THE THEATRE ROYAL, LEICESTER
1836—1958

by

Richard Leacroft, A.R.I.B.A.

Leicester's first "proper theatre" was built in 1750 on the site now occupied in part by the Clock Tower. In 1799 the subscribers decided to erect a new theatre, which was built on the site directly adjoining the Assembly Rooms, and was opened on Monday, 17 March 1800. By 1836 it was considered necessary to replace this building, and it was demolished to make way for the building which was at first variously known as The Theatre or the New Theatre, but by 1851 was referred to in the Directors' Report as The Theatre Royal. This new theatre was sited at right-angles to its predecessor, with its main frontage in Horsefair Street and its stage elevation to the Market Place.

In spite of a persistent legend that the Theatre Royal was built in six weeks of remarkably fine weather, the work was actually commenced on 10 April 1836, and was completed in time for the official opening on Monday, 12 September. The theatre was designed by the County Architect, Mr. William Parsons, with its main frontage in the "manner of the Grecian Ionic School" (Plate Ib and Fig. 1). Both this and the rear elevation were constructed of brick faced with stucco, and all the mouldings of cornices, architraves and rustication were built up of this material; even the fluted Ionic columns were of stucco on a core of special-made bricks, while the capitals were formed from pre-cast stucco volutes attached to the main brick core with a lashing of cord, around which the remainder of the capital was formed. The original delicacy of the various mouldings was unfortunately lost to later generations beneath a skin of paint one eighth of an inch thick. The rear elevation, with its rusticated base and six pilasters, was crowned by a pediment which formed the gable end to the roof over the main building, this being, at this time, continuous over both stage and auditorium (Plate Ia and Fig. 2).

The auditorium was designed in the form of a horse-shoe, having a Pit at ground level fitted with benches which were "fixed differently to any before seen in this town, each second one having a rail at the back"; on these there is reported to have been room for 450 persons. Above the Pit was a Circle divided into Boxes, and above this a further tier of Boxes; these together seated some 350. At the upper level there was also a Gallery seating between 450 and 500.

The internal decorations were carried out by Mr. Crace, Ornamental Designer to the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, the Royal Olympic and the St. James's Theatre, and they are described as being "of a chaste arabesque character on a light ground in the style of the well-known Baths of Titus, relieved with light gilt ornaments". The ceiling was divided into eight compartments, forming open panels through which a rich specimen of clouding could be seen. The whole was surrounded by a cove divided into panels in the centre of which were cameo paintings of celebrated
Fig. 1

ELEVATION TO
HORSEFAIR STREET.
(a) The Theatre Royal, with Market Place elevation, from the spire of St. Martin's, 1869.

(b) The Theatre Royal, with Horsefair Street elevation, showing the stage alteration of 1888.
The stage from the auditorium.
The auditorium from the stage.
The stage: bottom left, the proscenium opening; centre, the two fly-galleries and connecting catwalks; top right, the paint gallery. One of the upper scene grooves can be seen at the left-hand end of the lower fly-gallery.
dramatic authors. A magnificent chandelier, executed by Mr. Morland Broderip, was suspended from a central gilded flower. The front of the upper tier of boxes was decorated with festoons of flowers, with light honeysuckle ornaments. The Dress Circle front was formed in panels in which were painted arabesque scrolic ornaments, in the centre of which were various kinds of birds of elegant plumage on a dark ground.

The scenic department, including the act-drop and curtain, was under the control of Mr. Finley of the Theatres Royal, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, and Mr. Alfred Finley of the Theatres Royal, Birmingham and Liverpool. The stage and stage machinery were constructed by Mr. Evans of the London theatres. It projected forward into the auditorium in a curve (Fig. 3), and was reported to have been 48 ft. deep by 25 ft. wide at the proscenium; the actual depth to the remaining brickwork being 45 ft.

The Theatre opened, under the management of Mr. Monro who had taken it on a three year lease, with a performance of The School for Scandal, together with a Prologue spoken by Miss Booth. Doors opened at half-past six and the performances commenced at seven. Prices ranged from 3s. for the Boxes, 2s. Pit to Is. in the Gallery. Carrying on an old theatrical tradition the second half of the evening could be taken in at half-price after a quarter before nine.

During the early years the theatre, with use of gas and scenery, was normally let out to various theatrical managements for periods ranging from five to twelve months. One manager, wishing to establish a circuit between Leamington, Leicester and Derby, proposed a lease of from five to seven months at an average rent of £5 per week. During this period he proposed running two seasons, the first commencing on Easter Monday and the second in September. In addition to these regular seasons it was customary to open the theatre in public weeks, such as the Cavalry week, the Races or at Fair time, when a favourite play might be bespoke by the High Sheriff or other dignitary. On the Wednesday following the opening of the theatre the performances were under the patronage of the Most Noble the Marquess of Granby—His Grace the Duke of Rutland and the Marquess being accompanied by a large number of their friends.4

In the following October the management secured the valuable services of Mr. Charles Kean for an engagement of five nights: on Monday Hamlet was performed, followed by The Grand Oriental Spectacle The Forty Thieves; on Tuesday Macbeth and The Forty Thieves; on Wednesday King Lear and a Romantic Drama; on Thursday Othello followed by The Miller and His Men; and on Friday, for the benefit of Mr. Kean, King Richard The Third again followed by The Miller. Kean's performances were not enthusiastically received by the Gentlemen of the Press, however, who wrote: “with the exception of a tolerable reading of his part, and an over-done melo-dramatic action throughout, Mr. Kean has no claim to rank with many we have witnessed, not only in London, but on the Provincial boards”.5 Other famous players appearing on these boards included William Farren, Helen Faucit, Barry Sullivan, J. L. Toole, Sothen and Sir Henry Irving.

The fare offered was full and varied. A playbill for 1839 announced the Celebrated Historical Play Virginius, followed by a Comic Song and the much applauded Pantomime Gammer Gurton, which introduced a Celebrated Ode, a Grand Pas de Deux, Chinese Contortions, Acrobatic Exhibitions, and amongst many other features “Several Characters from
Shakespeare's Plays will occasionally appear". It cannot, however, be claimed that these various theatrical ventures were all highly successful. There are numerous records in the minutes of pleas for time to pay arrears of rent or recoup losses on the Grand Pantomime which was being got up; more often than not this last hope proved forlorn. To some extent these losses may be accounted for by such puritan elements as are exemplified by the association formed in 1772 for "the protection of the poor from extravagance, and in particular for preventing the opening of a theatre at Leicester, it being well known, as the promoters believed, that the poor are unable to refrain from a temptation so pernicious to them in its effects". In addition to their normal income from the lease of
the theatre, the owners were, however, able to draw revenue from the lease of the rooms and cellars at the front of the theatre; the former serving at differing times as a billiard room, a reading room and a news room.⁷

In 1847 the proprietors decided to dispose of their property, and in March a new company was formed which purchased the theatre for the sum of £3,500. An added inducement to shareholders was a reminder that the tenure of stock of the value of £50 entitled them to vote for Members of Parliament in elections in South Leicestershire.⁸

In September 1851, a local drama *Allen the Gipsy or the Murder of Bradgate Park* was staged for two nights, and now, interspersed among the longer bookings, we find the theatre being put to other than directly theatrical uses. On Thursday, 29 January 1852 there was a Masquerade and Fancy Dress Ball, on which occasion the whole of the extensive stage was thrown open; whilst from 20 December 1852 to 14 January 1853 there was presented a Panorama from the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, which was in motion for two and a half hours “starting from the City of St. Louis, across the mighty Rocky and Sierra Nevada Mountains, to the Great Gold Fields and Cities of California”. In the last week added inducements to an audience took the form of “a number of valuable Prizes, consisting of Twelfth Cakes, Gold and Silver Pencil Cases, Books, Toys, etc”. In 1854 an operatic season was given, which included the operas *Fra Diavolo* and *La Sonnambula*, and in May 1879 Miss Emily Soldene, having acquired the provincial rights from Messrs. Choudens of Paris, presented *Carmen* at the theatre. In her book *Theatrical and Musical Recollections* Miss Soldene said: “The interest taken by the town was immense, and the patient audience stood in the streets for hours before the doors opened”.⁹

By 1865 the County Fire Office was calling for certain precautions against fire which included, amongst other items, the provision of “a small fire engine to be kept in the Flys”, and the prohibition of smoking in the auditorium, with a constable on duty to enforce the regulation.¹⁰ In 1869 it proved necessary to line the front of the Gallery with sheet iron to protect it from the rough usage of the “Gods”.¹¹ As a result of these various requirements and the generally dirty and dilapidated state of the auditorium it was decided to remodel the interior, and the work was commenced in April 1873 under the supervision of Mr. Eliot Galer.

These alterations were of a very thorough nature, though the main structure of the circle and gallery remained basically the same.¹² “Mr. Galer . . . has so thoroughly transmogrified the old building, swept away its unsightly stage boxes and dress circle, improved the pit sittings, and remodelled the whole interior, that it may be laid to his credit that he has transformed what was dreadfully old into something surprisingly new . . . Entering the building we found a new office and other rooms (Fig. 3) have been provided on the ground floor, to be used as a box-office, and on mounting the stairs, which have been considerably widened, we enter a spacious hall leading to the dress circle (Fig. 4). In a niche in front of the stairs . . . will be placed a bust of Shakespeare about 8 feet in height. On the right hand side is provided a spacious refreshment saloon got up with a richly ornamented counter. Adjoining this, with a separate entrance, there is a large and comfortable saloon. Instead of one entrance to the dress circle as formerly, there are now two. The walls are papered with light green and gold, and by placing a balcony on the front of the old dress boxes (Figs. 4 and 7), provision has been made for
PLAN AT STAGE AND PIT LEVEL

Fig. 3
two additional rows of seats . . . The old stage boxes have been entirely
removed, and a concave wall placed instead of the abutting obstruction
which in bygone days has effectually hidden the stage from those to whose
lot it fell to sit in the side boxes near the stage. The 'gallery proper' has
been enlarged, and by a re-arrangement of the ceiling, each one of the
gallery visitors will be enabled to have a view of the stage.

"In the pit the manner of egress and ingress has been much improved
(Fig. 3), two doors have been provided in place of the old one. An entirely
new boarded floor has been laid, and seats with backs provided, with [iron
bar] separations\textsuperscript{13} between every two seats to prevent overcrowding. In
front of the orchestra 'stalls' have been provided, an entrance to which
is obtained by a private staircase from the box entrance."

The old ceiling with its cameos of authors was altered, and the new
ceiling brought some "six feet nearer the stage". It was now dome-shaped,
and panelled "showing figures of Griffins finished in arabesque, and in the
several panels medallions of Shakespeare, Byron, Dante, Goldsmith, Mozart,
Mendelssohn, Beethoven and Rossini, the work of the scenic figure painter,
Mr. Earle of London". These paintings were still to be seen up to the
time of demolition, but the griffins had earlier vanished (Pl. III).

The fronts of the gallery and circle (Fig. 6) were also altered to
their final design of a sunken fret, painted "with a graceful blending of
warm grey, salmon, white and gold". The old chandelier was replaced
by a new sunlight, described as "a gorgeous piece of mechanism, giving
forth the light of 190 gas jets in nineteen clusters". The Royal Coat of
Arms was now prominent over the proscenium, and the curtain was of
red baize instead of green; whilst the drop scene, painted by Mr. Herbert
of Manchester, showed a view of the ruins in Bradgate Park.

Although the original stage boxes had been removed, the circle was
still divided into boxes as we know from an inventory of 1897,\textsuperscript{14} in which
mention is made of the two private boxes on either side, together with
a centre box, and passages around the boxes. Traces of the partitions to
these boxes could be noted on the underside of the ceiling, and they are
indicated on the plan (Fig. 4). Mention is also made in the minute books
of coal fires in the pit and box passages, which from the beginning had
heated the auditorium. These were presumably bricked up when the
"efficient hot water apparatus" was installed in 1918,\textsuperscript{15} but were revealed
during demolition (Figs. 3, 4, 7). The boxes were gradually removed to permit
of open seating, the last to go being the two private boxes, one on either
side of the auditorium, which were removed in 1913.\textsuperscript{16}

At the time of the 1873 alterations the stage and scenery are described
as being entirely new, the stage machinists being Mr. Roberts of Notting-
ham and Mr. Goodger of the Surrey Theatre, London. The stage was
fitted up in the manner normal to the period, and was so arranged that
sections of the stage floor could drop and be drawn off under the side
stages, leaving a number of openings some no more than 10 inches wide
and others of greater width (Figs. 3 and 7). Through the narrow openings,
known as slot cuts, pieces of scenery could be raised from beneath the
stage by machinery, whilst through the larger, groups of actors could be
raised on bridges. In addition there were traps through which an actor
could be gently raised or shot into view, together with a grave trap for
churchyard scenes.
In 1883 the scenery consisted, according to an inventory, of four French chamber scenes and a wood scene made up of flats, and wings which were supported, and could be slid on and off stage, in a series of grooves which held the tops and bottoms of the scenes. The top grooves were fixed to the underside of the fly galleries on either side of the stage (Plate IV and Fig. 7). A pair of these top grooves remained in the theatre until 1947, when they were removed to the Museum for safe keeping, these being the only known pair extant in this country. These scenic arrangements made it possible for scenery to be changed in full view of the audience, a method which persisted to a certain degree in the transformation scenes of our childhood pantomimes. All this machinery became redundant, however, when new methods of staging plays required the scenery to resemble real rooms.

In 1881 the curved portion of stage projecting into the auditorium was removed and the front made straight and flush with the proscenium opening. This was in line with the development of this period when the actor was finally pushed back from the stage which in earlier days he had occupied in the auditorium, and contained behind a picture frame.

In July 1888 further alterations were made to the theatre under the supervision of Mr. Barradale, architect, and the stage was altered to permit new methods of changing scenery. In earlier days the scenes had been made in two parts which could be drawn off to either side of the stage, but later hanging scenes were often used. There was, however, seldom height for these to be raised out of sight, and so the cloths had to be rolled, but the new alterations, which included raising the stage roof and walls an additional 16 feet in height, enabled "the scenes to 'hang' without being rolled up or folded, which not only prevents damage to the scenes by creasing, but allows twice the number of scenes to be used". The new flies were now two storeys in height and a second fly gallery was introduced on either side. Externally the Market Place elevation was now crowned by a hung-tile façade to the fly-tower, and the dressing room wing was raised by an additional storey (Fig. 2, 7; Pl. 1a, b).

Until now the roof space over both stage and auditorium had been used by the carpenter and scene painter, but now a new scene painter's room was installed and the old roof space blocked off by building up the proscenium wall (Figs, 5 and 7). This new room may have been the painter's gallery extending across the rear of the stage; this had a paint-frame which could be raised and lowered with a large wooden wheel, enabling the artist to reach any part of his work. Some form of frame had, however, been in existence previously as there is mention of a windlass for the paint room in 1883.

Additional dressing rooms were now added, and an old scene dock was removed from the rear of the stage, whilst a new scene door and ramp replaced the earlier scene doors (Fig. 2), and allowed the scenery to be "placed direct from the street on to the stage". Alterations were made to the pit entrances, and the winding gallery staircase was replaced by one of stone with straight flights. Iron doors were provided to the openings in the proscenium wall, and a fire curtain of asbestos was installed. After this only minor alterations were made to the building, but in 1905 the gas lighting was replaced by electricity, except for use as an emergency source of light.
CROSS SECTION ON A - A.

Fig. 5
At times the theatre was let for short periods. In the week beginning 16 December 1878 the Amateur Dramatic Society presented *She Stoops to Conquer* at 7.30 and the farce *Area Belle* at 10.15. During this century the theatre became part of the touring system of this country, and companies visited the theatre for a week at a time. In the week beginning 22 January 1912 a company from the Lyceum Theatre presented *Under Two Flags* for the first half of the week and Ouida's *Moths* for the second. Prices now varied from 5s. in the Boxes to 4d. in the Gallery, and the second price was still allowed “as near 9 o'clock as the action of the play will allow”. The week of 10 July 1916, saw the production of *The Vicar's Sin*, twice nightly throughout the week. During the inter-war years the growth of the repertory movement affected the theatre, and it was leased to various managements who ran their seasons on a repertory basis, presenting a new play every week on a once or twice nightly basis until the final closure.
On 14 July 1947, the Leicester owners sold the building to a Birmingham firm at a reputed price of £40,000. At a meeting on 1 February 1956, the Town Planning Committee considered an application by the owners for permission to develop the site for offices and shops. As the building was protected under the Schedule of Buildings of Architectural and Historic Interest, application was made to the Minister of Town and Country Planning, who referred the matter back to the local authority. At a meeting on 26 June 1956 the City Council gave formal approval for the theatre’s demolition. The premises were later purchased by the Leicester Permanent Building Society as a site for their new offices, and demolition of the building commenced on 13 January 1958.

It is unfortunate that so far no illustrations have come to light showing the early interiors with their tiers of boxes; indeed no drawings of the building existed until a record survey was carried out by students of the School of Architecture, under the supervision of the author, immediately prior to demolition, when, considering the age of the building, the structure was found to be in remarkably good order; the drawings reproduced here are based on this survey. The author would like to take the opportunity of thanking all those who helped to make this survey possible; in particular the Leicester Permanent Building Society for their kind co-operation in making the building available, and those students whose diligent work enabled this invaluable record to be made. Thanks are also due to the staff of the Leicester Museums and Library for making the various records of the theatre available, and to Miss Sybil Rosenfeld for her research on Miss Emily Soldene.
NOTES

2. *ibid.*, 9 Sept. 1836.
3. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*, 7 and 14 Oct. 1836.
6. Author's collection.
13. A request for the removal of the iron bars in the Pit seats is in Minute-Book, 18 Apr. 1874.
14. Minute-Book. The boxes were also mentioned in the announcement of prices of admission at the re-opening of the theatre: Private Boxes, One and Two Guineas: Orchestra stalls, 5s.: Balcony stalls, 3s.: Amphitheatre stalls, 1s. 6d.: Centre Boxes, 2s. 6d.: Side Boxes, 2s.: Pit, 1s.: Gallery, 6d. (*Leicester Journal*, 19 Sept. 1873.)
17. The Chamber scene consisted of the following items:
   1. Oak chamber, 18 feet high by 24 feet wide, the Framework attached is 9 feet by 24 feet.
   2. Oak side pieces, right and left, making 4 pieces in all, 18 feet high by 6 feet wide each.
   3. Light chamber, 18 feet high by 24 feet wide, the Framework attached is 9 feet by 24 feet.
   4. Light side pieces, right and left, making 4 pieces in all, 18 feet high by 6 feet wide each.
   5. Front chamber, Baronial Hall, 18 feet high by 24 feet wide, the Framework attached is 9 feet by 24 feet.
   6. Front Flat, 18 feet high by 26 feet wide, the Framework attached is 12 feet by 26 feet.

The Wood scene consisted of the following:
   1. Borders, 6 feet high by 31 feet wide.
   2. Border, 11 feet high by 32 feet wide.
   3. Wings, 18 feet high by 6 feet wide.
   4. Cut cloth, 18 feet high by 26 feet wide.
   5. Back cloth, 12 feet high by 15 feet 6 inches wide.
   6. Set tree, 9 feet high by 8 feet at the base and 2 feet wide with Border to match 14 feet high by 30 feet wide.

   Minute-Book, 16 March 1883.
18. A fuller description of this stage machinery, together with detailed drawings by the author, will be found in R. Southern, "The Wooden Stage of English Tradition: the Theatre Royal, Leicester", *Wood*, Aug. 1948. See also R. Southern, *Changeable Scenery* (1952), pp. 317-8, figs. 50-2. For a drawing based on the stage of the Theatre Royal at this time see H. and R. Leacroft, *The Theatre* (1958), 57; see also pp. 47, 61-2 for other drawings of this building.
23. Programmes, author's collection.
The First Minute-Book, 1847-1884, the Directors' Reports, a set of the survey drawings, and other matter are at the Leicester Museum. The second Minute-Book is lost. Record photographs of the building taken for the National Buildings Record are on permanent loan to the Society for Theatre Research and are to be found in their Library at 77 Kinnerton Street, London, S.W.1. Two of these are reproduced here (Plates II and III) by permission of H.M. Stationery Office. A set of the survey drawings will also be found here and at the National Buildings Record. The most complete collection of photographs, including colour slides of the interior during demolition, is in the author's collection.