

## Early Lighting for the Amateur Stage in Bristol

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During research into the history of the Bristol Amateur Operatic Society to prepare a booklet to celebrate their centenary in 1994, I noticed in the accounts a reference each year an item for '*the limes*'. This I knew referred to gas limelights which were hired initially from Bromheads and thereafter each year from Husbands & Sons. What intrigued me most however was that the limes were still used up to 1922, Well into the period when good electric lighting (ie Carbon Arc Lamp) would have been available.

Research led me to a book published by the Society for Theatre Research *Theatre Lighting in the Age of Gas* by Terence Rees. Mr Rees's book traces the development of the limelight in depth up to the device that would have been available in 1900. The limelight originated as the Oxy-Calcium light, designed by a Lieutenant Thomas Drummond and consisted of a ball of quicklime which was heated in a stream of oxygen directed through the flame of a spirit lamp. Later, the idea was developed to include jets of both oxygen and hydrogen passing through two pipes before mixing at the burner and then through the quicklime stone, thus creating a very bright light. The

presence of large gas bags or metal cylinders behind stage made for a reasonably dangerous environment. Not only was the gas dangerous - the limestone could crack and explode. Eventually, town gas replaced the hydrogen as this became more available.

With the advent of better lenses, the wooden boxes which had encased the lime and jets were replaced by metal cylinders and placed upon a tripod. The limelight could be trained upon the actor or actress and thus the limelight became the forerunner of the modern follow-spot. These would have been the devices hired by the Operatic Society from 1900 to 1922.

Electric arc lamps were available for the same purpose from 1900 onwards but Terence Rees assures us that the reason for the retention of the limelight was due to the warmer light being more sympathetic to the actors' faces with their make-up on. Limelights have gone and arc lights have gone, but nevertheless the term '*in the limelight*' lingers on!

Bristol Amateur Operatic Society is the oldest amateur stage group in Bristol. The history booklet is available at Georges Bookshop, Park Street, Bristol and the Museum Bookshop of the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Queen's Road, Bristol.