summer variety bills from 1932 to 1938.

As the economic situation improved in the late 1930s, the good times returned and the Grand became an all-year theatre again as the Opera House was closed for nine months for rebuilding. There were better shows with bigger stars; Flora Robson, Gladys Cooper, Fay Compton, Leslie Henson, Bobby Howes and Donald Wolfitt to name a few. After war was declared on September 3, 1939, the parade of top London productions was non-stop; among the stars were John Gielgud, Edith Evans, Peggy Ashcroft and Jack Hawkins in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance Of Being Earnest*; Rex Harrison, Anton Walbrook and Diana Wynyard in Noel Coward's *Design For Living*; Ivor Novello starring in his own comedy, *Second Helping*; and Marie Tempest in Dodie Smith's *Dear Octopus*.

Even more stars

World War Two brought a bonanza for local theatre owners. Blackpool was relatively safe from the German blitz and the resort was packed with civil servants dispersed from London and RAF personnel in training.

Grand Theatre highlights that must be mentioned were Robert Donat in Bernard Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple* and Margot Fonteyn with the Sadler's Wells Ballet (1940); Peggy Ashcroft in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Richard Tauber in Franz Lehar's *The Land Of Smiles*, and John Gielgud in J. M. Barrie's *Dear Brutus* (1941); Vivien Leigh in Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1941 and 42); Noel Coward premiering his own plays *Present Laughter* and *This Happy Breed*, with the addition of his recent London success *Blithe Spirit* (1942); Richard Attenborough in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1943); Emyln Williams in his own thriller *Night Must Fall* (1943); and Anna Neagle starred in Jane Austen's *Emma* in 1944. A further selection of 1940s highlights appears in the Appendix.

In 1940 the Tower Company took a step that was to bring the Grand new prosperity. They launched a policy of staging summer season shows, attracting a different type of audience for about 15 weeks, while continuing to present the very best London plays and musicals shows "out of season." For several summer seasons the shows were produced by the London impresario Tom Arnold, starting with two locally-based stars, comedian Harry Korris and comedienne Tessie O'Shea, in 1940's revue, titled *It's A Funny Thing*. Harry Komis returned for the 1941 season in a stage version of his huge radio hit *Happidrome*, with his comedy cohorts Robbie Vincent and Cecil Frederick.

After the war many shows were premiered at the Grand and the big names continued to come on an almost weekly basis: Wendy Hiller, Gertrude Lawrence, Jessie Matthews, Cicely Courtneidge, Margaret Lockwood, Evelyn Laye, Michael Redgrave, Jack Buchanan, Peter Ustinov and Alec Clunes.

The theatre had last been refurbished in 1920 but the war and then the austerity of post-war years had delayed a much-needed overhaul. Finally, in the spring of 1950, the theatre was closed for six weeks. On completion, a Gazette reporter wrote that the auditorium had been decorated in "a most tasteful scheme of turquoise and gold" the gold leaf being preserved and "its beauty brought to full glow." The curtains, pelmets and seats had been cleaned and renewed where necessary. On the technical side the stage had been redecked, a new counterweight system installed and an electrically-operated safety curtain replaced the old hand-cranked curtain. The Church Street frontage gained new showcases and a modern box canopy that lasted, in various configurations, until a gale brought it down in 1993.

Risky business

Everything was set for a bright future and there was little indication in 1950 that the decade would develop into a graveyard for many British theatres. But Blackpool lovers of theatre, uninterested or unaware of the chancy economics of the business, had a marvellous time right through the Fifties. There was quality and variety of touring product and the sheer star appeal and glamour of seeing many fine shows before the West End.

The Grand Theatre's existence, however, depended increasingly on the success of its summer season shows, which were patronised mainly by visitors. Most Blackpool summer shows were musical revues and the Grand's switch to northern farces was a winning move. The first was 1953's *The Love Match*, an hilarious football yarn by actor-writer Glenn Melvyn, which starred Arthur Askey, Thora Hird, Glenn Melvyn and Danny Ross.

Another development in the early 1950s was the arrival in London of the top Broadway shows and, inevitably, they soon went on tour. These shows fell into two categories; tuneful, "feel good" musicals by the likes of Rodgers and Hammerstein, and the strong sex dramas of writers like Tennessee Williams. In Blackpool the musicals went into the Opera House and it was the Grand Theatre patrons who had a rude awakening from plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Summer and Smoke* and *Come Back Little Sheba*. There was plenty of balance, however, in light comedy, farce and thrillers.

Important plays of the 1950s included Michael Redgrave in Clifford Odets' *Winter Journey* (1952) and in N. C. Hunter's *A Touch Of The Sun* (1958); Ralph Richardson in R. C. Sherriff's *The White Carnation* (1953) and Robert Bolt's *Flowering Cherry* (1958); Robert Morley in his own play *Hippo Dancing* (1954) and in Gerald Savory's *A Likely Tale* (1956); Evelyn Laye in the musical *Wedding In Paris* (1954); Tyrone Power in Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple* (1956); and Fay Compton in Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden* (1958). A further selection of 1950s highlights is given in the Appendix.

Devastating slump

The arrival of commercial television in the mid-1950s had a devastating effect on provincial theatres. The effect was two-fold. First, the patrons stayed at home to watch the new-style programming of Granada-TV and, secondly, there was a dearth of touring product as many actors and entertainers saw television as an attractive alternative to touring. The Grand Theatre was closed for eight weeks in the autumn of 1956 and from that time there would be the occasional week when the management couldn't find a decent show to book.

The arrival of the "new wave" drama exemplified by the English Stage Company with John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* found little support from conservative Blackpool area audiences and when *Waiting For Godot*, Samuel Becket's comedy of the absurd, played the Grand in May, 1956, there was pandemonium on the opening night.

The Evening Gazette review recorded: "A large body of the audience beat a disorganised retreat; others stayed and, showing appalling manners, made interjections that must have been audible to those on stage." One of the actors, Peter Bull, who played Pozzo, recalled in his 1959 autobiography *I Know The Face* that they started with an audience of about 800 and finished with about 100. He blamed the catastrophe on the management's puzzling decision to allow pensioners to see the play for only a shilling (5p) on the opening night. He recalled that there was also an alarming Wednesday matinee.

As theatres began to close all over Britain the Grand maintained its all-year programming until 1963, when worsening business and the difficulty in finding good touring shows caused the management to adopt a policy of winter closure from mid-November to March. However, as the decade progressed, the period of winter closure became longer and by 1969 the theatre was operating only from late May to early November.

Meanwhile the Blackpool Tower Company, its glory days far behind, had given up the struggle and decided to sell out - the Tower, the Opera House and Winter Gardens, the Grand and sundry other properties - to the mighty EMI for £4,500,000 in cash and shares. If theatregoers thought that EMI's arrival was going to result in more plays, they were mistaken. Mr Showbiz, Bernard Delfont, then an executive of EMI, assumed overall control of the Blackpool entertainment empire (although the local management was retained) and he saw light entertainment as the only area in which to make money. As far as 'Bernie' was concerned, the old Grand had had its day.

Golden memories

But there was much to remember from the 1960s at the Grand, even if there was not much profit. Two of Ian Carmichael's successes were in Alec Coppel's *The Gazebo* (1960) and Ira Levin's *Critic's Choice* (1961); Margaret Lockwood triumphed in Philip King's *Milk And Honey* (1961) and Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1965); Michael Denison and Dulcie Gray in Shaw's *Candida* (1961); Trevor Howard in John Mortimer's *Two Stars For Comfort* (1962); Wendy Hiller and Susannah York in Henry James's *The Wings Of A Dove* (1963); Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge in Agatha Christie's *Spider's Web* (1963) and William Douglas Home's *The Reluctant Peer* (1965); and Julia Lockwood and Ron Moody in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1967). A further selection of 1960s highlights appears in the Appendix.

The crunch came for the theatre in 1972. The management's secret plan to demolish the Grand and sell the site for a Littlewoods store slipped out when it was discovered that the theatre had been made a Listed Building, Grade Two, at the suggestion of Jeffrey Finestone, whose role is acknowledged with a plaque in the dress circle foyer. Because of the Listing, to comply with the law a small typewritten notice was placed on the doors stating that the company had applied for permission to demolish the building and that any objections should be lodged with the Town Clerk by the end of September.

A petition against the plan was launched by A. Burt Briggs, the then treasurer of the Blackpool Operatic Players, who forced the topic into the news, thereby halting the scheme and, effectively, saving the Grand. The author of this book wrote a series of three articles in the Evening Gazette and enough written objections were lodged by the public to persuade the Secretary of State for the Environment to call a public enquiry. (At the annual meeting of the Grand Theatre Trust in September, 2004, Burt Briggs was elected the first president of the Trust).

A brilliant lawyer

The Friends of the Grand were formed at a public meeting at the Imperial Hotel, Blackpool, on Sunday, February 11, 1973. Elected joint chairmen were John Hodgson and Burt Briggs, secretary Marjorie Higham, treasurer Bill McGinty and solicitor Sam Lee. A boost for the Friends came when the Blackpool-born barrister, Peter Boydell QC, an expert in planning law, offered to lead the case for the objectors in response to a request from Marjorie Higham, his former teacher. He brilliantly demolished the position taken by the owners and the (Conservative) ruling group on Blackpool Council. There was a four-month wait for the result of the enquiry but when it came in August it caused a sensation. The application to redevelop the theatre was dismissed and the planning inspector reported: "The Grand Theatre could be successfully run by a (theatre) trust or the council as a combined civic and commercial theatre. It is to be hoped that the council will have second thoughts in the public interest and give a lead to ensure that the theatre will be put to the best possible use for the benefit of local residents and holidaymakers alike."

But the change of heart was slow and grudging. Eventually the Friends agreed not to oppose EMI's plan to refurbish the theatre and reopen it for bingo. The Friends would be allowed to stage two weeks of theatre before bingo was launched. Coupled with the deal was the offer by the now elevated Lord Delfont giving the Friends the option to buy for £350,000.

The interior was restored by EMI at a cost of £200,000 with a bold new colour scheme of wine, chocolate and gold replacing the blues and turquoises of old. The theatre was fully carpeted in maroon at a cost of £20,000, which had been the total cost of the theatre in 1894. In a write-up of the new look, your author used the words: "One thing is sure. Nobody is going to believe it's a bingo hall."

The Grand reopened on July 25, 1977, with Dora Bryan and Dawn Addams in Noel Coward's *Fallen Angels* the first of two shows presented by the newly-formed Grand Theatre Trust. It was followed by a touring production of the musical *Godspell*. Bingo then began under the management of Bob Parsons, a former manager of Blackpool's ABC Theatre, but although he gained acres of Press publicity the scheme failed because the town was not exactly short of bingo clubs!

The pressure was now on the theatre trust to raise enough cash to buy the Grand but in spite of heroic efforts the target of £350,000 seemed hopeless. Lord Delfont made a vital move in reducing it by £100,000 on condition the deal was completed by June 30, 1980. How ironic that it was made possible by Blackpool Council, whose majority group had been so hostile a few years earlier. The council donated £50,000 from the civic lottery, matching an Arts Council grant £1 for £1, and also made an interest-free loan of £50,000.

The new owners

The Trust took possession on October 1, 1980, eight years after the demolition had been challenged by Burt Briggs and his group of supporters.

But success brought another crisis. The purchase had cleaned out the bank balance so the Friends of the Grand were re-formed under the chairmanship of John Broadbent, becoming the theatre's very active support group, raising funds and providing volunteers for "front of house" duties.

In October, Blackpool folk were given the chance to see the theatre in performance. The theatre trust rented the theatre to the BBC for the telerecording of a Mike Harding series before invited audiences.

On March 23, 1981, the Grand reopened with the Old Vic production of Timothy West as Shylock and Prunella Scales as Portia in Shakespeare's *The Merchant Of Venice*. It was a most fortunate engagement for as well as paying respect to the Grand Theatre's tradition as a quality playhouse, it brought the box office "clout" of two of Britain's most popular TV stars; Timothy West for his highly acclaimed roles as Churchill and Edward V11, and his wife for her role as Sybil Fawcety in the 1970s cult sitcom *Fawcety Towers*.

The gala week won approval in all quarters but the theatre trust was now in a high-risk business with hardly any cash. The second week's booking catered for more popular tastes with Agatha Christie's *A Murder Is Announced*, starring Margaret Ashcroft, Hazel Bainbridge as Miss Marple and Peter Byrne as the police inspector. Then there was a wonderful but thinly attended week of old time music hall with several true greats of variety - Sandy Powell, Cavan O'Connor, Adelaide Hall, George Lacy and Bob and Alf Pearson.

A Noel Coward light comedy, *The Marquise*, starred Moira Lister, Michael Craig and Derek Waring and allowed the Grand's pre-closure patrons to fondly remember the golden days of mannered acting and gorgeous settings.

Another glance back to the glory days of the Grand Theatre was the visit of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, for two weeks in May, with their repertoire of ever-popular Gilbert and Sullivan shows.

There were a couple of "turkeys" in the spring schedule but the management had been unable to book anything better and took the view that to close for the odd week would have had a terrible effect on the theatre's credibility.

A Royal Performance

The crowning event of the theatre's rebirth was the honour of a Royal Performance before the Prince of Wales, on Friday, May 29, 1981. The then chairman of the theatre trust, Geoffrey Thompson, welcomed Prince Charles, who stepped into the foyer to formally reopen the Grand by unveiling a marble plaque.

When the prince entered the royal box, to the right of the stage, he was clearly impressed by the beautiful auditorium and gazed all around it as the audience applauded his arrival. After the show the prince chatted with the cast, who included several local performers, before members of the Grand Theatre Trust and committee members of The Friends of the Grand were introduced. The programme of the show, which was produced by the great Robert Nesbitt, is reproduced on another page but - for the record - it was generally agreed at the time that Anita Harris and Wall Street Crash had made the biggest impression.

The Grand became central to an effort by Blackpool Borough Council to boost the resort's pre-season attractions. The council gave financial support to a week of one-night shows in June, 1981, under the title of the Blackpool Festival. The concert attractions included the Band of the Royal Marines, the Northern Viennese Players, the Chris Barber Band, the Syd Lawrence Orchestra, a rock'n'roll night, the Houghton Weavers folk group, and Bob Monkhouse.

But all was not cosy with some sections of the council. Later in the year the BBC asked to use the Grand to telerecord another TV series. Some members of the Publicity and Attractions Committee were furious when the request was refused on financial grounds. The theatre trust was vilified for killing an event that would have brought valuable publicity to the resort. The simple fact was that the theatre would have had to close for two weeks, losing revenue that was absolutely vital to its survival.

For the first summer season of the new era the theatre met most people's expectations by booking a farce to carry on the fondly remembered tradition of the 1950s and 60s. The play was Robin Hawdon's *The Mating Game*, starring Barbara Windsor, Trevor Bannister and Jack Smethurst. It was seen by a modest total of 78,000 in a 15-week season, which proved much needed to be done to re-establish the theatre on the competitive Blackpool summer show scene.

But there was a more immediate problem. A pantomime starring Rod Hull and Emu was booked by the manager for six weeks, a mistake because even in the heyday of live theatre, Blackpool pantos never did more than four weeks' business. The risk of being in the theatre business came home with a thump and the Trust lost £120,000 on the deal.

There began the long road of recovery under new manager John Shedwick, the former producer of the Thornton Cleveleys Operatic Society, and production consultant Bernard Crabtree, the well-respected former entertainments manager of the Blackpool Tower Company.

Confidence returns

Bernard's presence on the team gave confidence to the London producers, who had been reluctant to send shows to a theatre that had been dark for eight years. The new management steered a "popular" path and there was early encouragement from the success of Francis Durbridge's thriller *House Guest*, starring Simon Ward and Barbara Murray. Box office sales topped 7,000 tickets.

Other successes in that spring season were by Bernie Winters and Leslie Crowther as Flanagan and Allen in the musical tribute show *Bud And Ches*, and Agatha Christie's *The Hollow*, starring Jennifer Wilson, Valentine Dyllal and Mandy Rice-Davies. A second Blackpool Festival, in June, saw Hinge and Bracket's first of several Grand visits and the "dear ladies" were the most popular act of the week, ahead of the Syd Lawrence Orchestra.

A major success that generated great publicity for the theatre was the 1982 summer attraction of Jess Conrad in *Joseph And His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, a show that had been a surprise hit on a week's visit the previous December. At the time a musical as a summer season show was regarded as bold and risky but by the end of the season *Joseph* had acquired cult status and the attraction was to make a dozen visits (weeks) over the next few years.

The next two summer shows, *The Keith Harris Show* and *Laugh With Les*, (starring Les Dawson), brought more success before another financial disaster hit the Grand. The 1985 season of Leslie Crowther's *Come On Down* was a flop and only a rescue package by Blackpool Borough Council kept the Grand in business. But by the time of John Shedwick's departure at the end of 1988, to become general manager of Preston's Guild Hall and Charter Theatre, the Grand had become well established with residents and visitors alike.

1980s highlights

Among the best remembered shows of the 1980s are Michael Denison and Dulcie Gray in *The Kingfisher* in 1981, the National Theatre's 1983 visit with *Hiawatha*, Sir Anthony Quayle's five visits from 1984 to 1988, the many visits of *Joseph* and *The Rocky Horror Show*, the 1986 fortnight of *Cabaret* starring Wayne Sleep, the 1988 visit of Roy Marsden and Kate O'Mara in *The Relapse* and 1989's *Shirley Valentine*, with Paula Wilcox.

However, times had changed. Whereas in the 1950s there were 35 week-long shows and a 15-16 week summer show, in 1989 there were fewer touring plays and musicals to be found. Only 20 shows played for a week or more, there was a 16-week summer show and a line-up of about 60 one or two-night shows.

This was the reality facing the new general manager, Paul Iles, who came from Australia to win artistic acclaim by introducing companies that had never been to Blackpool before (and in some cases had never been heard of by Blackpool theatregoers). The theatre's programming took on a very different stance, tipped firmly towards the arts. Even the Sunday concerts out of season featured contemporary dance groups, touring opera, and gay theatre companies. Niche markets were created but at the same time the management also discovered what Blackpool didn't like.

In the 1990s one very welcome addition to provincial touring theatres was the arrival of east European ballet and opera companies, which had been supported by state funding in the former communist bloc countries. These companies began to "look west" to survive with regular tours of Britain and other countries. In the main they brought a good level of performance and continue to attract good audiences to the Grand Theatre.

The Queen's visit

Throughout the 1980s the Friends of the Grand had been raising considerable sums for the theatre. In the 1990s a £500,000 improvement plan was launched with the Friends contributing £100,000, which included £60,000 for recarpeting. The theatre's centenary year, 1994, saw comedian Ken Dodd, a long-standing patron and champion of the Grand, launch a £250,000 appeal towards a new roof and a front canopy identical to the iron canopy of the theatre's early days.

The supreme honour for the theatre came with a visit by the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh on July 22, 1994, to mark the centenary. The royal couple were welcomed by theatre chiefs before watching the artistes rehearsing for the following night's Gala Centenary Concert. Members of the theatre trust and Friends of the Grand were introduced to the Queen. The visit took place on a bright, hot day and is commemorated by a large marble plaque in the dress circle foyer.

Some of the highlights of the 1990s were *Evita* starring Jacqui Scott in 1990, the Northern Ballet Theatre's *Romeo And Juliet* (91) and *A Christmas Carol* (92), the Royal National Theatre's *An Inspector Calls* (92), D'Oyly Carte's *The Pirates Of Penzance* (93), Adam Faith in *Alfie* (94), the Royal National Theatre in *What The Butler Saw* (95), Mobil Touring Theatre with *Noises Off* (95), the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Cyrano de Bergerac* with Antony Sher (97), Simon Williams and Stephen Tompkinson in Moliere's *Tartuffe* (98), and Paul Nicholas in *The Pirates of Penzance* (1999).

The 1990s saw no fewer than four managers make their contributions to the Grand. Paul Iles moved to Edinburgh in 1992, being briefly replaced by Will Quekett before Danny Moar took over in 1994. When he, too, moved on to become general manager of the Theatre Royal, Bath, the theatre's first female general manager, Stephanie Sirr, took office in 1997 until she became general manager at Nottingham. She was succeeded at the Grand in 2002 by Peter Cutchie, who moved on in 2005 to Wolverhampton and Paul Iles returned to manage the Grand in March that year.

Conservation scheme

Repairs and improvements went on in the second half of the 1990s, financed by a Lottery grant of nearly £700,000, while a Lottery Heritage grant enabled the trust to repair and restore the theatre's beautiful painted ceiling. A brilliant scheme was devised to allow performances to continue during the 18-month project.

A huge platform was built just below ceiling level, suspended on steel cables. This allowed a team of conservators under Brian Cardy to carry out their meticulous cleaning and restoration in safety. The wonderful result of their work was revealed to the public on January 18, 2002, at the start of a week's visit by the Carl Rosa Opera Company in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*.

This left the final phase of the theatre's complete restoration - new seating, decoration of the auditorium in the original colours, better toilet facilities and the relocation of the sound and lighting boxes - scheduled for 2004-05 at an estimated cost of £500,000.

The many improvements to the Grand have been carried out over the years under the supervision of Neil Thomson, deputy general manager and technical manager and the theatre's architect, Gordon McKeith.

Soon after completion of the beautifully executed ceiling project, the Grand Theatre Trust lost several stalwart members who had done much to bring a transformed Grand into the new Millennium. Vice-chairman George Thomson, who was also chairman of the Friends of the Grand, died suddenly in the spring of 2002, and 18 months later Sam Lee, the chairman, died aged 62 after a short illness. A further blow to the theatre trust was the death at the age of 67, in June, 2004, of vice president Geoffrey Thompson, managing director of Blackpool Pleasure Beach. And then, at the end of October, the member who had started the campaign to save the Grand in 1972, A. Burt Briggs, died at the age of 92, just five weeks after being made president of the Grand Theatre Trust. In October, 2005, vice president Bernard Crabtree died at the age of 90

The restored theatre is the legacy of their work. Without the foresight of the early Friends of the Grand in the 1970s, guided principally by Sam Lee, and the business acumen and great local influence of Geoffrey Thompson as chairman of the theatre trust from 1981 to 1992, the Grand Theatre would probably not have survived.

the end