PAST, PRESENT AND PROPOSED No.8.

At the end of my last article in this series, (see Newsletter 83) I explained how the second theatre found to be in such a bad state of repair, was condemned for demolition and the last performance took place on the 4th June 1791. Work began almost without delay to rebuild, but there were problems to surmount before the new theatre opened. To continue:

THE THIRD THEATRE

Richard Sheridan wanted to build bigger and better. The architect Henry Holland was chosen to build on a scale of magnificence never seen before. The seating capacity was to be even greater than before. The estimated cost was £150,000, but soon trouble began to hit Sheridan from all sides. First, his wife died in childbirth, which devastated him as she was the stabilizing influence in his life. Then it was found that the building estimate was £70,000 short which had to be found somehow. Sheridan raised the money by selling shares at £100 each. This allowed the shareholders free access to the theatre, (except behind the scenes), and payment of 2s.6d now (12p) per day every day the theatre was open for a performance.

But now the Duke of Bedford, who was the ground landlord made trouble over the lease. It was made clear that Sheridan did not hold the Charles II Patent, only the licence granted him by Queen Anne. The Patent was still in the possession of the Rich family; Sheridan had to buy it back, but at considerable cost. In the end the Duke granted the lease to Sheridan on condition that a private box was held for himself and his descendants in perpetuity. The box could not be sold by the Duke, nor could the lease holders make any use of it. The Bedford box is still there in the present theatre, but the Bedfords have relinquished their sole rights to its use.

But eventually the new theatre was ready; Holland had indeed created a magnificent playhouse. The exterior was quite different from the previous theatres. There were so many windows it was likened to a barracks. The length east to west between Brydges Street and Drury Lane was to be 320ft, while the width of the theatre was 155ft. But when completed it was somewhat less.

The main entance was in Russell Street which led into a lofty vestibule. To the east of this entrance was the foyer and staircase which led to the King's box decorated in crimson and gold. The entrance on the opposite side of the theatre in Little Brydges Street were a duplicate foyer and staircase leading to the Prince's box, decorated in blue and silver. In 1795 a further entrance was opened in Brydges Street with access via a 70ft covered passage to the semi-circular west wall of the theatre containing a vestibule, lofty saloon and toilet accommodation.

The decoration of the auditorium was in pale blue, white and silver. The seating capacity was calculated to be 3,900. From the entrance foyers rose a grand staircase to give access to the four tiers of boxes, which included eight boxes on the stage. There was a gallery also an upper gallery. Either side of the proscenium arch stood statues of Melpoeme and Thalia the Muses of tragedy and comedy. Above the flat roof of the auditorium rose an octagonal tower which hid the staircase for access to the roof and a ventilator. On top of the tower stood a 10ft high golden statue of Apollo holding a lyre. A terrace on the roof gave a fine bird's eye view of London.

Sheridan thought it was a very fine building, and for the time it probably was. It had two very modern features, (1) an iron safety curtain, and (2) four very large reservoirs of water situated in the roof which could be distributed to all parts of the theatre in case of fire. However the intended design was never completed. The theatre was supposed to have been encased in a complex of hotel, shops, taverns and coffee houses. The whole was to have been unified by a colonnade of Ionic columns.

The opening night was 12 March 1794. As it was Lent the programme was of Sacred Music by Handel. The dramatic season began on April 21 with (perhaps ill-omened) a performance of *"Macbeth"* with John Philip Kemble as the Thane and Sarah Siddons as his Lady. But before the play was a prologue which drew attention to the fire curtain. This was lowered and it was struck with a large hammer to show its solidity. Then it was raised to reveal a cascade of water pouring down into an artificial lake on which a man in a boat rowed about. So the audience breathed a sigh of approval; all was right with the new theatre.

But all was not right. Sheridan's finances were chaotic; at times there was not enough money for his own needs, let alone others. No one was paid from the shareholders to the lowliest cleaner. Actors and staff were penniless, some were sacked for asking for their just dues, others left. However it seemed that a miracle would save the day. This was a hitherto undiscovered play by William Shakespeare, *"Vortigern and Rowena"*. In fact it was a forgery by a young man of nineteen named William Ireland. But the manuscript fooled the experts and it is said that Boswell, at the sight of it, knelt and kissed it. Sheridan snatched at the chance to make a lot of money. It's not certain if he knew it was a fraud or not. And so on 2nd April 1796 *"Vortigern"* opened to a packed house. But as the evening wore on it soon became clear that this was no play by Shakespeare and the audience became restless. In the fifth act at the line *"And when this solemn mockery is over"*....the audience saw to it that it was over. They rioted. The curtain was brought down, money was given back and Sheridan's dream of making money had gone for ever.

Affairs had been so badly managed by Sheridan that now his creditors were demanding their money. Kemble that great actor and his sister Mrs Siddons were owed money and tired of being fobbed off with promises, decided to leave. Within a short space of time both were installed at the rival theatre Covent Garden. There is always something new in the theatre and now two newcomers took the stage to revive the fortunes of Sheridan and Drury Lane.

One was William Betty, an infant prodigy born in 1791 and known as the Young Roscius who between 1804 and 1805 took London by storm. This child star played most of the great tragic roles by Shakespeare. On one occasion when he was playing *"Hamlet"*, Parliament was adjourned to give Members a chance to see him. But like most child stars his talent declined as his years increased and he was booed off the stage when he attempted *"Richard III"*. He left London in 1808, living in obscurity the rest of his life

The other was Joseph Grimaldi born in 1778. He was the funniest of clowns, and to this day the comic clown is known as Joey. His father was the ballet-master at Drury Lane from 1758 until 1788. Young Joe made his debut at Sadler's Wells at the age of three, but was soon at Drury Lane billed as *"The Little Clown"* He appeared regularly until 1805, when his wife who thought he was badly treated suggested that he approach Covent Garden. He did so, where he was offered a salary of £6 a week for the first season. rising to £8 for the next. His salary at Drury Lane was £4. Grimaldi left Drury Lane on 9th November 1805 only returning once more for his benefit performance on 27 June 1828.

Poor old Drury Lane was going downhill fast. Productions suffered, horses replaced actors, tightrope walkers and performing dogs were to be seen instead of the great tragic plays and comedies. Sheridan preferred Parliament (he had been a Member since 1780), his debts increased and he could not meet his liabilities. On February 24th 1809 Sheridan was waiting to speak at the House of Commons when he was told that Drury Lane was on fire. He hurried to the scene of the disaster. Friends found him at a coffee house watching the blaze whilst drinking a bottle of wine. To their remarks about his seeming casualness he replied: *"May not a man be allowed to drink a glass of wine by his own fireside?"*. Only a few months earlier Covent Garden had been destroyed by fire, but this was different. It was not just a theatre being burnt but *the theatre* the oldest in town, the holder of the title 'Theatre Royal'. The fire had started at 11pm and at 4pm the roof collapsed. By morning the destruction was complete. Very little was saved - a few costumes, some wigs that had been Garrick's. Lost in the flames was the organ that had once belonged to Handel. Thankfullly the iron box which held the original Charter was saved, also some of Wren's theatre of 1674 survived; these can still be seen in the present theatre. But what of the famous fire precaution? Well, the fire curtain had become rusty and could not be moved, and the four reservoirs of water in the roof were, empty!!!

Sheridan was faced with ruin. The theatre which cost over £250,000 was only insured for £35,000. Perhaps a lesser man than Richard Brinsley Sheridan would have thought twice about starting again. He put forward his idea for re-building even bigger and better. But his debts were against him and few would trust him. The debts of the theatre totalled nearly £437,000. The Duke of Bedford had rent of over £4,000 owing him. Generously he waived his claim to the sum. One man came forward, this was Samuel Whitbread, a brewer and a Member of Parliament. Without him there would not have been a fourth theatre and it is quite certain that he saved Sheridan from a debtors' prison.

Whitbread raised a Committee of Management, on the board were two Dukes- Argyll and Bedford, four Baronets and several Members of Parliament. Sheridan was excluded, a grudge that he held for the rest of his life. So great were Whitbread's efforts that nearly £300,000 was raised from the insurance and the sale of shares. But first all the intricate finances had to be resolved, they had to buy out the holders of the Patent. Sheridan was given £24,000 for his half share, £12,000 went to his son Tom for his quarter share, and £6,000 went to purchase the remaining quarter.

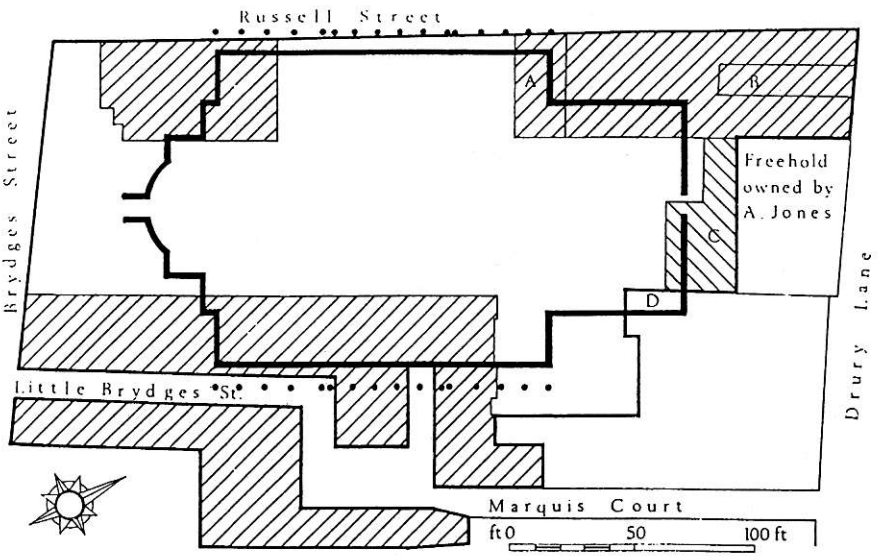
Next the shareholders of the previous theatre had to be dealt with (see Newsletter 83). Nearly all of these agreed to forego all arrears due to them and to accept a reduced rent of 1s.3d (about 11p) per day plus free admissiion. They insisted that this should be regulated by statute, and in 1812 an Act was passed to safeguard their rights. This meant that the theatre had a liability of £3,750 per annum before it had even opened. This agreement lasted until 1836 when the shareholders agreed to be paid only 1s (10p) per day. In 1897 the holders closed the account and agreed to a final dividend of £4.9s (£4.45p).

The Committee and Whitbread felt that the entire debt could be met for about £144,000. In October 1811 the designs of the architect Benjamin Wyatt were accepted and the foundation stone was laid on the 29th of the same month. By April 1812 it was reported that most of the brickwork was complete and that work was in progress on the roof. The building was planned on a model of the great theatre at Bordeaux and opened on 10th October 1812, the cost was £151,672.

Two last anecdotes about this ill fated theatre. On the evening of 15th May 1800 King George the Third came to the theatre which was full. As he entered the Royal Box the audience rose to applaud him. The King bowed and the applause increased. He bowed a second time and over the noise of the applause and cheers a gun shot was heard. Pieces of plaster fell on the Royal wig and a bullet was seen embedded in the pillar behind the King who had bowed at just the right time. Below the box there was a struggle and the would be regicide was seized. He was James Hadfield a discharged soldier, once an orderly to the Duke of York. At his trial the Judge stopped the case. He was clearly insane and sent to Bedlam, the asylum for the insane.

The second concerns Joe Grimaldi. One night in 1803 Joe was entering the theatre Green Room when he was hailed by a stranger. This turned out to be his long lost brother John who had run away to sea to make his fortune. Now he had returned with over £600 in his pocket. Joe had to go on stage, but had time to warn his brother of the danger he faced in carrying so much money with him. Joe told his brother to wait for him, then they would go to see their mother. After his performance Joe went to his dressing room to change out of his costume, then he went back to the Green Room. There was no sign of John, the theatre was searched as were the streets and nearby taverns. His brother John was never seen again. Why he left the theatre (if he did leave it alive) and where he went, nobody will ever know. It is just one of the many mysteries connected with the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

To be continued.....Pip Clayton.



Site plan, 1791–1809. Based on leases and plans in Greater London Record Office

Boundary of the area which the Duke of Bedford agreed to lease to Sheridan and Linley in 1791

Outline of H. Holland's theatre

Columns of the colonnades