

## CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2018

Welcome to the 10th Annual General Meeting of the Farnham Theatre Association Ltd. In 2007 we were incorporated as a private company, limited by guarantee. In time we became registered as a small charity with the aim of establishing a public theatre for professional and amateur performance in theatre, music and dance, for the benefit and education of the population of the surrounding area of Farnham. I want to thank my fellow directors and supporters for their stoicism and dedication in carrying forward this good work.

It has been a long journey! It started in 2006 with Crest Nicholson Sainsbury's imminent threat of demolition of the Redgrave Theatre and incredibly, 12 years on, this is still the case. Lack of financial backers for the scheme has led Surrey County Council to become involved and the demolition of the theatre is now scheduled between December 10th and March 4th 2019. Nevertheless, we believe that FTA has contributed in some way to the fact that the theatre is still standing after 20 years of closure. Certainly our ability to raise thousands of objections to the demolition has played its part. Also our campaigning for better facilities for theatre in Farnham has seen improvements at Farnham Maltings. Then came the construction of two new theatre buildings at Weydon and All Hallows schools after the Blue Skies Report was published by FTA and presented to Jeremy Hunt MP.

This last financial year – April 2017 until March 2018 - began with the refusal of the High Court to accept that our local tax payers and Councillors had legal standing to challenge the Council's decision to lower the land value at Brightwells. Even with every community asset stripped from the site, the developer has managed to acquire the land at an incredibly low price, at a time when land values have escalated right across the country – and we seem powerless to do anything about it.

Having pledged some of FTA's precious financial resources to assist the Farnham Society in its legal battle against Waverley, we were disappointed to find in January that when it came to fighting the demolition of the Redgrave at the Listed Buildings Application in the Waverley Council Chamber, FTA was left to do this alone.

At the New Year, reports were pouring in of declining shopping centres and major retailers with their backs to the wall. This should have been the opportunity for the whole of Farnham to shout loudly for Community and Culture –not for 8 more restaurants and 24 more shops - instead of a theatre! For a moment, we dared to believe that Marks and Spencer's would decline the offer to head up this risky

list of empty premises. But, Surrey County Council decided it was time to prop up the fiction that is now crudely termed 'Brightwells Yard'. The tax-payer is once again to foot the bill for Waverley's folly.

However, in the face of the threatened bulldozers, cranes and wrecking balls, FTA still has important work to do. This is to re-establish the reputation of professional theatre in Farnham and to preserve its memory.

At the Farnham Town Council Annual Meeting in March, one of our Directors, Abigail McKern asked The Town Council to assist in the recovery of the Time Capsule, buried in the foundations of the Redgrave Theatre by Sir Michael Redgrave in 1972. We were then astounded to read in the Farnham Herald in May that the Waverley leader and a local builder had already retrieved the capsule themselves. Nevertheless, on June 4, we met Waverley's Chief Executive, Tom Horwood and Leader Julia Potts and duly received the capsule as had been previously promised. It is now in our hands, safely stored.

In discussions with the Chief Executive at the time he said he was fully aware of the difficulties that town centre retailers were experiencing and that he understood when we said that that was one good reason why the theatre should be retained.

We took the opportunity to ask Waverley if they would help us find a permanent solution for storing the archives. Last year we moved the theatre collections from expensive commercial storage into temporary accommodation at Runfold, thanks to the generous invitation from Michael Blower. We are incredibly grateful to him for rescuing the collections, as without it, valuable archiving could not take place. At this point, I will thank Chris Reeks and Peter Hunter for their painstaking and diligent work. Without their inside knowledge, most of the photographs for example, would remain unidentified.

Supported by Farnham Residents Councillors Stephen Spence and Andy Macleod we are applying for a grant from the Surrey County Council local funds. We hope to match the amount from our own resources and to begin building funds for the purchase of an office cabin to contain the collections. We intend to ask other Farnham organisations if they would like to share the facility for their own archives and to contribute to the funds.

We are delighted that the Farnham and District Museum Society has agreed to publish FTA's history of the Castle and Redgrave Theatres. Research from The Museum Society 1970s Newsletters and two previous Redgrave publications have provided valuable information about these theatres and how they developed

through the inspirational work of their Artistic Directors. More recently, fascinating anecdotes and memories have been contributed by the actors and technicians who worked at these two theatres. This publication should go a long way towards re-establishing Farnham's reputation in having created two of the country's finest regional theatres.

Many people in Waverley have no idea of the value of what is being destroyed at Brightwells. Some regard stage theatre as a minority interest and to be 'airy fairy'. However, they will happily watch top rank actors on screen, who learnt their skills at small theatres such as The Castle and The Redgrave. Stephen Mangan is one such very popular TV star actor: his first stage performance was at the Redgrave. He has agreed to write the Foreword to our 'Tale of Two Theatres'. We are greatly indebted to him and to FTA's ambassador, Abigail McKern for making this possible.

To bring the matter down into what is termed 'the real world' of finance, Waverley Borough Council has a Cultural Strategy which anticipates financial contributions from developers to culture across the Borough. Waverley's Community Infrastructure Levy demands that contributions from new developments should benefit the community and Waverley's Local Plan attempts to define how sustainable development can be delivered in the Borough. FTA has made submissions to all these consultations. The case we make is that Waverley's policy documents should provide the means to bring community, culture and viability to Farnham's struggling town centre and to rebuild the creative energy that once thrived on our streets.

This summer we read of the dire state of the country's town centres in Part 2 of the Government's Grimsey Review, called 'The Vanishing High Street' and the need to support retail with community and culture. The Government's Planning Policy document says that town centres must respond quickly to rapid changes and that Local Planning Authorities should look at what is likely to be needed "*at least ten years ahead.*"

With all the housing developments planned around Farnham, in Waverley and in North East Hampshire - what stronger message can we send than – "Look at East Street and despair! Waverley needs more leisure and cultural facilities, not less! Do not destroy our theatre but keep it or build a new one!"

Thank You.