

am dram

Forty years more



**Tony Flook's
Spotlight on:**

Bletchingley Players

Bletchingley is an interesting village. Straddling the A25 between Redhill and Godstone, its High Street is something of a honeypot for visitors to the antique shops, old pubs and those simply interested in the architecture of the buildings, some dating back 300 years or more.

Tucked away, just a few metres from all this activity — yet not the sort of place you'd easily stumble upon — is the Village Hall, the community centre and venue for Bletchingley Players' productions.

The players present two



Encore: Peggy Bristow, a founder member of the Players and still involved with the group, 40 years on

shows a year, which passers-by may see advertised on the main road.

John Tomlin, the chairman, told me that these posters do a good job in telling local residents about forthcoming productions, as well as attracting theatregoers from out of the area.

I can endorse this; when I went to one of the players' shows I sat next to someone who had seen a banner and had stopped while driving home to Kent that evening. Advertising obviously pays. As a result of this and the players' reputation, many performances are sold out.

What's the secret of this success? "We try hard to find plays which will appeal to our audience," John said. "In the past, we staged a number of farces but now lean towards well-crafted comedies. For example, we have put on two Neil Simon plays, including the novel female version of *The Odd Couple*. This and our most recent presentation, *On Golden Pond*, played to packed houses.

"Our autumn production this year, to be staged at the end of October, will be Noel Coward's *Waiting in the Wings*. It is set in a home for retired actresses and uncovers the squabbles and petty jealousies amongst these ladies, who are determined to grow old disgracefully."

I reminded John that this play calls for a large cast, which is one reason why it's performed less frequently than

some of Coward's works.

"We're fortunate there," he replies. "Although we're quite a small group we've grown a fair bit over the past two years and now have a membership of over 40. This means that we can consider plays that some societies in other relatively small villages couldn't cast.

"We're also lucky to have a great cross-section of skills and interests in our membership — many who like to act but just as many who prefer working away from the spotlight, doing those vital jobs backstage and front-of-house. It's also encouraging that we've started to attract younger members, although we're far from complacent about this and are always on the look-out for new talent, especially men."

"Another factor in our success," John adds, "is the



A sell-out: A scene from Bletchingley Players' highly successful production of *On Golden Pond*, performed earlier this year (l-r) Billy Ray Junior (Danny Hulme), Norman Thayer (John Tomlin), Ethel Thayer (Di Brooke)

fish-and-chip suppers we introduced about five years

ago. We arrange the seating cabaret-style around tables.

This, together with the attraction of the licensed bar, helps to create a convivial atmosphere and some of our patrons book parties of 10 or more to make the whole evening a social event."

Two years ago, Bletchingley Players bought their own premises, on the outskirts of the village. Although this building, previously the Scout hut, isn't big enough to serve as a theatre, it's ideal for rehearsals and to house the society's ever-growing props and scenery store. "Before that, we used a dilapidated school outbuilding. In the end, the roof leaked so badly that we sometimes had to rehearse holding umbrellas. Not surprisingly, it was eventually condemned by the council," John says.

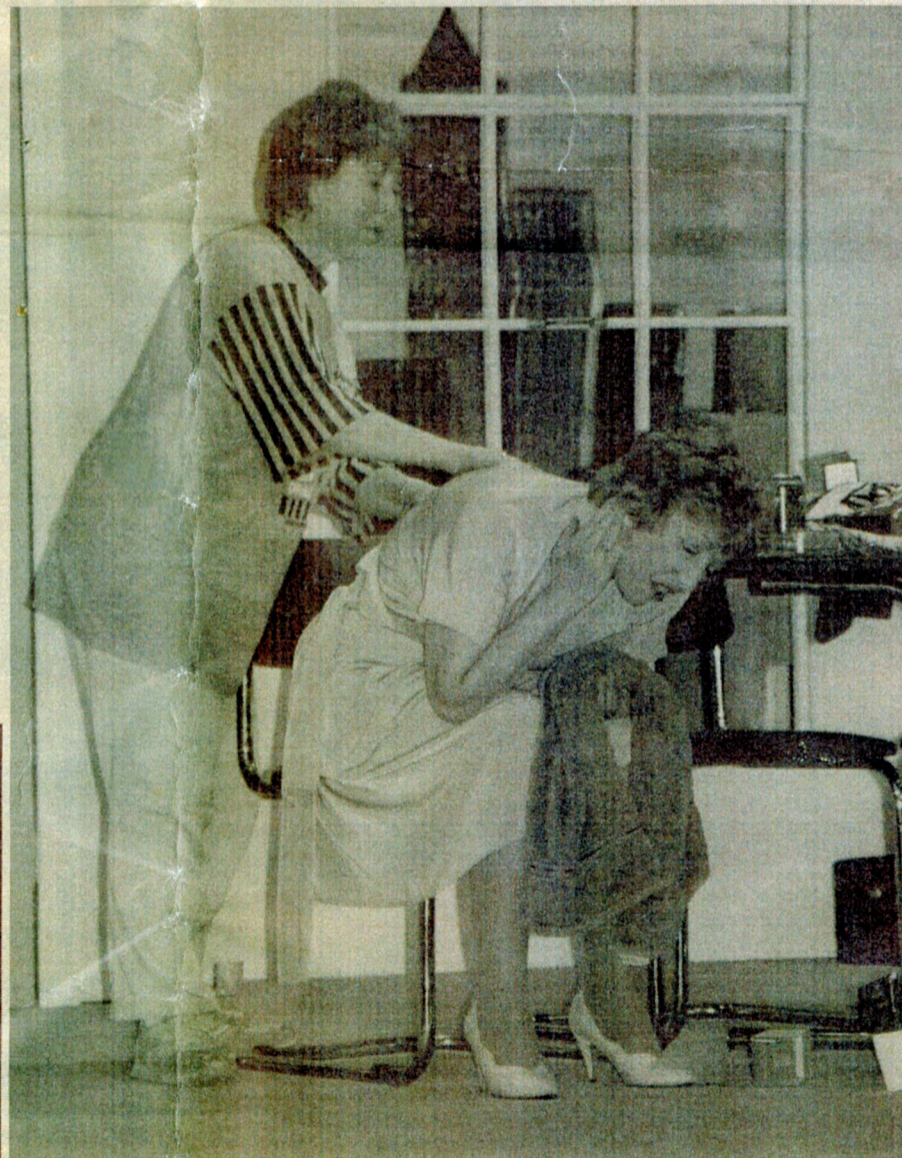
The players are proud that two people who helped create the group in 1963 are still members after almost 40 years. Betty Bristow has acted directed and, as she says "done almost every other job that's needed when a show's being put on". Betty, now the players' honorary president was also, for many years, closely involved with the Betchworth Festival, the local round of the All-England One Act Festival.

Mary Wilson, another founder member, is over 90 years old and has "retired" from acting but still supports the players' productions.

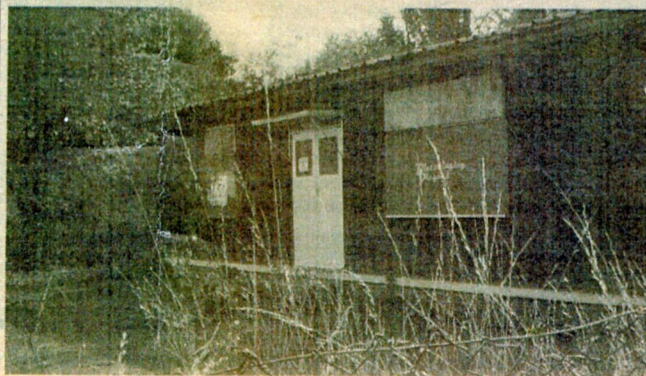
Bletchingley Players plan to mark their 40th anniversary with a party on October 25 and the hunt is on for former members, particularly those from the early days, to help celebrate and, hopefully, to meet old friends.

John Tomlin would be pleased to hear from anyone who has been associated with the players (originally known as Bletchingley Amateur Dramatic Society) in the past and, indeed, from potential new recruits.

He can be contacted on 01883 743194 and the secretary, Susan Sarti, on 01737 646225. They can also be e-mailed at Bletchingley.Players@britishdirect.plus.com



Novel touch: Bletchingley Players' production of the female version of *The Odd Couple*, with Olive (Felicity Lund) and (seated) Florence (Liz Tomlin)



Hut: The Players' new premises on Grange Meadow, Bletchingley