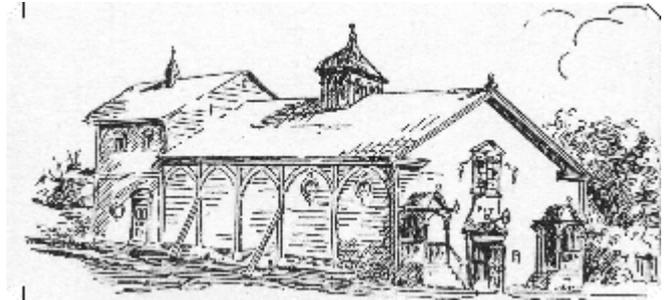


## Richmond's Theatres

The first evidence of theatrical activity in Richmond is records of performances given in the great hall of Richmond Palace by various companies in the years 1588-1603 during the times that Elizabeth I was staying there. Although records exist which show what companies appeared, there is no evidence to prove that Shakespeare was one of the actors or that any of his plays were performed. Christopher Marlowe was a playwright for the Lord Admiral's Company, but again the records do not list his plays.

### The Theatre on Richmond Hill

In 1715, the title page of Benjamin Griffin's tragedy **Injured Virtue** states that the play was printed "as it was acted at the Playhouse in Richmond by His Grace the Duke of Southampton and Cleaveland's servants". The location of this theatre is not known, but it is probably Richmond Wells.



These had been developed around a chalybeate spring discovered on the hillside in the 1670s and the water had similar properties to Epsom. At first exploited as a medicinal spa, the leaseholder developed the area in 1696 with pleasure grounds, a pump room, assembly and gaming rooms and daily concerts and weekly balls soon became a regular feature. Gradually the Wells began to be deserted by the fashionable clientele and by the 1750s was attracting a noisy and rowdy crowd who disturbed the local inhabitants. Rebecca and Susannah Houblon, who lived almost opposite the Wells, purchased the buildings in 1763 and closed them down – much to the relief of the Vestry.

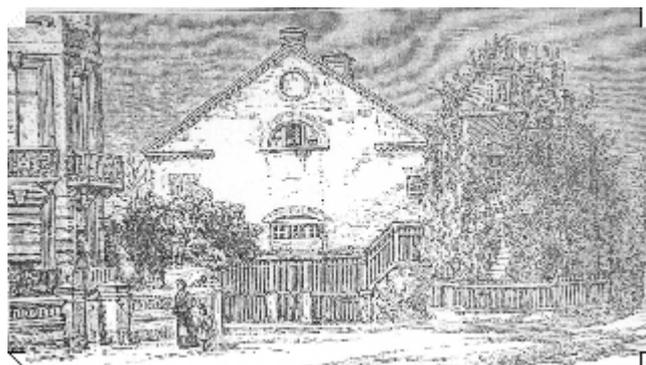
Will Penkethman, a comedian who specialised in knockabout farce, took over a barn on Richmond Hill in 1719. The barn which had been used as a stable for donkeys was on the site which is now 62-70 Hill Rise. Penkethman converted the barn into a theatre which opened on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1719 and continued to put on plays there until his death in September 1725 when the theatre closed. Penkethman lived at Crawford Cottage – now part of the Richmond Gate Hotel – and was buried in the Parish churchyard.

Another actor, Thomas Chapman, had appeared at Penkethman's theatre in 1724 and he decided to open his own playhouse. But he did not manage to obtain a lease on a property higher up the Hill until 1730. The property, owned by John Darrell, stood on the site of 10-18 Richmond Hill and was described as "a small, but very neat and regular theatre". The playhouse had a summer season of performances till 1747 when Chapman died and then his widow continued as lessee for a further 10 years. It lost its licence c. 1753-4 and became known as the 'Music room'. In 1756, Theophilus Cibber, the son of Colley Cibber, tried to get round the problem of no licence by advertising it as a 'cephelic snuff (i.e. wit) warehouse' which might be purchased by patrons who would also be able to see, free of charge, rehearsals by students of its attached drama school.

The scheme was not a success and after Cibber's death in 1758, the theatre had a brief revival in the 1760s. But with the new theatre on the Green opening in 1765, the Playhouse struggled against the opposition for a couple of years and finally closed its doors c. 1769. For the next 20 years it was a Methodist meeting house, then a stable and a storeroom. The building was demolished in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and replaced by nos. 10-14 Richmond Hill.

### The Theatre Royal, Richmond Green : 1765-1884

The theatre stood on the south-west side of the Green, at the top of Old Palace Lane, on a site adjacent to that now occupied by Garrick Close. The first manager (also thought to have been responsible for its erection) was an actor, James Dance – known on the stage as 'Mr. Love'.



The interior design of the theatre caused widespread interest. The lobby was as spacious as in either of the theatres of Drury Lane or Covent Garden. The unconventional dark panelling of the auditorium helped to focus attention on the lighted stage when the curtain was raised. Most of the audience was accommodated in boxes. There was one gallery and a large orchestra pit.

The theatre first opened on 15<sup>th</sup> July 1765 with the comic opera **Love in a Village**. A special prologue was written for this occasion by David Garrick and was delivered by the manager himself. Within a year of the theatre's opening, the stage was enlarged and other improvements were made.

George III and Queen Charlotte became patrons. On their first visit, three of the boxes were formed into one for the reception of the royal family and suite, other boxes being erected on the stage to assist in the accommodation of the audience.

During the first 30 years or so of the theatre's existence, many famous actors appeared on its stage, including Mrs. Jordan, the elder Macready, Mrs Baddeley and Charles Dibdin. In October 1807, Sarah Siddons played her celebrated role of Lady Randolph in the tragedy of **Douglas**.

In 1831, Edmund Kean became the lessee and took up residence in the house adjoining the theatre. He had played there on a number of occasions earlier in his career, during Klanert's management. He was now past his prime, however, and his declining health had increased his long-held desire to manage a playhouse in some salubrious rural area. Richmond seemed ideal, though, as he still felt bound to fulfil engagements elsewhere in the country and in Ireland, his health grew worse rather than better. His death at Richmond on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1833 marked the end of a legendary era of heroic acting in the British theatre. (See **Local History Notes: Edmund Kean at Richmond**).

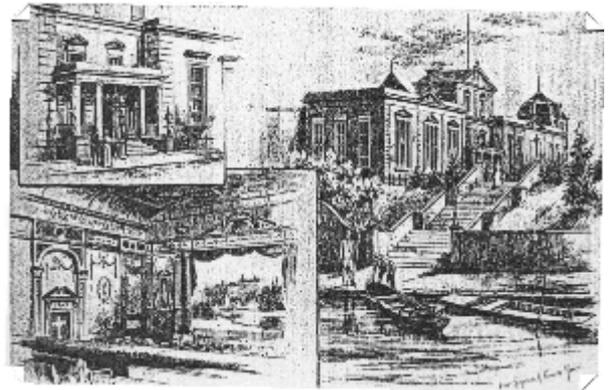
Gas lighting was installed in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, probably during the management of Miss Desborough who took over the theatre in 1837.

Perhaps the most prosperous time for the theatre in the Victorian period was during the 12 or 13 years from 1858 onwards. There was now a new generation of local nobility to act as patrons: these included the Duke and Duchess of Teck and the Duc d'Aumale. Plays produced at this time included **East Lynne** and **Jeanie Deans**.

The last proprietor was John Russell, whose first season opened in July 1880. After an initial success, attendance quickly dropped and the shortage of actors willing to play at the theatre led the unfortunate manager to engage street entertainers, which did nothing to please the diminishing audiences. In the early 1880s the old playhouse was finally closed and was demolished in 1884. Garrick House was built on the site, but was also demolished in 1961 when Garrick Close – a development of 6 houses - was erected.

### The New Theatre/Theatre Royal : 1890-1899

In 1889, F.C. Mouflet, proprietor of the Greyhound Hotel in George Street and who also owned the Assembly Rooms of the Castle Hotel, converted the banqueting room of the Castle Hotel into the New Theatre. It opened on Easter Monday 1890 and changed its name to the Theatre Royal in 1891.



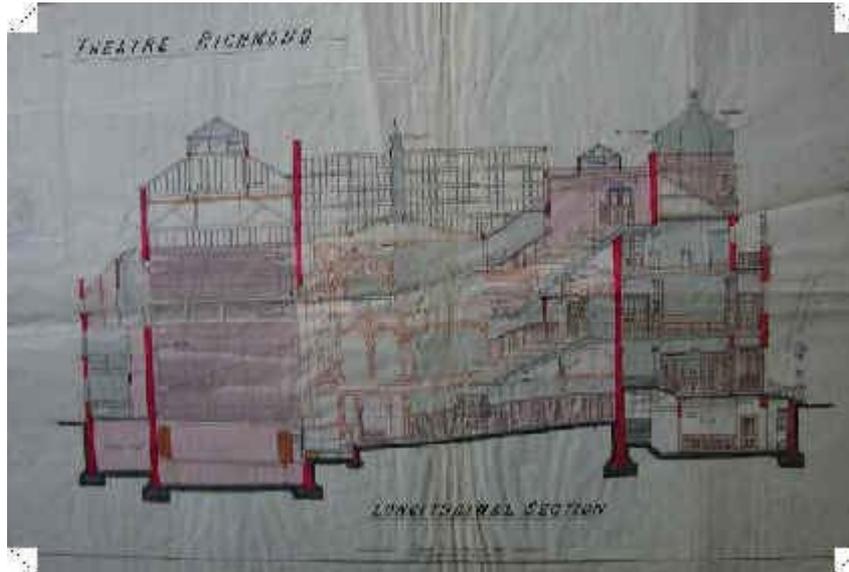
By 1910, it was being advertised as the Cinematograph Palace – Richmond's first cinema and in 1915, it was the Castle Rooms.

By the 1950s the Castle Assembly Rooms had become a popular ballroom and were reopened in 1952 after extensive renovations. Another facelift followed in 1966, but by 1971 the ballroom had acquired a rather dubious reputation. Although still popular, it was closed down in 1981 after many complaints by local residents and the owners decided to operate it only as a public house. The Castle was demolished in 1984 when the whole riverside site was redeveloped to a design by architect Quinlan Terry and was opened by Queen Elizabeth in 1988.

### Richmond Theatre : 1899

Mouflet decided that what Richmond needed was a purpose-built theatre. So he acquired a site on the Little Green next to the public library and commissioned Frank Matcham – the leading theatre architect of the day – to design it. On 18<sup>th</sup> September 1899, the Richmond Theatre and Opera House opened with a performance of Shakespeare's **As you like it**.





The theatre went through several name changes until 1924 when it reverted to the Richmond Theatre. – the name that still is used today.

### Richmond Fringe Theatre

Founded by Sam Walters, the Richmond Fringe Theatre opened on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1971 in the upper room of the Orange Tree Public House, Kew Road, Richmond. It was a success from the start and was, for many years, the only British theatre producing plays by the then Czech dissident, Vaclav Havel, who went on to become the President of Czechoslovakia.

By 1987 plans were approved to turn the disused St. John's School, Clarence Street – just across the road from the Orange Tree – into a new theatre. These plans had been in the pipeline since the early 1980s. The Orange Tree Theatre opened in its new premises in February 1991. The original room in the Orange Tree became the Studio Theatre and Sam Walters is still involved as the Artistic Director.

### Twickenham Theatre

Twickenham had its own theatre during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In July 1730, Thomas Chapman – manager of the recently built theatre on Richmond Hill – took his company over to Twickenham where they opened in **The Conscious Lovers**. In 1746 the company was dividing its time about equally between the two theatres at Twickenham and Richmond, a practice which continued after Chapman's death in 1747. Two benefit performances – one in each theatre – were given for his widow.

By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, attendance at the Twickenham theatre had dropped considerably. The company subsequently limited its performances there to one a week until 1753, when they decided to confine themselves to appearing at Richmond alone.

Whether the Twickenham theatre which was in existence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the one where a performance of two plays took place on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1825 is uncertain. The plays were George Coleman the Younger's **John Bull: or An Englishman's Fireside** and **Is He Jealous?** by Samuel Beazley, Jr. The 'Mr Etherington' who appears as a ticket agent on the playbill had been given a benefit at the Theatre Royal in Richmond on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1818. He was also the ticket agent for that and is described on the bill as 'Musician, Twickenham'. He was John Etherington (d.1826) who, in 1792, founded a music firm in Twickenham. He probably had some professional connections with the local playhouse – possibly as a member of the orchestra. His grandson, James Etherington (1801-1883), the organist at St. John the Divine Church, Richmond, played in the orchestra at the Theatre Royal, Richmond.

It was James who moved the family business to Compass Hill, Richmond in the early 1830s, then to Hill Rise in 1849 and Hill Street in 1866. Succeeding generations continued the business which, by 1892, was selling sheet music and musical instruments as well as operating a tuning and repairing department, a music library and a concert and theatrical agency. The firm appears in local directories as late as 1929 when the entry reads 'Etherington's Music Saloons, 18 Hill Street Richmond, and Hall, Red Lion Street'. The directories from 1930 to 1932 give 'Etherington (Robert Morley and Co., Ltd., proprietors), pianoforte makers, 4 Red Lion Street Richmond'. The firm does not appear in subsequent directories.

Sir George Pocock (1765-1840) whose name appears as patron in the 1825 playbill, was the son of Admiral Sir George Pocock (1706-1792). The admiral had been Commander-in-Chief at the capture of Havana in 1762. By 1764 he had acquired the Twickenham villa later to become known as Orleans House which, from existing records, seems to have remained the property of the Pocock family until about 1830.

### Further Reading

- |                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| Bingham, Frederick   | <b>A celebrated old playhouse; the history of Richmond Theatre (in Surrey) from 1765-1884.</b> 1886  |
| Cloake, John         | <b>Richmond past: a visual history of Richmond, Kew, Petersham and Ham.</b> 1991   |
| Courlander, Kathleen | <b>Richmond: from Kew Green to Ham Common.</b> 1953  |
| Dunbar, Janet        | <b>A Prospect of Richmond.</b> 1979<br><b>Local History Notes: Edmund Kean at Richmond</b><br><b>Local History Notes: Performances at Richmond's Theatre Royal 1765-1853</b> |

More information on Theatres in Richmond upon Thames is available from the Local Studies Collection.