Summary / abstract: Melbourne was not established until almost 50 years after Sydney; Melbourne's first theatre space was little more than a timber shed of the early 1840s. It was well documented in the 1850s for its idiosyncracies. A brick theatre opened in 1845, with decoration that was described as “grotesque”. A huge theatre, the Royal, was the next to be built, its size rivalling that of Drury Lane and Covent Garden Theatres in London at the time. In the mid-19th century the forerunner of the Princess was constructed as an amphitheatre (for equine-dramas), as well as a prefabricated iron theatre imported from England. British actor-manager George Coppin settled in Melbourne and was responsible for much of the first wave of Victorian theatres in the city. Then came J. C. Williamson from USA and the British vaudeville entrepreneur Harry Rickards, both setting up Melbourne as headquarters for theatre circuits. The theatres for which they were responsible, but have been demolished, are also described. Notwithstanding, Melbourne has the best collection of 19th century theatres in Australia, even if their auditoria were rebuilt in the 1920s and 1930s.

Key words: Theatre history; Australian history; Australian theatre; Melbourne history; Theatre architecture.

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Melbourne's Lost Theatres

(PART 1)

Olympic Theatre 1855. A scene from Macbeth with G V Brooke (right) as Macbeth, and R Younge.

In 1834/5 Melbourne was unofficially settled by Henty and Batman; in 1842 the town saw its first official theatrical performance in a timber shed which possessed the ubiquitous title, Theatre Royal.

Melbourne was fortunate to have possessed an Irish immigrant who, after arriving in 1841 and becoming a leading journalist, developed by the mid-sixties an increasing concern with the preservation of the then vanishing history of the early settlement. Under the name of 'Garryowen', Edmund Finn chronicled an historical, anecdotal and personal account of the town and its people from 1835 to 1852. He describes the two earliest theatres, the actor-managers who ran them and finally dwells at some length on George Coppin, the first of the big touring actor-managers to organise theatre in Australia.

Finn gave the dimensions of the Royal, Pavilion, Victoria, as it was variously known in its short life, as 65 by 35 feet. It contained a pit and a surrounding dress circle of boxes which was constructed so low (probably in the style of an English provincial Georgian theatre) that the more affluent classes could lean over and 'bonnet' patrons in the pit, that is, push their hats down over their eyes. A kind mannered pitite, upon removing his hat and showing a bald pate, would frequently have his denuded dome made the target of catarrhal expectorations. There was also in the accommodation of the theatre a gallery made up of a circular row of small pens arrived at by a ladder-like stair.

This Pavilion Theatre, rocking in the wind, leaking in the rain, was a small house run by a consortium of amateurs (the only system of management by which it could obtain a licence). Its performances were the scene of regular uproar and ruffianism with actors having to walk out of role to abuse an unruly audience. One

night when George Buckingham began brandishing a dagger at the audience a "burly loon in the front of the pit declared he would punch Buckingham's head, and the enraged actor solemnly vowed 'he would leap dagger and all down the other fellow's throat'. There were missiles thrown at actors from the audience and, in counter attack, threats were made of storming the dress circle by the company, with occasionally the entertainment in the auditorium rivalling that on the stage. In 1844, when the Pavilion was virtually bankrupt, Charles Wentworth treated a woman, said to be his wife, to an outing; both were in a forward state of inebriation when a quarrel broke out between them in the gallery. "Wentworth set to thrashing

Queen's Theatre (1845). The theatre building was much improved upon the original Melbourne theatre, but the audience behaviour remained much the same.
the fair one, and she nailed him, like a wild cat, about the throat. He was half choked, and to ward off death by asphyxia had her up on the parapet in the act of pitching her over into the pit, when he was pounced upon by Chief Constable Sugden..."

The Pavilion was not relicensed after April 1845. On the 21st of that month a new theatre was opened—The Queen’s Theatre Royal. It was a "plain, substantial, brick, single-roofed building, with not attempt at external architectural ornamentation", situated at the southwest corner of Queen and Little Bourke Streets. It was slightly larger than the Pavilion, being 75 by 40 feet, holding during a capacity benefit performance 943 persons. The stage would have cut off between 30 to 35 feet from the long dimension; a contemporary newspaper gave the pit as only 37 by 25 feet, yet at that benefit it held 453 bodies. The interior design by architects Charles Laing and George Wharton, was criticised by being vulgar, "outré in design and crude in execution. The proscenium was an elliptical arch, supported on pilasters, and surmounted by the Royal Arms, whilst there was a grotesque attempt to construct niches, out of which leered figures said to represent Aeschylus, Euripides, and a couple of unrecognisable magnates of reputed mythological antecedents."

The company at the Queen’s was fair but the weather was so exceedingly poor as to deter the most ardent playwrights; when the weather brightened so too did the box office takings. Then there arrived a more illuminated theatrical in the form of George Coppin. Coppin had formed a company in Launceston after having played in Sydney and Hobart. The Tasmanian company landed in Melbourne on June 14th, 1845 and first performed at the Queen’s on the 21st. They, particularly Mr and Mrs Coppin, were a tremendous success; on 3rd July in the farce Winning a Husband Mrs Coppin sustained eight different characters "in very superior style". The Coppins remained at the Queen’s in Melbourne until August, 1846 when they moved to Adelaide. After losing his wife and a fortune in Adelaide, George Coppin returned to the stage, for the most part at Geelong, then went to England, only to return to Melbourne in 1855 to settle. And to bring with him his own prefabricated theatre!

Before this event there were two other houses built: there was the predecessor of the Princess, Astley’s Amphitheatre (to be detailed in another article), and another Theatre Royal which opened between Swanston and Russell Streets in Bourke Street on July 16th, 1855, only fourteen days before Coppin’s prefabricated iron Olympic Theatre presented its first dramatic season.

The Royal was built by John Black to the plans of J R Burns. The fronting hotel and theatre had a depth of over 300 feet to Little Bourke Street; the auditorium and stage, in their dimensions, were equal to the equivalent at London’s Covent Garden or Drury Lane Theatres of the time. Its four levels seated 3,000 persons in typically cramped 19th century conditions. Although the population had grown considerably due to the Victorian gold rush, Melbourne could not find 8,000 pairs of buttocks every evening to sit in its new four theatres.

In October 1855 John Black went insolvent and the builder of Astley’s auctioned off his new amphitheatre. The lights of the Queen’s flickered and sputtered to permanent darkness in 1856 but Coppin took over Astley’s for vaudeville in 1855 and formed a partnership with the tragedian Gustavus Brooke to buy the lease on the Royal, re-opening it in June 1856 with She Stoops to Conquer.

The amphitheatre was renamed Princess’s in 1859 and the smaller capacity Olympic was found redundant so Coppin had it converted to Turkish baths which were more financially successful than his theatres in the depression of 1860. (During mid 1850’s there was also a strange circus tent-like structure, the Sale de Valentino, which was only licensed for musical entertainment.)

The building of the Olympic, perhaps more than any other act demonstrated Coppin’s flare for adventurous entrepreneurship and his own confidence in his ability as manager. Being a well respected actor-manager in England he could beat his Australian opposition in obtaining quality performers, however not everyone walked down the street to buy a theatre off the shelf and ship it across the world (as well as signing up a leading actor for 10,000 Pounds for 200 performances)! The manufacturers of the theatre, E. & T. Bellhouse of Manchester, did have some experience, that of building Prince
Albert's iron theatre and ballroom at Balmoral Castle. The Olympic had cast-iron stanchions, being clad mostly in glass, where it showed a public front, and in galvanised corrugated iron elsewhere. It was 88 feet long, 40 feet wide with, it seems, from a description in *The Australian Builder*, no gallery. The layout was very modern for the time with six boxes built into the proscenium in lieu of the earlier Regency style doors; and comfortable stalls took over the front portion of the pit. The proscenium for a house holding 1150 persons was a relatively wide 33 feet.

Olympic Theatre, Exhibition and Lonsdale Streets (1855). This cast and corrugated iron theatre had a relatively low auditorium roof; the slightly higher stage is seen at the right.
In 1861 Coppin was having difficulties at the Theatre Royal. He lost a legal battle for possession, so decided to go into direct opposition to it by building another theatre a little up the hill on the opposite side of Bourke Street, extending through to Little Collins Street (1862). It was the Royal Haymarket, later the Duke of Edinburgh, destroyed by fire in 1871. It was also quite up-to-date in design by P.T. Conlon being more conventionally Victorian in the auditorium, but still without a fly-tower above the stage. Although the latter was 86 feet deep. Comfort was being introduced, with every seat in the stalls and dress circle being upholstered in red damask, and every bench in other parts of the house supplied with a back rail.

Coppin toured the USA as an actor in the company of Charles Kean and Ellen Tree from 1864, returning to Melbourne to once again take over the Theatre Royal (1866), but only to be devastated by the uninsured building being burnt to ashes in March 1872. He rented the St George’s Hall next door (later rebuilt as Hoyts Deluxe/Eskdale cinema) and performed there until he arranged a partnership to purchase the ground lease on the Royal site and rebuild. The most extraordinary aspect of this venture was its being designed by George Browne and built within eight months. It opened in November 1872 as another large four level theatre, and hotel of similar dimensions to the previous one, but this time very much the English Victorian opera house style of design. The architects constructional drawings are still in existence and from these Susan Clarke has set up a perspective drawing accurately showing the spatial design and major decorative elements; minor decoration has been assumed from written descriptions and similar designs of the time.

J.C. Williamson took over the lease of the Royal in 1882, had the auditorium rebuilt on three levels in 1904 then sold it for demolition in 1933.

Apart from the predecessors to the Princess, Athenaeum, Palace and Her Majesty’s Theatres there were two other important houses built in the last thirty years of the 19th century and one in the first decade of the 20th century. They were the Prince of Wales Opera House later Twioli (1872), and the Academy of Music, later Bijou (1876) and Kings, later Barclay (1908).

Melbourne’s Opera House, like the Royal, has been detailed elsewhere, however suffice it to say that this four level theatre was poorly designed from the aspect of audience safety and after a series of running battles with the licensing authority, it was forced to be rebuilt in 1899 for Harry Rickards of the original Twioli vaudeville fame. (However the original Opera House was appreciated by Melbourne Punch 29/8/1872 for its decoration and lack of fleas.) The Twioli opened in 1901 in Bourke Street opposite the Royal. The architects, Backhouse and Co. had designed it in the Victorian style on three levels still with the usual forest of cast-iron posts supporting the two tiers above the stalls. The stage was 60 by 64 feet with a large property room and block of dressing rooms off to the prompt side. It was originally fronted by a small four storey hotel in French Renaissance style. The capacity of 1,539 was reduced to 1,442 in 1956 when major alterations were carried out. It became a cinema for a short period after the Twioli Circuit concluded its business until a fire prompted its removal in the 1960’s.

The Bijou, a few doors up the road from the Twioli was a much admired theatre even if it never achieved the good or ill fame of some of its competitors. It was small, seating on three levels only 1,000 persons and would therefore have had the intimacy now associated with Hobart’s Theatre Royal. Also uncommon for the
Theatre Royal. Perspective of auditorium constructed from the architect's working drawings (1872) by Susan Clarke.

King's Theatre (1908). Russell Street near Bourke Street.

Bijou Theatre prior to the fire of 1889. For a house of only 1,000 persons this was a somewhat exaggerated sketch.

Time was its luxurious salon for dress circle patrons. This 100 foot long space had a tessellated tiled floor and was lined on one side with arched stained glass windows and bronze statues, and on the other by large mirrors in decorative frames; a series of handsome basket crystal chandeliers lit the room at night.

During a season by Brough and Boucicault in 1889 it was burnt out in a disastrous fire which killed two persons. It was rebuilt in association with the Palace Hotel which also contained space which was used as the Gaiety Theatre, for music hall style variety. Brennan ran this with his National Entertainers in the early years of this century before it and the Bijou were taken over by the management of Sir Ben and John Fuller. The Bijou remained an old style theatre, occasionally being used for films, until an out-of-work actors company performed for a short period in the Depression before demolition in 1934.

The King's in Russell Street also has received little historical attention, yet it was designed by William Pitt, the architect for the present Princess Theatre. Although leased for most of its stage life by Williams and it was frequently sub-let and perhaps did not achieve the fame of the Royal or Her Majesty's, William Anderson had the original management; he was running two companies at the time but most of his productions were "stirring" melodramas sprinkled with elaborate spectacle. In opposition to J.C.W.'s, J and N Tait ran the theatre for their productions, starring amongst others, Maggie Moore and Edgley and Dave (1919), until the Tait brothers amalgamated with the elder entrepreneur. Finally Fullers and Garnet Carroll held the King's before the Norman Rydge of Greater Union Theatres bought the freehold for himself in 1947 and converted it to a modern cinema in 1959. Up until this date it had been the typical three tier theatre with domed auditorium and a stage 63 ft wide by 80 ft deep "arranged for the presentation of sensational scenes, in which live cattle or traps motor cars, etc., may be necessary for the purposes of realism" (Herald 18/6/1908).

These were the major city theatres which have disappeared without trace in the last 130 years. A future article will relate the history of the buildings on the sites of the current old established theatres.

*These buildings have been mentioned at length in books by the same author: Theatre Buildings in Australia to 1905 and Theatres in Australia distributed by Book People of Australia.