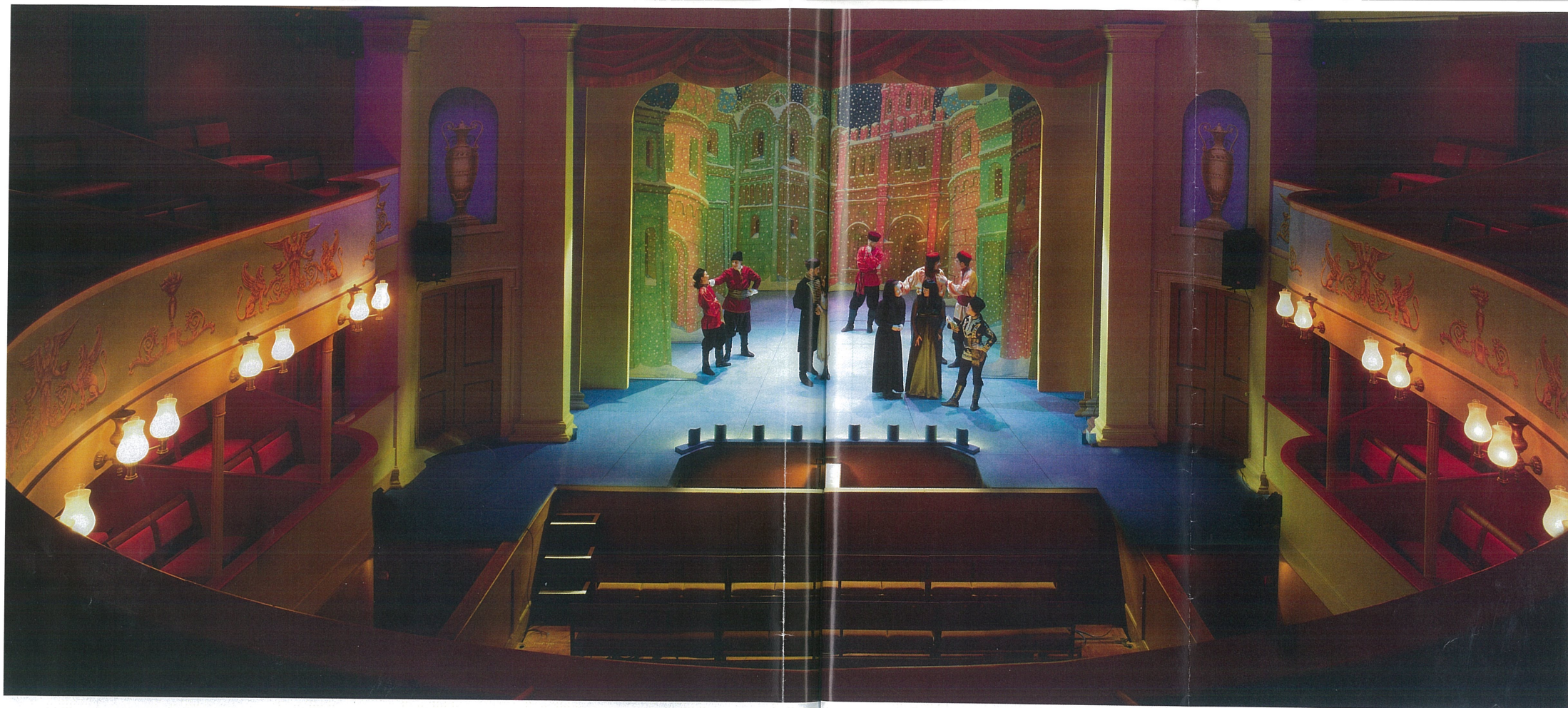




1—The gloriously restored interior of the Theatre Royal, England's last surviving Regency theatre. The new stage can be configured in various ways.

KING OF THEATRES

DAVID ADSHEAD celebrates the restoration of the superb Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds, and tells the remarkable story of its development and re-creation

THE reopening of the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds last year returned the sole surviving Regency playhouse in England to working use. Rather as the reconstructed Globe in London offers modern audiences an insight into the realities of Shakespeare's theatrical world, this offers a compelling vision of the vigorous—but comparatively little known—theatrical tradition of 18th-century and Regency England. Particularly important to this was the use of a stage that projected into the audience beyond the proscenium arch (Fig 4). This forestage

created a close rapport between actors and audience that the English loved.

In its changing fortunes, the Theatre Royal offers a fascinating portrait of English theatrical history. The theatre was built by William Wilkins in 1819, a figure with both building and theatre in his blood. His father, also William Wilkins and a practising architect, became the lessee of the Norwich circuit in 1799. This comprised the playhouses at King's Lynn, Yarmouth, Colchester, Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds and Cambridge. The theatres were sub-let to the Norwich Company of Comedians, which toured from one

venue to another, deliberately coinciding with annual fairs and markets. A secondary, complementary circuit of East Anglian theatres—at Beccles, Sudbury, Lowestoft, Eye, Bungay, Woodbridge, Thetford, East Dereham, Swaffham, and Newmarket—was managed by the Fisher family.

It made good business sense for the Wilkinses to repair, remodel and rebuild the playhouses on the Norwich circuit themselves. The elder Wilkins rebuilt the Norwich Theatre in 1800 and erected a new one at Colchester in 1811–12; the younger perhaps rebuilt the Barnwell theatre in Cambridge in collaboration

with his father, prior to his work at Bury.

Wilkins Jnr persuaded the St Edmundsbury Corporation to allow him to build a new theatre (Fig 2)—‘of ample dimensions and elegance corresponding to the other public buildings of the place’—on the south side of Bury St Edmunds. It replaced the tiny performing space on the first floor of Robert Adam’s 1773 Market Cross building, which Wilkins Jnr had leased in 1808, and which, despite its size and inconvenience, he found ‘one of the most productive... in the circuit’—the income it generated allowed him to cover losses incurred elsewhere.

The theatre’s profitability stemmed from the fact that it functioned only during the four- to six-week period in October and November when, with the harvest safely in and cash at their disposal, people from all walks of life poured into town for the entertainments of the annual

Bury Fair. A greater turnover could be expected from a larger theatre on a new site, despite the fact that the new building was to cost £5,000. Astonishingly, at its opening, the Theatre Royal accommodated 780 theatre-goers—300 in the Pit, 360

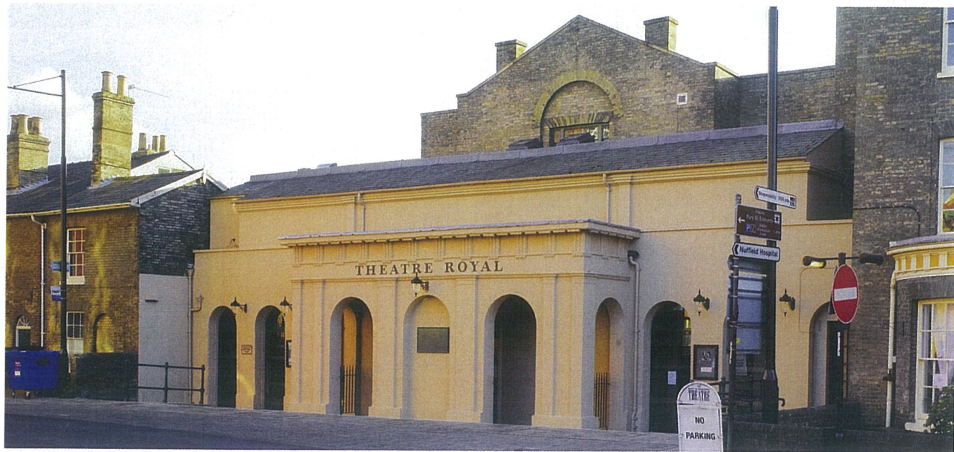
In its changing fortunes, the Theatre Royal offers a fascinating portrait of English theatrical history

in the Boxes and 120 in the Gallery; today, it seats 350. Despite these statistics, a diarist noted on its opening night in October 1819: ‘There is from the upper boxes a cheerful breath and airiness that is quite exhilarating contrasted with the pent-up chicken coops of most theatrical boxes.’

The segregation of society into three

tiers (Fig 3)—those in the Boxes paid for the privilege, the ‘Pittites’ parted with 2s 6d, and the ‘Galleryites’ had a perch for the gods for 1s 6d—demanded separate entrances to the auditorium and so ingenious architectural planning. Patron in the boxes had exclusive use of the Saloon, a room warmed by a pair of fireplaces that lay directly behind the building’s arched portico; those headed for the Pit entered a sloping passageway on the east side of the theatre and emerged into the lobby part of the auditorium via a tunnel; and those destined for the Galleries climbed a steep stair that lay behind a door the far right of the entrance façade.

Yet within 10 years of its opening, the Theatre Royal’s fortunes were on the wane and Wilkins wrote that: ‘Bury, which used to contribute to the support of the old theatres... scarcely now pays its expenses and the extent of the outlay is building

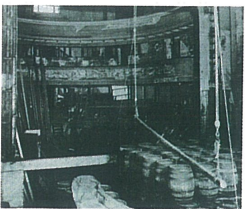


3—The austere Classical exterior of the theatre, 'of ample dimensions and elegance', heightens the effect of its rich internal decoration

ry and repairs.' There followed further investment in the theatre in 1839, with oration and the introduction of gas lighting. But then the development of the railways in the 1840s gave easy access to men's rival attractions, and the decline of the theatre continued. In 1845, one of John Wilkins's sons prudently sold the shares of the Norwich circuit theatres. In the 1880s and 1890s, London and metropolitan centres increased their provincial audiences with a new generation of theatres that could hold audiences of up to 4,000. The pressure on small theatres grew, and in 1903, the Theatre Royal closed.

Almost immediately, however, a brave sign offered it a reprieve. In 1906, after negotiations by London theatre architect Herbert Crewe, it reopened to optipress: 'Burians who are accustomed

to the interior of the theatre as a barrel vault in the middle decades of the 20th century. As a stage-struck teenager, of curiosity', Sir Peter Hall, the director of the recent Restoration, saw the theatre in this, its 'young Beauty' era, and recalls: 'Even with the dust and the barrels, the intimacy of this theatre shone through.'



'One of the greatest triumphs has been the design of the elegant, continuous seating'

to the dismal dilapidation to which their ancient playhouse has fallen will rub their eyes with wonder at the transformation which has taken place... the total cost of the various repairs, alterations and improvements is over £1,000.'

In the modernising process, however, the forestage, already reduced in the 19th century, was cut back to the line of the proscenium arch. At the same time, the flanking doors to the forestage were removed, as were the stage boxes. The theatre limped on until 1925, when the brewer Greene King, which had bought the freehold five years earlier and had attempted to keep the theatre going, was obliged to close it. The cinema, or rather two cinemas, had arrived in town. For the next 40 years, the theatre was used, pragmatically enough, as a store for the brewery's beer barrels (left), and the stage and substage were removed. Ironically, it was at this time that the building was listed for its architectural significance.

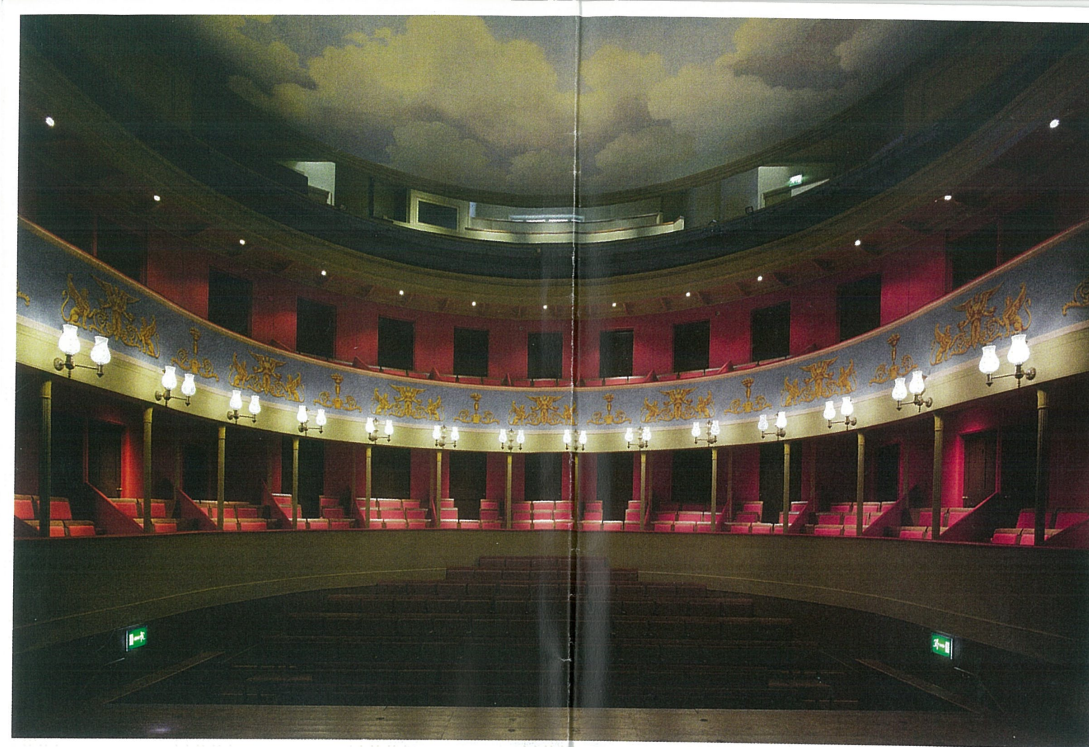
From 1965 to 1975, a second heroic campaign to restore and reopen the building, partly prompted by the 1959 closure of Bury St Edmund's other theatre, the Playhouse, was led by Air Vice-Marshal Stanley Vincent and encouraged by Greene King, which rented the building on a peppercorn rent to a newly constituted body, the St Edmundsbury Theatre Royal Trust. The restoration work was directed by

a local architect, Ernest Scott, and advised by the then authority on historic decoration John Fowler, and, to great celebration, the theatre opened again in 1975.

Much evidence of the theatre's original form had been lost over the decades, and, unfortunately, the forestage was restored to its Edwardian rather than its Regency condition. Meanwhile, the new stage was built flat, rather than to its gentle Regency rake of one in 24, and plush cinema seating was introduced. On the completion of the modernising work and the opening of the building, the St Edmundsbury Theatre Royal Trust relinquished its 21-year lease, and Greene King granted a new 999-year lease to the National Trust.

In his excellent book, *Pit, Boxes & Gallery: The Story of the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds* (1979), Iain Mackintosh identified where evidence had been overlooked or misinterpreted during the campaign of the previous decade and expressed the hope: 'One day, the restoration of the 1819 theatre will be completed as far as safety and good sense will allow. One day, the national importance of this unique theatre will become more generally understood.'

In 1987, the National Trust commissioned a design study from the architectural practice Levitt Bernstein to establish how such a restoration might be done, with the constraint that historicism should be carefully balanced with the practical needs of a modern theatre company and its audience's expectations. Today, those aspirations have been spectacularly realised. In September 2007, following the completion of a £5.3-million project that has seen the building's historic core restored, and new ticketing, bar and restaurant facilities constructed in and behind the



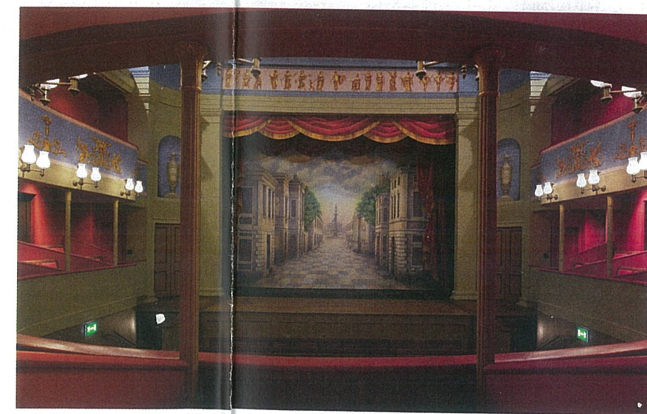
3—The auditorium with Pit, Boxes and Galleries. Its painted decoration, including the ceiling, is based on comparative evidence from other theatres of the period

adjoining terrace house, No 5, Westgate Street, the theatre reopened once more.

The reinstatement of the stage boxes and the restoration of the forestage (to proportions inferred by the architect Axel Burrough) has re-established the quintessence of the Theatre Royal, and it has encouraged the theatre company's artistic director, Colin Blumenau, to stage plays of the Regency period, the repertoire of which has long been ignored. But in its new design, the stage can be configured in a number of ways, giving the company considerable flexibility (Fig 1).

The Pit and its historic entrance has also been reconstructed. One of the greatest triumphs has been the design of the elegant, continuous seating in the Pit and the new seats in the boxes of the Dress and Upper Circles. Luke Hughes's impossibly slim hardwood seating, with its subtle upholstered surfaces, is a product of 21st-century engineering and craftsmanship, yet its form was guided by extensive research into the benches that 18th- and 19th-century theatregoers endured.

Two major areas where neither documentary nor archaeological evidence gave certainty in the restoration process—the



4—The stage and forestage separated by the proscenium arch. Dramatic action was shared between the forestage, entered from either side, and the scenic stage beyond

decoration and lighting of the theatre—were also led by comparative research. Thanks to the advice of Jane Finlay, the auditorium is now painted in a vividly rich livery of 'an unfamiliar combination of paint colours devised to be seen in the thin yellowy glow of oil lamps'.

A key factor in the success of the decoration, both flat colour and monumental painting, was its execution by the same scenic artists, Meg and Kit Treay, who created the perspectival badraps and

wing flats that helped to bring period conviction to the opening play, Douglas Jerrold's *Black Eyed Susan* of 1829.

Open 362 days a year, and enjoyed by an audience of 80,000, the Theatre Royal has emerged from a period of darkness as a gorgeous butterfly, fit for a third century of drama, music and dance.

Photographs: Will Pryce and the Theatre Royal. Experience the history of the theatre as part of a week of Georgian events from April 21 (01284 769505; www.theatreroyal.org)