

Theatres of Opulence

Numerically, theatres were by far the most significant seaside entertainment buildings, with at least 100 built in 44 English and Welsh resorts between 1870 and 1914. That figure is undoubtedly on the low side, since it excludes the many small theatres which came into being at the seaside around the turn of the century - often little more than simple, flat-floored halls or rapid conversions of previously unsuccessful entertainment buildings. These tiny and architecturally less interesting halls were unlikely to be reported in the building trade journals or to survive for long, but they housed an important part of the astonishingly wide range of theatrical entertainments then available at the seaside, from full-scale opera to intimate concert parties.

One estimate puts the number of theatres constructed in the British Isles between 1840 and 1920 as 413 and, although this is an underestimate caused by the metropolitan bias of the trade journals, it is clear that seaside theatres made up a significant proportion of all turn of the century theatre building. Nationally, the boom years for theatre construction were 1896-1910; at the seaside, the boom came in two phases, 1896-99 and 1908-14, with many theatres-cumcinemas built in the first few years of the reign of George V. The quiet period at the start of the century may be explained by the greater rate of construction of pier pavilion theatres at that time, and the presence of theatres in the few but continually expanding pleasure complexes. The rate of formation of companies set up to run theatres remained high throughout the 1890s and 1900s.

Seaside theatres were required to be adaptable and were often reconstructed as entertainment fashions changed. Some combined circus rings and stages, while those with flat floors and side stages were used for ballroom dancing and music hall and, when the cinema became popular, many small halls staged mixed bills featuring variety acts and films. There were also exquisite examples of pure theatres and opera houses, designed by Britain's leading theatre architects, which contrasted with some idiosyncratic halls produced by local men.

A good example of an all-purpose turn of the century seaside theatre is the Knightstone Pavilion and Opera House (1903) at Weston -super-Mare, designed by J. S. Stewart. The towered Italianate facade hides a long, rectangular hall which originally had a flat floor. The Palace Theatre, Westcliff-on-Sea (1912) was a combined cinema and variety theatre with a Baroque facade in red brick and stucco. Internally, onion dome canopies on the boxes, and decorative panels which held the numbers of the music hall acts, betray its ancestry. The Pier Amphitheatre (c1908) at Rhyl, not a pier pavilion despite the name and now known as the Gaiety Theatre, may be the only surviving pre-1914 concert party theatre in Britain. The concert party originated in 1890 with a small group of concert singers who also performed for private parties, at which they wore masks so as not to affect their professional standing. Pierrot costume was introduced in 1891 and the idea of a troupe of players performing a bill of mainly musical variety acts soon

became popular at the resorts. They used either conventional theatres or stages set up on the beach. The Gaiety has no proscenium arch, only a thrust stage and a single raked arc of seating for 800 people. In contrast to this small venue for polite entertainments, the concert hall at the Cunningham Holiday Camp, Douglas, was described in the Camp's advertisements as a 'huge recreation pavilion'. The large, rectangular, heavily glazed hall was built in 1904 and decorated with Oriental turrets and onion domes; it was demolished soon after 1945.

Although most smaller resorts could support only one or two all-purpose theatres, the larger resorts were able to provide specialist venues, and indeed seven theatres were built at Brighton between 1876 and 1900. At the Royal Hippodrome, built 1876 by Messrs Stanning, the visitor could see melodrama with murders, battles and sudden deaths, while Frank Matcham's Grand (1887) rivalled the older Theatre Royal for high class entertainment and his Alhambra (1888) could be adapted as a circus. The Theatre Royal began life in 1807, had its auditorium rebuilt in 1866 and its facade reconstructed in 1894 in red brick with twin octagonal copper-domed turrets. The architects were local firm Clayton and Black. Music hall was catered for in the 1890s by the construction of the Empire Theatre and the New Oxford. Matcham's third Brighton theatre was the Hippodrome, which opened on 28 August 1901 and unusually combined circus and music hall, though the arena was removed after only a few years. Thus in these theatres, the pier pavilions and doubtless other small halls, circus, music hall, concerts and the whole range of theatrical entertainment was available to Brighton's Edwardian visitors.

Eleven architectural practices specialised in theatre design between the 1880s and 1914, the most important being London-based Frank Matcham. He built or reconstructed over 150 theatres between 1875 and 1913 while his nearest rival, C. J. Phipps, built 72, during a slightly earlier period, 1863-99. Despite this large number of commissions neither Matcham, Phipps nor any of the other established theatrical specialists designed many seaside theatres, although these accounted for roughly one in four of those built between 1870 and 1914. They made up only one tenth of Matcham's output, Phipps built nine and Bertie Crewe, who designed 41 theatres in all, built three at the seaside. None of W. G. R. Sprague's 40 theatres had a resort site. The seaside theatres were to a great extent the work of seaside specialists and local practices, but despite this were comparable in quality of design and decoration to their inland counterparts.

The Manchester practice Mangnall and Littlewoods, architects of the Empress Ballroom (1896) and Opera House (1911) at Blackpool Winter Gardens, were seaside specialists who designed four resort theatres, two at Bridlington, one at Weymouth and their first, the Victoria Pavilion, at Morecambe in 1897. Their work has received little acclaim, though the Victoria Pavilion, a music hall with 2,200 capacity, is of considerable interest. The promenade facade in red brick and Ruabon terracotta is decorated by three gables, the central one deeply stepped, almost notched, above a large semicircular window. The entrance has elegant mosaic work and faience wall

panels, similar to the cornucopia panels in Blackpool Tower Buildings; the dado is in deep brown and the panels are pale blue framed by green and yellow. The wide auditorium has a single balcony and the boxes, box canopies and balcony are decorated with elaborate plasterwork.

Other important seaside theatre architects were G. A. Humphreys at Llandudno and J. W. Cockrill at Great Yarmouth. George Alfred Humphreys was architect to the Mostyn Estate which developed Llandudno. He designed two of the town's theatres, Prince's (with Bradley) in the 1880s and the Grand in 1899-1901, with the noted writer on theatre architecture, Edwin Sachs, as consultant for the latter. The Grand's towered, red-brick facade hides an intimate 1,000 seat auditorium enriched with high quality plasterwork. J. W. Cockrill, Great Yarmouth's Borough Surveyor, built the Pavilion in nearby Gorleston in 1901. Its domed Art Nouveau red brick facade has terracotta panels and the stained glass carries maritime motifs. The interior is typical of a small seaside music hall, with an ornate proscenium arch and a gallery supported by decorative iron girders. Another Borough Surveyor, H. A. Garrett of Torquay, designed the town's Pavilion in 1911, a wonderful domed Baroque creation with a steel frame clad in green and white Doulton faience. The Pavilion was basically a music hall, and a balcony with a cast iron balustrade ran round three sides of the auditorium.

The architects of many smaller seaside theatres are as yet unidentified. The Clacton-on-Sea Palace Theatre was opened in 1906 as part of the Palace-by-the-Sea, intended as an exhibition venue to rival London's Earls Court. Development of the Palace and its grounds cost £50,000 and the park featured such novelties as a Japanese Pagoda and Illuminated Electric Fountains, but it proved unattractive and the enterprise began to lose money within a few years. The Theatre was left as the only viable asset. Its architect is unknown, but the Palace combined elements of music hall, winter garden and conventional theatre in its elegant design. It had an iron-beamed, glazed roof, a flat floor with a single balustraded balcony, and a stage with a tremendously ornate proscenium arch sited at the end of the hall. It was capable of being adapted for any type of stage performance, dancing or exhibitions, and was thus the ideal hall for a medium-sized resort which already had a pier pavilion and two other small theatres. It continued as a theatre until the 1930s, when cinema took over, but was demolished around 1980. It thus shared the fate of many similar halls which made up the lesser known bulk of the seaside theatres.

Whether at seaside resorts or inland, stylistic eclecticism was endemic in theatre design at the turn of the century. The first concerns of most theatre architects were the design of the lavish and sophisticated interiors, and technical issues relating to ventilation and fire prevention. The style of the facade was less important providing it attracted attention, crucial in seaside locations with competing entertainments along the promenade. Gothic, Neo-classic and Queen Anne Revival were all popular for facades, often tricked out with eye-catching domes, towers or gables. Matcham's Grand (1894) at Blackpool uses a Baroque tower with a copper fish-scale dome to

dominate its corner site. Its interior has three balconies and a pair of pedimented boxes, the whole replete with opulent plasterwork and painting. The interiors were the true delight of the theatres and especially the music halls, where styles were a wild mixture of Baroque, Oriental, Gothic, Flemish, Middle Eastern and assorted ill-defined motifs. Some Edwardian theatre interiors display evidence of a trend away from elaborate decoration towards a cooler English or French classicism, as shown by Stanley D. Adshead's Royal Victoria Pavilion (1904) at Ramsgate. Adshead, who trained under George Sherrin, based the interior design on that of the Marie Antoinette Theatre (1770) at Versailles.

Aside from the question of style, an important consideration for any architect working on a sea front site was the durability of his materials. Hard-wearing terracotta was therefore popular, as it was both extremely durable and capable of being produced in ornate decorative forms. Matcham used it for the domes, finials and decorative panels on the stepped gables of his Southport Opera House (1890-91). These mouldings, provided by Messrs Fambrini & Daniels of Lincoln, were described in *The Builder* as being of imperishable red concrete masonry. The New Palace Theatre (1898), Plymouth, by J. T. Wimperis and W. H. Arber, was faced entirely in buff terracotta and glazed majolica by Doulton & Co of Lambeth, with mermaid panels designed by W. J. Neatby. In addition to the Queen Anne Revival gables and turrets, the facade displayed two finely coloured semicircular tile panels of the Spanish Armada, reproductions of paintings by Sir Oswald Brierly. The Marine Palace of Varieties (1897-99), on Hastings sea front, also had a buff Doulton terracotta facade. Its architect was Ernest Runtz, designer of 12 other theatres, including the Empire Palace of Varieties (1896-97) at Middlesbrough, which had a similar facade in a style described at the time as Spanish Renaissance. Terracotta was equally useful for theatres at the seaside and in dirty industrial towns; in both locations durability and eye-catching decoration were required.

Resort theatres were integral to the seaside scene, rather than particularly memorable elements of it like piers, pier pavilions and towers. Theatres were rarely shown on seaside postcards; they could be seen at home, and were not novelties in the manner of Ferris Wheels or circuses. Although theatres were the least unusual of the seaside entertainments, they were still financially important and essential for the larger resorts, where visitors could see a different show every day. Between 1863 and 1919, 67 joint stock companies were set up to build or run theatres, opera houses or music halls at the seaside. Llandudno, a resort of medium size, was the home of six separate theatre companies, which ran four theatres during 1890-1919. Companies were frequently formed to take over previously ailing ventures; thus theatres passed from hand to hand in the local business community, but many companies were new ventures in which architects were often financially involved, helping to acquire the land, find backers and eventually produce the design for a new theatre. The architect as entrepreneur was no rarity at the turn of the century.

