

1638-1641

Royal Patent for New Theatre

1639: William Davenant has been granted a Patent to build a new theatre. His application was approved and sealed on March 26 by King Charles. Several possible sites are mentioned, though Fleet Street seems to be the most preferred at present. Davenant will now seek financial backers for his scheme.

John Ford Dies, Age 53

1639: A former lawyer who waited until he was 35 before starting to write for the theatre, John Ford's first play "The Witch of Edmonton" was written in collaboration with Thomas Dekker and William Rowley. His solo works include "The Broken Heart" and "'Tis Pity She's a Whore" - a bloody tale of incest which has had enormous success.

Thomas Heywood Dies

1641: Famous for "A Woman Killed With Kindness", an intense drama of adultery, Thomas Heywood was a most prolific playwright, having had a hand "or at least a main finger" in over 200 plays. Although he left Cambridge University without his degree, he rose to the heights of Court favourite and collaborated extensively on masques and royal presentations for King Charles. For the past ten years he has been the chief writer for the annual Lord Mayor's Show.

Beeston Jailed and Davenant gets his job

1640: William Beeston succeeded to the position of Governor of the King and Queen's Young Company - popularly known as Beeston's Boys - on the death of his father, Christopher Beeston, last year. Unfortunately he has now lost this position following a row over an unlicensed play.

Apparently Beeston's production deeply offended their Majesties, who ordered his arrest and removal from the royal appointment. He is currently imprisoned in the Marshalsea.

His position as Governor of the royal drama school has gone to Sir William Davenant, who was recently appointed Poet Laureate and has long been associated with the production of masques for the King and Queen. Davenant is known to be the godson of William Shakespeare, and it is also rumoured that he is actually the illegitimate son of the great playwright - being the result of Shakespeare's liaison with the hostess of the Crown Inn, Cornmarket.

Last year Davenant was granted a Patent to build a new theatre. Since his new position gives him control of the Cockpit Theatre in Drury Lane (the home of the Beeston Boys), he is now said to be considering re-developing the Drury Lane site as the new "Theatre Royal" under the terms of his Patent.

Prolific Playwright, Massinger, is dead

1640: Philip Massinger has died at the age of 53. During his lifetime he is estimated to have had a hand in the authorship of some forty plays, collaborating with John Fletcher, Nathan Field, Thomas Dekker and William Shakespeare among others. The plays attributed to him in his own right are generally felt to be lacking in passages of lyrical beauty, but he is recognised as a superb dramatic craftsman. In 1625 he inherited Fletcher's mantle as the resident writer for the King's Men, and in a highly productive period wrote several successes, including "The Roman Actor", and "The City Madam". His greatest success came with "A New Way to Pay Old Debts", written in 1625, which introduced the character of the rapacious Sir Giles Overreach - a great favourite with actors and audiences. He came from an educated family - his father was a Fellow of Merton College and a Member of Parliament. Massinger's last request was to be buried alongside John Fletcher, his fellow playwright.



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The first 75 years of English Theatre has created a whole new industry

Public Theatre in England is about to enter its 75th year. In 1567 James Burbage built the country's first playhouse in the courtyard of the Red Lion House in Stepney. Eight years later another playhouse had opened in Newington Butts, and in 1576 Burbage built his "Theatre" in Shoreditch—the first of three theatres to open that same year. The next twenty five years saw a great expansion of theatre building in London, with the Rose, the Swan, the Globe and the Fortune opening.

London was supporting eight playhouses by 1610.

The astonishing growth of theatres was fuelled by the rise of a number of brilliant playwrights. Their works found enormous popularity with the ordinary people of London. This popularity spread throughout the country as the London players frequently were forced out of town because of outbreaks of plague. When the London theatres were closed the actors would move into the provinces to ply their trade. Within a single lifetime a whole new industry has been created, and a whole new genre of literature has come into being. When the history of Theatre comes to be written, the Elizabeth and the Jacobean years will be regarded as the most exciting and significant era.