

mercury  
theatre  
colchester

MERCURY  
THEATRE

Past,  
present

STORY  
SHARING  
MEMORY  
MAKING  
LIFE  
CHANGING  
MERCURY  
RISING

& FUTURE

# A warm welcome

This booklet explores key moments in the Mercury Theatre's history, from the establishment of the Colchester Repertory Theatre Company in 1937 to the development, design and opening of the theatre we know today.

Here, you'll find documents from the archive to demonstrate the rich history of the theatre.

This comprehensive collection includes programmes, photos, designs, scripts, and oral history recordings made with staff and audiences by our project partners Colchester Recalled.

Mercury Voices is an archive project which captures the history of the theatre, and keeps the history safe and accessible for future generations.

If you would like to know more about Mercury Voices or have memories of the Theatre to share, please email [mercuryvoices@mercurytheatre.co.uk](mailto:mercuryvoices@mercurytheatre.co.uk).

As a registered charity, the Mercury Theatre depends upon donations from the public to sustain our work.

Our fundraising appeal, Mercury Rising, will raise money to complete multi-million pound extension and refurbishment of the Mercury Theatre. It will transform and safeguard the building for future generations.

Make a donation today at [www.mercurytheatre.co.uk/support](http://www.mercurytheatre.co.uk/support).

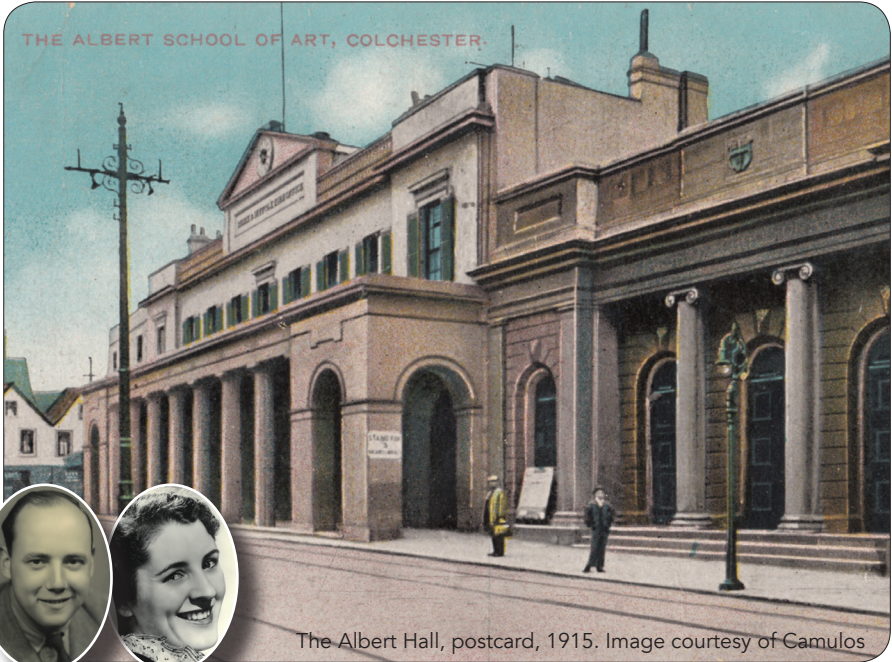
Mercury Voices is supported by the National Lottery: Heritage Lottery Fund and Essex Heritage Trust.



Listen to the oral history recordings in this booklet at [www.mercurytheatre.co.uk/digbygallery](http://www.mercurytheatre.co.uk/digbygallery)



# Birth of the Colchester Repertory Company



The Albert Hall, postcard, 1915. Image courtesy of Camulos

Colchester Repertory Theatre Company was established in 1937 by Robert Digby and Beatrice Radley, pictured above.

They had both previously studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), and when the pair were introduced in 1936, Beatrice already had a career in repertory theatre and had appeared in the West End.

Local man Robert had changed profession and was working for a firm of London solicitors when he announced, "we're going to start a theatre".

There wasn't money for a new building so alternative premises had to be found. The Albert Hall and Art Gallery, a Victorian building in Colchester High Street, was a good size and in a good location.

It was owned by the council and used as a meeting place, venue for dinners and dances as well as to display art exhibitions.

Beatrice approached Colchester Council for use of the Albert Hall as a professional theatre in spring 1937. Permission was granted, but only for every other week and for a period of just three months.

 Jenny Lithgow talks about meeting Robert Digby at the Albert Hall. 1 min 12 secs

# First productions at the Albert Hall

*Journey's End*, production photograph, 1938. Image kindly donated by Bernard Polley



In October 1937, Colchester Repertory Theatre Company presented its first play at the Albert Hall, *The Late Christopher Bean*.

The rest of the season was filled with thrillers, a farce and the first Christmas show, *The Rose and the Ring*, which all toured to local towns on the week when the Albert Hall couldn't be used.

At the end of the year, the council allowed the hall's continuous use as long as the public were allowed in to view the art in the gallery. This was an important moment for the security of the Company.

Early improvements to the hall included raked flooring in the auditorium, a ticket kiosk and the purchase of tip-up seats, but the building did present some challenges.

The stage itself was an irregular semi-circle shape only 3m (10ft) at

its deepest point. The offices were in the basement and the toilets were open for bus drivers to use.

There was no workshop or storage, and the china cups used for interval refreshments, and served from a trestle table in the auditorium, could be heard clinking as the ushers set up and cleared away.

The Rep remained at the Albert Hall for the next 34 years, staging over 40 plays a year. Beatrice left in 1942, but Robert remained an integral part of the theatre until his death in September 1963.



Above: The Albert Hall foyer. Photograph Geoff Pettit, early 1970s. Kindly donated by Bernard Polley.



David Forder talks about conditions at the Albert Hall, 1min 20 secs

## The war years, 1939-1945

The Second World War brought immediate and ongoing difficulties for the Rep. Casting was problematic and there were challenges with air raids, blackouts, lack of public transport, and rationing of building materials and petrol.

Discounted tickets were offered to HM Forces and plays remained popular with audiences, but each programme reminded them what to do if the air raid warning sounded during a performance:

"An announcement will be made from the stage, and the audience will be requested to remain in their seats as the shelter in the basement is reserved for those in the streets."

In 1940 the Rep was invited to tour garrison theatres in the UK and abroad by the Entertainments National Service Association, or ENSA, sometimes referred to as 'Every Night Something Awful'.

That summer they toured to France and later to Italy, Holland and India. After the war, in June 1947, the Rep performed *Hamlet* for German prisoners of war detained in Colchester.

Actor Edward Jewesbury made a short welcoming speech in German, to which prisoner Bernard Dieters replied that the occasion was "the happiest afternoon we have had since we were taken prisoner".



Above: Colchester Repertory Theatre Company staff on the steps of the Albert Hall. Photograph, 1940



A few weeks later, one of the detainees, Erich Oddey, presented Robert Digby and producer Wallace Evennett with a painting of the performance.

He had made paint from brick dust collected around the camp and painted with his toothbrush. The painting was displayed in the reception area of the Albert Hall until the move to the new theatre.

After this performance the Albert Hall welcomed 100 German prisoners a week to the theatre, coming in two parties of fifty on Thursday and Saturday afternoons.

# Life as a repertory theatre company

Life in a repertory company was busy with nightly performances and the requirement to perform one play while rehearsing the next.

The weekly workload of the early years was described in one programme:

*“On Monday morning the artistes have their hair done and get their clothes ready for the play opening at night.*

*At 12 noon the dress rehearsal begins and this finishes at about 4.30 pm. There is just time to get to a little food and then back to the theatre for the show.*

*On Tuesday at 10 am, rehearsals for the next production begin. A break is made at 1 o'clock for lunch, and at 2.15 they begin again and last till about 4.30 pm. On Wednesday rehearsals begin at the same time and finish at 1 o'clock.*

*After lunch the artistes return for a matinee as well as the usual evening performance. Thursday and Saturday are the same as Wednesday, and Friday the same as Tuesday.*

*In addition to all this words have to be learnt and the only possible time is after the performance in the evening, meaning that the artistes rarely get to bed before 2 am.”*

A loyal group of regulars was soon formed, the 'Monday Nighters', who could be relied on to provide an opening night audience, and staging recent West End successes was a reliable way to bring in the casual theatre-goer.

Colchester's weekly rep of the early years was replaced in the 1960s by fortnightly then three weekly rep theatre, but nationally theatres struggled with finances and to attract audiences.



Above: *The Importance of Being Earnest*, photograph 1939.

From left: Coral Fairweather, Ronald Mansell, John Wyndham, Trevor Howard, Margaret Inchbold, Michael Kingsley, Elizabeth Jeppe

# A new theatre for Colchester



Building the new Mercury Theatre

When David Forder (*above left*) joined the Repertory Company as manager in 1963 he found the Albert Hall run-down and in financial trouble. Thoughts soon turned to a new purpose built theatre for Colchester.

The Colchester New Theatre Trust, led by Lord Alport, was formed in 1968 to develop the campaign, identify the site and oversee the construction of the new theatre.

Essex County Newspapers owner Hervey Benham publicised the plans in the local press and Dennis Thorogood (*above right*), one of the Rep directors, co-ordinated public fundraising initiatives.

The Mercury Theatre Appeal was launched in 1969, using members of the Rep Supporters' Club to

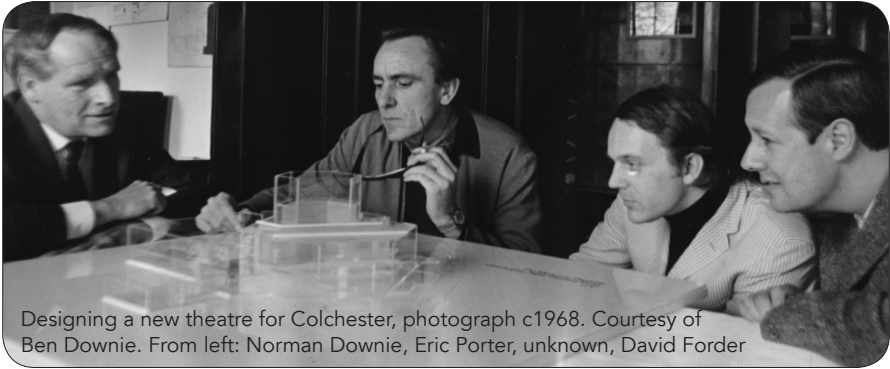
search local telephone directories to collate a personalised mailshot and post 20,000 letters to civil servants, lawyers, doctors and business people. Other fundraising schemes included buying a brick or paying to have your name on the back of a seat.

Colchester Borough Council pledged a site as well as funds to the campaign and the Arts Council provided match funding. By 1971 the fundraising campaign exceeded expectations and the new theatre would become a reality.

Performances continued at the Albert Hall during this time, with the last show, *Beauty and the Beast* on 22 January 1972, estimated to be the 1189th at the hall. The Mercury Theatre opened its doors on 10 May 1972.

 Barbara Phipps talks about her memories of the fundraising campaign

## An innovative design



Designing a new theatre for Colchester, photograph c1968. Courtesy of Ben Downie. From left: Norman Downie, Eric Porter, unknown, David Forder

The new theatre was designed by Colchester based architect Norman Downie Associates and supported by consultant Christopher Morley.

The brief was to make the new theatre "economical, without luxury, yet to provide glamour and a 'sense of occasion'" (*Colchester Gazette* article, 1972).

The hexagonal stage and hexagonal auditorium design for the Mercury Theatre was unique. It was designed to ensure adaptability and "no limitations or compromise on future theatrical presentations" (Mercury Theatre leaflet, 1972).

This included side walls that could be moved forward over the seating alongside the stage to create a proscenium arch or pushed back for an open stage. This was a new concept in theatre design.

The final design was a modern, partially glass building featuring a main auditorium seating around 500 and a studio seating 80.

The opening production, *The Recruiting Officer*, used an open stage and an auditorium seating 505 people. The next production, *Present Laughter*, adapted the space with a traditional proscenium arch, house curtains and capacity for 410 people.

A new studio space was created for smaller performances and from the outset was intended to facilitate drama workshops for young people led by dedicated youth theatre staff.

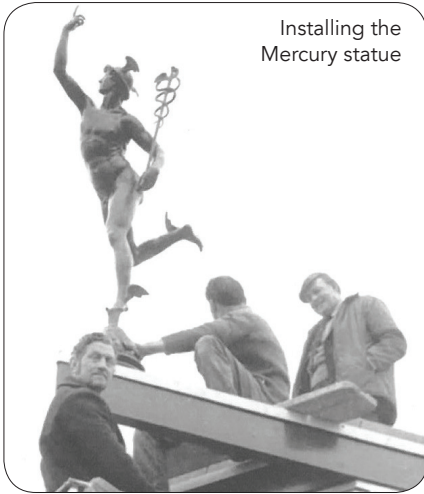
It was named Jenny Bone Studio Theatre after the daughter of one of the Mercury's trustees.

In March 1973, a group of Salisbury theatregoers visited the Mercury Theatre to see *The Liars* and left enthused by the possibilities for their own new theatre.

Norman Downie was appointed as architect for the new Salisbury Playhouse, which was built in 1976 and is similar to the Mercury.



# The Mercury Theatre



Installing the Mercury statue

Paul Warner describes installing the statue “on the prow” of the building: “I am just off the photo on the ground level because we were using my set of spanners to attach it at the time but almost every time I see the statue I think of my spanners”.

Wednesday 10th May 1972 marked the opening night of the Mercury Theatre, which was so successful it was repeated on the following two nights.

Patron Eric Porter was the first actor to appear on the new stage, performing a prologue written by John Bensusan-Butt and standing in the position of the Mercury statue.

The public were invited in the press to suggest a name for the new theatre. Thirty eight names were suggested including the Balcerne Theatre, the Hole in the Wall, the Heritage, Pegasus and Phoenix.

David Forder, Colchester Repertory Theatre Manager, felt The Mercury Theatre was a suitable name as the new theatre aimed to be “adaptable to every theatrical taste, full of light and life”.

The name also linked the new theatre with Colchester’s Roman history and a bronze statue of the Roman god Mercury discovered at Gosbecks in 1948. When a different, larger statue of Mercury came up for auction Bernard Mason, chair of the New Theatre Trust, put in the winning £710 bid.

For the first year after opening, the programme covers were produced in gold and showed the Mercury statue inside the hexagonal shape of the stage. At this time tickets were priced at 75p, 55p or 40p.



Opening night Photograph, 1972

 Listen to the prologue

## The Future: Mercury Rising

The Mercury Theatre is changing. We are currently undergoing the largest capital project since the theatre was built in 1972. We are developing our space to make the entire building more community focused and suitable for the wide variety of work we deliver.

Mercury Rising will transform our arts and theatre offering to Colchester and the local community through:

- Modernised facilities and updated equipment to deliver more critically acclaimed theatre
- Creating a fully accessible building for all – three new lifts, accessible signage and additional accessible toilets and changing facilities
- Two new rehearsal studio spaces for professional and community use, including a professional level sprung floor dance studio
- A new all day cafe/bar to bring new audiences into the building and creating a welcoming space
- A dedicated community arts education space for children, young people, those with additional needs and community groups to fully engage with theatre and performing arts - the only space of its type in Colchester
- An incubation space to house emerging creative small businesses to support local economic growth of the sector
- Additional seats in the auditorium to increase our standing on the regional theatre circuit, appealing to larger touring productions and personalities, continuing to deliver top quality productions to local audiences

“Arts and cultural spaces are an essential part of their local community, not just for providing a source of entertainment and creativity, but also as social space where people can come together to enjoy a variety of experiences. The Mercury Theatre has always been a huge part of its local community. But Mercury Rising will elevate the venue to a new level, establishing it as a creative hub in the heart of East Anglia where artists can hone their practice and visitors can feel at home.”

*Hedley Swain, Area Director,  
South East, Arts Council England*

Our Mercury Rising capital project will cost a total of £9.6 million and will see the refurbished and extended building reopened to the public in 2020. So far we have secured funding from Arts Council England, Essex County Council, Colchester Borough Council, European Regional Development Fund, South East Local Enterprise Partnership and private foundations including Garfield Weston, Foyle and Fidelity foundations.

While we have been very successful we always need support from our audiences and local community, and we value any donation of any size. As a registered charity, we depend upon donations to improve the theatre and sustain our work across the community.

“ She has completely stepped out of her comfort zone; with her heightened anxiety we weren't sure she'd step through the door! The practitioners and all of their wonderful natures have given my daughter the opportunity of a lifetime and opened a door in her life to so much to enjoy and explore. ”

*Parent of participant in our Take Flight summer school for children with additional needs*



# Ways to support Mercury Rising

## Adopt a Seat

We can't promise your name in lights, but the next best thing is to adopt a seat in our main auditorium for £475! You can support Mercury Rising by adopting one of the more than 400 seats in our auditorium!

The adopted seat will be yours for ten years and your name or dedication will appear on a plaque on your adopted seat. You'll also receive a certificate of thanks and be invited to special Supporter events.

Have a special someone who loves theatre? Adopt a Seat in their name as a unique gift experience!

## Leave a legacy

Leaving a gift to the Mercury Theatre in your will is one of the easiest ways to support us. You can feel comfortable knowing that your legacy will support the future development of arts and theatre in Colchester and the surrounding areas.

Including the Mercury Theatre in your will is a simple addition to make and usually requires just a quick meeting with your legal advisor. You can decide to leave a set amount or percentage of your estate – whichever works best for you and your family!

## One off donation

To make a quick but big difference to the Mercury Theatre's redevelopment and future work you can give a simple one off donation in person, over the phone or online. One of our friendly Ticket Sales staff will be glad to speak to you.

A donation from as little as £5 helps us to replenish ribbon stock in wardrobe or bulbs for our lighting team, while £20 will help us to buy equipment for our youth theatre workshops.

**For more information and to donate now, please visit [www.mercurytheatre.co.uk/support](http://www.mercurytheatre.co.uk/support), drop into our Box Office or call our Development team on 01206 245496.**



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