

1620-1624

Fortune burns to ground

1621: The round wooden theatre which was the Fortune is no more. For twenty-one years it has been one of London's successful theatres - so profitable that Edward Alleyn was able to use much of its surplus to found a trust for educational purposes in Dulwich. It was originally built by Henslowe and his star actor, Alleyn, as a rival to Burbage's Globe, and stood in Cripplegate. For most of its life it was occupied by the same company of actors whose official name changed periodically from the original Admiral's Men to Prince Henry's Men and to Palsgrave's Men.

Fortune Rebuilt in brick

1623 : The Fortune Theatre has been rebuilt on the same site in Golden Lane, Cripplegate - this time in brick. The dimensions of the theatre remain the same - the site occupies 80 square feet, with the inner space being 55 square feet. The stage is 43 feet wide. It has reopened with a repertory of fourteen plays and is to be occupied by its former tenants.

"Game of Chess" is a Success and Scandal

1624: Thomas Middleton's new play "A Game of Chess" has run for nine successive performances at the Globe, grossing £1,500. This is the longest consecutive run of any play at this theatre, and the largest ticket sales to date. The success of the play is attributed to its relevance to recent royal scandals.

The Spanish Ambassador complained about the content of the play, and the Censor received an official reprimand for allowing the play to be staged. After nine days, Thomas Middleton was arrested and the company was ordered to stop performances. The fact that it took so long to ban the play is regarded as evidence that the Government was secretly pleased at the embarrassment caused the Spanish - and the ban is just a piece of political necessity.

"Handsome and Wild" Actor Nathan Field Dies, Aged 33

1620: Felt by many to be a rival to Burbage, Nathan Field was acclaimed for his creation of the role of Bussy d'Ambois in Chapman's tragedy. He was the son of a preacher who was totally opposed to theatre and who sent his son to St Paul's School, hoping he would enter Holy Orders. However, at the age of 13 Nathan was recruited into the company of the Children of the Chapel Royal and took up acting as a career.

He was an extremely handsome man and very learned, continually studying throughout his career and becoming an expert in Latin and Greek. At the same time, though, he was wild, dissolute and constantly in debt.

Philip Henslowe is said to have rescued him from the threat of imprisonment for debt on several occasions, primarily because Nathan Field was a favourite with audiences, particularly in the role of young lovers. He was the author of two plays - "A Woman is a Weathercock" (1609) and "Amends for Ladies" (1611) and collaborated with Massinger and Fletcher on many more.



Dulwich Picture Gallery

Edward Alleyn Re-Marries

1623 : Six months after the death of his first wife, Joan - the stepdaughter of the late Philip Henslowe - Edward Alleyn has married again. His new wife, Constance Donne, is half his age and is the daughter of the Dean of St Paul's (and the famous poet) John Donne. The marriage has been strongly opposed by John Donne, who has refused to give the customary dowry.

Beeston Back in Business

1622 : Christopher Beeston has formed a new theatre company to perform at his Phoenix Theatre (commonly called by its old name, the Cockpit). The Company will be known as Lady Elizabeth's Men. An earlier company under the same name existed from 1612-1616 and was primarily associated with Philip Henslowe's Hope Theatre. The new company is to present plays by Middleton, Massinger, Rowley and Heywood.

Folio of Shakespeare's Collected Works in print

1623 : The works of Shakespeare have been published in a "Folio", costing 20 shillings. The volume contains 36 plays - half of them appearing in print for the first time. The edition has been compiled by actors Henry Condell and John Heminge, and contains a dedicatory poem by Ben Jonson, claiming Shakespeare "was not of an age, but for all time".

The Folio claims to correct the errors in the earlier "stolen and surreptitious copies, maimed and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious imposters", and to be true to Shakespeare's plays "as he conceived them". However, the publication is somewhat patchy. "The Tempest" is printed with full stage directions, divided into acts and scenes and including descriptions of the stage spectacles. "Much Ado About Nothing" has one scene where the character's names are confused, and the names of the original actors are given instead. The proof reading in some of the plays is irregular, and the page numbering goes awry—"Hamlet" jumps from pages 156 to 257 for no reason.

For all its faults, though, this Folio of the Collected Works of William Shakespeare is one of the most important books ever published. Along with the Authorised Version of the Bible, which appeared nine years ago, it is likely to become a publication which will never disappear from the bookshelves of the educated. Thanks to the "care and pain" of two actors, Heminges and Condell, the world has become an infinitely richer place.