

1567-1572

Playhouses Open prior to 1572

London - The Red Lion
Liverpool - The Cockpit Yard
Yarmouth - Gaming House
(since 1539?)

An End for the Inn-yards?

1567: London's Cross Keys and The Bell in Gracious Street, La Belle Savage on Ludgate Hill, the Bull in Bishopsgate Street, the Boar's Head in Eastcheap and the famous old Tabard Inn at Southwark - all of these have been used in the past by troupes of actors. Their owners must now surely be worried that the improved public and performing facilities at their rival, the Red Lion in Stepney, will mean the end of the innyard theatres.

The innyards had their problems in the past—just ten years ago the Boar's Head was closed and its actors held under arrest for 24 hours following the performance of a "lewd" play called "A Sacke Full of News".

According to Foxes's "Book of Martyrs" (1563) the dissenter, John Rough, was arrested during a performance at the Saracen's Head, Islington.

For the present it seems provincial innyard theatres - like the New Inn at Gloucester - will be safe, but those in London might well be facing a bleak future.

Information on these innyards is somewhat skimpy. The earliest recorded reference to a performance is 1557, though it seems clear that performances were given a long time before then.

Similarly there are no details of the nature of the staging. Many of the inns are believed to have erected a simple trestle stage at one end of their courtyard whenever the players arrived. Some are felt to have made a more elaborate and permanent provision for the strolling players.

Neither is it known what financial arrangement was made with the players. Certainly the inns will have benefited from extra custom from those attending the performances. Some say the innkeepers allowed the players to use the space free of charge and to take a collection from the audience. Others think the players negotiated a fee.

THE RED LION OPENS

Has Burbage built the very first public playhouse in England?

1567: James Burbage and his brother-in-law, the grocer John Brayne, have formed a partnership and opened what is thought to be the first public playhouse in England. It is in the courtyard of the Red Lion House in Stepney, beyond Whitechapel. The building has a five feet high stage and a "turret" or a tower which apparently includes a tiring-house for the actors to change their costumes.

Whether or not it is the first is debatable. John Rastell (1475-1536), the deviser of the royal pageants for Henry VIII, built a timber and lathe stage in his grounds at Finsbury Fields, and is known to have hired it out - together with a collection of costumes - for performances.

The Corporation of Great Yarmouth opened a public "game house" in 1539, and these premises have been rented by performing companies. It is also reported that the Cockpit Yard Theatre has just opened in Liverpool.

Whether or not James Burbage's is the very first, it certainly marks a new departure for acting companies in London.

Stratford audiences Rogues & Vagabonds

1569: The Warwickshire town of Stratford-on-Avon seems to have developed a taste for theatrical performances. A company calling themselves The Queen's Men played the town by permission of the town's authorities, and were paid the sum of nine shillings for their visit. Then a few weeks later the Earl of Worcester's Men visited the town. This latter company seems to have worked on a different financial basis - they were paid an official fee of one shilling, though this sum does not take into account the money collected for the performances. These performances are presumed to have taken place in a local inn-yard.

1572: Parliament has passed an Act demanding that all "Common players. . . and minstrels not belonging to any baron of this realm, or to any other honourable personage of greater degree... shall be...deemed rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars" Penalties for a breach of this Act are to be "openly whipped until his or her body be bloody and sent to the parish where he was born".

This does not affect the three major acting companies already under noble patronage - the Earl of Leicester's Men, formed 13 years ago, Lincoln's Men, headed by the actor Laurence Dutton, and Derby's Men who are exclusively based in the provinces.



A typical Innyard Theatre in Elizabethan times (possibly the Tabard Inn in Southwark).