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**The Theatre Royal, Bristol**

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## THE THEATRE ROYAL, BRISTOL

THE Theatre Royal, the oldest building of its kind in the kingdom, has had a continuous existence since 1766, and was reopened on 11 May 1943. Its long association with the Drama merits the all too short notice which can be given in the *Transactions*. The Brochure issued by the Preservation Fund Appeal Committee is so concise, and presents the principal facts concerning the Theatre so well, that with the permission of the Chairman of the Committee, Mr Wilfrid Leighton, it is printed in full.

The movement for the restoration of the Theatre was inaugurated by the Council for the Preservation of Ancient Bristol, and is supported by the National Trust, the British Drama League, the Royal Society of Arts, the Georgian Group, and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and although the sum raised by Public Subscription was not sufficient to free it from debt, the theatre has now been conveyed to trustees to be held in trust for Bristol and the Nation as a building of National Historic Importance. The Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) has taken a lease of the Theatre and its policy is to make it ' a centre where the best plays can be seen, the best music heard, and exhibitions of special theatrical interest enjoyed '. The text of the Brochure is as follows :—

The foundation stone of the Theatre was laid on 30 November 1764. David Garrick, who wrote a special prologue for the opening night, pronounced it to be ' the most complete of its dimensions in Europe '. The architect was James Paty, of Bristol, and the interior, which remains substantially unaltered, was planned by Saunders of Drury Lane, and was the first semi-circular auditorium

constructed in England. The builder was Gilbert Davis, the mason—Foot the smith—Franklyn, and the interior decorations were carried out by Simmonds and Michael Edkins, well known as a painter of Bristol porcelain and glass. The fine ceiling, still in perfect condition, probably dates from 1800.

The actual structure of the Theatre is unique and the only existing example which illustrates fully the peculiarly English features in stage development. The proscenium doors, the 'thunder run', the 'sloat' system of raising scenery, the 'cat walks' above the stage, the 'drum and shaft' method of hanging scenery, and the 'groove' fixing for scenery which obtained in every English theatre from the time of Inigo Jones until it disappeared about 1880, all remain, together with traces of an 'apron' stage. It is, in the opinion of experts, the historical Theatre *par excellence* of England.

The promoters who received tokens entitling them or their assigns to 'a sight of every performance' had to overcome many difficulties: various religious bodies in Bristol, disapproving of the stage, threatened to invoke the provisions of an Act of 1737, by which anyone acting in an unlicensed Theatre would be liable to conviction as a rogue and vagabond. A poem—'The Bristol Theatre'—published at the time affirmed that the stage tempted men to break all laws, human and divine, and that the result of establishing the Theatre could only be the enticement of the population into the paths of misery and vice: truth, trade and industry would decay because men would turn highwaymen: the gaol would have to be enlarged to accommodate the criminals thus produced and debtors would clamour for food at its doors.

To avoid the threatened prosecution the opening performance on 30 May 1766 was advertised as 'A Concert of Musick and Specimen of Rhetorick'—a comedy and a farce being introduced between the ordinary performances of the orchestra.

To obtain letters patent legalising the Theatre a special Act of Parliament was necessary and owing to continuous opposition this was not passed until 1778. The royal licence was then granted by George III to George Daubeny, the nominee of the proprietors. From this grant the Theatre obtained its name, and the royal arms appear prominently on the proscenium and above one of the stage boxes. In 1779 the Theatre was leased to John Palmer, who also owned the theatre at Bath, and is famous as the originator of the coach-borne Royal Mail. He undertook to carry out certain alterations including the erection of a second tier of boxes and the circle. In 1800 a new gallery was constructed. The original entrance from King street was through two houses, behind which the Theatre was built, which were then retained, the upper parts being the manager's residence. The present unsatisfactory elevation to King street was built in recent times.

For many years the Theatre was the most prosperous in the provinces and it was no uncommon sight to see over a hundred carriages at its doors. Robert Dyer in 'Nine years of an Actor's Life', recalls that in 1818 he went to the Theatre to see Edmund Kean's first appearance in Bristol, and although his party paid box admission they were only by determination able to obtain seats in the gallery. Performances then commenced at half-past six and patrons were requested to send their servants by five o'clock to keep places.

Since the Theatre's opening practically every actor of note—with the exception of Garrick—and nearly every great actress—has appeared on its stage. Dodd, Barry Sullivan, Baddeley, Shuter, Quick, Bannister, Mrs Siddons, Bensley, the Kembles, the Keans, Mrs Jordan, Macready and Elizabeth Inchbald may be mentioned. Maurice Barrymore and his wife, who were married at St. Mary Redcliffe, held their wedding feast on the stage after a performance. Amongst many more recent performers, may be

remembered George Melville, Ellen Tree, Helen Faucit, Kate Bateman, Marie Wilton (Lady Bancroft), Madge Robertson (Dame Madge Kendal), Henrietta Hodson (Mrs Labouchere), Kate and Ellen Terry, Charles Coghlan and Arthur Wood.

Shortly before the last war Repertory Seasons were run by Miss Muriel Pratt and by Miss Horniman. In its later years the Theatre has been at times the home of variety, with a successful pantomime at Christmas. Its association with music dates back to its earliest days, for many years oratorios were regularly produced during Lent, and during the present century a brilliant season of grand opera was organized by the late Mr Napier Miles, of Kings Weston, when the conductors were Adrian (now Sir Adrian) Boult and Malcolm Sargent, the producer being Johnstone Douglas.

During enemy attacks on Bristol in the winter of 1940-1, the Theatre sustained slight damage and in 1942 it was advertised for sale by auction and would have been purchased for commercial purposes had not the Council for the Preservation of Ancient Bristol taken immediate steps to secure its preservation. With the aid of a number of public-minded citizens appeal committees were set up in Bristol and London, and although the sum aimed at was not realized, the theatre was purchased by the aid of an anonymous friend who advanced the purchase money temporarily. The building has now been placed permanently in trust as a building of National Historic Importance, the trustees nominated by the Council being : Messrs Wilfrid Leighton (chairman), F. C. Burgess, Fred M. Burris, Ellison F. Eberle, Foster G. Robinson and Ernest J. Taylor, who have let the theatre on lease to the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA). Redecorated in the colour-scheme of 1766 and with some alterations to the seating in the gallery—the original wooden benches being preserved at the sides—it was opened again on 11 May 1943 when a special

prologue, written for the occasion by Mr Herbert Farjeon, was recited by Dame Sybil Thorndike. The management of the theatre by CEMA, by which it became in effect the first State Theatre in the country, has attracted a great deal of interest.

On the occasion of the Society's Annual Meeting in Bristol on 14 July 1943 the Members present were invited to visit the Theatre, now so happily restored. The principal features were described by Mr Wilfrid Leighton and an outline of its history given by Mr James Ross, the City Librarian.