



Byre
Theatre

To mark the 20th anniversary of the opening of the current, award winning building, the Byre began to chart the story of the theatre and the people who made, and make it all possible, through archive materials.

During the Summer of 2021, the Byre worked with a Summer Intern, Beth McHugh, to begin the process of bringing together a vast number of materials, including photographs, programmes, plays and documents from various collections and places with the aim of organising, cataloguing and digitising them to preserve and share them with everyone who has an interest in, or an attachment to, this wonderful, small theatre. She uncovered the tip of an enormous iceberg, revealing the beginnings of a significant collection.

In recognition of this moment in the Byre's history, excellent work on the archive, what follows is Beth's personal and evocative response to our invitation to reflect on her internship.

THE BYRE IN TEN MOMENTS

Beth McHugh

Byre Summer Intern, September 2021

ONE

One moment which really stood out to me was finding pictures of the original cow byre, before it was converted to the first Byre Theatre by the Play Club. In the pictures of the empty cow byre, although they are blurry and dark, it is something special to look at the pictures filled with potential, knowing what we do now about how far the theatre has come. I was reminded of a section in the book *The Byre Theatre Through the Years*, written by the Byre's founder Alexander B Paterson (known as Alec), about when he had first found the building. He discussed how he had gone on a walk with some friends from the Play Club, when one of them mentioned that the Abbey Street Dairy Farm had recently become available to rent. Alec insisted they went along to see it immediately, and he recounted the experience vividly, writing:

'Peering through the cobwebbed windows, I saw a rectangular chamber with the remains of cow stalls, partly removed to make way for potatoes. Above was a loft, where fodder had been stored for the cows. "This would be the very place for us," I announced.'

Getting a glimpse into the bare bones which would become the theatre was easily a highlight for me!



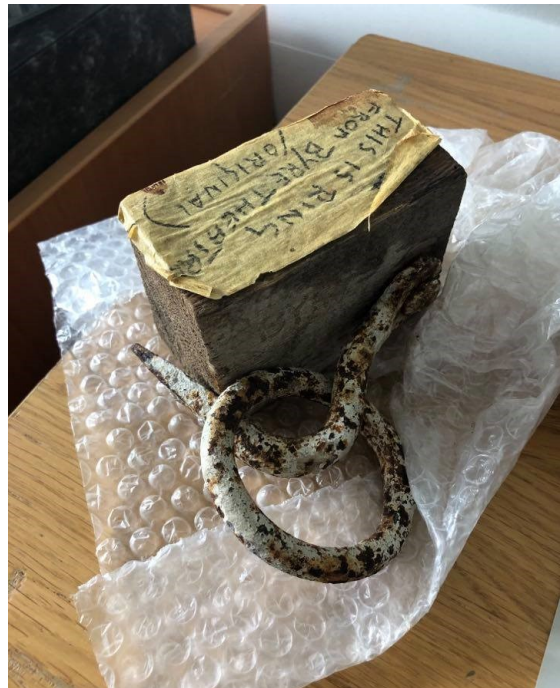
Another moment that stood out to me in my research was the story of Ted Holman. When I was starting out on this project, I tried to research all of the original Play Club members to learn more about the people who created the Byre. I knew that it was an endeavour taken up by the local people of St Andrews, coming from within the community rather than being imposed on it, something which Alec Paterson was especially proud of. Pictures of the original Play Club members were preserved, which was lovely to see. In my research I learned that not long after the Play Club had begun their shows in the Byre, nearly all of the members were conscripted into the Second World War. One member, Ted Holman, joined the RAF – a role in which he sadly lost his life. I went along to the war memorial in St Andrews next to the cathedral, and found his name, Edward John Holman, engraved. It was a sad moment, but it stood out to me as one worth remembering.



THREE

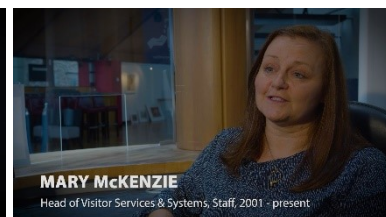
Meeting Jimmy Bone for the first time was undoubtedly a special moment during the project.

Along with a wealth of stories, ranging from moving, to funny, to supernatural in nature, Jimmy brought with him a folder full of photographs, and a very special object – a bull's tether. This tether was from the original cow byre which was converted into the first Byre Theatre. Jimmy explained how it had been on stage in every production put on in that building, due to the fact that they couldn't get it out of the wall. Having it with us as we met in the Byre's third building felt like a really special connection between the theatre's origins and the present day. I have since found a photo of it in a play, and we are hopeful that soon we can arrange for it to be made available to view online in 3D thanks to the help of the University of St Andrews Special Collections.



FOUR

Another highlight of the project was interviewing people who had been involved with the Byre over the years for the 'Byre Back in Time' film. I wrote out general questions for everyone, and some specific questions for each individual, and went into the interviews without any idea of what to expect. What stood out most to me was the emotional responses from the interviewees. One of my favourite questions to ask was 'Can you sum up what the Byre means to you in 3 words?' – I was always excited to see how each interviewee would interpret it. Two responses stood out to me in particular. The first was given by Jimmy Bone, who paused for a moment, before answering, 'A lifetime's experience.' This beautifully summarised Jimmy's love for the Byre. The other answer, given by Sylvia Donaldson, also showed me how special the Byre was to our interviewees, as she simply answered, 'Well, I only need one word – *everything*'.



FIVE

While I was sorting through the huge assortment of pictures associated with each theatre, I began to notice some similarities. As I mentioned earlier, the picture of the first Byre before conversion had really captured my attention. However, it didn't stop there – I saw elements of the same atmosphere and composition in photographs I found of the auditorium under construction in both the Byre's second and third buildings. I put the three of them together and seeing them in comparison to each other was a lovely moment to reflect both on what has changed over the years, and what has stayed the same. During the interviews, different opinions were presented on whether Alec Paterson would have liked the current theatre – some believed that he appreciated the simplicity of the earliest building the most, and some believed he would be incredibly proud that what he began had come so far and the community could benefit from such an amazing building. But whilst we will never know what the original founder of the theatre thought, the pictures through the years capture the similarities, highlighting that a mixture of both has been achieved.

AUDITORIA UNDER CONSTRUCTION AT ALL THREE BYRES

First Byre 1930s



Original Cow Byre Interior
Showing Stairs Leading to
Hay Loft

Second Byre 1960s



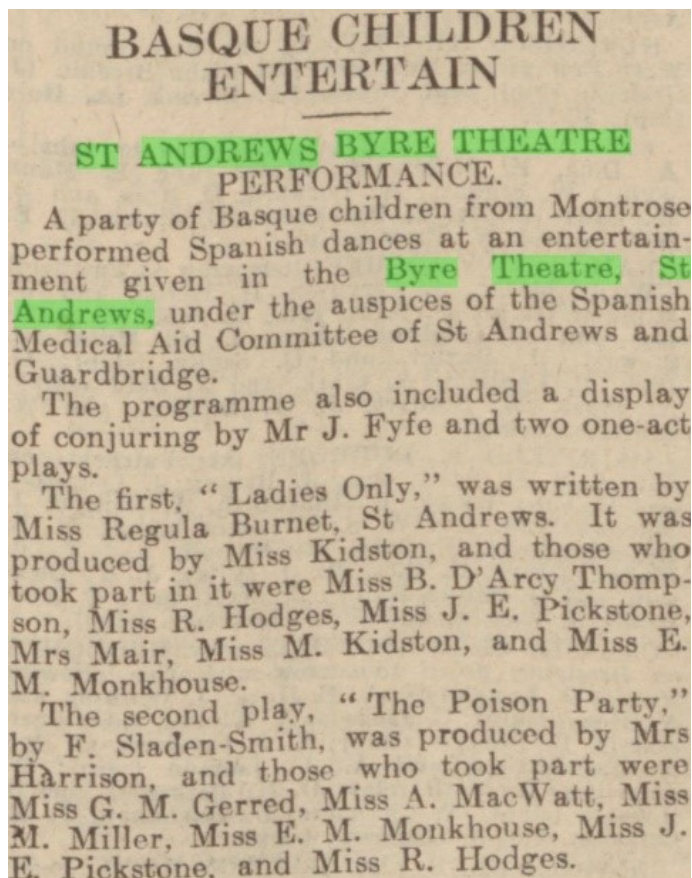
Auditorium Stage
Right

Third Byre 2000s

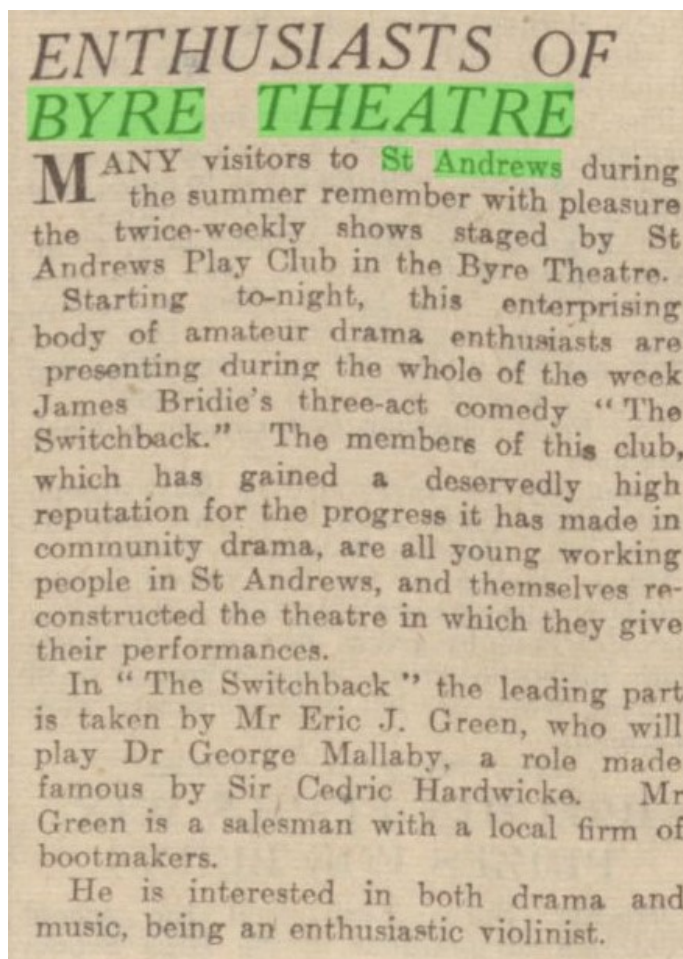


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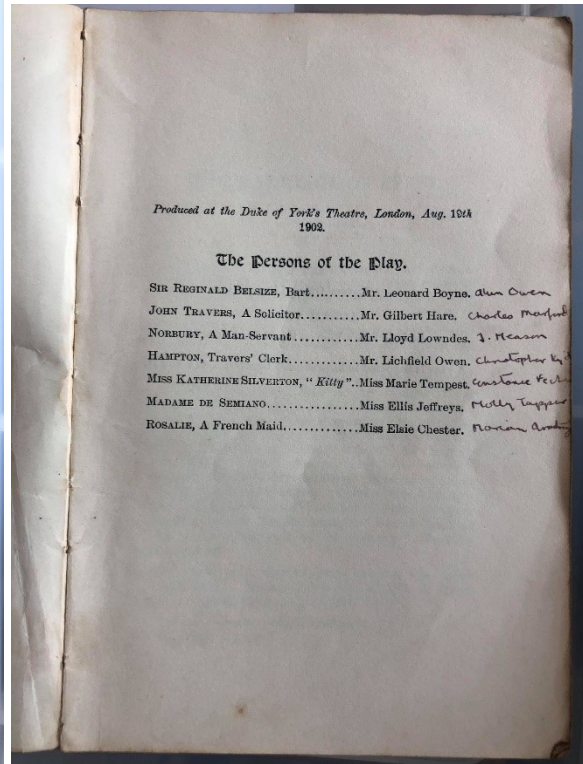
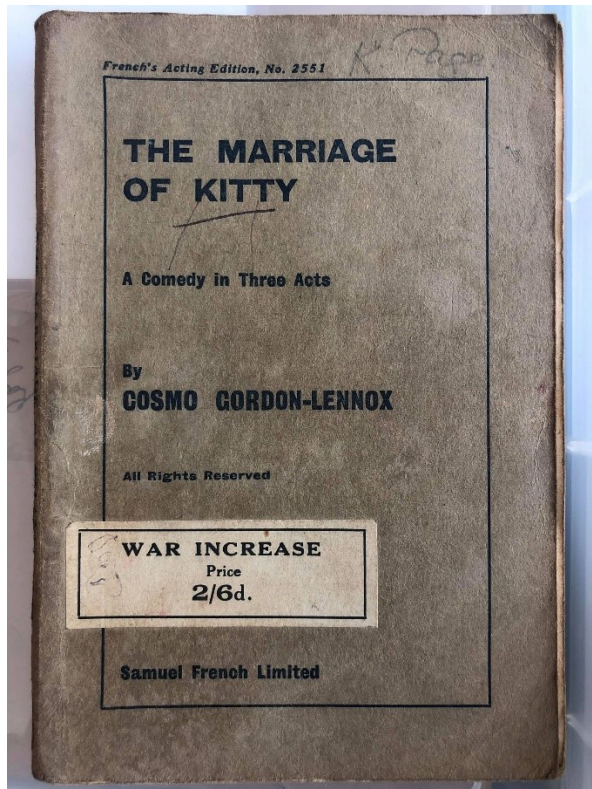
Newspapers were another avenue I explored for insight into the Byre's history. I found some amazing articles, including one from 1935 discussing one of the earliest plays performed in the Byre for an audience. However, one article which really stood out to me was from 1938, entitled '*Basque Children Entertain: St Andrews Byre Theatre Performance*'. This article describes how a group of Basque children who were living in Montrose as refugees from the Spanish Civil War had performed Spanish dances under the watch of the Spanish Medical Aid Committee of St Andrews and Guardbridge. I found this story to be a lovely example of the Byre acting as a focal point for community and culture from its earliest times.



Many special moments came from looking through the scripts from the Byre's productions, from the earliest days onwards. One script that stands out is for '*The Switchback*' – this copy in particular was published in 1931, and the play was produced by the Play Club in 1939. The script is browned and fragile. The most exciting moment for me was when I looked at the page containing the names of the characters in the play, and there next to the characters were the names of the actors and actresses who had played the part, including several original play club members. It felt really special to be holding something that was used to make one of the earliest plays at the Byre come to life. There is also a newspaper article about the performance, which added great context to the script. The newspaper described the Play Club as an '*enterprising body of amateur drama enthusiasts*', before highlighting that they were all working young people of St Andrew who had converted the old cow byre into a theatre themselves. Between the script and the newspaper article, I feel like you can really appreciate the effort and excitement of the early actors and actresses.



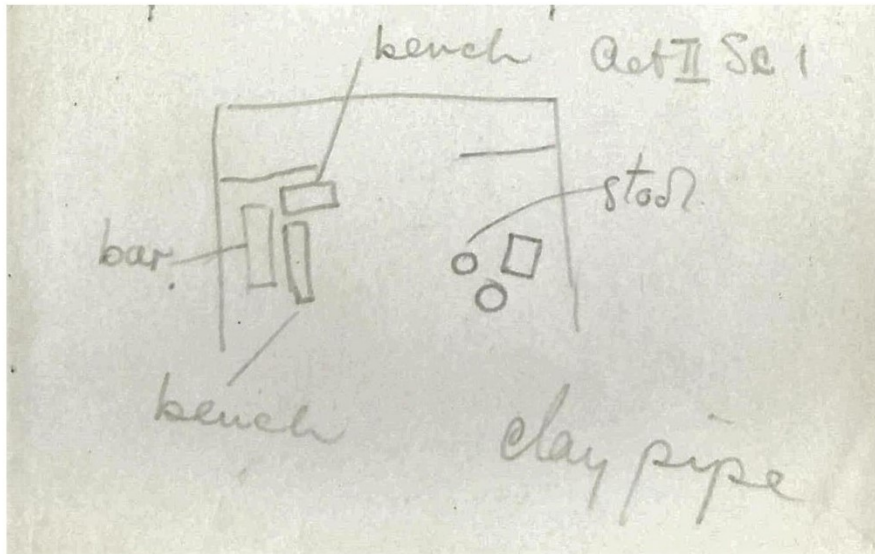
Another amazing moment from the scripts was when I found a set for the play 'The Marriage of Kitty', which was performed in the 1942-43 season and the books are marked with a War Increase on their price. The cast list showed the names of people who had kept the Byre going throughout the war whilst the Play Club were away. The theatre persevered under Charles Marford, his wife Molly Tapper, and their adorable dachshund Mopsy who I was delighted to find a couple of pictures of. To see a script with their names pencilled on was a special moment as it felt like their legacy was tangible.



MOLLY TAPPER AND MOPSY

NINE

One play from 1955 united different materials to produce a fuller view. The play was '*The Anatomist*', and inside the cover of one of the scripts were some sketches of set designs. The Byre has a large collection of boxes of H.P.3 Plates, with a good selection from the 1950s, including photo plates of '*The Anatomist*'. It was possible to find a picture that you could see the set in once it was developed from negative. This was a great moment for me as I loved that it was possible to see the progression of ideas from sketches to set through a script that was 66 years old.



The last moment in the history of the Byre that I really loved was the photographs of the change from the second to the third building. The pictures begin at the last performances in the old building – photographs of the set, the play, the staff who worked that night, and even the audience in their seats. Then there is thorough documentation of the destruction of the second building, which is obviously a sad moment for those who loved it, but you can also sense the excitement of the new building. There are so many plans, models, and construction photos of the third building that it feels like a really complete view of what happened. It is really interesting to be able to see the current building coming together, and the pictures of our interviewees on site are also amazing to see. I am glad that this process was so well recorded as it is a crucial moment in enabling the Byre to continue functioning best for the community it was formed to benefit.

