

# TRICKY STAGES...

Peterborough Civic Society Chairman **David Turnock** and Vice Chairman **Toby Wood** go head to head...

**D**avid Well here we are again, Toby – another year in Peterborough. It'll be fascinating to see what changes there will have been by the end of 2022.

**Toby** I think there may well be many changes – and not all for the better!

**David** Come on Toby, that's not like you to be negative. What's happened – too much food and too little exercise over Christmas?

**Toby** No, it's not that. I was really upset when I heard of the potential closure of the Key Theatre. Even though the closure might only be temporary, it's an indicator that the City Council is in real financial trouble.

**David** I'm afraid you're right. As we speak an Improvement and Assurance panel, led by Eleanor Kelly, has been set up to oversee improvements at the council following critical review of its finances and governance.

**Toby** Who's Eleanor Kelly?

**David** She's the outgoing chief executive of Southwark council in London. Apparently she has played key roles in local government's responses to the Grenfell Tower disaster so has had plenty of experience at the top level. She's been appointed to help Peterborough City council steer a path through the current financial mess.

**Toby** Well I'm sure we wish her the best of luck but it's hard to see how she's going to help the council find £27m to fill its financial hole.

**David** Perhaps transferring ownership of the Key Theatre is going to be part of the cost-cutting exercise.

**Toby** I was wondering how long it would be before you got round to mentioning the problems surrounding the Key!

**David** I'm afraid it's an indicator of the problems that Peterborough's got at the moment. In the House of Commons on 12 January, Peterborough's MP Paul Bristow was being positive by mentioning that the government has provided £75m to help businesses in Peterborough as well as £59m in city centre regeneration and our new university. In contrast the city council is in deep financial trouble.

**Toby** So is that why the Key Theatre was facing closure and many other of the city's leisure facilities are still under threat?

**David** You see, that's the difference between the public and private sector. There is a gradual shift from public to private and when the currently publicly-run Key Theatre reopens it will be run by the private sector, by the operators of the New Theatre. I can't currently see the government bailing out a local authority

even though it is the same political colour.

**Toby** Well I do hope it is successful. The Key Theatre first opened on November 26, 1973, having cost £165,000 to build. In the early days it had its own repertory company – imagine that! One of its first directors was a man called Jack Emery who was married to Dame Joan Bakewell at the time. I often used to see her around Peterborough – I was amazed at how tiny she was!

**David** The Key Theatre has played such an important part in Peterborough's cultural life. One of its main assets, as well as limitations, is its size. For years it had a capacity of 398 seats, although I am reliably informed that these days it's slightly less than that. The Key's been a place that has seen so many Peterborough people enjoy their first experience of 'treading the boards'. You've only got to look at the thousands of young people who have enjoyed success at the Key – young dancers, musicians, performers – have all had their first taste of performing at the Key. Peterborough has no other place like it.

**Toby** That's right. So many Peterborough people have had experiences of performing there – I myself appeared in a couple of Mask Theatre productions as well as a Gaslight comedy club AIDS

benefit event on a Sunday afternoon at the Key Theatre many years ago, in the late 1980s/early 1990s, which featured Jo Brand at the top of the bill and a very nervous young Irish comedian named Graham Norton! I remember it well.

**David** I suppose live theatre and performance has generally suffered because of the advent of television and people staying at home. Times have certainly changed.

**Toby** I'm sure that's true. There was a time when Peterborough had quite a number of theatres and cinemas. The Embassy Theatre, opened in 1937 and which was formerly called the Hippodrome, Palladium and the Palace, is renowned for being the first venue that the Beatles played outside Liverpool. The Fab Four played there twice in 1963.

**David** The Civic Society placed a blue plaque on the Embassy building a couple of years ago, as well as on the site of the Theatre Royal in Broadway, virtually next to what is now the New Theatre on Broadway, a building which was originally not a theatre but a cinema, the Odeon. Confused? Stick with me Toby!

**Toby** I once read that Laurel and Hardy came to the UK in 1952 with their stage show *A Spot of Trouble*, the first two weeks of which were at the Embassy Theatre. Thousands of fans welcomed the duo on their arrival at Peterborough North station and the

performances broke all box office records.

**David** Of course there were other theatres in the city but many of these are long gone. However, now is the time to look forward. The area in the city centre, particularly close to the river Nene, is fast being developed, with the new ARU Peterborough university as well as what is finally agreed as part of the Embankment masterplan. It's vital that Peterborough gets this right – it's too important an opportunity to mess up!

**Toby** I entirely agree. I know that there is a powerful groundswell of opinion that will be hard to ignore. Just look at the recent petition to save the Key. Over 10,000 people signed. I've been part of online Zoom meetings to discuss the future and there is no doubt that there are many people who are determined to ensure that this city does not become a cultural desert. In particular, I have been very struck how many young people in the city feel passionately about the future. They just can't be ignored. However, the future of local authority-funded culture in Peterborough does not look good.

Peterborough Civic Society  
**This building was opened in 1937 as the EMBASSY THEATRE**  
 Designed by David Evelyn Nye, it was converted into a cinema in 1955, split into 3 screens in 1984 and closed in 1989.

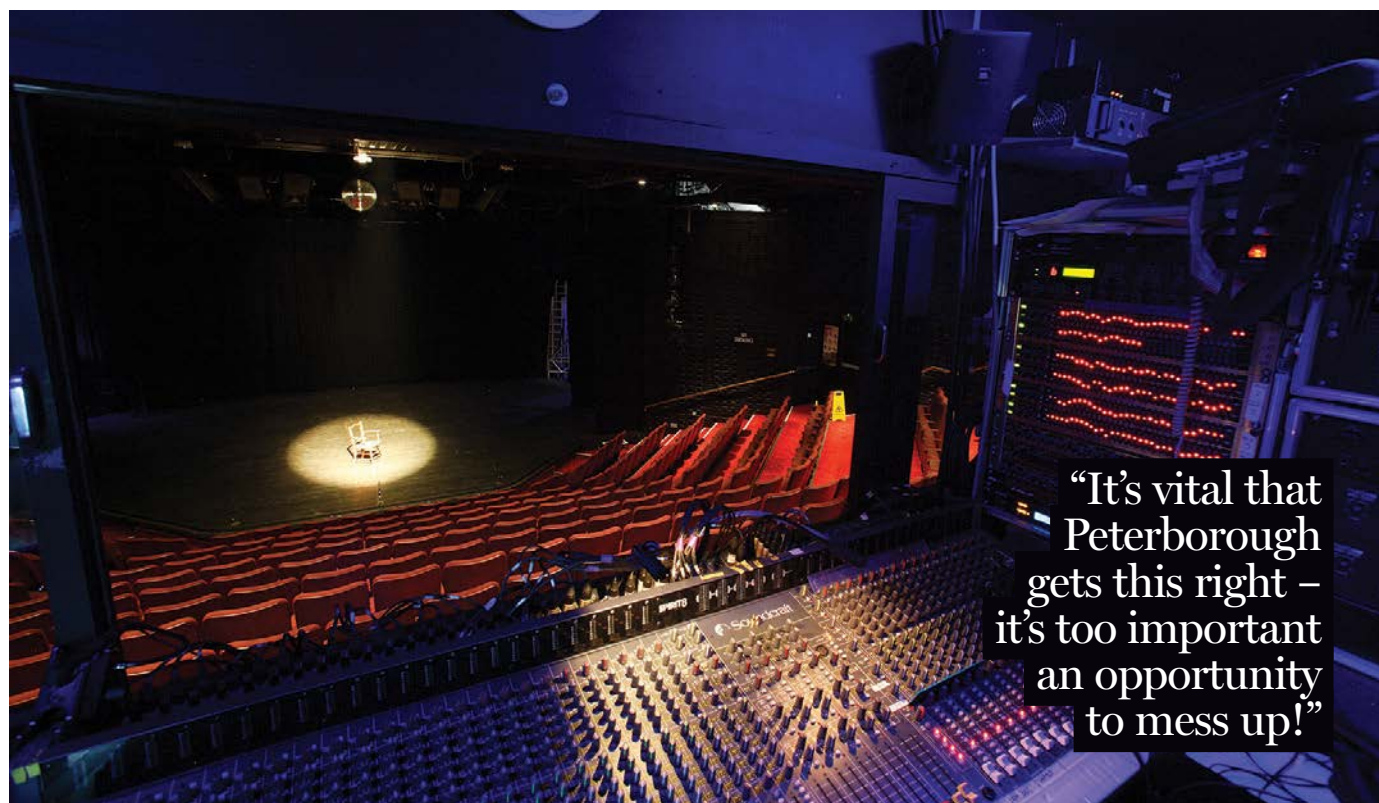
Peterborough Civic Society  
**Site of the THEATRE ROYAL built in 1877**  
 as a public hall, converted to a theatre in the 1890s and closed in 1959. In 1961/2 Shelton's department store was built here.

**David** Yes, the Covid-19 pandemic has been a timely reminder that people need stimulation and social interaction. A vibrant cultural scene is vital and it would be criminal if we gave in with a whimper and let it disappear. As we in the Civic Society keep reminding people, we're not just about the built environment, we're just as much

about people, happenings, events, enhancing and enriching our lives. There's no doubt about it, cultural activities are so important to the health and welfare of any village, town or city.

**Toby** Quite right. Heritage is about the present and future as well as the past. What was it that Joni Mitchell wrote all those years ago? 'They paved paradise and put up a parking lot; With a pink hotel, a boutique, and a swinging hot spot. Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you got till it's gone; they paved paradise and put up a parking lot.'

**David** Very good, Toby. We want Peterborough to be colourful, not merely shades of grey. There's no point in looking backwards although, having said that, there are sometimes lessons to learn from the past. One of the main lessons to learn is that it's a leadership that is vitally important. When we meet again, towards the end of 2022, I wonder how positive we'll both be about Peterborough. I suppose we'll just have to 'wait and see'.



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