

## TIMELINE

### THE OLD VIC

#### The first 100 years

<b>1818&gt; Conception &amp; Opening</b>	<p>The Royal Coburg Theatre was opened on Whit Monday 1818, just under a year after the formal inauguration of Waterloo Bridge which took place on the second anniversary of the battle.</p> <p>Since there were not enough local playgoers, its prime role was to lure across the Thames North Bank folk looking for entertainment. This was a long-established tradition in London. The City of London had, since medieval times, legislated for entertainment of all kinds to take place across the river to minimise the risk of fire, plague and riot.</p> <p>The Coburg's architect was Rudolf Cabanel whose portfolio included the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. The Coburg had three tiers above the pit and two boxes either side of the stage. Front of house was the Grand Marine Saloon and a Grand Looking-Glass Curtain – an ornamental folly made of 63 plates of glass set in a gilt frame. Because of its weight (5 tons), it endangered the roof. It remained in place for only a few years before being dismantled and re-used around the theatre, both front and back of house.</p> <p>The Coburg had a 'burletta' licence; like most houses, it was forbidden to present plays and musical works in their entirety. 'Legitimate' work was (until 1843) restricted to the Royal Patent theatres – Covent Garden, Drury Lane and, in the summer, the Haymarket. The Coburg, like most houses, saw this more as a challenge than a restriction. Technically, Lambeth was outside the Lord Chamberlain's building licence, though not beyond the reach of his role as licenser of plays.</p> <p>The theatre was named after Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld. He married the much-loved Princess Charlotte of Wales, the heir to the British throne who represented the hopes for a positive future after a long period of uncertainty. They married in 1816 but she died, aged 21, in childbirth in November 1817. He returned to the continent and later became King of the Belgians.</p> <p>Within a few years, it was clear that the bridge was not delivering the hoped-for North Bank customers. The theatre had to appeal to its local working class audience. In 1818 a Gallery ticket cost one shilling, in line with other similar theatres. By the mid 1830s, the price had dropped to 2d, a sixth of the previous price.</p>
<b>1820s&gt;70s Downhill</b>	<p>In 1833, the theatre was renamed after Princess Victoria, aged 14 and heir to the throne. She visited the theatre only once, in 1833, the only Royal contact before Emma Cons took charge in 1880.</p> <p>In the '20s and '30s, you might have enjoyed some of the greatest names in British entertainment at the Vic – Phelps, Macready, Kean, Grimaldi, Paganini. But by the '40s, critics were describing it as 'the most degraded (theatre) in London'. In his 1850 novel <i>Alton Locke</i>, Charles Kingsley describes an audience drawn from gin-palaces and thieves' cellars, child pick-pockets 'vomiting forth slang, filth and blasphemy' and calls it a licensed pit of darkness.</p> <p>In the late 1870s, George Augustus Sala, a leading journalist, describing the area, wrote of 'the howling of beaten children and kicked dogs, the yells of ballad-singers...and reciters of sham murders and elopements; the bawling recitations of professional denunciators of the Queen, the Royal Family and the Ministry; ...the fumes of the vilest tobacco, of stale corduroy suits, of oilskin caps, mildewed umbrellas, of decaying vegetables, of escaping gas, of deceased cats, of ancient fish, of dubious mutton pies and of unwashed, sodden, unkempt, reckless humanity... The New Cut is one of the most unpleasant samples of London that you could offer to a foreigner'. The police reported that, on a Saturday night, there could be 40 arrests inside and around the theatre.</p> <p>At this time, the gallery held over 1000 people, all hot, sweaty and thirsty. They used a handkerchief rope to haul up stone bottles of beer from the pit. But however rowdy they were before curtain-up, they fell silent for the show. The Vic specialised in 'fearful fights',</p>

	<p>'sensational scenes', 'final explosions' and 'good murder' – the best melodrama around although it was important that, in the end, virtue triumphed and vice was punished.</p> <p>But around 1870, the Vic was struggling to attract a regular audience against the challenge of the music halls. There were eight within a few minutes' walk of the Vic as well as the 'penny gaffs' springing up freely. The Vic was put up for auction in '71 and again in '74, both times failing to find a buyer, before closing in 1880.</p>
<b>1880&gt; The Coffee Music Hall Company</b>	<p>'To keep men happy helps to keep men good, and that benefits all, whether rich or poor' – the declaration of the Council of the Coffee Music Hall Company. Why the Vic? 1) it was a cheap venue, 2) it was in one of the poorest areas of London, where alcohol encouraged violence to women and children, 3) it was close to Surrey Lodge, Emma Cons' social housing project that represented her mission to give working people the chance to improve their lot themselves.</p> <p>Emma Cons leased the theatre for 18 years at about £1000 pa. Then £3000 was raised to alter and redecorate. The Vic was emptied of sackloads of heads and tails of shrimps, periwinkle shells, nut shells and dried orange peel, dug out of the pit.</p> <p>On Boxing Day '80 the Royal Victoria Coffee and Music Hall was opened. The word 'theatre' was avoided for almost 40 years because of its unsavoury connections. There were no spirits, beer or prostitutes but you could buy tea, coffee and sandwiches. Present in one of the boxes on opening night (the one that later became 'her' box) was the 6 year old Lilian Baylis, Emma Cons' niece.</p>
<b>1881&gt; Opened &amp; re - opened for business</b>	<p>While business on Saturday evening was good, Emma Cons had to face the rest of the week without the benefit of bar receipts. She introduced concerts on Thursdays, persuading like-minded professionals to perform for free or at a discounted rate alongside amateurs. Fridays offered temperance meetings and a magic lantern show. Saturday afternoons were variety shows suitable for children and on Sundays a divine service.</p> <p>The Illustrated London News, among others, remarked on the good manners and good nature of the Vic audience. But that alone was not enough to balance the budget. The Vic held 2,300 (with room for another 500 for a Saturday-night squeeze). But admission charges were minimal – 800 gallery places at 2d, 500 in the pit at 3d and 120 stalls at 1/- . On Wednesday and Friday, gallery places were 1d. Running costs (including gas and rent) were £6 a night.</p> <p>After 8 months, the Vic closed with a deficit of £2800. Emma Cons had to fight hard to persuade investors that the project was worthwhile and her rich friends contributed appropriately.</p> <p>In October '81, the Vic reopened with a new manager, William Poel. He was already experimenting with Shakespeare production. Earlier in '81, he had produced a First Folio Hamlet (lasting only 2 hours) with no scenery. But the Vic could offer him no opportunity to pursue this as it still had no theatre licence. When he left 2 years later, he was praised for raising the tone of the entertainment while lowering costs.</p>
<b>1882&gt; Contacts for the future</b>	<p>An important ally was Lady Frederick Cavendish. After her husband was murdered in Phoenix Park, Dublin in 1882, 'Lady Fred' made social work her life's focus. She was not without connections:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Her father was Lord Lyttelton</li> <li>• Her brothers included a general, an admiral, a bishop, a viscount, a headmaster of Eton</li> <li>• Her father-in-law was the seventh Duke of Devonshire</li> <li>• Her brother-in-law was the eighth Duke of Devonshire</li> <li>• Her brother-in-law was Bishop Talbot (one of Lilian Baylis' heroes)</li> <li>• Her uncles included Gladstone, the Earl of Carlisle &amp; the Duke of Sutherland</li> <li>• Her nephew Alfred Lyttelton, his wife Edith and their son Lord Chandos played a major part in the campaign for a National Theatre</li> <li>• She was related to the Earls of Liverpool and Antrim, Archbishop Temple, the Duchess of Westminster and Lord Hampden (who was also the Chairman of Emma Cons' South London Dwellings Company)</li> <li>• She was Maid of Honour to Queen Victoria and later to Queen Alexandra</li> </ul> <p>Lady Fred was able to encourage royal visits, lending respectability to the Vic following its years of dubious reputation. Queen Victoria's niece, Princess Frederica of Hanover visited twice before Christmas '81. In the New Year, the Prince and Princess of Wales came for an</p>

	Irish Night.
<b>1882&gt; What's On</b>	<p>Though there were occasional outbreaks of rowdiness, the Vic lived up to its slogan of 'The People's Hall, The People's Entertainments, The People's Prices'. Alongside variety evenings with acrobats and animal acts, you might find 'A Grand Shakespeare Night' offering 'songs, glees and scenes selected from Shakespeare's plays' including scenes from acts 3 &amp; 5 of <i>Othello</i>. Occasionally there was a Mozart evening, with the 'ladies and gentlemen of the Royal Academy of Music' singing act 1 of <i>Così fan tutte</i>, in costume and in English. There was also an enthusiastic reception for the <i>Messiah</i>. Poel booked the band of the Life Guards, for £20, to perform on stage – 'the first appearance of any military band on a variety stage'.</p> <p>In '83, Emma Cons introduced a weekly Tuesday evening science lecture. These were well attended but, like the temperance meetings, contributed little to the budget.</p>
<b>1884 The Royal Victoria Hall</b>	<p>By '84 the Vic was facing financial collapse again. Emma Cons called on the support of Samuel Morley, one of the greatest philanthropists of that time. He was a millionaire textile manufacturer, a Liberal MP, a Non-conformist and introduced the first major pension scheme in British industry. He opposed smoking and drinking and was not over-keen on 'worldly amusements', including the theatre. He was, however, impressed by reports of the Vic's 'reformed' audience and to his surprise, even enjoyed a few evenings there.</p> <p>He joined the committee, donated (on condition that the 'improving works' continued) and encouraged others to donate so that Emma could buy the theatre's lease for £3000. A new council was set up with Princess Christian as Patroness and the Duke of Westminster as President. The building became known as The Royal Victoria Hall (&amp; Coffee Tavern). The parenthesis was soon dropped and The Coffee Music Hall Co. ceased to exist.</p>
<b>1888&gt; Buying the freehold</b>	<p>In '88, the Charity Commissioners agreed to give the Vic £1000 pa on condition that the trustees bought the freehold. They had 4 months to raise £17,000.</p> <p>Emma Cons quoted a Japanese proverb 'there is nothing that unites the highest and lowest so much as community of entertainment' and her supporters rallied behind the belief that all classes should have access to 'pure' entertainment. Lord Mount Temple, on the extreme poverty in the Waterloo area, said 'There are 9000 people not wealthy enough to keep a servant'.</p> <p>By the skin of its teeth, the Council raised the money in time and in '91 the freehold was formally vested in the Charity Commissioners. The Royal Victoria Hall Foundation included representatives from the City Parochial Foundation, the University of London, the Royal Academy of Music, the Royal College of Music, the London County Council and the Borough Road Polytechnic Institute. The Vic was officially dedicated to the benefit and enjoyment of the people forever'.</p>
<b>1884&gt; Morley College</b>	<p>In the last few years of his life, Samuel Morley contributed, not just financial but also moral support to all aspects of Emma Con's work.</p> <p>Following the introduction of the Tuesday evening science lectures, a group of young men asked if they could be extended further. In '84, Emma put her friend Caroline Martineau in charge and within a year there were 60 regular students. The classes took place in the saloon and backstage in the dressing rooms.</p> <p>The range of subjects and the number of students increased quickly and in '89, the educational activities at the Vic were given under the name of the Morley Memorial College. The first students proudly added the letters OVS (Old Vic Student) after their names. Morley College took its place in a line of venues offering evening classes – the Mechanics' Institute, the Working Men's College and the Polytechnic, opened in Regent St in '82. But the difference was that Morley admitted women on an equal basis. Its first and second heads were women and at least three of its council members had to be women. No other similar educational institute included women in this way. The key female players involved in its development were Emma Cons, Ethel Everest, Caroline and Constance Martineau and Lady Frederick Cavendish.</p> <p>The college functioned under the stage, in dressing rooms, in scene-docks – wherever space could be found. As well as classes and lectures, it offered opportunities for music, fitness and general societies and students could buy half-price tickets for Vic performances Monday – Friday.</p>
<b>1886&gt; Performing</b>	<p>In '86 J Arnold Cave brought a case against the Vic for staging a pantomime. He had been the manager there for 10 years before Emma Cons took over and was now running the</p>

<b>practice</b>	<p>Elephant and Castle Theatre. He was supported by Bernard Isaacson, a former music director at the Vic. The Vic's fine was 12/6 plus agreed expenses. Emma Cons could have applied to the Lord Chamberlain for a full theatrical licence but she would have to make structural changes (which she couldn't afford) and also apply a smoking ban.</p> <p>So the Vic continued to offer dramatic readings, recitals and ballad concerts but, from '89, added fortnightly concerts of opera excerpts, sung in English. These were performed by guest singers in front of the curtain which was occasionally raised to reveal an appropriate tableau. Participants in these had to remain completely still, just as those at the Windmill Theatre did many years later.</p>
<b>1897&gt; The arrival of Lilian Baylis</b>	<p>Emma Cons' workload was considerable so from '94 she was helped by an acting manager, Miss Phillips. When she left in '97, Emma's niece Lilian Baylis returned from South Africa to convalesce in London. In exchange for accommodation with her aunt, Lilian worked with her at the Vic.</p> <p>From childhood, Lilian had visited the Vic, helping her aunt with her work, entertaining residents of the Surrey Lodge estate, organising meetings and fundraising events. Aunt and niece were very close and Lilian's presence was a great strength. She was persuaded to stay for a year to manage the Vic. She was initially reluctant; in South Africa she earned between £50 - £80 per month while in London Emma provided her board and lodging and paid £1 a week.</p> <p>She became the acting manager at the Vic in '98 and her input was comprehensive. She organized all the musical entertainments, lectures, meetings and variety bills; she dealt with the Executive Committee, the staff, the builders, the police, the neighbouring pubs and businesses; she patrolled the audience checking for alcohol and lewd behaviour; she sold programmes and helped with costumes; she organised entertainments for local children on Tuesday afternoons; she later reported that she also scrubbed the stage.</p> <p>In 1901, Lilian's salary was increased to £3 per week and then to £175 pa in 1905 though she insisted that the decision could be reversed if the Vic losses increased.</p>
<b>1894&gt; Making improvements</b>	<p>Emma Cons had constant battles with the London County Council about the Vic's structural condition and maintenance. She always insisted that the Vic was a 'special case', had no way of paying for repairs, etc but the officers continued to put her under pressure. One such case involved the quick-change dressing rooms at the side of the stage. These were made in lath-and-plaster and so were a fire hazard. Emma insisted that nothing had been said when she took over the Vic and nothing had changed since then. Then she protested that surely the LCC wasn't condoning the immorality of both sexes dressing in public. The officers said the dressing rooms had to be rebuilt in brick. Far too expensive! In the end, after further protests, they were rebuilt in corrugated iron.</p> <p>But the LCC architects and fire officers insisted on full surveys and in 1904, the Vic was presented with 72 recommendations concerning safety, structure and sanitation. These would cost only £200 but Emma insisted on a very public fund-raising campaign so show that running up debts in the Vic's name was against her policy.</p> <p>She also fought tooth and nail against the installation of a telephone in case of fire. The LCC, in 1905, insisted that every theatre and hall had to have one and threatened to refuse her licence renewal. Once the renewal went through, Emma refused to install the phone, insisting that the Vic couldn't afford the £4 10s annual rental cost and, anyway, since the fire station was just across the road, it would be quicker to shout. She won her case.</p>
<b>1905&gt; the audience</b>	<p>Both staff and audience were 'family' at the Vic. In 1909, a letter in <i>Encore</i>, recorded that the 14 members of staff had, between them, 245 years of service.</p> <p>While it was forbidden to bring alcohol into the hall, food was allowed. So fish and chips, jellied eels, meat pies were brought in. The Vic's refreshment room – Pearce and Plenty – sold a boiled meat pudding (known as a 'baby's head') with two veg. A woman sold pigs' trotters at a ½d each outside the gallery entrance and local cookshop sold baked potatoes. Though alcohol was forbidden inside the hall, local pubs were open from 7.30am till midnight. The audiences were generally well-behaved but food remnants were often thrown into the pit from gallery.</p> <p>About one in four Londoners died on public charity and in Lambeth poverty was clear. It was usual for clothes and boots to be taken to the pawnbrokers on Mondays and to be redeemed</p>

	<p>on Saturdays. Since their regular audience could contribute very little to the Vic's income, Lilian often asked other supporters for cast-off pieces of furniture or evening dresses for use on stage or backstage.</p>
<b>Early 1900s&gt; Opera</b>	<p>Opera was a great passion for Lilian Baylis and in Britain in general. Six or seven companies toured regularly in 1909. Lilian continued to offer old favourites like <i>The Bohemian Girl</i> but introduced Wagner from 1904, with <i>Tannhäuser</i>, and <i>Lohengrin</i>, in 1906. They still had to be performed as 'recitals'. Although Lilian was pushing the Executive Committee to apply for a full licence, they refused. Tyrone Guthrie reported later that she asked for permission to set up an opera company but was refused because they considered it 'not merely impractical but exceedingly sinful'.</p> <p>There was little 'direction' in these recitals. The singers wore their own costumes, had little or no rehearsal so essentially they arranged themselves as best they could on stage and sang.</p>
<b>1901&gt; Cinema</b>	<p>In 1901, Lilian experimented with showing early 'animated picture' shorts, well ahead of the first cinema opening in London. By 1903, there was a film shown every week, as part of a mixed bill but in the 1904-5 season, films had their own regular slot; first every 3<sup>rd</sup> Monday, then later every Monday. In the 1907-8 season, they made a profit of £250. But by 1909 attendance was in decline as other Animated Picture Halls opened in area.</p>
<b>1905&gt; Concerts</b>	<p>In 1905, Lilian began symphony concerts. They were costly to put on and 2 years later, when they were losing a large amount of money, she tried to abandon them. But Emma Cons insisted they remained. Lilian added concerts by military bands. So in April-May 1910, the Band of the Coldstream Guards joined singers in a concert made up of a costume recital of <i>Fra Diavolo</i>, a ballad concert <i>Carmen</i>, music from the military band, a ballad concert <i>Il Trovatore</i> and <i>Faust</i>.</p> <p>Military bands didn't save the day, Lilian engaged Charles Corri as musical director. He remained there for 30 years, coming from a dynasty of dancers, musicians and composers, originally from Italy, several of whom had performed at the Vic. One of his great skills was to re-score large pieces for 15 – 18 players without losing the heart of the work. He built up a core of good musicians who required minimal rehearsal time. He often disagreed with Lilian Baylis but they had great respect for each other and his input was important for the Vic's future success.</p>
<b>1910&gt; Financial problems</b>	<p>Despite attracting Royal visits in 1910, the Vic was in serious financial trouble. Films and opera were successful but concerts and variety were not. Because they paid very little, many of the variety stars would not perform at the Vic, or would drop out at the last minute if they received a better offer. Local boy, a young Charlie Chaplin, twice applied to Emma Cons for work but as he didn't include a stamped, addressed envelope, he didn't receive a reply (her golden rule).</p> <p>Further structural and decorational work was ordered by the LCC, which meant that the capital had been eaten away. This, as well the drop in ticket sales, meant that the Vic's finances were in a sorry state. Emma and the Committee refused some of Lilian's requests for change and things looked bleak.</p>
<b>1912 The end of an era</b>	<p>On 24<sup>th</sup> July 1912, after a short illness, Emma Cons died. She was 74 years old. Lilian was inundated with letters of sympathy from the many whose lives Emma had touched, not just at the Vic but through all her other work.</p> <p>But now, though still answerable to the Committee, Lilian was able to make the changes she required. One of her first changes was to obtain a full theatrical licence. Now the Vic could stage operas and plays in full, though the Lord Chamberlain was warned by the LCC that the building was suitable only for occasional full length productions. There was only £15 in the bank in Spring 1913 but nothing was going to hold Lilian Baylis back. Her time had come.</p>

For further information:

*Lilian Baylis, The Lady of the Old Vic*. Richard Findlater. Published Allen Lane, 1975

*Lilian Baylis, A Biography*. Elizabeth Schafer. University of Hertfordshire Press, 2006

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