**BALHAM EMPIRE**

1890  Opened in a converted swimming pool as Balham Music Hall  
1897  Altered and used for stage plays  
1900  Further rebuilding  
1902  Renamed the Balham Empire  
1907  Closed and became the Empire Cinema, later the “Theatre de Luxe”  
1915  Renovated and reopened as the Olympia Cinema, later the Pavilion Cinema  
1949  Renamed the Gaumont Cinema  
1960  Closed and used as a bingo hall  
1974  Demolished

The Balham Music Hall opened in the High Road in 1890. It was converted from a swimming pool. It had 900 seats, and was a most peculiar building. It had a long, narrow entrance—the width of a shop front—which led into the long and straight auditorium, containing a gallery down the sides. The floor of the auditorium was a wooden sloping structure, directly placed over the swimming pool which was never filled in. It was known locally as “The Hole in the Wall”.

In 1902 it was renamed the Balham Empire and shortly afterwards was refused a licence for stage plays and instructed only to play as a variety theatre. The rival Duchess Theatre (later called the Balham Hippodrome) was permitted to present both kinds of entertainment and the Empire felt this was most unfair.

The theatre changed hands in 1907 and became one of the very first theatres to become a full-time cinema. It was launched as a Pathé exclusive house under the name “Theatre de Luxe”. In 1915 it closed for alterations and reopened as the Olympia Cinema, and in 1922 once more changed its name—this time to the Pavilion Cinema. It became part of the Denman/Gaumont circuit in 1928, and eventually (in 1949) was renamed the Gaumont Cinema, Balham. The cinema closed in 1960 and the venue was used for bingo. It closed in 1973 and was demolished in 1974. The site was used for open-air car sales.

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**BALHAM HIPPODROME**

1899  Opened as the Duchess Theatre  
1910  Name changed to Balham Hippodrome  
1939  Closed and became a cinema  
1960s  Demolished

Designed by W.G.R. Sprague for himself. He was the first manager and licensee. As late as 1923 the Sprague family was still involved in managing this venue, though from 1905 onwards it was part of Walter Gibbons’ circuit of music halls. The month-long Music Hall strike of 1907 was aimed directly at two circuits—one owned by Walter Gibbons and the other by Adney Payne. Mr Payne point-blank refused to accept any of the terms demanded by the performers. Mr Gibbons said he would agree to the terms, but he refused to put his agreement in writing.

The Gibbons’ theatres were picketed, but they managed the occasional film show and turns by strike breakers like Belle Elmore (later murdered by Dr Crippen) and Lockhart’s Performing Elephants. The story is often told of picketing performers yelling “Blacklegs” at the elephants. Another tale has the manager of the theatre coming forward and saying to the audience “You’ve seen the film and you’ve seen the elephants. That’s all we’ve got. Do you want to see the film again? Or the elephants?” The audience chose the elephants!
**BALHAM PALLADIUM**

1912c Opened as a cinema  
1928  Enlarged as a cine-variety venue  
1940  Destroyed by bombs  
1950c Site cleared

The Palladium opened as a very large cinema, with 1,180 seats. It was taken over by the Gaumont Company in 1928 and was enlarged with a full stage, flying facilities and dressing rooms. The architect for this conversion was Cecil Massey.

It staged some variety shows (along with films) through the early 1930s, but in the immediate pre-war years seems to have been used only for cinema. In September 1940 it was extensively damaged by enemy bombs and closed. The building was left derelict until the 1950s when it was demolished. Later an office block was built on the site, and called Station House.

**BANQUETING HOUSE, Whitehall**

1609  Original building opened  
1619  Burnt down and demolished  
1622  Rebuilt with stage facilities  
1635  No longer used for performances  
2002  Building remains in use for State occasions and corporate use.

The first Banqueting House was occasionally used for performances for the Court of King James I. The 1622 rebuilding (designed by Inigo Jones) incorporated lavish stage facilities for the production of masques and similar entertainments.

After 1635 royal stage performances ceased and moved to a new building nearby.

**BARBICAN THEATRE**

1982  Opened

The Barbican redevelopment was an ambitious and unparalleled initiative by the City of London. The site covered some 60 acres—one tenth of the historic City square mile. After 25 years of planning and construction the regeneration of this vast area of wartime destruction was completed—the largest single development of its kind in Europe. The development included commercial, residential and business redevelopment as well as a major arts centre.

The arts complex was opened by the Queen on 2 March 1982—the Barbican Centre for Arts and Conferences—and it contained an art gallery, a concert hall, three cinemas, a music library, a lending library, exhibition and conference halls and two theatres—the Barbican, seating 1166 and the Pit, seating 200.

So vast was this complex that a series of stories were soon heard—doubtless mostly urban myths—how theatregoers would get lost in the building and not manage to find their way to the theatres until after the show had ended. Elaborate colour-coded lines were painted along the walls and walkways to enable patrons to find their way from the car-parks to the theatres and concert hall.
The Barbican was intended as a permanent home for the London Symphony Orchestra and as the London home of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. The latter have their own theatre on the site. (q.v.)

From the outset its theatre activities proved a worthy rival of the National Theatre. Productions included Judi Dench as Mother Courage and Derek Jacobi as Cyrano de Bergerac, and all the major Shakespearian productions transferred from Stratford on Avon to the RSC’s permanent London headquarters.

In 1984 The Barbican staged the British premiere of the musical “Les Miserables”. The RSC was criticised for entering a commercial partnership with Cameron Mackintosh to produce this new musical based on Victor Hugo’s famous novel. This show went on to run in London’s West End and on Broadway, in theatres all over the world, and earned a fortune in royalties for the RSC.

In 2002 the RSC announced that it was leaving the Barbican after more than twenty years. Among the reasons given were a suggestion that the Barbican was too much “out of the way” from the West End and it was difficult to attract audiences—suggestions that were dismissed by many critics, who blamed the RSC’s declining standards and lack of excitement for falling audiences.

In 2004 a major renovation began with the intention of re-designing the foyers, entrances and public spaces over a two year period. Work was phased in such a way that performances would not be affected. The main theatre is now run by the City of London as a touring venue with many in-house productions.

BARNES THEATRE, Richmond

1906 Built as the Byfeld Public Hall
1910 Converted into a cinema
1925 Renamed the Barnes Theatre
1932 Reverted to cinema use and named Ranelagh Cinema
1951 Damaged by fire. Rebuilt
1989 Completely redesigned as a recording studio.

Although its theatre life lasted just seven years, the Barnes Theatre made an impact on British Theatre during the late 1920s. Under the direction of Philip Ridgeway, this small theatre had early successes with a version of Hardy’s “Tess of the Durbervilles” and the London premiere of Chekhov’s “Uncle Vanya”. Its business manager was the 17 year old Hugh Beaumont (later, as “Binkie” Beaumont, to become the leading force in West End Theatre).

A series of Russian dramas followed, directed by Komisarjevsky, and featuring performers like John Gielgud in Chekhov’s “Three Sisters” and Charles Laughton in Gogol’s “Government Inspector” The theatre next staged two plays by John Drinkwater and then reverted to use as a cinema.
**BATTERSEA PALACE**

1886  Opened as Standard Music Hall, next to Royal Standard pub
1887  Renamed the Washington Music Hall
1900  Renamed the Battersea Palace of Varieties
1903  Renamed Battersea Empire
1910  Reverted to name of Battersea Palace
1924  Closed

Possibly as early as the 1850s there was a song-tavern attached to the Royal Standard pub—an attraction known as the Magpie. By 1876 this was known as the Battersea Music Hall, licensed to present concerts on condition it was not used as a music hall. There followed a ten year battle with the authorities to get permission to open it as a full music hall, and this was finally achieved in 1886 when a new hall was built at the rear of the pub and licensed as the Standard Music Hall.

Within a year the music hall was licensed to George Washington “Pony” Moore, who renamed it the Washington Music Hall. “Pony” Moore was involved with the management for the next twenty years. In 1900 the Washington Music Hall changed its name to the Battersea Palace of Varieties, and underwent a further name change in 1903—this time the Battersea Empire.

In February 1908 the Battersea Empire was bought by Frank Macnaghten as part of his Vaudeville Circuit and eventually the name was changed to Battersea Palace (Macnaghten wanted to name all his theatres “Palaces”). However, it was not a very profitable acquisition, and Macnaghten disposed of the lease in 1911 to Fred Baugh who ran the theatre for the next twelve years, and then in 1924 the theatre was sold by auction.

**BECK THEATRE, Hayes**

1977  Opened as the Alfred Beck Theatre

A purpose built modern theatre named after a local worthy, the Beck is situated in parkland off the Uxbridge Road. With 600 seats and multi-functional uses, it houses national tours and local amateur shows. In 2003 it became part of the Clear Channel Entertainment UK circuit.

**BERNIE GRANT THEATRE, Tottenham**

2007  Opened as part of an arts centre

The Bernie Grant Arts Centre, named after the Haringey MP who died in 2000, features a 300 seat theatre, rehearsal room and extensive training facilities. It opened in October 2007 with the specific aim of developing the next generation of black and culturally diverse theatre practitioners.

The building was designed by David Adjaye and cost a total of £15 million. It comprised three “modern” art-blocks attached to or incorporated in an existing Victorian building. The multi-purpose arts centre focuses on interdisciplinary work and runs a range of educational courses to address a shortage within the sector of culturally diverse managers and technicians.
BEDFORD THEATRE, Camden Town

1824  Opened as the Bedford Arms Tavern
1861  Rebuilt as Bedford Music Hall, often called Bedford Palace of Varieties
1898  Reconstructed
1958  Closed
1969  Demolished

Flushed with his success at the Raglan Music Hall in Bloomsbury the previous year, Harry “The Hebrew” Hart rebuilt the hall adjoining the Bedford Arms as the Bedford Music Hall. (He was later to add the Star at Bermondsey to his trio of music halls).

The Bedford was immortalised by Walter Sickert in a series of paintings. For many of its early years the Chairman was a man called Joe Haynes. Both the “Old Bedford” (1861) and the “New Bedford” (rebuilt in 1898 to the designs of Bertie Crewe) hosted such artists as Marie Lloyd and George Leybourne.

In February 1920 the Bedford gave a special show to celebrate Marie Lloyd’s 50th birthday where a huge crowd gave her a rapturous reception. It was the first time she had performed at the Bedford for 28 years. She informed the audience that her first wage at the Bedford had been fifteen shillings. Her aged father was brought up on stage from the audience. She was presented with flowers and fruit, and, at the end of the show, the whole audience cheered her to her carriage.

A little over a year later Marie Lloyd returned to the Bedford, ending her act with “One of the Ruins that Cromwell knocked about a bit”. By now she was unsteady on her feet, getting a reputation for being unreliable, frequently confused and stumbling over her words. In the audience was the writer Virginia Woolf who recorded in her diary:

“We went to the Bedford Music Hall last night and saw Miss Marie Lloyd, a mass of corruption—long front teeth—a crapulous way of saying “desire” and yet a born artist—scarcely able to walk, waddling, aged, unblushing. A roar of laughter went up when she talked of her marriage. She is beaten nightly by her husband. I felt that the audience was much closer to drink & beating & prison than any of us”.

Towards the end of its life, when variety was failing, the Bedford was used for revivals of popular plays. It closed in 1958 and was demolished in 1969.
BIANCI’S THEATRE, Shoreditch

Situated in the High Street, Shoreditch, near to the junction with Hackney Road, this seems to have been a small but successful theatre run for a few years by a Mr Bianchi. It is known from an illustration of 1857.

It then declined rapidly into a venue of ill reputation, frequented by young criminals and prostitutes. It ended its life as a Penny Gaff (q.v.)

**Bianchi’s Theatre, circa 1857**

BIJOU THEATRE, Haymarket

1860  Opened as part of the Her Majesty’s, Haymarket
1867  Burnt down with the main theatre

This was originally a small concert room inside the Royal Italian Opera House (later Her Majesty’s Theatre) in the Haymarket and was used for chamber music and recitals. The entire premises closed down in 1852 when most of its audience defected to Covent Garden. The premises were mostly unused for the next four years, but reopened in 1856 after Covent Garden had burned down. The concert room was converted for theatrical use around this time. It was using the name Bijou Theatre by 1862 when Charles Matthews, Jnr appeared there in a series of plays. It was frequently hired out for amateur performances staged by the upper classes for their own amusement. The Bijou Theatre burnt down when the main theatre itself caught fire in 1867.

**BISHOPSGATE INSTITUTE**

Opened 1895

The Bishopsgate Institute opened on 1st Jan 1895 as a centre for culture and learning. It was created from charitable bequests made to the parish over several centuries, all of which were finally drawn together into one endowment. The original aims were to provide a public library, public hall and meeting rooms for people living and working in the City of London. The Institute contained two halls, the Great Hall and the Upper Hall, both of which were ‘erected for the benefit of the public to promote lectures, exhibitions and otherwise the advancement literature, science and the fine arts’.

The Upper Hall seats around 350, and the Great Hall around 320 when laid out in theatre style, and both have been frequently used for theatrical and concert purposes. The Institute was the first of the three major buildings designed by Charles Harrison Townsend (1851-1928); the other two are the nearby Whitechapel Gallery and the Horniman Museum in South London. His work combined elements of the Arts & Crafts and Art Nouveau styles, along with the typically Victorian. The building has a Grade II* listing.

**The Great Hall laid out for a concert**
BLACKFRIARS THEATRE

1576  Opened
1584  Closed
1597  Re-developed as a theatre but not opened.
1600  New theatre opened.
1642  Closed by Government order
1655  Demolished

Originally opened in the grounds of an old monastery as a private theatrical venture by Richard Farrant, the master of Windsor choirboys. The theatre was created by knocking two rooms into one and creating a large rectangular hall. It was probably the first permanent indoor venue for plays in London.

From 1581 onwards—after the death of Farrant—it was used by other children’s theatre companies. In 1584 Sir William More took over the lease, closed the theatre and used the building as a schoolroom. In 1597 James Burbage spent £600 converting the premises back into a theatre. (It is not known if he converted the exact same rooms, or some other rooms in the same monastery). Once the work was finished there was a vociferous campaign from local residents. They were opposed to it re-opening as a theatre, and after a great deal of fuss, permission was refused. James Burbage flew into a terrible rage, and it was said this rage contributed to his death shortly afterwards.

From 1600 Richard Burbage (James’s son) leased it to the Children of the Chapel Royal, and they were allowed to use it for occasional private performances. By 1608 he at last obtained permission to use the premises for adult public theatre. The King’s Men regularly used it as their winter home, presenting plays by Shakespeare, Jonson and others. It became highly popular and fashionable with the nobility, and was noted for its scenery and music. It was closed during the Civil War, and later demolished.

BLACKHEATH HALLS

1895  Opened
1940  Closed and used for war purposes
1980s  Brought back into public use
2004  Major refurbishment

The Grade II listed Blackheath Halls were created by public subscription in 1895, and comprised two venues: the Great Hall with a seating capacity of some 500 (1,000 standing) and the Recital Room holding around 300. The Great Hall has a proscenium stage and flying facilities. Both venues became known for their excellent acoustics and were used for recordings and broadcasts.

At the start of the Second World War the venue was requisitioned for war recruitment purposes, and was not returned to public use until the 1980s. In 2001 Trinity College of Music relocated to Greenwich and began fund-raising to upgrade the Halls. From 2004 onwards major renovation was carried out, with plans to acquire an adjacent property for use as seminar rooms and offices. The venue is funded by Greenwich and Lewisham Councils and is used extensively for classical and pop concerts, jazz, film and contemporary theatre.

In 2009 the Hall acquired a Compton Organ from the ABC Royal Cinema, Plymouth and intend to install it in the Great Hall.
BLOOMSBURY THEATRE

1968  Opened as the Collegiate Theatre  (Part of the University)
1982  Renamed the Bloomsbury Theatre
2001  Renamed the UCL Bloomsbury Theatre

Originally intended as a campus theatre for use by the University, the Collegiate Theatre was part of the student facilities which, among other things, included a practise rowing tank over the auditorium! It obtained its funding on the basis that it would be occasionally hired out for commercial use, especially during University vacations. A few years of frequent commercial use were followed by several years where it seemed to be used almost entirely as a private venue.

The theatre was renamed in 1982 to reflect its geographical location, as well as the cultural associations of the name, as the Bloomsbury Theatre. In 2001 it was renamed again to integrate its position within the university as The UCL Bloomsbury. In recent times a more commercial policy has been pursued.

The current practice is for UCL, which has no performing arts departments, to use the theatre for 12 weeks of the year. It contributes about £200,000 per year to the running costs. The theatre is required to cover the remainder of its annual running costs from externally generated income.

BOHEMIA THEATRE, Finchley

1900? Opened
1914 Closed and converted into a cine-variety
1915 Used as a World War One factory
1919 Back in use as a cinema
1920 Closed and used as a factory
1994 Demolished

The Alcazar Pleasure Gardens located on Ballards Lane was in existence by 1880. It had a Winter Garden Hall which apparently incorporated a “Chinese Garden” and by 1900 also included a small theatre. In 1913 it was subject to complaints about two open-air stages that had been built without permission on either side of the premises, and from February 1913 the hall was in use as the Alcazar Picture Palace. A year later it was reconstructed as a 1000-seat cine-variety with the design credited to a John Taylor. After a brief cinema life it was used as a factory for making barrage balloons for the Great War. In 1920 a New Bohemia Cinema was built on Church End and the old Bohemia was converted into a factory, with part of the site being used as a parade of shops and housing. The buildings were finally demolished in 1994.

BOB HOPE THEATRE, Eltham

1943  Opened as Eltham Little Theatre
1982  Renamed the Bob Hope Theatre

An amateur theatre, founded in 1943, the Eltham Little Theatre was threatened with demolition in the late 1970s. The landlord converted the lease to a monthly one, pending selling the site for redevelopment. The amateur company was threatened with dissolution and its survival seemed highly unlikely. At this point the actor and comedian Bob Hope stepped in and saved the day. Bob Hope had left Eltham in 1906 and become an American citizen, but clearly he had never forgotten his roots. Through his generosity the theatre was saved. It underwent renovation and reconstruction and was renamed the Bob Hope Theatre in honour of its benefactor.
BOLTONS THEATRE CLUB, Kensington

1947  Opened in a converted cinema
1951c Closed and returned to cinema use as Paris Pullman Cinema
1986  Demolished

Although it was only open for around four years, this 246 seat Club Theatre was highly influential, due to the artistic and pioneering flair of Peter Cotes, Joan Miller, Isabel Dean and its founder-director, John Wyse. During the War, Gunner John Wyse, a former Shakespearean actor, served alongside 2nd Lt. Denis Blanckensee. As extra duties they staged a series of plays to entertain their fellow soldiers. One of their plays had been performed in front of H.M. Queen Mary at Badminton.

At the end of the War Wyse and Blanckensee took over a derelict cinema in Drayton Gardens, and with a lot of volunteer help, converted it into a Club Theatre. Its policy was to present only new plays—no revivals—and, where possible, to cast ex-servicemen and women to help revive careers stalled by the War. It opened on 15 Jan 1947 with “The Lake of the Swans” It soon had a great success with the premiere of “Now Barrabas” by William Douglas Home. In its first season Queen Mary accepted an invitation to attend a performance, and the Boltons thus became a highly fashionable “fringe” venue.

It closed at the beginning of the 1950s and returned to cinema use.

BOROUGH THEATRE, Stratford

1896  Opened
1933  Closed and reconstructed as the Rex Cinema
1960c Cinema closed and used as a bingo hall
1975  Closed. Later damaged by fire.
1997  Reopened as a live music venue, with the circle area adapted as a smaller cinema.

Albert Fredericks had taken over control of the Theatre Royal, Stratford in 1886. Ten years later he built a second theatre, intending to widen the range of shows on offer to his audiences (and to double the money he was making!)

His second theatre—the Borough Theatre and Opera House—was very splendid—and had been designed by Frank Matcham. Unfortunately, Fredericks could not obtain a drinks licence for it. Even though he was an elected Stratford Borough Councillor, the forces of the East End Temperance Movement were too strong. The “Borough” was not allowed to sell alcohol. The intention was for the Theatre Royal to present Variety shows and the Borough to present more serious entertainments. The Theatre Royal began to attract the lion’s share of the audience, and the Borough had a difficult time.

As interest in the Borough slackened, Fredericks tended to put the better shows into the Royal. Accordingly, the Borough turned into an occasional theatre, closed for long periods, and then finally it became a cinema.

The 1933 conversion to a cinema destroyed most of Matcham’s work and re-created the building in Art Deco style. The building was re-opened as the Rex Cinema for cine-variety. By the 1960s the cinema was closed and the theatre used as a bingo hall. After a fire in 1975 the building was left derelict.

In 1997 the fly-tower and stage were demolished, a new stage was built to serve the dance floor (formerly the stalls area) and the circle was re-created as a cinema.
BOULEVARD THEATRE, Soho

Originally a strip-club venue as part of the famous Raymond RevueBar in London’s Soho. During the early 1980s it was used as an occasional venue for the Comic Strip—an early form of alternative stand-up comedy.

By the mid 80s it was being used for the more “way-out” play or staged event. In 1990 it housed a revival of the “sexual musical for today”, “Let My People Come”. It remained in occasional theatre use throughout the 1990s.

BOW PALACE, Bow

1855  Opened as the Three Cups Music Hall
1889  Renamed Marlow’s Music Hall
1892  Completely rebuilt and named the Eastern Empire
1903  Renamed the Palace Theatre, Bow
1917  Renamed the Tivoli Theatre
1918  Reverted to name Bow Palace
1923  Converted into a cinema
1958  Closed and demolished

Originally a 300 seat music hall built at the rear of the Three Cups Public House in Bow Road, it was bought by the Marlow family in 1889, and named after William, the head of the family. Three years later William’s son, Fred, completely rebuilt the hall as a lavish theatre with a capacity of just over 2,000—naming it the Eastern Empire.

Fred Marlow had been one of the first managers to employ and encourage Marie Lloyd, who repaid the favour by appearing at his new venue. The actor Bransby Williams, famous for his dramatic recitations and monologues, was another performer to make an early name for himself at the Eastern Empire. (Fred Marlow was later to become influential in the formation of the Variety Artists Federation.)

In 1903 the Eastern Empire was bought by Frank MacNaghten, to become part of his large Variety Theatre circuit. His rivals Moss & Stoll had their “Empires”, and Barrasford & De Frece had their “Hippodromes”, so MacNaghten set about naming all his theatres “Palaces”. Accordingly, he changed the name of the Eastern Empire to the Palace Theatre, Bow. MacNaghten’s London Halls included the Bow Palace, Foresters Music Hall, Sadlers Wells, the Surrey Theatre and an interest in the Britannia, Hoxton. In 1908 the Battersea Empire was added to his London circuit.

The First World War brought many changes to the world of theatre and music hall. MacNaghten sold several of his “Palaces” during this time, including the Bow Palace. The new owners renamed it the Tivoli Theatre, but the old name stuck, and within a year they reverted to its former name. In 1923 it was converted into a cinema. The cinema itself closed and was demolished in 1958.
BOWER THEATRE, Lambeth

1837  Opened
1875  Rebuilt

It opened as the Bower Saloon at the Duke’s Public House and was built by Phil Phillips, freelance scenic artist to many theatres, and owner of the Chinese Gallery near Hyde Park. There were a lot of theatres and music halls in this area, and Lambeth was a popular lodging area for performers. By 1843 Phillips had leased the management to the Irish comedian, George Hodson, and the Hodson family were to run the Theatre for many years.

Hodson’s daughter, Henrietta, became a very famous actress and a famous, if rather scandalous hostess. Henrietta’s daughter, at first an actress, ended up firstly the wife of the Italian Prime Minister and secondly as the Princess Odescalchi.

By 1864 the Hodson family had renamed the Saloon the Bower Theatre (occasionally the Bower Operetta House). It was a rather dirty and disreputable little theatre but it became a kind of nursery for great actors and actresses—so many performers began their early careers here. In 1875 it was rebuilt and called itself the Stangate Music Hall (and sometimes the Stangate Theatre). It opened with the pantomime “Mother Goose”. However it did not survive long in its new building. Like so many of the places which began as saloons attached to public houses it was outclassed by the regular theatres. After just two years it closed and was later converted into a warehouse for Price’s Patent Candles.

BRICK LANE MUSIC HALL

1992  Opened in Brick Lane
1996  Closed. Reopened in Curtain Road, Hoxton
2001  Closed.
2004  Reopened in a converted church in Silvertown.

The Brick Lane Music Hall was the only music hall to have opened since the Second World War. It was created to celebrate the history and tradition of music hall theatre, but to do so with a modern audience in mind. It was formed as a charity with the intention of providing a service to the elderly and presenting educational music hall to schools, at the same time as providing a cabaret-style entertainment preceded by a three-course dinner for ordinary theatregoers seeing a good night out.

The original venue was converted from a derelict brewery building in Brick Lane. It was the brainchild of Vincent Hayes, an Irish-born entertainer and former East-End landlord. It opened in 1992 and within a few years had become a successful and popular night out as well as a much welcomed social service in a deprived area. In 1996 the ownership of the site was sold and the new landlord sought to double the rent. Vincent Hayes was forced to close down and move to a new venue—this time in Curtain Road, Hoxton—where he re-created his music hall in a disused button factory. He now occupied the whole ground floor of a six storey building.

The extra space allowed an increased number of diners and the “new” Brick Lane went from strength to strength. Established performers like Danny La Rue were happy to play there; “trendy” magazines recommended it as a fashionable place to go. It seemed the Brick Lane Music Hall itself had succeeded in re-generating that part of the East End.
In 2004 the Brick Lane Music Hall opened in its third venue. This time it was housed in the converted Grade II* listed St Mark’s Church in Silvertown, close to the City Airport. Newham Council had contributed towards the £1m spent on refurbishing the church. With a secure tenancy, it will hopefully be third time lucky for this fascinating project.

BRIDEWELL THEATRE, Bride Lane, EC4

1994  Opened in a converted Edwardian swimming pool
2004  Closed following a funding crisis
2005  Used for amateur productions

The Bridewell Theatre was founded in 1994 in a disused Victorian swimming pool and laundry. The empty pool is still beneath the floor of the stage and seating block and is now used as a band pit or access for stage trap doors. The laundry room has been transformed into the theatre's bar but you can still see the Victorian washing machine and dryer.

The Bridewell's aim was twofold: to create a centre of excellence for the development of music theatre and to provide an independent off-West End venue for the City of London. The Bridewell Company made a significant impact on musical theatre by staging new and unknown works. It was especially active in promoting the works of Stephen Sondheim, and staged the premiere performance of Sondheim’s earliest work “Saturday Night”.

The venue also pioneered a series of “lunchbox” productions—plays lasting around an hour and performed whilst the audience from local city offices sat around eating their packed lunches.

In 2003 it suffered a funding crisis. Its heavily subsidised rent was readjusted to a commercial level and the theatre was forced to close in the late summer of 2004. In 2005 the venue was taken over on an eighteen month lease as a temporary home for the Tower Theatre Company—a long established amateur company—whilst their new premises were being completed. Its use would be shared with the Stock Exchange Amateur Operatic Society.

Meantime the original Bridewell Theatre Company—the directors and performers—continued to operated under the name “Bridewell” but from other venues.
The original “Saloon” opened on the site of the Pimlico Tavern—an Elizabethan inn said to have been frequented by Shakespeare. It was built by its proprietor, Samuel Lane (1804-1871), thanks to a loan from the brewers, Elliotts. The saloon offered free entertainment for diners, and was a genuine early “music hall” with a capacity of 1,000. It opened on Easter Monday, 1841. The opening performance included a sketch called “The Red Lance or the Merrie Men of Hoxton” and a number of variety turns including Flexmore, the dancing clown. Subsequent performances included a farce called “Martin the Foundling”, featuring a 17 year old singer and dancer named Sara Wilton.

Six months later the local magistrates forced it to close on the grounds that it was presenting “plays” and was, in any event, detrimental to the neighbourhood. Sam Lane rallied local support and gained valuable assistance from Bulwer Lytton, MP (afterwards Lord Lytton). His petition for a new licence was supported by numerous local businesses and, indeed, by churchwardens of the local parish. He headed a protest march to Parliament—accompanied by the Britannia’s musicians and a large number of well-behaved local supporters. Public sympathy was with Sam Lane, and his licence was renewed at the next Magistrates Sessions. Shortly afterwards Parliament passed the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, thus allowing all properly licensed halls the right to present plays. It was felt that Sam Lane’s campaign had contributed to this.

From 1843 onwards the Britannia Saloon began to present complete plays—mainly farces or meaty drama—as well as music hall entertainment. The plays became extremely popular. Sam’s first wife died, and shortly afterwards he married Sara Wilton. Her performances under the name Sara Lane (1823-1899) added to the popularity of the business. In 1850 the Lanes remodelled and enlarged the Saloon as the New Britannia Theatre, Hoxton. A season of Shakespeare plays with the famous actor James Anderson proved to be enormously successful, even though Anderson’s weekly wage was increased to a staggering £120. Another notable star of this season was the black actor, Ira Aldridge, famous for his performance as Othello.

In 1858 they further enlarged theBrittania so that it could now accommodate 3,000. This enlargement cost the staggering sum of £28,000. At one period the Britannia was regarded as the most valuable theatrical property in England. The local community regarded it with immense pride, writers like Dickens and Clement Scott praised it for the quality of its work and the well-behaved nature of its audiences.

The Lanes ran the Britannia with a strong stock company—the last in London to maintain this custom. Once an actor fitted into the scheme of things at the Britannia, it was his own fault if he ever left it. It was said that “Audiences and actors grew old together so long that at last it seemed as if they formed one vast family”. Some of the actors remained in the company for forty years. Discipline was strictly maintained, but everyone was treated fairly and equally. It was a condition of employment that actors would play “as cast”. A leading player in Shakespeare one night could be called upon to play a humble walk-on role the next night. There were no “stars” and no room for egos and temperament in the company—just an integrated company working for the good of the Britannia.

There was an elaborate series of fines for breaches of the rules:

- Being absent from a call: 6d
- Introducing unauthorised “ad-libs”: 1s
- Smoking backstage: 2s.6d
- Quarrelling anywhere in the theatre: 2s.6d
- If a blow is struck: 10s.6d
- Going on stage intoxicated: 10s.6d

(A repeat offence entailed dismissal)
Sam Lane died in December 1871, during rehearsals for the annual pantomime. He was 67 years old. His widow continued to run the theatre, and under her care the Britannia became the most consistently prosperous theatre in London.

A standard evening would consist of a full length play, followed by a farce and a number of variety turns. More than anything else, though, it was the annual pantomime that drew the crowds. These were so successful, they would run regularly until Easter. For fourteen consecutive years Sara Lane herself played Principal Boy. The Brit became an institution. Generations of families remained its loyal audience, authors wrote specially for it, actors spent whole careers there.

The 1898/1899 pantomime was “King Klondyke”. In its first week it sold 28,000 tickets and took £1,100 at the box office. On one single night it took the sum of £184—an all time record for that theatre—and its weekly takings never dropped below £800. It lasted longer than any other pantomime in the country, and by the end of its run had been seen by 260,000 people. This was to be the last pantomime under Sara’s management.

On August 19, 1899 Sara Lane died, thus ending a period of 58 years during which the Britannia had been built by and controlled by the same management. The whole neighbourhood turned out in mourning. The streets were lined by thousands of East-enders in a silent tribute as her funeral procession passed by. It was truly the end of an era.

The Britannia was left to her manager-nephew Alfred Lane Crauford and his brother. The London County Council immediately stepped in with a demand for £8,000 worth of improvements and alterations before the theatre’s licence could be renewed. They decided to sell the theatre to the Barrasford-Macnaghten Vaudeville Circuit, and the Britannia lost its dramatic content and became a Palace of Variety.

The next decade saw several changes of management, all of which failed to recapture any of the glory of the old days. Gradually the Britannia endured regular periods of closure, and by 1913 was almost exclusively used as a cinema. In 1923 most of its theatre facilities were removed and the building was converted for full-time cinema use. In 1927 it became part of the original Gaumont Cinema circuit. During the blitz of 1940 the building was destroyed by bombs, and was later demolished.

**BRITTEN THEATRE**

1986 Opened as part of the Royal College of Music

A private theatre for the Royal College of Music, designed by Sir Hugh Casson in miniature classic opera house style, and named in honour of the composer, Benjamin Britten. It was funded by the successful Centenary Appeal launched in 1982. It holds 400 people and is run as a fully professional theatre with its own staff. It is home to the London Royal Schools Opera, and is the venue for two main opera productions and several informal presentations each year. It is occasionally available for outside use.
BRIXTON ACADEMY

1929  Opened as the Astoria
1972  Closed as a cinema, used briefly as a disco
1981  Opened as a rock venue, but rapidly failed
1983  Re-opened as a reggae and punk venue
1990  Given a Grade II* Listing
1995  Major refurbishment and restoration

Brixton Academy was built in 1929 at a cost of £250,000 as the largest of four "Astoria" cine-variety theatres. The opening film was Al Jolson's first "talkie" – "The Singing Fool", preceded by a Variety show with Winnie Melville, Heddle Nash, Derek Oldham, Fred Kitchen and the Astoria Orchestra, and George Pattman at the Compton organ. The last 40 minutes of the opening stage show were broadcast by the BBC.

It was a stunning Art Deco building and was intended to be the originating house for all the Astoria circuit cine-variety shows. It was equipped with a large scenery workshop. The main feature of the entrance was a 35ft semi-dome carried out in copper sheet finished in spray bronze. The Auditorium was designed to give the audience the impression of sitting in an Italian garden. There was a huge dome 140ft in diameter (big enough to cover the middle of Leicester Square), onto which were projected moving clouds by day and twinkling stars by night. A bridge linked the two towers either side of the proscenium arch. The projection room was within the thickness of the circle structure allowing close and flat-on projection.

Its early years were a great success. In the 1940s it was renamed the Odeon Astoria as part of a business takeover, and in 1949 it underwent major re-decoration and repairs to the Dome. It continued to stage occasional variety events along with its films, and a Christmas attraction in 1950 included Charlie Chester, Talbot OFarrell, G.H. Elliott and other star names.

But times were changing, and the Astoria eventually closed its doors on 29th July 1972. The stalls were removed to provide a dance floor and the circle seats were left in situ, for rock concerts. It re-opened as the Sundown Disco in September 1972, but closed in January 1973 and stayed empty for over a year.

The building was threatened with demolition, but fortunately a Grade II Listing was enforced, and for a while the building was used as a store for the Rank Organisation, and finally sold to Watneys Brewery. It re-opened as a rock venue called "The Fair Deal" in 1981, with a concert by UB40 and an interior restoration but closed shortly afterwards, £300,000 in debt. Watneys gave up and sold the building to a man called Simon Parkes, who re-opened in 1983 with a concert by top Jamaican reggae outfit, Eek-A-Mouse.

Simon Parkes did wonders for the Astoria and for Brixton itself. The 1980s saw a series of big name concerts as well as regular reggae nights. Eric Clapton, Dire Straits, The Police, The Clash, and even an impromptu appearance by Diana Ross turned the Astoria – now renamed the Brixton Academy – into one of the best known and most successful pop concert venues in the country.

By 1995 the Brixton Academy was under new ownership (The McKenzie Group), and reinvestment started immediately with a complete £500,000 refurbishment of the Art Deco building frontage to its original grandeur, additional facilities both front of house and backstage and a capacity increase to just under 5,000.

The Brixton Academy has gone from strength to strength. It attracts over half a million customers each year and in recent years has played host to a range of acts from Madonna, Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones, to the Kings Of Leon, The Killers and today's biggest artists. Further restoration has taken place—the total now spent amounts to £2 million—and Brixton Academy is one of the glories of the Art Deco age of cine-variety.
BROADWAY THEATRE, Barking

1936 Created as part of the Barking Town Hall
1961 Renovated and improved.
2002 Closed for redevelopment
2004 Re-opened as a part-Educational, part-Community venture.

The new civic centre, built in 1936, was acclaimed in its day as a minor pinnacle of 20th Century architecture. Included in the complex was a theatre of the flat floor kind associated with “town Hall” theatres.

Used only occasionally, and chiefly for amateur productions, the theatre underwent some alteration in 1961, when it effectively became a multi-purpose hall adjoining Barking Town Hall. In the late 1980s it underwent some conversion to equip it for regular theatre use. However, this use became more infrequent, and more than one company went bankrupt during its pantomime seasons in the 1990s.

By 2002 there was a proposal to spend a large sum converting the premises into a performing area for drama students at Barking College and to enter into a Theatre Studies partnership with the University of East London. This renovation was completed at the end of 2004 and the Broadway Theatre, Barking opened with a pantomime, “Dick Whittington and his Kool Kool Cat”.

The theatre was completely remodelled by Tim Foster Architects. A total of £4.6 million was spent on creating a flexible theatre-space. The 341 seats are retractable to create a flat floor accommodating 950 standing. The stage can be enlarged or contracted to produce an arena in which theatre is only one of the things that can be presented. The basement area houses the Barking College School of Performing Arts and contains custom-designed drama and dance studios and music and recording facilities. The main auditorium is named after Dudley Moore, Dagenham’s best known arts personality.
opening of 80 feet and 40 feet in depth. It lasted just thirteen years as a full-time theatre and thereafter was used chiefly as a cinema.

From 1916 it was used exclusively for films. In 1948 it was taken over by the Granada chain and underwent some reconstruction. It kept the name of Broadway Cinema, though it was renamed the Century Cinema in 1955. It closed five years later and was demolished in 1963.

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**BYCULLAH ATHENAEUM, Enfield**

1883  Opened  
1931  Burnt down  
1933  Demolished

Bycullah Park, a 54 acre estate in Enfield, was ripe for re-development in the late 1870s. Prompted by the opening of the railway station in 1871, and by the enthusiasm for "garden suburb" housing for the emerging middle class of commuters, the estate was developed with detached and semi-detached housing either in a Gothic style or with mock-timber framing.

Building began in 1879, and was centred around an “Athenaeum” which opened in 1883. This “Athenaeum” was to provide a cultural, educational and entertainment heart for the housing estate—and was promoted heavily as a selling point for the new houses. By the time the estate was completed in 1897 the architects had modified their plans somewhat, and more modest housing had been added. However, the “Athenaeum” remained a strong selling-point.

It was used for a wide variety of cultural, social, musical and amateur theatrical activities. The occasional professional tour played there, and it was used to show films of an educational nature. It was damaged by fire in 1931 and eventually demolished. It was replaced by a garage and motor sales company.