

Sources for the history of London Theatres and Music Halls at London Metropolitan Archives

London Metropolitan Archives Information Leaflet 47



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Introduction

London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) holds a wealth of archival and printed source material for the history of London theatres and music halls. The most striking sources held are those deriving from the licensing powers of the Greater London Council (GLC) and its predecessor authorities. These provide evidence of how places of public entertainment were established and managed with less emphasis on the entertainment itself. However, in addition to the records of local government held at LMA, there are a number of deposited collections among which can be found playbills, programmes, newspaper cuttings, and contemporary accounts of performances.

This leaflet will cover the most significant series of records held relating to the history of London theatres and music halls.

Part 1 - Official Records

Middlesex and Westminster Sessions

The Middlesex Sessions were meetings of the Justices of the Peace held at least four times a year in the County of Middlesex. The Middlesex Justices, whose records survive from 1549, administered the area north of the Thames until 1889, with the exception of the City of London. Westminster held its own sessions under a separate commission first granted in 1618 for the City and Liberty of Westminster until 1844. For this reason, Westminster sessions papers dealing with theatre and music hall licensing form a separate series of records from those relating to Middlesex prior to 1844.

Under the Disorderly Houses Act of 1752, places of entertainment and houses used for music and dancing in London and Westminster and within twenty miles from there were required to obtain a licence from the Justices of the Peace. These could be issued or refused after presentation of a petition by a new owner, or one wishing to renew a licence.

Middlesex and Westminster Sessions: Music and Dancing Licences (MR/L/MD)

From 1752 to 1836 applications for music and dancing licences, if preserved, are to be found with the Middlesex and Westminster sessions papers. From 1837 they were kept as a separate series which survives

for the years 1837, 1840, 1849-1860, 1877-1888. Petitions for or against the licence were sometimes filed with the application. The licences themselves survive for the years 1752, 1763, 1766, 1768-1781, 1823, 1844, 1880-1881. They give the name of the owner of the establishment, the address of the premises and terms of the licence. These have been catalogued in detail and our catalogues can be searched by name of premises or by the name of proprietor on the [LMA Catalogue](#). Also included among the records of the Middlesex Sessions are printed lists of licences issued the previous year with manuscript notes of renewal which date from 1849 to 1888, justices' and police reports, certificates of structural alterations to places of public entertainment, and plans accompanying the licence applications.

Lord Chamberlain's Office

Prior to the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 there were only two theatre companies which had the sole right to perform dramatic entertainment in London. Charles II reconstituted the theatre after the Restoration and granted royal patents to Sir William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew and their heirs which gave them the right to operate theatres in London as a monopoly.

The Duke's Company operated under Davenant's patent and from 1660 performed at Dorset Garden Theatre. In 1682 the Duke's Company amalgamated with the King's Company and moved to the Drury Lane Theatre until 1732 when the Duke's Company established itself at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden. The King's Company operated under the Killigrew patent. From 1660 the company performed at Vere Street Theatre and from 1663 at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane.

The Little Theatre in the Haymarket offered the first serious competition to the two patent houses and had the capacity to survive without a patent or a licence. From 1735 to 1737 the theatre was managed by Henry Fielding. However, during this period a number of political satires were staged at the theatre which gave rise to the Licensing Act of 1737. This Act re-established the monopoly of the two patent theatres and introduced censorship of the stage by requiring the Lord Chamberlain's approval of any play intended for performance. However, Samuel Foote obtained a royal patent for the Haymarket in 1766 which allowed it to open during the summer months for the

duration of Foote's life. After his death the theatre remained open on an annual licence.

The Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 brought an end to the patent monopoly and laid down a nationwide system of licensing. This allowed all theatres in the Cities of London and Westminster, and the boroughs of Finsbury, Marylebone, Tower Hamlets, Lambeth and Southwark to apply for a Lord Chamberlain's licence which enabled them to perform drama. This Act therefore forced small saloon theatres to apply either for a magistrates' music and dancing licence which permitted drinking but did not allow dramatic entertainment, or a Lord Chamberlain's licence which permitted them to present drama but forbade drinking in the auditorium. As a result of this Act, theatres and music halls developed as distinctly separate entities.

The theatre files of the Lord Chamberlain's Office dating from before 1902 are located at The National Archives, Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU. The main classes of records are in [LC7](#) which include warrants, registers of licences, inspection reports and plans of theatres from 1666 to 1901, and in [LC1](#) which contains the correspondence of the Office of the Lord Chamberlain from 1710 to 1902; later records remain in the care of the Lord Chamberlain's Office at St. James's Palace. From 1737 until 1968 the Lord Chamberlain also had the power to censor all stage plays. The texts of the plays submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's Department from 1824 are now deposited in the British Library Manuscript Collections, 96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB. The earliest plays submitted, up to 1824, were passed in 1917 to the Huntington Library in the USA.

A volume of papers relating to the licensing of theatres by the Lord Chamberlain can be found among the records of the London County Council Theatres and Music Halls Committee held at LMA ([LCC/MIN/10927](#)). This mainly relates to the contribution which the Council made to ensuring that theatres were safe from danger of fire because, from 1902, a Lord Chamberlain's licence could only be obtained if the LCC had first provided written confirmation that theatres were adhering to fire regulations.

London County Council (LCC)

The Local Government Act of 1888 transferred most of the administrative functions of the Quarter Sessions to newly created county councils. The London County Council (LCC) therefore took over

the responsibility for registering premises of public entertainment and granting licences to proprietors. As the LCC operated a committee structure, it administered the system of theatre licensing through its Theatres and Music Halls Committee. This became the Entertainment (Licensing) Committee from March 1931 and in 1941 its functions merged with those of the Public Control Committee. The Greater London Council inherited these responsibilities in 1965.

The Committee held annual sessions each November to investigate all new applications for licences, but could grant licence renewals at any time. Its regulation of theatres and music halls focused on the safety and well-being of the public. Buildings were inspected during the year by an architect, chief engineer and chief officer of the Fire Brigade who were jointly responsible for structure, maintenance and fire prevention.

Another aspect of LCC regulation of places of public entertainment involved regulating the behaviour of performers and members of the audience. Music halls were of particular concern due to the nature of the performance and because some were established haunts of prostitutes. A group of inspectors who were authorised to report on music halls by the Theatres and Music Halls Committee often drew attention to suspicious conduct either among the audience or on the stage.

The case of the Empire Theatre in Leicester Square is the most famous instance of LCC intervention in the running of the music halls, although similar cases occurred at the Oxford and the Alhambra music halls. In 1894, one of the leading campaigners against vice in London, Mrs Ormiston Chant, attempted to oppose the Empire's application for the renewal of its licence on the grounds that 'the place at night is the habitual resort of prostitutes in pursuit of their traffic, and that portions of the entertainment are most objectionable, obnoxious, and against the best interests and moral well-being of the community at large' ([LCC/MIN/10803](#)). The LCC decided that it would only renew the Empire's licence if a screen were put up between the promenade and the back row of the dress circle and the upper circle, to discourage soliciting in the promenade. The music hall was closed for a short time but when it was reopened the screen was pulled down immediately by a crowd of people. The Empire was such a fashionable place that the management won a great deal of support from the Press and West End society. The Daily Telegraph gave great prominence to the

proceedings of the licensing committee, and its letters page debating the issue of the Empire ran under the heading 'Prudes on the Prowl'.

The inspectors' reports and the proceedings before the Licensing Committee often provide revealing insights into the performances themselves as information on the lyrical content of songs and the behaviour of performers is cited as evidence against the renewal of a licence. In their reports the inspectors often target specific artists and their acts. In a report on the Oxford music hall an inspector notes that 'Miss Marie Lloyd produces her characteristic effects, it seems to me, not so much by words and phrases that can be laid hold of and taken exception to as by her manners and actions - knowing nods, looks, smiles and winks full of suggestiveness...' ([LCC/MIN/10869](#)).

The entertainment itself is also detailed in cases where a dispute arose over the definition of dramatic entertainment which had been prohibited in music halls by the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843. A hearing in 1889 following the application of the proprietor of the Canterbury music hall for a music and dancing licence details a debate over a performance of 'The Stowaway' showing how difficult it was to define and prohibit the performance of plays in music halls ([LCC/MIN/10782](#)).

LCC Theatres and Music Halls Committee, Entertainments Committee and Public Control Committee

These series consist of agenda papers and minutes for each theatre and music hall. The minutes are arranged chronologically; the presented papers are bound theatre by theatre from 1889 to 1909, and from 1909 they are bound meeting by meeting chronologically. They contain reports from the Superintending Architect and the LCC inspectors, and the proceedings of hearings where the proprietor of an establishment was allowed to give testimony in order to renew a licence. These hearings include statements by witnesses who were able to testify on behalf of the proprietor, or could offer evidence of misconduct. Printed copies of applications for licences, some of which include the proceedings of hearings, can be found in the volumes at [LCC/PC/ENT/02](#) which cover the period 1889 to 1960, or in the LMA library at 43.05 LCC which date from 1894 to 1985.

LCC Architect's Department: Building Act Case Files (GLC/AR/BR)

LMA hold applications to the LCC and GLC under the various building regulations and town planning Acts which governed the construction

or alteration of buildings throughout London. These files contain correspondence between the applicant and the Council which often provide very detailed particulars of alterations to the buildings. It is possible to search our collections on the [LMA Catalogue](#) by the name of the theatre or music hall or the name of the architect.

To use the paper catalogue in our Information Area it is necessary to know the address of the property concerned as properties are listed alphabetically by street name. Under 50 per cent of these files are held at LMA, many having been transferred to the London boroughs in 1965. Some of the files may by now have been deposited in local history collections, but most are likely to be located within the working departments of the borough councils.

LCC Architect's Department: Theatre Building Plans (GLC/AR/BR/19)

Plans of building alterations to places of public entertainment had to be approved by the LCC Architect's Department who kept copies of all the plans and drawings submitted. These were transferred to the GLC Building Regulation Division in 1965 who re-surveyed the buildings every ten years. This has created an extensive collection of London theatre and music hall plans which provide a complete history of the structure of these buildings. Information collected included the accommodation provided by theatres and music halls, means of escape, types of dressing room, and the ratio of stage to auditorium. The plans have proved to be particularly valuable to those researching the history of music halls in yielding information on their evolution from the pub room of the early nineteenth century to the grand music halls of the 1850s through to the sumptuous variety palaces of the early twentieth century (see 'Building the Halls' John Earl, in **Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure**, Peter Bailey (ed.) (44.18 BAI).

It is possible to search our collections on the [LMA Catalogue](#) by the name of the theatre or music hall or the name of the architect. The paper catalogue which is arranged by call number provides details on covering dates and numbers of plans held for each establishment. An index is also available which lists each establishment alphabetically, giving the call number allocated to each.

LCC Architect's Department: Photograph Collection (44.2)

The LCC Architect's Department was also responsible for a photographic library which comprises almost half a million

photographs, including many of theatres and music halls dating from the late nineteenth century. It is possible to search the [LMA Catalogue](#) by the name of the theatre or music hall. The photographs are arranged alphabetically by name of the theatre or music hall. A card catalogue is available in the Information Area.

LCC Fire Brigade Department: Subject and Policy Files (LCC/FB/GEN)

Until the formation of the LCC, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade was administered by the Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW). In 1877 a Select Committee on the Metropolitan Fire Brigade recommended that no new theatre or music hall should be licensed until the MBW had certified that there was adequate protection against fire. These powers were taken over by the LCC in 1889. As a result of these regulations, a series of files were produced by the Chief Officer of the Fire Brigade relating to security and fire prevention in places of public entertainment.

LCC Valuation Department: Goad Fire Insurance Plans (LCC/VA/GOAD)

These plans were used by the LCC Valuation Department but were produced by Charles E. Goad Ltd. They give details of land use, internal and external building construction, height, street width, and names and property numbers. The most complex coverage was given to the major cities, with twenty two volumes covering London. For urban areas, individual plans include those for factories, transport termini, as well as for places of public entertainment.

Middlesex County Council (MCC)

MCC Engineer and Surveyor's Department (MCC/CL/ES/EL, MCC/ES/EL)

The Entertainments Licensing Section of the Engineer and Surveyor's Department of the Middlesex County Council (MCC) existed from 1889 to 1965. The jurisdiction of the MCC for entertainments licensing was limited to the area within twenty miles of London and Westminster until 1894 when the Music and Dancing Licences (Middlesex) Act was passed which gave the MCC control over the whole county. The records consist of buildings files containing surveys made by the Department on the safety of public buildings, plans of buildings, and general policy files. The Local Government Act of 1888 required the

managers of theatres to enter into a bond as required by the licensing authority. A series of stage play bonds from 1902 to 1909 are included among these records. It is possible to search our catalogues on the [LMA Catalogue](#) by the name of the theatre or music hall.

Greater London Council (GLC)

GLC Director General's Department (GLC/DG/EL)

The Local Government Act of 1963 established the Greater London Council which inherited the functions of entertainment licensing. The records created by the department responsible date from 1911 to 1980 and comprise correspondence, inquiry reports and copies of licences for places of public entertainment. The paper finding aids for these records are arranged alphabetically by the address of the premises, alphabetically by the name of the premises, and alphabetically by premises type. They are not at present fully searchable on our computerised catalogues.

Part 2 - Deposited Records

Estate Records

As many of the oldest London theatres were built on land leased from family estates, some of the collections of estate papers held at LMA contain a number of records relevant to the history of London theatres and music halls. It would therefore be useful to search the estate papers of Lord Camden, the Marquess of Northampton's Islington and Clerkenwell estates ([E/NOR](#)), and the De Beauvoir estates in Hackney and Shoreditch ([E/BVR](#)).

The Bedford estate papers ([E/BER](#)) are particularly important in this respect because a major part of the London estate covered the Covent Garden area. Among the papers are architect's building plans and drawings of Covent Garden Theatre, Drury Lane and Aldwych Theatres, together with prints of the interior of Covent Garden Theatre. In addition there are leases, tenancy agreements and building contracts for streets on the estate, which includes the original lease to John Rich for building Covent Garden Theatre in 1730 ([E/BER/CG/L/022](#)). Amongst the papers dealing with matters of litigation are records concerning the legal opposition by Covent Garden and Haymarket Theatres to licensing the Lyceum Theatre in

1830. The briefs and affidavits contain a detailed theatrical history of both theatres ([E/BER/CG/E/09](#)).

The records of the New River Company, include records relating to the ownership and management of property, and contain various papers on Sadlers Wells Theatre dating from 1759 to 1832.

Family and Personal Papers

Collections of records of families and individuals often contain items of interest to those researching the history of theatre. The papers of the West family ([F/WST](#)) contain a bundle of early nineteenth century letters from the box office keeper of Covent Garden Theatre which include admission tickets and playbills. The Cook Collection of Theatrical and Miscellaneous Papers ([ACC/0595](#)) comprises playbills, programmes, librettos and newspaper cuttings for several London theatres, dating from 1859 to 1865.

Diaries and journals of individuals can be a useful source for contemporary accounts of the theatre. The diaries of Anthony Heap ([ACC/2243](#)) include reviews of theatre performances from 1928 to 1985. From the late 1920s he was a regular first-nighter in London theatres which produces some interesting, if somewhat subjective, observations. On attending the first performance of Noel Coward's play 'Blithe Spirit' in 1941 he states that he was 'inclined to agree with the solitary irate voice from the gallery which, above all the rapturous applause that greeted Noel's curtain speech, bellowed forth "Rubbish"!' ([ACC/2243/15](#)).

Records of amateur dramatic societies

Among the deposited collections can be found a number of records of amateur dramatic societies. The Hampstead Garden Suburb 'Play and Pageant Union' ([ACC/3816/04/02](#)) consists of an extensive range of material including photographs, programmes, reviews, scripts and videos of performances. The records of the Greater London Council Staff Dramatic Club ([ACC/1337](#)) cover the period 1903 to 1975 and include minute books, a rehearsal register and scrapbooks containing notices, reviews and programmes. Also held is a volume of programmes and reviews of performances by the Enfield Operatic and Dramatic Society ([ACC/1287](#)). The volume dates from 1889 to 1925 and also contains ephemera relating to various professional dramatic societies.

The records of parish drama clubs can sometimes be found among church records. For example, the records of Saint Michael, Battersea ([P70/MIC](#)) include documents relating to Saint Michael's Guild of Players among which are newspaper cuttings, programmes and photographs. Parish magazines can also be a useful source of information on parochial societies and clubs.

Hospital archives often include records of amateur dramatics by staff or medical students. In particular, amongst the records of West Middlesex University Hospital are three albums containing photographs, programmes and newspaper cuttings of the West Middlesex Hospital Players, 1952 to 1960 ([H36/WMX/Y/01/001-003](#)). The records of Normansfield Hospital include programmes and scores of the Genesta Amateur Dramatic Club founded by Dr John Langdon-Down and his family c.1892 to 1952 ([H29/NF/Y/02/001-006](#)), as well as photographs of the Normansfield Theatre ([H29/NF/PH/08/001-003](#)).

The print collection

Many images from our Print Collection including theatres and music halls can be viewed online at [Collage: The London Picture Archive](#).

Also included in the Print Collection are a large number of playbills and programmes dating from the 1680s to the 1970s, and a collection of stage portraits of eighteenth and nineteenth century actors including David Garrick, Samuel Foote, Edmund Kean, Henry Irving and Ellen Terry. For further information please consult staff.

Printed sources

LMA has its own library which specialises in London history, and has a noted collection of books on entertainment in London consisting of both contemporary and historical accounts of London theatre and theatres.

The library also houses a large collection of periodicals. Diana Howard's *London Theatres and Music Halls, 1850-1950* (44.2 HOW) is valuable for locating articles in periodicals as she cites contemporary accounts available for every theatre and music hall in London.

The following, held at LMA, contain architectural reviews, descriptions, illustrations, plans and reports on renovations and alterations to places of public entertainment :

The Builder 1843-1966 (35.11)

Also available is **The Builder Illustrations Index, 1843-1883** Ruth Richardson and Robert Thorne (Builder Group and Hutton & Rostron, 1994), and The Builder index on microfiche, 1842-1892.

Building News 1857-1925 (35.11)

Architect and Building News 1922-1970 (45.0)

Architect's Journal 1925-1981 (45.0)

Illustrated London News 1842-1995 (67.0 ILN)

The Times can be useful for theatre reports and for obituaries of actors and managers. LMA and Guildhall Library have access to *The Times* on line from 1785-1985. **The Gentleman's Magazine** (66.6 GEN) is useful for theatrical gossip and critical reviews of performances, and includes a monthly theatrical register which details performances being staged at the London theatres. The library holds copies from 1731 to 1868, together with an **Index to Biographical and Obituary Notices in the Gentleman's Magazine, 1781-1819** Benjamin Nangle (ed.) (Garland, 1980) (2.0), and a **Classified Collection of the Chief Contents of the Gentleman's Magazine from 1731 to 1868** George Laurence Gomme (ed.) (Elliot Stock, 1904/5) (66.6 GEN).

Also available in the library are the theatre journals **Theatrephile** 1983-1985 (44.2), and **Theatre Notebook** 1945-1995 (44.2 SOC).

The following books can be found in the library. References are given in brackets at the end of each entry.

Reading List

BAILEY, Peter (ed.) **Music Hall : the business of pleasure** Open University Press, 1986 (44.18 BAI)

BAKER, H. Barton **History of the London stage and its players** Routledge, 1904 (44.2 BAK)

BOOTH, Michael R. **Theatre in the Victorian Age** Cambridge University Press, 1991 (44.2 BOO)

FRANCHI, Francesca **Directory of Performing Arts Resources** Soc. for Theatre Research and the Theatre Museum, 1998 (R44.2 FRA)

HADDON, Archibald ***The Story of the Music Hall*** London, Fleetway Press, 1935 (44.18 HAD)

HOWARD, Diana ***London Theatres and Music Halls, 1850-1950*** The Library Association, 1970 (44.2 HOW)

HUME, Robert D. (ed.) ***The London Theatre World, 1660-1800*** Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1980 (44.2 HUM)

PENNYBACKER, Susan D. ***A Vision for London, 1889-1914 : labour, everyday life and the LCC experiment*** Routledge, 1995 (18.0 PEN)

RITCHIE, J.E. ***The Night Side of London*** Tweedie, 1857 (40.0 RIT)

SACHS, WOODROW ***Modern Opera Houses and Theatres*** Batsford, 1896/8 (44.2 SAC)

SAINT, Andrew (ed.) ***Politics and the People of London : the LCC, 1889-1965*** 1989 (18.0 1989)

SHERSON, ***Errol London's Lost Theatres*** Bodley Head, 1925 (44.2 SHE)

WALKER, Brian (ed.) ***Frank Matcham : Theatre architect*** Blackstaff Press, 1980 (45.89 MAT)

WEIGHTMAN, Gavin ***Bright Lights, Big City : London entertained, 1830-1950*** Collins and Brown, 1992 (43.0 WEI)

WILLIAMS, Michael ***Some London Theatres - past and present*** Sampson Low, 1883 (44.2 WIL)

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