

"All lovers of the useless, and they must be increasing in Britain hourly, could hardly fail to delight in the Alexandra Palace before the war. What a pleasure it was to tread acres of echoing boards past disused slot machines in search of the roller-skating rink where the huge steam organ would be playing to a few swirling couples, what a pleasure to open a wrong door, as I once did, to find Gracie Fields with a full chorus behind her, singing to an empty theatre. Gas, brickwork, silent dark towers, wet and windy amusement parks, bandstands where no silver band has played for twenty years, all these are associated with deserted exhibitions – and what terrible crimes, hinted at by Denton Welch or invented by Graham Greene, may not be perpetrated in the dark, deserted refreshment rooms or cloak-rooms where water drips everlastingly into stained, cracked and no longer hygienic porcelain. All that is part of the romance of decay."

Extract from 'First and Last Loves' by the late Sir John Betjeman. John Murry Publications.

THE Alexandra Palace Theatre has been erased from public awareness for half a century. Its descent into oblivion has been so total that the building failed to merit even a mention in the book published a few years ago entitled 'The Lost Theatres of London'. Yet this building was no mere forgotten back-street music hall.

When opened in 1875, there was a claimed seating capacity of 3,500 in an auditorium eighty-four feet wide by a hundred and thirty-five feet long confronting a proscenium arch thirty six feet in width and a raked stage forty-eight feet deep.

Unfortunately its subsequent history belied the promise of these impressive statistics. Its only recorded period of success or profitability occurred between 1911 and the outbreak of the first World War during which time the theatre enjoyed a brief period of prosperity as a cinema. Until that interlude the building seldom attracted the size of audience for which it was designed and was subjected to many periods of complete closure as successive companies tried and failed to operate Alexandra Palace as a profit making venture. Between 1876 and 1898 there were no fewer than seven periods when the palace was closed

to the public as a result of financial crises. On the penultimate occasion the closure lasted seven years from 1891 to 1898.

It is not hard to see why the theatre, even when Alexandra Palace was open and functioning, was less than popular with the public. The uncharacteristic 'shoe-box' proportions of the auditorium together with its tithe-barn dimensions were totally unsuited to any kind of drama as the hapless actors had to attempt to communicate across its cavernous vastness, a predicament made worse by the fact that the two original galleries were shallow and placed so that the closest central gallery seat was almost one hundred feet from the setting line! Add to these defects the fact that the size and proportion of the space made it highly reverberant, that the huge pit with its shallow rake inevitably had restricted sight-lines – in fact a number of seats in the side aisles were offered free in the early years in a desperate attempt to ensure their occupation – and that the level of insulation from the vagaries of the elements was so poor that it prompted one contemporary commentator to state that the most regular performers were 'The Four Winds', and it is little wonder that the great theatre-going public stayed away in their tens of thousands.

During the Great War the Palace was again closed to the public and appropriated firstly for use as a centre for Belgian refugees following which it became an internment camp for German prisoners. Great damage was done to the building but despite sustained petitioning by the Trustees for nearly four years after the war ended, the reparations paid were nowhere near adequate to compensate for the dilapidation that had occurred. The lion's share of reparations that were received were invested in a major refurbishment of the theatre by the manager appointed in 1922, W. MacQueen-Pope, who was sufficiently deluded by the similarity of its dimensions to those of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane to imagine that he might create an equally splendid rival establishment in North London. He commissioned the services of Mr. C. J. Hyde from Wandsworth who had purportedly carried out design work for the alterations to Drury Lane that had just been completed. New fire escape corridors were installed in the aisles where previous managers had vainly tried to entice a reluctant public with the offer of free seats. The upper gallery was demolished and seating replaced to give wider gangways and more generous elbow room. The dim, remote corners of the pit beneath the first gallery were walled off to provide a much needed foyer bar. These measures together reduced the seating capacity to one thousand and fifty, less than a third of the intended original.

The grand re-opening took place at Christmas 1922 with the pantomime 'Cinderella' performed twice daily at 2.15 and 7.30pm. The cast included Madaline Rees as

The ultimate vanishing trick!

by J. A. Hutchinson

Prince Charming and Beatrice Varley as Cinderella. It was not long before it was clear that the theatre was still far from being the jewel in the crown of Alexandra Palace that had shone so dazzlingly in MacQueen-Pope's Drury Lane inspired fantasy. By the end of 1924, MacQueen-Pope had resigned and the theatre had been leased to Archie Pitt who used its ample stage for rehearsals prior to opening elaborate West End shows. The lease contained the condition that the Trustees could regain possession of the theatre on Bank Holidays.

One consequence of Archie Pitt's tenure was that Gracie Fields' London debut took place here with a preview performance of 'Walk This Way', an entertainment both written and produced by Pitt. In 1934 Pitt moved out and for two years the theatre was opened at infrequent intervals for amateur use. The latest performance that I have been able to trace was a school production of 'The Mikado' which took place in the Spring of 1936. Eventually the entire East End of Alexandra Palace was leased to the BBC after the commencement of regular television broadcasting. The ultimate ignominy being that the Theatre was merely used for props storage, not as studio space and that the building had no function in accommodating this infant medium.

In stark contrast to the auditorium, the construction of the stage was directed by someone who knew what they were doing. T.W. Grieve was one of a family of scene painters and had previously obtained a patent for a device which he termed a 'lock iron'. This was claimed to obviate the need to secure manually the supporting structure beneath the sliding sections of the stage floor with iron hooks and consisted of an iron flange attached to the edge of the slider which was connected to iron bracing spanning the slider soffit. The flange ran in a steel channel which was fixed along the longitudinal perimeter of the cut in the stage floor. Although the contemporary accounts of the

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theatre opening mention this device, no evidence remains of its installation. The stage floor was entirely renewed by Pitt in the late 1920's so the lock iron may have been discarded when this was carried out.

The stage contains a layout of traps typical of the period of its construction. Proceeding up stage, the layout is as follows:

- i) A brass hinged carpet cut 8" x 36' 0".
- ii) A two-post grave trap, 78" x 22" flanked by two, two-post demon traps, 22" x 22".
- iii) Nos. 1 and 2 cuts, each 11" x 36' 0"
- iv) No. 1 bridge, 46 1/2" x 36' 0".
- v) Nos. 3 and 4 cuts of the same size as iii) above. Thereafter the sequence runs from bridges nos. 2 to 5 with two cuts between each bridge, nos. 5 to 10. Cut no. 11 is the last, which is immediately upstage of bridge no. 5.
- vi) Paint frame slot, 86 1/2" x 36' 0".

The five bridges were constructed using a very light, cross-braced framework and had a raked surface identical with that of the stage (1:22 gradient). They descend into a stage cellar twenty-three feet deep and were counterweighted with four double weight hangers. Their operation was from winches located on a mezzanine seven and a half feet below the stage floor.

Although there is evidence of sloats¹ having been installed, none of these remain. These would also have been operated by winches situated on the mezzanine floor, stage left; the opposite side to the location of the bridge winches.

The arrangement of the grid iron