

Brecon's Theatre History

An historical walking tour of Brecon's 18th and 19th century theatre buildings. copies also available in Welsh

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This resource has been created in conjunction with BLT's promenade production *A Time Traveller's Guide to Theatrical Brecon*. Resources and further information to be found at www.breconlittletheatre.co.uk



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



Brecon and Theatre in the 18th and 19th centuries: historical contexts

By the turn of the 18th century Brecon had developed into one of the most important towns in Wales. Today, given its relatively small population and its quiet geographical location nestled between hills and mountains, this could be surprising to visitors or indeed residents, yet in the 18th and 19th centuries, Brecon was firmly placed as a market, manufacturing and administrative centre. It also had its own member of parliament and status as an assize town.

The success of Brecon's industry and commercial interests was deeply interwoven with the imperial power of Britain. Jeffrey Jeffreys (c.1652-1709) of the Priory Brecon and Captain Thomas Phillips (c.1664-1713) of Havard House Brecon were key players of the Royal African Company in the late 17th century. Jeffrey's sponsored Captain Thomas Phillips to captain the Hannibal slave ship. The voyage led to the horrific death of hundreds of African slaves in 1694. Five Brecon

men - merchant Walter Wilkins, his brother Jeffrey Wilkins, soldiers Frederick Jones and David Price and sailor John Lloyd - were key members of the East India Company in the latter part of the 18th century ensuring that Brecon was the centre for Wales' network to Britain's Indian empire.

The Anglo-Welsh gentry of Brecon, who patronised the theatre and dominated Brecon's political and commercial scene, owned large houses that still ring the town. English was the dominating language of the ruling classes and over the 18th and 19th centuries there was a shift, gradually replacing Welsh with English as the language spoken by the majority of its inhabitants.

In 1756 the London to Brecon coach route was established which hugely increased the numbers of visitors to the town. Brecon developed a supporting infrastructure of accommodation and entertainment, of which English-speaking theatre

was an important part. This was further cemented by the completion of the (now defunct) Brecon railway in 1863.

Many of the performers and theatre managers who played at Brecon in the 18th and 19th centuries had appeared on London stages themselves and the repertoires were very similar to those of the London theatres. With strong support from the local gentry, Brecon was firmly placed on the strolling players' touring map and the town's theatrical history, although somewhat since forgotten, is of significant historical and cultural importance.



This map includes the buildings - which rather remarkably are all still standing - that harbour Brecon's rich 18th & 19th century theatrical history. You can follow the map in any order to see the outside of the buildings. Please be respectful that most of these properties are privately owned. Short Films and further information are available from breconlittletheatre.co.uk

1 The former Ursuline convent

Sister Bonaventure Kelleher (1923-2019) was a dedicated Ursuline nun, teacher and passionate historian of Brecon who specialised in the development of English-speaking theatre in the town in the 18th and 19th centuries. She passed on a large archive of research material to the Brecknock Society and Museum Friends, who alongside the Ursuline Order, are funding the completion of a research PhD at University of Bristol on Brecon's theatre history. Sister Bonaventure's home was surrounded by the historical sites that were the subject of her interest.

2 'Theatre Brecon'

In 1787 the theatre manager John Boles Watson opened Brecon's first purpose-built theatre which remained open until 1871. The building itself was acquired and developed by proprietor and builder Andrew Maund and was adjacent to Maund's New Inn. This permanent theatre space cemented Brecon's prestige and importance as part of the theatre touring scene. For almost a hundred years the theatre produced popular and widely performed plays including Shakespeare, comedies, melodramas and pantomimes. The local people of Brecon were sometimes even involved as writers and performers themselves.

4 Golden Lion Inn

In 1756 the Golden Lion Inn became the terminus for the first London to Brecon coach route and included stalls for around fifty horses. It was owned by Thomas Longfellow who was also the proprietor of The Bell Inn. It had a large room which hosted performances as well as other popular entertainments such as winter balls.

5 The Bell Inn

John Ward's company of strolling players played at The Bell Inn in Brecon for eight weeks from May-July in 1755. Performances here continued until at least 1789, when notably on 4th December a 'Mrs Hudson' performed a solo entertainment titled *Exhibition of the Times: Or As You Like It*. This performance is particularly significant as it is the first example of a surviving playbill for Brecon's theatre and is held in the Burney Collection in the British Library. 'Mrs Hudson' was an actress from London and chose this location to host her solo performance.

3 The Sarah Siddons pub

Sarah Siddons (1755-1831) was one of the most prolific actresses of the 18th century and a key player in the emergence of a celebrity culture. She was born in an upstairs room of the Shoulder of Mutton Inn (now renamed The Sarah Siddons pub) on 5th July 1755. Her acting family - parents Sarah and Roger Kemble and grandfather John Ward - were performing in Brecon at the time. The family continued to have ties to the town; her younger brother Charles was born here and there are reports that her parents originally wanted her to marry a local Brecon man, rather than fellow actor William Siddons who she married in 1773.

6 Ship Street

The first recorded surviving evidence of English-speaking theatre being performed in Brecon was in 1699 and appeared in Samuel Owsley's diary. According to revisions made in 1676 to the Brecon rent roll, Samuel Owsley lived on 'Shippe Street' (now Ship Street) and was listed as a "Gent" and "Grocer."

7 'The Great House'

Samuel Owsley's diary states "Acters came to this towne" playing at "the great house in wheat street" between 16th December 1699 and 15th January 1700. In 1699 it was owned by Thomas Morgan, MP for Brecon. The upstairs hall (now subdivided into several rooms) would have been approximately 50 feet in length and could have provided a temporary playhouse for a select invited audience.

