

Brecon Theatre and Charity

by Jayne Gold*

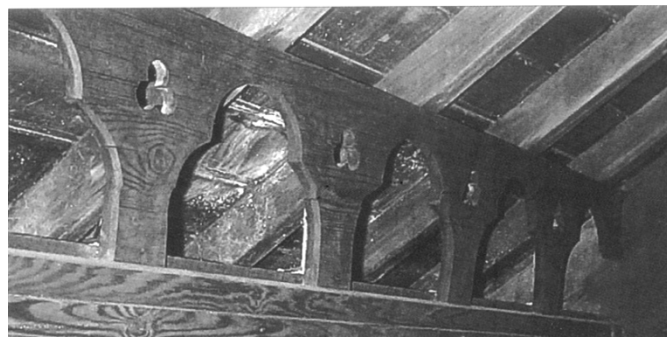


Peace Garden, The Watton, in 2020 showing the buildings that largely replaced Brecon Theatre

There has been a connection between theatre and charity since at least the middle of the 18th century and Brecon's theatre scene is no exception. Whereas the 1737 Licensing Act placed London Theatres under the control of the Lord Chamberlain, theatre in the provincial towns such as Brecon was left to the discretion of the local justices. One way of maintaining the goodwill of the authorities was for theatre managers to produce plays for charity thus establishing a tradition of theatre philanthropy. After opening its doors in 1787, Brecon Theatre, the first purpose-built theatre in the town

(in 1856 to become known as Theatre Royal Brecon), hosted various performances from which the takings were donated to charity.

A number of these events, involving both national and local charitable causes, are highlighted in this article. The main sources for my research are Sister Bonaventure's two published articles on the theatre in Brecon (*Brycheiniog* vol. 25 1993 and vol. 39 2007) as well as her wonderful archive of notes, press cuttings, playbills and other material.



Decorative wooden frieze remaining from the theatre (Plate 3 in Sister Bonaventure's 2007 paper)

The earliest example of a link between Brecon Theatre and charity that I have come across is a 1793 performance at Brecon Theatre of *The Dramatist* and *The Irish Widow* under the management of John Boles Watson. As quoted in the Gloucester Journal, Monday 25th March 1793:

"The entire receipts of this night's performance will be remitted to the Crown and Anchor Tavern, London, towards increasing the fund of the Society for the Relief of Widows and Children of those brave seamen and soldiers, who fall in the defence of the of their country."

War with France had broken out only the previous month so this charitable cause would no doubt be considered worthwhile and timely. The performance coincided with Assize week, presumably to attract more audiences from the gentry.

Brecon Theatre’s connection with the Crown and Anchor Tavern in London highlights its links to prestigious spheres of influence. Located in London’s bustling business centre on the Strand, the tavern was an influential meeting place for political and scientific debate. It had a special status as the headquarters and favoured dining establishment of radical figures like Charles James Fox. Christina Parolin’s (2005) book *Radical Spaces: Venues of popular politics in London, 1790-c1845* offers an intriguing insight into the activities of those who frequented the tavern.



The classical façade of the Crown and Anchor, London. At the rear was a grand assembly room capable of seating 2000 people. (Thomas H. Shepherd)

In 1822 Charles Crisp became manager of Brecon Theatre and, as reported in *The Cambrian* on 31st May, vowed to donate profits of one night’s performance “to the poor of Brecon.” This is a glimpse into the way in which Brecon’s theatre scene impacted the wider demographics of local society (i.e. not only theatre-frequentering gentry) and is an interesting area for further exploration.

Later, in 1828, in an evening of performances for King George IV’s birthday, “celebrated joyfully, with peals of bells, by a large party of respectable inhabitants”, receipts for the night were donated “for the benefit of the sufferers by the late catastrophe at the Brunswick Theatre” (*The Cambrian*, 26th April 1828). Located near what is now Wilton’s Music Hall in East London, Brunswick Theatre had only been open for three days when in the middle of a rehearsal, the theatre collapsed killing at least ten.

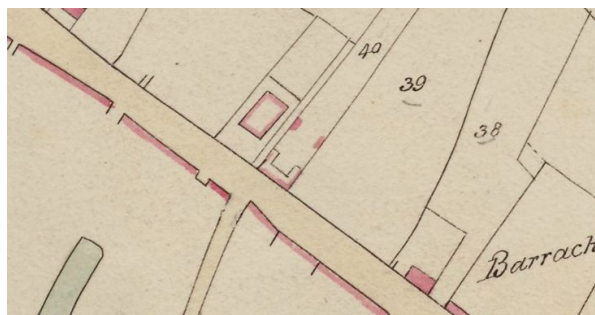


The Falling of the New Brunswick theatre

The benefit night in aid of victims of this tragedy again highlights Brecon Theatre’s links to London and the London theatre scene.



The Infirmary (a pink-edged rectangle set back from the Watton) on the 1839 tithe map.



By 1832, John Boles Watson Junior had taken over the management of Brecon Theatre. He donated the takings from a February performance of George Colman's play *John Bull* and James Kenney's *An Illustrious Stranger* to the—about to be established—Brecknock Infirmary (The Cambrian, 11th February 1832). The Infirmary was located on the northern side of the Watton and served the town until the opening of Brecon War Memorial Hospital in 1928. The patron for these performances was

John Lloyd Watkins of Pennoyre, soon to be elected Liberal MP for Brecon.

The importance of this charitable event is emphasised in a rhyming Prologue written by John Lloyd and delivered by a Mrs Granby who was part of the acting company. The John Lloyd here is almost certainly John Rees Lloyd (1797-1875), the son of Captain John Lloyd who founded the family fortunes while in the employment of the East India Company. Ken Jones, who is the authority on the history of the family, has given him the soubriquet of 'John Lloyd, the poet' in recognition of the volume of English and Latin poems he published in 1847. The Prologue was

The following Prologue, written by John Lloyd, Esq. was recited before the Play for the benefit of the Infirmary at the Theatre, Brecon, on Friday last, by Mrs. Granby:—

" Pit, gallery, full, nay overflowing quite !"
This is indeed a welcome scene to night :
To see his audience rang'd in countless rows
Is the first pleasure which an actor knows ;
No scene on *earth* for him such beauty spreads,
He thinks no *sea view* like a *sea of heads*.
But whence this pleasing change ? no showman's train
Has brought us lions fresh from Drury-lane ;
No pond'rous elephant to walk the stage,
Or tiger train'd to *act* without a cage ;
Our playbill boasts to night no stranger's name,
Down to the prompter *we* are all the same :
Perhaps the Prologue helps the house to fill,
And curious critics crowd to shew *their* skill.
No—'tis a feeling far more pure and bright,
An holier talisman that works to night ;
'Tis Charity, whose heav'n directed power
Presides triumphant o'er this scene and hour,
With mild attraction charms each sex and age,
And guides at once, and consecrates the stage ;
Yes, from this source the main'd, the blind, shall gain
Relief from wretchedness, and ease from pain ;
Arts' generous sours unbidden tend the poor,
And strive to comfort those they may not cure.

Ev'n now methinks before these gladden'd eyes,
On Usk's fair banks th' Asylum seems to rise,
And Fancy paints returning Health once more
Resume her walk before its sunny door,
Sees the glad cripple throw his crutch away,
And eyes long darken'd hail the light of day :
Bless'd be the generous thought, the glorious plan,
In bonds of mercy linking man to man,
Thrice bless'd, *who first* its fair foundation laid,
And gave unask'd his voluntary aid.*

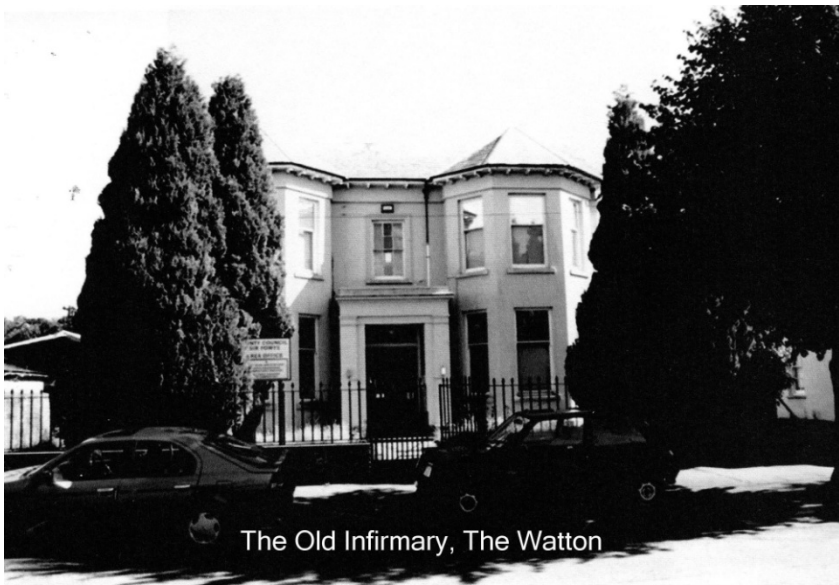
Pleas'd with my theme I fain would longer stay,
But time waves on, and you expect the Play.
Kind friends, adieu ! may yours be every bliss,
I only ask—a benefit like *this*.

* In allusion to Mr. Watkins's munificent donation.

published in *The Cambrian* on 18th February 1832 and glorifies and celebrates the process of charitable giving;

*"Tis charity, whose heav'n directed power
Presides triumphant in this scene and hour"*

One can imagine a modern-day star-studded charity event having similar levels of praise for "*Arts' generous sons (sic)*", although one would hope this gendered language would be eschewed in recognition of the women who have always been so key to these events. Incidentally, my supervisor at Bristol University, Dr Catherine Hindson has written a (2016) book on this subject entitled *London's West End Actresses and the Origins of Celebrity Charity, 1880-1920*.



A late photograph of the Infirmary. The porch and bay windows were not present on the original building. See *Brecon Past and Present* by Robert Eckley for a recent view of the site.

Later, in 1839, with the newly-refurbished Brecon Theatre now under the management of W. H. Maddocks, more takings were donated to "Brecon County and Borough Infirmary" (*The Silurian*, 9th February 1839). However, Maddocks took less than £2 in the house and though he would have struggled to afford it, he made the amount up to £5 (Price, C, *The English Theatre in Wales*, 1948,

page 174). This less than successful season ended in March that year.

The last recorded season at Theatre Royal Brecon was in 1870 after which the theatre closed. In the *Brecon County Times* for Saturday 25th June 1870, I have discovered a notice for an amateur charity performance which took place at around the same time as the professional season ended, and once again it was in aid of the infirmary. I am yet to find out anything about this amateur group but it is interesting to see that Brecon Little Theatre and Westenders of today have their antecedents well back in history.

*Jayne Gold is the holder of the Sister Bonaventure Theatre Studentship in the Department of Theatre at Bristol University. This studentship is funded under a gift agreement between the University and the Brecknock Society and Museum Friends; one third of the sum coming from The Ursuline Sisters, the Order to which Sister Bonaventure Kelleher belonged.