

Yorkshire Telegraph and Star, December 1935

Disastrous Fire in Sheffield Theatre Royal Guttled Only the Blackened Walls Remain Lyceum at One Time in Danger

The Sheffield Theatre Royal is gutted. Now only the four blackened walls and the property room remain after a disastrous fire which was discovered early to-day.

So fierce was the blaze that the Sheffield Lyceum Theatre, a few yards away, caught fire—but not seriously.

The Adelphi Hotel, opposite, was in real danger, and even now the outside wall of the theatre opposite this hotel is unsafe.

Sunday is the only night when a fireman is not en duty at the theatre.

Manager as Fireman

The Theatre Royal is one of the few variety houses in the country where contracts have been placed until next December.

Mr. Arthur Holland, the manager, worked at the fire in fireman's helmet and coat, which he had donned after leaving party at his house.

The managing director and licensee of the theatre, Mr. J. E. B. Beaumont, together with the Chief Constable (Major F. S. James), were early on the scene.

The fire started in the roof in the middle of the building.

It spread from top to bottom and took everything in its stride.

It was the oldest Sheffield theatre, and one with the largest seating capacity,

The fire was discovered just before 3 a.m. Mr. Torn Bolton, the licensee of the Adelphi Hotel, had retired to bed. He heard the barking of his Chow dog, which sleeps outside his bedroom door.

Then he heard a woman in the street shouting "Fire, Fire."

Flames through Roof

He rushed to the front windows end saw smoke pouring from the roof of the theatre.

Whilst he was phoning the Fire brigade flames burst through the top of the building and before the firemen arrived the theatre was an Inferno.

Flames reaching 150 feet in height leaped into the sky and three-quarters of an hour later the roof fell in.

Thirty firemen under Superintendent T. Breaks braved the terrific heat which met them as they burst open the doors. One fire-fighter in particular stuck to his post at the top of the water-tower until flames beat him back. At times it seemed as though he was in the middle of a sheet of flames

Nothing could save the theatre from destruction.

Flames crept round the galleries and ate up the plush-covered seating as though it had been paper.

Gallery down First

The gallery was the first to be taken by the blaze; this collapsed into the upper circle, which, in turn, fell into the dress circle and stalls.

The flames licked through the orchestral pit underneath the safety curtain on to the stage, which, with the scenery, rapidly disappeared.

The band instruments were destroyed, as also were the valuable instruments and properties of Castelli's Gypsy Accordion Band, who were to have appeared this week.

Desperate attempts were made by the firemen to check the onslaughts of the flames and hundreds of gallons of water were poured through the broken windows and over the top of the walls where the roof had collapsed.

Occupants of houses in the area hurriedly left their beds and rushed into the street in night clothes.

They were soon joined by hundreds of sightseers as the news of the disaster spread and a cordon of police kept the crowds from the blazing building.

Previous Fire

Two years ago a fire occurred at the Theatre Royal when a flash of lightning during a storm caused an electric wire to fuse and set fire to the switchboard.

This fire, which also occurred on a Sunday, was discovered by Mrs. Bolton.

Since then the danger of the Theatre Royal getting on fire had become an obsession with her.

Had she not so promptly seen smoke coming from the windows of the theatre the building might have been gutted two years ago.

Saved from Fire

One thing saved from the fire is a box bearing the crest of the manager's wife's family.

Thus box, of sentimental value, was in the office. The manager, Mr. Arthur Holland, told Supt. T. Breaks, of the Fire Brigade, of its position in the office, and, braving the scorching flames, the Superintendent fetched it.

"Mrs. Holland will be pleased about this," said Mr. Holland to a "Star" reporter.

Artists' Losses Clothes and Instruments Gone in Fire

Huddled together in the Adelphi Hotel, Sheffield, to-day, was a group of actors and actresses.

They were not drinking; they were not smoking - they were numb. Everything they possessed had been destroyed, by the Theatre Royal fire.

These stage folk had turned up at eleven o'clock for rehearsal.

But listening to their conversation, Castelli, the noted accordion player, who's Accordion Band, had been booked to head the bill at the theatre this week, stands in the middle of the room.

His players and other actors and actresses sit around on stools.

Castelli speaks. He attempts to put a brave face on the situation but his colleagues realise the seriousness of their plight.

"Wire 'so and so' we must get some money right away. I had some sort of premonition a month ago" says Castelli

That is why I insured my instrument for fifty quid; I wish all of you had done the same.

Anyway, don't lose heart.... I'll wire some friends straight away...."

Castelli leaves the room. I follow him (writes a "Star" reporter).

There in the hall, Castelli brushes tears from his eyes.

I can't let them see me upset," 'he tells me. "They depend on me for a lead. But what can we do? We have been out of work for two weeks everybody has spent up on the Christmas festivities.....we have at least seven consecutive weeks' booking before usand now this happens.

"Everything has gone. There's nearly £500 worth of instruments melted and there's all our tools. In fact they have nothing but what they stand up in.

"Next, week plays with Sir Harry Lauder, but how can we manage to do it?"

Castelli then thinks of his own instrument. He tells me it is a chromatic accordion and only three people in this country play this instrument.

Gleam of Hope

"Where can I get another instrument like that? ...perhaps I can borrow One? But then there are the others to consider. I know I will claim the insurance money for my instrument and use that for deposits on the others."

Castelli's face brightens,

"That is good," he says,

"Then we shall have to buy new costumes or make some the best way we can."

Again, Castelli realises the gloominess of the situation.

"Last night," he says, "coming here in the car, everybody was singing. We were so happy. I had been out work for two weeks and during that time I had played for nothing at a working men's club in Edinburgh - the place where I got my first chance, On Saturday night, three men - all of them very poor - presented me with a gold scarf pin and to-,night they are sending me telegram of good wishes. That is the opposite side of this tragedy, for tragedy it is."

Castelli leaves the hotel with a gleam hope in his eyes. Next week, he fervently hopes to regain his position by playing Harry Lauder's company.

But what of the players on the bill?

All are equally in the same plight Castelli's little band.

Their costumes have gone, and J. W. K Daley and his Theatre Royal Orchestra have lost their instruments in the havoc caused by this fire.