

# The story of the how the Willow Globe came to be where it is and how it was planted...

by Susanna Best - Artistic Director, Shakespeare Link

*"There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come."*

*Victor Hugo*



Now the Willow Globe is here it's hard to imagine the field it was planted in, in April 2006, without it. The theatre nestles in a corner of a field behind our house, Penlanole; when we had the idea to plant a theatre we took advice as to the most welcoming habitat on the farm for such a willow structure. The willow would like a bit of shelter, we were told, and damp ground – easy to find with Rhayader's high rainfall making it statistically one of the wettest areas in the British Isles – and this field fell in a gentle slope from West to East towards a ditching brook, so it met these requirements, and also our own considerations that for an open air theatre it would be helpful if there could be a natural rake to the auditorium and the setting sun could light the stage of an evening. All good. But before going further, why plant? What was the rationale behind planting a theatre? Mad. Or not; this is after all Radnorshire and there's room for imagination and dreams.

Penlanole – spelt as Pen-llan-olau on the wall in Nantmel Church, where the tablet in memory of a former inhabitant Daniel Reid is hung – has been on record in the Powys Archives since in 1643 it changed hands as payment for a gambling debt. Local historian Douglas Mytton considers it was here long before; that the Romans, and others, travelling North over the hills from Beulah, forded the Wye at the crossing below the Argoed Mill and found at Penllanolau a welcoming flat patch, bathed in sunlight, for pitching their tents. At 625ft above sea level it would have always been safe from river flooding, and certainly it's an old place - when we were growing up here Dad found a curious brown lump which he took to be an old crock lid, or even could it be a fossilised cowpat? He sent it to the University of Wales where experts pronounced it to be a crog-ball, a section of the earth's crust bubbled up under the water when all hereabouts was under an ancient pre-Silurian sea. So Penlanole has always had a magic of its own.



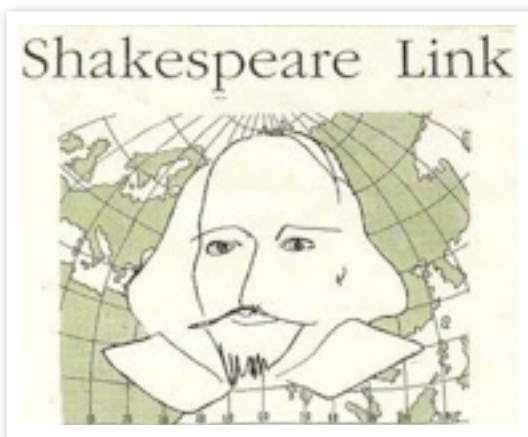
Perhaps before going further in the story of how the living willow theatre has come to be here - willow, tree of dreams , 'we are such stuff as dreams are made on'- its appropriate to give a brief background of how we, it's planters, got here. My parents came to Penlanole, nr Llandrindod Wells, Radnorshire in the 1950s. Dad, Major Francis Pulford R.A., had been a regular soldier, and he absolutely relished what he saw as the freedoms and companionship of farming. In those early days of mechanisation much was still done by hand, we had great gatherings at such events as harvesting, dipping, or shearing when everyone would foregather to help with the neighbours' stock. Mum, painting under her maiden name Elizabeth Stewart-Jones, was a professional artist who had used the endless travelling of army life as fuel for her sketchbook and countless portraits. Now, when time permitted, she painted local landscapes and - able to catch a deft likeness very quickly - many local portraits. Her much-loved picture of Tony Hawkins, MFH, hangs still in the Lion Royal in Rhayader. My sister and I went off to university then based ourselves in London, returning always for holidays with our growing families.



Theatre was where the work was for me. I worked variously as actor, fixer, stage-manager, writer, researcher, workshop leader, director - and at every level: weekly rep, fixing for the Monteverdi Orchestra, acting Rosalind in open-air Shakespeare, assisting Dr Jonathan Miller, directing the WWII Children's' Opera and becoming a staff director at the Royal Opera. It was during a stint working with Michael Bogdanov and the English Shakespeare Company that I fell in with Philip Bowen, an actor whose career had spanned playing the back end of a donkey in panto, seasons in Regent's Park, and Hamlet at the Old Vic. He had spent years on the road, acting in theatres around the world with Michael Redgrave's Company 'Shakespeare's People' and then with companies working for the British Council. Together we decided to form our own company, Shakespeare Link.



The premise underpinning Shakespeare Link was simple. Its remit is to use drama, and particularly the works of Shakespeare, for the benefit of the community, in ways which are not necessarily limited to theatre performance or academic study. We believed, and still do, that Shakespeare is a behavioural resource second to none; that, writing over 400 years before Marx and Freud, his tools of analysis can't be beaten; that access to his plays should be free and easy and exposure to them will be always helpful to all concerned. We became a Registered Charity and in the early days we were a sort of commando unit, always on the road to schools, colleges, prisons, working with specialist groups such as family therapists and often on performance/teaching tours abroad. We saw ourselves as client led, always trying to provide what might be required: a session using Shakespeare as a springboard for debate about gender, or leadership, or families at risk; a production celebrating the links between England and France for a Festival in the Lebanon. We met up with some deaf actors, and realised that they had no access at all to a cultural icon the rest of the world takes for granted, that Shakespeare has been translated into over 80 languages around the world, everyone knows Romeo and Juliet, yet there was no translation into Sign Language. Making our first film in BSL brought us back to Radnorshire.



Penlanole provided a wonderful location for the several films in the series that followed. Wonderfully diverse, with an orchard for Ariel to sing under the blossom, a turberry field for Caliban to hunt for firewood in, twisted woodland for Oberon to meet Titania, the sunny lawn in front of the house for Viola to visit Olivia, it offered backdrops for almost every scene. And it was around this time that we realised that it was time to come home. Dad had died in 1978, and having been on her own for years Mum now could do with a hand. We moved back to Penlanole, took back in hand the 40 acres which had been under a grazier, Phil started his own organic small farming enterprise and Shakespeare Link began to operate from the spare bedroom. Coincidentally this was coming up to the Millennium. Suddenly, with so many local groups looking for some support in their efforts to mark this special time, a local freelance theatre director was in demand in Radnorshire, and we got involved in many things. 'A Little Below Heaven' at the Wyese in Builth celebrated Builth's history for the last hundred years and led to the formation of Builth Wells Community Arts; 'Red Kite, Boda Wenol' developed into the Red Kite theatre group in Hay-on-Wye; we produced the Llanwrthwl pageant, and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' with the Mid Powys Youth Theatre. The Laura Ashley Foundation funded a programme 'Have-a-go Shakespeare' which still runs fortnightly. Like-minded people began muttering about the possibility of a 'mid-Wales Shakespeare Centre', and 'if you've got a Shakespeare Centre, then perhaps you'll need a theatre?'



Which is a long-winded background as to why, at a Shakespeare Link AGM in March 2006, the directors put to the trustees the idea that Shakespeare Link could spearhead and host a Shakespeare Centre for mid Wales, and by the way could we start fund-raising to build a theatre? Shakespeare's theatre was The Globe, so should we build a Globe? The trustees took this very well, but suggested tentatively that to fundraise this enterprise could be time-consuming. Undeterred we talked around it - obviously we should use local materials, and plenty of local stone and timber were to hand, but these could be prohibitively expensive in terms of time and materials and funding skilled labour. 'Why not plant a willow theatre?' Ros Garrett joked. Well, we did already have a willow patch. Dr Rebecca Heaton (MICfor) of the Salix Project based at nearby Llys dinam had already persuaded us to do trials of willow as a bio-mass fuel, and a particularly damp quarter acre had been planted out with a thousand rods three years earlier. So we had some 8 foot tall growth in the damp patch. The idea of a willow theatre was up and running.



To plant this year we had to move fast as it was already March, Spring coming on and the willow sap rising. Once the leaves started fully to sprout it would be too late for happy planting. We contacted Becky and having surveyed our smallholding and identified the best patch - in its naturally formed dip, bordered by a brook and self-contained, damp to help the willow root and already with a good access track from a small B-road, we rang Shakespeare's Globe in London. Did they have a book containing architect's drawings of the theatre? Sorry, it was out of print, was the reply, but they could let us have a card model kit called "Build your own Globe". We ordered two copies by post and set about assembling a building team. Becky is an experienced willow sculptor, but she'd never before built on the scale that we envisaged. Despite a busy professional schedule she set aside a week to plan and construct the theatre, estimating that with a core of two or three other specialised workers and some volunteer labour we could complete the main structure within a couple of weeks. Nick Marchmont, a local landscape designer, was keen to be part of the project to add to his own skills base and Manny Xerri, a skilled carpenter, wanted to learn about willow. The team was completed by Phil and Sue, Shakespeare



## **Preparation work – materials, conditions, tools:**

- Harvested willow of differing growths from the smallholding.

- Collected supplementary willow from local growers. We harvested rods donated by Llowes Court in Clyro, The Llysdinam Field Centre in Newbridge-on-Wye, Newbridge School and Fforest Fields at Hundred House.

- Tested pH of the soil: willow likes a pH of 7 or 7.5 and as the soil was quite acidic we indentified the need for some lime around the willow roots. Ordered lime.

- Identified the best angle of slope in the field to maximise natural amphitheatre.

- Ordered and collected 2 x 50m rolls of MYPEX matting, along with Spindle Bush true ties for the planting process.

- Borrowed a spiker from The Bracken Trust cancer respite centre. This specialist tool makes the hole for planting. Checked and sharpened secateurs, loppers and pruning saw. Bought several cans of different coloured spray paint for marking out.

- Let the local grape-vine know what we were planning, and hoped for some volunteer help.

The packs sent by Shakespeare's Globe included a footprint of the theatre. This provided our basic lay-out plan and Nick worked on it during the week before the build. He arrived on Build Day 1, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2006, with precisely marked angles radiating from the centre of the theatre footprint plan. He set up his theodolite and using cans of spray and lines of string we marked the two concentric 20 sided polyhedrons, working out where would be entrances, where walls, and importantly the best orientation for the stage itself. We had to bear in mind the natural fall of the field and the direction of the setting sun, a critical consideration for open-air theatre in summer. We worked to a scale of around a third: Shakespeare's Globe is 100' across, ours is 10 metres in diameter across the inner circle and 13 across the outer circle. We dug matting strips, with a little lime sprinkled beneath, along the line where we would start planting, and began.

We planted fast growing varieties of willow – mainly *Salix viminalis* varieties – using rods of between one and five years old. The five-year-old rods were fairly thick in diameter (up to about 8 cm) but despite this we planted them unrooted directly into the ground and nearly all of them have rooted and produced new growth. This exceptional rooting ability from rods is what makes willow so ideal for living structures, as well as its fast growth. The older willow is less flexible, so for the large arches, using 5-year-old willow, we had to consider the natural curves in the stems and accommodate those into the structure. We used lots of thin whippy rods to pull the whole structure together and different coloured basketry willow for the stage screening.





*Above: Each year as the Willow grows, it is pruned and re-woven into the ever evolving theatre structure*

As the framework got under way, with Nick as the ladder man and all the theatre arches organically woven at the height he could reach from his stepladder, volunteers began turning up: ‘we hear you’re planting a theatre – would you like some help?’ The rest of the walls were woven as a community effort and the main structure was in place after ten days. Manny then set to work on the stage and completed it in time for an inaugural performance on Shakespeare’s birthday April 23rd 2006. Our neighbour Debbie Leeton, now Artist-in-Residence, painted ‘All the world’s a stage’ in Latin, Welsh and English on the three down-stage edges of the boards. The paint was still drying as Viola cried the Bard’s words “Make me a willow cabin at your gate” across the willow branches towards the setting sun. We all knew something special had begun.

The rest of 2006 was a whirlwind: applications, planning, licences and permissions, retrospective funding for wood and labour to build the stage. The Ashley Family Foundation were already supporting our local ‘Have-a-go Shakespeare’ sessions, now they added funds to underpin some administrative support. We hosted community groups, school workshops and local bands. This pilot year proved that there was an appetite and an audience for Shakespeare and we officially opened the 2007 season with 250 people crammed into every available space in and around the living willow theatre - the Willow Globe.



*Totus mundus agit histrionem  
Ma’er byd i gyd yn lwyfan  
All the World’s a Stage*