

THE MINERVA ORCHESTRA 1925-1999 35

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In 1925 Mr. Fred Seeley, well known in Dover for his musical prowess particularly with the 'cello, decided to form a small group of musicians to give concerts for charities and to play at local functions. They met each week to rehearse at the home of one of the members - in Minerva Avenue. Thus the Minerva Orchestra was launched.

By 1930 the group was well established with six regular players, with Fred Seeley as conductor; Mr. Gough as leader; Fred Burch, 2nd violin; Jessie Husk, pianist; Mr. Taylor, flute; and Stan Coles, 1st violin.

Numbers increased and the group twice changed venues. In the same year the Highland Light Infantry came to town and so many army bandsmen joined the group that they had to move again to larger premises in Husk's Yard. This was the peak time of the group's existence, when a 30 strong orchestra gave many concerts.

Sadly, by 1932, the conductor had gone, the bandsmen had moved and the orchestra shrank. It gained several new members, however: Daisy West (then Sawyer) who played 1st violin; Don Bailiff, who played the viola, violin, double bass or sang; Les Bailiff, violin or piano and Mrs. Beach, violin. C. Dowler took over as leader from Mr. Gough. This smaller group continued giving concerts at many venues, including the Brotherhood, Sisterhood, St. Mary's Church, St. Martin's Church and performed at civic and other functions. Some of the members, including Daisy West, joined a mandolin group, which gave weekly concerts on Dover sea front.

From 1939-46 conditions in Dover made it impossible for the group to continue. Most of the men left to serve their country. However, in 1946 Fred Seeley soon got the Minerva on its feet again, with a trio meeting in Don Bailiff's house in River one week and Fred Seeley's house

the next. Playing out consisted of civic functions again, dinners, banquets and a few charity events.

It became a quartet in 1947, when I joined the group, playing violin, as did Don Bailiff. Les Bailiff played the piano, with Fred back on the 'cello. More engagements were undertaken and the fee split among the players. There were also many more charity performances. Happy days!

Once again numbers started to grow. By the end of 1948 we were meeting at the home of Charlie Hedgecock in London Road, River. Charlie and his son Mike played violins and Charlie's cousin, Bill, led the orchestra, after Mr. Dowler, who had hoped to rejoin, sadly was unable to do so because of rheumatism. Stan Coles and Daisy West came back. Concerts were given more frequently and further afield. In fact we travelled anywhere on any day, as long as transport was provided.

With the return of Fred Burch we had to move again. In River Village Hall it seemed as if new players turned up every week. By now we had brass and woodwind players joining and we went to River School to rehearse.

Over the next few years we had many more new members. In 1948 Frank Fuller, a great character, joined us. He played the 'cello and did violin repairs for us. His father was a listed violin maker in London and Frank had his tools. In 1949 we gained the most colourful character, the clarinetist, Sam Bateman, who had played for many years in London theatres. Although he was well over seventy he cycled to our practices and local concerts. Also he looked after our stands and other equipment, repairing and maintaining them for the next ten years.

We played for pantomimes, musicals and orchestral concerts and found we had

36 insufficient time left to practise and plan new programmes. It was difficult for most of us to spare more than two nights a week. many of our concerts were annual or twice-yearly; the alms houses in Dover, Eastry Hospital, most Dover churches, carol concerts and homes for the aged in Kearsney and Dover.

1953 was Coronation year and the Minerva Orchestra rose to the occasion with a Grand Coronation Concert in the Co-operative Hall, Maison Dieu Road, Dover, on Wednesday, 15th April, at 7.30 pm. We had a complement of 22. There were six 1st violins, five 2nd violins, 'cello, double-bass, clarinet, trombone, trumpets, percussion and pianoforte. The conductor was Fred Seeley and the leader Bill Hedgecock. The vocal solos were by Don Bailiff, who was the secretary, and the trumpet solos by Fred Crane.

In the following years the orchestra continued to meet in River, but changed meeting places several times. Fred Seeley, who had long wanted to play more 'cello, left the Minerva and joined Dover Orchestra. He was sorely missed. Then Bill

Hedgecock retired as leader due to ill health. Various leaders took over for short periods. I led for a while as a stop gap when I returned from overseas. Then when I moved away again Don Bailiff came to the rescue and conducted and George Peters took over as leader.

Concerts were given at many local venues and by 1961 we had 29 members on our lists and were meeting in Shatterlocks Primary School. Tony Marples came along with his French horn and was a real asset. From 1963 to 1967 we had several changes and additions to the orchestra. In 1968 John Hainsworth recatalogued and filed all our music, no mean task with over 300 pieces. In 1972 Frank Fuller's wife, Eva, came and played the piano. She was a really wonderful accompanist and was much in demand in Kent.

In 1972 Les Bailiff died, a bitter blow for the orchestra, who had relied on his knowledge and hard work. Then, after returning from a long holiday in South Africa, Don Bailiff died, yet another difficult place to fill. We had to spread the work around. Mr. Reg Franklin was our new conductor.

We were playing at a lot more schools at this time. Then the cost of hiring halls became an over-riding factor and, for this reason, we moved to Deal Secondary School for our rehearsals and also became affiliated to the Evening Institute.

In 1975 we were fifty years old and celebrated by giving a concert of light orchestral music in St. George's Hall, Deal, on St. George's Day



Some members of the Minerva Orchestra at River School. 1951 Left to Right - Back Row. Messrs. Sutton, Hedgecock Jr., Hedgecock Sen., Gourlay, Brett, Challis, Ashley. Middle Row. Messrs. Burch, Dowler, Fuller, L.Bailiff, Coles, Wilsher. Front Row. Hedgecock (Leader), Wheeler (Mrs), Sawyer (Mrs), Seeley (Conductor), Dowler (Mrs), D.Bailiff (Organiser)



The Minerva Orchestra at a concert in St. Richard's School Hall in 1972

with George Peters as leader and myself as deputy. When Reg Franklin resigned, George Peters became conductor and I became leader. Tony Marples was Secretary and Linda Hayward Treasurer. We had fewer players and gave fewer concerts. When Dover Orchestra had to close we gained, as some of their players joined the Minerva.

The next major change came with the sudden death of George Peters, who had given us unselfish service since 1962. His musical knowledge and feeling for orchestral expression enabled us to reach our potential with concerts which enhanced our reputation.

In 1980 we gave a present of an engraved hip flask to Stan Coles to commemorate his membership of 50 years. He took on the difficult job of librarian and general adviser and, with our help, he checked through every set of music!

Daisy West died just before she completed 50 years service with the orchestra. Stan Coles survived only a few more years. In a short time we lost two of our first violins. In the following years there were many changes in all sections, with people moving away, or being too busy, or retiring. Our concerts had to be curtailed. At times we split up and at Deal

Music Festival in 1983 the string section and woodwind section played separate items.

In 1984 we gave two concerts, one at Eastry Hospital, a regular venue, and one at Dover Methodist Hall, our favourite old haunt.

Since then there have been many other players of all sorts and with all shapes of instruments who have come along for a few weeks or years and left for various reasons. There have also been many "friends" who will help for a concert but cannot attend regularly because of other commitments, but on whom we rely to maintain a balance. Mention must be made of our soloists. We have been able to call on some very fine vocalists from the East Kent area who have given their services free.

There is a list of members who have been with us long enough to pay a subscription, but it is too long to include here.

Now, in 1999, seven of us still meet at East Studdal, and play for our own enjoyment. We choose to play in the afternoons, as we are all retired. Two years ago I celebrated my 50 years with the orchestra and Tony Marples is still with us as Secretary/Treasurer. (Tel: 01304 202360)

Good luck, Minerva. Any more players out there?