

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Ronald Willett – interview transcript

**Interviewers: Martin Brough and Alison Norden**

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Musician. Audiences; finance; Geoff Love; Gene Patton; orchestral role; rehearsals; Royal Theatre, Castleford; television; theatre; variety; variety acts.

MB: This is Martin Brough and Alison Norden with Mr Willett on 4th December 2006. Can I just have your permission for the British Library to have copyright of this interview, sir?

RW: Certainly.

MB: OK, thank you. So when and how long did your father play in the Royal Theatre for?

RW: From 1933 to 1952.

AN: And you played the piano?

RW: Percussion.

MB: And then you played also in the role?

RW: In February 1947 he was taken ill and the musical director of the show that was there that week asked me if I played the drums. I said 'Yes', and he says – well, he didn't ask me, he told me! - he says 'I want you here tomorrow afternoon to play'. I was 15 years old.

AN: Were you very happy to do that?

RW: Oh yes, I'd been studying under my father since I was about seven years old and I'd always gone to the theatre - it was like a playground, I grew up in it. I knew the routine, I knew all the musicians in the orchestra so it was, you know. And I must have coped very well on the afternoon because they said 'Back tonight, but you'll want a

dinner suit on', because I'd just gone in an ordinary suit in the afternoon matinee - I had to have a dinner suit for the evening. After that whenever he wanted a holiday replacement or things like that, I was brought in. The simple reason is that I did it for the experience rather than money so he was saving money you see. Typical musician, that!

AN: Were you doing a couple of performances a night?

RW: Well the first time I went in it was three shows, it was pantomime. Matinee, Saturday afternoon matinee and two shows at the night. When I worked after that, it had got to revue time during the summer so you were just doing six nights, two shows a night. That was up to... let me see... the beginning of August 1949 and I did that show for him while he was away on holiday and unfortunately three weeks later I was called up into the Army so I was away then. But I did come back 1952 when they stopped variety, they finished with variety August Bank Holiday 1952 and went over to drama, the Fortescue Company, but the same company decided to put a pantomime on, with the help of some outsiders, they brought a musical director in, etc. All the orchestra went back for the two weeks over Christmas except my father who had moved on to other things then, so I went in and did the two weeks and unfortunately the last Saturday evening - they were only doing one show in the evening, that was all they were doing - about twenty minutes into the show every light went out in the theatre, there was an electrical fault. The only light which was on was the pilot light which was right up at the top of the auditorium. That was it - 'I'm sorry, we can't go any further'. There were no orchestra lights to read the music, there were no lights on stage or anything so they just packed it up. I did blame my future wife for it, it was the first and only time she'd ever come to Castleford to the theatre and she'd gone in there with my younger sister and as I say, I blamed her for that!

MB: The Royal was the second largest stage in England, what names were you acquainted with during that period?

RW: I think I'll have to take a little look at my notes. I tried making a few from what I can remember of acts, you mean the actual acts that were on stage do you?

AN: Yes.

RW: You'll find here that a lot of these names, I don't think anybody will be familiar with, because it was a number two theatre was Castleford. A good number two, I always thought, but never a number one so you get the slightly lesser known acts, but first one I've got here is a guy called Tom E. Bradley - and that's 'Tom E. Bradley' and not 'Tommy', if you know what I mean, Thomas Edward I think he was. He came to Castleford Theatre quite a lot, he lived in Sheffield, used to produce his own shows and bring his company. His wife was always the musical director for him, it was unusual to have a lady then in the orchestra pit, but there you are. His junior lead came with him, I don't know her second name but it was a young lady called Maureen who later on into the sixties I worked with because she was a club act, I worked with her in the clubs and she was known as 'The Mighty Atom' and her husband was Roy. He was a straight singer. She was a singer but she could dance and was a comedienne as well, and she

went on then to appear with Les Dawson on television as the leader of the Roly-Polies, I think about half a dozen very, very large ladies who were a dance team. There is also a Tommy Brennan, he was another comedian who came round, and another one I've got here, Phil Strickland. Tommy Brennan was a comedian and Phil Strickland a comedian and he worked a lot for a chap called Jack Gillam from Manchester who was a producer of shows and he did put quite a lot of revues into Castleford Theatre, he had quite a lot of people working for him but I'll be honest, we're going back so many years I can't think just offhand of any more. I've got a name here, Geoff Love, which a lot of people will know or remember as a little darkie fella who used to conduct the orchestra for Max Bygrave's shows on television. Well, he came to Castleford Theatre - I think it was either 1946 or '47 - and he'd been playing with the Jan Ralfini Dance Band in the Isle of Man and had been working alongside the Joe Loss Orchestra at the Marina which is the usual thing at these places. You get the star band and the band beside is usually known as the house band and when they'd finished there they did a small tour of the theatres and they came to Castleford Theatre with the Jan Ralfini Band and he played trombone and went on to better things of course! There's another double act here, Morris and Cowley, they took the name from the Morris and Cowley cars. They used to do two old soldiers act, they were comedians and dancers, they also used to do a piece called 'The Cricketers' in which they were dressed in cricket gear and ran up and down the stage while doing, I suppose what we would call rapping now, you know, to the music. That was Morris and Cowley. A note tells me here that they used to work also with a guy called Johnson Clark, a ventriloquist known throughout the business as The Squire and he used to bring the shows and it was always known as The Squire's Party Variety Show, and Morris and Cowley worked with him. Dave Morris, he was known as Mr Blackpool, he was a Yorkshireman who worked the summer season at Blackpool year in, year out because they had to find work during the winter so he came along and then another really old guy, Gene Patton, and that's spelled G-E-N-E, Gene Patton, P-A-T-T-O-N, and he had four sons and his eldest two sons went out on the halls like their father and they were known as the Patton Brothers. On television now we've got the two youngest brothers who are still working under the Chuckle Brothers, if you know the Chuckle, on the kids television, Chuckle Time, the Chuckle Brothers, they were Gene Patton's two youngest sons. Jerry Builders, I've just seen them on those bills, theatre bills we had, they had Jerry Builders, three or four guys that were absolutely stupid things they would do, supposedly building a house and walking round with a ladder on his shoulder and knocking a guy over and that sort of thing, they were a knockabout act. Alex Monroe who was a very small Scotsman and his saying was 'Oh the size of it'. Another guy here, Ted Loon, who appeared in Castleford in 1947 and 1948, front cloth comic, very, very good, broad Lancashire man, he was quite a decent singer as well, got his self off on a song and he also finished up on television in The Army Game. Don't ask me what he played, I don't know, television was something I never got round to seeing because I was working. Mario Harplavenzi, the guy working the halls that played the harp and he played stuff, not jazz obviously but pop stuff, pop music of the day and the odd serious number. Another great act here, Billy Whitaker and Mimi Law, man and wife team, very, very good comedians, brought some beautiful reviews and his father was the Great Coram who was a ventriloquist who actually had a doll that walked on at the side of him. That was going back to the old Music Hall was the Great Coram, we're not talking in our time because we are going from '45 aren't we?

AN: Yes.

RW: Bill West and his Harmony Boys, a pianist, Billy West and he always had about probably eight young lads with him. I've met up with one or two lads who have gone on to be club acts, you know, that I've worked with when I was in the clubs, they used to sing all sorts of melodies, songs from the shows. Now one here, Rupe Silver and Marian Day, they were a two piano act and they were a bit like Ravitz and Landor. Unfortunately Rupe Silver was a guy was a little bit, slightly miscued when he was born I would think, he had kind of a little hump on his back and it is said that they'd never book him on the number one halls because of his stature, he didn't look out very well but he was a good act. One of the oldest family acts ever to - I should think - work the stage was the Sheri Brothers, there were five of them and the Sherina Sisters, there were three of them, all the eight, brothers and sisters, all the same family. They used to travel together in the same show, five Sheri brothers and the three girls, the Sherina Sisters. The last time any of them appeared at Castleford, it was either 1947 or 1948 and they were doing a short three week tour more or less for rehearsals before they went to the coast for the summer in the Catlin's Follies, just two of them appeared, Peter and Sam. They were clog dancers, singers, musicians, that sort of thing and on that same show there was Bill Hook Scott who was another top liner, he was in the same show. A trio, if my memory doesn't fail me, Vinemore and Nevada, I seem to think it was a guy at the piano and two singers and the top of the bill was a very well known comedian but I am very, very sorry but I can't think of his name. But like I say, another double act, man and wife, Vane and Hilliard, and their special feature was Napoleon and Josephine and she would start on the stage as Josephine and then they would drop the back cloth which was a painting of the mountains, they would drop the back cloth right the way down onto the stage and he would just step over it in his Napoleon uniform and throw a bit of snow up in the air - artificial snow - and say 'Madam, I have crossed the Alps to be with you'. And then he'd walk the stage, then they would pull the back cloth back up again. But of course it went on possibly ten or twelve minutes and of course it finished with 'Not tonight Josephine' but very, very funny people, very, very funny act. Which there was, there was a lot of very, very good acts about. We've covered the Johnson Clark with the Squire with Morris and Cowley... Oh and then Billy Bennett who unfortunately died in 1942 so we are going back before the time that you're wanting, but he was a top line comedian who did appear just before he died actually in 1942, he appeared here at Castleford and he always wore frock tail-coats, a smart pair of trousers with a big pair of hobnail boots and he always wore a stiff dickie front but actually it rolled up so it was showing his bare chest and his bow tie round his neck of course. He used to do monologues of his own writing. Can I give you an example of that?

AN: Yes, yes.

RW: You'll probably hear the dirty side of this but anyway it went, 'In the street...' Before I read that, he used to stand there with one foot in front of the other, one hand on his hips, stick his chest out, his head back and he's bawl this out, 'In the street of a thousand bun holes to the east of Limehouse Reach, lived a blind Chinese who loved the sea, well he was the son of a peach. He had a beautiful niece called Wong-Wong and Wong-Wong was yellow all right, her father had been a Royal Marine but two Wongs don't make a White.' That nowadays would be cancelled out.

AN: Yes.

RW: I think we talked earlier amongst ourselves about the Black and White Minstrel Show, its non-U isn't it now? But going back all the years, there was... Also Billy Bennett, just while... and this is the last one, there was the Great Albert Wheelan who was an Australian, and it is said that he is the person that starts acts having signature tunes, and he would come on whistling to the Jolly Brothers, they used to whistle that and he'd take his hat and his coat and his gloves off and then he'd do a few minutes singing and gradually go back to whistling the Jolly Brothers and put back on his coat, his hat and his gloves and walk off. Well they worked together, they also did a black-up duo, black face, again I don't think it's allowed nowadays. They were known as Alexandra – Alexander, sorry, and Moze so in actual fact you got three acts for the price of two and one night, the act following him, following these two, was Leslie Hutchinson, known as Hutch, a pianist who was a genuine coloured person. As they're coming off he is waiting to go on stood in the wings, he says, 'What's the audience like?' and Billy Bennett says, 'Not worth blacking up for, kid.' That, as I say, I did have loads and loads of stuff but I cannot find them. I eventually found that, I thought I'd lost this. That is my father in the orchestra pit at Castleford Theatre.

AN: Being members of the orchestra, did you feel very much involved with the acts on the stage?

RW: No, no. Possibly more so with a variety bill, because they didn't have their own musical director, they used the resident MD so you possibly would, if they wanted something special doing they would come down at band call when they bought the band parts - that's the music by the way, the band parts - and if they wanted anything special doing then they would come and talk to you over the footlights, and specially possibly a knock-about act would want effects from percussion you see, things like that and you always had a lot of comedians who probably had a bit of [inaudible] with the drummer - why they picked the drummer I don't know! - but you usually got that. If they were with a review, which the majority, and pantomime, reviews were in the majority at Castleford Theatre at that period of time, they always brought their own musical director and he'd bring the parts down at band call on a Monday morning and go through the music and he knew everything that wanted doing so you didn't actually get involved with the acts.

MB: According to Richard Iveson, the theatre was almost in ruins as it was financially troubled. Was this noticeable to you and the general audience?

RW: Er, I couldn't say about the financial side of it, I'll be honest. As I say, Bank Holiday week 1952 was the last variety show, and the only time we went back was that following Christmas. They found that it was cheaper to run the Fortescue Productions, the drama. They were only doing one house a night, you didn't need as much staff, you didn't need the stage staff because variety was fashionable but you certainly needed a full staff both in the flies and down on the stage for changing scenery.

MB: Do you remember any of the special effects they used to use?

RW: Special?

MB: Special effects, the Royal Theatre was quite famous in England for its special effects, do you remember anything?

RW: I can't ever remember any special effects apart from... but being brought up in the theatre you see, I was only two years old when the old man went there so I mean I was brought up in it, I never knew anything else but the theatre and to me whatever happened that was normal so they might have had special effects but as I've gone and been to, as I've got older and been to other theatres I can't say that there was anything more special about Castleford Theatre Royal than anywhere else.

AN: Did you experience any technical difficulties much?

RW: Technical?

AN: Yes, whilst you were there.

RW: I was told - Mr Iveson's just told me - I didn't know this but there was two different... I don't know, how do you say, two different lots of electricity. Part of the stage apparently was 110 volts and the auditorium was 240 which is what we use now, and apparently that did cause some problems but I've only found that out by talking to Mr Iveson earlier on today, that's the first time I've met him but I can't ever remember, apart from that night, the last night of that pantomime when every light went. It was a mains electrical fault and I mean it wasn't a general thing, the street lamps were still on, the club next door was still open, it was just actually a fault in the theatre.

AN: Were you very much aware of the reactions amongst the audience, their reactions to the variety shows?

RW: Yes, yes. Fortunately they were reasonably good people in Castleford. It is said that the Glasgow Empire had wire netting over the orchestra pit so that the stuff that got thrown at the galleries - at especially the English acts! - didn't hit the orchestra! Whether that was true or not I don't know, I never went, but it is said they had wire netting to protect them, but certainly you were there. As I'm sat here now, the front row of seats is where you are, that's how near you are to the audience, and it wasn't a pit as such. I mean I've been in some where you couldn't see the orchestra at all, it was so far down. I went to play at an aerodrome once and they had a proper theatre and the first thing I said is that if we'd been much further down we'd have been with the first seam of coal, it was very, very deep! But in Castleford you were virtually sat next to the audience, so you did get that, you could think, 'Oh we're not doing so well tonight' or, 'Yes, it's a hit' and all this, that and the other.

AN: Were they generally very good perceptions, was it an escape for people to come and see variety shows?

RW: Well yes, there was no television. Loads of picture houses..., what have we? We had four... four picture houses at the time in Castleford, plus two on the outskirts at Glasshoughton and Airedale but I mean there was no television or very, very little. I think most people bought their first television for the Coronation which was 1953. I know we didn't have a television. We didn't have a wireless until – sorry, a radio - till during the war. We went out and got one to be able to listen to the news mostly, but there was at that time - again I'm going back to during the war - there was quite a lot of good musical entertainment on the radio. Saturday nights used to have John Sharman's Music Hall which used to put possibly six different acts on in the hour that they had.

AN: Do you think television can be blamed quite a lot for...?

RW: People say that television killed the theatres. It did to a certain extent because obviously people could watch and it was new I suppose, people could, but I think it's greed that's done it. They got to the point that acts, artists, were wanting so much money that they just couldn't afford to do... It's only last week on the newspaper I read of seven or eight different people who are appearing on television, they're going into pantomime - they aren't theatricals, they are television acts. They're going into pantomime which is, that is genuine theatre is pantomime, that goes back years does pantomime and they are £8-10,000 a week. Good God! I think my father was doing twelve shows a week for six quid, I think - six pounds! All right, cost of living weren't what it is today, but I know when I started with the dance bands I could earn as much in two nights as what he did for the week. At home my younger sister and I were pantomime characters, Captain and Little Mate.

MB: When the Royal became the last Las Vegas Night Club did you see a play there?

RW: I didn't. I never went, I never went in. Like I say, I went dance banding, all I ever wanted to do was play in the theatre. Unfortunately those theatres were closing hand over fist, I mean Castleford 1952, I can tell you the Empire at Gateshead, that closed I think in 1949, you know, it was just the business was going, so I didn't bother. As I say, by then I'd gone out dance banding and I never came back, I didn't even live round here so I never went to the Las Vegas. I've heard lots about it from different people. A guy used to play in the theatre pit at the time that I first went there played double bass, he did come back and play there in between having a spell at the Leeds Empire and then he came back when it was the Las Vegas and played bass. I met up with him again years later when he was playing a trio in a restaurant, Jack was on bass and I was on drums and the guy on the piano was the son of the resident MD at the Theatre Royal, that was the – oh I forget the name of the restaurant now, funnily enough it's been burned down a year or two ago.

AN: Did you have long rehearsal hours? Was most of your time spent at the theatre with the orchestra?

RW: You got the band call, that was all, on Monday mornings, eleven thirty, you'd probably be there up to two hours. That was one thing about theatre musicians, they had to be good because you could have anything thrown at you from extracts from opera, extracts from bits and pieces of overture, serious dance music up to the pop music of the day. You could get all that in one show. You could get the band parts, you read them and that was it. It was no good going in the theatre unless you could read music and I was very fortunate that my Saturday mornings were spent a) cleaning the band room out - that was under the stage - all the band on Friday night when they got paid used to put a penny in an ashtray, a penny, an old penny and that were my pocket money for cleaning the band room out. After that I'd go into the pit and clean my father's drums, you know, polish up the cymbals, blah-blah-blah, because Mrs Lawton was very particular about the instruments must be cleaned, the orchestra must [inaudible], she was very particular. And then my father would come along... by then it would be about twelve o'clock and he'd go through the music with me that would be on the stand for the show for that week, so we were spending a lot of time in the theatre, I knew all the jargon and stuff like that and with knowing all the orchestra as well, that did help when I got thrown in at the deep end, but of course it also taught me to read music, I think I could read music quicker and better than a newspaper at that time. I've got to admit now, I haven't touched the drums for twenty years, almost twenty years. I think I would be a little bit rusty now but I have kept in, in odd times, since I actually finished in the clubs, I play with a brass band which, again a lot of people don't like brass bands, but my God, they play some good music and it's not easy stuff, especially the stuff they're writing these days for brass bands.

AN: Were you aware of the acts when you were playing?

RW: On the whole I always found them pretty reasonable but there were times when you knew that something had gone off, you could tell possibly by the way they were acting on the stage, the way they were approaching each other, that possibly they had had a row with somebody else. They did say that there was a lot of discontent between different acts and that, but I can't say that I ever saw that. Possibly I was looking through rose tinted glasses because it was the only place I wanted to be and the only thing I wanted to do, was be in the theatre. There is one thing, I have a book at home that was written by an elderly lady who had worked the halls back in the thirties and she makes a point there that on the Sunday travel days, the variety people would always speak to one another - 'What sort of a week have you had?' 'OK', 'Oh you should do well wherever you're going'. But you'd get the drama - the straight people - they stuck together, they were quite, you know, uppity. I don't think they really thought that variety people were good enough. I don't know, but the variety people to me were on the whole a decent set.

AN: Were variety shows common in regional theatres then?

RW: Were what?

AN: Were variety shows common in the regional theatres at the time? Because in the 1950s there was the emergence of kitchen sink drama in the West End.

RW: You mean common as in the number not the tone?

AN: Yes, sorry.

RW: The number... oh I should think... I'm quite sure every town had at least one variety theatre. I mean, in Leeds - which is only ten miles away - you had the City Varieties which is a number two like Castleford, you had the Empire which was a number one, plus the Grand Theatre which did the drama and the touring shows, the musicals and opera and you also had the Theatre Royal which always ran one of the longest pantomime seasons in the country - it used to start at Christmas until about the end of May and then the rest of the year they just did drama - but Castleford had one theatre. I know for a fact that Newcastle had two variety theatres plus the Theatre Royal which like the Grand at Leeds did opera and musicals. Most places had a variety theatre but it comes down from the old... well, it started in pubs, the singing room in pubs and it became Music Hall and then of course they went posh and became the varieties.

AN: Do you have any other memories, anything else you might want to share or talk about?

RW: Oh. In what way? Now then. I think overall I've covered most of what I know. Like I say, I did have a whole list of acts, those there that I've just gone through were what I put together when I sat down just thinking about it yesterday afternoon. I did have this whole list. I've always been, obviously been interested in the theatre and if there is anything going in the books, you know, several books about theatres, not necessarily books as regards acts but non fiction, sorry, fiction. There is a good book that I've had quite a number of years that is called Only Been Kissed in the Same Place Twice and it's about a young couple that got together way back in the late 1800s working the varieties, but there is that little bit of truth about it because it gets on about different acts that were working at the time and about the time when the top artists of the day went on strike to stop the owners of the theatres working the turns. I don't know if you are going to clubs or not, it does happen round here, they don't say the artists or the acts, they call them turns? But they stopped that so many years ago: working the turns was working possibly four or five theatres in one night, which you could do. It was easily done in London because you had the theatres at the reverse end sort of thing. It would have been a little bit harder once you got out in the regions, like, but possibly in the cities you could but they stopped that because it was killing people - it was hard work, going on doing whatever minutes you were allowed, and that was something that was particular in the variety theatres. If the stage manager said, 'You are doing six minutes', you did six minutes. Not six and a quarter or five and a quarter, you did six minutes. That would be possible, the opening act was usually a dance duo and then you'd get a front cloth comic after that, and he'd probably have about eight or ten minutes, but everything was to the minute because it all had to be worked out, because you'd only so much time to put a show on and you always had to have the interval of course, fire precautions - because of the safety curtain which was lowered and raised again every show - fire precautions to make sure that the fire curtain was working properly and things like that.

MB: Thank you very much Mr Willett and that was very good.

RW: Well I've just sat and talked. I was thinking, I hope you weren't getting bored!

MB: No, no, no, it was very, very interesting.

AN: Yes, thank you very much for your time.

MB: Thanks for your time, yes.

AN: It's been a pleasure to talk with you.