

## The intimate atmosphere of 'The Civic'

In July next year the Civic Centre will probably bring down its last curtain as a place of enjoyable entertainment in the town centre. I say probably, because since its closure was announced some years ago, the centre has had a number of reprieves.

The Civic Centre was the last great public building commissioned by the former Aylesbury Borough Council. The idea of a new Civic Hall was first mooted by Borough Councillors in 1968, but plans didn't really get under way until 1970. Council minutes in that year stated: *'In presenting his report, the borough architect referred to the problems of trying to reconcile the various uses envisaged for the hall, particularly those requiring a flat floor and, for instance, stage presentations which really demanded raked seating. From his discussions with the ministry's architects and visits to recently built civic halls and theatres and from extensive research, it had become clear that the trend in recent theatrical and educational practise was away from the conventional picture-frame stage.'*

Building work eventually commenced on 17 January 1972, by builders Benfield & Loxley of Oxford. The main building stood on the site of the former market hall run by Loaders, and its design reflected the octagonal shaped auction rings in the adjacent livestock market. Including the swimming pool, the total cost was a little under £900,000. The Civic, as it later became affectionately known, was opened on 2 September 1975 by Cllr Tony Mogford, Chairman of the new Aylesbury Vale District Council.

The inaugural concert on 6 September was the 'Messiah' performed by a combined choir and orchestra drawn from local music societies. Starting at 7.30 pm in the main auditorium, then known as 'The Vale Hall', the entrance fee was 60p for adults, or 20p for seniors and children. This was followed on the Sunday by a 'public viewing' of the new centre, when a 'Songs of Praise' was held in the evening. Wrestling with Mick McManus & Johnny Kwango was on 8 September when the cost of entrance was increased to 80p, and on the following Wednesday there was an 'Old Tyme Music Hall'. Rothmans, one of the biggest employers in the town at the time, then held a charity dance with Bob Miller & the Millermen.

Over the years many famous people have performed at the Civic: Comedians Frankie Howerd, Ken Dodd, Jasper Carrot, Danny laRue, Norman Wisdom and latterly Jack Dee, to name but a few; Crooners Val Doonican & Ronnie Hilton with the Kaye Sisters; and numerous 'Big Bands' and international ballet

companies. When 'Friars' relocated to the new venue such acts as Genesis, The Jam, Police and Talking Heads, supported by an up and coming group called 'Dire Straits' took the stage. The entrance fee for that particular concert was an unbelievable £1.40. In more recent years Jools Holland, Bill Wyman and Peter Green have brought their bands to the intimate atmosphere of The Civic.

Over recent years the Civic has presented pantomimes which have always been well attended. Celebrities such as Britt Ekland and Linda Robson have taken lead roles in these shows, and the last pantomime to be performed in this venue in December and January will feature the famous couple Paul Daniels and Debbie McGee.

Besides concerts the Civic has also hosted countless company dinner dances, the annual 'Street Life' party, civic receptions, exhibitions and collector's fairs, craft and trade shows - one of the most popular being the Railex Exhibition. The Aylesbury Association for the Protection of Persons & Property annual dinner, relocated to the Civic when Hazells Hall burned down in 1999.

In addition to the Maxwell Hall (formerly the Vale Hall) there are other smaller rooms which are used by a variety of clubs, including The Aylesbury Club for their annual Duck Dinner.

The Civic Centre is a unique, multi-functional venue, with an intimate atmosphere that both performers and audiences delight in, and respond to. It has been called the Village Hall of Aylesbury, and it will be sadly missed when it closes.

**Roger King**



Sketch by Nick Carter, courtesy of The Aylesbury Society