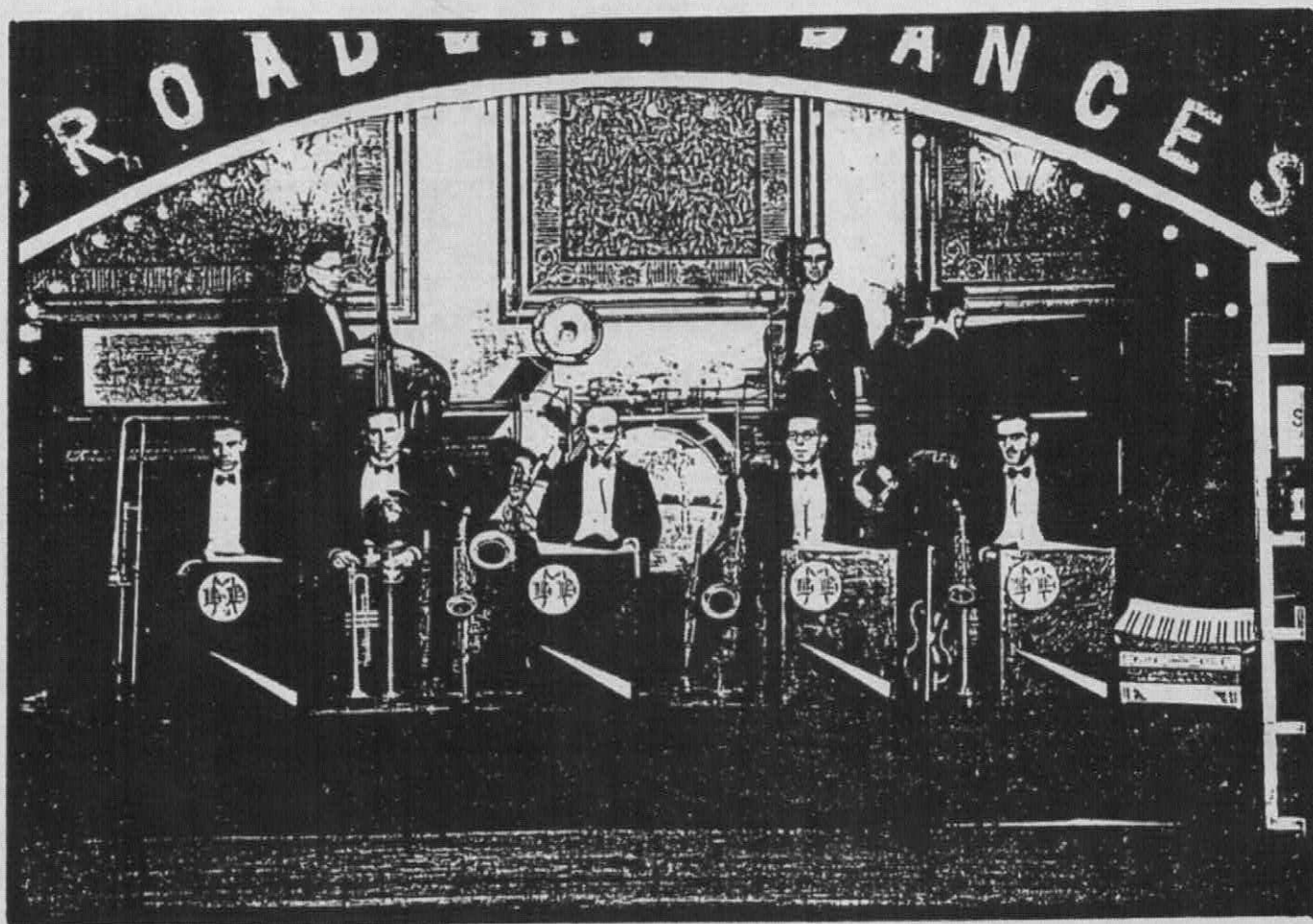


THE RENDEZVOUS DANCE HALL



A HISTORY
by
GEOFF SADLER

The Rendezvous Dance Hall

A History

By

Geoff Sadler

Originally published by Derbyshire Library Service, 1990.

This edition is a scan of the original edition, made available by courtesy of Derbyshire County Council and published electronically on the website of the Chesterfield & District Local History Society (<http://www.cadlhs.org.uk/>), April 2023.

© Derbyshire County Council 1990.

THE RENDEZVOUS DANCE HALL

A HISTORY

BY

GEOFF SADLER.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

The author wishes to express his sincere thanks to the following:-

Mr.R.Ashworth.

Mr.R.Batteson.

Mr.R.Chapman.

Mrs. Clark.

Mr. Clarke.

"Dancers of Yesteryear."

Mr. and Mrs.A.Daykin.

Mr. Dunn.

Mr.R.Few.

Mr.B.Finan.

Mr.B.Gettings.

"A.R.G."

Mrs. Goodwin.

Mrs.E.Gumbrill.

Mr.A.H.Hale.

Mr.H.Hardwick.

Mr.A.Hawes.

Mr.F.Hession.

Mr.F.C.Holmes.

Mr.J.R.Hudman.

Mr.H.Johnson.

Mrs.P.Laughton.

Mr.J.Lofty.

Mr.J.S.Lowe.

Mrs.G.McDougall.

Mr.T.McKay.

Mr.G.Mowbray.

Mr. and Mrs.S.Murray.

W.T.Parker(Auctioneers,Estate Agents.)

Mr.E.W.R.Pygall.

Mrs.M.M.Rawicz.

Mr. Riggott.

Mr.E.H.Swaine.

Waldo Furniture Ltd.

Mrs.D.M.Warner.

Mrs.D.Wheatcroft.

Mr.A.J.Wills.

Without their kind assistance, this history would not have been written.

Other sources consulted include "Derbyshire Times" reports, and maps from the stock of the Chesterfield Local Studies Library.

G.Sadler. 1990.

INTRODUCTION.

Most people passing the old Stylax Bedding Factory on Sheffield Road are probably not aware of the many uses to which this building has been put, in a varied and unlikely history stretching back over 130 years. Nevertheless it is a fact that this empty warehouse once served as a centre of entertainment not only for the inhabitants of Chesterfield, but for the whole of the East Midlands. The story of the "Rendezvous", as it was once called, has not previously been documented, but now - thanks to the information and eyewitness accounts of several who made use of the building more than 50 years ago - it has been possible to piece together a detailed account of what took place. To these, and other former patrons of the "Rendezvous", this story is dedicated.

EARLY HISTORY:1858-1920.

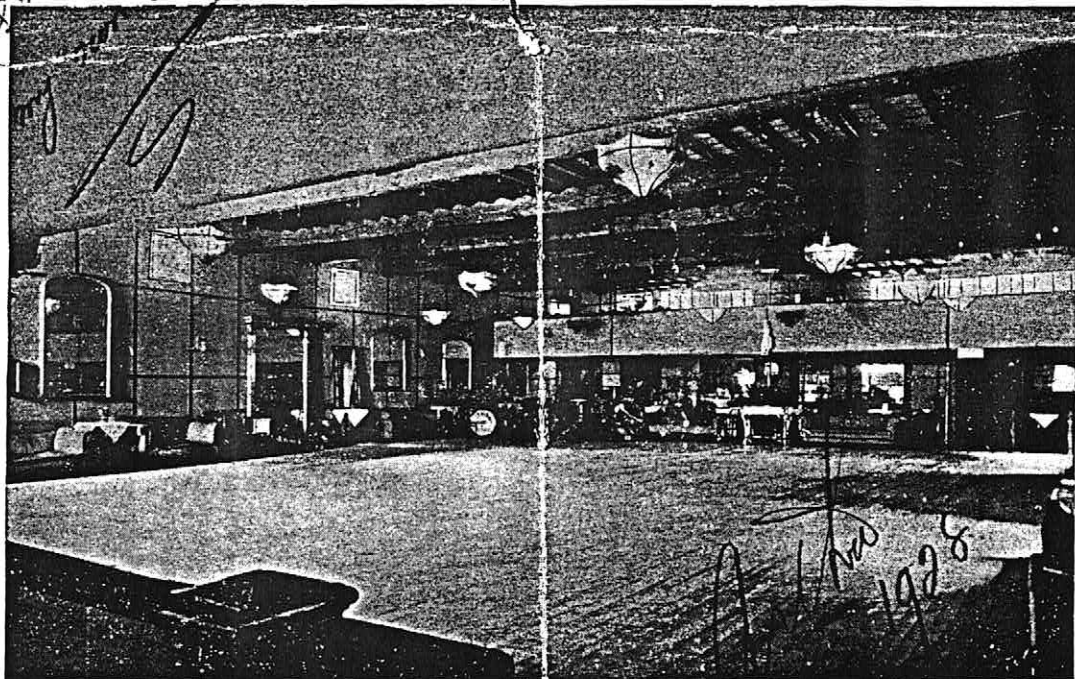
The date incised on the pillar inside the building reads "1878",but this is misleading,as existing map evidence indicates a date at least twenty years earlier.On "Map of the Borough of Chesterfield in the County of Derby",produced by Thomas Ward and Richard Hugh Burman in 1858,the building is clearly shown on its present site to the west of Sheffield Road below Trinity Walk(then Trinity Lane) and sharing the same grounds with St.Helen's House,which is now part of St.Helena School.It differs from later versions in having two outbuildings on its west side,but is otherwise the same.No indication is given as to its use at that time,but on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1876,where it is shown in much greater detail at the 1:500 scale,the building is clearly listed as a "Malthouse." The two outbuildings have been replaced by a single extension on the west side,but there has been no other change.The building does not appear on Charles Robertson's map of Chesterfield dated 1850,which suggests that it must have been erected some time between 1850 and 1858.The date "1878" inside presumably refers to alterations or improvements carried out in that year.

As a malthouse,the building was the property of the Burkitt family,whose corn and seed business was flourishing world-wide by the mid-1850s,with markets in France, Germany and the United States.William and Samuel Burkitt controlled all the maltings in the Chesterfield area,and also had businesses in Langwith and King's Lynn.The success of their operations made both men extremely rich.Samuel Burkitt supervised the Chesterfield side of the business from his home at St.Helen's House,close to the malthouse itself.After his death in 1898,the business was continued by his son, William Burkitt.The malthouse remained in the hands of the Burkitt family until the death of William Burkitt in late 1920.Mr.R.Few,whose family once lived on Sheffield Road,has a childhood recollection of looking into the building some time between 1914 and 1918,and watching the rats in a margarine store there.In his opinion,the place

looks much the same now as it did then.

About this time, Mr. Riggott - now of Athlone Close - was a young boy playing ball at the back of the malthouse with other lads of his own age. The Riggott family lived a short distance from the building on Sheffield Road, across from the lane known as Burkitt's Walk. Mr. Riggott remembers the gennel that went between two buildings near the malthouse, where the Burkitt's horses used to stand. He also has a distinct recollection of the appearance of the building itself. Seen from the back, the roof was low - barely three or four feet from the ground - and covered with unusual orange stone brickwork. Mr. Riggott and his friends used to gain entry to the yard at the rear of the building to play ball, and on several occasions the tennis balls they used would fall through the metal grid that covered the entrance to the cellar. Evidently the place was still being utilised as a storehouse, with a door at the side for barrels to be taken in. One day in particular sticks in Mr. Riggott's mind, when the ball dropped through the grid and he went to recover it. He lifted the metal grid to reach the ball, which had landed on a trap door lower down. Falling against this door, he pushed it open and fell through into the cellar. The huge dark room frightened him, and he scrambled back to safety once he had found the ball again, but he remembers the cellar as a single long room, with a low, arched roof, and what appeared to be chandeliers set into the stone overhead.

Following the death of William Burkitt, in December 1920, the family estate was sold. Whether the malthouse itself was included in the sale is not clear, but what is certain is that some time in the early 1920s it passed into other hands to begin a new career.



RENDEZVOUS BALL ROOM, CHESTERFIELD.

The Rendez-vous Ballroom, 1920s

From a postcard inscribed by Mr. Arthur Hawes in 1928.
It shows the impressive layout of the interior, with extensive
lighting and the large, polished maple floor.

The man who took over ownership of the malthouse building after William Burkitt's death was Mr. Colin Richardson, who is said to have been a gentleman farmer from Derby. The precise date of the purchase is not known, and it is possible that the malthouse did not pass into his hands immediately - two local residents claim that it was still in use as a storehouse in the early 1920s, and one of them, Mr. Clarke, recalls looking inside and seeing three large stone vats in the basement there - but by 1924 Mr. Richardson was certainly in possession. On 16th December that year he obtained official approval for his Building Plan (No. 3690), which proposed the conversion of the "old Malthouse" into a dance hall. The Chesterfield firm of architects, Wilcockson and Cutts, were employed to carry out the work.

The conversion of the building was completed in the early months of 1925, and was evidently an ambitious undertaking. The outside of the malthouse was left virtually unchanged, but a major transformation was effected with the interior of the building, where a large dance floor was laid, and rooms and balconies constructed. Mr. E. H. Swaine, who now lives in Alfreton, was one of those employed in the work, carrying out electrical installation and fitting under the electrician Edward Folger. Mr. Swaine remembers the original layout of the building, whose passageways were made up of large stone slabs, and recalls that: "The dance floor was a lovely piece of work. We had to wrap sacking over our boots to work in there." He also confirms that Mr. Richardson was owner of the building, and that dancing lessons were given to a gramophone accompaniment.

Once the work had been done, the extent of Mr. Richardson's achievement became clear. The "Derbyshire Times" delivered an enthusiastic report in its March 14th issue: - "Mr. Colin Richardson, of Derby, is the enterprising owner, and has effected a marvellous transformation of the old malt-kiln... It is internally that one finds the remarkable manner in which an old building has been adapted to the most modern form of amusement and recreation. Externally the building presents much the same appearance as

when used for the more prosaic purpose of making malt."

"Entrance to the dance hall, which is on the first floor, is gained by a staircase leading from the vestibule which is 42 feet wide and 16 feet in depth. Off the vestibule are also the ladies' and gentlemen's cloak rooms, capable of dealing with 300 dancers of either sex. This floor will also contain a commodious supper room which will accommodate either a large or small party, a bay leading off the main room being easily converted into a self-contained room with a separate entrance. There is also a "quick lunch" buffet in the vestibule."

"The prevailing colour scheme in the vestibule and the dance room is carried out in panels of blue framed with oak."

"A distinctive feature of the main hall is its ceiling of old oak beams, 50 feet long, and open rafters, after the Tudor style. The floor is of maple polished to a degree which dancers will appreciate, and 800 people will be able to dance with comfort at the same time. At either end are large balconies each capable of sitting 120 dancers round the tables on which refreshments will be served. There is also a cafe and a supper room, the former leading off the recess underneath one of the balconies and the latter being entered through a doorway close to the head of the staircase. This is a useful room for whist drives and other private parties and will be let off separately at any time, whether dancing is in progress or not. Gold framed mirrors ornament the walls of the dance room, but elaborate electric lighting is part of the decorative scheme. In addition to the large glass chandeliers there will be a number of strip lights running along the beams and these can be changed to red, yellow, blue or amber. In order to facilitate these changes the switch board attendant will be connected by telephone with the ball room and receive his instructions from the manager. In addition there will be limelight effects with the latest rainbow attachment, a very effective system of varying the light."

"The whole of the heating is by gas radiators, the work having been carried out by the Chesterfield Corporation Gas Department. Elaborate measures have been taken to deal with the subject of ventilation, the whole of the upper storey being devoted to housing the apparatus. This work has been carried out by Messrs. Blagg and Johnson, of Newark, Notts. Briefly it consists in a system of galvanised trunking hidden from view which runs along the centre of the building and is connected to an electrically driven fan in the gable end and at the rear of the hall. Another fan diffuses the air in three different directions and augments the supply of air to the hall in addition to that which enters by infiltration. A complete change of air takes place three times every hour."

"The whole of the work has been carried out by the owner and his staff with the exception of the brick work, which has been in the hands of Mr. Tomlinson, builder, of Chesterfield."

"The architects were Messrs. Wilcockson and Cutts, of Chesterfield, who are to be congratulated on their work."

"A word about the staff. In charge of the hall, as manager, will be Mr. John Harvey, London, considered by experts to be one of the finest ball room dancers in the country. He with his partner, Mrs. Julia Harvey, will give lessons and demonstrations, and will have the assistance of eight expert dancers. The lady in charge of the catering department also comes from London, where she has been engaged at a well known West End club. Suppers will include special dishes from her own recipes, and a great feature will be made of this department, not only in the fare provided, but in the reasonableness of the charges."

"Music will be provided by an orchestra engaged in Leicester, and the latest music for the most modern dances will be well played by these efficient musicians. The opening date is April 1st."

It is clear from this report that Mr. Richardson had managed to achieve a great deal

in a short space of time. Nor was the "Derbyshire Times" reporter the only one to be impressed by the new-look "Rendezvous Palais-de-Danse". The official opening, on April 1st 1925, was attended by 300 invited guests. Those present, according to the "Derbyshire Times" in its report of April 4th, included "the principal townspeople of Chesterfield", together with "many from Sheffield, Derby and the surrounding district." Mr. Richardson had once more excelled himself in showing off the interior of the hall to its best possible advantage: "Everyone appeared both surprised and delighted on entering the dance hall, which looked exceedingly pretty, the beautiful cut glass chandeliers, handsome mirrors and floral decorations adding greatly to the appearance of the room.. The fronts of the balconies were festooned with artistic floral decorations which were illuminated with divers coloured lights." The dance floor also greatly impressed the guests, who apparently claimed it to be "by far the best floor in the county." The evening was a great success, with Mr. and Mrs. Harvey (or Hervey, the spelling varies from one report to the next) giving a demonstration of exhibition dancing which, according to the "Times", "was greatly appreciated by everyone present." The music was provided by two bands, who played alternate "sets" throughout the evening, and "the dancers had a most enjoyable time." The opening was followed by the first public dance, which was held the next evening, on Wednesday April 2nd, and once again there was "a splendid attendance." One of those present at the public dance was Mr. Jim Lofty, who as a musician and crooner was later to perform at the "Rendezvous" himself.

These early newspaper reports indicate the rather grand, exclusive nature of the dance hall that Mr. Richardson had created. The lighting effects, in particular, sound surprisingly modern for 1925, and the maple dance floor was presumably laid at considerable expense. The general impression of a high-class, luxury ballroom is confirmed by several who worked or danced there during the period 1925-1930. Mrs. Wheatcroft, whose mother was employed as a catering supervisor at the "Rendezvous", and who sometimes

helped her in the kitchen, remembers the chef cooking the food there. She also recalls the dance floor and the gilt-edged mirrors positioned all round the room. There was no bar, but drinks were obtainable in the restaurant, and the balconies were used to accommodate the diners. Mrs. Wheatcroft remembers Mr. Richardson as a very smartly-dressed man who used to drive a big car, altogether in keeping with the high-class establishment of which he was the owner.

From the beginning, the "Rendezvous" followed an ambitious programme of dancing throughout the week, with separate days given over to various events or specialities. The advertisement in the "Derbyshire Times" of April 18th for the forthcoming week gives the following list of items:- "Monday April 20th. Grand Carnival Night. 7.0.-11.0 p.m. 1/-.

Tuesday April 21st. Special Night (Evening Dress Essential)
7.0.-11.0 p.m. 5/-.

Wednesday April 22nd. Cinderella Dance (Heap of Novelties)
7.0.-11.0 p.m. 2/-.

Tea Dance. 3.0.-5.30 p.m. 1/6.

Thursday April 23rd. A Grand Ball (Chesterfield Borough
Police in Aid of Widows and Orphans Fund) 8.0.-2.0 a.m. 2/6.

Friday April 24th. Request Night. 7.0.-11.0 p.m. 1/6.

Saturday April 25th. Carnival Night. 7.0.-11.0 p.m. 2/6.

Tea Dance. 3.0.-5.30 p.m. 1/6.

The Celebrated Cabaret Players Always in Attendance."

This advert is typical of subsequent weekly programmes at the dance hall, and effectively sets the tone for the "Rendezvous" in its early period. It is interesting to note that the Tea Dances on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, which were to become a regular feature, were established at such an early stage. Interesting, too, is the insistence upon evening dress for the "Special Night" on Tuesday, further evidence of Mr. Richardson's high and exacting standards, which clearly applied to the patrons as

well as the staff. Indeed, there were some who felt that he went too far in this regard, and the carefully cultivated image of the "Rendezvous" may have deterred some local people, confining its use to an elite group of patrons only. Mr. Syd Murray, who was to play an important part in the "Rendezvous" story at a later stage, has commented that, in his opinion: "The place was a little too high-class for Chesterfield."

For the moment, this feeling would not have made itself apparent to Mr. Richardson, who forged ahead with his ambitious programme of entertainment. A "Grand Fancy Dress Ball" was held on May 6th, with prizes for the most original costumes, while on May 23rd the feature was a "Novel Balloon Gala", when patrons were urged: "Don't burst your balloon until a given signal!" Prizes were awarded for "the lucky ones." A few days later, Mr. Richardson was extolling the virtues of the ventilation system in another "Derbyshire Times" advertisement, encouraging the readers to: "Come and dance in your flannels. It is cooler in the Rendezvous than outside", adding that "ventilation can be inspected." The programme of dances continued until the end of June, when the hall was closed for the next two months. A Grand Re-opening was scheduled for Monday September 7th, and the management announced that: "We shall then begin Ballroom and Operatic Dancing Classes, particulars of which can be obtained on application to the manager."

By the time the building was re-opened in September, a number of changes and improvements had taken place. The dance floor had been re-polished by a specialist firm, Messrs. Hollis of Hull, and was now said to compare favourably with similar halls in London and Blackpool. The "Derbyshire Times" of August 29th reported that: "the popular manager (Mr. Harvey) has been to Paris to obtain the very latest dances. He has engaged a very competent staff, who are prepared to give lessons and dance with patrons. A new departure will be made during the season by the engagement of a well known operatic and step dancer, who will give lessons daily either at the Rendezvous or at private houses. A speciality of this will be children's dancing." A further development was

the opening of a new department which catered for large and small parties of visitors. Presumably this would be the department which employed the chef, and Mrs. Wheatcroft's mother. Attendances at this time were obviously still good, with dancers coming to the "Rendezvous" from Sheffield and Derby, and other neighbouring towns. The management made a point of informing them that the last bus for Sheffield left Chesterfield at 10.30p.m. Further innovations were promised at the Tuesday "Special Night" on September 8th, when those attending were promised a demonstration of "the new Charleston dance." Mr. and Mrs. Harvey were apparently to provide several demonstrations of the Charleston during the course of the evening. In the "Derbyshire Times" of September 12th, Mr. Richardson was able to inform his customers with some pride that: "We teach the West End of London style of dancing and have the finest dance band of four in the Midlands." The same announcement also mentioned the start of a series of dance competitions. The band would appear to have been the "Celebrated Cabaret Players", who were the resident musicians at all dances during this period. Unfortunately, we have no information on the members of the band, who were probably not local men, the band having been recruited in Leicester.

There are a surprising number of people who remember the original "Rendezvous" dance hall. Mrs. Marjorie Rawicz recalls taking part in the programme of children's dances with her sister at the hall: "I cannot remember who was the teacher. We gave several displays, the principal one I recollect when I danced a Jockey Dance, and my sister dressed as a fairy emerged out of a huge Christmas pudding. The music was played on a gramophone as I distinctly remember the Jockey tune as being Sousa's "Blaze Away". Mrs. Rawicz adds that "I think the dancing venture did not last long, since I transferred to the Misses Calladine who held Ballroom classes in the Corn Exchange."

One of the hall's employees at this time was Mr. Arthur Hawes, who at various stages worked in most of the local dance halls. Mr. Hawes, who began his career at Joe Greenan's dance hall on Hipper Street in 1919, and ended it at the Victoria Ballroom in 1961, says:

"I was employed at the Rendezvous from late 1925 until 1928, when I was Chief of Staff and Senior Dance Instructor. We had what was known as a pen, where myself, another fellow and two females were able to dance with patrons who had bought a 6d. ticket for one dance with us." This accords with Mrs. Wheatcroft's recollection of tickets for dances being bought from the kiosk adjoining the ballroom. Further confirmation is provided by Mr. and Mrs. Albert Daykin, who attended the "Rendezvous" during this period. Mrs. Daykin, then Miss Edith May Wright, was one of the lady dancers employed at the hall, and identifies the others as Leslie Barton, Elsie Bradford and "A.N. Other". This last was presumably Mr. Hawes, although the number of dancers seems to have varied during the 1925-1928 era, the "Derbyshire Times" advertising as many as eight professional dancers at one point. Mr. Daykin, who played saxophone in Edward Varney's local dance band, was also an accomplished dancer, and a regular patron of the "Rendezvous". He and his wife won the Charleston Competition there in 1926, and the cup is still in Mr. Daykin's possession.

Mr. and Mrs. Harvey (or Hervey) must have remained resident professional dancers at the "Rendezvous" for most of this period. Mrs. Mary Warner, of Somersall Lane, remembers them as being there in 1926, when she attended dance classes as a girl of 13 under a Miss Fell. Mrs. Warner still holds an inscribed dance card for a party at the "Rendezvous", dated 8th January 1926, and remembers that souvenir spoons and butter knives inscribed with the name of the dance hall were sometimes given to patrons.

1926 appears to have been a particularly eventful year for the "Rendezvous", with a full programme of entertainment which maintained the sequence of afternoon Tea Dances and Fox Trot and Tango Competitions. On January 23rd, in the "Derbyshire Times", the "Rendezvous" management were able to announce: "Exclusive Engagement of Miss Estelle King and her 8 Cabaret Dancers." In the February 9th issue Mr. Richardson topped this with the "Special Engagement of Monsieur Pierre, the Great Exponent of Modern Ballroom

Dancing." It seems reasonable to assume that "Monsieur Pierre" was the famous "operatic and step dancer" whose engagement was promised by the management the previous year. At any rate, the readers of the "Derbyshire Times" were told soon afterwards that, on February 9th, "Monsieur Pierre will give demonstrations in the Latest Tango (as Danced in Paris), the Paso Doble, the New One-Step, Waltz and Foxtrot." The hall was to be open from 8.0.-1.0.a.m., and the admission charge was 3/-, a fairly "exclusive" price for 1926.

On Thursday 1st April 1926, the "Rendezvous" celebrated its first year as a dance hall with a "1st Birthday Ball", which was billed as a "Special Long Night" with dance, supper and cabaret included at a price of 10/6! Shortly afterwards, it reverted to its regular programme, which now took the following form: Monday - Popular Night.

Tuesday - Novelty Night.

Wednesday - Favourite Night.

Thursday - Request Night.

Friday - Hall Let.

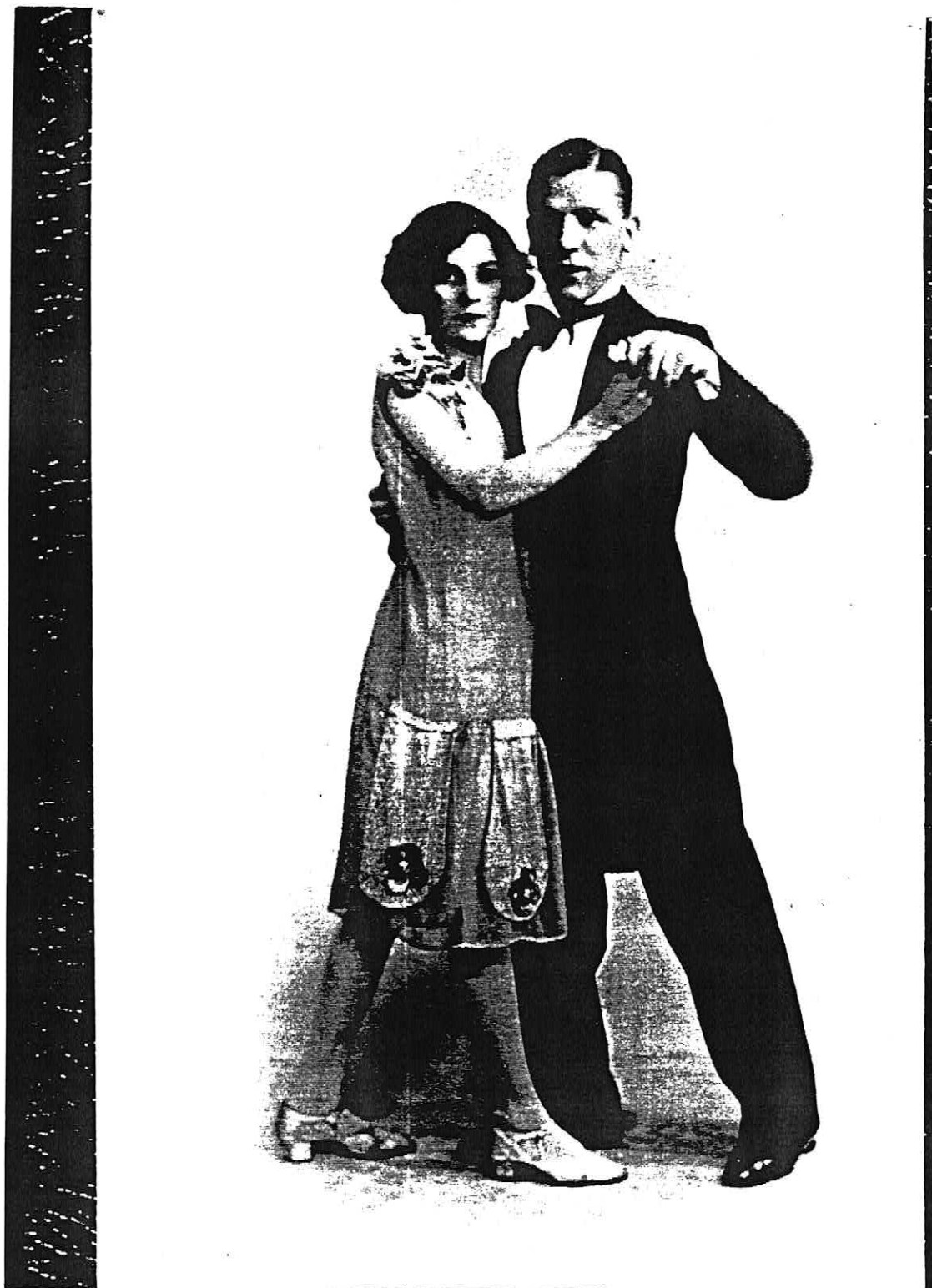
Saturday - Carnival Night.

The Tea Dances remained a feature, although by this time they appear to have been restricted to Saturday afternoons only. Mr. Richardson, in the "Derbyshire Times" of April 17th, continued to extol the virtues of the hall and its staff: "Lessons given daily by Mr. and Mrs. Harvey and Expert Staff in all the latest dances. The Ballroom Floor is considered one of the finest in the Midlands. Band specially timed for comfortable dancing."

The years that followed saw less advertising in the press, but seem to have followed a similar pattern as far as the dancers were concerned. The "Grand Opening Night" billed in the "Derbyshire Times" of September 24th 1927 suggests that the hall closed for July and August each year as a matter of course. The fact that the "Rendezvous" was still in operation in the late 1920s is confirmed by a photograph held by Mr. Hawes, which shows the decorated interior of the hall, and is dated 1928. Nevertheless, as the decade moved to a close, there were indications that a crisis was approaching. Perhaps the exclusive

image Mr. Richardson had cultivated at the "Rendezvous" had deterred would-be patrons, while the regular clientele may have become uninterested as the novelty of the place wore off. Whatever the reason, the "Rendezvous" had begun to suffer from sparse attendances, and was posing financial problems to its owner. Mr. Richardson could no longer afford to maintain the building as a dance hall, and some time between 1929 and 1930 he sold the "Rendezvous" to a new owner.

The first phase of the "Rendezvous" dance hall was over. Under new management, the second phase was just beginning.



Dancers of Yesteryear

Two of the many dancers who frequented the Rendez-vous Dance Hall during the 1920s and 1930s.

DANCE BAND DAYS:THE "RENDEZVOUS" DANCE HALL 1930-1939.

The new owner of the "Rendezvous" was Mr.Edwin Morgan,a market trader from Rotherham.According to one account,Mr.Morgan owned similar dance halls in and around Rotherham,and he had definite views on how the "Rendezvous" should be run.When the building was re-opened as "The Rendezvous Danse Hall" in 1930,the earlier "high-class" image was abandoned in favour of a more popular approach aimed at all sections of the community.The result was a considerable increase in the number of dancers attending the "Rendezvous",which ensured the financial success of the hall for several years.

A key figure in this transformation was Mr.Syd Murray,who for almost six years was M.C. and Floor Manager of the "Rendezvous" at the height of its fame.A well known amateur ballroom dancer,Mr.Murray visited the "Rendezvous" during the late 1920s to take part in various dancing competitions,notably the Derbyshire Amateur Dancing Championship.By 1928 he had left his home in Sheffield to live in Hollingwood,in the Chesterfield area,where he officiated as M.C.and gave exhibition dances at several local venues.One evening during this period Mr.Murray acted as M.C. at the Barrow Mill Memorial Club,where a local band were playing for a dance.The musicians were the Blue Melody Boys,who at that time were led by their drummer,Harold Johnson.A few days later, Mr.Murray received a letter stating that the band had been engaged as resident musicians at the "Rendezvous",and "because he was impressed with the way I carried out my duties as M.C. would I be interested in a resident position as M.C./Floor Manager at the "Rendezvous." At the time,Mr.Murray was not too sure about accepting the invitation, regarding a job at the "Rendezvous" as:"a bit of a gamble.I had noticed that the place was not very popular as regards dancers attending.The place was a little too high class for a town the size of Chesterfield." All the same,he eventually accepted the offer,and began work at the "Rendezvous" under Mr.Morgan.He too remembers the "pen" and its

professional dancers - three men and three ladies, in this case - and the patrons buying tickets at 6d. a dance.

When the new "Rendezvous" opened, the response was overwhelming. No less than 700 people attended the opening night, and subsequent dances drew a regular crowd of between 350 and 400 at a time. Mr. Morgan kept to a programme of six nights a week, with private bookings on Wednesday and Friday from 8.0.p.m.-2.0.a.m., and dancing from 8.0.p.m.-12.0 midnight on the other evenings. The afternoon Tea Dances were retained, and these were also well attended.

Much of the early success appears to have been due to Mr. Murray and the resident band, the Blue Melody Boys. According to Mr. Ralph Pygall, a former trumpeter and official of the local Musician's Union who played several of the Chesterfield venues during the 1930s, the Blue Melody Boys were originally formed by the Liverpool bandleader Lou Meyer, who came to Chesterfield in the hope of improving his fortunes. Meyer eventually returned to Liverpool, but the band continued without him. Whatever the reasons behind the founding of the band, we can be fairly sure of the personnel. From the accounts of Mr. Murray, Mr. Pygall and Mr. Jim Lofty it becomes clear that the regular band consisted of the following musicians:- Horace Varley (trumpet), Sid Milner (trombone), Jack Orme, and Frank Hubbuck (saxophones), Cliff Turner (saxophone and violin), Lennie Barrett (piano), Jack Evans, later, replaced by Jim Lofty (string bass), and Harold Johnson (drummer and leader.) From time to time there would be temporary changes in the line-up, when the regular musicians were sick or otherwise engaged - Mr. Pygall deputised for Horace Varley on several occasions, for example - but for most of the period 1933-36 the band's personnel remained the same.

The main change was the replacement of the bass-player Jack Evans by Jim Lofty, who joined the Blue Melody Boys in 1934. Mr. Lofty was called in to fill the gap left by Jack Evans, who had moved on to one of the Sheffield dance bands. Unlike his predecessor, Mr. Lofty was not an experienced bassist - in fact, he claims that he started work with the band on a Monday evening, having learned the rudiments of his instrument the previous

Friday! Although delighted to be working with such a popular band and with so many accomplished musicians, Mr. Lofty was acutely conscious of his own shortcomings as a bass-player in the early days, especially on one occasion when Billy Merrin's Sheffield band played opposite the Blue Melody Boys at the "Rendezvous", and the skills of his symphony-trained bassist showed up Mr. Lofty's own lack of experience. He eventually mastered the technique of bass-playing and became a valued member of the band, but it was not solely for his ability on this instrument that he was hired in the first place. Mr. Lofty also sang, and had some knowledge of the piano, and this latter talent proved useful to the band's pianist, Lennie Barrett, who was blind. This had not prevented him from working as an entertainer at other local venues in the past, but at the "Rendezvous" it was often necessary to learn several new tunes at short notice. Mr. Lofty would play the tunes to Lennie Barrett, who memorised each of them. His memory was remarkable, and he never forgot a tune once it was played to him. Mr. Lofty remembers that Lennie also had an advanced grasp of harmony, and would provide his own accompaniments for the melody.

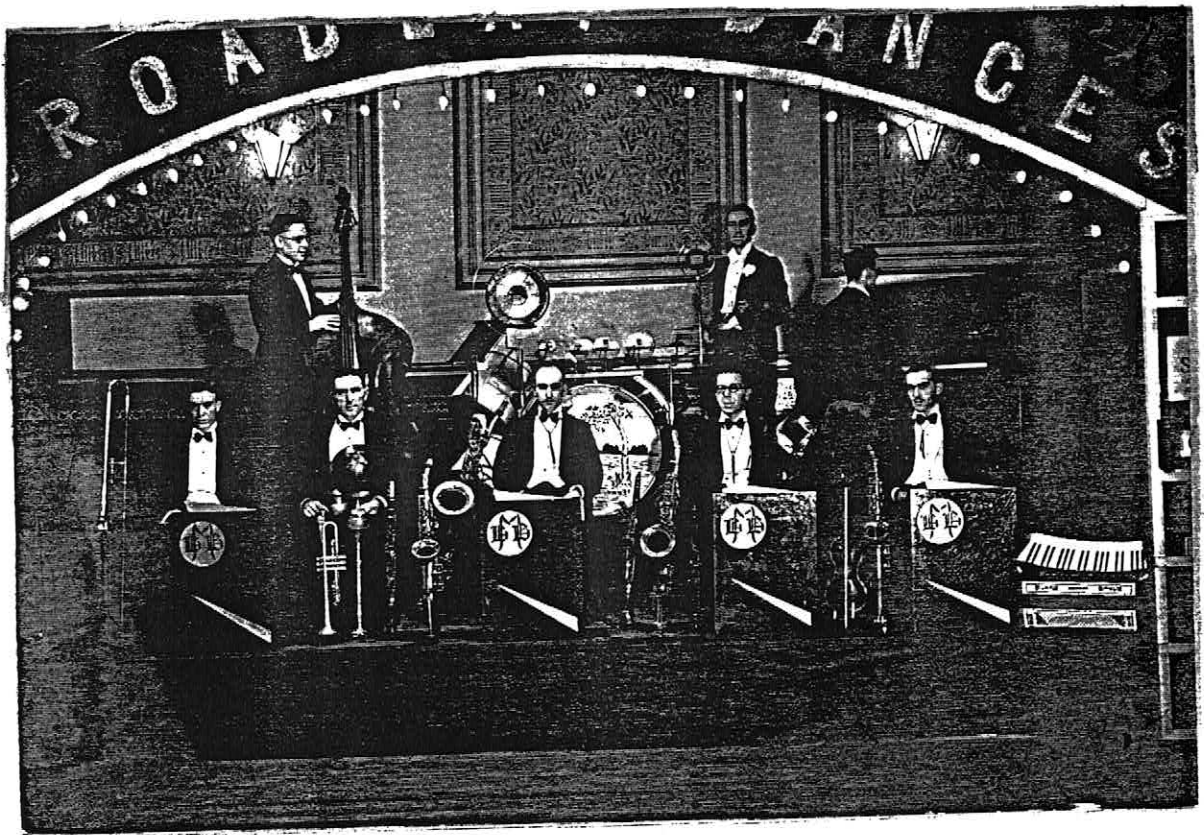
Working with the Blue Melody Boys at the "Rendezvous" was an exacting business, and the financial rewards were by no means great. The musicians would play from 8.0. until 12.0, or sometimes from 8.0. until 2.0. in the morning for roughly 2/6d an hour, rarely being paid as much as 15/-, and after the long and exhausting set they would have to walk home. In Mr. Lofty's case, this meant covering the distance from Sheffield Road to Chatsworth Road, where he lived with his parents. In spite of these difficulties, Mr. Lofty thoroughly enjoyed his stay with the band, and has many happy memories of their time at the "Rendezvous". He was still with the Blue Melody Boys when they moved to the Market Hall, and later led his own band at the Odeon for twenty-one years from 1942. He recalls that Ralph Fygal, the trumpeter, played at the Odeon with him. Mr. Lofty is now the sole surviving member of the Blue Melody Boys, all the other regular musicians having died.

In the early days, the number of musicians in the band appears to have varied slightly.

In 1933, for example, the Blue Melody Boys were billed in "Derbyshire Times" advertisements as: "Seven players, sixteen instruments. The Band that will give you happy feet."

The Blue Melody Boys were undoubtedly very popular with the dancers at the "Rendezvous", but if the building had a "star" performer it was surely Syd Murray himself. As M.C. he was responsible for the organising and supervision of the dances, and being an accomplished dancer in his own right he gave demonstrations and instruction to the patrons. An example is provided in the "Derbyshire Times" advert for a "Monster Carnival and Celebration Dance" on September 16th, 1933, which informs readers of a "Stupendous Attraction - Demonstration for the first time in the Provinces of the New Dance that is at present the rage of the London Halls, "The Blues Waltz" by Mr. Syd Murray and partner." Mr. Murray soon established himself as a firm favourite with the dancers at the "Rendezvous", where he introduced them to the latest party dances such as the Palais Glide, Lambeth Walk, Bowling in the Jack, Hands Knees and Bumpy Daisy, the Hokey Cokey and many others. He also organised novelty features such as Crazy Nights, Treasure Hunts and Fancy Dress dances, a pattern which continued through the period 1930-35. An anonymous letter from "Dancers of Yesteryear" attests to his popularity: "What a personality he had - elegant, extremely good looking and a wonderful dancer. He was our Elvis Presley in those days." Mr. Murray also took over from Mr. D. Fox as Floor Manager later on.

Another of Mr. Murray's innovations at the "Rendezvous" was his introduction of Olde Tyme Dancing on Thursday evenings. The idea came to him from the popular radio broadcasts being made on the same evening by Billy Merrin and his Commanders, a famous local band who were resident at the Nottingham Palais. The Olde Tyme nights proved extremely popular, with large coach parties of dancers making regular journeys to the "Rendezvous" from Sheffield, Derby and Nottingham. Following on from this, Mr. Murray decided to book Billy Merrin and his Commanders to play the "Rendezvous" for one night only, in December 1934. This proved such an attraction that the Billy Merrin band were retained for a further



The Blue Melody Boys, 1934

Back row, left to right: Jim Lofty (bass), Harold Johnson (drums/leader), Lennie Barrett (piano);
Front row, left to right: Sid Milner (trombone), Horace Varley (trumpet), Jack Orme (alto sax, baritone sax, clarinet), Frank Hubbuck (tenor sax, clarinet), Cliff Turner (alto sax, violin).

week, playing for six nights and the Saturday afternoon of the week commencing December 3rd.

Mr. Murray has a souvenir programme for Thursday December 6th, autographed by Billy Merrin with the word: "Cheerio", which was the band's signature tune at the time. Such was the response that the Commanders were booked for a further two evenings later in December.

The success of this venture led to an even more inspired decision by Mr. Murray. Radio broadcasting was very popular in the 1930s, with famous London bands featured most evenings, usually playing at the night clubs where they had a residency. Such names as Ambrose and his Orchestra, Carroll Gibbons and the Savoy Orpheans, Harry Roy at the Kit Kat Club, Roy Fox at the Monsignor, and others, were regularly heard on radio, but few in the Chesterfield area had seen these famous musicians in the flesh. Mr. Murray decided that he would try to book some of these "name" bands to play at the "Rendezvous."

His first, and perhaps his greatest coup, was in securing the services of Roy Fox and his Band, who were doing a tour of the Moss Empires in a number of cities. Hearing that they were appearing at the Leicester Hippodrome, Mr. Murray arranged to have a coach collect the band at the end of their performance and bring them on to the "Rendezvous." Roy Fox, an American cornet-player known as "the Whispering Cornetist" - "Whispering" was the band's signature tune - was one of the most popular of all dance band leaders, and his booking was a tribute to the skill and imagination of Mr. Murray, who vividly remembers their arrival: "They just walked out of the stage door of the Theatre in their stage uniforms on to the waiting coach, and out of the coach straight on to the specially built stage at the "Rendezvous." With Roy Fox and his 24-piece band was the greatest crooner of all time, Al Bowlly, and Peggy Lee the female vocalist." It proved a hazardous night for Al Bowlly, who found a crowd of female admirers waiting for him on the stairs leading up to the stage. The lady fans mobbed him and at one point had him on the ground, Mr. Murray remarking that: "I had to rescue him as they were plucking hairs out of his head and putting the hairs in their diaries." Obviously this kind of fan-worship has a

longer history than some might think! Fortunately, Al Bowllly recovered from the ladies' over-enthusiastic attentions, and the performance was a resounding success. The whole thing was achieved at a very reasonable cost, the band halving the admission receipts with the management. With an admission charge of 2/6, both parties collected £89-10s. each.

Encouraged by this, Mr. Murray embarked on a series of "name" band bookings, one of the most famous being Bertini, whose band were the resident orchestra at the Tower Ballroom, Blackpool, and who regularly broadcast on radio. Bertini had visited Derbyshire before, when he had presented the prizes at a Dance Band Contest - the Melody Maker All-Derbyshire Championship - held at Euxton's Pavilion Gardens on September 30th 1932, and where he was described as "Blackpool's Broadcasting Band King." His band played the "Rendezvous" for a two-night engagement on December 2nd and 3rd, 1935. Later in the month, Bertini's band was followed by that of Frank Payne, who had previously played with the Charlie Kunz Firbeck Country Club Orchestra, and the year closed with a one-night stand by Jann Halfini and his 14-piece band, billed as "another well-known E.B.C. and recording band." These were but a few of the famous bands to play at the "Rendezvous" between 1933 and 1937. "Dancers of Yesteryear" remember the bands of Lou Preager and Harry Roy visiting the hall, while Syd Murray recalls that the Billy Cotton Band was also featured there on one occasion.

Other bands to appear at the "Rendezvous" during this time were Frank Payne, George Roseblade ("the Singing Drummer") and his 9-piece touring band, Albert Turvey and his Championship Band from Sheffield, Albert E. Brookes and his Corona Dance Band, Billy Short, Hal Swain, Stan Milner, and the local bands of Stan Cox and Ray Oatey. One of the visits of Ray Oatey's band, in October 1936, featured Jim Lofty as a crooner. The period 1933-1935 marks the height of the "Rendezvous"'s popularity. Mr. Murray remarks that: "The hall proved so popular that Ray Oatey, resident at the Odeon Ballroom, saw very lean times, and even Stan Cox at the Victoria had to leave and do summer seasons in Jersey. The popularity of the "Rendezvous" was tremendous, and kept on year after year." The fact that the hall's two main rival bandleaders were glad to obtain engagements at the "Rendezvous" at this time bears out Mr. Murray's comments, and Stan Cox's summer seasons in Jersey are confirmed in the "Derbyshire Times." The "Rendezvous" also provided an attraction for staff at the other dance halls, as in the case of Mr. Ron Holmes, former "Principal" at the Victoria Ballroom, who by 1934 had defected to the "Rendezvous" as a dance instructor. Indeed, Mr. Murray himself received an offer to leave the "Rendezvous" and take over the Victoria for what he describes as "the princely sum of £5 a week." He declined the offer, staying on at

the "Rendezvous."

There are several interesting accounts from former patrons of the "Rendezvous" during this very successful period of the 1930s. Mr. A. J. Wills, who now lives at Hady, remembers trying in vain to get a job working on the building when alterations were being made in 1932. He adopted a novel expedient to raise the admission for his first dance there, by buying 3d. worth of logs from Allen & Orr the timber merchants, chopping them into sticks and selling them at 2d. a bucket. From this activity, he raised 7/6d., and attended the dance with a friend. Mr. Wills recalls that: "A blind man played the piano, and I think it was a six-piece band. The blind man played in the band at Holmewood Miners' Welfare for many years. His signature tune haunts me to this day. It was gentle, soothing, romantic music that made you sit and listen." The pianist was obviously Lennie Barrett, and the band the Blue Melody Boys. As for the signature tune, this was probably the gavotte "In a Little Rendezvous", which Mr. Murray remembers Lennie played between dances. Mr. Wills also recalls going to the "Rendezvous" at Christmas 1932, when "I put my hand down the back of this lovely settee and pulled out a note. I read it, and it said: "Collect £2 at interval, from cashier." I laughed, I thought it was a joke, but the manager announced what was on. I found another (note) on top of the three-cornered window below the balcony - 30/-. I gave it to my friend. By, I was a millionaire!"

What Mr. Wills describes is one of the "Treasure Hunt" evenings organised by Syd Murray which - not surprisingly - helped to attract customers to the hall.

Mr. A. H. Hale, of Rhodes Avenue, Chesterfield, also remembers visiting the "Rendezvous", and has a distinct recollection of its appearance at the time. "It was very big inside, with ornamental pillars in rows from east to west. The entrance was at the front, and the pay box just inside the first gates on the right hand side. The gateway at the side was opened for people to get out at the end of the performance." Both Mr. Hale and Mr. T. McKay can remember the famous bands playing there, and Mr. McKay recalls working for his father and uncle when their painting and decorating firm repainted the interior in tangerine and white during the 1930s. Mr. H. Hardwick also remembers the Tea Dances and Treasure Hunts of that era, when he travelled from Sheffield in his bullnose Morris Cowley for an evening's entertainment. He was on speaking terms with Mr. Morgan, the proprietor, and knew that he had other dance halls in the Rotherham area. Mr. Hardwick noted that the management employed Jimmy Conn, a well-known local boxer, as a doorman as a precaution against trouble-makers.

Mr. G. Mowbray, now living in Newbold, has good reason to remember his time at the

"Rendezvous", as he met his future wife at a dance there in 1936. Mr. Mowbray recalls the excellent dance floor, and the layout of the building with two separate balconies, and the bar and cloakroom below the dance floor itself. In his opinion, the "Rendezvous" had an advantage over many other halls in its ventilation system, which ensured that the building was cool in summertime, and warm in winter. Among the many attractions he particularly remembers the World Professional Ballroom Dance Champions, Adela Roscoe and Cyril Farmer, giving an exhibition dance there. Adela Roscoe was a famous local celebrity, whose father owned the Mansfield Palais-de-Danse and officiated at the Tower Ballroom, Blackpool, as Master of Ceremonies. Other professional dancers to appear at the "Rendezvous" during the 1930s were British Amateur Champions Bob Stanley and Evelyn Shortland, who were booked by Syd Murray for their first professional engagement at the "Rendezvous", where they gave an exhibition of the Waltz, Quickstep, Slow Foxtrot and Tango.

The popularity of the "Rendezvous" with its dancers was quite phenomenal, and drew large numbers of regular patrons from all over the East Midlands. Many romances took place at the ballroom - no less than eight former patrons recently contacted Syd Murray to inform him that they were celebrating their Golden Wedding, having met their spouse at the "Rendezvous", while another gentleman who married in 1935 brought his bride to dance at the ballroom every evening, rather than spend his honeymoon in Blackpool! Affection for the dancehall and for those vanished times remains strong, and several ladies apparently still have the ball gowns they wore at the "Rendezvous" all those years ago.

There can be no doubt that these bands and dancers made the "Rendezvous" one of the most famous entertainment venues in the East Midlands, and enhanced the reputation of its owner. Mr. Morgan, however, was not satisfied with the success of the dances, and from an early stage pursued other activities in the hall, in an effort to make more money. In 1933, whist drives were introduced on certain evenings, and in the same year an altogether more disruptive element surfaced when Mr. Morgan began to hold boxing tournaments at the "Rendezvous".

Understandably, this decision was not well received by Mr. Murray, who had played an important part in the success of the "Rendezvous" as a dancehall. The proposed changes placed a further unwelcome responsibility upon him, as the hall had to be converted for use as a boxing venue, and back again to a dancehall the following day. The "Rendezvous", with its polished dance floor and "unique lighting effects" was not easily altered, and this meant a considerable addition to Mr. Murray's workload. He was, in any case, opposed to

these developments, and felt that they would not improve the standing of the "Rendezvous" in the town. With this in mind, he attempted to persuade his employer to change his mind, but Mr. Morgan refused to be swayed. On the contrary, by the end of 1935 he determined to introduce All-in Wrestling to the hall as well! This proved the final straw for Syd Murray, who left soon afterwards. At about the same time, the Blue Melody Boys also left the "Rendezvous" and took up residence at the Assembly Rooms in the Market Hall.

After several splendid years of fame and success, the great dance band era of the "Rendezvous" was over.

UPPERCUTS AND ARMLOCKS: BOXING AND WRESTLING AT THE "RENDEZVOUS" 1933-1939.

The boxing bouts introduced by Mr. Morgan, while certainly unwelcome to some, cannot be regarded as a total innovation in Chesterfield. Boxing tournaments were taking place on a regular basis at the Cattle Market, and back in the previous decade Mr. Fred Kenshaw, owner of the Roller Skating Rink on West Bars, had organised a similar series of encounters. Jimmy Conn, the doorman at the "Rendezvous", had fought in contests at West Bars as long ago as 1920. It is Mr. Murray's opinion that he and Johnny Lowry, another famous local boxer, were responsible for convincing Mr. Morgan that such a scheme could succeed at the "Rendezvous." As the Skating Rink on West Bars was destroyed by fire in 1932, it probably seemed to Mr. Morgan that his main rival in Chesterfield had been removed, and that the way was clear for him to proceed.

While Jimmy Conn is mentioned only rarely in the local press at this time, Johnny Lowry was something of a celebrity. Former Midlands and British Flyweight Champion, he had won almost all his 234 contests, losing only 10 and drawing 4, and had never been knocked out in his entire career. He won the British Championship against a fighter called Bugler Lake, when Lowry had to return to the ring and box an extra round after having already been declared the winner. A well-known figure in his native Chesterfield, he played a key role in the organising of the contests at the "Rendezvous." He is usually referred to as Mr. Morgan's partner and co-promoter in the enterprise, and it seems safe to assume that he probably set up most of the bouts.

The first of these took place on Monday October 23rd 1933, the two main fights being Stan Davies (Rotherham) v. Joe Horridge (Rochdale), and Harold Cox (Hasland) v. Chuck Brownlee (Barnsley), both contests scheduled for 10 rounds. Further tournaments followed at weekly intervals through October and November. One, staged on Monday 6th November, billed itself as "the greatest boxing tournament ever in Chesterfield", and featured a lightweight contest between Kid Chocolate (Bradford) and Kid Kelso (Walsall). On these

occasions,as throughout most of the period featuring the boxing contests,the hall was still being used for dancing on other nights of the week,which must have caused Syd Murray and his helpers a great deal of work and annoyance.

The fifth evening of boxing at the "Rendezvous",on Monday 20th November,was altogether more significant.The day before the event was staged,tragedy struck at the Grassmoor Colliery,when an explosion tore through the Deep Hard Seam,killing fourteen miners and injuring another eight.News of the accident had reached Chesterfield before the fight,and the "Derbyshire Times" reported that:"Prior to the commencement the assembly stood in silence as a mark of respect for the men who lost their lives in the Grassmoor Disaster." A collection was taken during the course of the evening,and those present gave generously. Over £50 was collected,and forwarded to the Grassmoor Colliery Disaster Relief Fund.There were three featured bouts that evening - a rematch between Stan Davies and Joe Morridge, Kid Davies(Maltby) v.Pat Williams(Doncaster),and Billy Gibbons(Sheffield) v.Sonny Crofts (Rotherham).

These early tournaments were not a financial success,and by the start of December Mr.Morgan was admitting that they would "probably cease" after the 11th.The last contest of 1933 took place on Monday December 7th,when proceeds were once more pledged to the Grassmoor Colliery Fund.This time the attendance was less impressive,and the collection only came to £25-10s.,at which Mr.Morgan apparently "expressed keen disappointment", though thanking those who had come along that evening.The programme consisted of 11 bouts each of 4 rounds,and with no decision awarded.Most of the competitors were teenage youths from the Chesterfield and Sheffield area,and included Billy Gibbons and Sonny Crofts,who had boxed at the "Rendezvous" a few weeks before.The two referees for the evening were Mr.C.Clift and the boxer Jimmy Conn,who engaged in a certain amount of clowning between the bouts.Mr.Morgan and Johnny Lowry,the promoters,also attended and were later photographed with the contestants.

Mr.Morgan remained true to his word,and the boxing tournaments were cancelled from December 11th onwards.No contests took place during 1934 - no doubt to Mr.Murray's relief - and the hall enjoyed a successful time as a venue for dancing until the end of 1935,when sporting counsels again prevailed,and the bouts were re-introduced.This time Mr.Morgan decided to begin a series of All-in Wrestling contests,and ran them alternately with the boxing bouts.The first wrestling match was staged at the end of December 1935, and was quickly followed by an evening of boxing in January 1936.

Probably the best-known of the wrestlers at the "Rendezvous" was the "Red Devil", whose real name was Charles Glover.A former collier from Barnsley,HB was distinctively garbed in red trunks and a red mask which hid his face,and was a great favourite with the crowd.Glover Apparently played a similar role to that of Johnny Lowry,arranging the wrestling contests for Mr.Morgan.According to some,he arranged a number of the results, as well! His son,the actor and playwright Bryan Glover,followed his father's example for a time,wrestling under the name of "Leon Arras" to supplement his income while teaching in Barnsley.Other leading contestants featured at the "Rendezvous" during the 1930s were Buddy McTaff,Johanfesson and Karl Tierberman.According to Mr.A.H.Male,who attended some of the bouts as a young boy,usually by climbing on to an adjoining shed and in through the window in order to avoid paying,McTaff's real name was Atkins,and he had once played football for Mansfield Town.Johanfesson was in fact a veteran grappler called Joe Sheppard, who had been taking part in wrestling contests at the Skating Rink on West Bars in 1926. Mr.Francis Mession,of Grindlow Avenue,Chesterfield,remembers that Sheppard also came from Mansfield,and sold postcards of himself in the local pubs.No-one seems to know whether Karl Tierberman's identity was real or assumed,although some of those who watched him fight still have their doubts.Mr.J.R.Mudman,of Gloucester Road,is of the opinion that Tierberman "probably came from Barnsley too."

Mr.Mudman has produced a lively and interesting account of the wrestling contests at

the "Rendezvous", which is worth quoting in full:

"My own personal memories of the "Rendezvous" go back nearly sixty years when as a young teenager with my pals I attended wrestling promotions there in the mid-1930s(1934-36).

Wrestling in those days was billed as All-in Wrestling, and all-in it certainly was, as nothing much was barred when the two contestants got together in the ring.

If I remember rightly the promotions took place fortnightly during the winter months, on Tuesday nights, and were quite popular at the time. I can still recall being asked by my pals: "A tha goin' t - Randy on Tuesday neet to wrestling?"

The proceedings started at 8.0.p.m. and ringside seats were 2/- or 2/6(half a crown), and consisted of wooden forms or chairs. This price was beyond our modest means, and we were admitted through a side door where we paid one shilling and ascended some stairs to view the proceedings from a small balcony overlooking the main hall. There were no seats on the balcony and we had to stand. The balcony was comparatively small, so we were always early when admission started at 7.30 p.m., so that we could get to the front of the balcony and establish a good vantage point.

As I recall the hall was not very well ventilated, and as the evening wore on dense clouds of tobacco smoke rose from the affluent spectators in the ringside seats, so that in the latter stages we saw the grapplers in the ring through a floating mist, so to speak.

The audiences were predominantly male, very few ladies were in attendance, (Thirty years later Kent Walton and I.T.V. were to change all that!), but they were very enthusiastic and had their favourite contestants - and those they hated as well.

It was at the "Rendezvous" I learned the meaning of such expressions as "half nelson", "full nelson", "body-slam", "forearm slam", "Boston crab" and so on.

The wrestlers themselves were a tough breed, and billed themselves under outlandish names such as "The Ghoul" or "The Red Devil", and according to the bills came from all over the world.

The Red Devil, I recall, appeared in red robe and trunks, and wore a red mask which covered his head, with slits for seeing and breathing. The M.C. always informed us that he would only take off his mask and reveal his identity if he was beaten in the bout.

In my visits to the "Rendezvous" I never saw him beaten, but unknown to us at the time of course, the bouts were stage-managed so the longer he kept his mask on the more we flocked for the next promotion. Much, much later we learned that the Red Devil was a tough collier from Barnsley, supplementing his income by wrestling in his spare time.

Another popular wrestler was billed as Karl von Tieberman from Hamburg, Germany. He was short but thickset in stature, wore black tights and had his head shaved. His popularity stemmed from the fact that his tactics were always scrupulously fair and he never resorted to any underhand or dirty tricks. By arrangement I suppose, he was usually matched with an opponent who knew every dirty trick in the trade, so that the audience were always on von Tieberman's side. At the conclusion of his bout he would bow stiffly in Teutonic fashion to the four sides of the ring, and give the Nazi salute. (The war was five or six years away, so this caused little furore in those days.)

The referee at the "Rendezvous" bouts was a tough individual billed as ex-champion of Great Britain, "Tiger Ted" Baxter. During the course of his duties he frequently got involved with the contestants when one of them (usually the rough and tumble one) refused to break when told to do so, or questioned his rulings or decisions. On more than one occasion I have seen Baxter grab hold of the offending wrestler and throw him bodily out of the ring. This was great stuff for the fans, except for those in the line of fire, who had to scatter rapidly before 15 stone of sweating male landed on top of them. Usually a few chairs were broken in the process, but for us up in the balcony it was great stuff and we lapped it up.

I remember after such an occasion the offending wrestler rose from the ringside, kicked aside a broken chair and publicly challenged Baxter to wrestle him on a future occasion.

We all cheered when Baxter accepted the challenge, and it was announced from the ring at the conclusion of the evening's entertainment that the challenge bout would take place in one month's time. No doubt this was all stage-managed too, and if so it illustrates the fact that the wrestlers and officials could have earned their living on the stage, as well as in the wrestling ring.

The challenge bout subsequently took place before a full house, being the prime attraction of the night's billing. Tiger Ted was knocked out in Round 4 after each man had secured a fall, so lost the bout. Needless to say, Tiger Ted received a great ovation, and his opponent - despite his victory - was booed all the way to the dressing-rooms."

This reminiscence, one suspects, gives a fair impression of what the contests at the "Rendezvous" must have been like. The wrestlers mentioned, however, are only a few of the "stars" from a far larger number of fighters who took part in bouts at the hall. Tiny Summersgill, the "7-stone champion of the world", was a small but skilful and acrobatic wrestler who pleased the "Rendezvous" crowd in his battles with his rival Jackie Droit. Later on Whipper Billy Watson seems to have been a favourite, while at various other times the hall saw visits from Tiger de Lisle, Angora the Terrible Turk, Wild Tarzan, Jose Rossi, and the less exotic Jack Alker, Henry Adie and Flash Maunders. At the end of 1936 there was even a bout between two lady wrestlers, Miss Jubilee and Miss May Brewer! Perhaps the most unusual of all was Joe Lowther of Leeds, former North of England middleweight boxing champion, who in his time was said to have fought Jock McAvoy, Len Harvey, Jack Casey and "400 Others." Lowther appeared in a wrestling bout at the "Rendezvous" in March 1936, matched against Bernard Omond. This said, the biggest attraction appears to have been the Red Devil, whose succession of "final deciders" with his main rival Buddy McTaff were always given top billing. Not too surprisingly, the Red Devil seems to have had the better of these encounters, and at one stage he broke McTaff's arm. This injury forced him to retire temporarily, and a benefit was held for him in July 1936, in which the Red Devil

starred once again, defeating his opponent Brian Wass by two clear falls and throwing him out of the ring! McTaff evidently recovered from his injury, and was wrestling at the "Rendezvous" again by October.

Further recollections of the wrestling at the "Rendezvous" are provided by "A.R.G.", who remarks that: "the memory slips a gear and changes to shouting, screaming people. "Tear his arm off! Throw him out of the ring!" The sweaty clash of flesh meeting in combat. Names come to mind of the people who used to fight in the ring - Charlie Glover, Jack Atherton, Len King, Henry Adie, Darkie Bolton, Tiny Summersgill and many others - and of some adventurous people who used to climb the roof to look through part of the glass roof for free." "A.R.G." helped to set up the ring for the contests, fetched chairs from the dancehall and set them out, then stayed to watch the fights. He was on friendly terms with Charlie Glover, the "Red Devil", and used to help him in his gymnasium at the bottom of Colledge's Bakery yard, where a number of organisations and individuals attended either to practice keep-fit, boxing or wrestling. "A.R.G." remembers groups of girls coming in on Wednesday afternoons to play handball and netball. Of the "Red Devil", he comments: "Many people used to ask me what his real name was, because he used to wrestle under the name of the Red Devil. My answer was "I don't know, he wears his mask in bed!"

Towards the end of July 1936 the management announced a new feature. This was Free-Style Wrestling, which was described as being "an amalgamation of catch-as-catch-can, judo and Greco-Roman." One feels it cannot have been markedly different from the contests previously staged at the "Rendezvous", the more so as old favourites like McTaff, Henry Adie and of course, the Red Devil, appeared regularly on the bill for bouts of this kind, although the contest on September 25th did feature a couple of new stars - Harold Angus (British and European Welterweight Champion, "just returned from the Olympic Games at Berlin") and Pat Howard (Official South African Welterweight Champion.) Howard, in particular, seems to have caught the public's fancy, and made a number of return visits.

The wrestling contests, with such star personalities as the Red Devil and Buddy McTaff heavily featured, seem to have overshadowed the boxing for most of 1936. A boxing bout was staged at the end of the year - appropriately enough, on Boxing Day - when several local fighters appeared on the bill, among them Tommy Foley and Jack and Tommy Renshaw of Chesterfield. From this point onwards boxing and wrestling contests alternated until April 1937, when All-In Wrestling returned, and replaced the boxing altogether.

Unfortunately, the "Rendezvous" management suffered a damaging setback in May 1936, when Mr. Morgan found himself in court. The main culprit in the case was the match-maker, Charles Glover - the "Red Devil" himself - who had apparently shown as much aggression out of the wrestling ring as he usually displayed inside it. Glover was charged with assaulting an official of the British Boxing Board of Control, who had tried to attend a boxing contest at the "Rendezvous" in order to ensure that the boxers and officials were properly licensed. According to the report in the "Derbyshire Times" of May 29th, the inspector - John Greaves, of Sheffield - was met at the door by Glover, who evidently recognised him and refused him admittance. Escorted back on to the street by the large and intimidating "Red Devil", Greaves decided that "Discretion was the better part of valour", and returned to his car, where he was later joined by Mr. Morgan and others for a discussion of the situation. While they were talking, Glover came up to them, still in an angry mood, and pulled open the car door. He lashed out at Greaves, hitting him on the back of the neck as the official ducked forward. Not satisfied with this, according to Greaves' testimony, Glover then kicked him on the leg. Glover denied the assault, which Mr. Morgan and others claimed not to have seen, but the Chesterfield Borough Court was not convinced, especially when it was confirmed that Morgan was staging the tournament with an unlicensed referee, timekeeper and seconds. Judging this to be the reason for Glover's refusal to admit the inspector to the hall, the Court fined the "Red Devil" £1 plus costs, and bound him over to keep the peace.

The prominence of the case in the local press, together with the revelations of unlicensed boxing, must have harmed the reputation of the "Rendezvous." Certainly Morgan's rivals made capital out of it, as may be seen from an advert for boxing bouts at the Cattle Market in the "Derbyshire Times" a month later, the promoter remarking pointedly that all his bouts were licensed by the B.B.B.C! To make matters worse, Morgan was also obliged to read in the same newspaper of the "record attendance" at the Broadway Dances

in the Assembly Rooms at the Market Hall, where the Blue Melody Boys - or the Broadway Blue Melody Boys, as they were now described - were playing for dancing with the same success they had once enjoyed at the "Rendezvous"!

Mr. Morgan fought back as best he could, booking the Ray Oatey band in October 1936 and securing further visits from the Roy Fox Orchestra in December, and the following May. Such attractions, however, were few and far between, and after the second Roy Fox engagement there appears to have been a lull until October 22nd 1937, when All-Star Wrestling was reintroduced, with Whipper Billy Watson topping the bill. Watson was to feature in many of the bouts that took place in 1937-38, together with such newcomers as Vic Hesselle, Rough House Rafferty, Rene Labelle (the Flying Frenchman) and a mysterious character called "The Mask", who like the "Red Devil" refused to disclose his identity in the ring. Karl von Tieberman seems to have come into his own about this time, and Buddy McTaff was still a regular fixture, although he lost to "the Flying Frenchman" in November 1937.

All the indications are that, in spite of the spectacular nature of the contests, the boxing and wrestling promotions were not bringing in anything like the income that had been gained from the dancehall in the Syd Murray-Blue Melody Boys era before the end of 1936. In April 1937, and again in January 1938, the "Rendezvous" declared itself to be "Under new management", and it was clear that the owners were having problems.

On Friday March 11th 1938, the "Rendezvous" entered a new chapter in its history, when the hall was re-opened as the "Rendezvous Skating Rink."

meet **GEORGE JACKSON**

GEORGE JACKSON, manager of the Rendezvous rink, Chester Rd. for several years prior to its closing in December, 1939, who returned to skating in September, 1947, as manager of the Rollerhome, Wakefield, and finally went to the Casino, Rochester, as manager in November, 1949, undoubtedly ranks as, not only one of the best-known, but also one of the most respected personalities in British skating to-day.

As a skater, he has been active on rollers since 1917, when he first donned the little wheels at the old Premier rink, Chesterfield; he eventually joined the staff there and later became floor manager. For some years he was a very useful roller hockey player, and later became a proficient dancer.

George Jackson's success as a rink manager has been due, not to the often exaggerated abilities claimed for so-called showmen, but to many years of straightforward dealing with all comers at rinks where he has been engaged. Skaters always have a good word for him, and his courtesy and consideration have made him many friends in the sport.

Cyril B. Astall



Mr. George Jackson

Himself a famous roller-skater and roller-hockey player, Mr. Jackson was manager of the Rendezvous Roller Skating Rink during the period 1938-39.

THE RENDEZVOUS SKATING RINK, 1938-1939.

The opening of the "Rendezvous Skating Rink" in March 1938 was conducted with something of a flourish, the management announcing a "Grand Exhibition by Expert Skaters." The newly converted building was opened "by courtesy of J. Messer, Esq." and readers of the "Derbyshire Times" were informed that: "Mrs. W. Lloyd-Worth and Miss M. Wood, Britain's Greatest Skating Combination, of the Lido Rink, Doncaster, will give an exhibition of skating." This was roller-skating and not ice-skating, of course. Charge for admission was Ladies 1/-, Gentlemen 1/3d, and 6d for standing spectators.

Roller-skating had been extremely popular in Chesterfield for many years, the Skating Rink on West Bars having been established as early as 1909. Following its destruction by fire in 1932, the "Rendezvous" appeared to have the field to itself, and the conversion of the hall to a skating rink must have seemed a shrewd move. All the same, the management continued to hedge their bets. Wrestling contests alternated with skating at the "Rendezvous", and the Mask, Wild Tarzan and Karl von Tieberman plied their trade soon after Mrs. Lloyd-Worth and Miss Wood departed. Nevertheless, the new venture achieved a measure of success, and by the end of May 1938 the "Derbyshire Times" was advertising: "Rendezvous Skating Rink - three sessions daily (including Tuesday night). 10-12, 2-5, 7-10. Gents. 1/3, Ladies 1/-, Spectators 6d." Furthermore, a "Whoopie Carnival" was scheduled to take place on Whit Monday from 7.00-11.0 p.m., at a charge of 1/6d. The rink closed during July and August, but re-opened late in September, its programme once again alternating with bouts of free style wrestling. The redoubtable Red Devil made his return on November 25th, to take on Vic Messelle at the top of the bill.

Mr. Robert Ashworth worked at the "Rendezvous" as a skate mechanic during this period. He came to Chesterfield either in late 1937 or early 1938 from Huddersfield, having already worked as a skate mechanic in other towns. Mr. Ashworth has in his possession a photograph on which he himself appears, together with the manager of the rink, Mr. George Jackson, and his two daughters.

Mr. Jackson had been an excellent roller-skater in his youth, having taken up the sport in 1917 at the Premier Rink on West Bars. He later joined the staff there, and was promoted to floor manager. Mr. Jackson also made his mark as a noted roller-hockey player and later on became a proficient dancer. His residence as manager at the "Rendezvous" ushered in the building's last successful phase, as a skating rink and roller-hockey centre.

It is perhaps not surprising that Mr. Jackson should have introduced roller-hockey to the "Rendezvous", having been a player himself. Whatever the reason, it certainly appears to have been an inspired choice. On Saturday May 19th 1939 spectators at the Rink were treated to the first public practice match of the newly-formed "Spire" Rink Hockey Club, where Whites were pitted against Greens. The two teams were selected by the trainer, Mr. W. Cowley, and the game drew a large crowd. The Whites won an exciting contest 3-1, the scores being level at half-time. Scorers were Moody, Emery 2 - Renshaw. The five-man teams were Whites: Beaumont, Hurley, Parsons, Emery, Moody. Greens: Newsum, Siddall, Renshaw, Naylor, Jackson.

The general feeling of excitement at the launch of the sport at the "Rendezvous" was shared by the "Derbyshire Times", whose reporter commented: "This club, which is entering league hockey next season, has the makings of a first class team, and can be compared favourably with the old Rink Team of 1909-1914, which took all before it. The members are fortunate to have with them Mr. H. Naylor, who played during that period. Mr. G. Jackson, the manager, also played after the war, and both desire to build up a team which will make Chesterfield well known in the rink hockey world again."

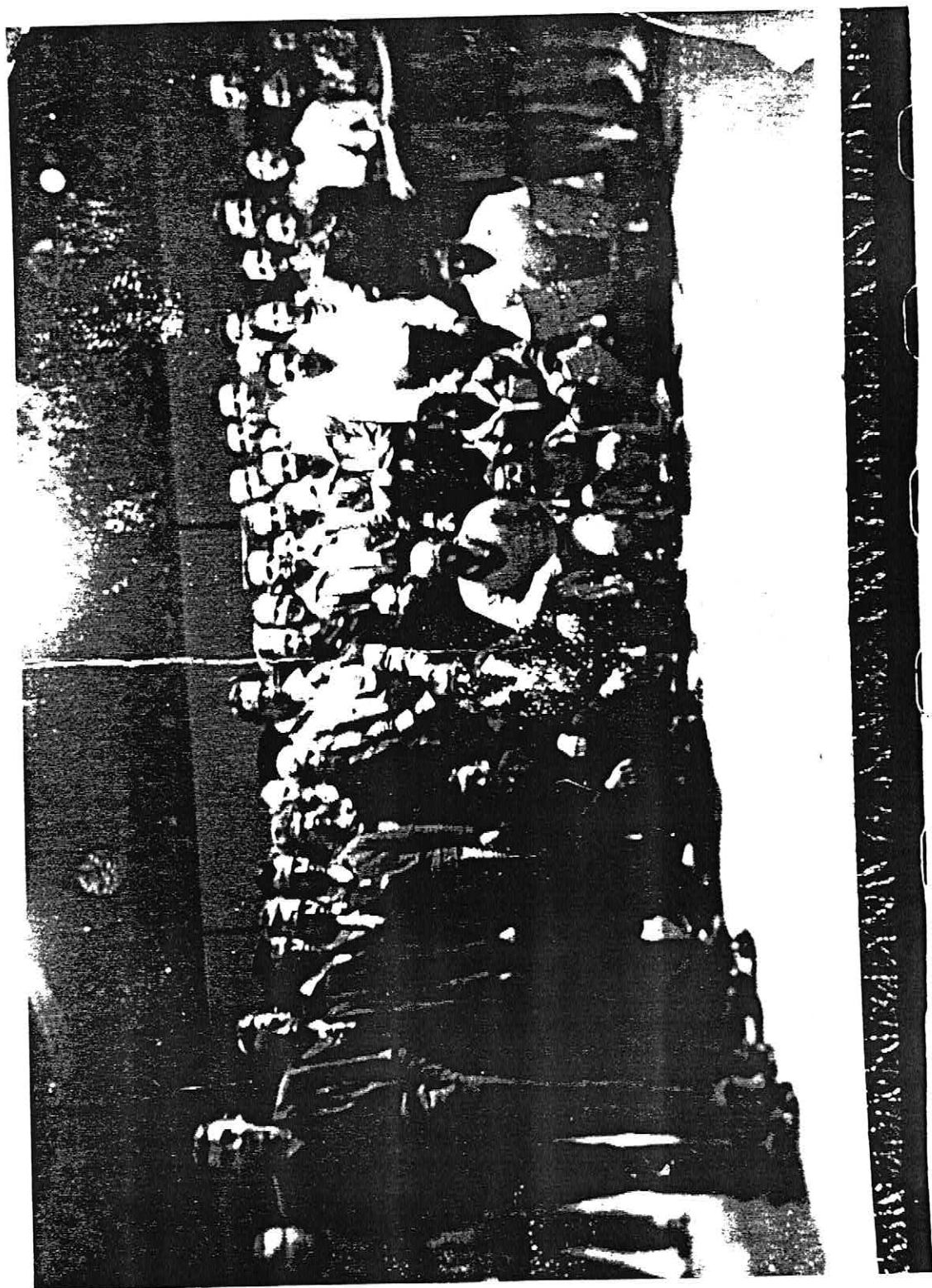
These high hopes seemed to be justified in the subsequent matches with other clubs. On June 10th the "Spire" held Derby Flyers to a 5-5 draw. Scorers for Chesterfield were Moody, with four goals, and Renshaw. One of the Derby scorers, with two goals, was Cyril Beastall, who soon afterwards joined the "Spire" Club and became one of its stalwarts. Beaumont, on the other hand, left to join Derby Flyers about the same time.

THE RENDEZVOUS ROLLER SKATING RINK



The Rendez-vous Roller Skating Rink

Mr. Jackson and his two daughters are at the centre of the picture. Mr. R. Ashworth (skate mechanic) far left, and Mr. Smith (caretaker) far right.



The Rendez-vous Roller Skating Rink

Employers and customers of the Rink, photographed c. 1938.

The following week, on June 17th, Chesterfield Spire beat Sheffield All Blacks by 6-1, Renshaw scoring 4 goals, and Moody two. Renshaw was the son of the former manager of the Premier Rink, West Bars. A week later they replayed Derby Flyers and inflicted a 7-5 defeat on them, although the Derby team included Beaumont and was captained by Beastall, who scored three times on his own account. Scorers for Spire were Moody(3), Parsons(2), Renshaw and the captain, Emery. The club continued its successful run into July with a 4-4 draw with Sheffield All Blacks at the Attercliffe Rink, and a 7-3 victory over Belper Royals. This last match saw the regular line-up of Newsum, Emery, Parsons, Renshaw and Moody largely replaced by a side fielding a number of experienced veteran players. The line-up was Newsum in goal, Hurley, Hopkins, Jackson and Naylor, the last two presumably being the "Rendezvous" manager and the Mr. H. Naylor who had played in the Premier team before 1914.

An interesting contest took place in July, when "Chesterfield New Boys" were matched with "Derbyshire Old Boys". The latter team included Harry French, a "pre-war exponent" aged 46, Horace Wood and Hedley Hewitt, and Cyril Beastall, who had captained Derby Flyers from 1932-39, and had been a player since 1923. The New Boys were represented by Newsum, Parsons, Hopkins, Renshaw and Siddall, and the referee was Mr. J. McLean. Youth was evidently no match for experience, the Old Boys winning the game 3-2 with scores from Beastall, Wood and Jackson against two Renshaw goals. The veterans won the replay even more heavily, with a score of 7-3, although it must be noted in fairness that the New Boys' keeper, Newsum, was injured when the score stood at 3-2. Scorers were Wood(3), Jackson(2) and Beastall(2) for Old Boys, and Hopkins(2), Siddall for New Boys.

By this time the Rendezvous Rink appears to have captured the public imagination, to the extent that the wrestling contests took a second place. Vic Hesselle, Henry Adie and other grappling regulars were performing at the Cattle Market rather than the "Rendezvous" during July 1939. The Spire Club continued its programme with a "Married" v. "Single" contest, where this time the veterans were defeated 3-1 by the youthful Single team, Renshaw(2) and Hopkins scoring the goals, with two Jackson penalties for the Married side.

Spire's long unbeaten run was ended when they went down 4-3 to Sheffield All Blacks at the Attercliffe Rink. The players more than avenged this first defeat, winning the return match 8-1 at the Rendezvous Rink, with Beastall scoring four goals, the other scorers being Wood, and Parsons with three. The referee on this occasion was Mr. W. H. Farnham of Sheffield, and Mr. Jackson acted as timekeeper. A second defeat was suffered, away to Hull White City, when the Spire Club was beaten by two goals to nil.

September saw the management announcing the re-opening of the Rink for the winter season, and offering: "Skating nightly 8.45-9.45 p.m., also afternoon sessions every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday 2-5 p.m. Special children's session every Saturday 10 a.m. - 12.30." It was to prove an over-optimistic claim, as war had already been declared between England and Nazi Germany a few days before. The "Rendezvous" Skating Rink was almost at the end of its time, and had only a few months to run.

Free Style Wrestling made the briefest of comebacks in September and October 1939.

The contest on October 3rd saw Vic Hesselle matched with Wally Seddon, and Jack Atherton with Al Morrow of Canada. The bouts continued for no more than a fortnight, the final wrestling contest at the "Rendezvous" taking place on Tuesday October 17th 1939, where Vic Hesselle once more topped the bill, beating Al Fuller, while Scottie Ambrose drew with Jimmy Brown, and Frankie Bowen beat Johnny Nelson. The "Derbyshire Times" of October 20th informed readers that: "It was announced that these weekly contests are to be discontinued this season, on account of recent poor attendances." The Skating Rink itself lasted only a short time longer, closing down at the end of December. The closure effectively ended the career of the "Rendezvous" as an entertainment centre, and the building was turned over for wartime use.

DECLINE AND FALL:1939-1990.

The transformation of the "Rendezvous" from a sporting and entertainment venue to a centre for military and civil defence activities was quickly effected. By the end of 1939 work was already in progress to open the cellars beneath the building for use as air-raid shelters. The work was undertaken by the Chesterfield firm of James Collis and Sons, builders. Mr. F.C. Holmes, who now lives in Grangewood, was employed by them at the time, and clearly recalls how he and his workmates opened up the cellars and cleared out the rubble which had accumulated there over the years. It seems likely that the cellars had seen hardly any use since the time of the Burkitts and their malting business, and Mr. Holmes certainly remembers removing some mouldering malt or grain from the building, together with the other detritus. According to his recollection, the cellar consisted of a single huge arched passageway, so long that it stretched away out of sight. Having cleared the area of rubbish, he and the others whitewashed the walls of the cellar, and left. Mr. Holmes subsequently joined the Army in 1940, serving until the end of the war. He was to return to the "Rendezvous" several years later.

The dancehall itself was first used by the local Sea Cadet Corps, who met there on a regular basis during 1940. Mr. Raymond Batteson, now of Walton, was a young cadet in those days, and remembers that the place was used for marching and band practice, and later as training headquarters for the Corps when the Boythorpe Road Drill Hall was taken over by the military. Mr. Batteson recalls the names of several officers and cadets from this time - Lt. Commander Trigg, Lt. Lucas, P.O. Oxley (drill instructor), Mr. Truswell (bandmaster), Eric Allsop (leading bugler) and the Gascoigne brothers, who played the drums. The Sea Cadets were at the Rendezvous for six to eight months in 1940, moving on to other venues before eventually settling at the Unitarian Schoolrooms in Saltergate, where they remained for most of the war. The building was later used by the Home Guard, originally known as the Local Defence Volunteers. Mr. Gettings, a neighbour of Mr. Holmes at Grangewood, recalls that the Home Guard also used the "Rendezvous" as a drill hall in the evenings,

meeting there from some time during 1943 or 1944 until the end of the war, when their headquarters was disbanded. An Anderson shelter was built in the "Rendezvous" yard during the war years, and Mr. Riggott, of Athlone Close, remembers seeing it there.

With the defeat of Hitler and the cessation of hostilities in 1945, the wartime use of the "Rendezvous" came to an end. In 1946 workmen from the Chesterfield Borough Council Highways Department came to seal up the cellars previously intended for use as air-raid shelters. One of their number was Mr. F.C. Holmes, who had helped to clear the cellars in 1939. At the end of the war he had returned to work for James Collis and Sons, but for some reason had been unable to settle there, and had subsequently joined the staff of the Borough Highways Department. Entering the dark depths under the building, Mr. Holmes looked around. The same long, arched passageway was there, but this time it held the relics of its wartime use. He saw camp beds, and shelves set along the walls that held candles, gas masks and rusting oil lamps. For a moment he remembered his earlier visit to this place, when the cellars were opened, and back beyond that to when he had watched the wrestling at the "Rendezvous" as a young teenage boy. Mr. Holmes took a last look at the underground passage, and went outside. He and his workmates removed the metal grate that gave access to the cellar, and bricked up the gap. Since that time, the cellar has remained closed.

Shortly after the war, around 1947, the "Rendezvous" building was bought by Messrs. Stockwell and Bax, the former using his Forces' gratuities for the purpose. Stockwell and Bax, who later operated under the trade name of Stylax, used the building as a Bedding factory until 1961, when they leased it to a Miss McDowell of Sheffield, under whose supervision the "Rendezvous" was used for much the same purpose. According to Mrs. E. Gumbrill, of Rhodesia Road, whose husband was manager of the factory from 1961 to 1978, Miss McDowell was succeeded by Waldo Furniture Ltd. in 1977. Waldo used the place as a storehouse until 1987, since which time it has stood unoccupied in spite of proposals to

convert it to a wine bar and/or hotel. That Miss McDowell and Waldo Furniture Ltd. were tenants, rather than outright owners of the "Rendezvous" building, is confirmed by W.T. Parker, the Auctioneer and Estate Agents, whose records show that Stockwell and Bax are still the owners. Their occupation of the building brings the history of the "Rendezvous" to the present day, where it awaits a new owner.

After the great days of the "Rendezvous Dancehall", and its use as a sporting venue in the late 1930s, its eventual fate may strike the reader as sad and deplorable. This said, it has become clear from the public response to enquiries about the "Rendezvous" that its past history is remembered with affection by a large number of Chesterfield people. Perhaps, in the end, it is the memories of those past days which matter most of all. Whatever happens to the "Rendezvous" building, it remains alive in the hearts and minds of its former patrons, and this history is the sum of their recollections.

G. Sadler.

11.5.90.