

1876-1878

Lyceum Audience left in the dark

1876 : The Lyceum has become the first theatre in the country to darken the auditorium during the performance of a play. This has disappointed those members of the audience who attend the theatre in order to be seen, but has pleased the actors who claim it will concentrate the attention of the playgoers on the play itself.

Eight Years Empty - but at last Her Majesty's re-opens

1877: For eight years the brand new Her Majesty's has remained empty and unused - except for some Moody and Sankey "revival meetings" two years ago. The theatre had been sold to new owners twice during this period, but neither of them managed to raise the necessary funds to launch a theatre season. However, Colonel Henry Mapleson has at last taken the plunge and on 28 April re-opened Her Majesty's as an opera house. This first performance was Bellini's "Norma"

Gaiety lights up electrically

1878: The Gaiety Theatre has lit its frontage with electricity - the first theatre in England to do so. The auditorium and the stage, however, remain illuminated with gaslight.

Cremorne Gardens refused Licence and forced to close

1877: For 32 years the Cremorne Gardens has been a serious rival to Vauxhall Gardens. Now it is to be closed following allegations that it has become a notorious haunt for prostitutes and drunkenness. Its site in Battersea is being proposed for an electricity station to meet London's growing demands for power.

Vanbrugh's Royal Italian Opera burns

1876: The 171 year old Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket has burnt to the ground. Built by Sir John Vanbrugh in 1705, it was named the Queen's Theatre in honour of Queen Anne. Over the years it has undergone several name changes - the King's Theatre, and, latterly, the Royal Italian Opera House.

When it opened it was used by Thomas Betterton and his company from Lincoln's Inn Fields, and was under the direction of Congreve and Vanbrugh. It was taken over by Owen Swiney, who suffered badly when the acting company were tempted back to the more central Drury Lane. Swiney turned to opera as a means of keeping his theatre open.

The building has been completely destroyed, and is a great loss to architecture since it was so splendid and ornate. However, most performers feel it is no real loss since its acoustics were always troublesome

Long Acre Queen's now a Co-Op Shop

1878 : After just eleven years, the Queen's Theatre in Long Acre has closed. The building has been taken over by the Clerical Co-operative Stores. The Queen's has always had excellent companies - Toole, Brough, Irving and Ellen Terry have performed there - and three years ago Salvini was acclaimed for his magnificent Othello. However, the venue is no longer financially viable. When it opened in 1867 it was the second largest theatre in London (next to Drury Lane) and was magnificently equipped.

Surrey Gardens Closes

1877: The 21 year old Surrey Gardens Music Hall has had a mixed history. It burnt down and was rebuilt, and then for five years it was used as a temporary hospital while St. Thomas; was being built

It was a venue of enormous size, and this contributed to its financial failure. Although very popular with audiences, the running costs of such a vast building finally defeated the owners.

Henry Irving takes over the Lyceum

1878: Following the death of Mr Bateman three years ago, his widow has tried to continue managing the Lyceum Theatre. However, she has now decided to surrender her lease to her leading actor, Henry Irving. He is now sole manager of the Lyceum.

Death of Samuel Phelps, 74

The Great Wells' Shakespearean

1878: Born in Devon, Samuel Phelps began his career as a reader on the Globe and Sun newspapers. When he was 22 years old he decided to try an acting career, and by 1837 he was well known, especially for his portrayal of Shylock.

When the monopoly of the Royal Patent theatres ended he took over the management of Sadlers Wells and for eighteen years established that theatre as a centre of Shakespearean production. During his time there he produced every Shakespeare play except four. He retired from management in 1862, but continued to perform in London and on tour for the rest of his life. His last appearance was as Cardinal Wolsey at the Aquarium Theatre shortly before his death.

