

Georgian Richmond

Francis Reid hits the tourist trail to Yorkshire where Richmond's Georgian Theatre and Museum is surely Britain's leading historic theatre monument for both specialist and non-specialist tourists.

My introduction to the theatrical magic of Richmond came with my 1955 discovery of a secondhand copy of Richard Southern's *The Georgian Playhouse*. I was no stranger to the charms of that Yorkshire market town. In 1952/53 I had been processed by that extraordinary sausage machine in Catterick which undertook the conversion of the nation's youth into soldiery in but four weeks and into military radio mechanics in a further twenty. Richmond was the railhead for Catterick's sprawling garrison. It also represented civilisation and so I sauntered its alleys, drank in its bars, and gazed into its rivers dreaming of theatregoing past and theatre career yet to come – knowing nothing of the historic theatre that I must have passed and re-passed in my wanderings around the alleys of that compact town.

In 1957 I visited Richmond with "Opera for All" to play in a school. This was before the restoration but we were able to visit the hibernating theatre. I can still recall the tingle of my first experience of Georgian theatre. To contact the stage from a courtyard side gallery and to embrace the house from a proscenium door!

Strangely perhaps – but perhaps not so strange to those versed in the ways of theatre life – I never quite contrived to visit Richmond from that day until this summer.

Richmond's Georgian Theatre is now firmly established on the Tourist Trail and its visitors include not just theatric tourists but many uncommitted people (I nearly wrote normal people) who have never hitherto given much thought to the finer excitements of theatre architecture. One of the pleasures of my visit was to note the lit-up eyes of people to whom it would never occur that Matcham and Phipps might be anything other than an old established firm of solicitors or wine merchants. (And that, whereas Izenour might perhaps not have been the distinguished general who became President, Mackintosh was certainly a chap who boiled sweets.)

The theatre and its museum are now open daily from 1st May to 30th September from 2.30 until 5.30 plus Saturday and bank holiday Mondays from 10.30 until 1.30 (outside this tourist season: by arrangement).

The restored theatre was opened in 1963 and its museum was added in 1979. This is not a general theatre museum but a specialised display of the history of one theatre. It is well laid out and it is well captioned – not just in English but with French and German translations alongside. The museum galleries lead the visitor through the history of the theatre from its

opening by Samuel Butler in 1788 (22 years after Bristol and 31 years before Bury – our other two extant working Georgian theatres) through its various vicissitudes until its rebirth in our own time.

We learn of Samuel Butler's circuit including the theatres that he built in Harrogate, Kendal, Ripon, Northallerton and Beverley as well as Richmond – with Whitby and Kendal as winter quarters in alternate years. A rugged circuit: consider the journey across the Pennines from Kendal to Northallerton which some of the players are known to have *walked* in two days. There is correspondence from Butler to the Mayor of Richmond over leasing details, and engravings of Butler's Richmond contemporaries including Frances L'Anson (the Sweet Lass of Richmond Hill) and Jane Wallis who went on to achieve considerable national acclaim at Covent Garden and Bath.

Kean's snuff box is among the artefacts that remind us that the great man, when a seventeen year old named Carey, joined Butler's company in 1808 as a singer of comic songs and "walking gentleman harlequin" at fifteen shillings per week. He returned in 1819 (at raised prices) and it is said that he refused his fee out of gratitude for Butler who had died in 1812, leaving the theatre under the management of his widow. In 1829 he played once again but by this time he was in decline and could not even fill the house at normal prices.

Playbills lead us to a gallery displaying the oldest surviving painted scenery in Britain, dating from 1836. The official guide book reports that this has been lent, in perpetuity and at Richard Southern's request, by the Society of Theatrical Craftsmen and Designers. This is a body new to me. I must attempt to find them: they are not the organisation set up in the mid-seventies by the removal of the word "lighting" from the Society of British Theatre Lighting Designers. This scenery was included in that marvellous Hayward Gallery exhibition of 1975 from whose catalogue we glean

In 1818, George Rivers Higgins, an actor and scene painter in a travelling company of players, settled in Royston and founded a decorator's business. He became a leading light of the local Dramatic Society and was assisted and succeeded in his business by William Hinkins who had been one of His Majesty's Servants in Norwich. By 1866 the firm of Hinkins had a large stock of stage scenery which was hired out, the nucleus of the stock supposedly being brought to Royston by Higgins in 1818.



An inventory of 1881 lists five drop scenes, three of which still exist. On the back of "The Woodland Scene" is painted a "Blue Drawing Room with Fire", panelling and a picture over the fireplace. The flats exhibited were listed in the inventory as *eight trees*. This set has been frequently retouched in the last one hundred and fifty years and there are even signs that one width of canvas of the three piece backcloth has been replaced above the second seam. The canvas of the flats appears to be original. Allowing for retouching this is the oldest scenery surviving in Britain.

The woodland scenery is now displayed in a room with a scaled down replica of a Georgian stage and is viewed under ambient lighting.

The Butler family connection ended in 1830 and the theatre was used infrequently by visiting companies during the general period of theatre decline until 1848 when the pit was floored over and the building survived a period of usage as wine vaults, auction room, corn chandlers and salvage depot. There are photographs of the latter years of this phase when the remaining theatre furnishings even survived a wartime fire of salvaged newsprint.

The third gallery is devoted to the restoration. The rediscovery of the theatre