

The Theatres of Oxford: Forty Years of Family Management

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SUMMARY

Oxford, without a professional corps of players until the very end of the 18th century, enjoyed the visits of a family theatre company during the first four decades of the following. That its two managers chose a number of real tennis courts for transformation into playhouses reflects a traditional use of this building type. The repertoire of the company, the social conditions and the gradual demise of the touring stock company are considered. Until the erection of the New Theatre in 1886 the University authorities abhorred the notion of a professional theatre in the city, which possibly accounts for the present lack of knowledge about the early 19th-century Oxford theatre. This article is a brief, descriptive attempt to fill that gap.

Christopher Hibbert's welcome *Encyclopaedia of Oxford* contains an entry headed 'Theatre' in which the contributor states that 'the first theatre proper was opened in 1833 in St. Mary Hall Lane'.¹ This is misleading: the 1833 theatre was no more 'proper' than its predecessors, nor could it be described as the first of Oxford's professional theatres. The text does, however, introduce the reader to Richard Barnett, a member of a theatre family whose management of a succession of playhouses in the city spanned almost half a century. This article considers the professional aspirations of the pater-familias, Henry Thornton, and his son-in-law, Richard Barnett.

Professional players had made occasional forays to Oxford since the reign of Elizabeth I in spite of the general disapproval of the University, formally expressed in the Licensing Acts of 1737 and 1788, the latter of which prohibited professional performances within a fourteen-mile radius of the city.² In 1799 Henry Thornton managed not only to circumvent the act but also to gain the permission of the vice-chancellor for the establishment of a seasonal theatre. This he set up in the real tennis court of Merton College.³ Tennis-court theatres were no new phenomenon. Roofed courts had been used in France since the 16th century and in England Sir William Davenant, upon his reception of a royal patent, opened his theatre in Lisle's Tennis Court, Lincoln's Inn Fields, in 1661.⁴ Compared with some of Thornton's other

¹ C. and E. Hibbert, *The Encyclopaedia of Oxford* (1988), 452.

² For visits prior to the 18th century see F.S. Boas, 'A Defence of Oxford Plays and Players', *Fortnightly Review*, cccclxxvii (1907), 309-19 and S. Rosenfeld, 'Some Notes on the Players in Oxford, 1661-1713', *Review of English Studies*, xix (1943), 366-75; *Statuta Antiqua Universitatis Oxoniensis*, ed. S. Gibson (1931), 432.

³ *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, hereafter abbreviated *J.O.J.*, 17 August 1799.

⁴ *The Revels History of Drama in English*, ed. T.W. Craik, v (1976), 84-5.

theatres the Merton court, 93 feet long and almost 32 feet wide, offered spacious accommodation. It was built in 1798 and stood on the site of two earlier courts, one of which had been utilised as a playhouse when the Duke of Ormonde's company visited the city in 1680.⁵ Presumably Thornton erected a trestle stage over the eastern half of the hall, setting up a temporary proscenium arch to divide the acting area from the rear stage, traditionally assigned to the scenery. The existing dedans would conveniently serve as two right-angled rows of boxes; backless benches on the floor of the court would form a pit, and a gallery, possibly a temporary wooden construction, would be set up. Admission charges of 3s. (15p), 2s. (10p) and 1s. (5p) prevailing at most of Thornton's other theatres may have held, unadvertised, in Oxford.⁶

When Thornton had earlier opened his theatre at Windsor a pattern of performing during the holiday periods of Eton College had been established and the same arrangement held at Oxford: Thornton's company would perform only during the long vacation.⁷ Furthermore, the vice-chancellor stipulated that readings were to be given. In consequence plays and afterpieces were performed in their entirety, with the actors holding texts they affected to look at from time to time.⁸

By 1799 Thornton had acquired fifteen theatres, the majority of which were located along the Great Bath Road and the Portsmouth Road.⁹ Geographically Oxford was an important base as Thornton could link with his nearby playhouses at Reading, Henley, Newbury and Windsor. The latter town was regarded by the manager as his home base: here he performed before George III and the royal family on numerous occasions, augmenting his company with the London comedians Richard Suett and John Quick for whose antics the king had a regard.¹⁰ The Licensing Act of 1788 allowed managers to perform for a period of up to sixty days at any one theatre, with the result that Thornton, as did his fellow managers, moved around the circuit making his visits coincident with fairs, race weeks and other festivities. With as large a company as his, Thornton was able to sectionalise the players so that when working along the Berkshire-Oxfordshire boundary, one set would play in Reading while the other performed for a shorter period in the University city.

Occasional letters to journals had bemoaned the lack of a theatre in Oxford, so that the presence of an established and reasonably opulent company was a welcome diversion during the summer months.¹¹ Thornton's choice of repertoire suggests that he was eager to present his patrons with a degree of spectacle. George Colman's *Blue-Beard*, an oriental extravaganza, was staged, followed by the highly popular Sheridan comedy *The Rivals* with its glimpses of fashionable Bath interiors. Not until the staging of Sheridan's *Pizarro* was the zenith of the spectacular reached. The play tells of the conquest of the Peruvians by the Spaniards with scenes set in exotic locations such as the Inca Temple of the Sun with its massed cohorts of virgins and the Valley of the Torrent in which Rolla, the Peruvian chieftain, scaled a precipice balancing on his shoulder a rescued native child.¹² For two hours before the performances started the

⁵ E.G. Scanlan, 'Tennis Courts in England and Scotland', *Theatre Notebook*, x (1955), 15; H.E. Salter, *Survey of Oxford*, ed. W.A. Pantin, i (Oxford Hist. Soc. n.s. xiv, 1960), 246.

⁶ e.g. Chelmsford: playbill, 24 August 1798, Chelmsford Public Libr.

⁷ P.R.O., Lord Chamberlain's Papers, LCS/163.

⁸ *Monthly Mirror*, xiv (1802), 206-7.

⁹ P.V. Ranger, 'The Thornton Circuit, 1784-1817', *Theatre Notebook*, xxxii (1978), 130-6.

¹⁰ C. Knight, *A Volume of Varieties* (1844), 72.

¹¹ e.g. *Gentleman's Magazine*, iv (1785), 591-2.

¹² See 'John Kemble in the role of Rolla', oilpainting by Sir Thomas Lawrence, 1800, in the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City.

theatre was crowded, and at the final showing seven hundred people were turned away.¹³

In 1807 Thornton transferred his theatre to the tennis court of Christ Church, situated near to the junction of Blue Boar Lane with St. Aldates.¹⁴ No explanation of the move was given in the newspapers, but a building flanking a main street was a financial advantage. Admission to the pit and boxes was gained from St. Aldates via the Bull Inn, leaving the gods to turn into Blue Boar Lane to get to the gallery. *Jackson's Oxford Journal* described the fit-up as 'neat' and judged the performers to be 'good' but criticised the elevation of the orchestra – possibly, as at Windsor, no more than half a dozen violins – which impeded the view of the stage.¹⁵ The Christ Church court continued to be Thornton's base until he made his final appearance there in 1815.

Two events must have unsettled the manager during his tenancy. In 1810 Thornton was faced with a rival, Samuel Russell, an actor of the Haymarket Theatre and the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Employing the services of two artists, Latilla and Smith, he turned the Merton court into another temporary theatre.¹⁶ In London Russell had made a name for himself as Fribble in David Garrick's comedy *Miss in her Teens*, which was later played in Oxford.¹⁷ Other than this, his repertoire was geared to an audience favouring sentimental comedy, with such popular but dated offerings as *The Blind Boy* by James Kenney and Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian*. During his first season Russell had to remonstrate with noisy youths in the gallery; one wonders if this disturbance was instigated by Thornton, for as a young manager he had resorted to extreme measures.¹⁸ Russell made a number of appearances in Oxford until 1815, after which he managed the Brighton theatre.¹⁹

Thornton's high-handed conduct was responsible for the second mishap. In 1815 Russell employed a bevy of stars at his theatre including Master Betty, the child prodigy, Dowton, the comedian, and Edmund Kean, the tragedian who fired the part of Richard III with breath-taking terror. Front of house, he restructured the court into a hippodrome, inviting Makeen and his stud of horse to perform.²⁰ Thornton had made some improvements to the structure of his theatre which a correspondent found 'convenient and commodious', but his own array of performers was less distinguished than Russell's. Miss Booth, a noted entertainer, was ill and unable to appear for some of the season, Munden, a favourite, appeared but briefly, and Dorothy Jordan, then at the end of her double career as child-bearing mistress to the Duke of Clarence and stage ingénue, inappropriately played the young Lady Teazle in *The School for Scandal*.²¹ Emulating Russell, Thornton engaged an equestrian troop which was to appear in *Timour the Tartar*, a horse drama by Matthew Gregory Lewis. The company had experienced the dangers of appearing with the horses in other locations, and at Thornton's theatres, unlike Russell's hippodrome, the steeds cantered across the stage in the wake of the actors. Thornton was presented with an ultimatum: either the

¹³ *Reading Mercury*, 30 September 1799.

¹⁴ *J.O.J.* 25 July 1807.

¹⁵ *ibid.* 8 August 1807; C. Knight, *Passages of a Working Life* (1873), 46.

¹⁶ *J.O.J.* 11 August 1810; *Gentleman's Magazine*, n.s. xxiii (1845), 446.

¹⁷ *J.O.J.* 18 August 1810.

¹⁸ e.g. the smear campaign Thornton launched against Mark Moore, the manager of the theatre at Rugby; M. Moore, *Memoirs and Adventures of Mark Moore* (1795), 122.

¹⁹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, n.s. xxiii (1845), 446.

²⁰ *J.O.J.* 17 and 24 June, 1 and 16 July 1815.

²¹ *ibid.* 17 June, 8, 15 and 29 July, 26 August, 2 and 9 September 1815.

company's wages were to be increased in compensation or the members would refuse to appear with the equestrians. Instantly Thornton sacked his Oxford performers and closed the Reading Theatre, transferring that section to perform in the University city.²²

Thornton paid no more visits to Oxford. Two years later, in 1817, he retired from management and the following year he died in Chelmsford.²³ Over a sixteen-year period he had brought to the city a somewhat conservative repertoire of well-established 18th-century and early 19th-century plays, the majority of Sheridan's works and a selection of those of Shakespeare. He had established and maintained a tradition of guest players, many from the London patent houses, but as Thornton aged so too did his visitors: he neglected the zest of youth which Russell had admired in Kean.

After a break of twelve years the Thornton tradition was revived when Richard Barnett, his son-in-law, returned to the Christ Church court in 1827. Two of Thornton's daughters were performers and married actors. One son-in-law, Arthur Hatton, played for some years at the Haymarket Theatre and, at the instigation of the Duke of York who regarded both Hatton and Thornton highly, managed the theatre at Gibraltar. He was responsible for directing the spectacular productions of the first Oxford season.²⁴ Thornton's other theatrical son-in-law, Richard Barnett, lived a provincial life, appearing frequently with his wife in the touring company. After his father-in-law's death he closed a number of the theatres which were difficult to maintain through the post-war economic depression, holding on to Guildford, Reading, Newbury, Gosport, Ryde and Oxford until the 1840s.²⁵

The years of the interregnum had seen no theatrical activity in Oxford. Instead, equestrian shows at Cooke's Olympic Circus, situated at the western end of the modern Park End Street, flourished.²⁶ Although the Theatre Licensing Act was flouted by companies performing at Abingdon and Bicester, Barnett's appearances in the city were restricted to the long vacation.²⁷ During the opening week of the 1827 season Barnett's patrons must have realised that the conservative repertoire of Thornton was to be continued as they viewed such fare as *The School for Scandal*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Speed the Plough*.²⁸ In the first of these plays the role of Moses was played by an amateur, 'well known in the fashionable world', who also appeared in *The Wags of Windsor*. He was not word-perfect.²⁹

The six annual seasons at the Christ Church court were subject to the usual incidents of theatrical life. An actor from Drury Lane, playing the part of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, was wounded in the duel scene by Tybalt using an officer's sharp-pointed regulation sword; luckily a surgeon, Mr. Cleobury, was in the audience and dressed the cuts.³⁰ Mary Russell Mitford, the Reading novelist and ardent theatre-goer whom Barnett had met during his seasons in that town, had written several plays for

²² *ibid.* 16 and 23 September 1815; *Reading Mercury*, 25 September 1815.

²³ Burial Register, St. Mary's Cathedral Church, Chelmsford, xvi, 67; *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 29 August 1817 and 24 April 1818.

²⁴ *Theatrical Dictionary* (1805), n.p., entry under 'Hatton'; A. Matthews, *Memoirs of Charles Matthews*, i (1838), 240; G.B. Greenwood and A.G. Martine, *Walton on Thames and Weybridge: A Dictionary of Local History* n.d., 60; *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 6 July 1798; *Hampshire Telegraph*, 7 June 1802; Theatre Museum, playbills relating to the Haymarket Theatre, 1803-16.

²⁵ L.T. Rede, *The Road to the Stage* (1827), 9.

²⁶ *J.O.J.* 6, 13, 20, 27 September 1823.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 15 August 1829; H. Lee, *Memoirs of a Manager* (Taunton, 1830), ii, 53.

²⁸ *J.O.J.* 4 August 1827.

²⁹ *ibid.* 1 and 8 September 1827.

³⁰ *ibid.* 22 September 1827.

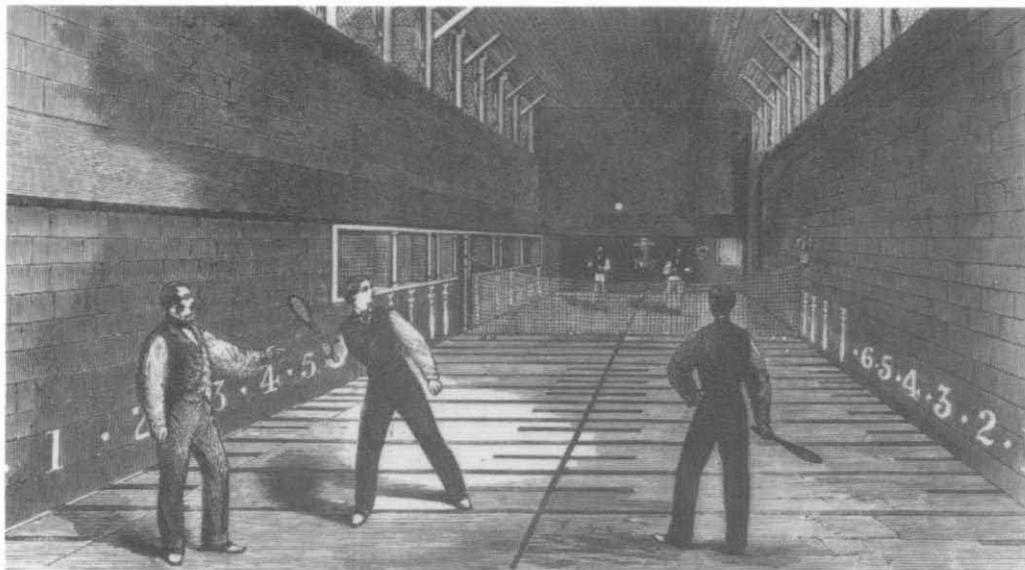


Fig. 1. The interior of the Oriel College tennis-court, from the *Illustrated London News*, November 1859. (Bodl. G.A. Oxon a.6, f.30. Reproduced by permission of the Curators of the Bodleian Library.)

Drury Lane, and two of these, *Rienzi* and *Julian*, were given at Oxford with the author attending a showing of the latter.³¹ Perhaps to refute the charge that the theatre had a degenerative effect on spectators, Barnett ended one season with an address on the moral rectitude of the drama, a theme which Mitford took up in a prologue to *Hamlet* which opened the 1831 season:

Hamlet the Dane! oh! but to follow well
The lessons which he gives were to excel
In our great art – the very rules we tell
Might we but practice, little were our need
For your indulgence even now we plead:
Yet plead we must, though hopefully, for here
In this fair circle, small our cause of fear;
Kind were ye ever! and our greeting blends
Warm thanks to past with hope of future friends.³²

Barnett was beset by difficulties in 1833. His attempt to manage the prestigious Theatre Royal at Bath proved to be abortive and his later transfer from the Christ Church court to that of St. Mary Hall next to Oriel College (Fig. 1) was, according to a prologue written by one of the Oxford citizens, not a willing move.³³ A couple of stanzas from the poem 'Oxford in Vacation' contain brief descriptions of some of the performers of the 1833 season at the new base:

Miss Crawford's black hair and bright eye
Are indeed most remarkably pretty,

³¹ *ibid.* 25 July 1829, 10, 17 and 24 September 1831.

³² *ibid.* 6 October 1827 and 16 July 1831.

³³ *ibid.* 6 July 1833; B.S. Penley, *The Bath Stage* (1892), 132; Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the City of Oxford* (1939), 168.

I've a sympathy quite with her sigh –
 Or smile – when her mood's to be witty:
 It does one quite good in the dance
 Miss Lidia's dear person to ogle;
 And Miss Western's sweet sparklers enhance
 Her archness when acting some low girl.

Mr Ball is excessively funny,
 Nor less so are Gattie and Wyatt;
 They've an Irishman worth any money,
 And Stuart, one may actually sigh at . . .³⁴

Barnett gave Oxford its first purpose-built theatre in 1836 when he abandoned St. Mary Hall. Situated in Red Lion Yard, the new playhouse was approached by way of Magdalen Street for the boxes and George Lane for the capacious pit. Richard Stevens' fruiterer's shop in Magdalen Street doubled as a ticket booth. In a spirit of celebration the manager commissioned a drop curtain depicting classical buildings to be added to the stock of scenery. One of the advantages of the building was the proximity of each part of the house to the stage.³⁵ This compact building served Barnett as his Oxford base for the remaining years of his professional life. With the manager's retirement in the 1840s the Thornton-Barnett company faded from the theatrical scene.

Although this account of a family management ends here, the subsequent re-use of established buildings and their expansion into new venues deserves a mention. In 1857 Hooper, the manager of the Theatre Royal at Cambridge, incorrectly styling himself the manager also of the Olympic Theatre, off the Strand, reopened for a short period the court at St. Mary Hall, which had been refurbished by a local builder.³⁶ He then transferred to the Star Hotel, subsequently the Clarendon, in Cornmarket Street, within which he set up the Theatre Royal complete with the usual three tiers of seating to which a lower gallery was added after the first season.³⁷ By 1864 the company had moved to the Town Hall. In that year Hooper died and his widow attempted unsuccessfully to keep the players going.³⁸ Barnett's building in Red Lion Yard, renamed the Victoria Theatre, reopened in 1866 with, yet again, *The School for Scandal* in the first week.³⁹ During term the theatre served as a music hall where the prevailing low tone and roughness of the 'glorified barn' made a police presence sometimes necessary.⁴⁰ Ironically, in vacations the building became the home of touring companies, amongst which was that of Frank Benson presenting the plays of Shakespeare, Farquhar and Sheridan.⁴¹ The opening of the New Theatre on the site of the present Apollo, in 1886, the year in which Henry Irving visited the city to discourse on drama, brought not only respectability but also marked the beginning of the university's acceptance of legitimate professional theatre in Oxford.

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³⁴ *J.O.J.* 3 August 1833.

³⁵ *ibid.* 25 June, 2 and 9 July 1836.

³⁶ *ibid.* 1 and 8 August 1857; P. Hartnoll, *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (1972), 392.

³⁷ Bodl. GA Oxon b. 93: Volume of Playbills, August 1859.

³⁸ *ibid.* August 1864 and August 1865.

³⁹ Bodl. G.A. Oxon 4 373 b. 93: Volume of Theatre Royal Playbills, 1859–93, 19 December 1866.

⁴⁰ A. Mackinnon, *The Oxford Amateurs* (1910), vii; J.G. Adderley, 'The Fight for the Drama at Oxford', *Church Reformer*, vi (1887), 210.

⁴¹ J.G. Adderley, *The Fight for the Drama at Oxford* (Oxford, 1888), pp. ix, x and 1; 'Foras', 'Notes on Playing Acting in Oxford', *Oxford Magazine*, i (1883), 335.