PAST, PRESENT AND PROPOSED No.7

In the second of these occasional articles (see Newsletter 69) I wrote about the "Manoel Theatre" in Valetta, capital of Malta. A few of our members wrote to me saying I was incorrect in one of the details I had given. Recently I have received two more letters from new members pointing out what they see as the same error. What I had written was, the Manoel is the oldest theatre in what was once the British Empire. All my correspondents are sure that the oldest theatre must be the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane here in London. I beg to differ and in this and the next two Newsletters would like to put forward my case in a brief history of this famous theatre.

THE THEATRE ROYAL. DRURY LANE. THE FIRST THEATRE.

The history of the theatre in England, certainly from the Restoration of Monarchy in 1660, is so much a part of this theatre that it really requires a large volume devoted to it alone. I will merely give a brief resumé here.

During the period known as the Commonwealth (1649-1659) Cromwell's parliament prohibited all forms of public entertainment. However some theatres did survive; in 1659 the authorities found that performances were being given in three London theatres, the Cockpit, Red Bull and Salisbury Court.

On 29 May 1660, King Charles II entered London to claim the throne of England. Less than three months later the King granted a warrant to two men, Sir William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew giving them the monopoly of theatrical affairs. By 1662 this was changed to two Patents for two separate companies which became the Duke of York's Servants and the King's Servants. Davenant with one company converted a Tennis Court into the first Duke's Theatre; this less than a hundred years later was to become the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden and eventually the Royal Opera House.

Killigrew, in charge of the King's Servants leased a plot of land from the Earl of Bedford for forty-one years for which he paid an annual rent of £50. The site known as a riding yard was enclosed on all four sides and measured about 60 feet wide by 112 feet from East to West. The only access to the yard was by two narrow passages approximately 10 feet wide one from Brydges Street to the West and the other from Drury Lane at the East end, see (Figure 1). The theatre which cost £2,400 to build opened on 7 May 1663 as the *Theatre Royal on Brydges Street* with a performance of "*The Humorous Lieutenant*" by Beaumont and Fletcher

The audience capacity of the theatre was about 700, and by all accounts was about the same size as the stage of the present theatre. Seating in the Pit was just benches covered with a green cloth. None were reserved. The doors opened at noon and one just pushed in and sat down, or you could pay someone to do just that and then keep the place until you arrived. People could also take advantage of the sampling system, this meant that you could see the first act of a play for free, then if you decided to stay you paid up, or you could leave without paying. The confusion and noise in the auditorium must have been terrible. Ladies of fashion were there to be seen, the young men about town hoping to make a conquest, hawkers selling their wares (oranges were not allowed to be sold upstairs in case they were thrown at the stage).

Reading the many accounts of the period it is very obvious that the populace, led by the Court, were certainly taking advantage of the freedom from the austerity of the previou Puritan regime.

In 1665 Nell Gwynne who was to become the King's mistress made her first appearance here in Dryden's "The Indian Queen".Due to the Plague and the Great Fire the theatre was closed from June 1665 until Nov 1666. It is a wonder that the theatre survived at all. The wheeling and dealing that went on during its existance is too complicated to summarise here. Suffice to say that before the theatre had even opened Killigrew had sold his building shares to a certain Sir John Sayer. After Sayer's death, Killigrew set up a trust fund for the widow from these shares. However although these shares were in trust, Killigrew In 1673 borrowed £950 against them, and then a month later did so again this time for £1,600 from somebody else. On 25 Jan 1672 the theatre was destroyed by fire, a contemporary letter reads,"a fire at the King's playhouse between 7 and 8 pm on Thursday last which half burned down the house and all their scenes and wardrobe", The Earl of Anglesey who lived nearby wrote his own account of the disaster ending it with the pious note: "The Lord pardon sin, which brings judgement's". Two months earlier Davenant's company had moved into their new theatre at Dorset Garden leaving the old Tennis Court empty to which Killigrew took his company while they waited for their new theatre to be built. This was to become.....

THE SECOND THEATRE.

This building generally acknowledged to being designed by Sir Christopher Wren opened as the *Theatre Royal in Drury Lane* with "*The Beggar's Bush*" also by Beaumont and Fletcher at a cost of £4000 on 26 March 1674 in the presence of the King and Queen. It was larger than the first theatre (see Figure 2) and some of the foundation can still be seen under the present stage. The new theatre was not a great success in the early years, (this was due to the loss of younger actors to the Duke's company) and it closed for a while in 1676. In 1677 Killigrew retired and gave up his Patent to his son Charles who together with his brother Henry tried to manage the theatre but without success, finally it closed again. Later in 1682 the two rival companies merged and under the leadership of the actor Thomas Betterton who realising that London could only support one theatre, settled at Drury Lane. Davenant's son Charles now took over the Patent, but in 1690 sold it to a lawyer named Christopher Rich. (It is Rich's son John who built the first Covent Garden Theatre). Rich who found the state of Drury Lane in a muddle, was to leave it in an even worse one. He was perhaps the first crooked manager, he lied and defrauded and certainly some of the actor's wages went into his own pocket. During his guardianship the fortunes of the theatre fell very low indeed and in 1709 he lost his Patent and the theatre closed yet again.

It was at this time that three actors, Colley Cibber, Thomas Doggett and Robert Wilks took over and in 1711 instigated what was to become one of the brightest periods of the English stage. It was during this period that two actors were to bring much excitement to the stage and to the theatre in general.

The first was Charles Macklin, an Irishman with an overpowering personality whose real name was M'Laughlin.

DRURY LANE: SITE

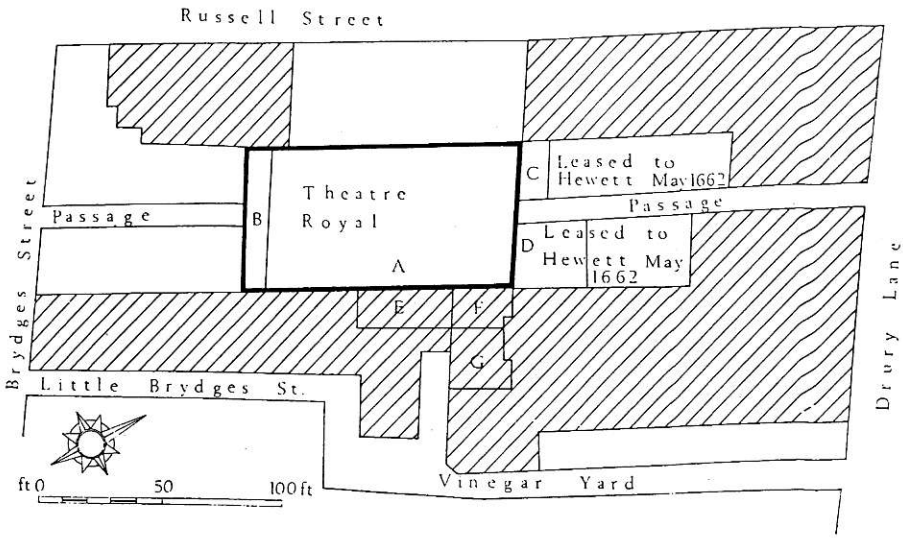


Fig. 1. Site plan, 1661–1748. Based on leases and fee-farm grants in Greater London Record Office. Hatched areas represent land sold by the Earls of Bedford before 1661. Unhatched areas represent land owned by the Earls and Dukes of Bedford

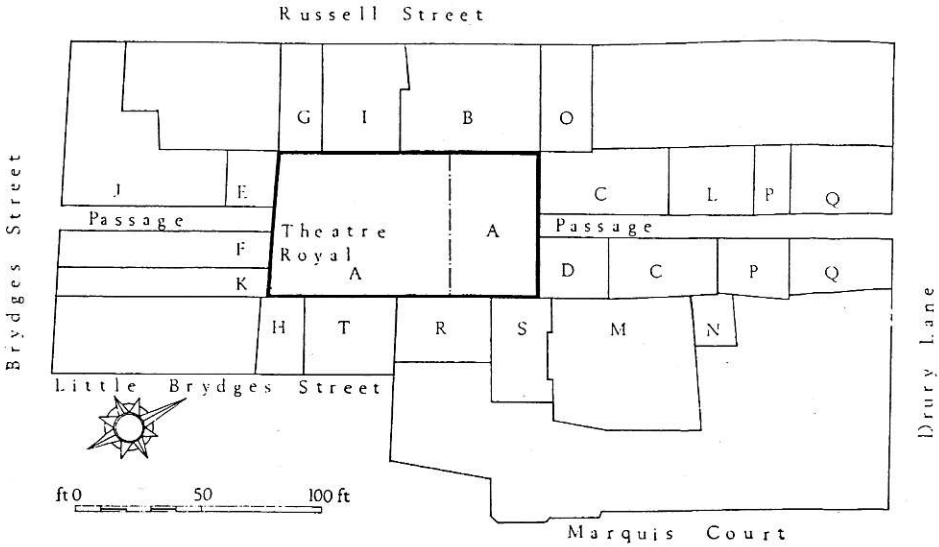


Fig. 2. Site plan, 1748–78. Based on leases and plan of 1778 in Greater London Record Office. The broken line denotes the position of the frontispiece, 1778. By 1778 the whole of the passage from plot A to Drury Lane had been built over

He had a quick temper and was often involved in violent disputes, during a quarrel in 1735 with a fellow actor backstage Macklin pierced the mans eye with a stick who as a result died twenty-four hours later. Macklin was tried and found guilty of man-slaughter. The penalty was prison and/or branding with a hot iron, but there is no record of either punisment being carried out. The old style of acting with the text spoken slowly and with very few gestures was still the norm, but Macklin favoured a newer style. He persuaded the management to revive Shakespeare's "*The Merchant of Venice*" with himself as Shylock. For years this play had been given as "*The Jew of Malta*" with Shylock as a comic character in a red wig. On the night of 14 Feb 1741 to a packed theatre he played the part in the manner he thought Shakespeare had meant, the role we now see today. The audience were astounded and went back time and time again to see this new characterisation, (King Gerge II who in his bad English said he despised "*blays and boetry*" came to see Macklin and was frightened by the intensity of the performance admitted later that he did not sleep that night). Although unable to finish the performance he played Shylock for the last time in 1789 at the age of 89, he lived until 1797.

The second was the great actor manager David Garrick. He made his first appearance at Drury Lane 11 May 1742 and was later that year seen as King Lear and Richard III. It was he who made a number of reforms: regular rehearsals, accurate texts and improvements to the footlights. Of greater significance and with difficulty he stopped the practice of members of the audience sitting on the stage. For the next thirty years he brought credit to the theatre. Not only did he correct the pesentation of the drama, he and the company gave productions of farce, pantomime and opera. Garrick changed the building itself. The gallery was enlarged, a new entrance was made to the boxes, and in 1775 a new auditorium was constructed designed by the architect Robert Adam. He retired 1776 giving farewell performances of his most famous roles, playing for the last time on the 10th May

The playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan together with his father-in-law the composer Thomas Linley now purchased the Patent of the theatre. It was during this period that the Irish tenor Michael Kelly, creator of Basilo and Curzio in Mozart's "*Le Nozze di Figaro*" joined the company. In 1777 Sheridan wrote for the company a perfect jewel of a play; this was "*The School for Scandal*" which had its premiere on the 8th May. Three years later when Sheridan became a Member of Parliament he handed over the management of the theatre to the actor John Philip Kemble. From 1783 it became known as the *Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.* The name which it has kept until the present time.

At the same time we must not forget the ladies who graced this stage. Only names now but some of the greatest actresses in the history of the theatre. to name but four the great Sarah Siddons, Peg Woffington, Kitty Clive and Mrs Abington whose career was interrupted by thirteen illegitimate children, ten of them fathered by the Duke of Clarence, later King William IV.

But by 1791 this old theatre which had stood for 117 years was surveyed and found to be in such a bad state of repair it was condemned. The only course of action was to demolish amd rebuild. The theatre closed on the 4th June and the company moved to the King's Theatre, Haymarket.

To be continued.....

Pip Clayton