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BARNET THEATRE

Brian Wise

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A short account of the only professional theatre to have existed in Chipping Barnet, extracted from a longer treatise by the same writer on the premises Now Nos. 72, 74 and 76 High Street. Before 1890 all these premises were in the Narrow Heck alongside Barnet Church.

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On the upper floors of part of the existing shops was the 'Great Room' in which there can be little doubt that Samuel Pepys enjoyed his cheese cakes on Sunday, August 11th. 1667. This Great Room was then part of the Red Lion, a hostelry traced back to 1551, by which date it had probably already been well-established. Four inns of this name have been found in the Manor Court Records of Chipping and East Barnet. Yet neither the upper Red Lion today nor its namesake at Underhill has any recorded connection with Pepys as has been asserted by both county and local historians. There is a strong inference that the present upper Red Lion changed its sign from that of the Antelope when the original inn of Pepys' day closed during the first quarter of the C18.

Thereafter the Great Room and a suite of smaller apartments were used and formally known as the Assembly Rooms, catering especially for visitors to the Physic Well at the bottom of Bells Hill where a spring yielding water with aperient qualities was of repute in the C17 and C18, to the extent that it was bottled and sold in London with other Spa Waters. In addition to the need for refreshment and entertainment, public meetings and local occasions, it seems a reasonable hypothesis that amateur dramatics may have been staged in the Assembly Rooms. There is an even greater possibility that strolling players used the premises during the life-span of the Red Lion.

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These suggestions may lend some weight to the tradition, admittedly far-fetched, that Shakespeare or at least Shakespeare's Company, performed there before Queen Elizabeth I. In this context it is interesting to find that Shakespeare's contemporary the dramatist and actor, Thomas Heywood (circa 1570 - 1640) in one of his some 200 plays, makes warm reference in lines beginning:-

"This Barnet is a place of great resort and commonly upon the Market Days here all the country gentlemen appoint a friendly meeting.....". Heywood then sketches the activities of these gentlemen: wagering on horses, dogs and hawks; some meeting merely to eat and drink - and "spend their money". However no hard evidence has been found of organized or ad hoc theatrical activities in the Red Lion or in the Assembly Rooms; the prospects of finding such traces now seem very remote.

It is not known precisely, or even within a year or two, when The Barnet Theatre opened its doors for the first time. The first evidence, reliable and informative, comes from a playbill exhibited in the Barnet Museum:-

"By Particular Desire"

For This Night Only - February 16th, 1830.

The Popular Melodrama, "The Miller and his Men".

(play by J. Pocock, 1813) Favourite Song by  
Mrs. H. Fenton

The Laughable Piece "Rendez-vous" or "Fun and Fright"  
(unidentified)

Comic Song by Mr. Jackman.

To conclude:- the Popular Musical Farce,

"Of Age Tomorrow" (play by Dibdin, 1800)

Boxes: 3s., Pit: 2s., Gallery: 1s. 6d. Second House  
8.30.p.m.

Doors open at 6.30.p.m. for 7.p.m. performance.

Tickets from Mr. Woodhall, Bricklayer of Hadley,  
and from Mr. King at the Theatre.

The Bill includes a footnote with a familiar ring in the profession - "All demands on the Manager are requested to be sent immediately, as the Theatre finally closes this evening". This indicates that a season of unknown length had taken place, ending on February 16th.

Mr. Jackman, as well as being a comic songster, was the Director of what an issue (date unknown) of the newspaper, "Herts. Mercury" described as a "Fairly well-known Company of Comedians". The troupe had played at Bedford in 1829, and appeared in Hertford, as well as Barnet in 1830. Jackman staged a charity performance during the latter visit in aid of the Chipping Barnet Churchwardens' Fund for winter coal for the poor.

The use of the phrase "finally closes" in this advertisement is equivocal. Did it relate to the season, or to the closure of the Theatre, entirely, during the foreseeable future? Jackman obviously, was no more than a lessee. Who, in fact, owned the Theatre premises and hired them to Jackman & Co., is obscure. Much of the scanty information in this paper has been drawn from playbills held in the British Museum: but there is a gap in the series until November 22nd. 1832, when a bill carrying that date announced that George Barnwell would appear in a production, "Sleeping Draught" (play by S. Penley. 1818) at the "Theatre, Old Assembly Rooms, High St., Barnet". Admission prices were the same as in 1830, except that children were let in for sixpence. A Mr. J. F. Savill emerges as proprietor and manager of this venture. He informed the public that Friday, 13th - presumably of December - would be his Benefit Night. Savill seems to have challenged the fates with unusual stage courage. He and his players, made up a team of ten men, two married women and two "misses". The public was further advised that in consequence of the Company's very short stay and "that families from the country may not be disappointed, the Theatre will be open every evening this week, Wednesdays excepted". On this solitary piece of evidence it is obviously impossible to determine the precise length of the season; not more than a month's duration; probably less.

Mention of the "Families from the country" is interesting, in local context, in regard to Hadley. Here is an early example of suburban development arising partly from the desire of wealthy landowners in remote parts of the United Kingdom to establish a pied-a-terre in country surroundings, but within easy reach of London, and partly from the establishment of a community by merchants, wholly or semi-retired; administrators; civil and service officers, who settled in Hadley for similar reasons. Of the local gentry, the Byng family was, at the time of the Theatre, especially active in the affairs of the district.

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It is also pertinent to note that the Railway system did not reach what was at first called Barnet Station. (i.e. New Barnet) until 1852. After much indecision about the siting of the terminus, steam trains reached High Barnet in 1871. Thus it will be seen that nobody came to the Theatre by train. The size of the population is also relevant to this survey. The first National Census in 1801 revealed 1250 people, of whom 597 were males, in Chipping Barnet. There were 215 dwellings, mostly cottages, with two or three major inns, and a preponderance of alehouses, themselves little more than cottages. A few houses of some substance existed in the High Street, and in the only other thoroughfare in the neighbourhood, Wood Street. The 1841 Census showed 2500 residents, so the figure during the Theatre's run can be estimated around 2000, with a high proportion of children - and a high infant mortality rate. The wagon cart would have been the only, cumbersome means of transport for the majority of people further afield.

There is another hiatus in the documentary evidence until 1834: but this gap cannot be accepted as conclusive. It is difficult to believe that these important premises lay idle in the meantime. During the off-seasons the Great Room must surely have been used for other purposes, although by this time the Physic Well was more or less derelict according to the observations of Dr. William Trinder of Rowley Green, in his treatise, "The English Olive Tree,"

published in 1812. In 1834, however, the Theatre re-surfaced in a series of playbills, the first ones dated March 31st. and April 1st. A Mr. Boulton appears in temporary command of "...the late Old Assembly Rooms...which... have been fitted up as a temporary theatre". That year's records suggest that the refurbishment was rather more than temporary and that, in the light of sources available, it was the peak period in the Theatre's short existence.

A glimpse is afforded of this "Fitting-up". On some undated occasion, Mr.F.W. Peters, a late member of the original Barnet Records Society, was given access to the upper floor of part of the shops in the Narrow Neck. Here he drew a plan of the Great Room and his survey is to be seen in the Museum. Mr. Peters found vestiges of a stage, measuring 25' x 12' with a proscenium of 11' x 6'. The auditorium measured 40' long and 20' wide with a height of 15': a sizeable room for what had been a small town inn. Three large windows looked across the Neck to Middle Row, a conglomeration of ancient buildings which abutted Barnet Church, dividing High Street and Wood Street until finally demolished circa 1890, having been gutted by fire. Peters found a recessed space for a small orchestra and a suite of rooms presumably for refreshment and retirement - and attirement. During reconstructions at No. 76 in the 1950's, a wooden arch was recovered. It is on view in the Museum. The Curator and other experts at the time assessed the date of this relic as "somewhat late Georgian", i.e. early C19, and concluded that it had formed part of an ornamental doorway which had given admittance, via an approach staircase, to an anteroom, which, in turn, afforded access to the Great Room or auditorium itself.

Reverting to the 1834 Season, thirteen playbills cover performances in March and April and another two in November. At this time two annual Fairs were held in Barnet for sheep, cattle and horses, with attendant amusements. These Fairs were of international renown and it can be assumed that Players would take advantage of the substantial, though temporary, influx of visitors to the town.

The Publicans certainly did, to a noisy, often notorious, extent. The 1834 casts included names of some who had appeared two years earlier, and in launching the Season, Moulton declared, "Performances will embrace all London Novelties with appropriate music, machinery and decorations. Arrangements have been made with persons of acknowledged excellence in various departments and they would not be inattentive to the comfort of patrons". Tickets were obtainable at the Phoenix Commercial and Literary Printing Office opposite the Salisbury Arms Hotel. The Phoenix Office belonged to Mr. William Baldock who was later editor, publisher and printer of the "Barnet Gazette", a forerunner and short-time rival of "The Barnet Press". From all accounts, Baldock was an energetic character who during his life had his finger for a while in most of the parochial pies. Early in this season, on April 7th., the audience was offered the following programme:-

"Green-eyed Monster" ( a play by J.R. Planche, 1828)

"The Double Mistake" ( a play by M. Barratt, 1831)

"Raising the Wind" ( a play by J. Kenney, 1803)

The titles suggest a mixture of melodrama and farce. Moulton promised the public "A succession of Novelties fully equal in interest to those Popular Pieces which have been received with Shouts of Laughter and Applause during the past week". As the April Fair that year was held between 8th. and 10th. of the month, the alleged enthusiasm may not have been an over-statement.

Moulton's Players brought fresh material to Barnet including a melodrama called "Jonathan Bradford; or Murder at the Roadside Inn" by Edward Fitzball, which had been staged at the Surrey Theatre, London during the previous year. Another production was Buckstone's comedy, "Uncle John" which had appeared at the Haymarket Theatre as recently as 1833. (John Baldwin Buckstone, 1802 - 1877, was a comedian and playwright who was both lessee and leading low comedian of the Haymarket between 1853 and 1877).

"The Green-eyed Monster" show was as in 1832, interspersed with musical interludes. On April 19th., a Mrs. Gannon, during a play entitled "Clare" which the writer has been unable to identify, sang the air, "Home, Sweet Home". According to a late member of the Local Historical Society, Mr. J. Faulkner, to whom tribute must be paid for his assiduous work in searching for playbills, "Clare" included the original performance of this enduring ballad. Another soloist to appear was a Mr. Bryant described as "the celebrated Irish Vocalist from the London Stage". Bryant sang on May 9th, "under the patronage of several gentlemen and tradesmen of Barnet" - a significant statement when assessing the financial viability of the whole enterprise. Traces of the 1834 Season fade after Monday, November 26th., when "Jane Shore" (a play by ? J. K. Kemble, 1815) followed by "The Children of the Wood" (a play by ? T. Powell, 1805) were presented. "Master Reynolds" was featured and this is the only reference to child actors which has been found. Before leaving 1834 a programme on April 24th., seems worth mention. It consisted of two pieces:- "Cure for the Heartache" a play by T. Norton, 1796, which was being performed by "particular desire", and a number entitled, "Family Jars", (a play by J. Lunn, 1822). After this the patrons were told "The whole to be concluded with the Grand National Anthem". At this point in the reign of King William IV, and against the scramble of the Hanoverians for the throne, the second item may seem particularly apposite.

The Theatre finally rang down the curtain in 1835. On March 5th., the players presented:- "The Soldier's Daughter", (by A. Cherry, 1804), and "The Floating Beacon", (a play by Edw. Fitzball, 1824), described as a nautical melodrama. The 10th March was a special occasion: at the request of "a party of ladies and gentlemen from Gannic (sic) Corner and Potters Bar" (possibly including the BYNG family?) the Company staged "The Honeymoon" followed by another performance of "The Miller and His Men". No subsequent playbills have been found, but a major source of information is

a retrospective article, very possibly written by Mr. Baldock, which appeared in the "Barnet Gazette" on 14th August 1858, on the subject of the Barnet Theatre. It stated that the Theatre finally closed its doors on 30th March 1835, and there is no reason to doubt this assertion. The programme for this Finale sounds weighty, and, without being facetious, one may say that if this was a sample of the fare it may have doused completely any theatre-going enthusiasm among the Barnet rank and file. This show comprised "The Rivals"; (a play probably by H.G. Lewis, 1811), "Timor the Tartar"; and the Fifth Act of "Richard the Third" (presumably Shakespeare).

"The Barnet Gazette" made no comment on these presentations, but summed up the entire picture in a telling, sad reflection;- "The Theatre was a place very neatly fitted up in the London Style and ..... patronised by influential families from Wrotham and Trent Parks by whom plays were frequently selected for performance". Finally he sighs that here was "A Company of Strollers of considerable ability whose exercises during a season of several weeks were nightly productive of only a beggarly account of empty benches."

Doubtless a beggarly account; even thirty years later in neighbouring Whetstone and Finchley, whence some support might have been expected, the average pay packet for most would have been nine or ten shillings a week. Chipping Barnet with its market, the forerunner of Smithfield, its important livestock Fairs, and above all, its coach and wagon trade was obviously better placed than some of its neighbours. Yet at the time the Theatre expired, Barnet was heading for an acute, if temporary, slump. Five years after the establishment of High Barnet Station, James Thorne, in his notable "Environs of London", published in 1876, described the town as "Busy-looking with an undue proportion of public houses, and on the whole a shabby and not very picturesque appearance". In the early days of that century there were indeed no fewer than thirty identified inns and alehouses on or near the stretch of highroad between Underhill and Hadley Highstone.



As a strategically sited stopping-place for traffic these establishments gave employment, directly or indirectly, to ostlers and postboys; domestics and potmen; to wheelwrights, saddlers and harness-makers; to smiths and farriers; to cornchandlers and fodder merchants; while some tradesmen, in turn, employed apprentices. As an example of prosperity, admittedly extreme, Charles Bryant, owner of the Red Lion and other properties, died in 1870, leaving an estate valued, then, at upwards of £30,000. It was from this "Support Group" for the carriage, coach and wagon traffic that the Theatre might have expected to draw a significant proportion of its audiences in stalls, gallery and pit.

Although "working men" as the term applied in those days, living further afield, might be prepared to trudge miles to Fairs and Market, they were unlikely to go far to witness "Timon the Tartar". On the other side of the Candle-lit or Oil-lit stage, Jackson, Moulton and others, must have led an extremely hard and precarious existence. In a small-town theatre, acting ability and artistic merit would have run a bad second to spectacular "effects", machinery, and devices - expensive luxuries upon which many similar ventures then, and even today, have foundered.

Thus the Great Room became a tradesman's store and the premises below engaged in business. How the original shops interlocked, if they did, with the Assembly Rooms and the Theatre seems impossible to unravel. None of the sources listed in the Appendix give any clue. According to local Directories, for some 140 years the premises have shown a distinct predisposition towards clothing and associated trades. The Great Room being filled in the mid-nineteenth century by Mr. John Thimbleby's wares, Amateur actors and musicians in the district found accommodation for a while in the Town Hall in Union Street, built not long after that bypass was cut in 1837. Subsequently local talent, of which there has been no dearth, has used facilities as available in church and school halls.

In conclusion it seems interesting to ruminate on those "Three Large Windows" in the Great Room. They, or their predecessors, perhaps of lattice, looked down on so many occasions and persons of historic interest and importance. Maybe watchers at the Red Lion witnessed the return to London of the victors and vanquished from the Battle of Barnet?

BRIAN WISE.

August 1975.

APPENDIX to

"THE BARNET THEATRE"

SOURCES used in preparing the Paper; most of them are in the Barnet Museum Archives, as indicated by B.M.A. in this list.

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5. Barnet Wills: 1537 - 1790. Transcripts.
6. BRANCH-JOHNSON.W.:"Hertfordshire Inns, Part I"  
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Office, B.M.A.
8. FAULKNER. John,: Lecture Notes. B.M.A.
9. HARPER G.C.:"The Holyhead Road", Chapman and  
Hall, 1902.
10. LEFTWICH. B.R., Annals of Parish and Township  
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12. Translation 1245 - 1291, B.M.A.
13. " 1553 - 1686, B.M.A.
14. In English 1743 - 1913.
15. "Business Done at the Court". 1689 - 1744,  
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16. MARCHAM. W. LicB., Misc. Records, Chipping  
Barnet, East Barnet and District.  
1956. B M.A. L42.
17. MARCHAM. W. LicB., Properties in Chipping  
Barnet, High St., Wood St., etc.  
Conveyances, etc. B.M.A. L43.
18. NAYS. A.S., "Legal Documents of Barnet" 1929  
B.M.A.
19. Middlesex Victuallers' Licences, circa 1710 -  
1810, Mddx.Cty. Records Office. Dartmouth St.  
W.1.

20. Newspapers: "Barnet Gazette"; "Barnet Press"; "Herts Mercury".
21. NICOLL Allardyce, "History of English Drama", 1660-1900, Camb.Univ.Press. 1959.
22. Petty Sessions: Sub Division Liberty of St. Albans; Victuallers' Licences, Transcript. 1750 - 1777. B.M.A.
23. Petty Sessions: "Boar's Head", Chipping Barnet, 1796 - 1797. Herts. Cty. Rec. Office.
24. STEVENS. Rev.H.W.P.: "Old Barnet", Cowings, 1912, B.M.A.
25. War Office Billeting Return - Chipping Barnet and District - 1756. P.R.O.,W.O.30/49.
26. WIDDICOMBE, S.H., "Barnet and its History", Cowings, 1912, B.M.A.
27. WIDDICOMBE. S.H. "Chats about Barnet", unpublished. B.M.A. J43.

**By Particular Desire,**

**POSITIVELY  
FOR THIS NIGHT ONLY.**

**THEATRE, BARNET.**

On **TUESDAY**, Evening Feb. 16th. 1830,  
Will be Performed the Popular Melo Drama, of **THE**

**MILLER  
And his Men!**

Grindoff, the Miller, Mr. BAILEY,  
Count Frederick Friberg, Mr. H. FENTON, Lothair, Mr. GREEN,  
Holmar, Mr. MASTERMAN, Karl, Mr. JACKMAN,  
Ribor, Mr. CHANNING, Golots, Mr. HENRY,  
Rorina, Mrs. MASTERMAN,  
Gaudino, Mrs. H. FENTON, Annette, Miss JACKMAN;

**A Favourite Song, by Mrs. H. FENTON,**

The Laughable Piece, of **THE**

**Rendezvous,  
Or, FUN and FRIGHT.**

Old Quabo, Mr. MASTERMAN, Captain Bolding, Mr. GREEN,  
Charles, Mr. H. FENTON, Smart, Mr. CHANNING,  
Simon, Mr. JACKMAN,.....Sophia, Mrs. H. FENTON.  
Laeretha, Miss C. JACKMAN, Rose, Mrs. MASTERMAN,

**A COMIC SONG, By Mr. JACKMAN,**

To Conclude with the Popular Musical FARCE, call'd

**Of Age To-Morrow.**

Baron. Frederick Willinghurst, Mr. H. Fenton,  
Baton Piffieberg, Mr. Masterman, Nolkus, Mr. Jackman,  
Fris, Mr. Channing, Servant, Mr. Henry,  
Lady Bramback, Mrs. H. Jackman;  
Sophia, Miss C. Jackman, Maria, Mrs. H. Fenton,

\*All Demands on the Manager are requested to be sent in Immediately,  
As the Theatre finally closes **THIS EVENING.**

**BOXES 3s. - PIT 2s. - GALLERY 1s. Second Price at half past 8. Boxes 2s Pit 1s.**

Doors open at half past SIX, and the Performances to commence at SEVEN o' Clock precisely  
Tickets may be had of Mr. Woodhill druggist, Hatley, and of Mr. King, at the Theatre.