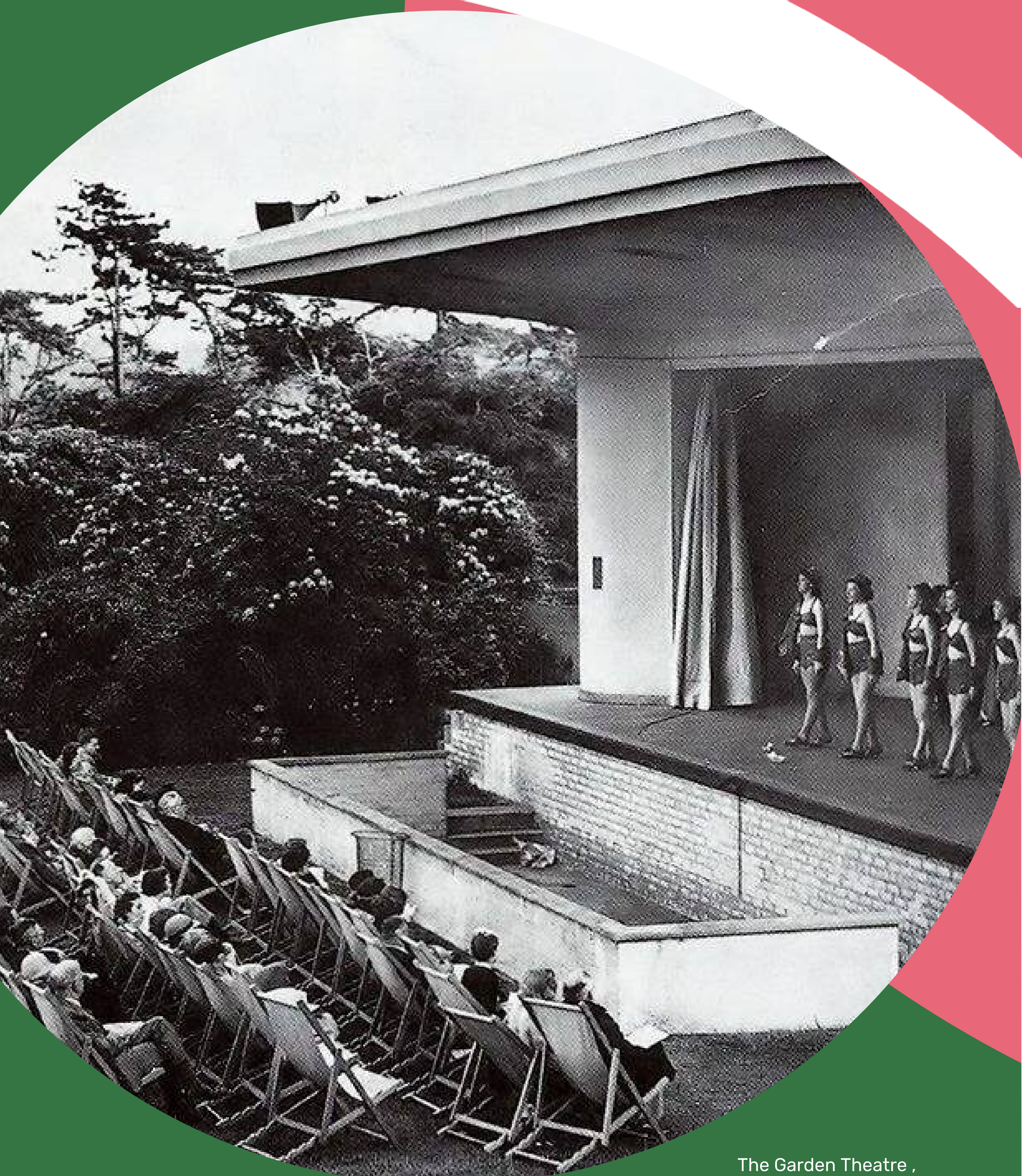


GARDEN THEATRE



The Garden Theatre, circa 1940's, courtesy of Liverpool Record Office

Outdoor theatre in Calderstones Park has its origins in the Holidays at Home scheme during World War II, when the local community was invited to enjoy open-air dance, musical and comedy productions in the park. These performances proved so popular that in 1947, an Art-Deco style theatre stage was added to the back of the Mansion House.

With funding from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, The Reader has restored the Garden Theatre and it once again welcomes the best theatre and performances from around the country. With further support from the Heritage Fund and a team of dedicated volunteers, we have been recording the memories and reminiscences of the Theatre with our local community.

This library of oral histories will ensure the survival of the intangible heritage of the Theatre, and help us understand its part in the history of Calderstones and in the lives of the people of Liverpool.

1939-1945 HOLIDAYS AT HOME

Holidays at Home was a government initiative to encourage people to 'Holiday at Home' during the Second World War in order to take the pressure off the nation's rail network, to give priority travel to military personnel, save fuel and to keep up morale.



Liverpool Daily Post - Friday 22nd June 1945

Plays and operas that we know were performed in the Garden Theatre include: *Much ADO About Nothing* and *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare, performed by The Liverpool Theatre Guild (June 1945 and by Liverpool Theatre Players June 1947) *Carmen*, *Faust*, *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci* performed by Liverpool Opera Company (June 1946) *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* by Philip Massinger and performed by Merseyside Unity Theatre (July 1947)



Liverpool Echo - Friday 16th July 1946

As a result of the success of the outdoor theatre programme, in 1945 it was decided it would become a permanent feature for Calderstones Park and Liverpool's cultural landscape. The Art-Deco inspired theatre, designed by Liverpool's City Architect Sir Lancelot Keay opened its doors to the public in 1947.



Liverpool Echo - Tuesday 3rd July 1945

'Open-Air Theatre Calderstones Scheme Permanent

The scheme is to construct a stage and proscenium 44ft wide and 18ft deep at the rear of the park mansion house, and facing a fine, broad stretch of tree flanked sward. There will be seating in the open for 2,000 or more, and eventually there may be provision for cover in the event of unfavourable weather.'

The Liverpool Echo, Thursday April 5th 1945

'Parks entertainment this summer included 350 concerts in Sefton, Newsham, Walton Hall and Calderstones Parks. In these, and Stanley Park, 80 band performances had also been given, with 240 shows for children in four parks, nine weeks of fun fairs at various parks, and three dozen plays and operas at Calderstones Park open-air theatre.'

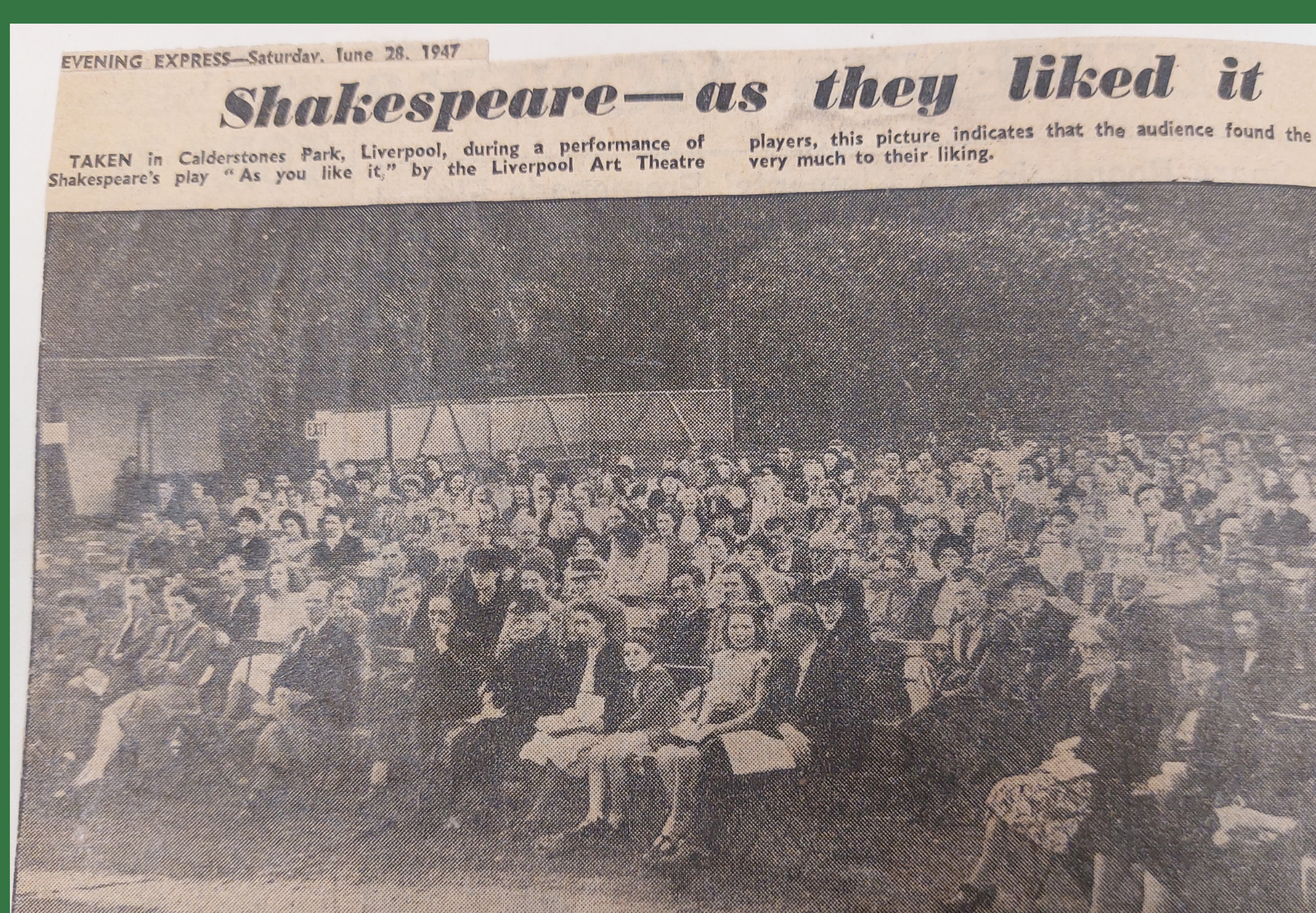
Liverpool Echo, Wednesday 20th November 1946

1947 COME TO STAY

'When better weather comes, work is to begin, I learn, on improving the Liverpool open-air theatre at Calderstones Park. This development of a municipal open-air theatre, a pioneer enterprise started at Otterspool as part of the Holidays-at-Home plan, has come to stay.'

Liverpool Daily Post, January 17th 1947

The Reader



Audience watching Shakespeare's play "As you like it", circa 1947

1950-1959 DECKCHAIRS & DUMMIES

"We were brought here by my mum to watch our eldest brother, and wow, he's part of us and he's on the stage doing his magic show. So we just sat there with everybody else just in amazement. He used to have a ventriloquists dummy that he called Charlie Brown and we'd see him doing the various tricks with (him). The one we remember and a lot of people seem to remember is the one with the rings that kind of magically went together and then came apart and I think he'd ask somebody up on stage and say 'can you do it like I do it,' and obviously, a child, they couldn't do that."

from Tom Holding's oral history



The Garden Theatre, circa 1955, courtesy of the Liverpool Record Office.



During the late 1950's and early 1960s Bernard (Ben) Holding performed magic and ventriloquism shows in the Garden Theatre. Picture, Bernard (Ben) Holding (dated 1954) donated by Tom Holding.

*I sang my songs so much
that they became
the soundtrack for my dreams,
the melody of my moods,
a room I lived in,
and a balm for my wounds.*

from You Go To My Head by
Carole Boston Weatherford

1960

AWARDS

On 15th June 1960, the Lord Mayor of Liverpool presented awards on the stage Garden Theatre as part of Liverpool Park Police's Annual Inspection.



Liverpool Park Police Inspection, 1960, courtesy of Liverpool Record Office

1964 SHAKESPEARE AT 400

Liverpool Echo -
Thursday 20th
February 1964

City's Shakespeare Celebrations
Celebrity Performers For 400th Anniversary

Liverpool's efforts to celebrate the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's birth this year will probably exceed those of any other town or city in Great Britain. Shakespeare will be performed in the Open Air Theatre at Calderstones Park. Between June 29th and July 18th Merseyside Unity Theatre will present 'Coriolanus' and the Masque Players 'As You Like It.'
The Liverpool Echo,
Thursday 20th February 1964

with **THE AMATEURS**
by Hughie Ross

Open Air Productions At Calderstones Park

ALTHOUGH most amateur societies are now enjoying the summer break, at least four in Liverpool are busy preparing their productions for Liverpool's Open Air Theatre in Calderstones Park, and, like cricket enthusiasts, are hoping that the Met. men are correct in their forecast of more settled weather conditions for the next few weeks. Facilities at Calderstones, I understand, have been improved since last year and it is hoped that a wider public will accept the opportunity to see what a high standard has been achieved by local amateur players.



1966-1967 MORE PERFORMANCES

Plays that we know were performed during the 1960's include:

The Taming of the Shrew by William Shakespeare performed by Liverpool Little Theatre Dramatic Society (February 1964) *Coriolanus* by William Shakespeare performed by Merseyside Unity Theatre (June 1964) *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare performed by The Masque Players (July 1964) *The Man With a Load of Mischief* by Ashley Dukes performed by Merseyside Unity Theatre (June 1966) *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare performed by Liverpool Masque Players (July 1967)

1960-1990 THE FIRST CAFÉ

From the 1960s to the 1990s, there was a café based in The Mansion House which was run by the Wright family. The first café the family ran in The Mansion was adjacent to the Garden Theatre with French windows opening onto wooden steps. The decision was made to convert the café into reception rooms and relocate the café to the opposite side of The Mansion where a café remained until 2017. The prizes for the children's talent shows, held in the Garden Theatre, were put on display in the café in a glass cabinet, perhaps to tempt children into performing!



The reception room at the back of the Garden Theatre. Image donated by Marie Wright.

"A lot of local people who were kids then will certainly remember the kids talent contest that would run in the school in the summer holidays that used to take place in the theatre, the open air theatre we used to call it."

from David Wright's oral history

"I do remember music and I do remember being able to sing, what we sang I don't know any you'd some children would get picked to go up and join in and that is all I can really remember but I do, as soon as I walked in last year I oh I remember this, I loved it. It just, it was something for you do to, you weren't roaming the streets. "

from a Garden Theatre oral history

"I remember being fascinated watching a lady with a performing dog cause I'd never seen anything like it before in my life and it was probably a very simple thing but I remember the dog walking upright on its hind legs and thinking it was amazing."

from Mary White's oral history



The Garden Theatre, 1972, courtesy of the Liverpool Record Office.

1970s COUNCIL OFFICES

During the 1970's The Mansion House became home to council offices for various departments, including Parks and Gardens.



Folk Festival News

Despite some financial difficulties and the transition of The Mansion House to council offices, outdoor theatre and entertainment continued throughout the 1970's. There was a real emphasis on family-friendly events with talent shows being a popular staple of the summer programme.

*Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of
the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother
who smiles as she sings.*

from Piano by D.H Lawrence

2011-2013 THE READER'S NEW HOME

Calderstones Park became the organisational home of The Reader in 2011. The Reader is a national charity that wants to bring about a Reading Revolution, so that everyone can experience and enjoy great literature, which we believe is a tool for helping humans survive and live well.

Liverpool City Council put The Mansion House up for sale in 2012 and in 2013, The Reader signed a 125 year lease to become custodians. The refurbishment project was the next chapter in a story that has seen the charity convert a number of unoccupied buildings at Calderstones into warm and welcoming community spaces, including The Reader Café and Ice Cream Parlour, and the magical space for children- the Storybarn.

"I remember you could often hear concerts going on in sort of in the distance if you were walking in the park or event even sitting at home in the garden you could hear, you could hear some of the concerts in progress. "

from Graham Roskin's oral history

"I remember coming here with half a dozen members of the team and our chair of trustees and walking round the building and the site and just thinking my goodness what would this be like if you brought it to life, what, it's fantastic, what an amazing asset so, I remember that feeling of excitement and no doubt and no sense of 'oh my god its going to be really difficult' although all that was true and I guess I knew it I, my main overwhelming feeling was this will be fantastic."

from founder of The Reader, Jane Davis' oral history



Founder of The Reader, Jane Davis, outside The Mansion House, pre 2019

2019

A NEW CHAPTER BEGINS



Garden Theatre at The Mansion House, pre 2019

In September 2019, Calderstones Mansion House, home of The Reader, reopened, with a weekend of free celebrations marking the completion of a £5m refurbishment of the Grade II building that took three years to complete. Re-opening the Mansion House supports The Reader's mission to give everyone a chance to experience literature's life-supporting benefits.

"The idea was to try and introduce lots of long straight sight lines using glass, because we were very conscious that the theatre particularly the theatre garden is sort of, you know, it's there for the community and we wanted it to feel welcoming."

from George Hawkins' oral history



Garden Theatre at The Mansion House

Performance of Julius Caesar, by William Shakespeare, in the Garden Theatre, 2022



TODAY

THE READER'S NEW HOME

The Reader at Calderstones is a place unlike any other, where everyone is welcome and anyone can come to experience great literature and find and share meaning. The Garden Theatre still holds centre stage and plays host to weddings, celebrations, garden parties and magical theatre performances.

Wedding set-up in the Garden Theatre



"I really enjoyed the play and have signed up for information about future events. The Mansion House is a lovely setting and it is good to see events so well attended."

Audience feedback from a theatre performance at The Mansion House, 2023



Family Theatre in the Garden Theatre, 2023

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts*

from The Seven Ages of Man by William Shakespeare



Looking toward the stage (theatre configuration) from 'The Future of Calderstones Mansion presentation'

"I remember we had a summer fair in the back garden and someone who was in one of our Wirral groups who had lived with anxiety and depression and forms of isolation took the tickets or the entry money on the back gate and welcomed 400 people into our back garden and I just felt, she's come all the way on public transport from the Wirral to speak to 400 people, she's a person who used to be unable to speak to everyone and that's Calderstones doing its job, I remember her."

from founder of The Reader, Jane Davis' oral history

2020-2021

BREAD & ROSES

Shortly after opening, The Mansion House was forced to close due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Inspired by the words of the early female unionists of the US, who recognised that life was not only about basic necessities but also about the ineffable beauty of the world too - 'give us bread, but give us roses', The Reader adapted its mission and created homemade meals - the bread - and organised Shared Reading and wellbeing resources for those feeling isolated - the roses.

"I will say as well the garden, we used the theatre room as part of the Bread and Roses project, which was part of the Covid response where we provided Shared Reading packs to different groups who were isolated. We fed people during the Covid period, we used the garden theatre, so the theatre room itself to effectively turn Calderstones into a soup factory for quite a few months where, you know, the chefs would basically mass produce really good, nutritious, usually root vegetable soup in the kitchens and we would cool this stuff on mass in the theatre room, package it up and send it out to various, various community partners and individuals actually, people who needed it."

from George Hawkins' oral history

Heritage Open Day at The Mansion House, 2022



This exhibition was made possible by the generosity and support of all oral history interviewees and The Reader's oral history volunteers. With thanks to National Lottery Heritage Fund.

