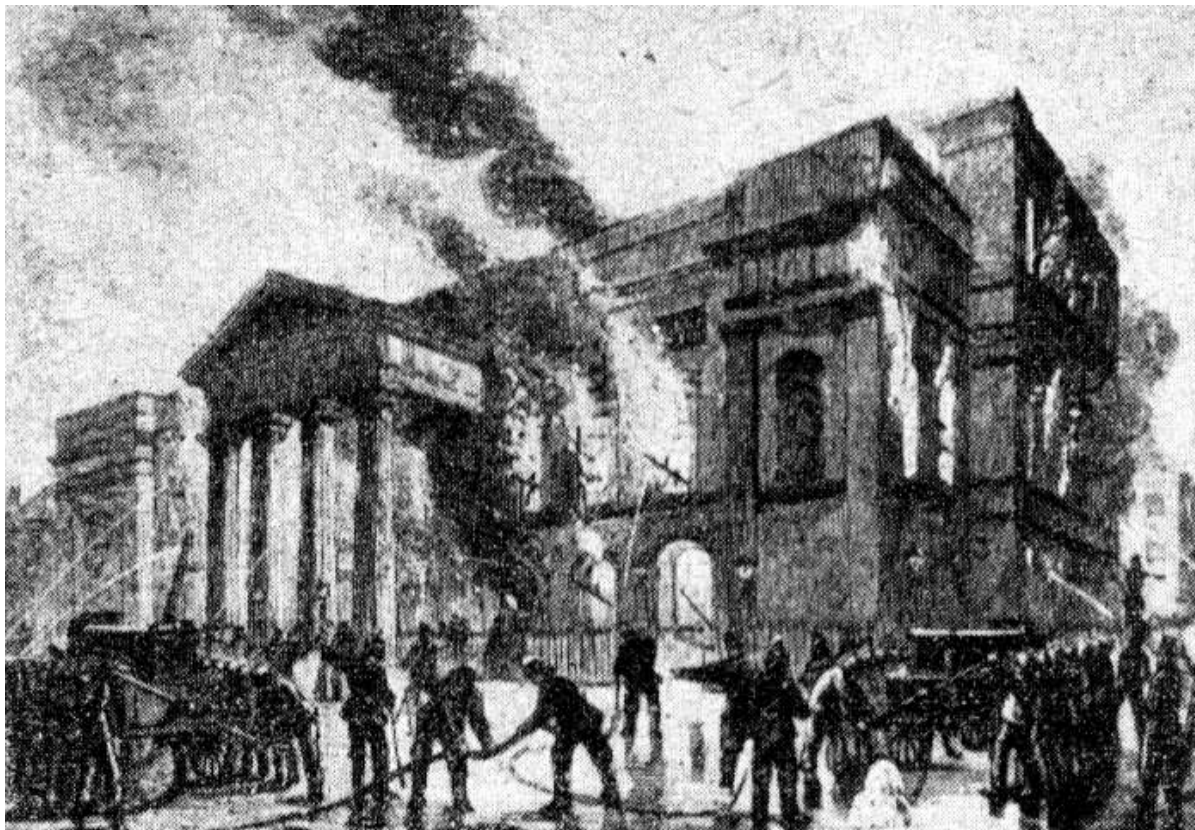


1855-1856

FIRE DESTROYS COVENT GARDEN

Opera House burns down for second time in its history



Another 84 Music Halls in London

1856 : Over the past two years another 84 Music Halls have been licensed in London. It is now felt that there are around 400 such venues operating in the London area alone. There seems to be no end to the proliferation of this new entertainment form, which is now the biggest source of employment for performers. An interesting distinction has arisen in that actors are said to “play” in theatres, whilst music hall artists “work” in their halls. And many of the music hall artists now “work” two or three different venues each evening - rushing from one to the other.

False Alarm kills 7 in Music Hall Panic

1856 : The Surrey Music Hall opened on July 15th in the Surrey Zoological Gardens, an elaborate building decorated with pagodas and minarets, and holding an astonishing 10,000 customers. On Sundays it is hired out for Baptist Church Services. It was on a Sunday, just a few months after opening, that seven people were killed in a panic rush following a false fire alarm.

1856 : The Royal Italian Opera House, better known under its old name of the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, has burnt to the ground. This was the second theatre on the site, and the second time it has been destroyed by fire. The fire in 1808 caused 23 people to lose their lives, but this time things were much more fortunate, and there were no serious casualties.

At five minutes to five in the morning of March 5th, while the last bars of “God Save the Queen” were being played, the building was discovered to be on fire. The theatre had been used for a masked ball, to raise funds for Professor Anderson’s season of entertainments whilst the opera company was between seasons. The dramatist Tom Robertson described the ball as a miserable affair, with only a few people in evening dress, dismal decorations which would have disgraced a barn, and attracting a lower class crowd .

The masqueraders were quickly ushered out, but within half an hour the roof of the building had fallen in. The entire contents of the theatre have been destroyed, including four paintings by Hogarth.

700 year old Fair closes

1855: For more than 700 years there has been an annual fair on a site in Smithfield. Since 1604 the Corporation of London has been in charge of it, and it has become a major centre of public entertainment as well as trade. Surviving even the Puritans, it has become over the past 150 years the Mecca for all strolling players and booth theatres as well as street entertainers of all kinds. The City Authorities now believe it encourages crime and public disorder and have closed it. It will eventually be replaced by London’s largest meat market.

Her Majesty's houses the Opera's refugees

1856 : Her Majesty’s Theatre in the Haymarket, empty, sad and closed for four years, is to re-open as a home for the Covent Garden Italian Opera Company following the fire which destroyed the Opera House. However, Her Majesty’s will need some renovation before the Opera Company can move in. Work has immediately started, but as a temporary measure, the opera company will open its new season at the Lyceum.