

Introduction to the play.

Milton Keynes: The City's Past

So proclaims one of the posters designed to attract newcomers to our new city. To carry the point, the picture is a colour photograph of the Sundial on a house in Stony Stratford, bearing a Latin inscription and a date: 1739. This new city has a past.

It also has a community theatre. When it first opened, I wrote in a programme note: "Stantonbury Theatre exists for us and belongs to us. We are the community in the phrase, 'community theatre'. The community is all of us: men, women and children. Anyone who lives near enough to the theatre to call it their own, whether born here or just moved in, can count on it. Our theatre is built. It's in our midst." I ended up by trumpeting forth: "Stantonbury Theatre is your theatre, at the heart of your community." And I meant the people of Wolverton as much as the people of Walton Hall.

From the day I first moved into this area, ten years ago, I was struck by the unique character of Wolverton and New Bradwell. What lay behind the formidable wall along the Front? What was the story behind the grid pattern of the streets? Who were the people who built the foundations of this town? What were their motives?

When the new city came along, the questions had a sharper edge. What was it like to be a newcomer moving into the new railway town of Wolverton from 19th century Glasgow or Liverpool? What was it like to be a resident of Bradwell Village and see unfamiliar buildings sprouting in the fields nearby and strangers with unpredictable ways, walking the new streets?

The poster with the Sundial stresses the picturesque side of the new city's past: the Roman and Saxon remains, the Georgian and Victorian buildings in Stony Stratford. It does not feature Wolverton. Yet I have long felt that if we could unlock the doors to Wolverton's past and make it live again, it would speak to us in a way that would heighten our consciousness of our own lives and develop a deeper understanding of the lives of others.

I know of no better way of doing this than through documentary theatre. We have gone to the roots of Wolverton; found out from primary sources what actually happened in the first thirty years of its existence. Local historians pointed the way. Old residents delved to the back of their long memories, affording us glimpses into the past, including what their fathers and their grandfathers had told them. These people gave us the flavour.

The language we have used was never spoken or written with a view to being reproduced by actors on a stage. The words have the power and immediacy of utterances from life.

Our creative function has been to organise our materials into a coherent story line; finding the juxtapositions that reveal the conflicts, the humour and the pathos of people's lives.

From the start, our project attracted people from all walks of life to come and share their skills and resources. In Stantonbury, the walls have never been up between school and neighbourhood; children and adults have collaborated to meet the challenge of bringing all our discoveries and insights into early Wolverton into sharp focus. Our job now is to communicate the result as vividly as we can in theatrical terms, live. We hope you will enjoy sharing this experience with us.

Roy Nevitt