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The Bard's Britain

We reveal the nation's top 10 Shakespearean sites on the 450th anniversary of the playwright's birth

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Theatres at risk

Why many of Britain's Victorian theatres are struggling to survive, and what can be done to save them

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A photograph of a grand, ornate theatre interior. The view is from the audience's perspective, looking towards the stage. The seats are upholstered in deep red velvet and arranged in a semi-circular pattern. The walls and ceiling are highly decorated with intricate gold-colored carvings and patterns. A balcony with more seats is visible above the main floor. The lighting is warm and focused on the stage area.

TAKING CENTRE STAGE

Once the toast of Victorian society, many of Britain's oldest theatres are now at risk of being lost forever. We investigate the challenges of safeguarding the future of these national treasures and the secrets behind the success of those bucking the trend

WORDS JO CAIRD



Refurbished glory:
London's Hackney
Empire escaped
demolition after a well-
publicised campaign

For the details of your
visit please contact the
Hackney Empire
Box Office

Theatres at Risk

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hen the London Hippodrome opened in 1900, 20 elephants could slide down a chute into an arena filled with 100,000 gallons of water pumped in from a nearby subterranean river. Those particular pachyderms may not have realised it, but the opulent structure that housed their aquatic exploits, now a casino, was part of the biggest boom in theatre building that this country has ever witnessed.

The reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) was an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity, the Industrial Revolution bringing about significant economic growth and demographic change, including mass urbanisation and, for many, an increase in living standards. A growing middle class flocked to theatres and music halls to spend their new disposable incomes, taking advantage of improved urban transportation systems and safer streets.

The implementation of the Theatres Act in 1843 was crucial, allowing local authorities to grant theatre licences, thereby breaking the monopoly of the handful of patent theatres – including the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane and the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden (now



THEATRES WERE FANTASTICAL CREATIONS – ALL ORNATE PLASTERWORK, GILDING AND TROMPE-L'OEIL

the Royal Opera House), both in London – to present works of drama. It also restricted the powers of the Lord Chamberlain, who had been able to prevent any new play from being produced without justifying his decision.

As theatre – from drama and comedy to variety – became ever more popular, theatre building became big business. The 1860s saw the first dedicated theatre architects, such as Charles J Phipps (see side panel, page 55), who was based in London but travelled nationwide designing new theatre buildings and refurbishing old ones. Theatres built during this period were fantastical creations – all ornate plasterwork, gilding and trompe-l'oeil – but they were also terrifically vulnerable to fire.

It wasn't until electric lighting, concrete and safety curtains became commonplace towards the end of the 19th century that theatres started to lose their death-trap status. Survivors from the early days of Victorian

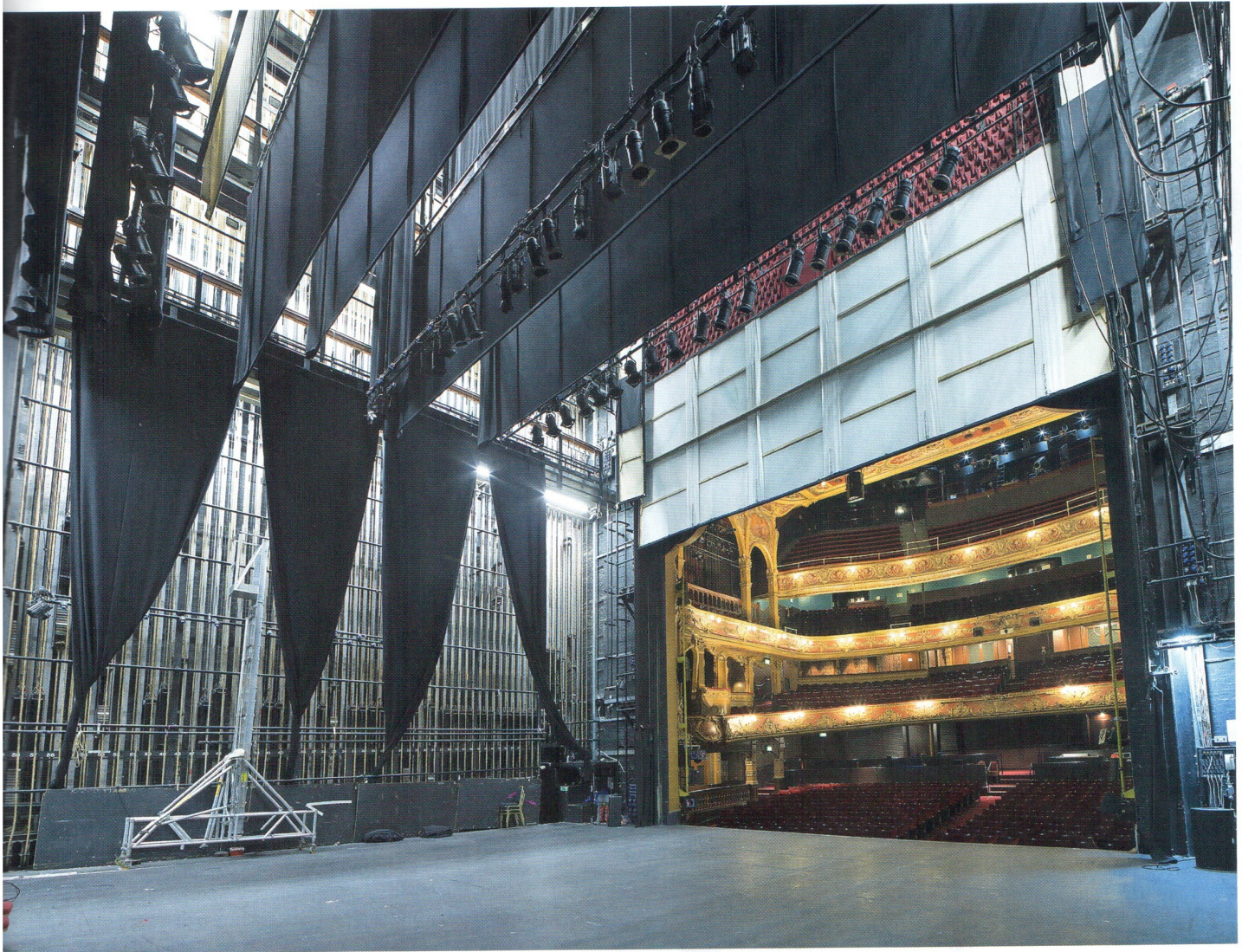
theatre building are therefore few and far between; the Royal Opera House, with an auditorium dating back to 1853, is one of the oldest and most beautiful theatres in the country.

Theatres also became more comfortable as the century continued. Separate entrances for the different seating areas were accepted without question – you could hardly expect the hoi polloi in the fancy boxes and galleries to mix with the riff raff in the uncomfortable pit – but the physical environment was made more pleasant for all following innovations in ventilation and seat design.

One of the most important advances in this era of exciting new theatre technologies was cantilevered balconies: pioneered by ground-breaking theatre architect Frank Matcham (see side panel), they allowed the creation of auditoria without supporting pillars obstructing views of the stage.

From top: Plush seating at Frank Matcham's restored Hackney Empire; reopened in 2004, Hackney Empire has seen improved access and facilities in a campaign led by actor Griff Rhys Jones

Opposite, from top: Ready for the spotlight, Hackney Empire; Theatre Royal, Drury Lane



It is estimated that there were around 1,000 theatres in operation during this period, from tiny private theatres such as the Shelley, outside Bournemouth, dating from 1866, to grand proscenium auditoria such as the King's Theatre, Glasgow, which opened in 1904.

"You couldn't build a theatre and lose money. If there was a site in central London, you put a theatre on it," says theatre historian and building surveyor John Earl, pointing to London's Shaftesbury Avenue, where playhouse after playhouse opened following the creation of the thoroughfare in 1886. The Apollo Theatre, where a collapse of the ceiling and balcony during a performance of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* led to serious injuries in December last year, is one of the many Victorian houses on this famous Theatreland street.

Theatres built in every borough of the city, designed to cater to local audiences, were no less grand than those popping up in the West End. The Hackney Empire, built in 1901, is just one example of this trend. The variety theatre was originally designed to be the flagship venue of theatre impresario Oswald Stoll, but Frank

Theatres at Risk



From top left: Frank Matcham's signature opulence at the Royal Hall, Harrogate; London Coliseum, a Matcham theatre opened in 1904

Opposite, from left: Phipps' original Vaudeville Theatre in London, 1870; refurbishments continue at Aberdeen's Tivoli

Matcham's plans were scaled back in favour of a West End headquarters in the shape of the London Coliseum. Even so, the theatre was an extraordinarily grand and technologically advanced creation, especially given its (at the time) suburban location. Central heating, electric lighting, an in-built cine-projector, not to mention the theatre's ornate interior and its terracotta domes, make it one of Matcham's most impressive works.

The boom continued under Queen Victoria's successor Edward VII and on into the reign of George V, but by 1916, it was all over. Theatres continued to be built, of course, but at nothing like the rate they had been since the 1880s; the First World War and rise of cinema saw to that.

It is thanks to Earl and his colleagues at what was then the London County Council that this wave of destruction was halted. As a result of their efforts, architectural listing for theatres was introduced first in London, then around the country.

But though listing was an important step when it came to safeguarding this precious resource, there are plenty of 19th- and early 20th-century theatres still under threat. The Theatres Trust, a body set up in 1976 to secure a sustainable future for UK theatres, each year publishes a list of 'theatre buildings at risk' (TBAR), whether from development, physical decay or financial hardship.

Top of the 2013 register is the Brighton Hippodrome,

PART OF THE CHALLENGE OF SAFEGUARDING OUR OLD THEATRES IS MAKING THEM FIT FOR MODERN USE

Nearly a century later, these Victorian and Edwardian theatres are regarded as architectural treasures, important relics of our cultural past. But it wasn't always this way. Until the 1970s hardly any theatres were even listed and John Earl estimates that as many as 80 per cent of the theatres that had been standing in 1940 were torn down in the two decades that followed the war.

"The future was going to be beautiful and the future was going to be new," he says wryly. "During that time an old building was by definition a building waiting to be demolished. An old theatre was a building that jolly well ought to be demolished because theatres were finished!"

a Frank-Matcham designed ice-rink-turned-theatre that hasn't operated as a live performance space since 1965 and closed as a bingo hall in 2007. Despite its Grade II* listing, there are real fears that a property developer's plans to convert the 1897 building into an eight-screen cinema complex could go ahead.

The Theatres Trust is pragmatic when it comes to protecting UK theatres: "We will often support a change of use which preserves and sympathetically converts them into other 'beneficial' uses such as nightclubs, bars, bingo halls, casinos and for religious purposes", says the Trust's Theatres at risk advisor Mark Price. But there are

limits. The current plans for the Brighton Hippodrome would “destroy too much of what makes the theatre unique,” he explains.

Another theatre on the danger list is the Morecambe Winter Gardens. This 1897 theatre closed in 1977, one of the many casualties of the decline of the traditional British seaside resort. Having fallen into disrepair, the building was purchased by the Friends of the Winter Gardens in 2006 and has since been refurbished to the point that it is now hosting occasional events and performances.

But even now the future is uncertain: £80,000 borrowed from the Architectural Heritage Fund at the time of the theatre’s purchase must be repaid by April 2014. Evelyn Archer, chair of the Friends, is deeply worried: “We don’t know what’s going to happen to the theatre again, even though it’s really in a better condition.”

It’s not all doom and gloom. There are plenty of examples of theatres being removed from the TBAR. Shona Ness, manager of the Tivoli Theatre, Aberdeen, describes how local businessman Brian Hendry bought the derelict building in 2009 after “falling in love with it” and restored the place with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Refurbishments are ongoing, but the Tivoli hosted a pantomime this past Christmas and further events are programmed.

“We won’t just be a venue for music and drama and comedy,” Ness is quick to point out. “It’ll be utilised by the business community in Aberdeen for things like meetings or conferences. It’s got to be viable as well as geared towards the artistic side of things. Hopefully we can find a balance.”

Part of the challenge of safeguarding Britain’s Victorian and Edwardian theatres is making them fit-for-purpose for today’s artists and audiences.

Stars of the show

Discover the nation’s grandest Victorian theatres, created by architectural pioneers, Frank Matcham and Charles John Phipps

Experts argue over exactly how many theatres the Devon-born architect Frank Matcham built or remodelled over the course of his extraordinary career but even the lowest estimate – around 150 – is undeniably impressive.

Surviving Matcham houses can be found all over the country; from the London Coliseum to the Royal Hall, Harrogate, these are some of the UK’s most beautiful theatre buildings, worth visiting partly for their gorgeous décor and partly because the sightlines in Matcham theatres are practically perfect, even from the cheap seats.

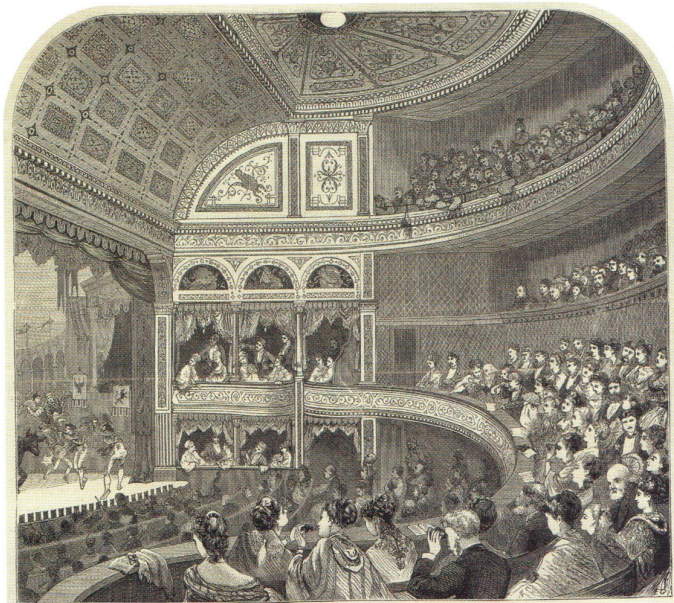
His leading contemporary, Charles J Phipps, was less prolific than Matcham, but still a force to be reckoned with, turning out at least 40 theatres in London and the regions. By the time that Matcham moved to London to join the architectural firm of Jethro T Robinson in the mid-1870s, Phipps had already designed or redesigned major theatres including the Theatres Royal, Bath, Nottingham and Brighton, as well as the Vaudeville in London.

Both men were innovators – Phipps’ Savoy Theatre was the first

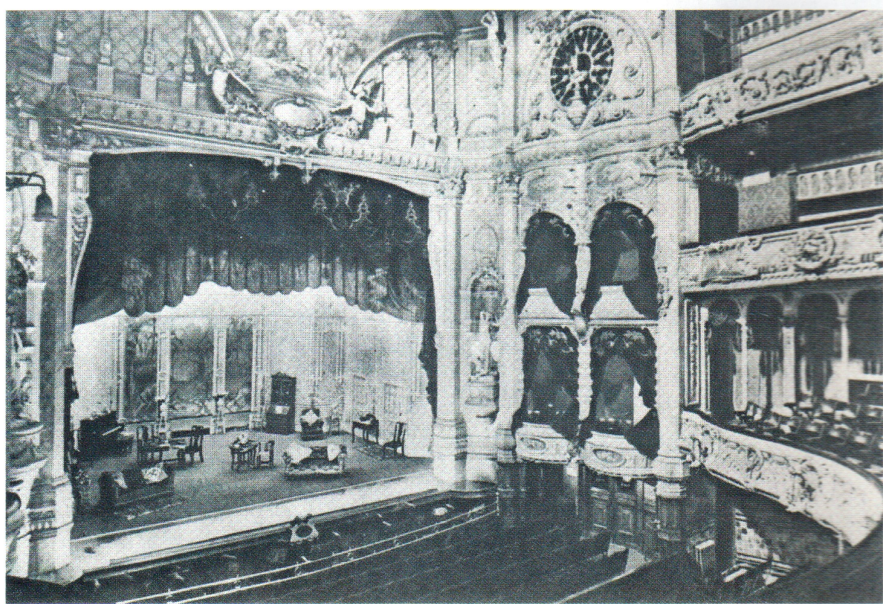
public building in the world to be lit entirely by electric light when it opened on the Strand in 1881, while Matcham and his civil engineer partner, Robert Alexander Briggs, took out patents on cantilevered balconies and panic bolts for emergency exits.

Matcham was much sought after by theatre impresarios because of the quality of his theatres and phenomenal speed at which he worked – turnaround times of just 20 weeks were not uncommon – but the architectural community were less impressed. His designs were regarded as “saucy” says theatre historian John Earl, too playful for their own good. Phipps, on the other hand, whose designs obeyed the conventions of the era, was much respected by his peers.

Both architects are buried at London’s Highgate Cemetery. Phipps, who died in 1897 just a few weeks after the opening of his final theatre, Her Majesty’s, lies in something of a tucked away spot, while Matcham is in a prime position on a main path – it would no doubt have pleased him that of the two graves, his has the far superior sightlines.



Theatres at Risk



From top left: New Theatre Royal, Portsmouth is under restoration. Since 1854 it has been rebuilt by both Charles Phipps (1884) and Frank Matcham (1900); Hackney Empire is now a cultural focal point for the community

“The most frequent complaints from the public relate to the lack of foyer, bar and toilet space, followed by uncomfortable seating, poor legroom and bad sightlines,” says Mark Price of the Theatres Trust. “Victorian theatres were simply not designed or intended for the modern lighting and sound equipment controls required for today’s theatre productions; for the weight and size of modern scenery and AV projection equipment; or for today’s rigorous standards and desires relating to access, circulation and safety.”

Crucial to any refurbishment, says Mark Foley of architectural firm Burrell, Foley, Fischer, is ensuring that “what is so exciting and unique about the spaces” is not lost. Foley’s team is currently working on a major



“Our first concern always is that they’re watertight and structurally sound, otherwise, anything else you do inside gets damaged with water ingress”.

After that, toilets are always a big issue. Blyth says that he has never yet been to a theatre where women don’t have to queue for the loos, but that he and his team do what they can within the space constraints. “In a lot of instances we look at all the toilet facilities and there’s a huge gents’ and quite a small ladies,” he says. ATG’s

“VICTORIAN THEATRES CAN STILL GIVE AUDIENCES AND PERFORMERS ALIKE A MAGICAL EXPERIENCE”

overhaul of the New Theatre Royal, Portsmouth (NTR), a building that dates from 1854 but was redesigned by Phipps in 1884 and Matcham in 1900. The addition of a new fly tower and improved disabled access are just two of the important changes taking place.

Of course not all our older theatres are in need of the sort of glamorous makeover taking place at NTR; for a huge number of Victorian and Edwardian theatres, it’s simply a matter of keeping them in good working order. David Blyth, property director at Ambassadors Theatre Group (ATG), explains that ATG spends around £6 million on upkeep and improvement of its 38 UK theatres, 14 of which are over 100 years old.

simple solution? “We swap them round.”

Efficient bar staff, a nice foyer and short toilet queues may seem like minor issues but when theatres are competing with so many other forms of entertainment for our leisure spend, these details count. Ultimately, it’s audiences that will decide the fates of our precious Victorian theatres, so it’s important to make theatregoers feel as comfortable as possible in these unique spaces.

“These lovely buildings can still provide audience and performers alike with the most magical experience,” says Mark Price. Long may the magic continue. ■

For more information on the nation’s historic, contemporary and new theatres, visit www.theatrestrust.org.uk For details on arranging tours of historic theatres go to www.visittheatres.org