

**Walthamstow School for Girls**

**Greek Amphitheatre  
1925 - 2005**

**80th Birthday Celebrations  
&  
Restoration Project 1st Meeting**

**Saturday 2nd July 2005**

## **Walthamstow School for Girls**



a specialist college in mathematics and computing  
"an exceptional School" OFSTED 2002

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### **Brief History of Walthamstow School for Girls**

On 19<sup>th</sup> January 1890, a "School for Girls" was opened in West Avenue, Walthamstow. The teachers were Headmistress Blanche Hewett and one other "mistress". There were 49 girls, whose ages ranged from 7 to 16 years. When the number of students grew the school moved to Church Hill House. The school came under the control of Essex County Council in 1911 and moved to its present site in Church Hill in September 1913. There were now 243 girls.

Following Blanche Hewett's retirement in 1924, Mary Norris became the new headmistress. She had graduated in classics from London University. At this time the unemployed were utilized in building projects and the school was offered the option of an open-air swimming pool but Mary Norris insisted on building a Greek Amphitheatre.

It was opened by Dame Sybil Thorndike on 2nd July 1925.

Mary Norris retired as headmistress in 1946. As part of Waltham Forest reorganization in 1968 the school became a "Senior High School", accepting girls of 14-18 years. In 1986 it became, as it is today, an 11-16 Girls Comprehensive School with 900 students, although the last 6<sup>th</sup> formers from the Senior High did not leave until 1989.

The school has achieved:  
Two School Achievement Awards.  
"Exceptional School" Ofsted. Oct 2002.  
Specialist College Status in  
Mathematics and Computing Sept 2004.  
Evening Standard School Award for  
Outstanding Achievement. 2004.  
Ofsted Hall of Fame. 2005.



*(The Greek Theatre 2005)*

### **The Greek Theatre 1925-2005**

#### **1925 -The Opening Ceremony**

The opening ceremony of the Greek Amphitheatre on July 2nd 1925 included a performance of The Medea. Dame Sybil Thorndike, her husband and children all had parts as well as students from the school



### **1930 – 'Magic'.**

In 1930 the school's prize giving was held for the first time in the Greek Theatre and there were additional activities that year too, to celebrate the fact that Walthamstow had become a borough. The girls were given bags of sweets, oranges and a beaker and there was a performance of conjuring and ventriloquism.

### **1944 - Dog Show.**

An even stranger event than 'Magic' were the Dog Shows which were held to raise money for charities. The 1944 copy of 'Iris' (the school magazine) referred to various fundraising activities for the Russian Red Cross, local hospitals, etc. and the report goes on to say:

'Our own Red Cross was not forgotten, and in May a very amusing and successful Dog Show was organised whereby £40 or so was raised. The dogs, which numbered about a hundred, were judged by Mrs. Edwards in the Greek Theatre, and were remarkably well behaved.'

### **1948 - Fifth Form Play.**

Once exams were over the Fifth Form always produced a play in the Greek Theatre.

The photograph shows a production of Beaumont's 'Knight of the Burning Pestle'



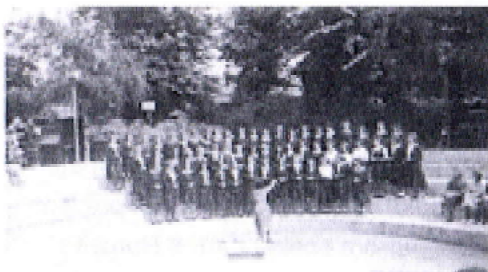
### **1950 - Diamond Jubilee Pageant.**

When the school was sixty years old a Diamond Jubilee Pageant was performed in the Greek Theatre when: Many coloured Iris, symbolic of the spirit of the school, opened our pageant with these words:

"I Iris am: the scene is Walthamstow. The fable of our lovely school we show in seven scenes to mark our Jubilee."

Three illustrations from this seven part pageant, which went back over the years;

- 1) 1950 was the school choir repeating their successful broadcast for the BBC.



- 2) 1930 saw the winning of the Essex Netball Trophy and in the photograph we can see the historic game being mimed and danced.

- 3) The photograph represents item four in the Pageant and celebrates the founding of the Greek Theatre with, appropriately enough, excerpts from 'Medea', right down to the burning of incense!



### **1951- Festival of Britain Commemorative Plays.**

The Festival of Britain was heralded at the Greek Theatre by a performance of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. In June (1951) Walthamstow High School Old Girls and Monoux Old Boys added to the Festival celebrations with their production of 'Much Ado About Nothing'.

### **1952 - Opera and Prize - Giving**

In her reminiscences of life at the school, Phyllis Allison referred to the performance of 'Dido and Aeneas', Purcell's opera for girls' voices, choreographed and dressed by Shirley Russell (nee Kingdon) in the Baroque style. She spent hours researching in the V. & A. and luckily the acting cupboard was well endowed with ostrich feathers and artificial pearls. No doubt Shirley Russell found this production experience good preparation for the work she would do in many of her husband's films, organising and designing the costumes.

The 1952 prize giving. Prizes were presented by the Leader of the Opposition Rt. Hon. C.R. Atlee and Mrs. Atlee. Pressure of work in the House of Commons did not prevent them from seeing part of Purcell's opera.



#### **School use today.**

Out door Class Room

School assemblies and celebrations  
such as Leavers Day

#### **Community Use**

##### **Greek Theatre Players**

The Greek Theatre Players have had at least one production every year since 1958.



Midsummer Night's Dream



King Lear

### **The Alumni.**

The school Alumni have now met on the first Saturday in July for several years. Hundreds of ex-students and staff have enjoyed good company, good food and shared many memories with long lost class mates.



Membership of the Walthamstow School for Girls Alumni is £5 for a year. This includes the newsletters. If you would like to be part of the Alumni then please send a cheque to the treasurer **Janet Hoad, 1/21 Castle Avenue, Highams Park, London, E4 9PY** and they will be happy to include you.



### **The Walthamstow Village Festival.**

This annual event was centred on the school grounds and Greek Theatre.

### **The Future.**

The 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Greek Theatre on 2nd July 2005 is not just a celebration of its achievements but also an opportunity to think of its future.

How will our Greek theatre be celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2025?

What needs to be done now to make sure it is a fully used and valuable resource for the School, Waltham Forest and London.

## **Greek Theatre Restoration Project 1st Meeting 2nd July 2005**

A meeting will take place at school on 2nd July 2005 at 3.00 pm as part of the 80th Birthday Celebrations and Alumni Event. (12.00-4.00 pm).

The agenda is to discuss, amend, prioritise and investigate possible funding for the following:

### ◆ **Essential Works.**

- Repairs to cracks and subsidence.
- Renewal of electrical supply.
- Renewal of 'pergola' entrance.

### ◆ **Desirable Works**

- New permanent lighting including facility for add-on spots and floods for productions.
- Paving of entrance and upper circle.
- New lighting box.
- Restoration and replanting of surrounding area.
- Improved access to school toilets, changing room and storage.
- Development / replacement of the pond and patio.

### ◆ **Possible Works**

- A pavilion. - in the corner of the east lawn. This could serve refreshments and store lights, seating (cushions), etc.
- A removable roof structure / canopy which could protect the Greek Theatre and its audience when it is raining.

It is hoped that all groups who use the Greek Theatre will be able to send a representative to the meeting but also that the day will attract a wider audience who are interested in the future of this valuable resource, which is a 5 minute walk from Walthamstow Central and only 20 minutes on the Victoria Line from the West End of London .

If you are interested but unable to attend please contact Mike Robson (Assistant Headteacher) and we will keep you in touch with developments:

Email: [Mike.Robson@sch.lbwf.gov.uk](mailto:Mike.Robson@sch.lbwf.gov.uk)