

1617-1619

ENGLAND'S "GREATEST ACTOR" IS DEAD

1618: As of March 13th 1618 Hamlet, Lear, Othello and Richard III are no more. At the age of 54 Richard Burbage has died, and is destined to go down in history as one of the greatest actors of all time. In the early years his reputation was eclipsed by the powerful and magnificent Edward Alleyn, but gradually Burbage's subtler and more restrained talents gained universal recognition.

He was the son of James Burbage, one of the founder figures of English Theatre, and inherited the family business. In 1599 he physically moved his father's Theatre across the Thames and renamed it the Globe. His long association with William Shakespeare has resulted in England's glory and Burbage's immortality. With Shakespeare as his house-playwright, Burbage was able to create some of the greatest roles ever written for an actor. His name became synonymous with all that was best in acting, and it was said of him that he did not "strive to make nature monstrous". It was also said that from the moment he donned his costume to the end of the play he kept up the role he had assumed, not only on stage but even in the tiring house.

He was born in Shoreditch in 1587, and married Winifred when he was 34 years old. The marriage produced six daughters and two sons. His early career was centred around his father's Theatre and in 1594 he made his first appearance before Queen Elizabeth along with Will Kemp and Shakespeare. In 1597, along with his brother Cuthbert and sister Alice he inherited his father's two theatres, one of which later became the Globe. The combination of England's best known theatre, with its best known playwright and best known actor means his death surely marks the end of a Golden Age for British Theatre.



Dulwich Picture Gallery

Richard Burbage

Ticket Price Riot Destroys Cockpit Cockpit back with new name

1617: They said it was all to do with the ticket prices. When Christopher Beeston moved his company from the Red Bull to the newly opened Cockpit Theatre he knew he had to recoup the enormous building costs of his new venture. Accordingly he decided to raise his ticket prices - but a sixfold increase was felt to be excessive. For several months audiences have attended the new theatre in large numbers, and although they grumbled at the prices, it looked as if Beeston had made the right decision. However, things changed during the annual Shrove Tuesday Apprentices Holiday. The usual rowdy merry-making turned ugly when a drunken mob of young men decided they would not pay the new rates and forced their way into the theatre. A fight broke out between the actors and the apprentices, and this rapidly turned into a full-scale riot.

The apprentices attempted to set fire to the building and to Christopher Beeston's house which stood next door. Beeston's house was burned to the ground and the Cockpit suffered extensive damage before the riot was finally quelled. Beeston is convinced that the "riot" was orchestrated by rival theatre companies, though there is no evidence for this.

1618: Christopher Beeston has repaired the damage caused by last year's riots and re-opened his Cockpit Theatre with a new name - the Phoenix. However, many patrons and even some of the playbills continue to refer to the theatre under its old name of the Cockpit. This will doubtless lead to confusion for future generations of theatre historians.

Hope Closes - Bears are Back

1617: Business at the Hope Theatre has been in decline over the past three years. Ever since the Globe re-opened audiences have been patronising the new luxury theatre rather than the old converted Bear-Pit. The death of Henslowe last year added to the Hope's woes. Riven with internal disputes and lacking firm management, the Hope has been closed for long periods in the past year, and used only by touring companies. A decision has now been taken to cease theatre performances and the building will revert to its old name - The Bear Garden—and its future attractions will consist entirely of bear-baiting displays.

Queen's death means Company disbands

1619: The Queen's Men, currently under the management of Christopher Beeston and resident at the Cockpit Theatre, have been disbanded following the death of Queen Anne, the wife of King James I.

Queen Anne agreed to become the patron of the players on her accession sixteen years ago, and the Queen's Men were re-united and assembled from former members of Worcester's Men and Oxford's Men. Thomas Heywood and Christopher Beeston were prominent members of the original company, and Beeston became the manager in 1612.

The Company performed regularly at the Curtain and the Red Bull, and then gained a permanent home at Beeston's new Cockpit Theatre when it opened three years ago.

New performance venue in Whitehall

1619: The new Banqueting House in Whitehall incorporates a proscenium stage in its main hall, and is intended to be used for Court performances.