

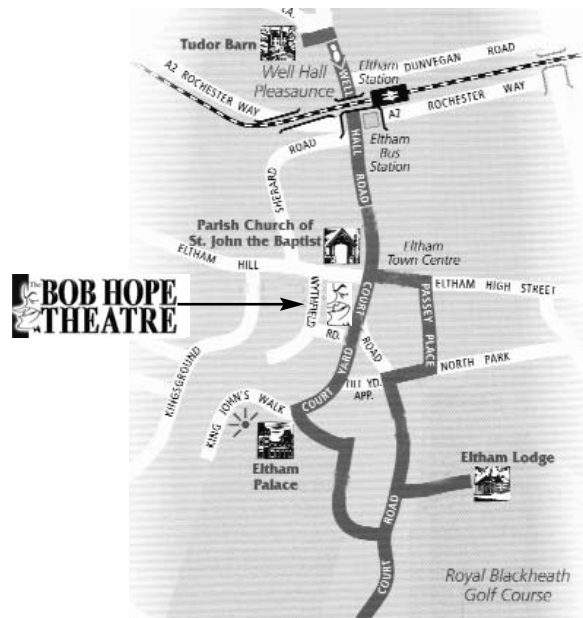
How to contact
THE BOB HOPE THEATRE
ELTHAM

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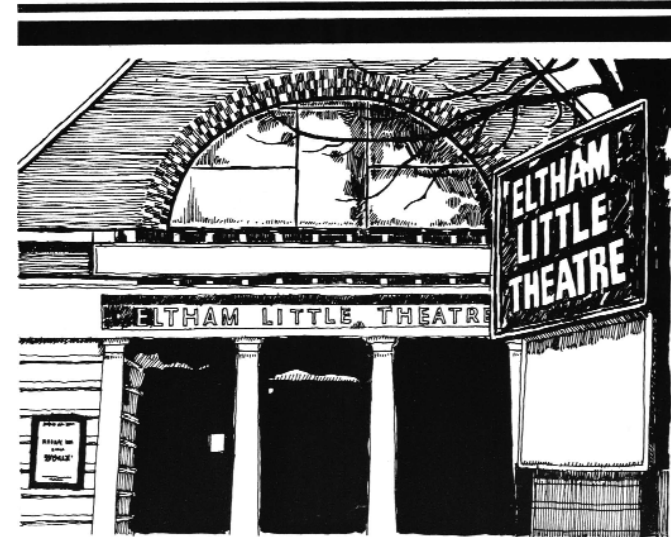
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HOW TO FIND US



Nearest British Rail Station: ELTHAM
Buses: 321, 124, 126, 132, 160
161, 233, 286, 314, B16

ELTHAM LITTLE THEATRE



A Brief History

Early in 1979, Eltham Little Theatre - occupying a former church hall in Wythfield Road, London SE9 - seemed doomed.

The lease from the Parochial Church Council had expired; the premises were up for sale; the membership and management feared it might be only a matter of months before their company was homeless for the first time since 1946.

Brave plans were made for future productions, but closure appeared inevitable.

Yet - a long way away - events were taking place which two years later would save the theatre and give drama a permanent home in Eltham.

BOB HOPE'S INTEREST

Plans were in hand for the first Bob Hope Pro-Am Golf Classic, intended to be an annual event in aid of selected charities. Since 1964, Bob Hope himself had been sponsoring a similar event in the USA - the Desert Classic in Palm Springs, held primarily for the benefit of the Eisenhower Memorial Hospital.



Bob Hope was born in Craigton Road, Eltham in 1903. He emigrated to the USA at the age of four; but he always maintained strong links with Britain. Within his organisation the idea was born that he might fund a theatre centre in his home town, particularly for the benefit of young people.

Accordingly, in 1980, Bob Hope visited our theatre. His reception was overwhelming; his car was mobbed on the forecourt and it became a struggle to get him safely into the theatre.

From the stage he announced - to members, the public, the press and a battery of TV cameras - that he intended to get the project off the ground. "And that's very important to me" he added.

Just how much this meant to all the people associated with Eltham Little Theatre may be imagined - particularly if one understands the theatre's long and complicated history.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those Theatre Members who have contributed to this booklet over the years by documenting events and publishing them in a number of forms. Without them, this brief history of Eltham Little Theatre and the Bob Hope Theatre would not have been possible.

If you would like any further information about the Bob Hope Theatre, how to become an active member or Friend of the Theatre, please contact the Theatre Office.

Details of how to contact us are on the back of this booklet.

Thank you for your interest in our Theatre.

In February 1998, Her Majesty The Queen conferred on Bob Hope the honour of Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire...an Honorary Knighthood...the highest award for a citizen of another country. On May 17th 1998, our Honorary Secretary, Jim Shepherd, was invited by the Hope family, to attend the Investiture at the British Embassy in Washington DC.



Pictured right: Bob Hope, Dolores Hope and Jim Shepherd at the Investiture in Washington

In May 2003, Bob Hope celebrated his 100th birthday. It had been almost a year of celebration. The BBC presented a special programme 'Bob Hope at 100' to mark the event. It was hosted by Bob Monkhouse from the Theatre, where the Royal Artillery Band opened the programme with Thanks for the Memory, Bob's signature tune.



Pictured left: Jim Shepherd, Hon. Secretary, Bob Monkhouse, and Paul Howard (former Hon. Chairman)

In June 2003, the London Borough of Greenwich awarded Bob Hope the Freedom of the Borough. At 100 years old, Bob was too frail to make the journey to receive the honour himself. He asked if our Hon. Secretary could receive this on his behalf and the Council agreed.

Pictured right: Deputy Mayor of Greenwich; Jim Shepherd, (Hon. Secretary), Leader of the Council, Chris Roberts, Mayor Janet Gillman, Wendy Hamilton (BHT Fundraising Manager) and Greenwich's Chief Executive



THE BEGINNINGS

Eltham Little Theatre was born on 12th November 1943 'to promote theatre, drama, music and the allied arts in Eltham and the immediate vicinity'. During its early years, while it was without a permanent home, its founder members acted as a sort of clearing house for local amateur societies. By the end of 1944, ELT administered twelve affiliated drama and music societies, with 215 members and £45 in the bank.

Early in 1946, Eltham Parish Hall - which during the war had been requisitioned as a furniture store - was released. By arrangement with the Parochial Church Council, ELT found a home there on an annual 'lease' basis.

In May 1946, Eltham Little Theatre was registered as a Company, limited by guarantee. The theatre building was officially opened by the Mayor of Woolwich (later incorporated into the London Borough of Greenwich). Following a few hectic months of cleaning and restoration (including the restoration of seating and lighting equipment) the first production was staged by one of the affiliated societies, the Kerwin Players, who presented Hedda Gabler, directed by Winifred Kershaw.



During the period from 1948 to 1950 there were some 600 individual members and 25 affiliated societies. A new production was staged every other weekend throughout the season.

Throughout this time the theatre's management aimed eventually to purchase the building. Members were continually engaged in fund-raising activities to that end. By 1957 however, it became apparent that the asking price was beyond reach, and a sub-committee memorandum was submitted to the Borough Council with a recommendation that the building be acquired as an artistic centre for Eltham. While rejecting the recommendation, the Borough awarded the theatre a grant in aid, towards running expenses, in the sum of £150. This grant, increased to keep step with inflation continued until the 1980s.



Raising the stage and redecorating the Theatre, July 1951

The number of affiliated dramatic and operatic societies made it impossible to give everyone a fair showing on the theatre's stage or, indeed, for the management to exercise any kind of artistic control. So the theatre gradually moved towards the establishment of its own group of performers with its production programme under the control of a Drama Committee.

During the late 1970s several commercial concerns expressed an interest in the building for such purposes as a video recording studio, a sports centre and a multi-entertainment complex. None of these came to fruition for one reason or another.

And so, by 1979, the theatre's membership was almost resigned to its fate. The lease was not to be renewed, funds were low...and then Bob Hope stepped in.

The 1980 and 1981 Bob Hope Classic Golf Tournaments in Britain raised £58,000 for the direct benefit of Eltham Little Theatre Limited, and a similar sum for the Stars Organisation for Spastics (SOS). The money was to be used for the purchase of the premises and as a start on the refurbishment of the building.

While negotiations for the purchase of the building continued, Dickie Henderson - Vice Chairman of the Bob Hope British Golf Classic - gave a benefit performance of his one-man show at the theatre to raise funds towards refurbishment. This was a tremendous evening of entertainment, enhanced by the presence in the audience of several star personalities, including Max Wall.

In 1996 the British Film Institute launched Cinema 100 to commemorate one hundred years of cinema in Britain. The Theatre management nominated Bob Hope for a commemorative plaque to be placed on the house where he was born in Craighton Road, Eltham.

The organisers felt this was appropriate and awarded the plaque.

Bob asked his grand-daughter, Miranda Hope, to represent him at the unveiling of the plaque and we were pleased to welcome her to the Theatre. She spent a very full day with us, during which time the Mayor of Greenwich invited her for tea in the Mayor's Parlour, she visited the Bob Hope and Bob Hope Theatre exhibits at the Greenwich Borough Museum and visited the Royal Blackheath Golf Club (one of Bob's favourites), and stayed late into the evening to see our production of 'Absent Friends'.

Many of our members were at the Theatre for her visit and were captivated by her enthusiasm for our organisation.



Miranda Hope presents the Mayor of Greenwich, Councillor Janet Gillman, with the latest Bob Hope book and video.

Pictured right:: Paul Howard (former Chairman), Miranda Hope, Jim Shepberd (Hon. Secretary), Mayor Janet Gillman, John Goodwin (former Treasurer)..

Bob Hope died on July 27th 2003, shortly after celebrating his 100th birthday. The Hope family continue to maintain contact with us and their interest in the Theatre is ongoing.

In September 2004, a new Bob Hope Theatre opened in Stockton, California. We were invited to be there and attended the Gala Opening where we presented the Theatre with a watercolour painting of the Bob Hope Theatre, Eltham. Painted by local artist and Theatre member, Peter Slaughter, this now hangs in a place of honour in the refurbished theatre.

THE BOB HOPE THEATRE TODAY

The management company remains Eltham Little Theatre Limited, a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. It is governed by a Board of Management, elected annually at the Annual General Meeting. Day-to-day affairs are conducted by the Board, consisting of three officers (Hon. Chairman, Hon. Secretary and Hon. Treasurer) and seven additional elected members.

The Bob Hope Theatre is not a 'members only' club, but a public theatre licensed annually by Greenwich Council. It is a wholly amateur theatre in the sense that all performers, management and ancillary workers give their services without payment, apart from payments made to professional musicians. While previous experience is necessary for some activities, such as production, direction and stage management, new members are encouraged to take part and are given appropriate training.

Those who join as members for a moderate annual subscription have the right to vote at General Meetings and may stand for election to the Board of Management. They are kept advised of theatre events via newsletters and have the right to audition for shows.

There is a thriving junior membership, an integral part of the organisation and source of extra enthusiasm and vigour.

The Theatre's season runs from September to July with a BHT production staged, generally, every four or so weeks. The Theatre is available for hire at very competitive rates and many amateur groups stage their own productions here.

The Bob Hope Theatre's programme of shows is planned and governed by a Drama Team which may, from time to time, appoint a committee to advise on and plan the Theatre's season of events.

The Theatre Bar is open Tuesday to Saturday between 9pm and 11pm (7.30 to 11pm on performance nights). A 'new members' evening is held in the Bar on Thursday evenings when there is no production in the Theatre.

BOB HOPE'S SECOND VISIT

In September 1982, Bob Hope visited the theatre again, met by an even more tumultuous reception which clearly and genuinely touched him. He unveiled the new name of 'The Bob Hope Theatre', a bust of himself (right), a special plaque in the foyer and a portrait by Llew Hodges who had been an active member since the theatre was founded.

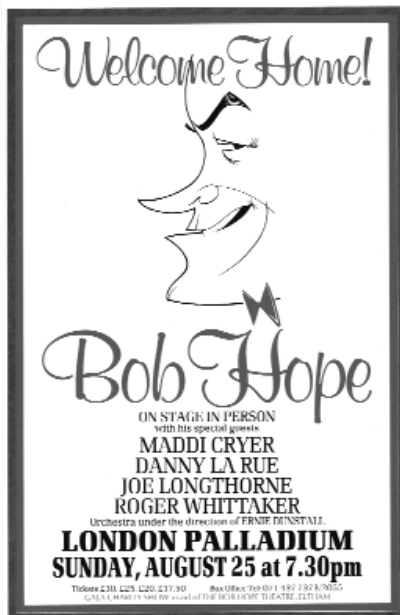


At the same time he accepted an Honorary Co-Presidency of the theatre. There was to be one other Co-President, Gerald Ford, ex-President of the United States of America and a close golfing friend.

THE PURCHASE OF THE BUILDING

At last, in November 1982, the contract for the purchase of the premises was completed. In the thirty-ninth year of its existence, Eltham Little Theatre became The Bob Hope Theatre, Eltham, and was now secure in its permanent home.





Bob Hope's Benefit Performance at the London Palladium in August 1991 for the benefit of The Bob Hope Theatre, Eltham



The George Tapp Studio prepared for its opening production 'Jacques and His Master'

THEATRE DEVELOPMENT

As a result of Bob Hope's generosity the theatre has continued to be refurbished. In August 1991, Bob donated £28,000 from the Benefit Performance he staged at the London Palladium to raise money directly for the theatre. He also did us the honour of visiting us again during this visit. The money raised from the Benefit was used to build the Bar extension, rebuild the foyer, refurbish the front of house facilities and auditorium, and to renovate and decorate the exterior of the building.

Our own small, but dedicated, fundraising team continue to raise money through raffles, jumble sales and other special events. Their ongoing activities have funded such things as the purchase of electrical equipment and many furnishings for the building. We are indebted to their enthusiasm and hard work.

Our youth drama group, The New Stagers, have also organised special events to raise money to provide equipment for the theatre. An induction loop system to benefit people with hearing difficulties, black drapes for the Studio are among the items bought by the group.



In April 1995 the large downstairs room backstage, which formerly housed the theatre's wardrobe and furniture store was refurbished and a studio was created. The Board of Management felt it appropriate to name this area The George Tapp Studio in memory of a founder member who had dedicated much of his life to the organisation as Honorary Secretary and as a stage manager. Many of our existing members owe a great debt to George, who trained them in the craft of stage management.

The George Tapp Studio was formally opened by George's widow, Irene, in October 1996 when she unveiled a portrait and commemorative plaque in the Studio.

Now into the 21st Century, we continue to look at ways to improve the facilities of the Theatre. How these plans develop will, of course depend on finances being available. We are currently (Spring 2005) improving the backstage area.