

my  
favourite  
theatre

Andrew Newton

# My Favourite Theatre

40 Years at the World Famous Leeds City Varieties



Three years after I started in the business, having four or five theatres under my belt, I stood for the first time on the stage of the world famous Leeds City Varieties Music Hall. That was on 26 October 1982. I was the first and only hypnotist ever to perform at the venue. Since then, I have done 332 shows there and thus contributed nearly half a million pounds to the theatre in rental fees. I also hold the record for having done more shows at the Varieties than any other artiste in the history of the building.

The City Varieties is a national treasure, tucked away in Swan Street, a narrow alleyway between the Headrow and Briggate. Unlike most other theatres, it is almost impossible to hire the venue – the policy is one of invitation only. It is almost certainly Britain's oldest working theatre.

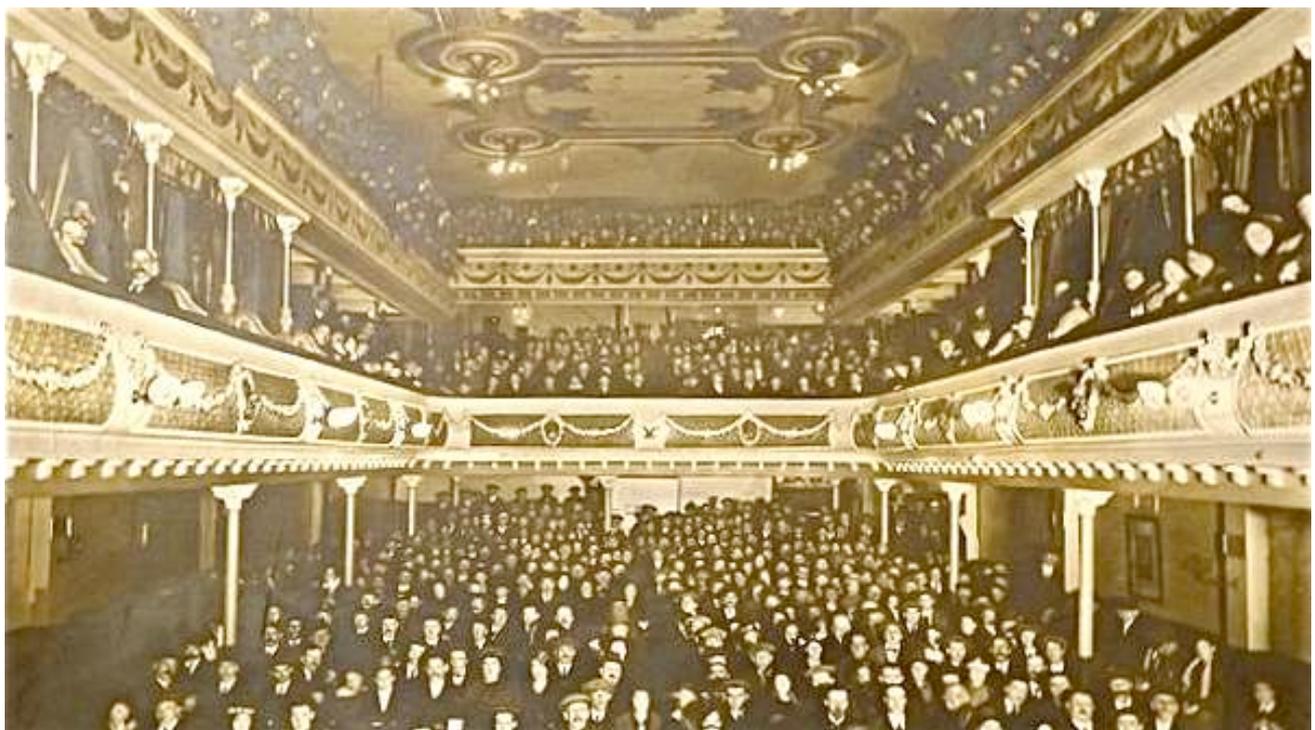
I already knew about the Varieties because of *The Good Old Days*, which ran for 30 years on BBC TV from 1953 to 1983. *The Good Old Days* was sold all over the world and was particularly popular in America and Australia.

In 1762, a coaching inn called the *Swan Inn* was built on the site, then called White Swan Yard. By 1766, a singing room had opened above the inn on the spot where the Varieties stage is now located. In 1799, the Swan Inn was demolished to make way for a larger building, again with a singing room about half the size of the present Varieties auditorium, and there it stayed until 1865 when Charles Thornton became the licensee and decided to

enlarge the premises, again demolishing much of the structure in order to rebuild it as a Music Hall. There it has remained until today, although the boxes were a later addition.

Beneath the Varieties are the foundations of the original buildings, and also a network of blocked up tunnels and entrances. No one knows their purpose, but it is likely that they were built to transport goods and for storage before the industrialisation of the nineteenth century when most of the tunnels would have been destroyed by the foundations of newer, larger and more modern buildings. Those in the basement of the Varieties however, remain.

*Below:* The old Swan St. entrance and the auditorium as it was over 100 years ago.



From 1898 to 1913, under Fred Wood's ownership, the Varieties enjoyed 15 years of glorious success.

In 1904, the great escapologist Harry Houdini played the Varieties, and was paid the grand sum of £150 for the week! The Prince of Wales and future King Edward VII was a regular visitor, sitting in Box D with its curtains drawn – especially when Lillie Langtry was performing!



After the horror of the First World War, the Varieties, like every other theatre in Britain, began to decline as the country suffered terrible losses. There was scarcely a family in Britain that hadn't lost someone in the war.

It is said that the golden days of the music hall ended after the Great War. Marie Lloyd, the great doyenne of the music hall and by then world famous, died in 1922 of a seizure whilst on stage at the Edmonton Empire, and with her, the last of the great music halls. Theatres up and down the country either converted to moving pictures – the old silent movies – or closed altogether. But somehow, the Varieties survived.

In 1941, Harry Joseph, whose own theatre, the Lewisham Hippodrome, had been demolished by the Luftwaffe, took a lease on the City Varieties from the White Swan Estate Company and put all his energy into revitalising the theatre. On Sundays it was used as a garrison theatre to entertain the troops by artistes from all over the country who gave their services free of charge.

Just eight years after the war ended, in 1953, Harry Joseph and Barney Colehan, a Leeds born BBC radio and television producer, planned a documentary about the golden days of

music hall. By that time, the Varieties was the only remaining music hall still in operation and the success of that programme led to the creation of *The Good Old Days*.



*Above: An early episode of The Good Old Days.*

*Below: Leonard Sachs, for 30 years, Chairman of BBC's The Good Old Days.*



But the theatre was in a very run down condition and Harry Joseph set about restoring it. The Good Old Days featured the all the stars of the day and reached weekly audiences of more than 10 million people! In 1960, the Varieties became a listed building and will be protected for future audiences to enjoy.

After his death in 1962, Harry Joseph's sons, Stanley and Michael, took over. By the very early 1980's however, business was again in decline and the theatre was dark for more weeks than it was open. Stanley Joseph ran a very successful theatrical agency from the office and Michael ran the theatre. Apart from the filming of *The Good Old Days*, the only substantial use of the building was the pantomime which ran for a month every Christmas.

In early 1982 I approached the Josephs with a view to putting on a regular show. My original idea was to do one night a month – preferably a Friday or Saturday – through the autumn and spring season, with a six week break for Christmas and New Year. But Michael – and Stanley in particular – didn't want to do this. What they said was that I should do a full week – Monday to Saturday – and then return the following year and do the same again.

I was horrified. How could I – then unknown in Leeds – possibly fill a week first time in? But it was either that or nothing. So I had to agree. If I was to add Leeds to my stable of venues, I didn't have a choice.

In those days, the Varieties had just over 500 seats – considerably less than the 1,500-seaters I had been doing in Liverpool, Blackpool, Sunderland and in New Zealand, where I was already a household name. But I really wanted to do the Varieties and make it a regular thing. I wanted to do it so badly, I was prepared to take the risk. And so this is how I did it...

Monday night's show's tickets went on sale at £1.25 (remember, this was 1982!) Tuesday went up to £1.50; Wednesday, £1.75; Thursday £2.50; Friday £3.50, and Saturday, the outrageously expensive price of £4.50. That way, the audience would be spread over the week.

That first night, there were 27 people in the audience and I struggled through with three people on the stage. Tuesday was slightly better, and as the week wore on, slowly the numbers started to increase. On Saturday, we just touched the 200 mark. I still pleaded with Stanley and Michael to let me just do one night, which I knew would sell out. But Stanley insisted I carry on and do full weeks. And so, five months later, in March 1983, I did another week.

This time the numbers were up by around 25% – proof that the 'word of mouth' was working its magic. And so it went – two weeks a year, one in the autumn, one in the spring, for the next two years. And then, suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, it went through the roof!

I turned up at the box office (which was then on the Headrow) on the Monday evening and to my absolute astonishment, there were very few tickets left. In fact, the whole week had nearly sold out. Backstage, before the show, Stanley greeted me with a big smile and told me that he always new it would work. He'd been right. The slog of the first four weeks had turned out to be worth it!

I will always be grateful for Stanley's advice, his confidence in me, and his gentle good humour. Michael too was all smiles. And from two weeks a year, the show started to run for four weeks, and then five weeks, every one sold out.



*Above left:* The old entrance on the Headrow. It was moved back to its original position in Swan Street in the early 1990's.

*Above right:* Stanley & Michael Joseph.

*Below:* The Circle Bar and its famous grandfather clock. On the walls, artistes of yesteryear, including Roy Hudd and Les Dawson.



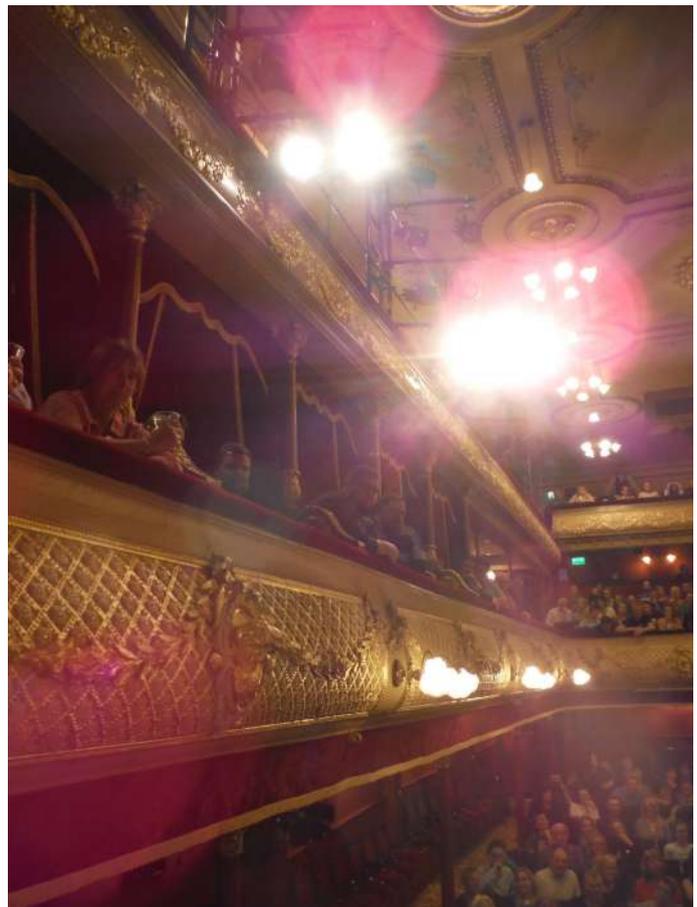
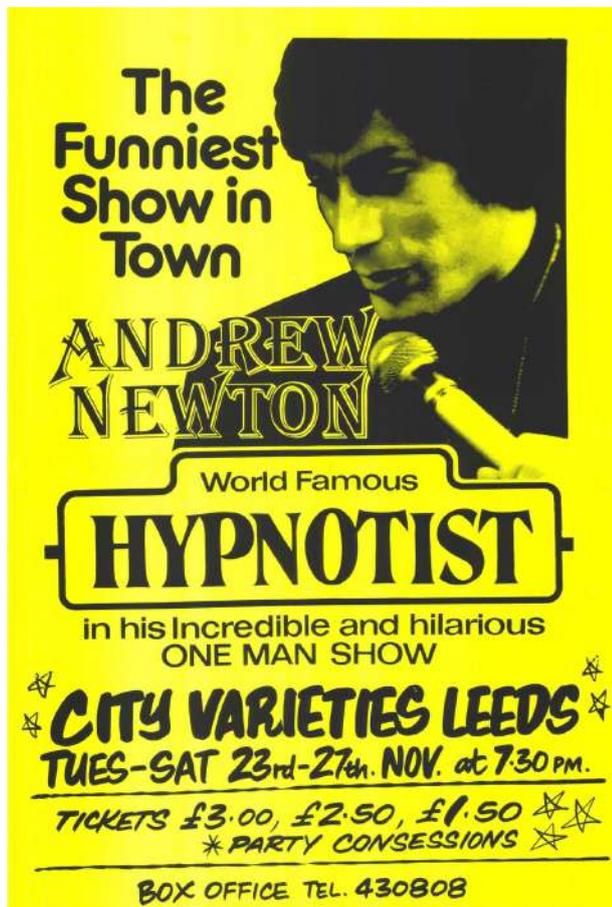
It was Peter Sandeman's stewardship of the Varieties that saw the building undergo a major refurbishment. Costing more than £9 million, the old pokey dressing rooms were demolished and new ones built.

The auditorium was fully restored, re-seated and redecorated, and a glass lift added to the outside of the building. New sound and light was installed. The famous Circle Bar was preserved, as was the grandfather clock that has stood in the corner of the bar for nearly one hundred years.

If you go into the Circle Bar today, you will find old playbills and photographs of dozens of artistes from a bygone era. Below left: The original Andrew Newton poster. I was thrilled to find one of my original posters is kept safe in the Leeds City Archives!

*Below left:* The original Andrew Newton poster – now in the Leeds City Archives.

*Below right:* On stage at the Varieties 2017... I took this picture during the show!



After 1997, I had to reduce the number of shows at the Varieties as the theatre became busier – more shows, more artists, less availability, and the entertainment dollar spread ever more thinly was one reason, but another was because I was already planning my move to Cape Town, South Africa, where I still spend most of the year.

But I still appear twice a year at the Varieties and those shows are still nearly always sold out.

Anyone who is anyone has appeared at the City Varieties – Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel & Hardy (in 1932) Lillie Langtry, Marie Lloyd, Harry Lauder, Harry Houdini, Ken Dodd, Morecambe and Wise, Tommy Cooper, Les Dawson, Barbara Windsor, Larry Grayson, to name but a few.

More recently, John Bishop, Paul Merton, Michael McIntyre and Derren Brown, have all performed at the Varieties. In fact many of the UK's top comedians use the Varieties to test out new material before embarking on their national arena tours.

So it is a special, and unique, Palace of Varieties! And if you will forgive me for blowing my own trumpet for a moment, I've done more shows there than any of them.



*Above and below: A newly refurbished City Varieties, restored to its former glory.*





*Above and below:* New seats, carpets and curtains, as well as a state of the art sound and light system.



Apart from a professional management team, based now at the Grand Theatre, the theatre is largely staffed on show nights by volunteers. Many of them have been there since Peter Sandeman took over as manager in the mid 1980s. The continuing success of the theatre is due almost entirely to Peter's foresight and dedication to 'the business'. It was Peter who raised the funds for the refurbishment by negotiating with English Heritage and the National Lottery and other organisations. If it wasn't for his enthusiasm, the Varieties would not be the success it is today. The Leeds City Council rewarded his hard work and commitment by making him redundant as soon as the work was complete.

# HYPNOTIST ANDREW NEWTON

Leeds City Varieties - Saturday 30 March



0113 243 0808 [www.cityvarieties.co.uk](http://www.cityvarieties.co.uk)

“Newton’s mischievous love of the absurd makes this a side-splitting laughter show not to be missed!”

*Above: A photograph of the show that became a poster.*



*Above: On stage at the 'Verts'.*

Every time I walk on stage, I think of all the greats that have 'trod the boards' before me, and I admit that gives me a buzz – and a sense of responsibility and respect for the past.

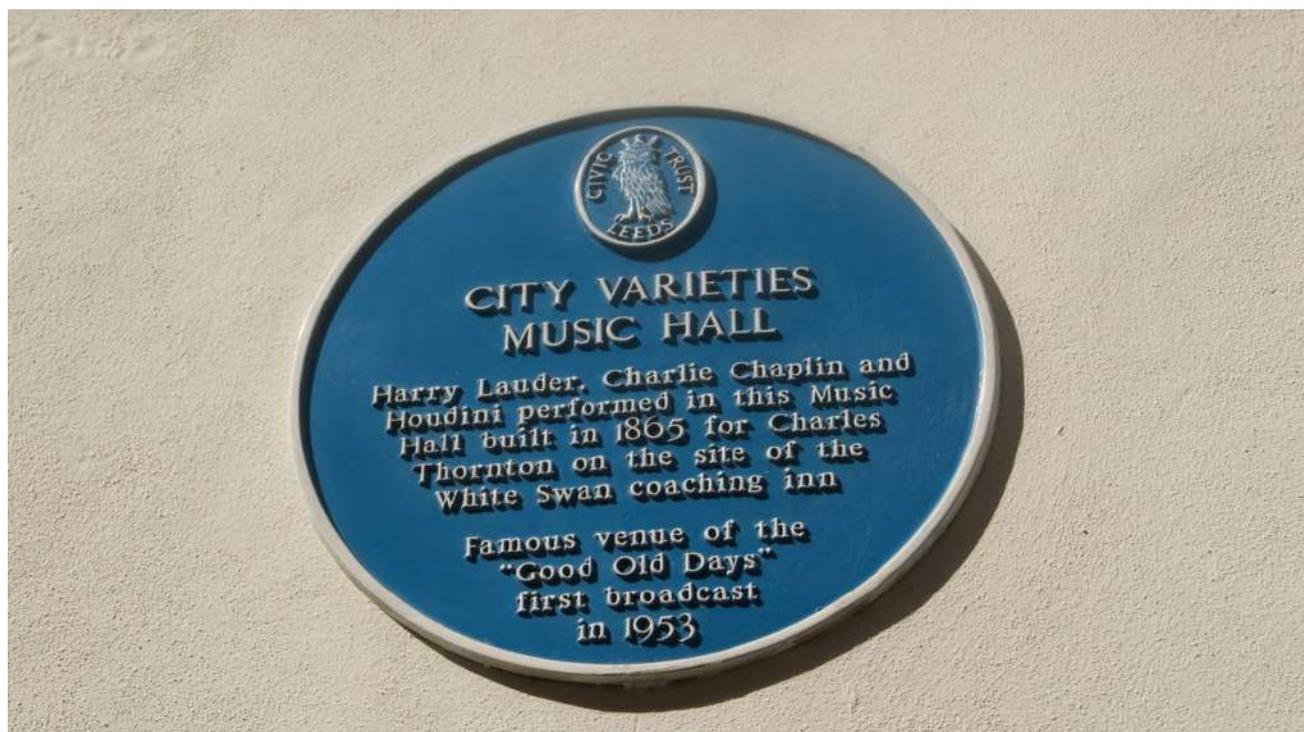
I am also aware of the fact that what was funny 40 years ago is now bland... so I'm constantly trying new sketches and routines. Since the Covid pandemic, health & safety and social distancing may still be a concern, so I have spent much of my 'time off' planning new and more intelligent routines.

Even though I'm doing a lot less than I did in the 1980s and 90s and my focus has shifted more to hypnotherapy and training, I will continue doing the Varieties for as long as I am able. This year (2021) I turned 64 – so I have another few years in me yet.

Since my first appearance in 1982, as of March 2020, I have done 332 shows at the world famous Leeds City Varieties – more than any other performer at the Varieties.

A £9 million pound refurbishment saw the theatre returned to its former glory. Now a listed building, it remains national treasure. The auditorium, with a seating capacity now of 465, has been completely refurbished with new seats and a state of the art sound and light system.

*Below: the Varieties BLUE PLAQUE on the outside wall of the building, confirming its place in history.*



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