In over two hundred years Sydney had lost many ‘live’ theatres. This two-part article notes those that had been destroyed from 1796 until the mid-1930s. Starting with a map of downtown Sydney that shows all theatres known up until 1979, the text takes the reader through one theatre to another in reasonably chronological order. The large impressive and much less significant theatres are outlined, often mentioning the entrepreneurs or actor-managers who were responsible for getting them built. Mention is also made of the few hippodrome or circus-type theatres that were popular in the 19th century.
TA Retrospective

Sydney has lost dozens of theatres over the past 180 years. Here TA continues its occasional series by the acknowledged authority on Australian theatre buildings.

Ross Thorne: The First One Hundred Years

SYDNEY'S LOST THEATRES

PART ONE

In the last 180 years Sydney has seen, in what we now call the Central Business District, some two dozen locations of theatres, excluding the Opera House complex. On two of these sites there are now new theatres, the only remaining commercial houses still existing from Circular Quay to Central Railway, from Darling Harbour to Hyde Park. These two theatres, the Royal and Her Majestys (formerly Empire) deserve and will receive a more detailed description in a future issue of Theatre Australia.

The first lost theatre was not Sydney's first theatre for continuous commercial performances. It was, according to David Collins, built by "some of the more decent class of prisoner". It was opened on 16th January 1796 by the convicts who had "fitted up the house with more theatrical propriety than could have been expected, and their performance was far above contempt". It is generally known as Robert Sideyway's theatre, he being either the prime mover in its establishment, owner or manager.

There is not complete agreement to its siting. Bells Row (Bligh Street), or High (George) Street near Jamieson or Hunter Streets are given by various authorities. Occasional performances were held until the arrival in 1800 of Governor King who objected to the alleged abuses which resulted from its establishment. (E.g. Convicts stole from houses while the occupants were attending the theatre.) Costing one hundred pounds it would have been a rather primitive timber slab-sided small hall or shed with perhaps a stepped floor; behind the pit there would be the "front box" over or behind which commenced a gallery.

The first "permanent" theatre to be built had a remarkable history by any standards. Originally built as the second level of a brick four storey grain warehouse in 1826 by Barnet Levey, the
Sydney’s Lost Theatres

Theatre Royal was not to open as a permanent theatre until 1833. The ebullient, somewhat erratic owner carried on a running verbal battle with Governor Darling in his effort to obtain a licence. In the meantime he constructed the Hotel Royal fronting the warehouse in George Street, was made bankrupt and it was left to the mortgagors, the new owners, to have architect-builder John Verge reconstruct the theatre, now in two levels of the warehouse. It contained a pit and three timber panelled tiers above, of boxes, family circle and gallery. Its proscenium contained doors onto the stage apron in the conventional Georgian Regency style of the day.

The Royal existed as Sydney’s only theatre for five years; in 1838 Joseph Wyatt, haberdasher, built the first large theatre, one which would have been the envy of a major provincial English city. Levey’s Royal burnt down in 1840 leaving the new Royal Victoria in Pitt Street without opposition. But this was not to be for long. Apart from the theatrical entrepreneur, Wyatt, there were a number of actors who took up theatre management for periods in the capital cities and occasionally toured the country. Samson Cameron was known in Sydney, Hobart and Melbourne, and Conrad Knowles also travelled frequently. The last-named was to take over the Australian Olympic Theatre in Hunter Street soon after its proprietor received its first theatrical licence on January 25, 1842. The short life of this theatre (six months) was the beginning of a line of circus-amphitheatre type buildings culminating in the Hippodrome built by the City Council for Wirth Bros., circus entrepreneurs, in 1916 (rebuilt as the Capital cinema in 1927/8).

The Australian Olympic Theatre was little more than an elaborate tent draped inside with decorative fabric and lit by gas. Around the circle used for equestrian events were boxes; a small stage was tacked on to the perimeter, all much the same as the first enclosed amphitheatre built by Philip Astley in London in the late 18th century.

Knowles returned to the Royal Victoria but another actor-manager, Joseph Simmons, attempted to break Wyatt’s monopoly at the “Vic”. He opened a one level theatre, probably in a small warehouse, in Market Street in May 1843. By July, after installing a second tier of boxes, the proprietors were insolvent. The Royal City theatre remained licensed for plays and entertainments until May 1850 but performances, if any, were rarely advertised. It was occupied by a furniture warehouse which vacated the premises for one week only in 1856 for the purposes of “Grand Musical Entertainments”.

From mid-1843 the theatrical monopoly remained with Wyatt and his successors at the Royal Victoria, with the exception of a few circuses and halls and hotels being used for musical and general entertainments, until 1855 when Wyatt built the Prince of Wales (more recently known as the Theatre Royal) in Castlereagh Street. His former “Old Vic” as it became affectionately known, was a very important theatre in Australia. It was the first large theatre, having a handsome three storey Georgian style facade to the fronting hotel; the auditorium was Regency style, still with doors in the proscenium but with four distinct levels of audience until 1865 when it was reconstructed more spacially with three levels. The stage was large, being extended to a depth of 100 feet a few years after its opening. Fire destroyed it in 1880, leaving Sydney with three playhouses: the recently rebuilt Royal in Castlereagh Street, a poor, cramped theatre in York Street and an even smaller one in King Street at the York Street corner.

The theatre in York Street was commenced by John Malcolm as an unroofed circus for “horsemanship, tumbling and rope dancing” in the yard behind the Adelphi Hotel in 1850. The patrons were protected in grandstand type accommodation appended to the rear of the hotel. Success allowed this accommodation to be extended around the sides of the performing surface which was roofed at the same time in 1857.

In the next year a stage was added whereby causing a name change from the Royal Australian Circus to the Royal Australian Amphitheatre. By 1854 Malcolm had leased it as the Theatre Royal Lyceum after the arena had been covered to form a pit. The lessees however suffered insolvency and Malcolm was back again in 1856 providing equestrian performances. In the same year it returned to human theatre with Gustavus Brooke, later one-time partner of George Coppen, treading the boards in his tragedian roles. The building had been reconstructed completely providing three levels of accommodation. But in 1857 it returned to becoming the Olympic Circus, then there followed a season of it being a ballroom.

Its chequered career continued thus with a variety of uses and name changes (Adelphi in 1869, Cafe Chantant in 1871, Theatre Royal in 1872) until the title of Queens was settled upon it in 1873. Two years later it was refitted for the opening of Struck Oil with J.C. Williamson and his wife Maggie Moore. Their four month season at this theatre was to inaugurate for Sydney the 100 year old association with the entrepreneurial organisation affectionately known as The Firm.

The Queens was condemned as a hazard to human life and closed in 1882. Half of block towards the harbour there existed from 1879 the city’s first Sydney Opera House, initially titled The Imperial Opera House. The small auditorium was in a very austere building above a series of lock up shops fronting King Street. Upon its opening the Sydney Morning Herald welcomed the lack of a gallery: “stamping about and the showers of playbills and more objectionable things which we have experienced in other houses are impossible here”.

It was used for musical comedy and as an overflow house; Coppen’s company moved into it briefly when fire forced it out of the Victoria in 1890.

Part two of this look at Sydney’s lost theatres will be appearing in the September issue.
Sydney has lost dozens of theatres over the past 180 years. Here the acknowledged authority on Aus. theatre buildings concludes his look at Sydney.

**Ross Thorne: The Past One Hundred Years**

**SYDNEY'S LOST THEATRES**

**PART TWO**

1880 saw the sudden need for more theatrical accommodation so the Catholic Guild Hall in Castlereagh Street was pressed into service. It became the Gaiety behind a suitably theatrical hybrid Venetian Gothic facade. The long hall was subdivided into stage and auditorium complete with prosenium boxes, a dress circle and sloping stalls laid over the old flat floor. In the nineties it was no longer required, there then being, in Sydney, five substantial theatres.

Another theatre which led a rather nondescript life through the last years of the 19th and early years of the 20th centuries was the Royal Standard in the next block towards Central Railway. It was the Royal Foresters' Hall minimally converted to a playhouse, occasionally presenting drama but more frequently it saw variety, boxing, or nothing at all. In 1913 it became Hugh Buckler's and Violet Paget's Little Theatre, where after savouring the new (highly non-commercial) drama of Shaw, Wilde or Arnold Bennett at matinees, the audience was invited to partake of a cup of tea.

In the same year of the inauguration of the Royal Standard (1886) the much admired Criterion opened. It was according to the *Sydney Morning Herald* "a great advance on Sydney theatres, and makes the spectator feel far nearer London than usual". Although the audience was on three levels it was probably similar to, although larger than Hobart's Theatre Royal for its feeling of intimacy. It was particularly suitable for plays; Sydneysiders saw, among other performers, Dion Bouicault and Marie Tempest as well as the spectacular productions of Oscar Asche on its stage. It was purchased by the City Council in 1933 for the widening of Park Street.

If 1886 saw the opening of this handsome theatre, 1887 witnessed the opening of Sydney's greatest theatre: Her Majesty's Theatre and Grand Opera House in Pitt Street. It was the first theatre to have accommodation commensurate with what we expect today in front of and behind the curtain. It contained a full fly tower, a relatively new facility, having a height of 109 feet from stage basement to grid, and the new method of shifting scenes laterally on trucks was also able to be operated.

Her Majesty's opened with George Rignold in a spectacular *Henry V* and was gutted by fire during the J.C.W. production of *Ben Hur* in 1902. (The chariot race with live horses took place on a moving floor with the scenery being rolled in the opposite direction.) The theatre was rebuilt in 1903 to continue seeing the greatest names in theatre, names such as Sarah Bernhardt, Anna Pavlova, Melba, John McCormack, Nellie Stewart, until 1933 when Gladys Moncrief as *The Maid of the Mountains* sang a special farewell on behalf of J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd.

It was not until 1960 that Sydney would again see a new Her Majesty's, a revamped Empire which had originally opened in 1927 as a musical comedy house.

Near the original Her Majesty's there were to
Vaudeville shows began its state of permanency under Harry Rickards in 1893, at what originally opened as the Garrick theatre in 1891 on the site of the Academy of Music. After a fire it was rebuilt for Rickards in 1900. His successors closed it in 1929 but the tradition was revived at the other end of town until 1966 when the last Tivoli show was seen.

The Alhambra was another variety theatre - music hall, but commencing its existence as an auction room. Known first as the Haymarket Academy it was the Alhambra from 1886 until it finished up as a picture house in the 1920s.

One seldom-remembered vaudeville theatre which may soon disappear is the National. Opened in 1906 as Brennans National Amphitheatre it was converted by the Fuller's management into a two level theatre in 1919 and continued until "talkie" films forced its conversion to a cinema (The Roxy) in 1930. Shortly after it was renovated as the Mayfair, the rather shallow fly-tower stage with multi-level dressing rooms on the northern side are still in existence.

Fuller's had another vaudeville city theatre for a number of years before it was bought for an extension to Marcus Clarke's department store in 1925. It was the Princess which commenced life as the Bijou Picture Palace in 1908.

Of all the variety theatres the most charming and intimate was the Palace. Built originally in 1896 as a Palace of Varieties its interior was a strange mixture - a kind of Moorish tinged with Gothic containing a forest of cast-iron posts. In 1924 the auditorium was rebuilt to provide an excellent house without columns, for drama. After being a second run cinema through most of the 1930s and World War II its traditional renaissance style of plasterwork was redecorated by Hoyts in antique cream, while the wall panels had their fabric replaced with crimson damask. Then for a short time it was a first-run English film house before returning to being a live theatre for such shows as Present Laughter and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf. It was much loved by audience and performers alike, although it was a fire hazard and the cooking smells wafted in from the kitchens of Adams Hotel next door. It closed, its fittings were auctioned off in January 1970 before demolition made way for the ubiquitous redevelopment.

be two more theatres built before the end of the century: The Lyceum in 1891/2 and the Palace opposite, in 1896. The Lyceum was a comfortable three level theatre (behind another hotel), with a stage almost 60 feet square; however, it became a film house as early as 1905. New owners, the Methodist Church commenced using it as a Sunday meeting hall in 1908 after delicensing the hotel.

Within recent living memory there have disappeared the lavish St. James originally built by Ben and John Fuller, and opening with No No Nanette in 1926. There was the Savoy which, for around ten years before 1939, housed live theatre companies, particularly Doris Fitton's Independent Theatre. Then there was the Phillip Street Theatre in the St. James Hall, where Bill Orr received his reputation as producer of those fabulous Phillip Street Revues.

Gone too is the Tivoli near Central Railway. This large theatre had commenced as the Adelphi in 1911 but was altered in 1915, becoming firstly the Grand Opera House (to be used frequently for melodrama), then the Tivoli from 1933 to 1970. The tradition of "Tivoli"