

Fisher Theatre Family

Imagine North Walsham in 1828. It's a small market town, with less than 3,000 population. No trains to Norwich until 1874, nor to Cromer until 1877. George IV is on the throne and the Duke of Wellington is Prime Minister.

6th May 1928 is the opening night of the town's new theatre built by the Fisher family at a cost of £1,800 on the site of an old barn, which had been used previously for theatrical productions since 1818.

So who were the Fisher family??

In brief, they were a very talented and very successful theatrical family, touring various venues in Norfolk and Suffolk in the late 18th, early 19th centuries. They would build their own theatres. They would even write some of their own plays. In some productions, there would be 18 members of the family. Beginning with David Fisher, who first found fame in Norwich, his son would take the lead role in Hamlet, Macbeth and Richard III at the Drury Lane theatre in London, his grandson would perform in front of Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle and both his grandson and great grandson would take the lead roles in the Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas performed by the D'Oyley Carte Opera Company.

However, just to make things somewhat confusing for any outsider, the eldest son in each generation was called David. So, the father, son, grandson and great grandson just mentioned were all called David Fisher. (For this purpose, we will simply call them 1, 2, 3 and 4.)

Historically the Fisher family were farmers from Hethersett and had been for over a 100 years. However, when David Fisher(1) was born in 1860, his parents were living in Norwich and his father (incidentally also called David) worked as a craftsman, but was not involved in the theatre at all. David(1) was their 3rd child, their eldest son. After school he trained as a carpenter, but started performing in amateur dramatics in his spare time. Handsome, and with a fine tenor voice, he was spotted by the manager of the Theatre Royal in Norwich and was soon engaged as a singer.

His fame grew in and around Norwich and by 1788 when his earnings were sufficient to support a wife he married Elizabeth Burrell, who soon joined him on stage.

By 1792, with a growing family, he branched out on his own and purchased the major share in a touring company owned by William Scraggs. There, Fisher became very successful, providing the drive, the ambition and the day-to-day management of the company. Although there were other touring companies in the region, Fisher(1) made sure his was the best in terms of scenery and costumes and, whilst he catered to all classes, his decisions as to where to visit and how long to stay were guided by the number of gentry and nobles who lived locally. He knew they would pay a premium to be entertained and when he was to open in a new location he would deliver advertisements to every large house within a 6 mile radius.

So, gradually, his became the pre-eminent theatrical company in the region and by the early 1800's he had established a profitable 2 year circuit moving from town to town every 2 months during which they would perform a huge repertoire, from farce to opera, from melodrama to pantomime, sometimes as many as 30 productions in each town.

After William Scraggs' death in 1808, Fisher(1) established his own company (the Norfolk and Suffolk Company of Comedians) and soon afterwards decided that his company was profitable enough to start building its own theatres rather than continue to perform in inadequate playhouses.

In 1812, he completed his first 2 theatres in Lowestoft and Wells-next-the-Sea. Over the next 16 years, usually raising capital with share offerings to local patrons, he opened theatres in Halesworth (1812), Woodbridge (1814), Eye (1815), Dereham (1816), Sudbury (1817), Thetford (1818), Beccles (1819), Swaffham (1822), Newmarket (1825) and Bungay and North Walsham in (1828).

However, by 1827 David Fisher(1) was 67 years old and, whilst he continued acting and singing until his death in 1832, he decided to hand over control of the company to his sons, and it was they who finished the building programme by building the theatres in Bungay and North Walsham.

Now for David Fisher(2), born in 1788. His education was somewhat sporadic as he was moved from school to school as the company, and the family with it, went on tour. But his real education was in the ways of the theatre and, like his father, he rapidly showed great promise, not only as an actor and musician, but also by becoming a skilful scenery painter. In 1817, shortly after he was married, his talent led to an approach from the Drury Lane Theatre in London to act as an understudy for Edmund Kean, a well known Shakespearean actor, who was temporarily incapacitated. As such, David(2) performed Hamlet, Macbeth and Richard III and when Kean returned he was offered a permanent position at the theatre. Unfortunately,

though, the death of his wife in 1818 precipitated a change of direction and, instead of continuing his acting career, he began to teach theatre and music.

So it was that, when David Fisher(1) handed over control of the Norfolk and Suffolk touring company to his sons in 1827, it was Charles, the 2nd son, who took on most of the management.

Let's look at what would have been on the programme for an evening's entertainment in North Walsham. Taking a typical bill board for Thursday, 29th April 1830, there would have been:

- The Overture from the celebrated comic opera "The Barber of Seville" by Rossini, with a few additional songs.
- A Dance - performed by Master and Miss Fisher; and
- A new Farce - Master's Rival (or A Day at Boulogne).

19:33 Thu 10 Apr northwalshamheritage.org.uk 45%

THEATRE, N. WALSAHM.
NORFOLK AND SUFFOLK COMPANY.

BY DESIRE OF
Mr. and the Honourable Mrs. PETRE.

On THURSDAY, 29th APRIL, 1830,
The celebrated & admired Comic Opera, called the
Barber of Seville.

The celebrated OVERTURE to the Opera, composed
by ROSSINI, will be performed.

Count Almaviva, Mr. HARGRAVE.
Doctor Bartolo, Mr. LAMBERT—Figaro, Mr. D. FISHER,
Fiorello, Mr. C. FISHER—Basil, Mr. J. FISHER,
Argus, Mr. HOLLIDAY—Talbuy, Mr. FISHER,
Officer, Mr. GEORGE—Algunzille, Mr. WITHAM,
Notary, Mr. HOLLIDAY—Soldiers, &c. &c.
Rosina, Miss HIBBERT—Marcellina, Miss C. POOLE.

In the course of the Opera, the following Music.

Trio, Piano Manicemo . . . Rossini.	Song, An old man would be
Duet, Maiden Fair . . . Pasquella.	won't . . . Bishop
Song, Lo! the Partolota . . . Rossini.	Song, With that bewitching
Duet, Mighty Jura . . . Do . . .	subo, ah! . . . Do.
Song, Tyrant, soon I'll burst	Song, Away, deceiver . . . Do.
thy chains . . . Do.	Trio, Step aside & Zephers Rossini.
Song, Wemankind . . . Bishop.	Finale, Young Love triumph.
Grand Finale to the First Act Rossini.	and sailing . . . Do.

END OF THE OPERA.

A Dance, Master and Miss FISHER.

After which, a New Farce, called
MASTERS' RIVAL,
OR, A DAY AT BOULOGNE.

Mr. Aldgate, Mr. J. FISHER,
Sir Colly Cowmeadow, Mr. LAMBERT,
Peter Shack, Mr. C. FISHER,
Paul Shack Mr. D. FISHER,
Captain Middleton, Mr. HARGRAVE,
Barnes, Mr. GEORGE—Sentinel, Mr. HIGH,
Robin, Mr. WITHAM.

Mrs. Aldgate, Mrs. HODGSON—Amelia, Miss HIBBERT
Tibby Postlethwaite, Mrs. C. FISHER.

Places to be taken of Mr. George, at the
Theatre, from Ten till One o'Clock.

FLURDLY, PRINTER.

Sadly, after David Fisher(1) died in 1832, whilst performing on stage in Dereham (where he is buried), the business started to struggle in the face of a national recession. David Fisher(2) returned to help Charles, but the recession was too severe and the financial situation impossible. All the theatres had to be sold off and the North Walsham theatre, which had cost £1,800 to build, was sold in 1845 at a loss for only £400. Afterwards the building became the National School until the Board School opened on Manor Road in 1874. Now, it is the Wilco Motorist Store.

After the sale of all the theatres, David Fisher(2) retired to Woodbridge in Suffolk where he lived with the Hon Mary Wilson, with whom he had planned to elope in his early 20's before he was married. She cared for him for the rest of his life, but they could never marry because her father's will precluded it on threat of disinheritance. He died in 1858.

David Fisher(3) (born 1816) first appeared on stage at the age of 7 dancing a hornpipe. Unfortunately, a leg injury interrupted his stage career for a while, but his exceptional skills as a violinist kept him busy and for a time he helped his father, David(2) run his stage and music school. Eventually his leg healed and he went on to have a successful stage career. In London he performed for Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle. As was the family tradition, he didn't just act, he was involved behind the scenes too, as a stage manager. His major achievement, though, was to be given a contract by the D'Oyley Carte Opera Company, where he played all the major comic roles in the Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire and was said to be a particular favourite of W.S. Gilbert. He was also a writer. In 1850, he wrote a play called "Music hath Charms" and later on 4 other plays. He died in 1887 and was buried at Highgate Cemetery.

Next, David Fisher(4), born 1844. After leaving school, he travelled with his father and ultimately followed in his father's footsteps. In 1873 he appeared with an English company at the Athenee Theatre in Paris. In 1880 he too joined the D'Oyley Carte Opera Company, and toured extensively with them not only in Britain, but also to Germany, Austria and Holland, playing all the leading roles in the Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire like his father. Sadly, though, he died in 1889, whilst performing in the Yeomen of the Guard.

So the Fisher family deserve to be remembered, but the most fitting tribute today isn't to be found in North Walsham, nor even in Norfolk, but is to be found in Bungay in Suffolk. Fisher's theatre there, opened in 1828, the same year as the theatre in North Walsham. Like the rest, it had to be sold, - becoming the Corn Hall, then the town's first cinema, then a laundry.

But, finally, there is a happy ending. After local fundraising, the theatre in Bungay was purchased and restored. Now known as the Fisher Theatre, it is a centre for dramatic arts, run by a not-for-profit charity.

Jane and Geoff Ward
March 2025

19:34 Thu 10 Apr en.wikipedia.org 45%

David Fisher (I)



Born	26 August 1760 Norwich, Norfolk , England
Died	6 August 1832 East Dereham, Norfolk , England
Occupations	Actor · theatre manager
Spouse	Elizabeth Burrell (<u>m. 1788</u> ; died 1814)

David Fisher (II)



1818 engraving of David Fisher by J.G. Walker

Born	29 December 1788 Norwich , Norfolk , England
Died	20 August 1858 Woodbridge , Suffolk , England
Occupations	<u>Actor</u> · theatre manager