

Swettenham Heath is a place for lovers. Lovers of good music, wine, food and romantic evenings. Lovers who want to get

Cosi in a cattleshed

'The list of those who have sung there since 1974 reads like a Who's Who of current casts in our leading companies'

Words: Graham King

BY the end of this year nearly 4,000 theatregoers will have enjoyed quality opera performances in what was once a cattleshed in a field at a Cheshire farm. Not only that, but several young newly professional opera singers will have taken their first steps with a nationally respected company. And many school children will have been introduced to opera for the first time. Clonter Opera Theatre is a phenomenon. It is also one of the most original evenings-out in the county. Ask any of the regulars who will enjoy summer picnics on the lawns, adjoining the theatre, between this year's performances of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* or *The Marriage of Figaro*. Or the lovers who will lap up the evenings of sheer romance at a secluded Cheshire 'Glyndebourne' lovers of good music, good food and wine, good company and, well, just lovers.

This year Clonter Opera Theatre not only celebrated its silver jubilee but it entered a new theatre league by extending to a 350-seat auditorium, building an orchestra pit for 15 musicians and upgrading the lighting

rig and audio system for its proscenium arch stage.

The dining area has been enlarged, too, where audiences can take extended supper intervals under the same roof. Not only does Clonter Opera Theatre stage several productions each year but



Audience enjoy a picnic



*Top: Anita and Jeffery Lockett in the straw bale days with daughters Isabella, Sarah and Amanda
Above: Il Tabarro*

it tours nationally, provides a training ground for young professionals and carries out a programme of educational workshops for North West primary and secondary schools.

This month it awards the annual Clonter Opera Prize, the UK's only



inter-conservatoire prize, for singers nominated by principal music colleges. Many of today's opera stars received a first platform for their talent at Clonter. Soprano Amanda Roocroft, called it 'an invaluable experience.'

And the onetime cattleshed is an essential visit, according to *Sunday Telegraph* critic Michael Kennedy who wrote: 'The list of those who have sung there since 1974 reads like a Who's Who of current casts in our (and Europe's) leading companies.'

The Clonter story began 50 years ago when the Lockett family moved from the Chilterns back to Clonterbrook Farm at Swettenham Heath where, 300 years earlier, their ancestors had been yeoman farmers. Jeffery Lockett, the present owner and artistic director of Clonter Opera Theatre, grew up there in an atmosphere of music.

His mother, Betty Bannerman, was a renowned mezzo soprano who taught at the Royal Northern College of Music, performed throughout Europe



Top: Anita and Jeffery Lockett Above: *Madam Butterfly*

and was a regular broadcaster. Her husband converted the cowshed at Clonterbrook Farm into an 18th century music room where she could perform to over 70 guests. Jeffery himself began singing at Harrow,

where he performed before Sir Winston Churchill, and studied in London under Dino Borgioli.

After leaving Cambridge with an agricultural degree he returned to the 250-acre dairy farm and, while at a cattle show in 1974, had an idea which combined music and farming with the natural Roman amphitheatre qualities of the cattle court. He invited the London-based Abbey Opera Group to give a special performance there for cancer relief, before an audience seated on bales of hay.

It was a great success and, by demand, the one-off concert became an annual event. The family pooled their talents, built sets and props and made costumes. In the early years Jeffery was the lighting technician as well as an occasional performer. His wife, Anita, handled Box Office duties. Audiences of 150 began to grow and in 1983 the barn needed a major reconstruction programme to cope.

The following year Clonter Farm Music Trust was formed and performances moved into a commercial area. Performers are mainly drawn direct from the academies and auditions are held each autumn in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow and Cardiff. Talented designers have created stunning original sets for classics such as *Madame Butterfly*, *Il Traviata* and *La Boheme*, evenings with George Shearing, Johnny Dankworth and Cleo Laine or last season's production of compositions by the controversial Jacques Brel.

And their national reputation for production values has attracted the respect of colleges, music academies and other opera companies such as Covent Garden, Opera North, Scottish Opera and Glyndebourne. 'We've had hideous things happen too,' says Anita. 'We once thought a man in the audience had died during a performance of Figaro so our lead, who was a qualified first-aider, leapt from the stage at the close of an aria and raced up the stairs to give him the kiss of life before carrying him out.' Meanwhile ... remember those lovers who find romance at Clonter?

They're coming back, now, to book the theatre for their wedding receptions!

CLONTER OPERA PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

2000 Clonter Opera Prize Concert **March 11th**

Così fan tutte **April 28th and 29th, May 5th and 6th**

Wyn Davies Cabaret **June 17th**

Marriage of Figaro **July 19th, 21st, 22nd, 28th & 29th**

Gala Showcase Evening **November 10th and 11th**