

## INTRODUCTION

The Compass Theatre is now an established and widely known feature of the Hillingdon Arts world and it is hoped it will long remain so. It was not always the case. This synopsis is based on programmes and other documents available, together with personal recollections of events. It does not pretend to be a comprehensive history, as it did not involve any research into Council archives regarding official policy. It is based entirely on reasonable assumptions and any specific detail available at the time. Historical notes are from extensive research carried out by Linda Casey and by local historian Eileen Bowlt.

## THE GROUNDS AND BUILDINGS

What we know today as the Compass Theatre comprises a substantial Grade II listed Georgian house and a small modern 158 seat Theatre. The entire complex, which is owned and managed by the London Borough of Hillingdon, is situated in about five and a half acres of parkland adjacent to the Uxbridge branch of the Metropolitan Line. Both buildings are inter-connected by a single storey assembly/reception area known as the Bistro, which was constructed between 1974 & 1976.

For many years the Georgian house has been known as Ickenham Hall, and for a short period Ickenham Manor. Its history is therefore often confused with that of Ickenham Manor House, a Tudor building near Ickenham Marsh, which still stands and is currently occupied. According to the Greater London Council's (GLC) Archivist, "*in 1348 John de Brock, son and heir of William de Brock, conveyed Ickenham Manor to John de Charlton, citizen and mercer, for life, with the remainder to his daughter Juette (Ivette,) and son-in-law Nicholas Shorediche and their heirs*". The manorial rights continued to descend in the Shoredich (Schoredicke, Shoreditch) family until c.1818 and included land where the Compass Theatre now stands.

In the mid-14<sup>th</sup> Century there were known to be cottages and various outbuildings on the land currently occupied by Ickenham Hall. While it is unlikely that any of the fabric of the present house dates from this period, it is a known fact that in 1627 the property on the site consisted of “*One Close of pasture or meadow commonly called Reynolds Close, containing by estimation, approximately three acres, with all the barns, stables and outbuildings ..... with appurtenances and also 26 ‘selions’ of land, one acre of meadow and one parcel of meadow called a Hook*”, which was surrendered by one John Nicholas and wife Agnes to Michael Crosier.

The Crosiers were major landowners in north-west Middlesex and were well established in Ickenham in the 16th century. They owned Church Place, (almost certainly Home Farm), Sherwyns/Sheerings and Sears in 1624. Michael Crosier purchased Reynolds Close near Sherwyns in 1628 and a house and barn were built on it, which became the home farm attached to the house. William Crosier purchased Rayners (later Milton Farm) from John Carwitham in 1685. After the Land Enclosure Act of 1780 John Crosier caused Hill Farm to be erected on his newly enclosed common land in the former Brook Mead.

So much of Ickenham was swallowed up by manorial estates, especially Swakeleys, that there was only one other estate of some importance, and this was centred on Sherwyns, the property owned and referred to by John Crosier in his will of 1769 and on which site the present Ickenham Hall now stands. The name Sherwyns derives from John Cherwynd’s ‘messuage’ (sic) mentioned in a court roll of 1416. The present name was adopted when the manor house owned by the Shorediches, ceased to be known as Ickenham Hall, instead becoming known as Manor Farm. The site is shown as Number 66 on the Ickenham Enclosure Award plan of 1780. The land and property adjoining Marsh, later Glebe, Lane (Avenue), remained in the Crosier family, eventually passing to their descendant Edward Hilliard junior in 1801, who was the second son of John Crosier’s niece Elizabeth Stafford Crosier, who had married George Hilliard, a lawyer, in 1779.

Around 1740 the existing buildings were re-built and enlarged by the Shorediche family to form a Georgian-fronted house of mid-18<sup>th</sup> century appearance that became known as Ickenham Hall, which stands to this day. Traces of the original building can be found behind what is now the kitchen and wine bar, and some timbers inside suggest an earlier building stood on the site to which had been added a more substantial farmhouse. The substantial brick wall outside predates the existing building and a pair of brick piers of undetermined date can be observed from the Bistro. It is assumed these piers formed a narrow gateway, and are all that now remains of the wall which once enclosed a kitchen garden, to which reference is made in the 1933 Harrods sale catalogue.

The residents of the house changed fairly frequently; the GLC Archivist found records of 17 different occupants having resided there between 1780 and 1949. All John Crosier's property descended to the Hilliards, who sold off their inherited land piecemeal. Milton Farm became part of the Swakeleys estate in 1816, and Hill Farm was absorbed by Northolt Aerodrome in 1916. Cyril Saich who died in 1989, and whose family moved into Home Farm as tenants in the 1890s, purchased the farm from the Hilliards in 1927.

In 1902 the Hilliards sold Ickenham Hall and surrounding land to the Uxbridge and Harrow Railway Company, latterly the Metropolitan Railway. They in turn sold it to Charles de Winton Kitcat two years later after the construction of the line from Harrow to Uxbridge which opened in 1904. The remodelled dining room and garden lobby probably date from this period. Nearby Lawrence Drive, honours the Hon. Dame Maude Agnes Lawrence, Director of Woman's Establishments at the Treasury, who from 1918 owned and lived at Ickenham Hall. The property was purchased on her death in 1933, by the Rev. Ralph Potts Guy.

According to a note (c.1973) by Paul Beaven, Ickenham Hall remained a private residence until around 1940, when it was used as a school - probably private. On Ralph Potts Guy's death in 1947, his

executors sold the house and adjoining five and half acre site to the Middlesex County Council, who from 1948 used it as a Community Centre. In due course ownership descended to the London Borough of Hillingdon on the demise of the Middlesex County Council when the GLC was formed in 1965. It is understood from a local resident, though not confirmed, that in the 1950s a wood yard occupied part of the site on which the main theatre building now stands.

## **COMMUNITY USE**

Paul Beaven records that the house became a Community Centre when these were being established throughout the country after the Second World War, to encourage people to combine and use their leisure time to form their own entertainment. He notes, however, that these schemes met with little success and Ickenham Hall being no exception fell into disrepair. In 1959 the Middlesex County Council asked the NW Middlesex Committee if they could make use of the premises. The Youth Officer at the time, mentioned this to Mr. Beaven's wife, Mrs. K M "Kit" Beaven, who was involved with the recently formed Argosy Players, a local amateur dramatic society. As a result, she was given use of the premises for a trial period of one year to see what could be done. The building was named the "NW Middlesex Youth House" and Mrs. Beaven became its "Warden", later referring to it as "Ickenham Hall Youth House".

Drama was the mainstay activity as it involved many skills and degrees of attainment. Two other clubs were also using the premises at the time; the Aero Modellers and Young Farmers. With encouragement from the Council and Clerk of Works, they worked with Argosy members and between them the place was redecorated. These three groups, while retaining their individual identities, began to combine interests and soon other social activities appeared - dancing, music, a Girls' club, and a photographic and cine club. Beaven records that from the drama group, in particular, grew an interest in community relations and exchange visits were arranged with Germany, Illeston and Unstone.

A joint production in Southall established links with the Asian community, while a visiting party from Unstone turned out to be mainly of West Indian origin.

Again according to Beaven, the authorities were so impressed that plans were made for a “*Hall and Stage suitable for more ambitious work*” to be built. However, by then Middlesex was being absorbed into the newly formed GLC and continuity of Council support was fragmented. Though finance had been set aside, costs were escalating and the original plans were eventually scaled down. A Youth Theatre was nevertheless built, though its location and direction were not as the Beavens had anticipated. When the theatre opened in 1968 its initial impact was to divert all aspects of drama and theatre away from the activities of the Youth House, thus significantly changing the role for which it had originally been established.

The Beavens had always seen drama and its associated activities as the ideal medium for social education in bringing together all classes of youth, but with its removal from their official sphere, the work of the house gradually changed. Mrs. Beaven “concentrated on counselling” encouraging the staff to take particular notice of members who “showed any sign of deviant behaviour”. It soon became apparent that here was a field in which important, though unspectacular, work was required. This led to developing close ties with Social Services, Probation Officers the Law Courts, and Detention Centres.

Other Youth related activities flourished, though some of the “clients”, who at one stage included the appearance of the Ickenham Chapter of the Hell’s Angels, did not greatly appeal to the residents of leafy Ickenham. Mrs. Beaven died in May 1974 and this event, coupled with an extension to the theatre led to the Youth House being dissolved as a separate entity, its educational and social functions being absorbed into the Youth Theatre, thus ironically coming full circle and fulfilling the Beavens original vision and concept for a youth

theatre. The history of Ickenham Hall would not be complete without paying tribute to the significant contribution the Beavens had made in helping young people from within the local community.

## **THE NEW YOUTH THEATRE BUILDING**

In a memorandum dated February 1967, Mrs. Beaven had set out clearly and knowledgeably the minimum supporting requirements of a new theatre building, including office space, refreshment facilities, dressing and rehearsal rooms, combined with facilities for designing, making and storing costumes, property and scenery together with a reference library, as many of these facilities already existed in Ickenham Hall Youth House. As the proposed theatre would become a social centre, she argued for it to be attached to, or immediately adjacent to the house, enabling its Director to work closely with the Warden in jointly serving the interests of young people. In the event, the Council appears to have decided they required a dedicated educational establishment, as distinct from more general youth and community activities. This resulted in the Youth Theatre being erected 40 yards (37m) from the house, with its own independent Director. The original auditorium was broadly the same as it is today, but shortage of funds meant that many of the above were severely lacking.

Mrs. Beaven envisaged the Director to be someone as “having youth service qualifications and considerable dramatic experience, both of production and training, who would be responsible for the artistic development and practical side of the theatre”. The appointment of a former teacher and youth worker, trained theatre Director and professional actor, in the form of John Sherratt, more than met this criterion, but his terms of reference reflected a different use of the theatre from that which Mrs. Beaven had in mind. In particular, its educational emphasis meant it could not be freely available for use by local dramatic, dance and other groups of a similar nature in Hillingdon, a development that continued to cause dismay and resentment for many years.

## ICKENHAM YOUTH THEATRE

The Ickenham Youth Theatre, as it was then called, was opened on October 26<sup>th</sup> 1968 by the Rt Hon. Jennie Lee (widow of the renowned Aneurin Bevan Labour MP and Cabinet Minister, and herself now Minister for the Arts) with the express aim of “*Developing the creative ability and technical skills of young people and adults in all aspects of theatre*”. Basic theatre courses were started and in December the first theatrical production was staged - “*Hans, the Witch and the Goblin*”. The following summer a Youth Theatre Arts Club was established. This enabled the theatre to operate as a private social club for students presenting and establishing productions, without the obligation of a Public Entertainment Licence, and to enable funds to be raised for additional facilities. An example of the latter was the purchase of a caravan to provide an office for the Director, Secretary and Stage Manager. The Youth Theatre later became known simply as the Theatre Arts Club.

In January 1974, John Sherratt adopted the name “Compass” for the theatre, by which it has been known ever since. A range of classes for young people and adults had by now been established, and the theatre's regular presentations covered plays, musicals, music halls and pantomimes. Each production had a firm educational emphasis and was considered in its historical and social context, a theme which extended in the provision of background notes for every member of the audience. But the dichotomy of the Youth House and Youth Theatre could not continue, and work began on an attractive single-storey building that would eventually link the two. Additions were also made to the theatre, including the provision of studios, a proper workshop, green room, library, and foyer.

Between 1974 and 1976 the work of the Compass went on amid the turmoil of construction work, using whatever space and facilities could be found. “The Compass on Tour” was devised as a means of retaining the interest of students and public alike, holding onto the significant progress which had already been achieved, and could

otherwise easily have ebbed away amongst the disruption. It involved rehearsing and giving presentations in schools, clubs, community centres, hospitals, hotels and libraries - anywhere and everywhere that could take them. An estimated audience of 7,500 attended shows in almost 30 locations. Worst of all were the repeated delays in completion of the construction work; a contemporary record notes that the traditional Christmas pantomime had to be abandoned, but remarks cryptically "Christmas entertainment at the German Embassy".

## **THE ICKENHAM CENTRE**

Finally, on October 16<sup>th</sup> 1976 the new complex was opened, again by Baroness Lee, with a gala performance of "*A Flea in Her Ear*". The official name of the combined complex was "The Ickenham Centre" though this never caught on, and some time later it became known as "The Compass Community Arts Centre", continuing to form part of the Adult & Youth section of the Education Department. John Sherratt was appointed as its Artistic Director and he was supported by a large complement of staff when compared with today's standards. This included teachers paid by the session for classes in pottery, art, music, archery, silk screen printing, speech, singing, photography and film animation, together with ancillary staff for the coffee bar and reception. John Sherratt taught acting skills to the 16+ age group, while the Assistant Director, Avril Booker, gave drama classes to younger students.

Classes took place every evening except Mondays: Saturdays, Saturday evenings and all day Sunday were devoted to rehearsals or performances. The technical aspects of theatre were also taught on a practical basis during preparations for forthcoming productions. Saturday morning cinema was introduced in 1982. Meals were served bistro-style after theatrical performances and the new communicating building became known as "The Bistro". Those associated with the Compass gave presentations over both days at the Middlesex, latterly Hillingdon, Show until its demise, and each year usually arranged for



a group to visit the German towns of Emden and Schleswig, which were twinned with Hillingdon.

This was the heyday of Education for All, and the Compass was indeed a very busy place, however it was not to last. In 1981 the first chill wind of economy was felt. There were modest reductions in staff, and the Compass was invited to consider ways of generating income as a desirable aim in itself. In 1984, however, came a thunderbolt, Hillingdon, along with practically all other local authorities, was subjected to savage cuts in Government subvention, coupled with strict capping of the amounts which could be raised from the rates, latterly Council Tax. The Council planned to close all specialised centres catering for youth and to cut back the provision for Community Centres. Frantic discussion followed all over the Borough, mostly directed towards rescuing the situation by utilising self-help from the community. At a meeting held at the Compass, it was decided to set up a group known as “The Friends of the Compass” who would generate income, and lobby the Council to fund part of the running costs. In the event, the Council decided to retain the Compass Theatre, the Hillingdon Outdoor Activity Centre and the lake (HOAC), Judge Heath Sports Centre, the Mountain Centre at Cwm Pennant in North Wales and the Narrow Boats. However, the level of staffing would have to be severely cut, and all except Cwm Pennant would have to generate substantial sums towards their annual running costs. At the Compass the number of staff required was reduced from a large complement to just the Artistic Director, caretaker and cleaner, and a contribution of some £24,000 was required to be generated by commercial activities. The Assistant Director was redeployed to a local school and the Stage Manager, Donna Clayton-Jones made redundant.

## **BACKS TO THE WALL**

These changes duly came into effect on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1985 and the initial impact was enormous. Most of the support staff continued on a voluntary basis, and were assisted by students running the coffee bar

and serving meals. All the teaching staff left, curtailing all classes except for pottery, which continued for a time on a self-supporting basis. Ann Jones continued in a voluntary capacity as administrator and general factotum, though she was reinstated as clerical assistant on a part-time basis about a year later.

In that chilly spring, the heating was shut down and all unnecessary lights turned off, reminiscent of the power cuts of the 1970s, while two urgent issues were discussed; which included how viably to maintain the theatre. Theatrical productions, including a few acting classes, were actually kept up remarkably well, thanks to the unstinting efforts of the students and volunteers, who with the caretaker, Jim Cooper, and the cleaner, Joyce Fuge formed a dedicated team under John Sherratt's leadership. Proposals for generating income ranged from conference lettings to exhibitions and training courses and a host of other less obvious suggestions.

Many enterprising and ambitious ideas flowed in, but nearly all overlooked the fact that the Compass was starting entirely from scratch, and therefore had no spare capital with which to invest in new or updated facilities and equipment, to compete with local commercial venues. Through it all, John Sherratt insisted the main educational role of the Compass must not be compromised by commercial money-making activities; to this end he renamed the complex "The Compass Arts Theatre", with much emphasis on the then popular Fringe Theatre.

The new regime changed the Compass in many ways. Plays continued to be selected for their cultural and educational value, but greater space had to be found in the programme for items such as the popular Music Halls, which had a wider public appeal, to bring in paying customers. The theatre programme had to be carefully arranged to allow the auditorium and other rooms to be used for a variety of activities throughout the day. Meals at lunchtimes and evenings were an attraction and a source of much needed revenue, but required considerable additional effort by volunteers and students

alike, whose working day now sometimes covered from early morning till midnight or later.

In addition to his teaching and management responsibilities, John Sherratt turned to large-scale catering, much of it being done in his own time. The wine bar expanded to include the sale of beer and spirits, relying on a team of regular voluntary barkeepers. The handling and accounting, often for large amounts of cash, at the end of each day became a specialised and demanding task. In addition to all of this, and as a direct result of cuts and loss of facilities elsewhere, Youth and Community Officers pressed strongly for youth and school related projects to be found both space and time at the Arts Centre Complex. This commitment imposed much additional strain upon the theatre's basic staff complement, and volunteers had to be found to staff the theatre throughout the day. Rarely was much financial support forthcoming during this period for the beleaguered Compass funds, leading to much dissension on both sides.

Apart from a few notable exceptions, the "Friends of the Compass" were long on ideas but sadly lacking with more practical help, and by the end of the first year had run out of steam. Although nominally continuing in existence until about 1992, they ceased to meet regularly and were effectively moribund. This is no criticism of the many fierce supporters of the work of the Compass, but was due to the fact that most of them had their own careers and businesses to attend to, with the bulk of the load necessarily falling on those who were retired. Nevertheless, during the first year the Compass met its financial obligation to the Council in full. Council officers were generally sympathetic and helpful when considering the difficulties they themselves faced right across the local government spectrum, whilst working within the limitations of a bureaucracy designed for more affluent times. They did their best, sometimes by devious means, to lighten the financial demands on the Compass. Some things however, they could not resolve, and it came as a shock to the fund raisers suddenly to find that commercial rates on the buildings, amounting to £10,000, which previously had been treated as a "book"

adjustment, had now to be found in hard cash. A fierce effort was also required to resist a demand to treat all future bookings at the Compass as “School Lettings” which required a minimum of three weeks’ notice, together with completion of a multi-page form requiring a fixed deposit and a guarantor against bad behaviour and non-payment.

A Parliamentary vote against Sunday trading resulted in a diligent licensing officer objecting to the regular profitable and popular antiques fairs at the Compass continuing. The officer was however later persuaded to permit them to continue.

## **THE ROAD TO RECOVERY**

By 1986 the Council had decided to establish a formal committee of Compass supporters, which included Youth and Community Service officers and affiliated organisations, to place fund raising activities on a much stronger footing. An inaugural meeting was held on Sunday March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1986, under the chairmanship of Councillor Dr D Payne, Chairman of the Adult and Youth Services Committee. Strangely, they decided to call it the “Friends of the Compass Consultative Group”. The existence of two bodies with virtually the same name caused confusion for some time. The working nucleus was to be a “Management Advisory Panel”, the members of which were elected at the inaugural meeting.

For many complex and varied reasons, the new “Friends of the Compass Committee”, which could have been a potent organ for easing the burden on the Compass and ensuring its voice was heard in the Council, was forced by increasing financial demands and conflicting priorities into wasteful disputes. This ultimately led the Council to decide upon a complete management restructure for the venue.

In the meantime, a volunteer group known as “Compass Promotions”, developed an extensive clientele of conferences, fairs, training groups and the like, which brought increasing revenue into the Compass.

Restoration of the post of Stage Director and the reinstatement of Ms Jones enabled the theatrical work to expand and to include gala evenings in the auditorium, with meals and cabaret or music hall for both private and public bodies. The Education Department, now faced with a huge retraining programme for schools under the Government's management and curriculum regimes, obtained grants and used the Compass as their base. They held regular daytime seminars, which together with meals, generated much sought after income. Thus the money provided by the Government for training, was helpfully recycled into local finances by way of the Compass contribution. The Compass also ran its own Management Training Courses, which in turn generated a few thousand pounds and Marjorie Hester, Head of the Youth and Community Education Service, arranged for a Government sponsored organisation known as "Community Network" to rent office and conference facilities within Ickenham Hall. Their task was to help long term unemployed people.

## **CLOSED AGAIN - Public Safety Problems**

A further unexpected blow came when the electrical wiring of the stage and switchboard failed and performances were abruptly curtailed in the middle of the 1986 pantomime season. After much deliberation, the Council authorised the remedial work to be done, but until this had been carried out the stage could not be used for several months. The Bistro was therefore turned into a mini- theatre, where some remarkably successful performances were staged.

However, far worse was yet to come, with the demise of the GLC in 1986, various public responsibilities were distributed amongst the London Boroughs, Hillingdon receiving the Public Licensing Department. A diligent officer noticed an advertisement placed in the local Gazette by the Compass and deemed it to be an invitation to children to attend Saturday morning film shows and for the public to attend performances. This he said, required a Public Entertainment Licence, for which purpose he would need to examine the safety standards at the venue.

The Compass argued it was being operated as a theatre club, for which a licence was not required, and all who paid to come were automatically enrolled as members of the Theatre Arts Club for the occasion. Other users of the premises were regarded as clubs and restricted organisations. The officer did not agree and carried out a preliminary inspection prior to the formal Licence application, and concluded the structure and even parts of the new wiring of the auditorium and backstage, were not up to the rigorous standards required for a Public Entertainment Licence. Even more damaging, the original wiring, which was enclosed within the walls, was found not to be protected by conduit and was potentially lethal. He advised the building was unsafe for any theatrical activity, and he would, therefore, be unable to issue the required licence. This situation could not be ignored by the authorities, and they had no option but to enforce closure of the auditorium for all performances for the foreseeable future. Once again the resident theatre company found itself without a theatre and as before, they quickly adapted. They presented plays, concerts and cabaret in the Bistro and Ickenham Hall, supplemented by visits to other venues. In the summer season, plays were staged in the grounds, and a large marquee with wooden seating for over 200 people was purchased, together with a lorry to move it. This purchase was achieved quite cheaply by using funds belonging to the original "Friends of the Compass". Fortunately, the auditorium was still usable for conferences, fairs and exhibitions. Therefore other fund-raising events were still able to continue, though income (which had been well on the way to the £25,000 required for 1987/8) would now be severely reduced. Fortunately the Council agreed to waive further financial contributions, due to the unexpected change in circumstances.

Whilst the Council agonised over the cost of the interim remedial work required, the stringent requirements for a full public entertainment licence hardened as a result of a new complexion on public safety after the tragic fire at Kings Cross Station in 1988. It soon became apparent the only real answer was to demolish and completely rebuild the auditorium. Repairs and renovation work for

Ickenham Hall had been moderately budgeted but these now became more urgent and more expensive. The cost of the entire work escalated with each examination, from £185,000 to £479,000, to an eventual £750,000. It seemed the Compass was doomed. Intense lobbying by many interested parties in the Borough, including the Hillingdon Arts Association, continued for many months and in early 1989, much to everyone's surprise, the Council unanimously approved, that all improvement and remedial work should be carried out.

## **THE NEW COMPASS**

The programme of work was planned to commence on November 13<sup>th</sup> 1989 and finish some 41 weeks later. The Council made it clear that they did not intend to build a completely new theatre and therefore the auditorium remained the same size and shape. However, much needed improvements to the dressing rooms and backstage areas were incorporated and the opportunity was also taken to install a lift to enable people with disabilities to access the stage. Retractable raked audience seating was considered to be a most desirable improvement but the Council was unable to approve this additional expense. The seating was eventually purchased and paid for from private donations and existing Compass funds.

This was by far the most difficult period of all for everyone at the Compass because the building work, though phased, extended over the entire complex. Everything had to be moved scenery, costumes and equipment much of it to Southbourne School and elsewhere. Although a removal company did the transportation, the mammoth task of selecting and preparing material for moving fell upon the Artistic Director, theatre staff, volunteers and students. A remarkable effort was made to continue to present plays and hold acting classes. The generation of additional income, however, began to suffer markedly.

As the expected completion date approached and with other Council Departments themselves in turmoil over the setting up of two overall groupings (one of which broadly covered people and the other things) Council officers made it abundantly clear fundamental changes were required. The Narrow Boats and HOAC would become voluntary Youth and Community organisations, both grant-aided by the Council for educational work, but otherwise self-supporting. The Sports Centre was likely to be merged with Hayes Manor Stadium. Cwm Pennant was as yet unaffected and the Compass would continue to remain the same, but operated on an even more stringent financial basis. The Education Department would continue to use the Compass, but on an increased scale and the premises would in future be hired to local and commercial theatre companies to stage productions, removing the emphasis from the resident company which by now had become something of a clique.

Additional class rooms and office accommodation were also required to be found for the Borough's Music Service and Adult Education classes. Both these requirements would severely restrict other viable commercial lettings and no clear indication was made at this stage on the amount of income the Compass could expect to receive as a result of these changes.

After this extensive modernisation and refurbishment, which commenced in the late 1980s (costing £1 million), the new Compass Theatre and Arts Centre was ceremoniously opened with a colourful and successful event on November 12<sup>th</sup> 1990 by HRH Prince Edward, whose presence was arranged by Barry Twigg of the Youth Service. The theatre programme resumed busily but this time in conjunction with several local amateur dramatic, dance and other interested groups, who in turn contributed considerably to the income. Ickenham Hall, though structurally sound, still required much interior work to be done and its use was confined mainly to music and further education classes. Council officers were still struggling with their own reorganisation with titles such as "Service Manager (Community Services)" and "Unit Manager (Community Education)", as if they



worked in a factory environment. One time Schools Officers now became responsible for “Client Services”. If Council Officers were not sure where they stood, the people at the coalface were even more baffled. Finances also continued to be further curtailed.

## **THE COMEDIA REPORT**

In the midst of restructuring and reorganisation, the Council commissioned a study by a firm of consultants, known as “The Comedia Company”, to prepare a “Corporate Arts Strategy” for Hillingdon. This is not the place to discuss this report in detail, but very broadly it recommended the setting up of an agency to co-ordinate the Arts in Hillingdon, funded by Council grant and sponsorships (nothing was indicated in the report about generating income); and the Council should have clear objectives and should *“Seek to ensure that there is Arts provision of an exemplary standard available to residents of the Borough”*. Committees or Partnerships - Companies limited by guarantee and registered as charities - should be set up to run groups of venues with the Council providing funding, so they in turn could pay rent to the Council, for the venues used. As the nature of activities at the Compass Theatre was of Borough-wide interest, it stood alone. Comedia said “It should be established as a separate trust to be grant-aided by the Agency”, and the Compass should be given a clear strategic role within the Council’s and Agency’s aims and objectives”. Comedia also considered the Compass might be used as a “College for the Amateur Arts”.

As the weeks and months passed it seemed increasingly unlikely this elaborate organisation of Agency and Partnership would be inaugurated or the Council would even consider funding it and the Comedia report eventually sank from view. However, its objective ideas for the Compass accorded in some ways with that of the Council’s view that the buildings must be used more effectively to justify money recently spent on them, and that access to a wider range of cultural activities was best left to local people to manage and encourage for themselves.

## UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

This overview was shared by the many amateur and professional groups who were anxious to make more use of the Compass. It coincided with drastic changes in education policy, which was by now moving away from centralised Local Government funding, control and policy-making. John Sherratt fought fiercely for the Compass to retain the primarily educational role for which it was built, but the Council now wanted the theatre to have a much wider role in Community activities. After much deliberation and discussion it was decided to set up a form of Trust to run the Compass, under the auspices of a Company Limited by Guarantee with charitable status. Its “Management Committee” would be initially selected by the Council but it would move quickly to self-governance and self-support.

The post of Artistic Director was considered to be no longer relevant and John Sherratt was to be made redundant, together with the post of Stage Manager. Youth Education in drama would still be a function of the Compass but would be delivered by a specific Council unit led by a Senior Youth Worker and located in the building as tenants instead of managers, which led to the formation of Hillingdon Youth Arts (HYART) and Magnetic North Youth Theatre.

At their 18<sup>th</sup> meeting on May 19<sup>th</sup> 1992, the full “Friends of the Compass Consultative Group” voted to disband, and Councillor Robert Taylor moved into the chair to appoint members to form a “Steering Committee” to pave the way for transfer of powers to the proposed Trust. The post of Head of the new Youth Education Unit was advertised and Chris Owen was appointed. For the next two years the Compass was partially funded by the Library Service and run by a volunteer “Management Committee” with - Trisha Grimshaw, Head of Library Service, retaining overall control, whilst the complex legal arrangements for transfer of responsibility to the Trust were considered.

John Sherratt departed prior to Chris Owen's appointment, and the students of the resident Theatre Company re-formed as the Studio Theatre Company (latterly Lemon Wedge), an educational arts and voluntary organisation. John Sherratt was asked by his former students to continue to direct their productions, some of which were still being held at the Compass, but now in the capacity of a visiting company hiring the venue. Work at the Compass continued, under the direction of its Management Committee, who further enhanced the reputation of the theatre which had been built up over many years. The post of Theatre Manager was advertised and Donna Chisholm was appointed. The theatre continued to be very busy throughout this period, hosting many amateur and professional companies. These presented varied productions, thus helping to maintain the theatre as a priceless facility with diverse artistic and cultural activity for the people of Hillingdon to enjoy.

Its welcoming ambience and design is a tribute to the dedication of John Sherratt, who for more than 24 years created a living theatre from what might otherwise have become just another Council-run hall. Its success is reflected in the hundreds of young people who have enriched their lives under his tutelage, many going on to make their careers in the professional theatre.

With a change of political leadership in 1994 the Council's plan for completely divesting control of the Compass was shelved, and at a meeting held on May 24<sup>th</sup> 1995 it was announced the Compass would remain as a form of local Community Centre. There would be a "Management Committee", having considerable autonomy but still within the framework of Hillingdon's Community Services. The existing members of the Management Committee, whose hard work for the previous two years had sustained the unique nature of the Compass and successfully created a broad clientele, were invited to continue.

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