

Many Cambridge people remember the old Festival Theatre in Newmarket Road. Still standing today, and used by the Arts Theatre as a wardrobe and workshop, the building has little in its present appearance to indicate the part it once played in the history of drama in Cambridge.

In the 15th and 16th centuries Cambridge was visited on many occasions by minstrels and players who were employed in noble households and who performed in the yards of local inns and in the Guildhall. In the Colleges, too, Greek, Latin and English plays were regularly acted by students before audiences of university members, of, on occasions, the townspeople, and before visiting royalty. But at that early date there was no theatre in the town.

Then, towards the last quarter of the 16th century, an attempt was made to provide entertainment for the many people who visited the great Stourbridge Fair, the fair which was held each September on Stourbridge Common probably even before it was granted a charter by King John in c.1211, and which was proclaimed for the last time in 1933. The performance of plays at the fair, however, or even the attendance at it of such entertainers as jugglers, tightrope walkers and so on, was not welcome in certain quarters. In 1575 the Privy Council wrote to the Vice-Chancellor of the University advising him, and all Justices of the Peace, to prohibit "shows of unlawfull, hurtfull, pernicious and dishonest games" not only in Cambridge itself but within five miles of it.

Apparently the warning was unheeded, for in 1592 the Vice-Chancellor and J.P.'s complained that people were coming into Cambridge for the purpose of showing "interludes, Plaies and Tragedies" and ordered that none of these players should be put up in local "yards, rooms or houses". This did not prevent the performance of the plays, however, so the Vice-Chancellor wrote to the Privy Council who replied by giving him, once again, absolute authority to ban all plays in and within five miles of Cambridge. Performances in the colleges, by members of the colleges, were not affected by the ban for they were considered part of the students' curriculum, and they continued throughout the 17th century.

In the year 1701 the Mayor and Corporation authorised a company of actors to play at Stourbridge Fair. The Senate of the University, angry

at this infringement of its privileges, hastily swore in 62 Masters of Arts as Proctors; these men went down to the fair, destroyed the booth erected for the performance of the fair, and hauled the chief actor before the Vice-Chancellor who committed him to gaol.

But the fair continued to attract players and, presumably, eager audiences, and it would appear that the Vice-Chancellor did not always exercise his authority. Certainly, in 1714, puppet shows were presented there, while in 1748 a London company of actors performed a pantomime called *Harlequin's Frolics or Jack Spaniard Caught in a Trap* in Hussey's Great Theatrical Booth at the upper end of the Garlic Row at the fair. By the 1760's several groups of travelling comedians were also giving performances, not only at the fair but in many of the villages through which they passed on their way to Stourbridge Common.

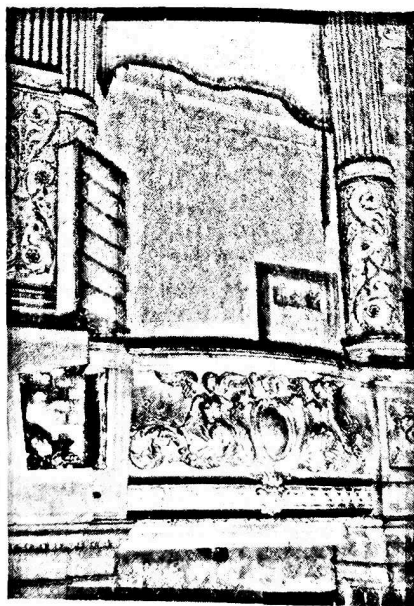
Still, however, there was no theatre in Cambridge, although an attempt to provide one had been made in 1737 by a Joseph Kettle who built a playhouse within the precincts of the University and actually produced plays in it. The Vice-Chancellor and the Heads of the Colleges complained to the House of Commons and were given permission to bring in a Bill to prevent such performances, on the grounds that they were likely to corrupt the undergraduates and to divert them from their studies.

A second attempt to bring a theatre to Cambridge was made in 1790 by Charles Day, who built one on the site of the present gates and Porter's Lodge of Downing College in Regent Street. The theatre was never used, however, and it stood empty for some years until, after being badly damaged in a gale, it was demolished.

At the end of the 18th century, among the groups of actors who came to Stourbridge Fair, was a company from Norwich. They were the first to use a permanent theatre, the name of which appears on contemporary playbills as the Stirbitch Theatre. It stood, outside the then boundary of Cambridge, on Newmarket Road on a site later occupied by a row of nine cottages called "Shakespeare Cottages". The Norwich Company was an excellent one, and the performances, given only during the three weeks of the fair and licenced by the Vice-Chancellor, were attended by members of the University and by residents of Cambridge and of the county.

# OLD CAMBRIDGE THEATRES

By  
Enid Porter



Part of the Circle of the New Theatre, taken in 1960 at the commencement of demolition.

During a performance in 1802 a false alarm of fire was raised; the audience rushed for the door and in the panic and confusion four people were trampled to death. It was then rumoured that the building was unsafe, so four years later it was pulled down and a new theatre was built next to the Sun Inn, on the opposite side of Newmarket Road near the corner of East Road. This theatre was in use for only 7 years or so and was, in its turn, replaced in 1816 by a new one, the Barnwell Theatre Royal, not far from the preceding one. In this century this became the Festival.

Many noted actors visited the Theatre Royal, among them Macready, Sheridan Knowles and Charles Kemble, and such famous companies as the Lyceum Company, the Sadlers Wells Company and the Royal English Opera Company. Charles Dickens gave readings of his books in the theatre and personally supervised the production of *Little Em'ly*. Most of the performances were given during the university vacation, in August and September.

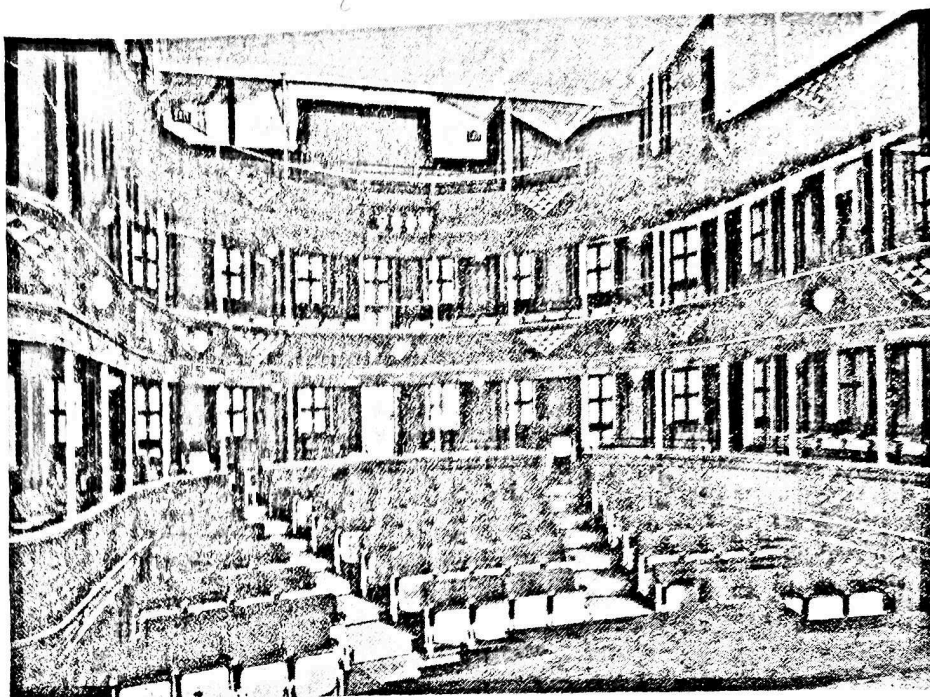
## The decline of the Theatre Royal

In the 1870's the theatre, along with many others in the country, began to decline, and in 1878 it became an unsectarian Mission Hall; it continued as such until 1920 when, for the next five years, it was used by the King's College Club for Boys. Then, in 1926, it became once more a theatre — the Festival — founded by Terence Gray and Harold Ridge whose ambition was that it should be the most progressive in the country, a "sort of university of dramatic art".

Terence Gray poured much of his considerable personal wealth into the venture. The stage was rebuilt, elaborate new lighting was installed, though the general lay-out of the early 19th century building was retained, and the theatre opened with a production of the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus translated from the Greek by R. C. Trevelyan.

Gray remained in charge for the first three years then left the running of the Festival, from 1929-30, in the hands of A. B. Horne, known usually as Amner Hall. The opening play of Hall's régime was Pirandello's *Six Characters of Search on an Author*, which was produced by Tyrone Guthrie and which starred the then unknown young actress Flora Robson.

In 1931 Terence Gray returned to direct the Festival for one year; in to next page—►



The auditorium of the Festival Theatre as it was in 1929.



Top left of this composite picture, the Theatre Royal, Barnwell after its conversion in 1878 to a Mission Hall. Bottom left. The Theatre Royal from the auditorium. Top right. The Theatre Royal Playbill of 1828. Bottom right. Part of a playbill giving a synopsis of Acts 2 and 3 of a melodrama.



1933 he returned for the last time and announced his intention of leaving the theatre on June 17th. "What will become of the theatre I do not know", he said. "It belongs to a company composed of disinterested persons for whom I managed it. I have told that company that I have done all the work I wish to do..."

For one more year the Festival managed to survive before having to yield to the economic depression which then affected the country. The building continued, however, to be used for a time for amateur productions. Too progressive ever, probably, to be financially successful, and on a site too far removed from the centre of Cambridge, the theatre nevertheless provided, in its short life, a training ground for many actors and producers who were later to become famous. It made a literary contribution, too, to drama by publishing the *Festival Theatre Review*, each number of which contained articles, verses and drawings as well as the programme of the current production. These programmes were peculiar to the Festival, being printed either in white on black transparent paper or in black on white;

they could thus be read in the darkened auditorium.

The closing of the Festival did not leave Cambridge without a theatre. In 1894 the University had finally renounced its right to license theatres and plays, and in that same year W. B. Redfern adapted a skating rink, St. Andrew's Hall in St. Andrew's Street, as the New Theatre Royal. Mr. Redfern, a well-known local artist who was four times Mayor of Cambridge and a Deputy Lieutenant of the county, then gathered together a Board of Directors and shareholders, with himself as Chairman, and made plans for a new building on the same site. In 1896 this building — the New Theatre — opened on January 20th with a performance by the Haymarket Theatre Company of *Hamlet*, in which Beerbohm Tree played the title role and his wife that of Ophelia.

### Cinema threat to the old New Theatre

For many years plays, musical comedies, operas and operettas were performed before large audiences at the New by leading London companies; it was in this theatre, too, that

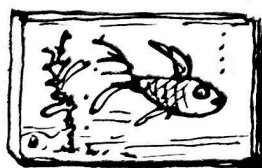
the May Week productions of the Footlights were held until the Arts Theatre opened in 1936. But in the 1930's the ever-increasing popularity of motion pictures presented a serious threat to many theatres. The New became, for a time, a Theatre-Cinema, alternating films and plays. In the years following the second World War a further decline set in and, in most weeks, only touring revue companies entertained steadily diminishing audiences. The theatre closed on the night of March 17th, 1956, with a production of *The Cabaret de Paris* — a far cry from the Shakespearean play with which it had opened.

Never an imposing building from the outside, though furnished inside in the traditional gilt and red velvet, the New Theatre was demolished in 1960-1 and a block of offices now stands on its site. One relic, at least, remains and is now in the Folk Museum. This is the wooden board which surmounted the door leading to the Stalls Bar and on which are carved three undergraduate gowns which symbolise, in their increasing degree of raggedness, the freshman, the first year and the second year man.



### NEW POT PLANT

Display  
Greenhouse



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