RAINBOW THEATRE, Finsbury Park

1930 Opened as the Paramount Astoria for cine-variety
1960s Used extensively for big variety concerts
1971 Renamed the Rainbow Theatre
1982 Closed on safety grounds. Left empty and derelict.
1984 Preservation order obtained for the building
1999 Major restoration to auditorium. Used as a church.
2001 Major restoration to foyer

The Astoria, Finsbury Park opened on 29 September 1930 as a cine-variety, with an astounding 3,040 seats. The opening show was all live entertainment—a spectacle of music and dance extolling the British Empire. In December 1930 it was taken over by Paramount and renamed the Paramount Astoria. and through the ensuing years presented a programmes mixing films with live entertainment, featuring the Astoria Orchestra (conducted by “Anton”).

In 1939 the Astoria chain was bought by Odeon cinemas, though it did not use the Odeon name until 17 November, 1970. Throughout the war and the post-war years it was predominantly a cinema with the live entertainment confined to the mighty Wurlitzer organ. Throughout the 1960s the cinema circuit favoured the Odeon, Holloway Road, and the Astoria was used more and more for live music concerts. Frank Sinatra, The Beatles and Cliff Richard appeared there.

On 25th September 1971 the venue was renamed the Rainbow Theatre. Artists like Liza Minelli, rock groups like The Who and live shows like Chipperfield’s Circus played the theatre until the January 1982 when the Greater London Council forced it to close on safety grounds. In 1984 it was given a Grade II* listing as a building of historical importance.

The building was unused for the next eight years and was gradually falling into serious disrepair. It was used briefly in 1990 by the Elim Pentecostal Church but the cost of repairs made it impractical for the Church to remain in occupancy. In 1996 the Rank Organisation was prepared to sell its freehold, and the property was bought by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God—a Brazilian based religious organisation. The Universal Church began a sensitive and careful restoration of the auditorium and this was completed in 1999. The Foyer was restored in 2001.

RADIO THEATRE, Portland Place

An Art Deco theatre, seating 295, inside the BBC’s Broadcasting House, Portland Place. It was created for radio performances, though designed for use as a “proper” theatre.

In 2002 it underwent a four-year long major renovation, and from 2006 onwards was made available for outside hire for conferences, showcases and corporate events.
RED BULL THEATRE, Upper Street, Clerkenwell

1599 Known as an inn-yard theatre
1600c An open-air playhouse constructed on the site.
1625 Renovated and rebuilt, possibly with a roof covering
1642 Closed by Government order
1661 Re-opened
1663 Closed

Probably from the 1580s onwards the inn-yard of the Red Bull public house in St John Street, Clerkenwell, was an established place for public entertainments. In 1599 part of the inn-yard’s gallery had collapsed during a puppet show. It was said many were injured, though no fatalities were reported. Aaron Holland, a local businessman, bought the ruined inn-yard and built a new open-air playhouse on the site. The new playhouse was to be resident home for the Queen’s Men for the next 17 years.

In 1617 the Queen’s Men moved to their new premises at the Cockpit Theatre and the Red Bull was used infrequently. In 1625 it was renovated and was possibly was roofed in at this time. It then started a second lease of life. It is said that Thomas Killigrew began his career here. According to Samuel Pepys the Red Bull would offer free admission to the rest of the play to young boys who would play “walk-on” parts in the crowd scenes. Along with all playhouses, the Red Bull was closed from 1642 because of the Civil War.

In 1653 Robert Cox and his entire acting company were arrested and imprisoned after a raid on the Red Bull, where Cox was performing illegal “drolls”. “Drolls” were farcical entertainments intermingled with rope-dancing and conjuring tricks. They did not need an elaborate stage set-up, and could be quickly organised (and just as quickly abandoned) in the event of a lookout spotting Cromwell’s troops in the area.

The Red Bull was officially reopened in 1660. Killigrew’s company used it briefly. Samuel Pepys visited it in 1661 to see the play “All’s Lost by Lust”. He reported on a poorly dressed, poorly acted and poorly attended play. In 1663 the theatre closed. It had been demolished by 1665.
RED LION THEATRE, Stepney

1567    Opened
1575    Closed

James Burbage and his brother-in-law, the grocer John Brayne, formed a partnership and opened what is thought to be the first public playhouse in England. It was in the courtyard of the Red Lion House in Stepney, beyond Whitechapel. The building had a five feet high stage and a “turret” or a tower which apparently included a tiring-house for the actors to change their costumes.

Whether or not it is the first is debatable. John Rastell (1475-1536), the deviser of the royal pageants for Henry VIII, built a timber and lathe stage in his grounds at Finsbury Fields, and is known to have hired it out - together with a collection of costumes - for performances. The Corporation of Great Yarmouth opened a public “game house” in 1539, and these premises were rented by performing companies. The Cockpit Yard Theatre opened in Liverpool in the same year.

In 1576 Burbage and Brayne built their “Theatre” in Shoreditch. It was intended as a replacement for the Red Lion, which then ceased to be used for plays.

REGAL, EDMONTON

1934    Opened
1968    Divided into two auditoria, renamed the Sundown Theatre
1972    Cinema closed and became a banqueting suite
1985    Closed
1986    Demolished and replaced with a supermarket.

When it opened on a site in Fore Street in 1934, the Regal was said to occupy the largest site of any cinema in the world. It had a seating capacity of 3,000 and room for a further 1,000 standing. It was built for cine-variety and the stage was 97 feet wide and 55 feet deep. If the orchestra pit was not in use, the stage could be extended by a further twelve feet. The stage contained a built-in revolve with a diameter of 39 feet, and the stage floor contained four lifts. This was one of the finest equipped stages in the country.

The building contained its own café and a large ballroom which had a separate stage for an orchestra. With public lifts to all floors, a ten-ton Christie cinema organ, and the very latest in projection and lighting equipment, the Regal. Edmonton was one of London’s best appointed cine-variety theatres.

Although primarily used for films, many spectacular productions appeared there—pantomimes, variety, ice-shows, ballet, symphony and jazz concerts. Variety artists like Sid Fields, Tommy Handley, Billy Bennett, Tommy Trinder and Elsie and Doris Waters appeared there. It was the first cinema in the country to have a stage show televised when “Cinderella” starring Derek Roy and Jean Kent was performed there. It was also used for post and pre-West End tours: both Lionel Bart’s “Oliver” and “Blitz” were staged at the Regal.

By 1968 the days of large cinema attendances was over, and the Regal was sub-divided into two auditoria. It became a 1,200 seater cinema and a Bingo Hall with 1,850 places. At this time it was re-named the Sundown Theatre. The cinema closed in 1972, and was converted into the Regal Banqueting Suite. By 1985 the building was run-down and shabby and in January 1986—despite an attempt to preserve at least the façade—it was demolished to make way for a supermarket.

REGENT THEATRE, Euston Road

1900    Opened as the Euston Palace of Varieties  
1923    Renamed the Regent Theatre  
1932    Converted to a cinema  
1954    Renamed the Century Cinema  
1967    Renamed the Granada Cinema  
1968    Cinema closed and used for bingo  
1969    Closed  
1971    Demolished

Opened as the Euston Palace Music Hall on 26 December, 1900. It was designed by Bertie Crewe and had a seating capacity of 1,310, and was part of the circuit run by George Adney Payne. In 1904 Harry Houdini caused a sensation by escaping from a safe onstage at the Euston Palace of Varieties - to the astonishment of the safe builders, who declared the feat was impossible. (Much later it was decided that a confederate must have passed him a tiny screw-driver in a hand-shaking episode and that Houdini unscrewed the inner part of the lock)

In 1923 the new owners, Variety Theatres Consolidated Ltd, saw their music hall business decline, and so they leased the building to the actor-manager, Nigel Playfair. He renamed it the Regent Theatre and opened it with Arnold Bennett’s “Body and Soul”. The same year saw the premiere of the Capeks’ “The Insect Play” and in 1924 John Gielgud and Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies appeared in “Romeo and Juliet”. For nearly a decade the Regent Theatre was the home of exciting new dramas and interesting classic revivals, many of them staged by the Phoenix Society and other similar groups.

In 1933 the theatre was bought by the Kings Cross Cinemas Ltd. For a short while it alternated films with occasional live theatre hirings, but by 1935 it had been taken over by ABC and was in full time use as a cinema. The ownership of the cinema changed hands several times in the next decades, and in 1954 it underwent considerable refurbishment and re-opened as the Century Cinema. It was renamed the Granada Cinema in May 1967 at which time it was said to have just 853 seats. Just under a year later the cinema closed and re-opened as a bingo hall. The cinema closed in 1969 and was demolished two years later, the site being used for an extension to the Town Hall.

REGENT THEATRE, Hayes

????    Opened  
????    Closed and demolished. A supermarket built on the site.

The Regent Theatre in Coldharbour Lane had a seating capacity of 842. Shortly after the Second War it was producing weekly repertory under Cygnet Theatre Productions, and then under the management of Jean Shepeard in the early 1950s. It was also used for touring shows such as Hughie Green’s “Opportunity Knocks” and the “Jane of the Daily Mirror Show”. It was part of a touring variety circuit for a while, and staged a number of early Paul Raymond shows. However, it is chiefly remembered as a cinema. Further information is needed.
REGENT THEATRE, Regent Street

1834c Opened as a “Gallery of Sciences”
1838 Became the home of the Royal Polytechnic
1848 Enlarged and named the Marlborough Hall
1881 Burnt down and rebuilt as a lecture hall
1912 Frontage rebuilt and cinema facilities installed, called the Marlborough Hall
1923 Reconstructed as the Polytechnic Theatre, and used as a cinema. Later called the Cameo-Poly
1974 Renamed the Regent Theatre and used for stage shows
1979 Closed and reverted to cinema use
1980 Sub-divided and used as lecture rooms

From its early days there was a “theatre” incorporated into this educational complex, which included a gallery, exhibition centre and lecture rooms. In the 1870s the “theatre” was used for “dioramic illustrations and optical illusions” and for a demonstration of the famous stage effect of “Pepper’s Ghost”. In 1878 there was a performance of “Pilgrim’s Progress” - “with the assistance of several actors and actresses and illustrated by dissolving views and stage tableaux”.

Following the rebuilding of 1911 it was used most frequently for film shows. In 1923 it was remodelled for cinema use and became a regular cinema—though the films were of an educational nature and often accompanied by lectures and discussions. By the 1930s it was, more or less, a standard commercial cinema and eventually declined into a News Theatre and then a cinema for foreign and “art” films. In 1974 the lease was taken over by theatre impresarios Larry Parnes and Laurie Marsh and it was converted into a theatre.

With its new name—the Regent Theatre—it opened on 27th March with “Flowers—A Pantomime for Jean Genet” devised and directed by Lindsay Kemp. The theatre then cashed in the scandal surrounding “Oh, Calcutta” with a production entitled “Let My People Come”. In 1979 its theatre activity ended and it reverted to cinema use. The following year the theatre space was sub-divided into lecture rooms.

REGENT THEATRE, Westminster

1866 Mentioned as an existing theatre
1871 Licensed as a theatre holding 1,500 people
1877 Mentioned in a Fire Brigade listing of theatres.
No other information known

The Select Committee on Theatrical Licensing and Regulations Report of 1866 mentions an existing theatre in St Anne, Westminster. It reports that this theatre held 1,500 people and had cost £25,000 to build.

It held a Lord Chamberlain’s License for the presentation of plays in 1871-2 with the Licensee recorded as Edward Tyrrel Smith. It is mentioned again in 1877 in a Select Committee Report on the Metropolitan Fire brigade. So far no further information has come to light.

RICHMOND THEATRE (1)

1718 Opened as a temporary building
1719 Rebuilt as a permanent theatre from a converted stable
1726c Closed

The first theatre on Richmond Hill, Surrey seems to have been a fit-up theatre created in a barn especially for a visit from one particular group of travelling players, led by the actor William Penkethman. The visit was a commercial success, so Penkethmen bought the barn and an adjoining stable and converted them into a permanent venue for regular performances—though the performances are likely to have been seasonal around some touring circuit. Penkethman died in 1725 after which his theatre closed and fell into decay.
RICHMOND THEATRE (2)
1730 Opened
1767 Closed because of competition from the new Richmond Green Theatre

Richmond’s second theatre was built a little way up the hill from its predecessor, and was slightly smaller. It was created by Thomas Chapman, an actor in Penkethman’s company who was aware of the good business to be found in Richmond. This was the beginning of a remarkable explosion in theatre building throughout the country. A number of theatre companies established themselves in a given theatre and then regularly toured to a circuit of theatres, fit-ups, barns and other venues in the surrounding districts. A number of London theatre companies would regularly make visits to provincial theatres. A number of “star” names would occasionally be paid to come and perform with the local actors as a special attraction. There is little written evidence, but it seems as if this theatre was a base for some touring around the Surrey area for at least part of its 37 year life-span.

After Chapman’s death in 1747 the theatre came under the control of Theophilus Cibber, son of the famous theatre manager and playwright, Colly Cibber. Theophilus died in 1758—drowned at sea whilst on his way to act in Dublin. In 1765 the whole undertaking has a rival—a new theatre had opened on Richmond Green. The Chapman/Cibber venue was hardly worthy of the name “theatre” by later standards, and once the audience discovered the “proper” theatre on the Green, this one very quickly closed.

RICHMOND THEATRE (3)
1765 Opened as the “Theatre”
1766 Renamed the Theatre Royal
1800 Name changed to King’s Theatre
1853 Renamed Her Majesty’s Theatre
1884 Closed and demolished.

First built in 1765 and called the Theatre on Richmond Green, this became an important part of the 18th Century theatre scene, even though it was unlicensed. It opened in direct competition with the existing theatre on Richmond Hill, and after just two years was successful enough to have forced its rival to close. It was brick built with several spacious boxes, a small pit and a gallery. Its horseshoe shaped auditorium is thought to have been the first in the country and the model for the later Theatre Royal at Bristol.

It opened on 15 June 1765 with a prologue written for the occasion by David Garrick, who lived nearby at Hampton. In 1766 the stage was enlarged and the theatre re-named itself the Theatre Royal. Its early days were subject to some pressure from the licensing authorities. As a subterfuge at one stage it was used as a “snuff warehouse” and offered free entertainment to customers buying snuff. Gradually it established itself and over the years attracted many famous actors. Charles Matthews the Elder as a stage-struck youth paid seven and a half guineas to play Richard II. Sarah Siddons appeared there, as did Charles Dibdin, Edmund Kean, Charles Kean and even Charles Dickens.

In 1800, as a mark of loyalty following the Drury Lane assassination attempt on George III, its name was changed to the King’s Theatre. In 1831 Edmund Kean acquired the lease of the theatre and took up residence in the adjoining house. On 15 March 1831 he played Othello in his own theatre at Richmond. His son played Iago and Ellen Tree (later to be famous as Mrs Charles Kean) played Desdemona. This was a “try-out” for their performance at Covent Garden ten days later. The novelty of the first London appearance of father and son together, plus the ever-growing fame of Edmund Kean, made the 25 March 1831 a night to remember at Covent Garden. In the middle of that performance Edmund Kean collapsed and the play was abandoned. He was brought back to Richmond and died on 15 May. The stage of the Richmond Theatre was used for an auction of all Kean’s belonging.

The middle of the 19th Century was not a good time for theatres (though enormously successful for the growing music hall industry). By 1853 the theatre had renamed itself “Her Majesty’s” and had begun to be part of the circuit that was radiating out from the growing West End of London. By 1884, however, the venue was in a state of disrepair and would cost a fortune to bring up to the newly required safety standards. It closed and soon after was demolished.
RICHMOND THEATRE (4)

1899  Opened as the Richmond Theatre & Opera House
1902  Renamed the Prince of Wales
1909  Renamed the Richmond Hippodrome
1915  Refurbished as Richmond Theatre
1975  Refurbished
1991  Lavishly restored and renovated

Richmond had been without a proper theatre for some time, whilst theatres were expanding everywhere else. A local impresario, Mr F.C. Mouflet, seized the opportunity and leased a former Assembly Hall in the town. He converted this into a basic theatre and started staging regular productions. (See under Castle Theatre, Richmond).

It was a great success and well supported by the local community and by customers from the surrounding areas. This encouraged him to take the risk and build the “real thing”, using the Theatre in the Assembly Hall as a temporary venue until the new theatre was finished. He appointed Frank Matcham as architect, and the result is recognised today as one of the most outstanding and important theatre buildings in the country—a superb example of the master theatre builder at his restrained and elegant best.

The theatre was formally opened on 14 Sept 1899 as the Richmond Theatre and Opera House. The first performance took place four days later and was “As You Like It” presented by the Ben Greet Company. It had a capacity of 1,600. In December 1902 it was renamed the Prince of Wales and came under the control of George Dance, a West-End-based impresario and touring producer. Up to this point the theatre had presented plays, melodramas and musicals. After the 1904/5 pantomime the policy was changed and the venue was now used for twice-nightly variety. It also housed the occasional “flying matinee”, when plays and musical comedies from a West End Theatre, with costumes and scenery, would travel to Richmond for just one performance.

In 1909 the theatre changed its name to the Richmond Hippodrome. Later it was called the Theatre Royal, Richmond, and eventually simply the Richmond Theatre. Anna Pavlova danced with the Imperial Russian Ballet in 1912, and by this time the twice-nightly variety had declined and was replaced with touring productions. From 1932 the theatre was used for weekly repertory. The theatre closed at the start of the Second World War, but reopened within six months as a touring and variety house.

In October 1944 it returned to repertory with Harry Hansen’s Court Players. Freddie Piffard, Andrew Melville and Alan Miles took over in 1947 and staged repertory for the next 25 years—weekly rep until 1964 and then fortnightly rep until 1972. From 1973 the Richmond Theatre was under the control of impresario Louis Michaels. The theatre built up a reputation for first class productions with all star casts and for outstanding pantomimes. Louis Michaels died in 1981 but his colleagues and successors continued the tradition until the theatre closed in March 1989 to undergo major refurbishment.

The theatre underwent a £4.5 million renovation, restoring Matcham’s original work to the exterior and the foyers but adding a new suite of modern facilities as an extension and reopened on 18 Nov 1991 with “An Evening with Peter Ustinov”.

It remains one of the UK’s leading touring venues, and is currently operated by the Ambassador Theatre Group.
RICHMOND ODEON

1930 Opened as a cine-variety— and named “The Richmond Kinema
1940 Renamed the Premier
1944 Renamed the Odeon
1973 Tripled
1998 Major refurbishment

Built in 1930 as a cine-variety, it opened with a variety show. In 1957 the interior was featured in the film “The Smallest Show on Earth” - as an example of a “proper” cinema as opposed to the flea-pit of the film’s title. The very wide stage and the dressing rooms are still intact and until the early 1970s were used for some large shows and concerts by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra. The original cinema (with 3,200 seats) was tripled in 1973, after which it ceased to be used for live theatre and was exclusively used as a cinema. The proscenium arch was obscured by a wide screen, but is still extant. In 1990 the building obtained a Grade II Listing.

RIVERSIDE STUDIOS, Hammersmith

In 1933 two film studios were built on the site of a former foundry, and in 1954 these were bought by the BBC and used for many of the popular TV broadcasts of that time. When the BBC ceased to use them in 1976 they were incorporated into an Arts Centre. In 1987 a cinema was added to the two large theatre spaces, and in 1994 the whole complex underwent major refurbishment.

ROMFORD EMPIRE

This entry is a bit of a worry. It is listed as a demolished theatre in the Theatres’ Trust Guide, but no dates and no information is given. There is a joking reference to it in a BBC radio “Goon Show” script—along the lines of “Neddy Seagoon is working next week at the Romford Empire”. It is also mentioned in an article about the pop singer Joe Brown and the Bruvvers, indicating that Jack Good of TV fame was holding auditions at Romford Empire and it was here that he discovered Joe Brown. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the site later became the notorious Romford night-club called Hollywood, which opened in the mid 1980s. By the start of the 21st Century the nightclub had closed and been transformed into two smaller venues called Vivid and Elite. More research is needed.

ROMFORD ODEON & ABC

Romford had two cine-variety houses in South Street, both of which were used occasionally for live shows. The Odeon (1936-1990) opened as the Havana—seating 2,351 with extensive stage facilities. Because of wartime restrictions, at first it saw very little live theatre. In 1949 it became an Odeon cinema. In the late 50s and 60s it was frequently used for large pop-concerts—notably for a Beatles concert in June 1963. The cinema was “tripled” in 1974 and ceased to be used for live theatre. In 1990 the cinema closed, and the building was converted into a venue called “Shoot ‘em up at Lazerquest” and in 1999 it was renovated as two nightclubs, “Time & Envy” and “Liquid”.

The ABC (1938-2000) opened as the “Ritz” with 2,019 seats. During the 1960s the Ritz was occasionally used for live concerts. It was renamed the ABC in 1962, and was “tripled” in 1970 when all stage use ceased. It closed in November 1999 and was demolished the following year. The ABC saw the Beatles as a support act in March 1963 and as a headline act in March 1965.
In 1587 Philip Henslowe, in association with John Cholmley, a grocer, built a new theatre in an area of Southwark known as the Liberty of the Clink. The land had been purchased one year earlier on a twenty year lease. The chief builder was a carpenter called James Griggs. It was called “The Rose” because it stood on the site of a former rose garden. The theatre was a 13 or 14 sided polygon, and was 72 feet wide. Constructed of wood and plaster on a brick foundation, and partly thatched it had a stage area 18 feet deep, and varying from 28 feet to 38 feet in length.

The stage faced south-east, in order to catch the maximum daylight. The main area for the standing patrons sloped towards the stage, so that those standing at the back would still get a good view. Henslowe secured the services of a rising young 20 year old actor, Edward Alleyn, to lead a company based on the existing provincial players known as Lord Howard’s Men. Lord Howard had recently been appointed Lord High Admiral of England—so Henslowe’s players at the Rose were called the Admiral’s Men.

In 1592 The Rose underwent major refurbishment and alteration. The building was enlarged to hold 2,000, and a roof was placed over the stage. The rebuilding cost £105 - and it was said 54,000 nails were used in the reconstruction. During the rebuilding Henslowe’s Company, the Admiral’s Men, went on a provincial tour.

They were still on tour when the reconstruction was completed, so Henslowe leased the new Rose on a short-term basis - February to May - to Lord Strange’s Men who usually performed at the Theatre, north of the Thames. This temporary season played every day except Sundays and Good Friday, and no play was repeated two days running. Henslowe has reported some of the box office takings: the March 3rd performance of “Henry VI” amounted to £3.16s.8d, with the overall income from 14 performances of this play amounting to £30. Other single performance takings include “Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay” (17s/3d), “Orlando Furioso” (17s/6d), “A Looking Glass for London” (7 shillings), while the performance of “The Jew of Malta” on 26th February took £2.10s. The Admiral’s Men returned to the Rose at the end of the Lord Strange’s Men season.

By 1599 the Rose was in trouble. Alleyn had retired, and the Rose faced huge competition from the newly-opened Globe Theatre and its hugely popular “star” actor, Richard Burbage. With only a few years left on his lease, Henslowe was in a quandary. His son-in-law, Edward Alleyn, emerged temporarily from retirement to help out with money, and they decided to build another theatre north of the Thames—away from the competition. This theatre, the Fortune, opened in 1600 and Henslowe’s company moved there, leaving their old home available for rent. In 1600 a rival acting company, Lord Pembroke’s Men, moved in to the Rose for two dates only, then there were fears that the Lord Mayor would allow only one theatre to operate on the South Bank, and that would be the Globe. The Rose was empty, and available for hire, but there were no takers.

In 1602 “My Lord of Worcester’s Players” took over the Rose, and celebrated their opening night on August 21st at a party at the Mermaid Tavern. Philip Henslowe paid the costs of the party, which came to 9 shillings. The star attraction for Worcester’s Men was the comedian, Will Kempe, who had recently defected from the Globe. The new tenants hoped to gain success with lavish, spectacular effects and to maximise the current popularity for plays of horror and painful death. Playwrights Thomas Middleton and John Webster
were already part of this venture. However in 1605, with one year to go on the lease, Henslowe decided to leave the area to the Globe Theatre and the bull and bear-baiting arenas. The building was demolished at the end of the year.

In 1989 part of the foundation was discovered during construction work. The builders wished to cover up the remains and continue with their office development. There was a great outcry. Prominent theatre people protested at the site, some even lying on the ground in front of the bulldozers. An international campaign was launched to achieve preservation of this historical site. Finally—and it was a very close thing! - the site was saved. The offices were built around and over the old theatre and an exhibition centre incorporating the preserved foundations opened in 1999.

The photograph (left) shows the preserved foundations of the Rose incorporated into the basement of a new office block. Laser lighting is used to indicate the original walls of the theatre, and the remains can be viewed via a plate-glass window screen at street level.

A fuller display of photographs taken during the excavations and models indicating the original layout form part of a permanent exhibition associated with the nearby Shakespeare’s Globe (q.v.)

ROUND CHAPEL, Hackney

The Round Chapel was built between 1869 and 1871 for Nonconformist religious use. Architecturally it is especially valuable for its innovative cast-iron columns and tracery. When its church use ceased the building was bought by the Hackney Historic Buildings Trust and given a Grade II Listing, and was newly restored as an arts centre. The main space can seat up to 600, and it is used for all manner of arts events, including concerts, plays and dance shows.

The adjacent Old School Rooms were originally a part of the Chapel and are currently used by the Clapton Park United Reformed Church. The Rooms contain a main hall and a number of small rooms suitable for a wide range of social and artistic functions. The School Rooms are used for religious services and as part of the community arts provision in the Round Chapel Arts Centre. Its stunning interior creates a very special ambience for the right kind of theatre production.
ROUNDHOUSE,
Chalk Farm Road

1964 Converted into a theatre
1984 Closed
1998 Major renovation prior to reopening
2000 Reopened
2006 A £30million reconstruction

The Roundhouse was built in 1847 for the London and Birmingham Railway Company. It housed a giant turntable to enable the parked locomotive to be moved to various lines or sidings as required. By 1869 railway development meant it was no longer needed and it was used as a warehouse for the next 95 years.

In 1964 the building was listed for its architectural and historical importance. Some suitable use was required and the building was acquired by Centre 42—a charity consisting of a new generation of artists of all kinds—for performances and exhibitions. Centre 42 ran into financial difficulties and its acquisition was passed on to the Roundhouse Trust who began adapting the building into a performance space.

After a series of “pop” concerts and “club” events with performers like Pink Floyd, David Bowie and the Doors, the Roundhouse finally obtained a license and opened as a public theatre in June 1968 with Peter Brook’s “Themes on the Tempest”.

In February 1969 it staged a “Hamlet with Nicol Williamson and Marianne Faithfull. In July 1970 it staged “Oh, Calcutta” - its first overwhelming success—and a production which transferred to the Royalty and later the Duchess Theatres.

It now began a period of hit shows that would transfer to the West End— including “Catch my Soul”, “Godspell” and an early version of “Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” - together with seasons from visiting regional and national touring companies. In 1979 the building underwent some reconstruction, but in 1984 it ran into financial difficulties and closed.

In 1998 a new Roundhouse Trust received a very large sum of Lottery money for redeveloping the building. By the turn of the Millennium the Roundhouse was open again. In 2002 it hosted the London season of the Royal Shakespeare Company who had abandoned their home at the Barbican and sought to perform in “more exciting” spaces like the Roundhouse. A £30million refit was completed in June 2006. The main space was renovated to hold 1,800 people seated and 3,300 standing. A new wing was built in an arc enveloping one side of the building incorporating a second theatre named Studio 42 plus studios with sound and video facilities.
ROYAL ALBERT HALL, Kensington

1871  Opened
1941  Became the permanent home of the Proms
1969  Acoustic improvements carried out
1996  Major renovation commenced—the Hall remaining open throughout
2004  Major renovation completed.

The Royal Albert Hall is one of London’s most treasured and distinctive buildings, recognisable the world over. It was designed as part of a national memorial to the late Prince Consort, and its official opening ceremony was on 29 March 1871. After a welcoming speech by Edward, the Prince of Wales, Queen Victoria was too overcome to speak, so the Prince had to announce that "The Queen declares this Hall is now open".

A concert followed, when the Hall's acoustic problems became immediately apparent. These were not properly tackled until 1969 when a series of large fibreglass acoustic diffusing discs (commonly referred to as "mushrooms" or "flying saucers") were installed in the roof to cut down the notorious echo. It used to be said that the hall was the only place where a British composer could be sure of hearing his work twice.

Since its opening the world's leading artists from every kind of performance genre have appeared on its stage. Each year it hosts more than 350 performances including classical concerts, rock and pop, ballet and opera, tennis, award ceremonies, school and community events, charity performances and lavish banquets.

The Hall was designed by Captain Francis Fowke and Major-General Henry Y.D. Scott of the Royal Engineers and was constructed mainly of red brick with terra-cotta block decoration. The dome on top was made of steel and glazed. There was a trial assembly made of the steel framework of the dome in Manchester, then it was taken apart again and transported down to London via horse and cart.

When the time came for the supporting structure to be removed from the dome after re-assembly in situ, only volunteers remained on site in case the structure dropped. It did drop - but only by five-eighths of an inch. It was initially lit by gas (when thousands of gas jets were lit by a special system within 10 seconds), and electric lighting was installed in 1897.

From 1941 onwards it has been the home of the BBC Henry Wood Promenade Concerts, as a result of which it has become one of the most famous concert halls in the world. The Hall has more recently undergone a rolling programme (1996 - 2004) of renovation and development to enable it to meet the demands of the next century of events and performances. Although its outward appearance has not changed, there has been a major transformation in its access, dressing room and technical facilities. The rebuilding also included complete renovation of its famous pipe organ—with 9,999 pipes it is the second largest in the UK. (Liverpool Cathedral has 10,268).

A separate room inside the Hall was originally named the West Theatre and used as a rehearsal space by the Central School of Speech & Drama between 1906 and 1957, after which it was renamed the Elgar Room. In 2009 this space underwent a £1 million refurbishment, removing the old raised platform and creating room for 350 standing or 110 if used as a restaurant. The re-launched Elgar Room will host live events, comedy nights and after-show parties.
ROYAL ALBERT MUSIC HALL Canning Town

1875  Opened as Relf's Music Hall.
????  Renamed the Royal Albert Music Hall.
1909  Rebuilt as the Music Hall of the Dockland
1931  Burnt down and rebuilt as a cinema
1958  Cinema renamed the Essoldo
1967  Demolished?

In 1875 the 'Town Of Ayr' public house was enlarged to contain a music hall known as Relf’s. At some later date it was renamed the Royal Albert. In 1908 the existing premises were rebuilt from the Imperial Theatre, Westminster (q.v.). The Imperial had been carefully demolished, all its pieces numbered, and then re-created as the New Imperial, or the Music Hall of Dockland.

The redeveloped theatre survived until 1931 when it burnt down and was replaced with the Imperial Cinema. In 1958 the cinema was renovated as the Essoldo, but soon afterwards became a bingo hall.

It was finally demolished in 1967.

A Benefit performance at the Royal Albert Music Hall, 1881

ROYAL ARTILLERY THEATRE, Woolwich

1782  Built as the Barracks Chapel Hall
1863  Converted for recreation use and later for amateur dramatics provided by soldiers of the Royal Artillery
1903  Burnt down
1904  Rebuilt with funds from subscription and the War Office. Used for servicemen.
1909  Leased for professional use.
1918  Damaged by an enemy bomb
1919  Re-opened
1940  Renamed the Garrison Theatre
1945  Damaged by bombs and closed.
1947  Reopened as the Royal Artillery Theatre for touring companies
1954  Closed
1956  Demolished

In 1863 the Royal Artillery Recreation Rooms were created inside what had formerly been a multi-purpose hall attached to the Woolwich Barracks. Some years later a stage was added and the rooms were known as the Royal Artillery Theatre. The interior was destroyed by fire in 1903, and a completely new theatre was built inside the shell of the old building, opening on 21 December 1905.

From 1909 to 1940 the theatre was leased by Agnes Littler. During this time she successfully presented such performers as Lily Langtry, Belle Bilton, George Robey, Albert Chevalier, Oscar Ashe and Violet Vanbrugh. Mrs Littler and her husband were both in the foyer when an enemy bomb landed just outside. Both were injured in the blast but survived.
In the 1930s the Artillery Theatre was managed by Prince Littler and his sister, Blanche (who later became Lady Robey—the wife of Sir George Robey). In 1940 the theatre was taken over by various Service units as part of the War Effort. It suffered further bomb damage, but in 1947 reopened as a commercial touring house, with rep seasons from the Wheeler & Salisbury Rep Company, and Smeddle Brothers’ Variety seasons.

It finally closed in 1954 and was demolished in 1956.

ROYAL BOROUGH THEATRE, Tooley Street
1834 Opened
1836 Demolished when the site was bought by a railway company

Between 1834 and 1836 there was a theatre in Tooley Street, Borough, which was pulled down to make room for the buildings of the South-Eastern Railways. The records are very scant and the place could have had a local importance only.

ROYAL CAMBRIDGE MUSIC HALL, Shoreditch
1864 Opened
1896 Burnt down
1898 Rebuilt and reopened
1924 Closed and used as a cinema
1936 Closed and demolished

With a capacity of 2000 the Cambridge Music Hall cost £16,000 to build. It was situated at 136 Commercial Street and opened in 1864 designed by W. Finch Hill—the famous “pub architect” who also designed the Hoxton Britannia. In 1878 it was renovated and improved by Jethro T. Robinson. This was almost his last work since he died the same year and his design and architecture company passed to his son-in-law, Frank Matcham. In 1885 some further work was carried out to meet safety legislation and the seating capacity was reduced to 1,488. In 1896 it was destroyed by fire.

It was rebuilt and opened in January 1989 as the Royal Cambridge Music Hall with a capacity of 926, and a stage that was 41 feet wide and 30 feet deep. The architect was D.H. Percival. The Cambridge is said to be the theatre where Charlie Chaplin made a solo comedy debut in the early months of 1906. The legend says Chaplin was called upon to deputise when the leading comedian fell ill. “Thus Charlie made his appearance as “Sam Cohen, the Jewish comedian”. In this role he wore the original comic’s baggy pants (a forecast of things to come?) and fell into a tub of water on stage, to great merriment.” By 1924 its theatrical activity had ceased. It was possibly used as a cinema for a while, but eventually closed and was used as a warehouse. In 1936 it was demolished and the site was used to extend an adjacent tobacco factory.
ROYAL COUNTY THEATRE, Kingston upon Thames

1897 Opened
1912 Closed and became a “Kinema”
1940 Demolished

The Royal County was designed by J.C. Bourne and opened in 1897. It was not a successful venue, and after just fifteen years it closed and became a cinema. Its theatre life ended with the last night of the 1911-1912 pantomime, “Tom, Tom the Piper’s Son”.

By 1933 Kingston was already served by the huge Regal cinema, the smaller Elite and the Kinema. The opening of a large Odeon that same year sealed its fate. It struggled on for a few more years but in 1940 it was demolished.
In 1870 Messrs Morgan and Oliver opened the New Chelsea Theatre with a policy of cheap prices and a mixture of stage shows and music hall. Their theatre was a badly transformed Nonconformist Chapel. It had no success at all. They tried changing the name to the Belgravia Theatre, but that didn’t work either. Finally they sold out to Marie Litton. She engaged the architect Walter Emden to reconstruct the theatre. Despite the efforts of the original owners, the New Chelsea or the Belgravia had always felt like a converted chapel and not a “proper” theatre, so Marie Litton spent a great deal of money on frescoes, plasterwork and satin drapes and reopened it as the Royal Court Theatre in January 1871 with W.S. Gilbert’s “Randal’s Thumb”.

In 1875 John Hare became manager bringing with him the Kendals and Henry Kemble with a top class company. Wilson Barrett appeared with them in 1879, and Modjeska played Juliet for them in 1880. In 1881 a new manager, John Clayton, added an elaborate new porch to the outside of the building and did more alteration and improvement inside. The Royal Court was by now a theatre of some distinction. Pinero’s “The Magistrate” (1885) was a great success and was followed by more Pinero successes.

Unfortunately for John Clayton within six years he was informed that his theatre would have to be pulled down for redevelopment of Sloane Square. As part the compensation package he secured a new site on the east side of the square, adjoining the entrance to the Metropolitan Railway. The old Royal Court closed on 22 July 1887.

On 24 September 1888 the new Royal Court, across the square, opened, designed by Walter Emden and Bertie Crewe. It was a three-tier theatre with seats for 642 people, decorated in Empire style. At the time of its opening it was criticised for being a plain and unexciting building. The opening production was a French farce called “Mamma”. The Royal Court, now under the management of Mrs John Wood was slow to take off, but eventually thanks to Pinero’s “Trelawney of the Wells” it was once again a highly fashionable and successful venue.

In 1904 J.E. Vedrenne and Harley Granville Barker took over and began a three year period which revolutionised British Theatre. No fewer than eleven Bernard Shaw premières, Greek Drama and challenging new work by Galsworthy and Barker himself, created a new kind of intellectual theatre and an audience prepared to be intellectually challenged and stimulated, rather than be merely entertained.

Barry Jackson took over management in the 1920s and staged more Shaw, including the mammoth five-part “Back to Methuselah” over four nights, modern dress productions of Shakespeare “Macbeth”, Expressionist plays like Elmer Rice’s “The Adding Machine” a three year run of Eden Phillpott’s “The Farmer’s Wife”.

In 1934 the advent of “talkies” and the Depression of the 1930s saw the Royal Court close. It was sold for £7,500 and was converted into a cinema. The cinema survived until November 1940 when it was badly damaged by bombs. The building remained derelict for the next twelve years.

In 1952 the building was renovated. The three-tiers were adapted to two, with the gallery closed off, the seating reduced to 401 (from the former 642) and the Royal Court Theatre reopened.

In 1956 it staged John Osborne’s “Look Back in Anger”. For the second time in its history, the Royal Court Theatre was leading a theatrical revolution. Under the direction of George Devine the Royal Court set out to stage and encourage new writing.
This policy continued under his successors, and the theatre introduced major and ground-breaking plays by new writers like John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, John Arden, David Storey, Christopher Hampton, and Caryl Churchill as well as European writers like Brecht, Beckett, Genet, Ionesco and Sartre.

Established “greats” appeared in new plays or revolutionary productions: Olivier as a seedy music-hall comic in “The Entertainer” or as a man turning into a rhinoceros in Ionesco’s “Rhinoceros”; Gielgud and Ralph Richardson in “Home”, Gielgud as a King Lear by Edward Bond not Shakespeare; Guinness in Ionesco’s “Exit the King” and as a “Brechtian-style” Macbeth.

The Royal Court was the powerhouse of British Theatre for much of the second half of the 20th Century. In 1971 a rehearsal room became the 80-seat experimental “Theatre Upstairs”, and in 1980 the theatre itself underwent further renovation which increased the seating capacity somewhat—though it was always an unimpressive auditorium with poor sightlines.

Under the artistic direction of Stephen Daldry, the theatre continued its success through the 90s. Major productions included “Oleanna” by David Mamet, and the notorious “Shopping and F***ing” (1997) by Mark Ravenhill.

In 1996 the Court closed for major reconstruction. The performing company moved to the Ambassadors Theatre in the West End while building work was going on. The rebuilding consciously decided to mix two styles—the old and the new. The original Empire style auditorium by Bertie Crewe and Walter Emden was maintained and lovingly restored—as was the proscenium arch. The rest of the building was re-planned in a kind of “old world meets high-tech” approach.

In 2000 the magnificently restored Royal Court reopened with McPherson’s “Dublin Carol”.

ROYAL FESTIVAL HALL, Southbank

1951 Opened
2007 Major renovation

The Royal Festival Hall, primarily one of London’s major orchestral concert halls, has been frequently used for staged and “semi-staged” performances, ranging from full-scale ballets and operas to musicals. It was used for a theatre production in its very first year, and, after a multi-million pound renovation in 2007, it celebrated its re-opening with a staging of the opera “Carmen Jones”.

ROYAL HOTEL THEATRE

1888 Opened
1914 Closed

Though listed in “Curtains” as a demolished theatre, it has not been possible to find any more information on this theatre. The original listing gave Ernest Woodrow as the designer. However, Woodrow did not go into private practice until 1895, prior to which he was employed by the London County Council. More research is needed.
ROYAL KENT THEATRE,
High Street, South Kensington

1831 Opened as the Royal Kensington Subscription Theatre.
1832 Closed when the company was declared bankrupt.
1834 Reopened as the Royal Kent Theatre.
1840 Closed, and occasionally used for amateur productions.
1842 Opened and closed, again through bankruptcy.
1844 Reopened.
1845 Closed.
1850 Demolished

The Royal Kensington Subscription Theatre opened in 1831 with “Othello” played by H. S. Kemble (a nephew of John Philip). In less than a year however the proprietor had been declared insolvent and the theatre was being used a Riding School. The theatre, renamed the Royal Kent Theatre, reopened in May 1834. Once more the opening production was an “Othello”, this time coupled with a “local” farce called the “The Gardener of Kensington”. After just two months the theatre closed temporarily, issuing a notice saying “performances have not hitherto been suitable to the taste of the inhabitants of the district and the theatre has been taken by a gentleman who proposes to supply every deficiency”.

It reopened in August 1834, redecorated with taste and elegance. Every effort was made to create a fashionable theatre to appeal to higher classes, but despite the guest appearance of such luminaries as Madame Vestris, the theatre failed yet again. By early 1836 the Royal Kent changed its policy and announced a series of pantomimes. It advertised “Signor Goffini, the man-monkey who will go through his wonderful gymnastic evolutions” and pursued such gimmicks as arranging for “a magnificent Montgolfier balloon” to ascend from the top of the theatre”. At one performance that year the audience consisted mainly of a large booking by the Royal Lodge of Odd Fellows. The Odd Fellows became very drunk and some decided they could perform the parts better than the actors. When they scrambled onstage, fighting broke out both onstage and in the audience. The police were called, and as a result the theatre was closed for several months by order of the Magistrates. It opened sporadically in the latter half of 1837 and “The Beggar’s Opera” was staged in January 1838. By August of that year the theatre was once more up for sale.

The Royal Kent changed hands several times over the next four years, with long periods closed and unused. In 1842 a “Mr Crisp, in no way connected with the late proprietor” re-opened the theatre, announcing “Police constables in every part of the house to prevent disturbances”. Shortly afterwards he renamed the theatre the Theatre Royal, Kensington, under the patronage of HRH the Duchess of Kent. However, the theatre soon closed again, remaining empty for eighteen months. From September 1844 the theatre functioned under a new owner, Mrs Morland, but after just five months it closed forever in January 1845. The property lay derelict until 1850 when it was demolished and the site was used for housing.

ROYAL MANOR HOUSE THEATRE, King’s Road, Chelsea

1838 Opened on the site of a medicinal bath
1841 Closed
1847 Demolished

In 1837 Richard Smith took over a dilapidated old Manor House in the King’s Road, Chelsea, installed hot and cold medicinal baths with musical entertainment and opened it as The New Vauxhall and Royal Bath Gardens. It failed to catch on with the public, so he quickly built a small theatre on the site and converted the empty swimming pool tank into a green room. The opening production was a mixture of farces, musical pieces, dances and burlettas. The costumes for the opening show were hired from Whitechapel and had to be taken away every night. Shortly afterwards Smith hired it to amateur authors who paid to have their work staged, or charged amateur performers a sum to appear in established works. There is a story of a retired prize-fighter who wished to play Hamlet or Richard III (he didn’t mind which) as long as he could incorporate a fist fight into it.

The theatre probably closed around 1841, though it survived a few years more as a Penny Gaff (q.v.). By 1847 Richard Smith had moved into property speculation. He sold the grounds of the Manor House for road development. The theatre was demolished to make way for a public house and commercial rooms in the new street which was to be named Rodney Street.
ROYAL NATIONAL THEATRE

1975    Opened two auditoria:  
        The Olivier Theatre, and the Lyttleton Theatre  
1977    Third auditorium opened – The Cottesloe

A National Theatre was first talked about in 1848. In 1907 the project at last was underway and the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre Committee was established. A 1910 report gave details of a proposed theatre to be built in Gower Street near London University. It would open in 1916—the 300th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare. The First World War ended any hopes of this.

By 1938 the plans were revived and a site was chosen opposite the Victoria and Albert Museum in Kensington. Money was raised, architectural designs were completed and building work was scheduled to begin in August 1939. Once again, War intervened.

In 1951 Queen Elizabeth (the wife of King George VI) laid a National Theatre foundation stone in front of the newly built Royal Festival Hall. However, it was to be a further 18 years before any building began—and then the building—and the stone—were moved further along the riverbank.

Meantime, in 1962, a National Theatre Company was created under the artistic directorship of Laurence Olivier. The Company was based at the Old Vic pending the building of their new theatre. In the thirteen years of waiting for a permanent home, the National Theatre built an ensemble and a style that was to become the envy of the world.

The National Theatre at the Old Vic launched itself with a production of “Hamlet” starring Peter O’Toole. In March 1976, under its new director, Peter Hall, the Company launched itself in its new Lyttleton Theatre with another “Hamlet” - this time performed by Albert Finney. Finney was also the leading performer in the opening production of the second auditorium in October 1976—Marlowe’s “Tamburlaine the Great”. The third part of the complex—the experimental Cottesloe Theatre opened on 1st March 1977—the first time all three auditoria were in use simultaneously.

The Olivier was, of course, named in honour of Laurence Olivier, who by now was Lord Olivier—the first actor to be ennobled. The Lyttleton was named after Oliver Lyttleton (Lord Chandos), the first Chairman of the National Theatre Board. The Cottesloe was named after Lord Cottesloe, the chairman of the South Bank Theatre Board.

In 1988 the prefix “Royal” was added to the theatre’s name and Richard Eyre took over from Peter Hall as director. In 1997 Trevor Nunn became artistic director, and then, in the new millennium, he was succeeded by Nicholas Hytner.
ROYAL ORANGE THEATRE, Pimlico

In January 1832 there was a meeting of the “Minor” proprietors to call for reform of the Patent Laws. Seven theatres were represented, including the Royal Orange (Pimlico), represented by a Mr Young. Later that year the Magistrates cracked down on many of the minors and refused licences to several. The “Orange Coffee House, Pimlico” was refused a licence “as being a nuisance to the neighbourhood and being a place where theatrical representations take place”.

Further information is needed.

ROYAL PANTHEON THEATRE, Catherine Street, Strand

1807 Opened as the Temple of Arts.
1809 Renamed the Minor Theatre, then various other names including Harmonic, Theatre Mecanique, Argus Subscription Theatre, Theatre of Variety, etc
1839 Enlarged and renamed the Royal Pantheon Theatre
1842 Theatre closed and building became Jessop’s Hall
1861 Reopened as a Theatre—called the Gem Theatre
1862 Closed
1863 Used as auctioneers. Later uses restaurant, newspaper offices.
1901 Demolished as part of Strand redevelopment.

In 1807 “The Temple of Arts” opened at number 11, Catherine Street, on the junction with Little Catherine Street. The theatre was on the first floor, with a firm of piano and organ manufacturers on the ground floor. The opening programme featured a German conjurer by the name of Moritz, and included magic, acrobatics and performing animals.

By 1809 it was known as the Minor Theatre and was “a private amateur theatre” where, just like the King’s Cross Theatre, any amateur or aspiring professional could play leading or supporting parts if they were able to pay for the privilege. By 1813 it was called Phillipstall’s Exhibition Room, then became a school of acting and re-launched itself in 1816 as the Harmonic Theatre.

Through the 1820s it frequently changed its name and its nature. In 1820 it was the Theatre Mecanique exhibiting mechanical figures; in 1821 it was back in amateur use as the Argus Subscription Theatre. In September 1823 it was renamed the Theatre of Variety; in 1826 it returned to the name Harmonic Theatre, but by 1830 was the Thespian Institute with a set scale of fees for amateur roles.

The premises were sold in 1839 to the actor Benjamin Smythson. He bought the adjoining premises at number 12 Catherine Street, knocked the two into one and reopened as the Royal Pantheon Theatre. It held around 150 people. Smythson managed to obtain a Magistrates’ License for the theatre and was thus able to charge entry.

Smythson died in 1842 and the theatre closed. Meantime the ground floor piano and organ shop had been taken over by a John Jessop and turned into a coffee house. Jessop now rented the upper floors as well and created Jessop’s Hall. This lasted a few years until its notoriety caused it to be closed and by the late 1850s the premises were the Royal Victoria Saloon and Ball Room. As a business venture this failed. The ground floor was turned into a Dancing Academy and, on September 17, 1861 the upstairs reopened as the Gem Theatre—again for amateur use.

However, this theatre too failed. In 1863 it became an auctioneers, in 1864 a restaurant and in 1870 became the offices of the newspaper “The Echo”. The building was demolished when this part of Catherine Street was lost in the Strand redevelopment. The site of this theatre is somewhere under the Aldwych in front of the present Waldorf Hotel.
ROYAL STRAND THEATRE,
Surrey Street/Strand Lane

1803  Opened as the New Panorama
1830  Closed and converted into a chapel
1832  Converted into New Strand (Subscription) Theatre
1839  Rebuilt with gallery, known as Punch’s Playhouse
      and then as Strand Theatre
1858  Partially rebuilt and opened as Royal Strand Theatre
1865  More rebuilding and theatre enlarged
1882  Closed
1882  Completely rebuilt and much enlarged and reopened
1905  Closed and demolished.
      (Aldwych Tube Station replaced it.)

Benjamin Lionel Rayner, the noted Yorkshire comedian, bought a property known as the New Panorama on the junction of Surrey Street and Strand Lane. It had opened in 1803 as the New Panorama but had been closed in 1830 and used as a temporary Nonconformist Chapel. In December 1831 Rayner completed his purchase and in just seven weeks transformed it into a theatre.

Rayner’s New Subscription Theatre in the Strand opened on 25th January 1832. It had been converted with taste and elegance with a Dress Circle, First Circle, Twelve Private Boxes and a Pit. It was said to hold 1,501 patrons and opened with a satirical burlesque called “Struggles at Starting”. The only struggle seemed to be the house curtains which refused to open and close for the final calls. It was, however, an unlicensed theatre. Accordingly tickets were sold off the premises, with the money paying for a concert with incidental dramatic pieces staged between musical items. The star attraction was the actress Mrs Waylett. Within a few weeks she had bought the premises off Rayner and was in sole charge.

By November she had run out of money. The musicians walked out of the orchestra pit half way through the show complaining they had not been paid. She was forced to close. She reopened in February 1833, but immediately received formal complaints from the Patent Houses. Knowing it was illegal to take money “on the doors”, she argued she was taking money “at a window”. However, the Lord Chamberlain dismissed her appeal and she was forced to close. In 1834 she tried a new tack: free admission on the purchase of an ounce of lozenges at 4 shillings. Yet again the Patent Houses forced closure.

In 1836 the theatre was put on the same footing as the Olympic and Adelphi and allowed to open. The opening show on 15th April was “The Painter of Ghent” by Douglas Jerrold, in which the author made his stage debut in the title role. In 1839 it was renovated and an extra gallery with 800 seats was added. The Strand Theatre soon found great success with a series of dramatisations of Charles Dickens’s novels. But the luck did not last. By the mid 1840s it was a showcase for General Tom Thumb and the Bosjesmans Family of South African natives. By 1847 the pit floor was raised to stage level and the theatre had become a dance hall.

In 1848 it began a three year period under William and Henry Farren, a father and son team which rapidly raised the reputation and status of the Strand with a series of excellent
classic revivals with a first rate cast. But they moved on to the Olympic in 1850 and the Strand was once more in difficulty.

On 28th April 1851 William Copeland of Liverpool took over and renamed the theatre Punch’s Playhouse, but after just two seasons it reverted to the name Strand Theatre. However, it was not doing well, and its fortunes descended very low indeed. It was generally felt to be a hopeless theatre for any would-be manager.

On 5th April 1858 it reopened as the Royal Strand Theatre with a play called “Nothing Venture, Nothing Win”. It was now under the management of W.H. Swanborough whose daughter, Ada, was to be his star attraction. In the ensuing years the Swanborough shows and burlesques proved to be great attractions and many leading performers appeared there. The resident writer, H.J. Byron was a master of the burlesque and with Marie Wilton as the star in a creation called “Pippo” the whole of London flocked to the Royal Strand.

In 1865, with healthy profits in the bank, Swanborough reconstructed his theatre. It was now a magnificent building and the height of fashion. It was the place to be seen. As the fashion for burlesque faded away it was replaced with a vogue for operetta and the Royal Strand was in the forefront, especially with Offenbach’s “Madame Favert” which achieved a 502-performance run from April 1879.

By 1882 the Royal Strand Theatre building failed to meet the new stringent fire regulations that had been imposed. It closed on 29th July that year and was completely rebuilt within four months to designs of C.J. Phipps.

The opening production of the New Royal Strand Theatre on 18th November 1882 was “The Heir at Law” by Colman the Younger under the management of Mrs Edward Swanborough. However the new theatre did not catch on with the public at first. It suffered a series of poorly attended shows until early 1888 when “Our Flat” ran for 645 performances. Then came several hundred performances of a curiosity called “Niobe” (1892—550 performances) - curious in that it became the fashion for wedding parties to visit this play. A major success followed: the record-breaking musical, “A Chinese Honeymoon” (1901), which ran for 1,075 performances.

The theatre was demolished in 1905 as part of the new road development. The site was used to build the Strand Underground Station (renamed the Aldwych Station in 1915).
ROYAL SUSSEX THEATRE, Marylebone

1831  Opened as the Royal Sussex Subscription Theatre
1832  Closed down as a result of bankruptcy
1832  Reopened under new management
1834  Closed and demolished.

The Royal Sussex Subscription Theatre opened on Monday 03 Oct 1831. The site, in Bell Street, was owned by a Mr Grimmen who had earlier used it for a circus. Access to the theatre was via an archway under a pub in Bell Street. Grimmen’s new theatre was constructed of wood, the interior having a decorative lining of paper. Poles were placed in the ground to strengthen the walls, whilst the timbers generally were covered with canvas. The theatre could hold up to 700 people, and the admission prices ranged from 2/- to 6d. He engaged a Mr Sheene as its manager and leading actor. Within three months the Royal Sussex had a rival. An amateur actor, Mr Maskell, built a theatre to showcase his own talents. This new theatre The Royal Pavilion West (See entry under West London Theatre) was just a few streets away. Maskell managed to persuade Mr and Mrs Sheene to forsake the Royal Sussex and join him in the new theatre.

By May of 1832 Grimmen was bankrupt. The Royal Sussex was up for sale, and Grimmen himself was in a debtor’s prison. A new manager, Montgomery, took over, and immediately staged two Benefit performances for Grimmen’s wife, said to be starving. (Grimmen was released from prison, but instead of returning to his wife, moved in with yet another woman. Poor Mrs Grimmen ended up in the Workhouse, and the Parish authorities demanded that Grimmen make some contribution towards his wife’s upkeep. Unfortunately, Grimmen had no money at all, so he ended up back in the debtors’ prison.)

Montgomery struggled on, and in April 1833 he was able to welcome back Mr and Mrs Sheene. The Royal Pavilion West had undergone a change of management and the Sheenes were not happy with the new set up, so they returned to the Royal Sussex. However, by the end of 1834 the Royal Sussex seems to have closed for good. No further reference to its programme can be found.

A watercolour of the Royal Sussex Theatre, 1832.

On the extreme right is the arch under the beer house which gave access to the theatre. The illustration and information is taken from “The Old Marylebone Theatre” by Malcolm Morley (Published 1960 by the St Marylebone Society).
ROYAL VICTORIA THEATRE, Bethnal Green

1867  Opened as the Royal Victoria Music Hall  
1887  Closed on safety grounds  
1890  Reconstructed as the Royal Victoria Theatre  
1903  Closed  
1982  Demolished

This opened as a ground-floor concert hall on land adjoining the Royal Victoria public house in Old Ford Road, Bethnal Green. It seems that the pub itself was sometimes referred to as the "Royal Victor", while the adjoining music hall was named the "Royal Victoria".

It had seats for around 300 people and was a typical music-hall of the old type, with the serving of food and drink taking priority over the entertainment and with a Chairman—in this case the landlord himself, William Scaddan—keeping order. William Scaddan held the licence for the premises for the next twelve years, and in 1879 Joseph Bruton took over as landlord and music hall chairman.

In 1887 the twenty-year old music hall failed to meet the newly required safety standards and it was closed by public order. The site was sold to Constant van Hoydonck who proceeded to rebuild it. In 1890 it re-opened with the name Royal Victoria Theatre.

There was an immediate objection from Emma Cons, the Secretary of the Coffee Music Hall Company Ltd. She had just taken over management of the building formerly known as the Royal Victoria Theatre, known at that time as the Royal Victoria Hall and Coffee Tavern, and known in common parlance as the Old Vic.

She claimed that a licensed theatre of the same name would cause confusion and damage her business. The opposing manager, Constant Van Hoydonck, claimed there would be no confusion between a venue in Lambeth below Waterloo Station, and one in Bethnal Green in the East End.

He put up a very large sign on his new building, prominently naming the premises the "Royal Victoria Theatre". However, he was quickly reprimanded by the local authorities. This new building was licensed by the London County Council as a Music Hall. He did not have a Lord Chamberlain’s license to present theatre plays.

In 1892 the sign was replaced and the building reverted to the name Royal Victoria Music Hall. It survived until 1903 when it finally closed. The hall was unused for a while and then became a Bioscope Cinema. It remained in cinema use up to the outbreak of the Great War. In 1914 it closed and then was used for a multitude of other purposes until it was finally demolished in 1982.

A private residential development was created on the site and it was named Royal Victor Place to maintain its old historical link.

Inside the Royal Victor
ROYALTY THEATRE, Dean Street, Soho

1840  Opened as Miss Kelly’s Theatre and Dramatic School
1850  Redecorated and renamed the Royal Soho Theatre and sometimes called the New English Opera House
1851  Portico added to building
1861  Named the Theatre Français for one season
1861  Major rebuilding and reopened as the New Royalty Theatre
1883  Reconstructed, opening as the Royalty Theatre
1895  More redecoration and reconstruction
1906  Following renovation, reopened as New Royalty Theatre
1938  Closed after licence refused on safety grounds.
1941  Seriously damaged by Blitz
1955  Demolished

Miss Fanny Kelly’s enormously successful career in the theatre, especially at Drury Lane, had made her a fortune. She retired with over £16,000 in the bank and decided to start a School of Acting. At first she conducted her classes in rented premises, but she wanted to create her own “modern and compact” theatre on ground behind her house in Dean Street.

She was acquainted with an engineer called Rowland Stephenson who persuaded her to incorporate his new invention whereby stage and scenery could be worked by machinery. With a series of wheels and cogs, scenery could be flown, moved on and off and even the stage itself could be raised and lowered. This would revolutionise theatre and make her theatre the most up-to-date in the country.

This new machinery caused several postponements of announced opening dates, but finally Miss Kelly’s Theatre and Dramatic School opened on 25 March 1840 with a new drama called “Summer and Winter”. But the machinery didn’t work. Stevenson had said it could be worked by one man, but by the time the theatre was ready, it had long been discovered that it would be necessary to use a horse to move it.

The theatre was so small—it held around 200—that the tramping of the horse and the roar of the machinery drowned out the voices of the actors and caused the building to vibrate. After just five nights the theatre closed. Then Miss Kelly discovered the theatre had been built round the machinery, and the only way to remove the machinery was to pull down most of the theatre. She tried to reopen after restoring the demolished walls but her heart was no longer in it. The theatre suffered patchy use, being empty for long periods, and mainly used for amateur productions (including one led by the author Charles Dickens). After struggling for almost a decade, Fanny Kelly had lost every penny she owned and was finally evicted by bailiffs. She moved to Bayswater to eke out a living with some private pupils.

On 30 January 1850 a new management took over, renamed it the Royal Soho Theatre, and used it for amateur performances. At the end of the year it was taken over by Charles Gilbert, renamed the New English Opera House, and, on 5 November 1850, launched a season of opera. This proved a failure. In 1852 the lease was taken over by Thomas Mowbray and he was prepared to sub-let it to almost any taker. In the early part of 1861 it staged a season of French drama and temporarily renamed itself the “Theatre Français”. In November 1861 it was leased to a Serbian ballerina, Albina di Rhona, who decorated the place, called it the New Royalty Theatre and opened with a melodrama called “Atar Gull” with a fourteen year old Ellen Terry in the cast. By January 1862 Mme di Rhona was bankrupt and the theatre was once more hired to amateurs. In August 1862 the theatre was sub-let to Mrs Charles Selby—another lady who ran an acting school. She enlarged the original theatre by buying the house next door. The foyer was therefore in one building, and the auditorium in the next one. The New Royalty had accommodation for about 650
people. It was mainly used as a showcase for her pupils, though it was occasionally rented out to other managements. By September 1864 it had changed management yet again and over the next decade it was to change hands no fewer than nine times.

A turning point came in 1875 when Gilbert & Sullivan’s “Trial by Jury” was given its first performance here, and in 1883 Kate Santley took a long lease on the theatre, reconstructed it and used it to stage comic opera, with an annual season of plays in French. In 1891 it started a policy of modern drama, including plays by Bernard Shaw and the first performance in English of Ibsen’s “Ghosts”. In 1892 “Charley’s Aunt” began its legendary run. In 1900 the equally legendary Mrs Patrick Campbell took a short lease from Kate Santley, and became the actress-manager of the Royalty. From 1904 onwards Kate Santley was in constant correspondence with the authorities, and a lawsuit took place over the alleged unfit state of the premises. In 1906 there was a major reconstruction to meet the safety requirements.

In 1907 Sarah Bernhardt appeared with her own company in “La Tosca”, “Phédre” and “La Dame aux Camélias”. By 1911 J.E. Vedrenne, formerly of the Royal Court, was running the theatre. Owen Nares, Gladys Cooper and the young Lynn Fontanne were among the young artists who appeared at this theatre early in their careers.

In the 1920s the productions included “The Co-Optimists” (1921) and “Juno and the Paycock” (1925). Its last great success was J.B. Priestley’s “I Have Been Here Before” (1938). On 25 November 1938 the theatre closed by order of the London County Council. A list of building improvements were to be carried out before it would be allowed to reopen. These building plans were put on hold because of the growing threat of war, and it remained empty. During the war it suffered blitz damage and became derelict. It was finally demolished in 1955 and replaced with an office block called Royalty House.

**ROYALTY (BRUNSWICK) THEATRE, Wellclose Square**

1787    Opened as the Royalty Theatre, but closed very quickly following a licence dispute.
1788    Re-opened for pantomimes and burlettas.
1810    Renamed the East London Theatre
1826    Burnt down
1828    Rebuilt and renamed the Brunswick Theatre, but collapsed 3 days later, killing 15.

In 1787 John Palmer, an actor well known for roles like Falstaff, Toby Belch and Captain Absolute at Drury Lane and the Haymarket, built a new theatre in Wells Street, Wellclose Square. He named it the “Royalty” and claimed it would hold 2,500 people. Sheridan had earlier nicknamed him “Plausible Jack”, and he was known to be an inveterate liar, so no one believed his statement that he had permission from “high up in the royal family” for his new venture.

However, no previous theatre had ever been allowed to be built within the limits of the City itself, and this made many believe he must, indeed, have friends in high places. The theatre itself caused a sensation. The proscenium was 28 feet wide, with the arch decorated with the Royal Arms and scarlet drapery. There were thirteen rows of benches in the Pit. There were fourteen boxes at stalls level and two spacious
The light was supplied by twelve cut-glass lustres suspended round the boxes. This was a very grand theatre indeed.

The opening production on 20 June 1787 was “As You Like It” with a fine company, and with a 14 year old boy called Braham singing between the acts of the play. Drury Lane and Covent Garden felt this was clearly a straight play and not a concert and summoned him. “Plausible Jack” managed to persuade the authorities that the main attraction of his theatre was the music and singing and he was therefore not in breach of the law. He reopened on 3rd July, but there was a riot inside the theatre (almost certainly inspired and paid for by the Patent Theatres). Plausible Jack was once more arrested and this time wasn’t so plausible. His theatre closed and he went back to work for Drury Lane.

In 1788 the elder Macready (father of the great actor of the early 19th century) obtained permission to stage burlettas and pantomimes at the Royalty. However, it met with little success. In 1794 it proved a temporary home for the burned-out company from Astley’s Theatre. In 1816 the Royalty underwent some renovation and proudly announced the installation of gas-lights. At this time it renamed itself the East London Theatre.

Further renovation and redecoration took place in 1819. As well as an increase in ticket prices, the box-office keeper publicly announced: “I am desired to express to you the great anxiety of the proprietors to keep certain parts of the house as select as possible... To be effected only by introducing that species of etiquette at the East London which has been established in the principal theatres at the west end of the town”.

At a later date it was bought by Peter Moore, a stage-struck Member of Parliament. Under his management the East London Theatre presented a whole series of spectacles including African lions, Red Indian war dances, and a real bear which had a starring role in a play called “Valentine and Orson”. In 1826, due to an escape of gas, the theatre burnt down. The cost of the damage was estimated at £20,000 but the building was only insured for £1,500.

On 25 February 1828 the replacement theatre—the Royal Brunswick Theatre—opened with “The Mermaid’s Well” - a version of Scott’s novel “The Bride of Lammermoor.”. Three days later, on 28 February, the company was on stage rehearsing Scott’s “Guy Mannering” when the roof of the stage suddenly collapsed, sending a great quantity of iron and brick on to the heads of the cast. As the roof caved in, so also did one of the side walls, burying many of the actors. Frantic efforts were made to dig out the injured - but fifteen people were killed, either as a result of injuries received or from suffocation. A further twenty were badly hurt. An immediate enquiry was undertaken into the cause of the disaster, which was said to be due to shoddy workmanship and cheap design, which caused the load bearing walls to be inadequate to support the weight of the roof.

A Sailors’ Home was eventually built on the site.