

The final published version of this article is published in:

'Georgian theatres in Arundel', *The Bell [Arundel magazine]*, Summer 2024, 54-56.

<https://www.visitarundel.co.uk/love-arundel/blog/#bell>

Article for *The Bell*

By Colin Chambers

Georgian Theatres in Arundel

Arundel is celebrated for many things but it will surely be a surprise to most people who know the town that just over 200 years ago it was home to two theatres, both to be found in Maltravers Street. They were built by theatre manager Henry Thornton, who first brought his company of itinerant players to Arundel in 1791 and must have liked what he saw because the following year he erected a theatre at what is now 5 Maltravers Street and occupied this site until 1807 before opening a new theatre on the opposite side of the street at what is now no 18. 'Generalissimo' Thornton, as the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* called him, came from Suffolk and was already a well-known provincial theatre manager when he came to Arundel. He was married to Elizabeth Pritchard, herself an actor and daughter of a provincial theatre manager. She had a brother and sister also actors and at least two other brothers who were intermittently involved in the theatre. Extended families were the core of the Georgian troupes, familiar from the Crummies clan in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and regional theatre was generally organised through these touring companies operating under a manager who ran a circuit, or 'walk', of theatres.

Thornton was said to have panache but little eye for detail. Rumour had it that he once wore at the same time all six shirts Elizabeth had packed for a tour and took each one off as it became too dirty to wear. He was also reported to have been cavalier with learning lines, a habit which apparently was caught by other members of his company. The plays they performed were traditional, based on past and present successes emanating from London, including versions of plays by William Shakespeare, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Oliver Goldsmith, sentimental and Gothic dramas, farces, comedies, a few worthy tragedies, operettas, and various interludes. This was before the era of the long run of a single play, and a bill of fare might look more like a modern variety show, with excerpts from at least a couple of plays and additional songs or turns, perhaps a wooden shoe/clog dance or a hornpipe, particularly popular during the Napoleonic wars. Celebrated ventriloquist Christopher Lee Sugg, for instance, seems to have appeared at 5 Maltravers Street and in

1797 one Mrs Aickin, who was staying with Partlet the butcher, performed there 'An Arundel Volunteer', a song given a local flavour at the time of massive mobilisation in the South-East, the frontline in any French invasion.

By the time he tried Arundel, Thornton had established a network of theatres in Newbury, Reading, Andover, Henley, Farnham, Dorking, Guildford, and Horsham. He was to run theatres in Essex and on the Isle of Wight. Thornton's company also played at Gosport in Hampshire, which became virtually a headquarters - the site of his theatre carries a plaque - and they also performed at Windsor, where he created its first Theatre Royal and entertained the king there.

Early in the 1800s, Thornton rebuilt the theatre at 5 Maltravers Street. It is likely the available space extended backwards beyond the limits of the current house to a yard at the back. There are no descriptions of the interior, but it was probably of standard Georgian design for rural theatres, familiar from Richmond's slightly older Theatre Royal in Yorkshire, with a thrust stage surrounded by galleries in a horse-shoe shape, a pit, and possibly boxes as well, and seating around 150 people. Arundel was established as a fashionable rendezvous for nobility and gentry as well as for the many young soldiers waiting to serve in France in the Napoleonic wars, and the military was a vital ingredient in Georgian audiences. Arundel's winter seasons were said to rival Brighton's and one commentator recounted that 'Brighton as a residence was considered dull in comparison.'

Thornton's success over several years was such that he decided to take another gamble, perhaps to expand seating capacity and potential income. He crossed the road and built a new theatre. He came to an arrangement in 1807 with the freeholder of a malthouse and surrounding land in Maltravers Street to convert the building into a theatre, which Thornton would lease each year for a season. Built at what is now 18 Maltravers Street, the new theatre did not follow the horse-shoe design of the old theatre at No. 5 but placed the stage end on with the audience in front of it rather than surrounding it on three sides. The façade, which was wider than at No. 5, was made of plain brick and looked like a private house. The entrance, stage door, and scene door were all in Maltravers Street, with the dressing rooms and stage nearest to the street and the audience, possibly up to 350 with pit, gallery, and

boxes, seated at the rear using the upward slope of the land to facilitate the auditorium and increased seating capacity. At the back was a domestic apartment for the manager. The theatre was lit by oil footlights, which a few years later set fire to one of the proscenium doors. The Duke was consulted about the exterior design of the theatre, which had to fit in with his taste. Consequently, the rear wall of the theatre, which came close to the castle, was given a Gothic makeover to achieve a unified look with the refurbished castle.

The new theatre was opened on 7 December 1807 with a performance by the 16-year-old William Betty, who a few years earlier had become a national celebrity as a child prodigy. Such was the grip of what became known as Betty-mania that the Prime Minister William Pitt once adjourned the Commons so that MPs could attend a performance. The *Hampshire Telegraph & Sussex Chronicle* reported that an audience of 'rank and taste' from a 20-mile radius came to see the 'wonder' at Arundel, not all of whom could get into the theatre. It is not clear what he performed but it is likely to have included speeches from one of his most famous roles, Shakespeare's Hamlet. In 1815, during the expansive (and expensive) celebrations for the 600th anniversary of the signing of Magna Carta, which were centred on the recently refurbished castle, the Duke and his entourage visited the theatre to see a farce and a comedy *The Wheel of Fortune*.

From 1808, the theatre housed a Worthing-based company under the management of Thomas Trotter, although Thornton is still listed as manager in 1812 and presumably leased it to Trotter. Mrs Thornton died in 1816 and Thornton declined quite quickly. On his death in 1818 he did not bequeath the Arundel theatre to his successors, who took on his circuit, so he must already have dispensed with the Arundel theatre. Thomas Trotter, almost 30 years younger than Thornton, was an actor by the age of 15, and was soon running a company in Kent and Sussex, and from 1802 one in Worthing where he lived. He retired in 1824, possibly due to ill health.

In 1823, the Arundel theatre opened under a new manager, William Evans Burton, who two years before, with his wife, had joined Trotter's company. Burton's opening year included a performance paid for by the friends of Thomas Reed Kemp, the property developer remembered as the architect of Brighton's Kemp Town, who the month before had been

elected Whig Member of Parliament for Arundel. Burton later went to the US, where he managed two theatres in New York, renaming one after himself, led a travelling company, became a dramatist and wrote several plays, and also several humorous books.

By 1828, the theatre had passed to another member of Trotter's Worthing company, Mr Chaplin, who, with his wife, son, eldest daughter, and two further daughters, became the lessees. In their opening year, they presented yet another child phenomenon, the 'Musical and Dramatic Prodigy' Master James Burke.

In the 1830s, the theatre seems to have been operating intermittently, and included what may have been theatrical events but were not of the theatre, for example in 1830 a lecture series given by schoolteacher Robert Goodacre on 'astronomy and astronomical geography'; the introductory address was reported as being 'well attended by most of the respectable inhabitants' and the first lecture 'was also well attended', evidence of a growing trend towards promoting educational improvement.

The last performance at the Arundel theatre for which there is evidence occurred in 1833, on April 8, with a standard of the time, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, featuring a star from Covent Garden, the opera singer Jane Shirreff reprising her role as Polly Peachum, among other parts. The theatre now seems to be leased by Mr Hodges, playing Macheath, who brings Shirreff to town and handles the tickets. In 1834, local miller Charles New demolished the theatre (though remains of the sidewalls could be seen flanking the garden) and built a house on the site of the stage which the Duke bought and leased to tenants.

Theatre circuits were in decline at this time – the Napoleonic wars were over and the military audience had shrunk. The economic recession of the 1820s undermined the prosperity of the average theatregoer, and, as seen in the report of the astronomy lecture series in Arundel, there was a new spirit of seriousness in the air, alongside a moral and religious earnestness among the merchant and middle classes. The establishment of cultural, scientific, and philosophical institutions, and an increase in evening classes and home pursuits (such as singing, playing musical instruments, and reading novels), provided competition for the theatre.

Perhaps, in the case of the Arundel theatre, it was too small to make a healthy income and attract top names. Chichester to the west and Worthing and Brighton to the east were more populous and their theatres had larger seating capacities and survived longer than Arundel's. Maybe the aristocracy did not extend the kind of patronage that would have been required to keep the theatre open in a place like Arundel, the commercial fortunes of which were diminishing, as seen in the continuing rise of Littlehampton as a port, and in 1832 a parallel loss in political status when boundary reform reduced Arundel's representation from two Members of Parliament to one. After the closure of the theatre, entertainments in the town were to be found in a big room over the Norfolk Arms inn and in the new town hall in Maltravers Street, which was built in 1834-5, exactly the moment when the theatre closed.

Theatre, Arundel.

THE MANAGER has the honour to announce most respectfully to the Nobility, Gentry, and the Public of Arundel, Littlehampton and their Vicinities, that he has, at a great expence, engaged for

**TWO NIGHTS ONLY,
MISS**

SHIRREFF

First Singer of the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden.

Mr. HODGES is proud to say, that he will have the pleasure of introducing into Arundel the most successful and one of the best Singers England has ever produced.

On Thursday, August 8, 1833,

Will be performed the very favourite Entertainment called The

BEGGAR'S OPERA

Peachum.....Mr. C. WEBB—Lockit.....Mr. MELLON—Fitch.....Mr. H. WEBB
Crook Finger Jack...Mr. SEAMAN—Mat O' the 'Mint...Mr. WHITE—Jenny Twitchee...Mr. DALE
Captain Macheath (with all the original Songs, &c.) Mr. HODGES
Mrs. Peachum.....Mrs. CHURCH

Polly Peachum, Miss SHIRREFF

Lucy Locket, Miss GROSETTE—Jenny Diver, Miss BENTZ—Sakey Tawdry, Mrs. BARKER

IN THE COURSE OF THE OPERA

“*Can Love be Controlled,*” Miss Shirreff.

“**I LIKE A SHIP,**” MISS SHIRREFF.

“**O! Ponder Well,**” Miss Shirreff.

“**CEASE YOUR FUNNING,**”

MISS SHIRREFF.

“**WHY HOW NOW MADAM FLIRT,**”

MISS SHIREFF AND MISS GROSETTE.

“*Hither Dear Husband,*” Miss Shireff & Miss Grosette

MISS SHIRREFF

Will also Sing all the other Songs, Duets, &c. belonging to the Opera.

In Act 2—A Hornpipe in Fetters, by Mr. Seaman.

A NEW COMIC SONG BY MR. H. WEBB.

A PAS SEUL BY MISS BENTZ.

The whole to conclude with the very favourite Melo-Dramatic Opera of

GUY MANNERING

OR, THE GIPSY'S PROPHECY.

Col. Mannering...Mr. WHITE—Dandy Dimont...Mr. MELLON—Henry Bertram...Mr. HODGES
Dirk Hatteraik...Mr. C. WEBB—Dominie Sampson...Mr. H. WEBB
Gilbert Glossin...Mr. SEAMAN—Jock Jabos...Mr. DALE—Sebastian...Mr. WILSON
Julia Mannering, Miss GROSETTE—Flora, Miss BENTZ—Mrs. M'Candlish, Mrs. BARKER
Meg Merrilies...Mrs. CHURCH

Lucy Bertram, Miss Shirreff,

Who will Sing all the Original Songs, Duets, &c. and introduce several New Songs.

Doors to be open at Seven, and the performance to begin at Half-Past Seven.
Notwithstanding the great attraction of the above celebrated Lady, the Prices will remain the same, viz.

Boxes 3s. Pit 2s. and Gallery 1s.—Second Price ¼ past Nine o'Clock, Boxes 2s. Pit 1s. and Gallery 6d.
Children in arms DOUBLE PRICE to all parts of the house.

Places to be Taken at the Theatre, or of Mr. Hodges, at Mr. Hartwell's, between the hours of Ten and Four.

HACKMAN, PRINTER, CHICHESTER.

Playbill for 8 August 1833 (Arundel Museum)