

1671-1673

DORSET GARDEN THEATRE OPENS

Magnificence of Christopher Wren's designs causes sensation

1671: Designed by Christopher Wren and magnificently decorated by Grinling Gibbons, the Dorset Garden Theatre has caused a sensation. It has cost £9,000 to build - an enormous sum of money, which has been raised by subscribers and investors who are appropriately called "adventurers". It stands by the river, south of Salisbury Court, and is very much larger than its predecessor in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and even larger than its rival, Killigrew's Drury Lane. It has a river frontage with its own steps for those arriving by boat. The entrance to the theatre is framed by two large classical statues topped with the arms of its patron, the Duke of York and bears the legend The Duke's Men. The building even incorporates a lavish apartment for the "Keeper" - the actor manager Thomas Betterton.

The opening performance on November 9th was the tried and true favourite "Sir Martin Mar-All", and the performance was dedicated to the memory of Sir William Davenant. Davenant's son and his widow, Dame Marie de Tremblay Davenant, are both involved in the business management of the new theatre. The acting company includes Betterton, Harris, Haines, Nokes, Sandford, Underhill, Mrs Betterton and Mrs Leigh, and the opening season will include the premiere of "King Charles VIII of France" ("all new cloathed") and "Mamamouchi, or the Citizen Turned Gentleman".



Theatre Museum

French Troupe Play at Cockpit

1672: A company of French comedians are playing a season at the old Cockpit Theatre. Although only two theatres are allowed to perform in London, the King has given special dispensation for this season since he greatly favours the French drama.

Lincoln's Inn Saved by Drury Lane Fire

1672 : The theatre at Lincoln's Inn Fields, redundant and standing empty since the Duke's Men moved into their magnificent new Dorset Garden Theatre, has received a new lease of life. It will house Killigrew's company from the fire razed Drury Lane Theatre whilst a replacement theatre is built.

The Royal Patent has, for the time being, transferred to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

DRURY LANE THEATRE DESTROYED Heart of Covent Garden devastated by fire Young actor killed in fire-fighting attempt

1672 : The fire was discovered between 6pm and 7pm on the evening of Thursday 25th January. That day's performance had ended, the audience gone home and the theatre had not long been locked up for the evening. The cause of the fire is not known, but its ferocity was overwhelming. Within a very short time the flames had destroyed not just the theatre, but also all the houses from the Rose Tavern in Russell Street to the corner of Drury Lane and Vinegar Yard, and had begun to burn its way through the properties in the Yard itself.

With the devastation of the Great Fire of eight years ago in mind, the authorities made a rapid decision to create a fire break to stop the flames from spreading through the Covent Garden area. They brought in barrels of gunpowder and blew up a threatened row of houses so that the Theatre fire would have nowhere else to spread and would burn itself out.

The plan worked, but the centre of Covent Garden is devastated. It appears that only one person was killed in the fire. The young Drury Lane actor, Richard Ball, died whilst trying to fight the fire at his place of employment. It appears he was attempting to rescue the company's costumes and made several trips into the blazing building. On his final attempt there was a very large explosion, and part of the building collapsed on top of him.