



SAVOY THEATRE
DRAMA, COMEDY, MUSIC AND MOVIES



THE SAVOY THEATRE
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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE THEATRE

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The Savoy Theatre occupies the oldest known theatre site in Wales. It was extensively refurbished in 1927 but, as it retained the basic structure of the previous Victorian building, it can claim to be one of, if not, the oldest working theatres in Wales.

It is managed by the Monmouth Savoy Trust which is a registered charity (113659). The Trust took over in 2010 when it looked as though the theatre would have to close. The Trust re-introduced regular high quality live performance and in conjunction with the cinema showings, has made the Savoy an indispensable place of entertainment serving the town and the wider Monmouthshire community.



The present building stands on the site of what was The Bell Inn, the history of which can be traced back to at least the eighteenth century.

At that time travelling companies of players toured the country and as there were few theatre buildings outside London, productions would be pitched up in any suitable location, from inns to barns and advertised as 'Assemblies'. The Assembly Rooms in Monmouth were built by Thomas Penson on the site of the Bell Inn and licensed for performance in 1832.

In 1850, J F Rogers a theatre manager with interests in Cheltenham, Bath and Swansea, launched the venue as The Theatre Royal. It was short lived and the building became the Corn Exchange. The failure of the Theatre Royal may be explained by the emergence of other theatres in Monmouth around that time such as the New Theatre in St Mary Street and a Playhouse in Monk Street on the current site of the Masonic Lodge. In 1888 the Rolls family gave the town the Rolls Hall (now the Library) and live performance was centred there. In 1905 the Alexandra Theatre was built near Dixton Gate but burned down after only a short period.

The Theatre Royal meanwhile was sold in 1875 and turned into, of all things, a roller skating rink called 'The Rinkeries' and was jointly owned by John Smith and

Charlie Colbourne. Smith eventually bought the controlling interest and the use changed back into a place of entertainment in the early part of the twentieth century. and by 1910 was showing the silent films of the era. The building operated then under the name of the Picture Palace and Variety Theatre. There were various name changes along the way from The Palace to The Scala and the Regent. The style of entertainment would have been the same, with "one reelers" interspersed with variety acts and pieces of theatre, usually lurid melodramas. In 1917 it was renovated and the entrance moved to Church Street. Owners during this period included the Western Provincial Cinematographic Co and the Perfect Motion Picture Co.

In 1926 the theatre was sold at auction and bought by the Ashley Ward chain who extensively refurbished it during 1927. The grand opening of the New Picture House was held on March 5th 1928. The last regular live variety act performed in the theatre in April 1930 after which talking pictures and the golden era of cinemas began. The ownership changed hands during the next thirty years eventually ending up with B T Davies, a serial cinema owner, who was at one time the Head of the Cinema Exhibitors Association. The Davies family still own the freehold to this day.

In common with many others, the theatre fell on hard times in the 1980's as cinema going fell away, and closed in 1983. It turned into a Magic Lantern Theatre and re-opened in 1987. It was listed by CADW in 1989. It closed again in December 1993. In 1995 the lease was taken by Michael Blakemore who renamed the building the Savoy.

In 2005 he relinquished the lease to a Trust in order that it could attract public money from grants and foundations. This was successful and the interior was expertly restored. However the Trust got into financial trouble in 2009 and the lease changed hands again and the current Trust took over.

On the 70th anniversary of the refurbished cinema, in March 1998, the Monmouth Operatic Society presented a tribute to Gilbert & Sullivan. This celebration was notable as it marked the use, once again, of the original raked stage, tabs and back-stage facilities. The new Trust has now taken this to the next level and re-invigorated the Savoy by turning this wonderful part of theatre and cinema heritage into a place of pleasure and enjoyment for the whole community.

