

# East Surrey Operatic Society 1907-2007

A proud past; an exciting future

ESOS has its origins in private theatricals that took place in a house known as *Batt's Hill*. These evolved into the East Surrey Amateur Operatic & Dramatic Society. The first performance, in 1907, was a production of Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Mikado*, an operetta very much in the 'operatic' tradition but nevertheless, at this period, a truly modern show. The first professional performance at the Savoy Theatre had been in 1885, only 22 years before and members of the D'Oyly Carte Company were still performing who had been directed by W S Gilbert himself. ESOS continued to entertain the people of Reigate and Redhill and the surrounding areas at the Market Hall until it was demolished to make way for the Warwick shopping centre and Harlequin Theatre.



Battshill House : Location of the first ESOS rehearsals



Market Hall 1907

For a while, the Savoy operettas formed the mainstay of ESOS productions until the final performance of *Yeoman of the Guard* in 1931. However, from the start, ESOS was prepared to try different shows such as *Miss Hook of Holland* before and again immediately after the Great War and *Floradora* in 1921 and *Veronique* two years later. Information from this early period are sparse but we do have a record of a donkey

hired from the village of Neasden for *Veronique* that obediently walked up the stairs to the stage but then resolutely refused to move. "Neddy" had to be replaced by a substitute from Brighton who behaved well on stage but insisted on braying loudly off-stage just as the soprano was singing her top note. ESOS has continued to put on a show every year apart from the war years of 1914-1918 and 1940-1947.

In 1933, a young professional dancer was asked to produce *The Vagabond King*. Elsie Rendell continued to produce every show until *Show Boat* in 1939. A number of members were lost during the war partly due to casualties but also because many people moved away. It looked as if the society would not be able to continue but in 1948 ESOS was back with another production of *The Vagabond King* followed by *Bitter Sweet* the following year. The photograph



Elsie Rendell

shows the oldest known existing image of the cast of an ESOS show.

Elsie Rendell continued to produce every show for ESOS until 1973 when, at the age of 83, ill-health forced her to give up the production of *Oklahoma!* after a few weeks.



1949 Cast - Bitter Sweet

The 'operatic' tradition in the name of the society continued for many years with *Merrie England* [1928, 1953 and 1963] and *The Merry Widow* [1960 and 1975] right up to *Orpheus in the Underworld* in 1992. However, ESOS was quick to embrace the new "book musicals" that were created from the 1940s. In these shows the songs were an integral feature of the plot

development rather than merely providing musical interludes. Some members, and in particular, Mrs Joyce Hooper the then musical director, put a request to the committee to put on a production by Gilbert & Sullivan. This was rejected by the committee and so Mrs Hooper called a meeting at the Market Hall to set up The Opera Club of Reigate and Redhill. Although, performances were timed, quite deliberately, not to clash with ESOS, relations between members of the two societies were difficult at times but in recent years there has been a spirit of friendly cooperation with joint concerts and many members belonging to both societies. The Opera Club concentrated on the Savoy Operas for many years but has produced modern musicals in recent years.



1960 Merry Widow - Molly

While many of the productions have been the popular American book musical such as *South Pacific* [1982 at the Dorking Halls] and *Carousel* [1959 and 1995], the society has not been afraid to put on more unusual shows such as *Bells are Ringing* in 1998 directed, as were many ESOS shows, by Gillian Jarvis with Angela Barker as Musical Director. *Sweeney Todd* in 2002 and *Merrily We Roll Along* in 2005 are further examples of the ESOS committee to take artistic risks.



1982 - South Pacific

ESOS has always encouraged young people in the dramatic arts putting on shows such as *The Sound of Music* [performed at Polesden Lacey open air theatre in 1989], *Oliver* [1993 and 2001], *Carousel* [2001], and *Annie* [2006] that require younger performers. The picture shows some of the younger performers at the 1992 production of *Oklahoma!* at Polesden Lacey. More

recently, ESOS has sponsored a show exclusively for younger members based on the story of the Ugly Duckling called *Honk!* [2004]. During this summer of ESOS's centenary year the society is repeating the experience with another production of *Oklahoma!* exclusively with younger performers at the Harlequin Theatre.



1992 - Oklahoma