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Private: Our Trailer Story

To celebrate the arrival of Trailer Story, Theatre by the Lake and English Touring Theatre have been taking a deep dive back into their shared history: Century Theatre and the 'Blue Box'.

Let's start from the beginning.

In 1948 John Ridley caught Wilfred Harrison after he finished a performance in Hinckley Working Mens' Club and shared with him his sketches for a mobile theatre. Captivated by the idea, Wilfred helped raise money for the project whilst John, with the help of coach-builder Dick Bull and electrical engineer Norman Robinson, began building. After four years of hard work (and many pots of blue paint) Century Theatre was finally ready to hit the road.

Century toured the country with a convoy of trailers, all towed by couple ex-service trucks. Packed into the trailers was a performance space, auditorium, box office, and dressing rooms. The rest of the convoy consisted of accommodation and dining facilities for the team.

Imagine deconstructing a theatre, an office, and a B&B and you'll have some idea of what they managed to pack together!

In 1975, during one of Century Theatre's many summers in Keswick, one of their trucks failed its MOT, which meant that what had now been dubbed the 'Blue Box', ended up staying put, remaining in Keswick until 1996.

Eventually there was a successful campaign for a permanent replacement to be built in Keswick: Theatre by the Lake was founded, and Century Theatre moved on to Coalville where you can still visit it today.

As well as their space in Coalville, Century Theatre continued to have a touring arm to its work. In 1992 Stephen Unwin took over the touring arm and relaunched it as English Touring Theatre.

So three companies evolved from those trailers and trucks!

It's been 60 years since the Century Theatre's first summer in Keswick. To celebrate, we got back in touch with some of those who worked there.

Photographer Chris Arthur recalled the journey to Keswick for that first season 1961:

The move from Preston to prepare its first Keswick season in 1961 was going to be the longest one ever attempted for the Century Theatre. Whilst this took place our acting company were sent 'on tour' to the Everyman Theatre at Cheltenham.

I was introduced to a number of the Century's essential driver 'Volunteers' who'd been recruited to help with this epic move. among them was Bob Pratt.

and it was my first meeting with Hilary Young who, it being a Sunday, had a day off from his summer season job in stage management Blackpool Opera House

In preparation for the big move John Ridley took some of the drivers on an advance recce to plan the route in his car. I was 'mating' for Hilary, but he had been working elsewhere and consequently had been unable to participate in that exercise.

As a mate, and on the narrower, hazard strewn and more convoluted roads one would spend a fair amount of time hanging out standing on the running board on the nearside of the drivers cab in order to be able to see what was happening with the last of our two trailers which were often hidden from the driver's sight by the sheer bulk of a main theatre trailer.

Large, very long and slow moving we'd inevitably be accompanied by a long tail of frustrated motorists who found themselves trapped behind us.

On reaching Kendal Hilary wasn't able to remember exactly which turn we were meant to take and as it wasn't somewhere we could easily hang around when we came to a sign showing a turn off to the left which said 'To The Lakes', we took it.

This road went up and up and getting ever narrower and narrower, with dry stone walls closing in on either side. Eventually we arrived at a place where 50 feet ahead it reached a horizon line with just blue sky above. We stopped, I got out and walked ahead our truck which rapidly disappeared from my view as the road plunged downwards toward a valley. We had no option but to go for it, which we did successfully. However, as I hung off the near side of the tractor I rather damaged the seat of my jeans as bottom repeatedly skidded against the dry stone walls.

One of the last challenges for our drivers on this run was the very tight 90 degree right turn beside Keswick Post Office, which on the date we arrived was being controlled by Paddy, a particularly animated and slightly eccentric policeman, who almost had a heart attack when he saw the size of our wagon trains. As Hilary has subsequently reminded me "Turning right by Keswick Post Office we knocked off the T and re-named it the 'rustee Savings Bank'.

Hilary Young, Former Manager of Century Theatre, reminisced about those long summers in Keswick:

I like to think that one of the high points in the life of Century was the 2nd summer season in Keswick in 1962. I had come back into the fold as manager and the hugely energetic Ian Curteis directed a season of plays that we would drool over these days. The first line of Ben Johnson's THE ALCHEMIST set the season going "I fart at thee". It was followed by PEER GYNT, DEATH OF A SALESMAN, THE ENTERTAINER, PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD, Moliere's THE MISANTHROPE and a new American play.

That summer we were welcomed back into Keswick by Lindsay Temple whose enthusiastic support was to become so important in later years when he kept Century afloat in difficult times.

The Council too welcomed us back and instead of the old tip we were sited in the middle of town on what is now part of the Central Car park. They also allowed us to put up a small ticket booth at the bottom of the market square. Rushing to open it one morning armed with the new posters, a brush and pan of paste and with a patient queue of customers waiting, I realised that I hadn't brought the key so I nipped into Temple's haberdashery shop and surprised Lindsay with a request for a carving knife – to slip the Yale lock.

He also touched on some of the less glamorous parts of managing the mobile company

The Theatre had a trailer with Ladies and Gents chemical loos for the public which I found that fastidious actors used to avoid defiling their own living van closet. And the one chore that the company never shared in my days as Manager was emptying them. It always fell to me.

There'd be an Emergency call – THE LOOS ARE FULL – just before audience arrived and I'd be emptying them dressed in my dinner jacket – down the nearest sewer cover.





Century Theatre in Keswick. Photo by Pete Savin (@pete_savin)

Colin Dobson recalled being on tour with the company as an actor in 1971:

The 'Blue Box' was sited in a car park in Lancaster when we first arrived. It became home to us so that whatever town we were in it was our focal point, the place in which we belonged and where we spent most of our time. At our first meeting Peter and guest director Nick Kent outlined the overall plan for the season. They also told us that we would be followed by a film crew who were making a documentary about the company.

Rehearsals began with two plays, 'Moby Dick Rehearsed' by Orson Welles and Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night'. The set for both was dominated by a large circular revolve raked at an angle. With the low side to the audience this became the sloping deck of the Pequod complete with mast and wheel. Turned round it was the pulpit in the Whale men's chapel and the arching back of the whale. In 'Twelfth Night' it was covered with a rich looking carpet whose colours were changed by lighting to reflect the moods of each scene. Working on a slope had its challenges, particularly when, in Moby Dick we were required to maintain a slight sway when on stage to give the illusion of the ship's motion. It was all too easy to lose balance and stagger. The Georgian Theatre Richmond also has a raked stage so Twelfth Night, which opened the season, was performed at an even steeper angle.

As the season continued the company were kept artistically fresh by devising and improvising a variety of scenes intended to be presented as a show called Strange Things, but it was never completed and never performed. At the beginning of October we left Keswick, and after a short break re-formed to open the new Duke's Playhouse in Lancaster.

I re-visited the Blue Box as an audience member during its final season in Keswick before moving to its new site in Coleville where, in August 2013 I visited again with my grandchildren. My time with Century Theatre has been an important highlight in my life and I am so pleased that the Theatre by the Lake has continued its work in Keswick. The town, the Blue Box and it's offspring will always occupy a corner of my heart.

Jenny Wilson also remembers daily life as part of the company:

I joined as a Secretary (working, as distinct from Honorary, a post filled by the inimitable Molly Sole of Old Vic fame). By then Century was fulfilling the "North West Theatre project" of taking theatre to towns in Lancashire, Westmorland and Cumberland. It had, at John Ridley's instigation, established an annual summer season at Keswick, modelled on the Pitlochry Festival, where visitors could see a number of plays over a week, and where the theatre could be confident of reasonable audiences over a stretch of ten weeks or so. For me, it was a steep learning curve – not only theatrical, but also some basic engineering, cooking, laundry and customer relations.

By the time I'd been upgraded to Admin Assistant a few months later, I understood a good deal more; I was not only drafting the schedule for move staff and helpers, I was calculating and paying wages, poster, banking, minuting Board meetings, typing up Arts Council reports and applications, finding casual staff, providing local authority reports on our visits, and from time to time (when a cook went missing) learning cooking skills too. And all without a landline or mobile, email or messaging.

Audiences fluctuated on all sites. Sometimes we could blame the play (no, sorry, Elizabeth Taylor is not in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" in Nelson); sometimes the weather – exceedingly hot gently broiled the audiences and performers together, so they emerged at the end of the show slightly shiny. Exceedingly cold brought audiences huddled in coats, scarves, hats and gloves, and not so many of them. Sometimes, long before social media, we had to blame ourselves and poor publicity prior to the visit. But the arrival of a large

blue metal structure on a prominent site was of itself, a good advertisement. Engaging in conversation with the curious who came to watch the build was not taking a break – it was PR and marketing.

The mobile theatre went to Keswick and remained there for over twenty years, with varying fortunes, but a regular summer audience and growing use by the local community. In the 1980's moves started for Keswick to have a permanent theatre, though it was 1997 before the mobile theatre finally left the site on Lake Road. Taken down, and carefully shipped to Snibston Discovery Centre by many of the volunteers from the 60's together with former employees like Hilary Young, who retain the blueprint for dismantling in their heads, the theatre retains its function as a centre for live performance of plays, music and readings, and has added the ability to show film to its offering. It remains a remarkable, curious, and heart-warming achievement – loved as much by its current band of volunteers as by the originators and their fellow enthusiasts.

The legacy of Century Theatre lives not only in the memories of those who were there, but is embedded in the company's which have evolved from it, and in the many towns where its visits inspired future advocates for theatre and the arts.

It is a testament to those imaginative and enthusiastic people who emerged from the trauma of the Second World War and found a beautiful way to reconnect and tell stories together.

So as we drive our Trailer Story truck down the small windy roads of the Lake District, we think back to that merry bunch who did so before us, paving the way for us and future generations.

This blog is part of a wider project to research and celebrate Century Theatre and our company origins.

**If you have any memories or stories of Century Theatre, we'd love to hear from you!
You can get in touch by emailing projects@ett.org.uk**

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