

# Fifty Years of Tynchwyke

or

## Pink Elephants Never Forget

*Jonathan Pollock, William Osler House*

There are, wrote Poe, some secrets which will not permit themselves to be told. In the history of the Tynchwyke Society, whose minute book is handwritten in its entirety by members of the medical profession, there are many such secrets. Its past lies less in documented fact than in a thousand fond memories of sketches well executed, professors well impersonated and Pink Elephants well inebriated.

Mr Ted Moloney has already written about the milestones in the society's early history, and the interested reader is referred to that excellent account.<sup>1</sup> What follows is instead an attempt to capture the atmosphere of the first Tynschwyce productions.

On 27th December 1940 the curtain went up in the Nurses Recreation Room at the Radcliffe Infirmary on 'Dick Whittington and His Dog' or 'Who'd be a Patient'. This was the society's first production and it set the style which to a surprising extent has endured for Fifty years. The producer was Charles Fletcher, a talented performer who had recently arrived in Oxford, as House Physician to Prof. Witts, from a certain other medical school. There he had produced 'Barts in Herts', a Christmas show for the staff, who had been evacuated to St Albans at the start of the war. He had also been involved in Gilbert and Sullivan productions in his preclinical Cambridge years. Even at Prep School he had shown promise and acquired impressive skills as a tap dancer.

Recently he kindly agreed to be interviewed, and enjoyed recalling the first production. He now lives in retirement in London after a busy career as a respiratory physician, broadcaster on medical matters, and most recently as Professor of Epidemiology at the Hammersmith Hospital. "I can still tap dance," he reassured me, "but rather slowly."

In the autumn of 1940 Charles Fletcher realised that "Christmas was getting near and there didn't really seem to be anything happening." So together with James Angell, a fellow houseman, as co-producer, and with Dr Alastair Robb-Smith of the Pathology Dept. lending his support, the idea of an Oxford pantomime gathered momentum. "We put up a notice to see if there was any enthusiasm for an entertainment of some sort." In just three weeks the script was written, an especially remarkable task considering that most of it was in rhyming couplets.

The original format had the production divided into two halves. The first was more-or-less traditional pantomime and the second was set in the Radcliffe Infirmary, with as many burlesques of hospital staff as possible. The plot centred around Dick, a London medical student played by Charles Fletcher himself. The hero decides to escape the war torn capital and head for Oxford.

"I know that London life is swell,  
I like our hospital as well,  
But to be frank the bombers' roar,  
And nightly raids I find a bore,  
So I must now leave London Town,  
(Too much of it has fallen down),  
I've heard that Oxford is the place,  
Where medicals may go the pace.

A salutary moral tale formed the sub-plot (of which incidentally there was only only one, in contrast to more recent years when the cast have usually lost count!) Blind medical ambition has caused Dick to ruthlessly abandon his true love, Sue.

"He left a note to say he'd have no time,  
To see me til the hour sublime,  
When he had qualified to heal the sick,  
And then he'd be my one, my only Dick."

Cherishing this bluntly-articulated promise, Sue takes a flat in Chelsea, but is driven to such despair by the separation from Dick that she ends up earning her living in a profession even older than medicine. Thus she is discovered looking forlorn on a street corner. As in all genuine pantomime, however, the forces of Good are not too far away:

"Enter on each side two female policemen (wearing little wings to show they are really fairies):  
Now listen girl and hark to us,  
While we consult our omnibus,  
For we have got to find a curse,  
To stop you going from bad to worse,  
Lest all your virtue now be shed,  
We change you to a quadruped"

With the wave of a magic wand and a cleverly stage-managed costume change Sue turns into the Dog of the title, Menopaws, and accompanies Dick to Oxford. Once there, predictably enough, Dick gets himself

admitted to the Radcliffe Infirmary by the rather unsubtle contrivance of an RTA in St Giles.

Dick

Alack! Alack! Some careless biker's,  
Ridden oe'r my umbilicus,  
Oh friends in need mistake me not,  
I am not just a drunken sot,  
A bicyclist has sent me flying,  
Bring succour quick for I am dying!

Charles Fletcher remembers a particularly convincing impersonation in the hospital scene which followed. Sir Arthur Hearst, a physician whose hearing aid made him an obvious Tyinchkwyke target, was burlesqued by John Hawkey. So effective was the portrayal that at the matinee the victim's 8-year-old son was heard to exclaim from the stalls, "Oh look there's Daddy!" To this day John Hawkey has in his possession a copy of Hearst's 1939 Harveian Oration inscribed "To Sir Ha-Ha Burst (alias John Hawkey) with best wishes from Sir Arthur Hearst 28.xii.42." It was a kind gesture, showing that a rather cruel impersonation was forgiven.

The show also contained some elegant pieces of musical plagiarism from songs by Noel Coward, Irving Berlin and of course Gilbert and Sullivan. Four doughty male performers rendered a popular song of the time, 'Four Faded Bluebells' as 'Four Faded Bluebelts' in a rather incautious parody of the nursing staff. Already Tingwykcke was afraid of no-one, not even the Matron.

The dress rehearsal took place on the afternoon of 27th December 1940. It established the tradition, upheld to this day, that for a good show the dress rehearsal should definitely be wanting. Dr Robb-Smith's minutes of the occasion record that "The gloom increased with each scene and at the end was impenetrable". By 8.30pm and curtain up, spirits had been restored somewhat by a spell in the Royal Oak, but the Green Room was still tense. To everyone's relief, a messenger came from backstage and exclaimed "The audience has laughed at the prologue!" From then on everything went smoothly, helped by a 30-minute reduction in the scene shifting time.

The minutes are curiously coy about celebrations that night but they do mention that "The next morning opened with muted trumpets and a lack of interest in eggs and bacon. Matron issued an edict that there were to be no more rowdy parties."

On Saturday evening, before the last performance, while the principals dined in the mess, the rest of the cast prepared more hilariously. "Dermott Finn screwed up his courage with eight rums and Billy Jack was more than a trifle wambly." The performance was adjudged magnificent by all except two old ladies who walked out during the military sketch, where the daring references to births outside wedlock were too indelicate for them. The Oxford Mail wrote that "the show was a delightful skit on hospital affairs....and the settings provided scope for riotous and snappy dialogue"<sup>2</sup>

## PROGRAMME

### PROLOGUE

#### ACT I. Sc. I—OUTSIDE A LONDON HOSPITAL

DICK CHARLES FLETCHER  
CHORUS OF STUDENTS  
ALISTAIR WILSON LINDSAY BARR GEORGE PATEY  
CLIFFORD SIMMONS BILL BRISCOE DUNCAN HAMILTON

#### Sc. II—A STREET IN SOHO

DICK JAMES ANGELL  
SUE PETER REYNELL  
THE LAW PHILIP SUTTON

#### Sc. III—SUBURBIA

THE MODEL DUNCAN HAMILTON  
WINDOW DRESSERS JACK HAWKEY  
JOHN TOBIN

#### Sc. IV—"STEPPING OUT"

THE ARTIST SCOTT RUSSELL  
DICK

#### Sc. V—"MILITARY MADNESS"

CAPTAIN BACKSIDE JAMES ANGELL  
SERGEANT PULLTHROUGH JACK HAWKEY  
DEFAULTERS LINDSAY BARR  
ALISTAIR WILSON  
LADKIN  
SICK PARADE DUNCAN HAMILTON  
RUDOLF PETERS  
CLIFFORD SIMMONS  
MAJOR SMELLEM JAMES ACKERLEY  
THE MAN PETER REYNELL

#### Sc. VI—THE ROAD TO OXFORD DICK AND MENOPAWS

#### Sc. VII—"OXFORD LULLABY"

#### Sc. VIII—HERE WE ARE IN OXFORD DICK AND CHORUS OF STUDENTS

### INTERVAL

### PROLOGUE

#### ACT II. Sc. I—CASUALTY

PORTERS JOHN TOBIN  
NURSES RUDOLF PETERS  
DERMOTT FINN  
CASUALTY OFFICER PETER REYNELL  
HOUSE PHYSICIAN JAMES ACKERLEY  
CLIFFORD SIMMONS  
LINDSAY BARR  
HOUSE SURGEON ALISTAIR WILSON  
DUNCAN HAMILTON  
DRESSERS GEORGE PATEY  
BILL BRISCOE  
AND DICK

#### Sc. II—"THE EXCHANGE"

TELEPHONE GIRL PETER REYNELL  
HOUSE SURGEON JOHN TOBIN

#### Sc. III—RESUSCITATION

DR. WHITE DUNCAN HAMILTON  
ASSISTANTS ALISTAIR WILSON  
BILL BRISCOE  
JOHN WALKER  
I. M. SORRY, ESQ., F.R.C.S. (Oxon)  
FAIRIES PHILIP SUTTON  
AND DICK PETER REYNELL

#### Sc. IV—"FOUR FADED BLUEBELTS"

DUNCAN HAMILTON  
GEORGE PATEY  
ALISTAIR WILSON  
JAMES ANGELL

*The First Production, 1940: "Dick Whittington & his Dog"*



At the end of the evening Charles Fletcher thanked the audience for their support and made the momentous announcement of the birth of a society. As yet however, it had no name. The performance had been publicised as the work of the Radcliffe Raspberries but that title was not regarded as sufficiently dignified for such professionals as these. Further inspiration came later that evening at a party in Dr Robb-Smith's rooms at 19 St Giles. Above the babble of celebrations could be heard the strains of 'Pink Elephants'. This was a contemporary popular song by Harry Woods and Mort Dixon, two American songwriters. It had recently been released on '78 by Joe Venuti and Eddie Lang's Blue Five and a copy had found its way into Dr Robb-Smith's record collection.<sup>3</sup> In the bibulous atmosphere of the party, the title of the record seemed uniquely appropriate and the society became 'The Pink Elephants' for a while.

The matter was not finally decided until the following Valentines Day. On that occasion the early Ktynchwyckians were gathered together to decide on a constitution. The central tenet of this was that 'The society shall produce an annual Christmas Entertainment'. This may not actually have been carved in a tablet of stone, but the wording is certainly solemn enough to hint at dire consequences for any successors foolish enough to fail in their duty. The officers, it was decided, should bear the titles of His Munificency (the President), His Solvency (the Treasurer) and His Serenity (the Secretary). The latter title was selected as being that quality most essential for success in the post. At this point the society's name was again discussed. Dr Robb-Smith, an enthusiastic medical historian in his spare time, proposed that Nicholas Tynchwyke (? - 1324), Fellow of Balliol College and the first known teacher of medicine in Oxford, should become the eponym. Practising as he did from an Inn in Catte St, Tynchwyke seemed the obvious candidate for such an honour. He was indeed a prodigious practitioner. Working several centuries before the advent of the controlled trial, Tynchwyke found his range of treatments to be limited only by the scope of his imagination. They included distilled oils of turpentine, aromatic flowers for baths, carminative electuaries, the oils of wheat, ash and bay, water of the roses of Damascus, wine of pomegranates and various remedies derived from pearls, jacinths and coral. Nowadays of course, medical students are taught to recoil at even the mention of such things. Back in the 14th Century, poor Edward I was more naive. He engaged Tynchwyke as his personal physician and had such confidence in him that he was once remembered as the practitioner "to whom, after God, we owe thanks for our recovery from the illness which has lately oppressed us." There is but one conclusion; to engender such faith in spite of his eccentric treatments, Nicholas Tynchwyke must surely have been a great actor.

As an antidote to the gravity of all this decision-making, the meeting then "became informal", a phrase from the minute book which over the years has embraced

all kinds of revelry. This milestone in dramatic history certainly didn't pass uncelebrated.

#### Contemporary medicine.

Pioneering developments at the Radcliffe in 1941 were certainly not confined to the Tynchwyke society. With his stage success but a recent memory, Charles Fletcher was working as the Research Assistant to Professor Witts. The latter had just been featured in Dick Whittington as one of the first in a long line of thinly-disguised Tinnshgewick parodies. His script, performed by Bill Briscoe included the following:

TUNE: 'A More Humane Mikado' by WS Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan.

Prof Splitts(SINGS):

My object perfectly pure, I shall achieve I'm sure,  
To find for every disease a cure,  
For every disease a cure,  
And make each patient pent,  
Unwittingly represent,  
A source of subtle experiment,  
Of subtle experiment.

The professor's very thorough research methods had also been observed:

Prof. Splitts:

"I should have thought that in these enlightened days it would have occurred to somebody to measure the amount of hydrogen distilled from the urine. There doesn't seem to be any record of the blood zinc! Neither can I find any note about the phosphorous in the stools!"

One morning in January 1941, Fletcher knocked on the Professor's door for some advice about a new project. Witts was not alone. With him was Prof. Howard Florey of the Dunn School of Pathology. Florey was seeking Witts' assistance in the clinical trial of an agent which had already shown striking antibacterial power in mice.

Here was the ideal project for Fletcher. The new drug had been found harmless to leucocytes, tissue cultures and a range of laboratory animals. Now Fletcher was set the important task of finding a suitable patient on the wards of the Radcliffe Infirmary to receive it. He spoke to a 50-year old woman with disseminated cancer and explained to her that he wanted to try a new medicine which could be of value to many people. She readily agreed.

So it was on 17th January 1941, with Florey and Witts looking on, that Charles Fletcher administered the first injection of penicillin.<sup>5</sup> It was the initial step in the work which would soon usher in a new era in therapeutics. Two hours after the injection, the patient's temperature rose and she suffered a rigor, which prompted a "slightly annoyed grunt" from Florey. Further purification of the penicillin extract was carried out to eliminate the pyrogen and before long Fletcher was selecting patients for a therapeutic trial.



*The cast of CINDERELLA 1941*

"It is difficult to convey the excitement," he wrote later, "of actually witnessing the amazing power of penicillin over infections for which there had previously been no effective treatment."<sup>5</sup>

Progress was swift. In August 1942, Florey confidently wrote; "It is most tantalising really, as there is for me no doubt that we have a most potent weapon against all common sepsis. Apart for the prospects of immediate use in the war these substances are full of interest and open up quite a vista"<sup>6</sup>. In March 1943, Florey published a series of 187 cases of sepsis treated with penicillin, leaving the world in no doubt as to the significance of the Oxford work.<sup>7</sup>

That Christmas, the Tynckchwyce scriptwriters gathered in the Royal Oak were not shy about trumpeting their pride. Brian Johnson's script for 'Little Red Riding Hood' contains the following:

RRH      Why don't you try Penicillin?  
Dr        Penicillin, what's that?  
RRH      Listen, we'll tell you about it.

Re-enter the Chorus of four, all singing the following:  
TUNE: John Brown's Body.

Verse

We've got a wonder substance but we are not very sure,  
Of the dosage or the method that will get a certain cure,

But the surgeons keep on telling us  
that deaths are getting fewer,  
As medicine marches on.

Chorus

Florey, Florey Hallelujah!  
Florey, Florey Hallelujah!  
Florey, Florey Hallelujah!  
As medicine marches on.

Verse

We put it in the abscesses, we put it in the blood,  
We are not very certain how its going to do most good,  
But we'll go on just the same until the method's understood,  
As medicine marches on.

Chorus

Florey, Florey Hallelujah! etc.

As a footnote to the penicillin story, Charles Fletcher's name appears with the rest of the Oxford team on the commemorative plaque in the rose garden opposite Magdalen College. The American donors of the plaque were not affected by the modesty which characterised the Oxford workers. The legend there reads: "All mankind is in their debt".

### Cinderella

For Christmas 1941 the society's second pantomime was 'Cinderella' or 'There's many a Slipper'. It was under the direction of Lionel Grunbaum who, Prof. Fletcher remembers, "had given up a career as a concert pianist in order to pursue medicine." "The show was an altogether more soigné affair than Dick Whittington." A copy of the script has survived in the Tyncgshvviwike archives. It contains some stirring reminders of the times in which it was written and performed:

from the PROLOGUE:

We ask you to recall those millions who,  
Cannot share our joy and laughter too,  
While for the moment they are forced to kneel,  
Beneath the weight of the invader's heel.



The chorus is written with an upbeat gusto:

Though worn to a shadow and worked to a stop,  
Our spirits are now at their height,  
For though we may say,  
That we've had a bad day,  
We know we shall have a good night,

To hell with the crisis the budget the news,  
The war and the Nazis as well,  
No hearing with groans ,  
The funereal tones,  
Of Bruce Belfrage and Alvar Liddell.

(The latter two names are those of contemporary newsreaders.)

As usual with Tinchwyke the plot deviates wildly from that suggested by the title to incorporate the hospital characters. A lovelorn nurse for example, is cast in the role of Cinders. Left alone to mull over her greatest fear -which was apparently spinsterhood - she is rescued by her Godfather:

Godfather:

In fairyland I heard your piteous call,  
And came to take you to the Radcliffe Ball,  
Put all those instruments and swabs aside,  
I'll see that theatre sister's satisfied.

Cinders finds her Prince Charming in the guise of an unusually lyrical House Surgeon:

HS:

You thrill me with your eyebrows  
and your fingernails and hands,  
And your chassis just plays havoc  
with my suprarenal glands.  
Please tell me what your name is,  
what's your birthplace and abode,  
For your pearly white incisors  
have inspired me to an ode,  
Come, let's not lose an instant -  
we must dance the whole night through.

Cinders

Alas it cannot be for  
I have other things to do,  
At midnight is night sister's round  
and I must need be gone,  
But be patient, my Prince Charming,  
I shall see you later on.

Surely the most delicate issue for this Tyncshwyc producer was what to do about the Ugly Sisters. With admirable tact, if a lamentable lack of courage, they make their entrance thus:

Enter Sisters, one big one and one little stooge:  
Sisters

We are the ugly sisters who come in this pantomime,  
And we're anxious not to give offence to anyone this time,  
And so we feel that just a word of explanation's due,  
Remember please dear Sister that we're not meant to be you.

For the cabaret in the Ball scene, Charles Fletcher wrote and performed 'Odds and Ends' which was a jocular reminder of the fortunes of war. It is written with the gentle humour and the occasional mildly risqué references which characterised all the early Tingwyk scripts.

**Odds and Ends**  
**Words by Charles Fletcher**  
**Music by Derek Goldfoot**

Ever since the dawn of history war has been a curse,  
And as the centuries roll on it's getting worse and worse,  
In prehistoric days there were no ration books and taxes,  
And civilians sat in caves to brew the woad  
and sharpen axes.

**Chorus**

It's war work, war work,  
They all of them had to do a little war work.

The Russians are our allies,  
they're brave and valiant men,  
But if an Englishman is "rushin"  
then it's just on five to ten,  
The pubs are getting short of beer,  
if nothing else is handy,  
No "gins and it", no whisky, port -  
why then we'll take to brandy!

**Chorus**

The luxury trades are closing down,  
they're set a hopeless task,  
They're short of men, materials -  
but what I want to ask,  
Is why the laundry's not  
allowed its normal operations,  
Why it's fully half a year since  
I put on clean combinations!

**Chorus**

We're short of many of the foods  
on which we once depended,  
And it isn't very often  
you can say you feel distended,  
But if you go and see your doctor  
with a form for him to fill,  
You can get a fat lot more  
by merely saying you feel ill!

**Chorus**

Cigarettes are getting scarce for ordinary folk,  
And you have to use your cunning  
if you want a decent smoke,  
We say we're reg'lar clients -  
if supplies get any shorter,  
We'll have to go and flirt  
with the tobacconist's young daughter!

**Chorus**

The Times is a newspaper  
which should be more widely read,  
It tells you who's been born  
and who's been married and who's dead,  
But since this darn war's started,  
there's a curious thing to see,  
There are more births than marriages -  
it's a mystery to me!

**Chorus**

The Ball scene also included a special musical commission. A polka was written especially for Tynjwik by Gerald Tyrwhitt, the 14th Baron Berners.

Berners was a respected composer, writer and artist who lived not far away at Faringdon House in Berkshire. Using his talents he established a considerable reputation as a society dilettante. "Between the wars", wrote Osbert Sitwell, "he did more to civilise the wealthy than anyone else in England."<sup>8</sup> Nancy Mitford, a regular visitor at Faringdon, reckoned the house was haunted: "At the end of the lawn, with head in hand on moonless nights, appears the ghost of Hampden Pye. It seems that he was a sailor who married a peasant and that his uncle, Admiral Pye, sent him to the forefront of the battle so that he should be killed, which he duly was, his poor head being quite blown off."<sup>9</sup>

Apart from his skills in composing and in telling tall stories, Berners was also an ornithologist, of sorts. Every Easter Sunday he gathered together his flock of pigeons and dipped the birds in various buckets of brightly coloured dye. He would then shut them in the linen cupboard to dry, before setting them free over the estate. The inimitable Miss Mitford again: "He rather disdained the modest English sparrow, eschewing it for something gaudier."

On the last night of Cinderella, Berners arrived at the Radcliffe in his 1904 Daimler coupe, to hear the Polka performed. He declared himself delighted with the result.

After each performance of Cinderella, as with every Tynchwyk, there was a collection. The proceeds that week were no less than £30. 14s. The expenses of the production (£2. 15s. 9d.) were deducted and the problem then arose of what to do with the residuum. It was decided to help finance the building of a new canteen, a laudable aim with a certain timeless quality about it. Unfortunately for the well-meaning Pink Elephants, the plan fell foul of the - Defence (General) Regulations 1939 (Regulation 56A) - . The following letter was shortly received from an officer of the Ministry of Works and Buildings, one appropriately-named Mr Wall.

"I am directed to state that careful consideration has been given to your application for a licence to erect a canteen at Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, and to inform you that we are unable to grant you such a licence.

The country needs for material of all kinds and for manpower are at present urgent. Licence can therefore be issued only in respect of work which is vital for the furtherance of the national War effort."

The proceeds of Cinderella went instead to more modest endeavours.

On the last night of the Fiftieth production last December, His Munificence remarked that the spirit of Tynchwyke is a healthy corrective to our obsession with political developments in medicine. If the fifty productions have had any common theme it is certainly that we should not take ourselves too seriously. As the opening chorus of Cinderella put it:

Cast away worry and cultivate charm,  
And nurture a mind like a sieve,  
Although we may strain to develop a brain,  
It's much more important to live!

Laughter, after all, is good for you.<sup>10</sup>



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