

REMAINS OF FORMER QUEEN'S AND ROYAL VICTORIA THEATRES AND HORSE BAZAAR

Corner Gilles Arcade and Playhouse Lane

Hidden at the end of an obscure lane is an odd but obviously very old structure; the remains of the oldest theatres on the Australian mainland.

These are extremely important to social history and the development of theatres, not just in this state, but in the national context. The original buildings were also put to other, quite unrelated, but significant uses.



(CD Ref 2023/50)

Although Australia's first theatrical performance was given in New South Wales in 1789 it was some time before a purpose-built theatre was built. Robert Sidaway erected a modest theatre in 1799, but major theatres were not built until the 1830s in Sydney and Hobart. In 1833 the Theatre Royal opened in Sydney and by 1837 the Hobart Town Theatre was substantially completed, reopening in 1839. The basis of this theatre survives as part of Hobart's Theatre Royal which justly deserves world-wide recognition as an excellent example of a Victorian period theatre.

The first serious attempt to provide a major theatrical venue in Adelaide was made in 1840 soon after the ventures in Sydney and Hobart. On 30 May 1840 the *South Australian Register* reported that '... Mr Solomon, of Currie Street, is about to make an important addition to the quarter of the Gilles Arcade, by the erection of a spacious and handsome edifice which he intends to fit up as a theatre ...'.

Queen's Theatre was built by the merchants Vaiben and Emanuel Solomon. Given the prevailing prosperity of Adelaide they were prepared to finance the 'new theatre and public rooms' to the extent of £3000. A prospectus was published in August 1840 to raise additional

Heritage of the City of Adelaide

capital of £7000 for an extended scheme. By November 1840 construction of the 'large and neat pile of buildings' was well under way. The Queen's Theatre opened on 11 January 1841 with John Lazar playing the leading male role in *Othello*. Lazar, who was the theatre lessee, encountered difficult times because of the onset of the early 1840s depression and on 28 November 1842 the Queen's Theatre held its last performance.

During those early years of theatre in Australia, Lazar divided his theatrical career between Sydney and Adelaide. He arrived in Sydney in 1837 and starred at and managed the Theatre Royal and the new Victoria Theatre until 1840 when he left for Adelaide. After abandoning the lease of Queen's Theatre in 1842, Lazar returned to Sydney, laying the foundations there for operatic productions and local drama. In 1848 he returned to Adelaide to manage Coppin's New Queen's Theatre and then, with Coppin, opened the Royal Victoria Theatre.

Lazar was mayor of Adelaide between 1855 and 1858, retiring from council in 1859. He left South Australia in 1863 and in 1865 he was appointed town clerk of Dunedin. He died in New Zealand in 1879.

After 1842 the old Queen's Theatre building was briefly used as a commercial exchange and as an extension of the adjoining Shakespeare Tavern. In 1843 negotiations between the government and E. Solomon led to the internal adaptation of the theatre for use as the Magistrates Court, Supreme Court and Police Court.



(CD Ref 2023/47)

A description in *Stephen's Almanac* of 1847 indicates that apart from a

division made between the stage and the auditorium, the interior remained relatively intact. The unusual court looked 'altogether grand and unique':

The stage is now the Supreme Court . . . More appropriately still, a lower dungeon, which formerly served for ghosts and wizards to rise from, or sink into, in melodrama or pantomime is made a temporary prison for the rough and rugged old convicts from Sydney and Van Diemen's Land, who form the staple of our criminals. The pit is our Police Court, and is still surrounded with tiers of boxes which occasionally, as if in memory of olden times, are tenanted by an inquisitive audience. What were once the lobbies are now the offices respectively of the Police Commissioner and his clerks. The Resident magistrate and the Official Assignee occupy the saloon, while the ladies' cloak room is claimed by the Sheriff. Other apartments are used by the Judge, the Master of the Court, the Advocate General, the Deputy Registrar; while some are devoted to the purposes of a tavern keeper, whose larder and cellar provide well-spread tables for litigants, witnesses, and advocates.

In 1846 George Coppin arrived in South Australia which was then recovering from the depression. He converted a large billiard hall, adjoining the former Queen's Theatre for his theatre, to be called the New Queen's Theatre which opened in 1846. Although it had no physical impact on the present remains, it contributed to a continuity of a theatrical venue in

Heritage of the City of Adelaide

the area and a partnership of Coppin and John Lazar, both important to the development of theatre in Australia. Their actions resulted in the next phase of the history of the old Queen's Theatre.

The New Queen's Theatre closed in April 1850. By then the adjacent courts had been vacated and so Coppin and Lazar could remodel, and enlarge, the old Queen's Theatre building to form the Royal Victoria Theatre which opened on 23 December 1850.

This theatre was described as a 'tout ensemble' never yet equalled in the Australian colonies. There was a new facade to Gilles Arcade (that seen today), a pit constructed on the principle of the Princess' Theatre in London, a dress circle with a ladies' retiring room and saloon, a gallery capable of containing 400 persons, and an extensive stage department, for the production of gorgeous spectacles'. Six private boxes were attached to the dress circle, the entrance being from Gilles Arcade, while the entrance to the pit and gallery was from Waymouth Street. The *South Australian Register* of 25 December 1850 described the interior. From this description Professor Ross Thorne, in *Theatre buildings in Australia to 1905*, has completed a conjectural restoration of the interior.

This new venture was just as short-lived as its predecessor as the gold-rushes of 1851 drew an exodus from South Australia which drastically cut theatre patronage. On 10 November 1851 the Royal Victoria was forced to close.

Coppin's role as the 'father of Australian theatre' has been disputed, but he was certainly an energetic pioneer entrepreneur. He was intimately associated with the second phase of theatre development in Australia, inaugurating the 'starring tours of visiting celebrities'. In an advertisement of late 1850 he stated that, 'Engagements are pending with some of the most ESTABLISHED FAVOURITES of Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart town, who will shortly make their appearance in Adelaide'.

Coppin's theatrical career spanned Sydney, Tasmania and Melbourne between 1843 and 1846, when he finally came to Adelaide. Coppin was also associated with theatre at Port Adelaide and the well-known Exchange Hotel and Auction Mart in Hindley Street. He suffered severe financial losses in 1851 so he went to the Victorian goldfields, playing to miners in Geelong. Then he left for England to appear at the Haymarket Theatre in London and in theatres throughout the country.

By 1855 Coppin was back in Melbourne with his prefabricated 'Olympic' theatre. He remained a prominent figure in the eastern colonies, particularly in Melbourne, not only in connection with the theatre but also as a philanthropist, Grand Master of the first Grand Lodge of Freemasons in Victoria, and a politician.

A testimonial regarding the Royal Victoria Theatre at the time of its proposed auction on 29 November 1852, listed the Victoria Theatre, Temple Tavern, old theatre attached, 'the magnificent saloon', casino, a dwelling-house, saloon and buildings, together with all the scenery, machinery, 'splendid wardrobe' and lamp, as forming overall ' . . . one of the most elegant places of amusement existent in this or any of the neighbouring colonies'. Besides the sum of £17 000 spent in the original construction of the premises, another £3000 had been spent in redecorating and additions since the government's lease was terminated.

Heritage of the City of Adelaide

Following further alterations the theatre reopened for a final term between 1859 and 1868. Between 1868 and 1872, publicans Johannes Schirmer and George Isaacs leased the property. From 1873 it was occupied by the City Mission until this moved into new premises in Light Square in 1877.

In December 1877 Messrs Formby and Boase opened their horse and carriage bazaar in the former theatre and adjoining buildings. Alterations to the theatre structure were made to place stalls, a ring and offices within the auditorium and stage areas. The tiered seating around the walls of the theatre remained intact in order to give prospective buyers an adequate view of the livestock. The auctions became famous both for the quality and size of stock auctioned and for the facilities provided by this shrewd conversion of the theatre. Formby and Boase held some of Australia's largest sales with buyers attending from all over the country. The ring was described as one of the most capacious in Australia.



(CD Ref 2023/71)

In about 1901 a large proportion of the theatre was demolished. The timber internal structure was simply sawn off at support points, and much of the stage area and rear structure were removed. This greatly reduced the integrity of the theatre seen today. The principal elevation of the Royal Victoria remains facing Gilles Arcade, and behind this the central portion of the earlier Queen's Theatre facade. The side walls of the auditorium also remain, the disposition of the various levels of seating indicated by the remains of timber joists and bearers. A conjectural and practical reconstruction would appear possible in the light of surviving physical evidence and the research of Professor Thorne. An adjacent arch and northern wall of Formby's stables may also be seen, the stable wall retaining typical slit ventilators and rings for tying the animals in the stalls.

The theatre remains are of immense historical importance and are important architecturally as evidence of the oldest colonial Georgian theatre to survive on mainland Australia. There is a direct association with the history of theatre in Australia because of the involvement of John Lazar and George Coppin. The remains are also connected with the development of the court

Heritage of the City of Adelaide

system in South Australia, and played an important role in the horse trade. All remnants, both of the theatres and the horse bazaar, are of major historical and architectural importance.

ACA, Assessments 1850-82, year books; Angas, H., *Historic Adelaide theatre architecture*, SAIT thesis unpublished, 1981; *Australian dictionary of biography*, D. Pike (ed), (Coppin and Lazar), Vol. 2, 1967, pp. 98-9, Vol. 3, 1969, pp. 459-62; Bagot, A., *Coppin the great* 1965; Dolan, D., 'Adelaide the well trod stage' in *Vantage*, Spring 1979; Kingston map 1842; MLSA, Historical photographs (Town Acre 176), Research notes 39 and 486A, PRG58, G.L. Fischer, E. Solomon's Letterbook, 1312; *Observer*, 30 September 1843; PRO, CSO docket 373 of 1843; *Register*, 14 July 1928; *South Australian Newsletter*, 14 December 1841; *South Australian Register*, 30 May 1840, 12 December 1840, 9 September 1843, 24 October 1846, 4 November 1846, 23, 24, 25 December 1850, 27, 29 November 1852, 20 December 1877; *Southern Australian*, 9 March 1841; *Stephen's Almanac*, 1847, p. 77; Thorne, R., *Theatre buildings in Australia to 1905*, 1971; West, J., *Theatre in Australia*, 1978.

The text in this Information Sheet was copied from the **Heritage of the City of Adelaide: An Illustrated Guide**, (1996). The photographs contained in this Information Sheet are a selection of those held by Heritage Services, in digital format.

The property described in this Information Sheet is included in the Register of State Heritage places. A heritage listing does not mean or imply right of access by the public to such properties.

The heritage related Principles of Development Control as well as the Precinct specific objectives and Principles of Development Control are contained in the Adelaide (City) Development Plan. These should be referred to in whole when contemplating any development.

Further information on the Heritage Incentives Scheme, an initiative of Council to sponsor timely and appropriate conservation action is available upon request of the Customer Service Centre.



CITY OF ADELAIDE HERITAGE STUDY

The City Heritage Register - Definition of Items

Prepared by the Dept. of Planning and Development

Item	REMAINS QUEEN'S AND ROYAL VICTORIA THEATRES	Building No Pt. 6/0207
Address	Cnr. of Gilles Arcade/Playhouse Lane (on part of land at 21-31 Playhouse Lane, 22 Gilles Arcade, 102-120 Waymouth Street).	CT 294/153 *

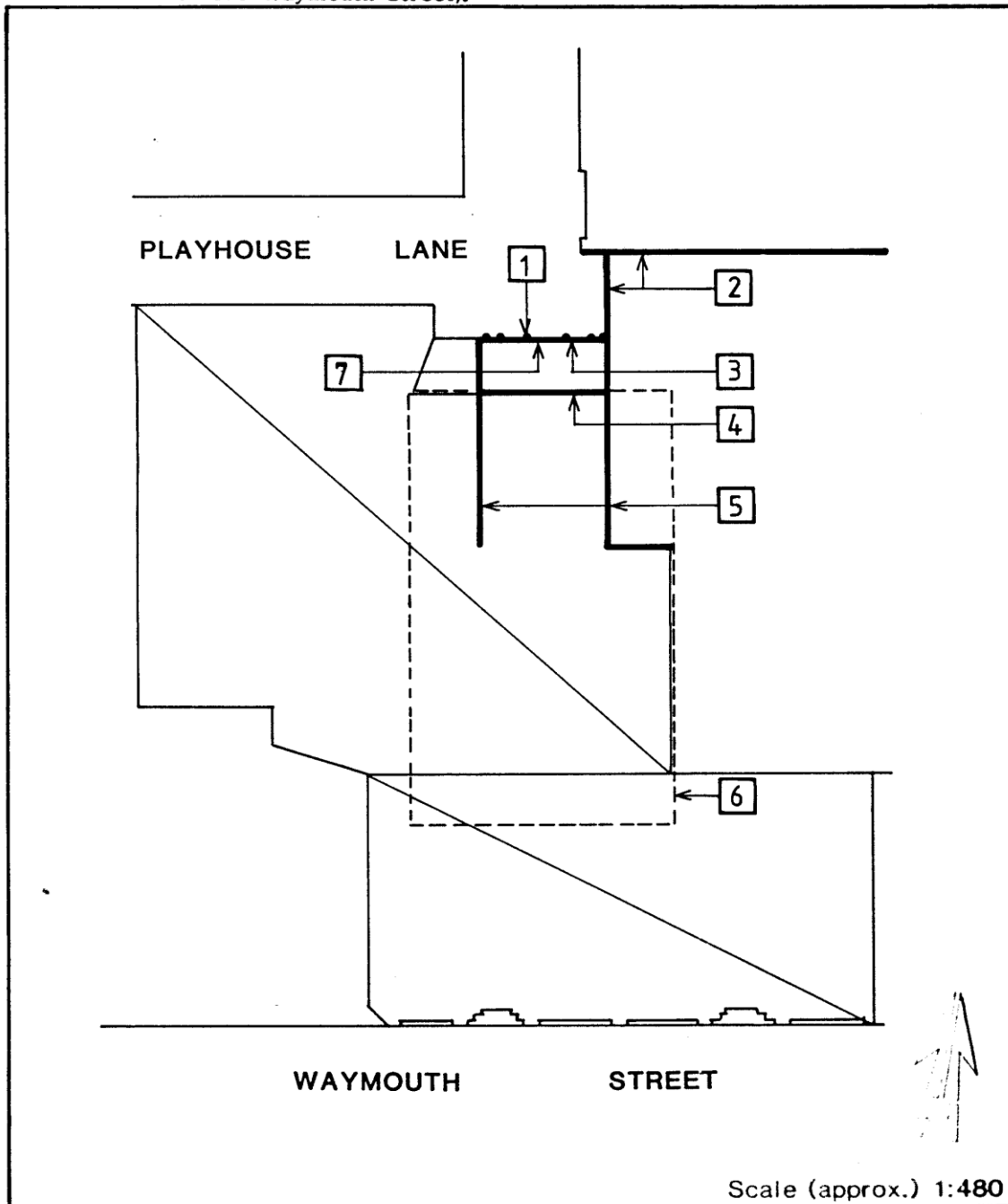


Image scanned - not to stated scale.

This Curtilage Map has been prepared as a guide only and no warranty or assurance is given about the accuracy of the content as it may contain obsolete information. The Corporation excludes all liability [including for negligence] in relation to your use of these documents.



CITY OF ADELAIDE HERITAGE STUDY

The City Heritage Register-Definition of Items

Prepared by the Dept. of Planning and Development

Item	REMAIN QUEEN'S AND ROYAL VICTORIA THEATRES	Building No Pt. 6/0207
Address	Cnr. of Gilles Arcade/Playhouse Lane (on part of land at 21-31 Playhouse Lane, 22 Gilles Arcade, 102-120 Waymouth Street).	CT 294/153*

NOTES:

1. Rendered masonry construction with engaged columns. Note pediments.
2. Arch and stable walling.
3. Royal Victoria facade.
4. Queen's facade.
5. Auditorium walls.
6. Approximate line of original building.
7. Vehicle entrance point cut into facade.

* (Remains of former Royal Victoria/Queens Theatre and Horse Bazaar including above ground remains, present exposure of archaeological evidence and other below ground remains within the site of the former Theatre; corner of Gilles Arcade and Playhouse Lane.)