

## **Programme Notes by Mark Fuller**

The Livesey family had a heritage in the theatre going back to at least 1874, when Thomas Carter and Mary (Marie onstage) Livesey, Roger's grandparents, joined Thomas Lawrence's Great Allied Theatre, a touring theatre company; not just the actors toured, but the theatre too, Lawrence was a Portable Theatre proprietor, the theatre being a tent, to be set up at fairgrounds or wherever a friendly council would allow them. Thomas and Mary already had a baby, Sam, born the year before in North Wales.

The couple made a name for themselves, as when the Palace of Varieties opened in Llanelli in 1878, they advertised wanting a leading man and a leading lady, and asked for them by name.

However the Livesey's took over the Great Allied Theatre as Lawrence retired, in around 1880, rechristening it Livesey's Paragon Portable Theatre, as before, touring the Midlands, and wintering at Mexborough. By the mid 1880s they abandoned the Portable theatre and toured public halls as the Livesey Paragon Dramatic Company, and at some point developed a permanent base, The Paragon Theatre, at Mexborough. Sadly Thomas Carter Livesey died in March 1890 leaving Mary a young widow with four teenage boys, Ted, Gus, Sam and Joseph, plus sisters Ellen and May, aged 12 and 7.

But the show must go on, and Mary (who had already from time to time been described as the proprietor of the company) soldiered on with her children and was soon advertising for new actors to join the company, which of course included her sons. An 1891 review praised Sam as a priest in *The Dead Heart*. He was 17.

Next, Mary had built the Prince of Wales Theatre, Mexborough, a medium sized but smart building, that opened in 1893. While that was happening the Portable Theatre idea was revived, to tide things over, and perhaps to give the boys a chance to learn the management side. The Summer of 1893 was spent in Rotherham, a mixture of classics and barnstormers played in a temporary wooden structure, including *Hamlet*, Sam starring, with Mary (Mrs TC Livesey as she was now billed) returning to the stage as Gertrude. Later he would be giving his *Richard III*....he was 19 by this point; Sam was definitely emerging as the leading actor.

Edward Carter Livesey (Ted) seems to have flown the nest first, appearing outside of the family troupe in late 1893; however when looking for work he gave the Prince of Wales as his contact address. Gus became the Assistant Manager, with Marie the manager; then manager with his mother described as the Proprietress. Sam, too was appearing elsewhere as touring repertory companies filled the theatre. Edward, now just calling himself Carter, took charge of the wooden travelling theatre in 1894 and started to create his own touring company; the leading man was, inevitably, either himself or Sam. Another member of the company is Lizzie Chambers; soon she will be billed as Mrs Carter Livesey, they had married in 1891. A year or two later they will be advertising themselves as a troupe of three with Miss May Livesey, youngest sister to the Livesey boys.

In 1895 Sam joined a touring company of *The Still Alarm*, in a lead role, and began to be noticed by theatregoers in London and the bigger regional cities. It was a spectacular production set in a New York Fire station, fire engines, horses and all, and Sam wasn't just playing small theatres in the Midlands any more. The twenty-plus week tour raised his profile to national level, and was followed by another national tour soon after in *The Span Of Life*.

In 1896 Gus gives up his managerial role and returns to treading the boards, now known as Gustavus, joining Sam, and E.Carter and his family in getting lucrative touring roles, and with Joseph joining them. The Prince of Wales, Mexborough, still run by Mum, remains their home base

however. Throughout 1897 and 1898 the Livesey family are on the way up; (Edward) Carter has a burgeoning playwriting career taking off while he acts elsewhere with his wife; their daughter May is appearing in a child role in a new play by Arthur Jefferson (Stan Laurel's father) and Samuel and Gus (they have changed their billings again) continue on the road in a long tour. In a precarious profession, all are working either steadily or constantly.

The end of 1898 brought change however; Mary stepped down from the Prince of Wales, Mexborough, but not before a gala farewell performance; Hamlet, with her sons Samuel as the Prince; E. Carter as Polonius, Joseph as Horatio, Little May as Ophelia, and herself as Gertrude !! The next month she was back acting, touring the country in The Ladder of Life, in a company that included Joseph and E. Carter, and his wife Lizzie. 1899 saw all the Livesey family, separately and together, in almost constant work all over the country.

The transition to Barry seems to have happened around March 1900. While Gus is still using The Prince of Wales, and Joseph that of his current engagement in Leeds, Mexborough as his contact address, and Joseph that of his current engagement in Leeds, Sam has acquired a new base; 36, Holton Road, Barry Dock, Cardiff. Now the flats above Evolve hairdressers, possibly the Rhondda Restaurant at the time..

There was a good reason for Sam needing a settled base; on March 2nd 1900, he had married Maggie Edwards, a Ballad Vocalist, at Holbeck Registry Office. They had toured together in a production of the pantomime Bluebeard the year before, Sam was Bluebeard, Maggie The Fairy Queen.; Maggie was Welsh herself, though whether from Barry or elsewhere.....very much a case of joining the family business, as Maggie would continue touring throughout the 1900s with Sam, and her mother in law Marie as Mrs TC Livesey, as part of the Dottridge and Longden touring company, occasionally billed as Mr and Mrs Sam Livesey, with only occasional breaks; Jack Edwards Livesey would be born 11th June 1901, Barry Edwards Livesey on 16th October 1905, both at Barry.....and a second generation of Liveseys to be brought up backstage were founded.

By 1909, the family-based touring company would be known as Dottridge, Longden and Liveseys....and this happy state of affairs lasted until October 1911.

Meanwhile brother Joseph, acting as Joseph Carter in both his brothers' companies, had himself married by 1906; to Mary Catherine Edwards, known as Cassie, sister of Maggie and like her, an actress, and on June 25th 1906 Roger was born, and then Margaret on April 1st 1911, also above their Grandmother's restaurant in Barry . But sadly, in October 1911, Joseph died, leaving Roger and baby Margaret fatherless and Mary a widow. In October 1912 the whole extended family decamps; the school logbooks simply record "Left for London"

In 1913, Sam's wife Maggie dies; later the same year, he marries Mary/Cassie, bringing the four kids, Jack, Barry, Roger and Margaret under the same roof, a move only made legal six years prior. Another daughter, Stella, was a result of this new marriage, in 1915.

Stella preferred to avoid showbusiness and, and despite graduating from RADA in 1933, became a horse trainer, after a wartime spell in the RAF.

From the 1910s through the 1920s and into the 1930s an increasing number of Liveseys were treading the boards, around the provincial theatres, in the West End, and abroad ; E. Carter Livesey was now established as a comedy actor and he and his sketches, with one or two acting partners, were popular and kept him busy on tour. His daughter Ellen, now calling herself Lillie and herself married to Lionel Balmont, another actor, was a busy leading lady; Sam was still in demand

but also Jack, Barry, Roger and Margaret, calling herself Peggy Livesey were now getting noticed although in their teens and early twenties. Their Aunt May was still acting too.

Theatre was most definitely in the Livesey blood, but the lure of Moving Pictures became irresistible. Naturally Sam went first, appearing in a quick succession of films starting in 1916, most famously the silent version of Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail*, as the senior Scotland Yard detective; then came Jack, starting in 1918, with Barry and Roger in 1921, in versions of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *The Four Feathers* respectively. As in the theatre, they collaborated; Roger featured as Sam's son in 1921's *Married Love*; Sam, Cassie (In her only film appearance) Barry and Jack appeared as the Boyd family in 1935's *Variety*, now seemingly lost; while Alexander Korda's *Rembrandt*, starring Charles Laughton, includes Roger, Sam, Barry and Jack. Peggy Livesey, waited for TV to be invented and made her small screen debut on the BBC in 1939.

All had notable but patchy film and TV careers.....understandably, for all of them, theatre came first. Even Roger's starring role in 1945's *I Know Where I'm Going* was constructed around his theatre commitments; despite being filmed on location in the Hebrides, he himself never made it North of Watford.

In 1934 Margaret married actor Desmond Jeans, brother of the better known Isobel, who had been married to Claude Rains; his other sister Ursula married Roger thus tying the family tree into another knot. They married in New York because, of course, Roger was in a play there; they appear together in the nursing home sequence of *Blimp*, and had a lifetime theatrical partnership, with occasional film appearances, until 1975; his death bringing the Livesey's acting dynasty to an end after 100 years.

Roger had the best chance of a starry career, and his films for Powell and Pressburger - *Blimp*, *IKWIG* and *AMOLAD* are his peak films, but it might have been still greater had the theatre, from a cineastes perspective, not got in the way; it was Roger, not Trevor Howard, who was the first choice to star in *Brief Encounter*. I can hear that voice with the Rachmaninov now.....