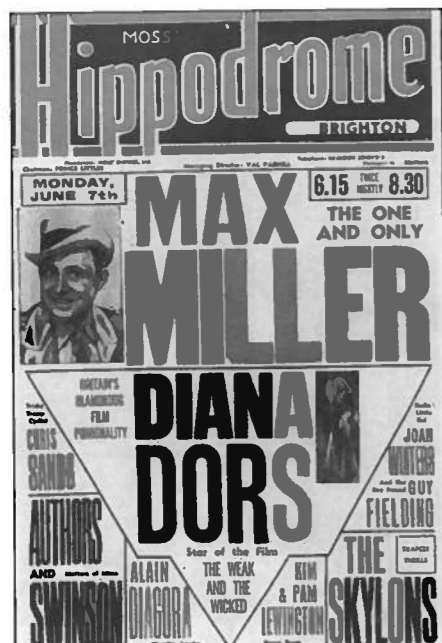


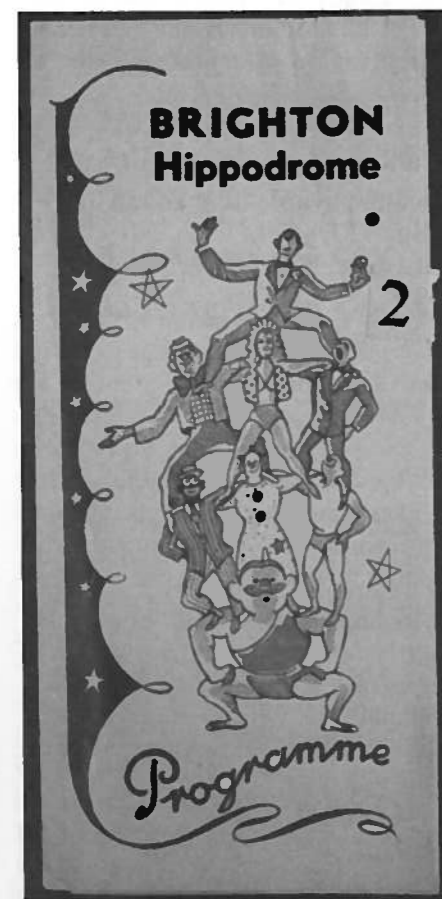
MEMORIES OF BRIGHTON HIPPODROME

By Nick Charlesworth



(courtesy of Howard Swinson and Nick Charlesworth)

As a family, having moved from Dorset to Sussex in 1952, we went to the Hippodrome pantomimes most years, except for occasional Christmas shows at Worthing, Southsea or Southampton. Many of the Hippodrome pantomimes of that time were virtually variety shows with a thin thread of narrative. A trampoline with chromium frame would suddenly appear in 'The Royal Ballroom' to interrupt the



(courtesy of D.J. Rutter and Nick Charlesworth)

action for eight minutes, while two men flung themselves towards the flies; or a troupe of saxophone players, blacked-up as negroes, took over the stage during *Robinson Crusoe* as friends of Man Friday!

Gradually the pantomimes improved when the management bought in shows originally staged at S. H. Newsome's Coventry Theatre and usually written by Pauline Grant. There were better orchestrations, a more believable plot and better scenery. The Hippodrome Orchestra was directed by Sydney Sharp, who was at Brighton for around 25 years, having been the youngest MD on Moss Empires when first appointed just before World War 2.

They did not play long seasons, unlike some theatres such as The Theatre Royal, Leeds whose show often ran until Whitsun. The Brighton pantomime usually opened on 24th December then continued from Boxing Day for about five weeks. Performances were at 2.30 and 7pm daily until the second week of January when matinees were on Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday.

As children we waited for the spotlight to hit the conductor's bald patch as the house lights dimmed, the footlights lit the front curtain and the 14-piece band burst into brassy life for the overture. Then the front cloth swept up, the usual colourful village scene appeared and the energetic villagers went into their opening number. It never failed to fascinate us.

We were usually a family party of seven or eight, sitting in the front stalls at the astounding price of 9s (45p), which was twice that charged for normal variety shows during the remainder of the year.

When I acquired a motor scooter in the late 1950s, I was more independent and able to travel from our Midhurst or Petworth home to see the Hippodrome's variety fare. I was quickly hooked, subsequently going regularly to the five remaining variety theatres in London, where I was doing a three-year course at the London School of Printing.

Arriving at the Hippodrome was quite exciting, particularly if one got there just before the start of the second house - there were two shows nightly at 6.15 and 8.30pm when variety was on the bill. The atmosphere was electric, as around 4000 people milled around in the narrow Middle Street, with 2000 coming out from the first house as another 2000 pressed forwards for the second house. As many as 25,000 people could see the Hippodrome's variety programme in a week, allowing for some standing room at each house.

We usually sat in the stalls to get a better view of the stage and as you took your seats there you were surrounded by the closely spaced orange-coloured light bulbs, which ran right round the dress circle. In the early 1960s these bulbs were replaced by conventional theatre light brackets in pairs. On each side of the stage was a large box painted red and topped by a golden onion-shaped dome.

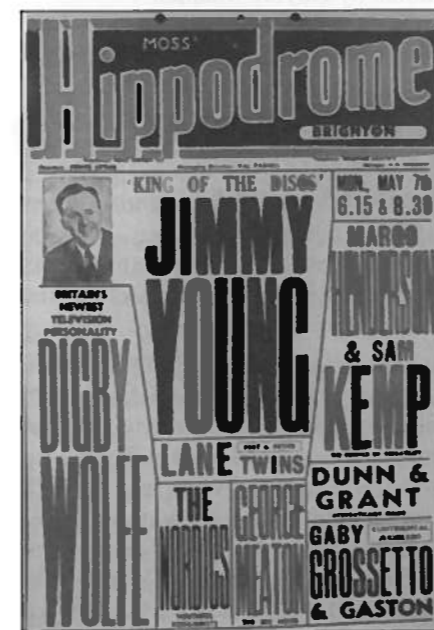
It was in such a seat that my brother, or a friend, and I enjoyed seeing Frankie Vaughan, Tommy Cooper, Max Bygraves, The Nitwits, Pat Kirkwood, The Skylons, The Temperance Seven, Tony Hancock, The Falcons, Dick Haymes, Anne Shelton, Arthur Haynes, The Clark Brothers and many others. One could never forget Richard Hearne's performance of 'The Lancers', Dick Emery's operatic version of *A Penny For Two Ha'pennies* or Jimmy Edwards' *Flight Of The Bumble Bee* on the slush pump! Sadly, I never saw Max Miller here at his 'home' theatre, when he had the packed house in turmoil twice nightly. Max, 'The Cheeky Chappie', was born in Brighton in 1894 although often taken as a London Cockney. He died in the town in 1963. *The Hancock Show* in 1962, starring Tony Hancock, was probably the best variety show I have ever seen.

There were weeks when variety was not presented, especially in later years, as Moss Empires attempted to diversify. Touring musicals like *The Merry Widow*, *Can-Can*, *The Student*

Prince and The Desert Song - the last two starring the popular singer John Hanson - were also staged. The Hippodrome was really too large for plays but some did appear, such as *No Trees in the Street* and Noel Coward's *The Marquise*. The production of John Osborne's *The Entertainer*, starring Laurence Olivier, was tried out here prior to London. Several Crazy Gang Shows also premiered in Brighton. The fast-moving *Black & White Minstrel Show* paid a number of sell-out visits to the Hippodrome, until it became 'politically incorrect'.

Most summers the weekly change of variety bill with its eight or nine acts gave way to a two-month season of a resident summer show. Basically a variety bill, but with better scenery and production values, a big line-up of dancing girls, two or three star names, several short sketches and a couple of speciality acts and running from the end of June to the end of August.

Dickie Henderson's *Light Up The Town* (a title often used) was a first class show staged in 1963. The show also starred the Sixteen Tiller Girls, the singer Eve Boswell, The George Mitchell Singers, Eddie Vitch, Sylvia Norman, Aleta Morrison, The Charlivels and Jimmy Currie's Spectacular Water Cascades.



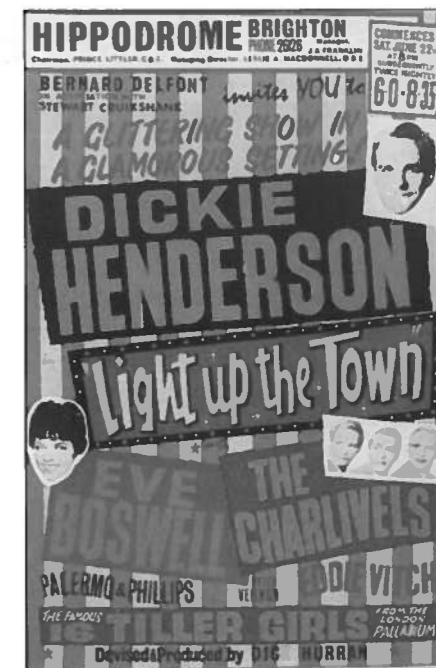
(courtesy of N. Finch and Nick Charlesworth)

An earlier summer show (same title with spot-lit heads of Irish singer Ruby Murray and the comedian Reg 'Confidentially' Dixon on the programme) was staged in 1956. It also featured Tommy Fields (brother of Gracie), Una Stubbs, Audrey Jeans (often in Moss Empire shows), The Kathryn Orly Trio, the acro-comedians Dick & Dot Remy, the aerialists The Skylons and others.

Here's Dora, starring comedienne Dora Bryan and singer Anne Shelton, was a far more modest show, which opened for a short season on 3rd August 1964. Also featured were magical comedian Joe Church, The Malcolm Clare Trio, The Jones Boys and AI Saxon. Dora had to do five spots and Anne Shelton two spots in quite a sparse production. The Hippodrome was rapidly losing ground by this time and closure loomed.

The Brighton Hippodrome was latterly part of the mighty Moss Empires' circuit of some two dozen variety theatres, which in 1930 comprised 33 houses and was the largest group of live theatres in the world. The Moss years were said to have been the Hippodrome's best. The Hippodrome joined the Moss Empires group only in 1947, when it was acquired, with other live theatres, from The General Theatres Corporation. Prior to that it was part of The Variety Theatres Controlling Company along with Hippodromes in Boscombe, Southampton, Portsmouth, Southend, Wolverhampton and elsewhere. The theatre was originally built in 1879 and for sometime was an ice skating rink. It was then a circus/theatre after conversion by Frank Matcham. Within a year it had failed and was bought by Thomas Barrasford, who ran a large circuit of music halls mainly in the north of England and who had a house next door to the theatre. He converted the Hippodrome into a straight variety house and it was an immediate success, continuing in that role for the next 62 years closing in 1965 after the pantomime.

Prince Littler was the Chairman of



(courtesy of N. Finch and Nick Charlesworth)

Moss Empires from 1947, with Val Parnell as his Managing Director. When Parnell stepped down in about 1957, Leslie MacDonnell took over. But despite his valiant efforts in introducing other types of entertainment, the circuit was gradually run down. Most of the theatres were on valuable town centre sites and they fell prey to developers.

When the Hippodrome closed after the 1964-65 pantomime *The Frog Prince* with Freddie Frinton, Nico Ferry and Charlie Cairoli, the Theatre Royal put on a summer show for a few years. Mike & Bernie Winters starred in 1969; while Kathy Kirby and Arthur Askey shared top honours in 1970. I saw this show on return from my five-year stint in Australia and quite enjoyed it except for the appearance of Heathmore, a pop singer not heard of since. The show was notable for Larry Grayson's spot, which convulsed audiences. He went on to become a star shortly afterwards. The Hippodrome itself was to have been turned into a cabaret theatre but the plans did not proceed; instead it became a rather unsuccessful television studio for a short time, notable only for the fact that Dusty Springfield appeared there. It was then opened as a bingo hall by Mecca Ltd., continuing in this role until 2007. For the last three years, the Hippodrome, a listed building, has remained empty.