

THE WHIPS

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE



BY Stephen Turner

The WHIPS came into existence shortly after 3.30 pm on the afternoon of Monday 19th July 1948. A committee meeting of the Dramatic Section of the West Horsley Women's Institute was in session at 'Tree Tops' in The Street, and it was proposed "that the Dramatic Section in future be called the 'West Horsley Institute Players' to be known as the W.H.I.P.S.". The motion was carried unanimously and so the WHIPS were born. This first-ever WHIPS committee was an all female affair, but it was a situation which was not to last for long. After drawing up the rules and regulations "to be printed in the form of a blue card like the W.I. programme", the secretary was instructed by the meeting to invite "Mr.Parker and Mr.Smith" to join the committee.

The two gentlemen were duly welcomed by the ladies at a meeting in August, and the committee turned its attentions to the W.H.I.P.S. first-ever production - "Charity Begins" - a three act comedy by Ireland Wood. Present members might care to note that the production was a success and "without a producer's fee there was a credit balance of 10s.0½d.". The payment of the vast sum of two guineas to the producer obviously threw the committee into some confusion, and it was decided that "in view of the balance sheet" the price of tickets would, in future, have to be raised to 3/6d. and 2/6d."

At the General Meeting held in November 1948 the future of the W.H.I.P.S. was discussed, but it was agreed that the group should remain a sub-committee of the West Horsley Women's Institute. It was decided, however, to widen the membership, and a proposal that 'Rule One' should be amended to read "and to consist of West Horsley Women's Institute Members and Residents of Horsley", was carried by eleven votes to one.

Six months later, such had been the growth of the W.H.I.P.S. that a Special General Meeting was held in July 1949 when, on the recommendation of the committee, the W.H.I.P.S. severed links with the W.I. and achieved full independence. Violet Bulley, the WHIPS first chairman, informed the meeting that the previous dramatic society in West Horsley had also started in the same fashion and when "it was strong enough to stand on its own feet" it too became a village society. This ancestor of the WHIPS closed down on the outbreak of the 2nd World War after a heady run of fourteen years, and the chairman hoped its successor would enjoy as successful an existence. Nearly forty years later, it would be reasonable to claim that her hopes have been fulfilled.

The initials W.H.I.P.S. continued to stand for the 'West Horsley Institute Players' until 1957. It was initially suggested at a committee meeting in December 1956 that the name might be changed to 'West Horsley Independent Players', but in the end the unanimous

decision of those present at the AGM the following February was that the society should be renamed 'THE WHIPS' and should not be regarded as having any connections with the West Horsley Institute. And we have remained 'THE WHIPS' ever since.

During the 1960s and early 1970s the WHIPS were in the habit of presenting at least two shows a year in the West Horsley Village Hall, and rehearsals took place in the barn at the Barley Mow. In 1974 the WHIPS left the Barley Mow and established themselves for rehearsal purposes at the hall at Glenesk School in East Horsley, where they were to remain for the next three years. The storage of scenery was always a problem, and the society used a variety of depots, including the Barley Mow itself, the barn at the Horsley Hotel near the station, and an outbuilding in Effingham.

A quarterly newsletter 'Whiplash' was being produced during the early 1960s, but it does not seem to have met with the success of its follower, 'Stage WHIsPerS', which first appeared in 1973 and is currently billed as a monthly. It keeps members fully informed as regards current productions, future plans and a wide range of social events for actors and non-actors alike.

The 1970s also saw the appearance of the WHIPS' junior sections. The youngest group, the 'Whippets' were first to come into existence in 1975, and following hard on their heels two years later, came the group's teen-age off-shoot, the 'Young Whips', and both of whom have been delighting audiences in the 1980s.

The WHIPS have been served by five presidents. The first, Hal Fielder, a founder member of the society, was its chairman in 1953 and 1954, and was elected its first president in 1958. He stood down in 1973 to make way for a younger man, and was replaced by Doug Gaze, who had been a leading member of the society throughout the 1960s. When the second president was forced to resign within the year through unforeseen family circumstances, he was replaced by George Vanstone, a WHIPS stalwart of long-standing. Yet another founder member, Joan Fry, became the WHIPS' fourth president in 1976, and on Joan's unexpected death in 1982 she was succeeded by actor and author Bill Pertwee, the current incumbent. Bill and his wife Marion had already forged close links with the WHIPS, Marion being the director of such successes as "The More the Merrier" by Ronald Millar in 1979, "The Hollow" by Agatha Christie in 1980, and the pantomime "Babes in the Wood" in 1983.

The 1980s have seen the company stage fifteen straight plays, four pantomimes, and shows by the Young Whips, and the Whippets, as well as providing regular play-readings and social events for the membership. Links have been forged with 'The Island Players', a leading theatre group on the island of Jersey, which have led to the WHIPS presenting two plays in St.Helier, whilst The Island Players have brought one show across to West Horsley to date, and are scheduled to perform a second one this spring. The year 1985 saw a summer production of T.S.Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral" in St.Mary's Church, West Horsley, and since then the WHIPS have undertaken the presentation of two immensely popular farces, "Caught Napping" by Geoffrey Lumsden, and "Move Over Mrs.Markham" by Ray Cooney and John Chapman. The society's most recent play has been Alan Ayckbourn's aptly entitled "Confusions". On the pantomime front, it is less than two years since extracts from the WHIPS' "Jack and the Beanstalk" appeared on BBC television, and this year's Puss in Boots has played to highly appreciative packed houses.

The WHIPS now rehearse in the barn at Britain's Farm and traditionally round off a hard evening's work with a pint or two at the King William IV, which is conveniently located just down the road. The committee is currently hoping to build a permanent scenery store to house an ever expanding collection of flats, props and assorted ephemera. Costumes are now located in a central depot, as opposed to being shared out between anything up to a dozen houses. All in all the society looks forward to its fortieth birthday celebrations next year with eager anticipation. If you would like to join us, in whatever capacity - and we welcome social members as well as those anxious to tread the boards or knock in nails behind the scenes - why not give our secretary Elaine Reay a ring on E.H.4153. We look forward to hearing from you.