

Brecon's Theatre History Schools' Resource Pack

This resource pack is aimed at KS2 and KS3 and covers, amongst others, the following curriculum outcomes:

History:

- Understanding the importance of local Welsh history and how this relates to the rest of the UK
- Learning through enquiry about notable people in the locality
- Establishing a sense of chronology
- Use a range of historical sources to select and summarise information

Communication Skills / Drama:

- Developing oracy and presentation skills
- Use questioning skills to find out information
- Explore the notion of working in role and improvisation

Learning Activities 1 & 2 are designed to be photocopied for students to fill in.

Learning Activity 3 is a lesson plan for teachers to prepare and deliver.

Every school in Brecon also has the opportunity to book a FREE workshop led by theatre historian and qualified Drama teacher, Jayne Gold. These sessions can be tailored to meet the needs of your students or specific learning outcomes. The workshop can be for up to 30 students, up to 1.5 hours in length and delivered in your setting or other location of your choice. Part of this could also include a theatre history tour of Brecon's historic sites. Please email goldjayne@gmail.com for further information and to book.

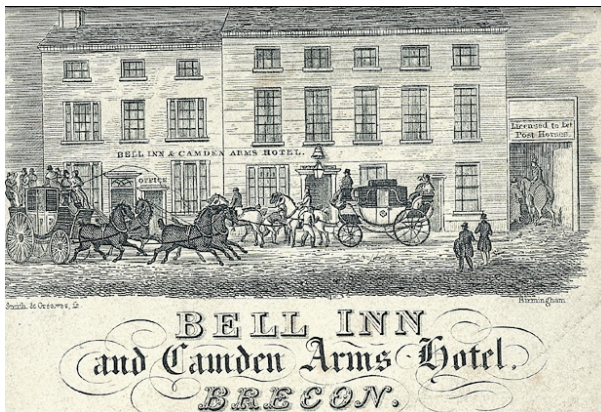
A digital copy of this resource pack, including prepared PowerPoint slides and a host of other materials are to be found at breconlittletheatre.co.uk

Created by Jayne Gold, for Brecon Little Theatre, as part of the Heritage Lottery Funded project, 'Engaging the community of Brecon with its theatre history heritage'



Learning Activity 1 – Brecon Theatre History Timeline

Did you know that in the 18th and 19th centuries Brecon was one of the most important towns in Wales? It had its own court known as an assize court where judges would visit from the higher courts in London to make decisions around law and order. Brecon was a manufacturing and market centre too.



Smith and Greaves print, circa 1840, NLW

We have found recorded evidence of theatre from London being performed in Brecon from as early as 1699. In 1755 the famous actress Sarah Siddons was born in our town and was christened at St. Mary's church. We had our own purpose-built theatre which opened in 1787. Two years later, an actress from London performed one of the earliest one woman shows in a room above a Brecon pub.



1785 portrait of Sarah Siddons by Thomas Gainsborough

In 1867 Brecon's theatre had a female manager Kate Robertson – something that was rather unusual at the time. As well as actresses and theatre managers, women played an important role in funding the theatre too. One of these was Maria Williams, who lived at Penpont. Maria sponsored performances in 1828. All of this wonderful history is right on our doorstep – take a look and see!

TASK: Using the timeline template on the next page, plot these events in the order they happened. The first one has been done for you.

EXTENSION: Can you research any other important Brecon events and put them on the timeline too? For example, when did the Brecon canal open?



Remember:

The 18th century is the 1700s

The 19th century is the 1800s

What century are we in today?

In 1756 the coaching route from London was established. People could travel between Brecon and London in horse-drawn carriages. Brecon was a busy place. And people wanted entertaining in the evenings. Of course, there was no television or internet back then. The theatre was the place to go!

1699/1700
Actors from London
performing in Brecon
evidenced in Samuel
Owsley's diary

1700

1750

1800

1850

1900

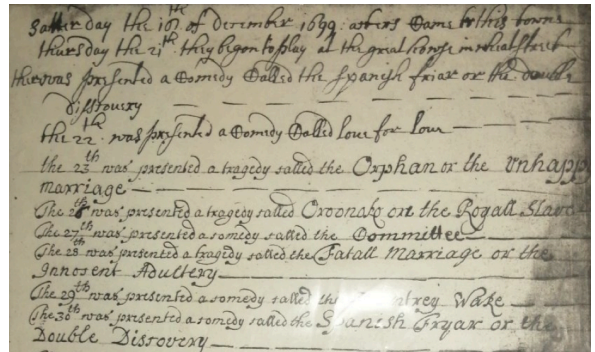
Learning Activity 2: Types of historical sources

How do we know that Brecon had lots of theatre performances in the 18th and 19th centuries?

There are three main sources for this information:

1. Diaries
2. Newspaper articles
3. Playbills (posters) or Handbills (small posters, like an invitation, sent to people)

Samuel Owsley was a grocer (a person who sells food). He had his business on Ship Street, Brecon. He kept a diary that listed events in Brecon. His diary entry tells us, “actors came to this town” playing at “the great house in wheat street” between 16th December 1699 and 15th January 1700.



The Memorandum Book 1679-1768 of Samuel Owsley, National Library Wales

The great house is now known as Buckingham place. You might recognise where it is in Brecon from the picture. At the time it was one big house. The performances most likely took place on the first floor which had a large hallway. It is likely that the actors came from London, as the owner of the house Thomas Morgan, had connections to the theatres there.



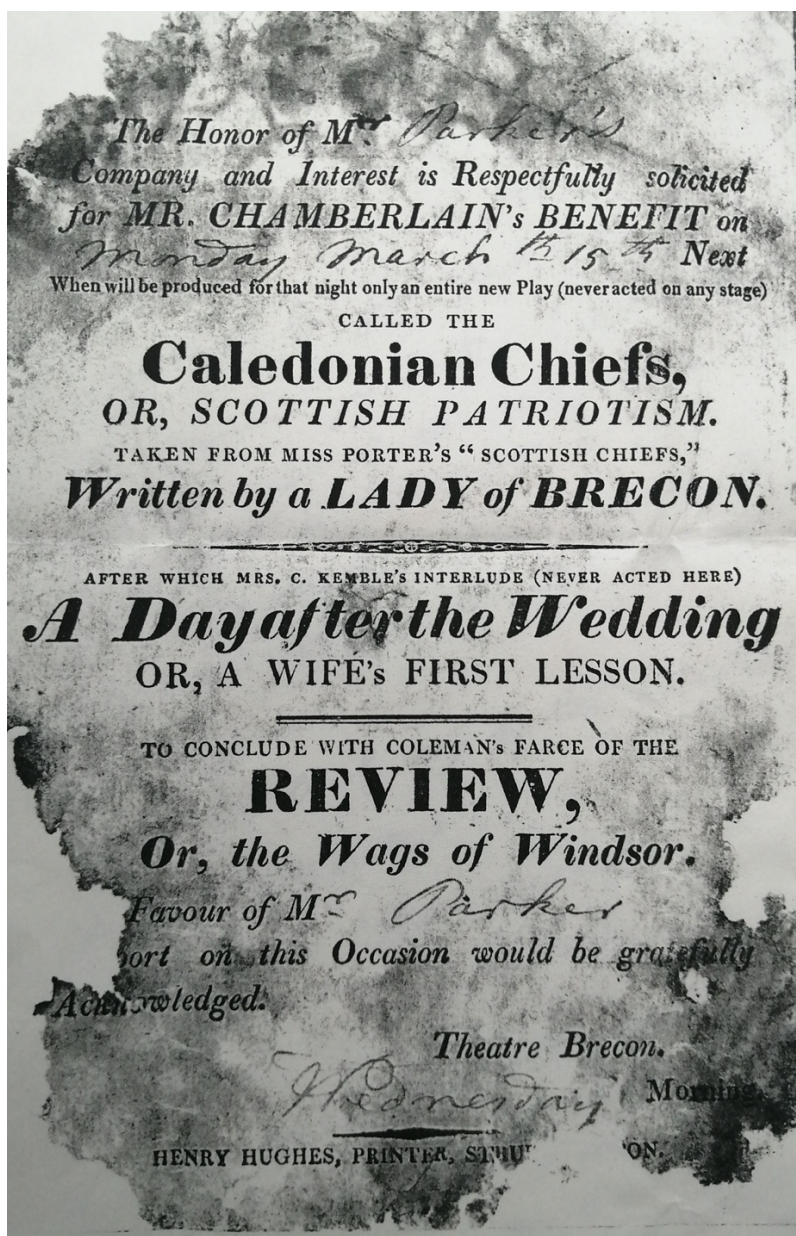
Google maps, 1-3 Buckingham Place Brecon

Questions:

How reliable are diaries as historical sources?

Can you think of any other diaries that have been important to our understanding of the past?

Here is a handbill from 1819 sent to a Mr Parker inviting him to the play in Brecon.



What information about the theatre can we gather from this source?

Think about:

- the length of the evening
- the types of plays performed
- who the writers were

Brecon handbill, Abergavenny museum, Hiley-Morgan collection

 **Some information that might help you:**

'Scottish Chiefs' – A 1810 historical novel about a 13th century Scottish knight

Coleman – George Coleman, popular English playwright

Farce – A comic play with silly jokes

Learning Activity 3 – Sarah Siddons Lesson Plan

Learning Objectives:

- Explore how to use **hot seating** to gain new information about an historical character
- To develop effective **questioning** skills
- To use **improvisation** skills imaginatively and develop confidence in speaking

Starter:

Warm-up activity: Drama game, 'Questions'

Divide the class into two equal lines facing each other so that each student is facing a partner. Taking it in turns to go down the line, each pair is given a prompt or a setting and interact based on the prompt. However, they can only speak in questions!

e.g. Prompt: On the moon.

A: How did we get here?

B: What do you mean?

A: Are you Neil Armstrong?

Other prompt examples: At the zoo, the doctor's office, late for the bus, lost in the woods...

Development:

Discussion: What different types of **questions** are there? What is an **open question**? What is a **closed question**? When might each be appropriate and effective to use?

Write some examples on the board to help provide prompts for those that need them.

Some examples / definitions:

Closed questions – answers that have a static response such as yes or no or a simple short response. E.g. Q. What year is it? A. 1785 Q. How old are you? A. 30 Q. Where were you born? A. Brecon.

Open questions – these questions require longer answers and often give more details. E.g. What is it like being a famous actress?

Main Activity:

Hot seating is a drama exercise where an actor takes on a role and the rest of the group takes turns to ask the character questions which they have to answer in role. It can be used to help an actor understand and develop their role but, in this case, we are using it as a strategy to find out information about an historical character.

This activity can work as either a Teacher-in-Role exercise, where the class teacher or teaching assistant takes on the role as Sarah Siddons or if you have a very confident student in the class who had prepared beforehand, they could take on the role. The rest of the class ask 'Sarah Siddons' questions, extracting as much information as they can. The actor playing Sarah Siddons can use the information given to answer the questions as well as their imagination and improvisational skills.

The class can be shown a picture of Sarah Siddons so they can get an idea of what she looked like.

The hat! – use the Sarah Siddons hat (provided) to demonstrate the moment the actor is in role as Sarah Siddons. When the hat is on, they are in role, when it is taken off, they come out of role.

Plenary questions:

What were the most interesting things you discovered about Sarah Siddons?
Why is hot seating a good strategy to use?

Information on Sarah Siddons for Teacher-in-role exercise:

Sarah Siddons (1755-1831) was one of the most prolific actresses of the 18th century. Siddons was particularly known for her tragic performances, particularly that of Lady Macbeth. She even took on the role of Hamlet. She was also a key player in the emergence of a celebrity culture and was considered the most acclaimed tragic actress of her time. She was born in an upstairs room of the Shoulder of Mutton inn (now renamed the *Sarah Siddons* pub) in Brecon and baptised at the nearby St Mary's church. Her mother and father were Sarah and Roger Kemble, both actors in the family acting company run by her grandfather John Ward. Brecon was a well-established part of the theatre touring circuit and her family were frequent visiting performers. Originally, her parents had wanted her to marry a local Brecon man, but instead she went on to marry fellow actor William Siddons.

Further reading to be found here: <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-25516;jsessionid=BD8A26D8C25A366EC21C3C64D9E316?docPos=4>
(Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Sarah Siddons)



1785 portrait of Sarah Siddons by Thomas Gainsborough