

Fran Birch Records Officer

Exploring Theatres Launch Speech

Within your launch packs you will see a copy of our current magazine, TM. The cover article is all about Exploring Theatres and the Trust's theatre resources, so I don't really want to repeat myself here: what I really want to do is provide some background and talk a little about the evolution of Exploring Theatres, and then show you the web pages.

So, to start with a bit of background - I joined the Trust six years ago, and soon realised that the Trust holds a unique archive of material about theatre buildings – working files which have been developed over the past thirty-odd years of the Trust's existence; a Theatres Database, with records of more than 3,500 theatres; photographs taken by staff and donated by volunteers and enthusiasts; we also hold some older archive materials in our treasured Faulkner and Kreiger Collections.

Based in a single office in central London, this huge amount of knowledge was not easily accessible to many people, and so in 2005, with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, we embarked on the Information Access Project... Its purpose, as the name suggests was to help increase public access to the information held at the Trust. Our main intention was to scan images from our archives, and create a new online digital image library. We would then develop

our Theatres Database to integrate seamlessly with this new Image Library, and make them both available via our website. We've succeeded in scanning in and cataloguing 2,000 or so images on there at the moment, with more being added each week – which is part of my current role.

But now comes the interesting bit! Partly because Information Access was an HLF funded project, and partly because the Trust wanted to engage with people of all ages – not just grown-up researchers and architects – we began to think about how our information could also be made accessible to young people.

Some work was done with three primary schools and with two theatres up in Yorkshire (the Theatre Royal's in Wakefield and York) to see if theatre buildings could be useful as subject matter within the National Curriculum. Because we had limited resources, we decided to focus on Key Stage 2 initially, and we were very lucky to engage David Walmsley as our expert.

David created the text, which took our initial ideas of 'having something for teachers' and grew them into 'Exploring Theatres'. He developed the text which fills our web pages, and also developed the PDFs which are available for teachers to download from the website.

Coming to the website, I'll just do a brief run through the pages to show you what's there, and mention any things that are still being added.

In terms of the future development of Exploring Theatres, Kate is going to be talking about that in a moment. I won't dwell on the pages here on the screen –

it is better for you to look through them at your own pace. Do by all means come and have a look once we've finished speaking, and if you have any questions we will do our best to answer them! For the basic guided tour though...

[show front page of ET]

[history pages..] with images that link to the DB entries

[décor pages]

[Stages and auditoria] we will be adding image examples so that this becomes more of a visual glossary of the spaces around a theatre – as with the [What makes..] pages too.

[Who works..] we are keen to engage with all the theatres in the UK, and anyone who works within them, and I am rather hoping that as we do this, we may be able to encourage some theatres to donate images of their staff and volunteers working in these various roles, so that this too can become a visual glossary.

The final part of the Exploring Theatres section is the [teacher downloads] page. Here we have a set of PDFs for teachers to download. They are aimed at teachers of Key Stage 2 children, but can easily be adapted for teachers of other Key Stages. There are five subjects – citizenship, art & design, history, literacy and geography - and there is also another PDF providing guidance for

teachers planning a theatre visit. Once again, I don't want to take you through the PDFs page by page, but I would encourage you to come and have a look at them yourselves, and if you have any questions just let me know.

One thing that we felt was very important when using theatres as a classroom tool, was to celebrate the variety of theatre buildings in the UK, and also the variety of materials that the Trust has to offer. And so we have tried to include a lot of images within the PDFs. Obviously this can cause a problem when it comes to downloading, as lots of images mean large file sizes. So in order to keep things as simple as possible, the images used in the PDFs are also provided within zip files on the downloads page – one folder per subject – so that teachers can download the images and use them in class, either as printouts or on an interactive whiteboard.

There are a couple of important things for me to say before I finish. One is to thank all of the people who helped Exploring Theatres to develop into what it is now – there are certainly too many to mention, and I daren't be selective for fear of who I will offend most by leaving them out! But more important than that is to say that this is just the beginning: Exploring Theatres is a new area of the Trust's work, and – I think – a very important one. And I am delighted to say that my colleague Kate will be taking it into the future and developing it.