

Kemble & Siddons quit Drury Lane

New "melodrama" pleases the public

1802: A new word has appeared in the theatrical lexicon. Thomas Hadleigh's "A Tale of Mystery" is described as a "melodrama" - a new kind of play, Gothic in nature, heavily underscored with music for mood changes and excitement, and highly emotional in gesture and style. It seems to have developed from the successful, lurid Gothic novels and the influence of the German "Sturm und Drang" drama, as well as the recent hit season in Paris of the "melodrame".

Fire destroys a piece of history

1802 : The Goodman's Fields Theatre, closed for the past fifty years, has burnt to the ground. In 1729 Thomas Odell converted his shop in Leman Street, Goodman's Fields, into a theatre. When he retired, four years later, he sold his rights to his stage manager, Henry Giffard, who built a magnificent new theatre nearby in Ayliffe Street, and turned the old theatre into a circus. The new theatre was forced to close in 1742, and the old one reverted back to theatrical use until 1751. For the past fifty years it has been used as a warehouse, and has now burnt down, thus closing a chapter of theatre history that stretches back to the Restoration.

Astley's burns again

This year has seen the destruction of Astley's Theatre, just eight years after it was rebuilt. And the reason it was rebuilt then was due to yet another fire.

It is said that the use of candles to light the stage is having the effect of drying out the chiefly wooden structures so that they become very prone to catching fire.

More London Theatres

1803 : The New Concert Rooms in London's Tottenham Street have been converted into a theatre, and the New Panorama has opened in Surrey Street, on the Strand.

Then take over Covent Garden in opposition

1802: John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons have ended a twenty-year association with Drury Lane because its manager, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, has consistently failed to pay their salaries at the proper time. Earlier this year the banking firm, Messrs Hammersley, attempted to sequester the theatre's assets on behalf of the creditors. The finances of Drury Lane have been in a mess ever since Sheridan took over.

A few months later, at the beginning of 1803, it was announced that John Philip Kemble has become the manager of the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden and thus has set himself up in direct rivalry to Sheridan's Drury Lane.

Carlos, the Dog, saves Drury Lane from bankruptcy

1803 : The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, on the point of closing through financial losses, has been saved - by a dog named Carlos. Carlos - a well trained animal - is the "star" of Frederick Reynolds' new play "The Caravan, or the Driver and his Dog". In the course of the play Carlos dives into a tank of water and saves a child from drowning. With both an animal and a child in the show, it is an enormous hit. Audiences are flocking to Drury Lane, box office sales are booming, and the theatre is getting back on its financial feet.

Dibdin's autobiography fails to answer the burning question

1803 : Charles Dibdin has published his autobiography - together with the words of 600 songs in a four-volume publication. He deals with his quarrelsome nature which ended his acting career but which launched him into great success with his one-man shows. He talks of his two most popular song hits - "Tom Bowling" and "The Lass that Loved a Sailor". However, he

does not mention his numerous love affairs nor his notorious womanising. Nor does he even mention the widespread and persistent gossip that most of his songs are not written by him at all.

Strong rumours insist they have been written by his one-time collaborator, the disgraced Isaac Bickerstaffe, who fled the country 30 years ago at the height of his career. The rumours claim that Bickerstaffe is selling them to Dibdin who is passing them off as his own.

