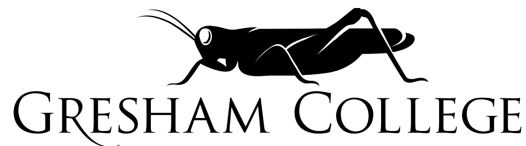

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The Birth of Modern Theatreland: Covent Garden and the Two Theatres Royal

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In My last lecture I presented my new plan of Westminster in the 1650s and described how the development of the land was almost entirely down to royal control. Monarchs from Henry VIII to Charles II exercised a decisive influence on the topography and building development of the area. But my plan really stops at St. Martin's Lane on the east and, although I mentioned royal interest in Covent Garden I didn't pursue the issue. Tonight Ladies and gentlemen I intend to take the story of the West End's development further to the east and discuss the inception and growth of Covent Garden in the seventeenth century. And, as with my last lecture when I took a single building as a focus, so I will tonight. But first let's recap a little.

Like the story I told last time it starts with Henry VIII who purchased the whole area you see on this map – basically the royal lands extended as far east as Drury Lane – named after a barrister who built his house there towards the end of Henry VII's reign. The land that we now know as Covent Garden was originally orchards and pasture and some woodland belonging to Westminster Abbey and bought from them, with the other Westminster lands, by King Henry. But the king didn't particularly need the land and he, and Edward VI granted forty acres to the earl of Bedford in 1541 and 1552. So in this way the Bedford family owned the forty acres of land bounded by St. Martin's Lane, Long Acre and Drury Lane. Their own house Bedford House was built to the south of this north of the Strand.

As I explained last time Monarchs from Elizabeth onwards attempted to control the growth of London and in particular passed a series of proclamations banning the building of new houses in Westminster. As far as we know the earl of Bedford didn't contravene any of these regulations himself but in 1612 we know that he surrounded his land with a substantial brick wall and divided it into two more or less equal parts. Remarkably we have this plan, drawn in 1612, which shows the wall, the land leased out and the 20 acres of pasture reserved for the earl himself. It was the earl's tenants who, against the law, began to erect houses on their land. We have some idea of how many had been built because in 1634 the earl was taken to court by the crown and prosecuted for the illegal dwellings – a surviving survey, probably connected with the court case, show that 504 houses had been built by then.

As I explained last time James I and Charles I were not implacably opposed to new building – but it had to be on their terms and to their specification – as with Charles II and St. James's Square. As we saw under James I and Charles I Several aristocrats got permission to build mansions on royal freehold land and, in 1628, Charles I attention turned to the Bedford lands as a possible site for some prestigious housing. In fact, the idea of developing Covent Garden probably came from the pressing need of St. Martin's Parish to build a chapel of ease to accommodate its rapidly growing population. Archbishop Laud asked the fourth earl of Bedford whether a new church could be built on his pasture land to relieve the pressure on St. Martin in the Fields.

The earl was a shrewd businessman and saw the opportunity the construction of a new church would give him to develop his pasture land for housing if he could get a royal licence to do so. Before the poor man knew it Inigo Jones accompanied by the king himself turned up in his field and got out plans that they had prepared for not only the construction of a church but the development of a brand new high class housing estate. We have

two early sketches in the hand of Inigo Jones for the layout of the new estate using the church as the centrepiece and deploying blocks of housing round it. This was a very different sort of plan to any that had been seen before in London. Look at the way it is basically a closed environment with no real through roads; it is approached deliberately circuitously to avoid undesired through traffic and to keep the area socially exclusive.

We know that this was not what the fourth earl had in mind. He had wanted something much simpler and cheaper – in fact he claimed that Royal intervention had put at least £6,000 on the cost of his development. The earl got a licence from the king to build this new scheme and went ahead under the beady eye of Inigo Jones, the King and the Privy Council.

So this is how we got the Covent Garden that we know so well from paintings and prints - an area that immediately became very fashionable and attracted prominent courtiers and a small colony of leading painters including Daniel Mytens and Paul Van Somer.

We now need to move onwards, through the Civil War and Commonwealth to the Restoration. Because after 1660 the area a gain began to become a focus for royal attention, but attention of a very different sort.

Throughout the Middle Ages plays, or what we might call theatre, had been tremendously popular with all sectors of society. Like so many aspects of medieval life theatre was itinerant, groups of players moved from place to place performing in market squares, inn yards or the houses or castles of the rich. In the Elizabethan period things began to change. London had grown into a vast and comparatively rich city with a population hungry for entertainment and hedonism. The staging of plays in the yards of inns had become almost a permanent feature of life. As they did the managers of Theatre companies realised that they could significantly increase their profits if they cut out the innkeepers and build their own venues. In the late 1570s and 1580s came the first purpose built theatres in England. They were circular or octagonal arenas, without roofs with tiered seating on four or five levels. Their stages were raised and projected out into the audience, surrounded on three sides by the standing audience or 'groundlings' in the pit. Actors made their entrance from two stage doors located in full view at the back of the stage. There was little opportunity for the use of scenes or sets and all performances had to be carried out in daylight, in the early afternoon.

In the early seventeenth century under the patronage of James I and his courtiers many companies would also run a winter season acting in halls or even the royal palaces. It is easy for us today to visualise these theatres as since 1997 the Globe, possibly the most famous of them all, has been rebuilt on the banks of the Thames. For the great halls we can still go to Middle Temple Hall just off the Strand and see the very room in which wintertime performances were acted.

It was in theatres such as these that Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson worked. Their audiences comprised most elements of society: apprentices, shopkeepers, craftsmen, lawyers, merchants and civil servants up to the nobility. The cost of admission to the pit was a penny, a fifth of a labourer's daily wage, while a stool on the stage was sixpence and a box or private room was a shilling.

The great popularity of the theatre under Elizabeth and James I, which had established seven playhouses in London, was increasingly undermined by the religious and moral sensibilities of middle class lawyers, merchants, academics and churchmen. They began to associate the stage with sin, social unrest and moral laxness. They were, of course, right. The theatres were located near brothels, and prostitutes cruised the audiences for clients. Young men went to plays to be seen and to rub shoulders, and more intimate parts, with girls. Drinking, rowdiness and the occasional brawl were all part of an evening out at the theatre. William Prynne, writing in the mid 1630s thought 'Popular stage plays' were ' the very pomp of the Devil...sinful, heathenish, lewd, ungodly spectacles, and most pernicious corruption; condemned in all ages as intolerable mischiefs to churches, to the manners, minds and souls of men.'

These attitudes became official Policy as parliament set itself up as an alternative to Charles I's monarchy. In 1642 parliament banned theatre supposedly until the troubles were over. The Globe Theatre was destroyed in

1644 the Fortune, Phoenix and Salisbury Court Theatres in 1649 and Blackfriars Theatre in 1655. However Londoners were not to be deprived of their pleasures so easily.

In May 1660 King Charles II returned in triumph from exile to re-establish the monarchy on the crumbled ruins of Oliver Cromwell's austere republic. With him was the future manager of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, Thomas Killigrew, courtier, playwright, womaniser and wit. Killigrew was born in 1612 and at the age of 21 he entered the Court as a page to Charles I. His first and most popular play was a bawdy comedy, *The Parson's Wedding*, but he also wrote and had performed a number of tragedies before the outbreak of Civil War. As he did he earned himself a reputation as a reckless spendthrift. An engraving, published by Hollar, portrayed him in despair with a monkey perched on his shoulder and dressed in a gown decorated with the recognisable portraits of 24 women. During the Civil War he fled to the Continent where he won a second wife with a dowry of £10,000, and hovered around the exiled Charles II entertaining him with his wit and humour of doubtful taste. It was presumably during this time that he secured a promise to be granted a license to run a theatre if Charles were ever to reclaim the crown.

On the 25th May 1660 the *Royal Charles* sailed in to Dover to be greeted by the great Cromwellian General, Monck and a crowd of joyous subjects. Killigrew had been entertaining the King on deck. Pepys records his jokes but either three hundred years or something in the telling makes it almost impossible to find them funny today.

Thanks to the increasingly regal Oliver Cromwell allowing the performance of a limited number of plays from the mid-1650s London, in 1660, had at least three playhouses. At Drury Lane there was the Cockpit with a troupe of actors under the management of John Rhodes a former bookseller. In Clerkenwell, was the Red Bull, and William Beeston and his troupe were installed at the Salisbury Court playhouse. Within two months of the Restoration Charles II overrode the existing businesses of these managers. A royal warrant gave the sole right to stage theatrical productions to just two men: William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew. Killigrew had received his reward for entertaining Charles to six years of bawdy jokes. William Davenant, who had been granted a patent for a theatre back in 1639, and had journeyed to France to petition the future King while he was still in exile. To ensure their monopoly was watertight the warrant also ordered all other theatres to be "absolutely suppressed". Davenant and Killigrew were to have extra privileges too, they were allowed to censor their own plays, employ women as actors (for the very first time) and by 1663 their licenses were made hereditary.

Why did Charles give only two licences for theatres? A king so fond of entertainment might have been expected to issue many more. The answer is that the theatre was still capable of being politically subversive. In Restoration London violence, civil disorder and religious dissent bubbled vigorously beneath the surface. Neither Charles, his courtiers or business interests wanted these substrata of disorder stirred up more than necessary. The King, quite simply, wanted to make sure that he could control political and religious satire in London to prevent it getting out of control.

Killigrew was given a license to form a company of actors by the King, called the King's Men and remarkably the present Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, still operates under the same license. The King's brother, and successor, James Duke of York, gave Davenant a company to be known as the Duke's Men, and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden still uses that. As their status became a reality, Davenant and Killigrew must have rubbed their hands in glee: seven theatres were built between 1576 and 1605 in a London of 200,000 inhabitants, while in 1660 there were around 300,000 residents in the city and greater London had 500,000. The two new theatres could carve up the London theatre audience between them. Although, over the years, other theatres sprang up, the monopoly lasted, at least in law, until 1843.

Both Killigrew and Davenant soon opted to convert tennis courts into theatres. This was probably in response to the fashion for using indoor tennis courts for theatrical productions in France, to which Charles and his circle would have been accustomed. By November Killigrew had already moved a troupe of actors to Gibbons' Tennis Court in the now lost Vere Street. It was not very satisfactory, the stage had no accommodation for scenery and the auditorium seated only 400. He soon made plans to build a new theatre at Drury Lane. We don't know how much thought he gave to the location of his new theatre. There had been a theatre there in the old

Cockpit before the Restoration and so there was a precedent. However it must have been the case that Killigrew wanted to build his theatre near to the houses of potential wealthy patrons. In fact before the Civil War Killigrew, himself had lived in Covent Garden.

On the other hand at least some of the first Restoration residents must have been drawn to Covent Garden by the theatre - like a character in Thomas Nabbes's play called *Covent Garden* of 1632–3. In this a character announces: 'we shall then be neere the Cockpit [in Drury Lane], and see a Play now and then'. But, in reality more than improving the social mix of the piazza the Theatre Royal probably stimulated tavern life in the area and led to very large number of local coffee houses. One of the first of these was opened at the north-east corner of Bow Street and Russell Street in the same year as the opening of the Theatre Royal, and Will's was founded a few years later, nearly opposite in Bow Street. The coffee houses of Covent Garden played an important part in the political and cultural life of London: At Will's coffee house Dryden hung out and was spotted there by Pepys in 1664: 'I stopped at the great Coffee-house there, where I never was before; where Dryden, the poet, I knew at Cambridge, and all the wits of the town, and Harris the player, and Mr. Hooke, of our college'. The Bedford Coffee House in the piazza, was frequented by Fielding, Pope, Sheridan, Churchill, Garrick, Foote, Quinn, Collins, Horace Walpole and others.

Killigrew raised the capital to build his new theatre by selling shares in the new venture and the new building was completed in May 1663 at a cost of £2,400. Killigrew's new playhouse was fully equipped to deal with scenery and spectacle. However, the whole building was not very large - the ground plan was probably around the same size as the present stage at Drury Lane. It did not last long. On 25th January 1672 the theatre burnt to ground taking with it all its scenery, costumes and a good number of surrounding houses and taverns.

Killigrew and his shareholders had to start again, and to finance the new theatre they further complicated ownership by mortgaging the lease of the new site and the royal patent. It is not known how much they raised, but the cost of the new theatre has been estimated at somewhere between £3,500 and £4,400. With the site and the finance all Killigrew needed was an architect. We don't know who designed the first theatre but it might have been the architect John Webb who had built theatres at Whitehall palace before the civil war, and again in 1665. Webb was dead by 1674 and it seems as if Killigrew turned to Christopher Wren.

By that date Wren was undisputedly the most famous, successful and fashionable architect in England. Charles II had chosen him to rebuild the royal palace of Whitehall and had sent him to France to get ideas for his new building. He had, only a few years later been put in charge of the architectural aspects of the rebuilding of the city of London after the great fire of 1666. In 1669 he had received the ultimate accolade when Charles II appointed him the Surveyor of the Royal Works. Wren and Killigrew must have known each other though it is doubtful if they could have ever been friends, given Wren's relatively austere and serious-minded character and Killigrew's foppishness. Yet Killigrew's wife Charlotte was the first lady of the Queen's Privy Chamber, a senior figure in the royal household and had a substantial lodging at Whitehall. Wren would have undoubtedly known the two of them. It is not known how Killigrew approached Wren, or what brief he gave him. Perhaps the King himself was consulted or maybe the three of them discussed the design of theatres generally. Whatever happened the commission was, without doubt, an exciting one for Wren whose very first building had been the University of Oxford's Assembly Hall the Sheldonian Theatre. This was not a theatre in the sense that he was now to build but certainly a specialised building where sight lines and acoustics were important.

Killigrew must have expected Wren to design him the most modern and fashionable theatre possible and in doing so both architect and patron must have looked to France. While Charles II was in exile in Paris Louis XIV allocated him the building we know today as the Palais Royal as his residence (although then it was then known as the Palais Cardinal). In it was France's first modern theatre built in 1635 for Cardinal Richelieu. Charles and possibly Killigrew too knew this theatre well, but by 1672 it was very old fashioned, and the theatre that everyone looked to was a building erected in 1659 in the Tuileries in front of the Louvre. This Theatre was designed by Italian architects on an Italian model and must have been one of the buildings visited by Christopher Wren when he was in Paris in 1664. Whether Wren bought engravings of the building, whether he sketched it, or even whether he sent for details after being approached by Killigrew we can never know. But what we can be fairly certain of is that Wren used this great French theatre as his model.

We know this because there survives, in the hand of Wren, a drawing for the new theatre*)* It is a section showing the full width of the 112 foot long building.

Even if this drawing shows the interior of the theatre as built (and we cannot be sure that it was not one of Wren's preliminary drawings) it gives little idea of the site. This was problematic from the very start. The first theatre was completely surrounded by houses and inns, explaining the enormous destruction when it went up in flames. The site that Sir Christopher Wren had to contend with was little better. The theatre itself was still on an island surrounded by other properties and connected to the street by a narrow passage. What this meant is that the theatre never had an exterior, it had no recognisable street frontage, only a door leading to the long dark passage to the auditorium. It also meant that there could be no side windows. A question therefore is how, without permanent artificial light, could people see inside?

The answer may lie in a map of the West End published in 1681-2. This was part of a project started by John Ogilby 1672 to survey The City and West End and publish a new and comprehensive A to Z of London. His map of the West End had small vignettes of important buildings drawn in semi-perspective. One of these is the Drury Lane Theatre, which he shows with a roof similar to that on the Wren drawing but with the addition of a dome, presumably for providing light to the interior. Our problem is that we don't know precisely when Ogilby's surveyors, Gregory King and Robert Felgate drew their diagram of the theatre. Some people have argued that it shows the first theatre, but it seems as if they were completing their survey at about the time the new theatre was completed. It would have been madness to publish a map missing out one of the most fashionable new buildings in town. So it ois likely the finished building had a small dome on top to provide light to the auditorium. One other chance survival brings the interior of Wren's only theatre to life. An engraving used as a frontispiece to an opera called *Ariadne* almost certainly shows the proscenium arch of the theatre with great Corinthian pilasters as shown on Wren's drawing*)*. It quite clearly shows the stage and the scenery for the opera that was performed at the Theatre Royal Drury lane in 1674.

The opening of the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane on 26 March 1674 heralded a new era in London theatre-going. There was a world of difference between a converted tennis court and Wren's French-inspired, purpose-designed theatre equipped with all the latest technology. The gulf was even wider for a pre-restoration audience that would have found it hard to reconcile their experience of theatre-going with the modern style. The new theatre was smaller, it was indoors and the seats were considerably more expensive. As a consequence it was much more like a winter time Jacobean performance populated by the better-off and more educated. The incredible social mix of the pre-Commonwealth theatre was to be banished from the world of live entertainment until the coming of the modern rock concert.

This of course reflected the social mix of Covent Garden a mix that now saw very regular visits by the king himself. Because the new theatre included a royal box opposite the stage decorated with bands of leather-gilt trim and a green baize lining. Charles II was passionate about the theatre and was happy to be seen out at the theatre as plays were performed only rarely at Court. Within five years a group of young literati known as the Wits had gathered around the King. His patronage of the Wits and his enjoyment of their company made writing for the theatre highly fashionable among the upper echelons of society and was responsible for drawing more playwrights than at any other time in the history of the stage from the aristocracy and the gentry. They incorporated amusing portrayals of each other in their comedies and they also patronised other less wealthy playwrights. The Restoration saw, for the first time, the emergence of actors as celebrities, such as Anne Bracegirdle and Thomas Betterton, the most renowned actor of the age, who was buried along with his wife in Westminster Abbey.

Going to theatre was not an unusual evening out for most of the audience. It was part of the leisure circuit for rich and fashionable society, they went frequently, if not several times a week then several times a month, and they were happy to see the same play time and again. This obviously was a major attraction of living in Covent Garden - like going to church theatregoers went to see and be seen. The design of Wren's new theatre facilitated this, and large candle-filled chandeliers ensured that the auditorium was as bright as the stage. Prologues which

introduced plays on the first three nights drew attention to the audience themselves, often satirising their tastes and customs but also flattering them, particularly those in the more expensive seats.

Unlike going to church theatregoers were often rowdy and their behaviour sometimes degenerated into drunken brawls. The audience chatted and joked through performances, heckling the actors and their fellows. It was customary for fashionably dressed young Wits to show off with humorous asides or witty interjections as the actors were in mid stride, often on the stage itself. The actors in their turn often played along giving as good as they got, ensuring an entertaining variety to performances. Nell Gwyn had a famous wit and could reduce the audience to helpless laughter with a fast rejoinder.

However the Restoration theatre was not simply a bawdy, licentious and rowdy plaything of the aristocracy. The performances were not just incidental background entertainment but were judged by the excellence of the players and the quality of the plays. Men such as the diarist John Evelyn, Judge Jeffries, the scientist and architect Robert Hooke, and Sir Christopher Wren himself were all regular playgoers. The social division of the house (and to a degree its behaviour) roughly followed seat prices, although these boundaries could always be broken. The upper gallery cost a shilling and attracted the most derision from satirists along with the middle gallery which cost 18d. The most expensive seats at 2 s 6d were in the pit directly in front of the stage, in the lower gallery and in the boxes. Pepys' outrage at 'citizens, apprentices and others' in the theatre is mainly at their presence in the expensive seats, which annoyed him as much seeing lowlier work colleagues lording it in better seats than himself.

While we might be able to imagine a Restoration audience, even if we might not want to have been part of one, it is very difficult for us to imagine a Restoration play as it was originally acted. This is partly because no theatre survives today in which the Restoration layout of stage, scenery and seats survives. At Drury Lane the main performance took place on a stage which projected out some 20ft into the audience in front of the proscenium arch as shown on the engraving from *Ariadne* and Wren's drawing. This was called the fore stage. Behind this (in the area that we would normally call the stage today) was the area devoted to scenery - the scenic stage (as it is called).

The scenic stage was considerably deeper than the fore stage. At Drury Lane the fore stage projected out 20ft and the full depth of the scenic stage was 45ft. This is clearly seen on Sir Christopher Wren's drawing. However it looked even deeper by the use of scenery painted in perspective dwindling to a vanishing point in the centre of the back wall. Scenes were painted on a number of sliding flats either side of the stage and at right angles to it. They were set in grooves in the floor that allowed them to slide either into the wings or out into the stage. Beneath the stage was a complicated system of pulleys and ropes that allowed all the slides to move in or out in unison. The technology was naval, based on blocks and pulleys as used on sailing ships. The only draw back was the noise that changing scenes made, and this was usually covered by sound effects.

This visually and technically complex arrangement could instantly reveal spectacular scenes of horrific carnage, victims in the throws of torture, or misery, the inside of a prison, tombs or vaults, even heaven and hell. It was also used for revealing or hiding actors or for the summoning of spirits or deities who could be called for by stamping a foot. The stage floor contained trap doors and a system of ropes and pulleys above the stage could give the illusion of flying or the clouds opening to reveal gods on chariots.

Wren and Killigrew's theatre remained until the 1770s when the great actor manager, David Garrick, Commissioned the greatest architect of his day, Robert Adam to finally give the theatre a street frontage. It was a magnificent Stucco fronted façade with a rusticated basement and elegant ionic columns supporting a pediment proudly containing the royal arms. No one could be in any doubt that behind this elegant façade lay a place of real quality and style. Inside Adam dismantled Wren's interior enlarging the size of the auditorium and the stage at the expense of some of the subsidiary offices. The ceiling of the auditorium was raised and painted in trompe l'oeil to represent a shallow dome. Was this an echo of the dome that Wren may have originally crowned his theatre with?

By this time a social change had come over the whole area. The theatre was still patronised by royalty and the aristocracy but it was no longer the place to live. In 1670 the earl of Bedford was granted rights to hold a market in the Piazza and while the Drury Lane Theatre had contributed to the raffish nature of the area in the years after the Restoration the founding of the market which had the most far reaching effect. The market spoiled the appearance of the Piazza, filled the surrounding streets with noise and traffic, and although for more than two hundred years it earned an ever increasing income for its owners, it eventually became such a heavy political liability that in the early twentieth century the eleventh Duke of Bedford decided, partly at least for this reason, to sell both it and the whole of the Covent Garden estate.

What had once been the most fashionable quarter of the West End, yielding some of the highest rents and attracting the country's most important theatres now became famous for a fruit and vegetable market. But, of course Its theatrical connections are perpetuated today not by one but by two great theatres for, in 1731, along came what we now know as the Royal Opera House. But the Opera House is a jonnie come lately because the Theatre Royal that stands today has the longest continuous record of performances of any theatre in the world – there are older theatres – but none that still put on eight shows a week.

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