

The People's friend in the country

WHEN Sir Charles Trevelyan, the Squire of Wallington Hall, died in 1958, his obituary in a local newspaper was headlined "The Prompter in the Front Row" – a reminder of his 40-year relationship with the North's premier amateur theatre group – the People's Theatre.

Sir Charles was honorary president of the People's for many years, and his involvement with the group was brought about by a combination of two of the great loves of his life; the fabian socialism of his politics, and a passion for the arts.

As its name suggests, the People's Theatre has its roots in politics, and was founded as a fundraising arm of the Newcastle branch of the British Socialist Party in 1911. The dramatically-minded members of the party had soon grown to love doing the plays for their own sake, however, and they split from the BSP in 1915 when they moved into a set of rented rooms in the old Royal Arcade. The basic principle of doing only plays containing an improving social message stuck for many years, though, so the works of Ibsen, Chekhov, and Bernard Shaw were mainly the order of the day.

The thriving little theatre inevitably attracted the attention of Sir Charles, who was Labour MP for Newcastle Central from 1922 to 1931. When up from Westminster, he would often take along colleagues such as Emmanuel Shinwell, Minister for Mines in Ramsay MacDonald's government, to sit in the audience with him.

By 1929, the People's had saved enough money to enable them to seek premises of their own. Eventually, a disused chapel in Rye Hill, Scotswood, was bought

CHRISTOPHER GOULDING recalls an amateur theatre group's links with a former Squire of Wallington Hall.



Alan Browning abseiling at Wallington in the 1950s.

and converted into a theatre. On the opening night, Sir Charles (by now Minister for Education) and Lady Trevelyan were guests of honour for the inaugural performance of Bernard Shaw's "Saint Joan".

Bernard Shaw was by that time a playwright of international standing. The People's had already been honoured with a visit from him at the Royal Arcade for their 10th anniversary in 1921. A renowned socialist, Shaw had been a guest at Wallington many times, so when the People's decided to celebrate its silver jubilee in 1936, who else would possibly do as guest of honour?

Sir Charles, by now honorary president, invited Shaw to Wallington, and they came along to see the opening night of his play "Candida". At the end of the evening, Shaw took to the stage to announce his retirement from public speaking and made what was to be his last speech. He ended it with the words: "This being my last speech in the theatre, I like it to be this one."

Sir Charles retired from public life himself shortly after 1945 and concentrated on the running of his 13,000 acre estate. A feature of being a member of the People's at that time was the invitations at Whitsuntide each year



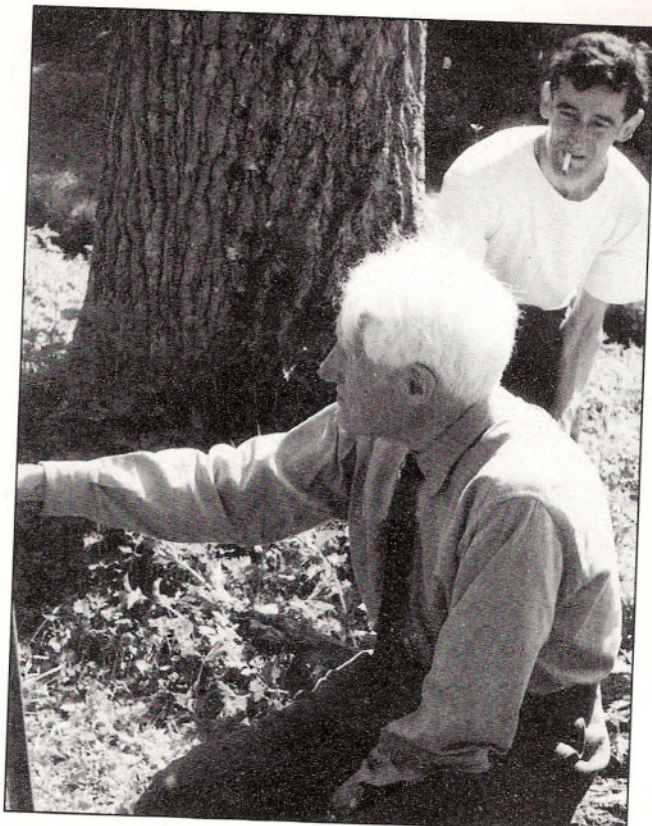
A walking party of People's members at Wallington.

for parties of two or three dozen to go up to Wallington for the weekend. Sleeping in the bedrooms and attics of the huge house and dining in the great hall, members spent their days going on glorious walks around the magnificent hills and valleys, enjoying open-air drama classes on the lawns, or organising vast complicated folk dances with Lady Trevelyan whooping directions as she sat at her piano. Sir Charles's favourite form of exercise was chopping wood – a passion he shared with Shaw – and only a handful of the male visitors would be entrusted with the use of his precious axe, which had been a gift from the great playwright.

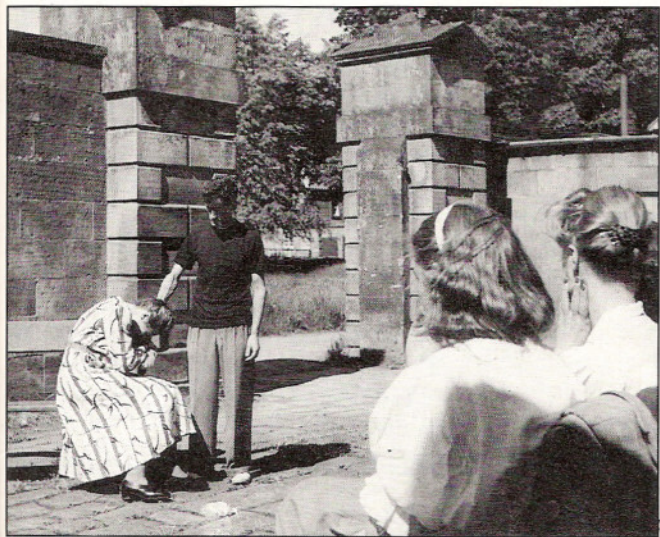
One member at this time who was a regular on the Wallington visits was Alan Browning, a local newspaper reporter and a talented actor. He was later to find fame on television, appearing in such series as "The Newcomers" and "Coronation Street" until his untimely death in the 1970s. Alan was a particularly keen walker and abseiler.

On Whit Sunday, 1951, a special production of Shaw's play "Man of Destiny" was taken to Wallington "... as a token of thanks for the many memorable days that the People's Theatre members have spent at Wallington." Thus, with his staff watching from the gallery, Sir Charles saw in his own hall a play by his old friend who had died only the year before.

Now well into his 80s himself, Sir Charles's visits to the theatre became less frequent. He always sat in the front row because he was going deaf, and followed a play word for word with his head bent over a script on



Sir Charles Trevelyan (foreground) and People's member Tom Emerson rest after chopping wood.



Outdoor drama classes were a regular feature.

his lap. Any fluffed line would meet with an accusing stare from the slowly raised white-haired head!

Having bequeathed the Wallington estate to the nation, Sir Charles often proclaimed that he had no pressing desire to continue, saying: "As I grow older, the approach of death does not disturb me." This was one of the last public utterances made by the politician, philosopher, nature-lover, and friend of the People's, who died peacefully in his home at the age of 87.

● *The People's Theatre has just celebrated 80 years of active life. It is now based in the former Lyric Cinema building in Stephenson Road, Newcastle, to which it moved in 1962. Christopher Goulding's book, "The Story of the People's" is available from local bookshops, price £5.95.*

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