

REVIEWS



The Old Stagers: Canterbury, Cricket and Theatricals
By Richard Ritchie
OS Publishing, £20

An account of Tory triumph, cricket and the creation of the world's oldest amateur dramatic society is delivered with wit and style, writes **Lord Lexden**

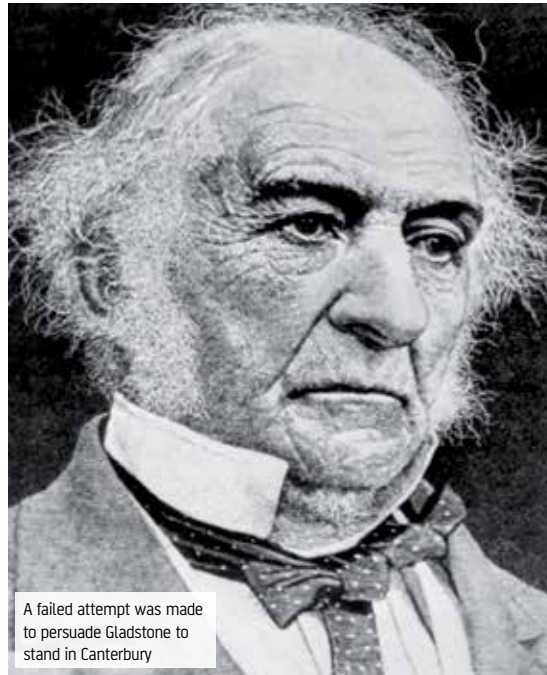
For two weeks in August 1841 the city of Canterbury was *en fete*. “The Tories had gained a great political triumph, and had succeeded in returning both members for the city to Parliament. The victory was celebrated with dinners and dances; there was a fancy bazaar, at which duchesses, marchionesses, countesses and baronesses kept the stalls,” as the editor of a local newspaper wrote later.

Traditionally, the two-member constituency was shared by a Liberal and a Tory, but in 1841 the Tories made a special effort, seeking votes among the electorate of some 1,500 with a zeal unrestrained by the requirements of electoral law. When an attempt was made to get Gladstone, then

“Ritchie naturally writes with deep affection for his fellow Old Stagers”

a “stern, unbending Tory” in Macaulay’s famous phrase, to stand in Canterbury at the next election, he indignantly repudiated any association with such “a very corrupt place”.

The city’s distinctly dubious political reputation was redeemed by two major annual occasions which stemmed directly from the celebrations that followed the Tory triumph of 1841. After the jolly bazaar organised by titled ladies, the mood calmed. “The cricketers held their soberer and less exciting revels. The great event of the week was the match between Kent and England.” The men of Kent, watched by



A failed attempt was made to persuade Gladstone to stand in Canterbury

some 4,000 spectators, won by 74 runs. The victory inspired the creation of the famous annual Canterbury Cricket Week which only World Wars had the power to cancel.

From the start, the week provided a splendid daily diversion for those attending it: each evening theatrical entertainments were laid on by a company formed by some of the visiting cricketers and supplemented by friends with thespian talent.

The success of the first performances in a run-down local theatre (recalled by participants as a “den of dirt and distemper”) forged lasting bonds between the actors. “Many of the amateurs walked the stage with the grace and style of favourite professionals to whom they would bear comparison,” a press report of the 1840s noted admiringly. They swiftly agreed on a name: the ‘Old Stagers’.

Still flourishing over 170 years later, they are the oldest amateur dramatic society in the world, sharing the distinguished black, red and gold colours of the I Zingari cricket club. This book tells their story with the wit and style that such accomplished performers deserve.

Richard Ritchie has been a central figure in the Old Stagers for nearly 50 years – as a leading actor, writer of revues and composer of accompanying music. He now has the pivotal role of manager. For this book he has drawn on an extraordinarily rich collection of documents going back to the early days, housed in the archives of Canterbury Cathedral. They include many historic engravings and photographs reproduced as lavish illustrations to this fine volume.

Ritchie naturally writes with deep affection for his fellow Old Stagers, but he possesses a historian’s detachment too. He avoids the chief snares which

trap so many of those who write accounts of beloved institutions: an inability to view them critically or assess their place in the wider world. Three times a Tory parliamentary candidate, he understands the changing national and social contexts to which the Old Stagers have had to adapt themselves. Only one member of the audience walked out when the first gay kiss came to the Canterbury stage in 2003.

The Old Stagers have always enjoyed teasing politicians. In 1892 they sang: ‘I’m the popular candidate/ I know every man by name/ Who is on the voters’ roll/ I remember what hour they came/ To whatever booth to poll/ Promises only spoken/ Plainly are meant to be broken/ That’s how we play the political game in the good old way’.



Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and historian