

Stage by Stage
The beginning: 1848 – 1962

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The Development of the National Theatre from 1848

Designed by **Michael Mayhew**

Compiled by **Lyn Hail & Stephen Wood**

With thanks to Richard Mangan and The Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection,
Monica Sollash and The Theatre Museum

The majority of the photographs in the exhibition were commissioned
by the National Theatre and are part of its archive

The exhibition was funded by **The Royal National Theatre Foundation**

The story of how the National came into existence is one of lengthy struggle. Here's how it begins...

1848

The first proposal for a National Theatre is made by Effingham Wilson, a London publisher. It is supported by leading figures of the day, including Charles Dickens, critic and poet Matthew Arnold, and actors Charles Kemble and Sir Henry Irving.

1880

Matthew Arnold writes an impassioned plea for a subsidised theatre in London, ending 'The theatre is irresistible; organize the theatre!'

1903

Actor-director-author Harley Granville Barker and critic William Archer publish the first detailed plans for a National Theatre, and circulate their book privately. ('On no account to be communicated to, or criticised or mentioned in, the Public Press.') Their plans cover staff, specimen repertoire, size of company (65), wages, seating capacity, a subscription scheme and seat prices. Coded cast lists for the first plays are included: 'Richard II ... Mr Kingsway' (Mr Kingsway = Henry Irving). The estimated total cost of the project is £300,000.

1906

Winston Churchill writes, 'Let us think with what excitement and interest we witness the construction and launching of a Dreadnought. What a pity it is that some measure of this interest cannot be turned in the direction of the launching, say, of a National Theatre.'

1908

Supporters of the campaign join forces with a group planning a memorial to Shakespeare, to form the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre. The Committee includes, from the world of theatre, Bernard Shaw, Arthur Wing Pinero, Beerbohm Tree, Johnston Forbes-Robertson, and Granville Barker; plus leading social and political figures like Viscount Esher and the Hon Mrs Alfred Lyttelton. Professor Israel Gollancz becomes the committee's Honorary Secretary.

The Objects of the Shakespeare National Theatre are published under the following headings:

1. To keep the plays of Shakespeare in its repertory
2. To revive whatever else is vital in English classical drama
3. To prevent recent plays of great merit from falling into oblivion
4. To produce new plays and to further the development of the modern drama
5. To produce translations of representative works of foreign drama, ancient and modern
6. To stimulate the art of acting through the varied opportunities which it will offer to the members of the company

1909

The committee obtains the first substantial donation to the appeal: £70,000 from Carl Meyer, son of a Hamburg banker.

1913

23 April: A Private Members Bill is brought before the House of Commons: 'That in the opinion of this House there shall be established a National Theatre'. The estimated cost is now £500,000. The result is 'Not decided in the affirmative'.

The Committee acquires a site, with over an acre of land, immediately behind the British Museum, at the corner of Gower Street and Keppel Street, at a cost of £50,000.

1914

At the outbreak of war the Committee suspends operations, but in 1916 they lend the site to the YMCA for the erection of a 'Shakespeare Hut' for the entertainment and social services of the troops. The site is sold in 1922 to the Rockefeller Trust.

1918

Geoffrey Whitworth, a young publisher, founds the British Drama League and becomes one of the most vigorous campaigners for the NT. At the League's first Annual Conference, actor Sir John Martin-Harvey moves that the League should make its chief aim the foundation of a National Theatre.

1924

The British Drama League, with *Country Life* magazine, holds a competition for architectural designs for a National Theatre, the result being announced at the British Empire Exhibition. The winner is W L Somerville of Toronto.

1925

Various sites are considered, including Chandos Street, Grosvenor Gardens (the triangular garden near Victoria Station where the Foch memorial now stands), and Horseferry Road. Bernard Shaw writes of the last, 'In the 18th century it would have proved an ideal site for a gibbet. Its sole advantage from our point of view is that it is conveniently near Mrs Lyttelton's'.

1930

In a revised edition of his book on the National Theatre, Granville Barker writes prophetically: 'The site facing the river, between County Hall and the Surrey Approach to the new Charing Cross Bridge, is about all that one can wish for; a National Theatre could hardly be better placed.' He also stresses the importance of having two auditoriums, not one.

1930s

Further possible sites are considered, including ones in Leicester Square, Hart Street, Bloomsbury, St George's Hospital, the New (now Noël Coward) and Wyndham's Theatres rebuilt as a single block, the Phoenix, the Saville, and the Cambridge Theatres, a site near the National Gallery, the premises of the Junior United Services Club, the Lyceum Theatre, a site at the back of Victoria Station, Charing Cross Hospital, His Majesty's Theatre (now Her Majesty's), and Drury Lane Theatre.

Fund-raising events include a Shakespeare Matinee at Drury Lane, directed by Ivor Novello and Sydney Carroll, the sale of seats

overlooking the procession routes of the Silver Jubilee in 1935 and of the Coronation of George VI, as well as a Coronation Ball at the Albert Hall.

1937

A site measuring 16,000 square feet, is purchased in Cromwell Gardens, opposite the Victoria and Albert Museum. Sir Edwin Lutyens and the architect of the Phoenix Theatre, Cecil Masey, are appointed to design the building.

A building committee of Ashley Dukes, Sidney Bernstein, Bridges Adams, Lewis Casson, Nicholas Hannen and Geoffrey Whitworth begins to meet. Granville Barker is asked to be director of the new theatre, but declines as he does not consider the site will have room for two stages.

Lilian Baylis, 'the most remarkable of all the talents at large in the British theatre between 1900 and 1940', dies. Her work, as the legendary manager of the Old Vic for 25 years, had laid the foundations for a national theatre.

1938

22 April. The Ceremony of the Twig and the Sod: The title deeds of the Cromwell Gardens site are ceremonially handed to the new owners with, in accordance with ancient custom, a sod of Kensington earth and a twig from a Kensington tree. A Fleet Street choir sings old English madrigals. Bernard Shaw, in his speech, says:

'Do the English people want a national theatre? Of course they do not. They never want



Lilian Baylis. Photograph from the NT Archive.

anything. They got the British Museum, the National Gallery, and Westminster Abbey, but they never wanted them. But once these things stood as mysterious phenomena that had come to them, they were quite proud of them, and felt that the place would be incomplete without them'.

1939

The Second World War delays the building of the theatre.

1940

The Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts is set up with direct grants from the Exchequer to fund the arts. In 1946 it is to become the Arts Council of Great Britain.

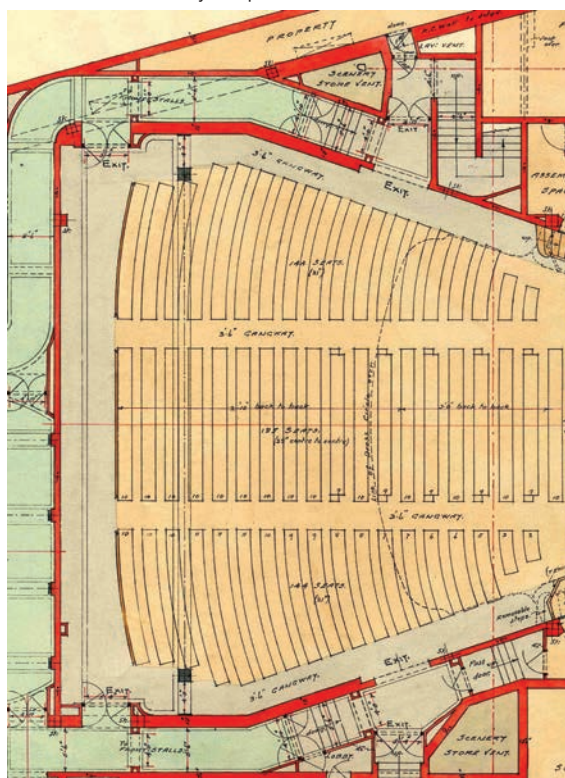
1942

Negotiations with the London County Council lead to an agreement whereby the Kensington site is exchanged for a new site on the South Bank of the Thames. Sir Edwin Lutyens and Mr Masey design a completely new building for this site, including the two auditoriums recommended by Granville Barker. The plans are shown at an exhibition at Burlington House in 1944.

1946

The Joint Council of the National Theatre

Detail from Edward Lutyens' plan for the main auditorium.



and the Old Vic is set up and enters into an agreement for the promotion and building of a National Theatre. Its Chairman is Oliver (son of Alfred and Edith) Lyttelton. Edwin Lutyens dies and the new architect appointed is an Australian, Brian O'Rorke, who estimates building costs to be in the region of £1 million.

1949

The National Theatre Bill is brought before Parliament, and is passed through without division, empowering the government of the day to contribute up to £1 million for the theatre's building and equipment.

1950

The Building Committee, now including Laurence Olivier, approve O'Rorke's plan for the larger theatre. However, he now estimates that to build the smaller as well would cost a further £200,000. The Joint Council agrees to compromise on the temporary use of the Old Vic as the smaller auditorium.

1951

On Friday 13 July, in Festival of Britain year, a foundation stone is laid by HM Queen Elizabeth (later the Queen Mother) on a site next to the Festival Hall. Dame Sybil Thorndike recites verses from the Poet Laureate, John Masefield.

1952

It is agreed with the LCC that the National Theatre should occupy a better site, adjoining County Hall. In 1955, critics Kenneth Tynan and Richard Findlater, despairing of the Theatre's ever being built, stage a mock funeral beside the foundation stone.

1960

A Joint Council report is submitted to the Chancellor, putting the building costs at £2.3 million, with annual running costs of £500,000. The newly inaugurated Royal Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon (director Peter Hall), joins the Joint Council of the NT.

1961

Pressure is brought on the government to release the promised money, but Selwyn-Lloyd, Chancellor of the Exchequer, refuses, promising increased help to regional theatres instead. After further negotiations, he agrees

to consider a new scheme which would house Sadler's Wells in an opera house under the same roof.

1962

The Royal Shakespeare Theatre withdraws from the scheme. In July, the Chancellor appoints the National Theatre Board, chaired by Lord Chandos (the former Oliver Lyttelton), and the South Bank Theatre and Opera House Board, chaired by Lord Cottesloe, to supervise the building operation.

In August, the appointment is announced of the National's first Director, Sir Laurence Olivier, then launching the first season at Chichester Festival Theatre of which he is Director. Kenneth Tynan becomes the NT's Literary Manager.

The Governors of the Old Vic agree to offer their theatre as a temporary home for the National Theatre. The initial lease is for five years.