

1829-1831

First Backs on Seats

1829 : Both the Lyceum and the King's Theatre have put in a few rows of seats with back supports. These rows are placed at the front of the pit. This has the effect of creating "stalls" at the front, and pushing the pit further to the back of the auditorium. Seats with back supports are, of course, more expensive than the others.

Fire destroys Lyceum

1830 : The 36 year old Lyceum Theatre, which underwent major rebuilding and lavish refurbishment fifteen years ago under the management of Samuel Arnold, son of the composer Dr Arnold, has burnt to the ground in an overnight fire. An immediate fund-raising campaign to replace it has begun.

And Astley's burns again

1830 : Astley's Amphitheatre has burned down for the third time in 44 years. It has been known as Davis's Amphitheatre since Astley's death in 1814, and in recent years has become a hugely popular venue with such spectacular shows as "The Battle of Waterloo" and "The Burning of Moscow". Since 1825 the joint owner has been the famous equestrian, Andrew Ducrow, who has widened the programme on offer to include melodramas as well as circus-type displays. Building work on a replacement theatre has already begun.

Campaign to end Patents

1831 : Theatres, headed by the Lyceum, have launched a determined campaign to end the monopoly on straight plays currently held by the Patent Theatres. Under present laws only the Patent Theatres are allowed to present any sort of play. All other theatres may only present music or operas. The non-Patent theatres have found ingenious ways round these rules but are still heavily restricted. King William has appointed Lord Brougham, the Lord Chancellor, to head a committee of three judges to examine the position.

Kean's Henry V debut ends in uproar as his memory fails

1830 : Henry V is a new role for Edmund Kean. The original opening night, February 22, was postponed just before the curtain was due to rise when his dresser found Kean in a kind of trance or coma induced by stage fright and his inability to remember the lines. The new opening date, March 8, was a pitiable event of mumbled words, long pauses, and the eventual grinding to a complete halt. There was little sympathy for the worn-out, failing actor. When he tried to address the public and apologise, there was much jeering and cries that he was drunk. When the curtain fell, there was much tumult in the audience and a great deal of antagonism towards the actor.

Death of Sarah Siddons - the Greatest Tragedienne

1831 : In her heyday strikingly beautiful, and throughout her long life graciously dignified, Sarah Siddons is the greatest tragedienne the British Theatre has so far known. Her voice was said to have "the melancholy yet shattering tone of the nightingale". No one who witnessed it will ever forget her incomparable Lady Macbeth. She retired from the stage nearly twenty years ago and many of today's audiences will know her as a stoutish old lady who occasionally appeared, dressed in white, sitting in front of a red screen, giving poetry recitals and readings at the occasional benefit for another elderly player. Or perhaps as a playgoer attending performances at her brother Charles' beloved Covent Garden. - when just walking into the auditorium would set up a buzz of excitement amongst the audience. But every one of them would have known of the Siddons legend. Just two years ago she attended the debut of her niece, Fanny Kemble, and is said to have expressed great pride that the family's tradition was being passed on to another generation. Earlier this year she suffered an attack of erysipelas on one of her ankles. This soon spread to both legs and gangrene set in. She died at 8am on the eighth of June, at the age of 76. But her name will live on forever.

Olympic re-opens under Mme. Vestris

1831 : Madame Vestris, famed as much for her glorious singing voice as her irregular private life, has re-opened the Olympic Theatre with "Mary, Queen of Scots" followed by James Planche's burlesque "Olympic Revels". She has tastefully redecorated the theatre, shortened the length of the bill, and is aiming to attract a high class of audience.

