

# London Theaters in the 16th Century

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## Commercial Theaters

Before the building of theaters specifically designed for theatrical performances, professional acting companies performed in inn yards or other suitable buildings. *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, for instance, was performed by the Queen's Men at the Bull Inn (on/before 1588). The first theater erected specifically for the purpose of performing plays was The Theatre, built by James Burbage in 1576 (see below).

**Blackfriars Theater:** Part of a medieval monastery, Blackfriars Priory. Unlike other theaters, Blackfriars Theater had a roof. Its admission fees were high, and audiences wealthier, more socially prominent and better educated than the average playgoer. Smaller than other theaters, with a candle-lit stage, Blackfriars was considered a "private" theater.

**Affiliations:** Combined Children of the Chapel/Paul's Children (early 1580's-1584), led by Henry Evans (assisted by Edward De Vere, Earl of Oxford) with plays by the gifted John Lyly performed at Blackfriars and at Court; James Burbage and his sons held the lease from 1584; Children of the Chapel (1600-09); King's Men (1609-)

**Curtain Theater (1577):** Second London playhouse, probably built by Henry Laneman. Round or multi-sided three-story building, located in Shoreditch near The Theatre near the neighborhood of Curtain Close. Last mentioned in 1627.

**Affiliations:** Strange's Men (1590-92); Lord Chamberlain's Men (1597-98). Queen's Men (1603-1609).

**Fortune Theatre (1600):** Built in a northern London suburb by Philip Henslowe and William Alleyn. Built to rival the Globe and in the same general manner. A statue of the Goddess of Fortune presided over the entrance. Burned down in 1621, rebuilt. Destroyed around 1656.

**Affiliations:** Admiral's Men (1600), succeeded by Prince Henry's Men.

**Globe Theatre (1599):** Southwark Theatre, reassembled by Cuthbert Burbage when the Theatre (see below) lost the lease of land for that building (see below). Affiliated with Lord Chamberlain's Men. The lease was held by Cuthbert and Richard Burbage (sharing in 1/2 of the building) and company shareholders

John Heminge, Will Kemp, Augustine Phillips, Thomas Pope, and William Shakespeare (sharing the other half).

The Globe was a roughly cylindrical 3-story timber building, each floor containing open galleries with seats. The galleries extended around most of the circle, the stage built out into the center from the remainder of the circle. Behind the stage were dressing rooms, storage, other functional areas. Above the thatched roof rose a tower, from which flags were flown and trumpets sounded to announce a production. A late account states that on the Globe's facade was a painted sign depicting Hercules supporting the planet Earth. This sign may have been alluded to in Hamlet (II.2.358), where the children's companies are said to have triumphed over 'Hercules and his load too.'

In 1613 the thatched roof caught on fire, and the Globe burned to the ground. Rebuilt in the same year, it was torn down in 1644, two years after the Puritan government closed the theaters. A new Globe Theatre opened in 1991, its director Mark Rylance, a major British anti-Stratfordian in the authorship controversy.

Rose Theatre (1587): The first theater south of the River Thames, built by Philip Henslowe of timber and plaster on a brick foundation. Probably torn down around 1606.

**Affiliations:** Strange's Men (after 1592); Sussex's Men (1593), briefly until closed by plague epidemic; Queen's Men and Sussex's Men (spring, 1594); Admiral's Men (spring 1594-1600); Pembroke's Men (1600); Worcester's Men (1602-03).

Swan Theatre (1595): Built by Samuel Langley, a man apparently with both political and underworld affiliations. A foreign visitor described a circular building with three stories of seats, each containing three rows, overlooking an unroofed central area into which a stage thrusts. The stage was half covered by a canopy extending from the rear wall and supported by massive columns on stage. Two doors in the back wall of the stage, with box seats above the doors. At the top of the rear structure a roofed hut, from which a flag flies and trumpets blow, to announce that a play is scheduled. Langley had trouble with obtaining a license and with bookings, presumably because of his unsavory reputation and opposition from political rivals.

The only play to known have been performed was the ill fated *Isle of Dogs* by Thomas Nashe (see (Pembroke's Men, above), a political fiasco that resulted in closing of all the theaters. When the theaters were reopened, Langley had difficulty in recruiting other companies. After Langley's death (1601) the theater was sold. By 1632 it had fallen into decay.

The first known mention of a William Shakespeare's connection to London arises in connection with Langley's feud with William Gardiner, a judge and real estate speculator with a history of criminal activity. In 1596 Langley sought court protection against Gardiner and his stepson William Wayte; and Wayte then sought the same protection against Langley, William Shakespeare, and two women named without a courtesy title, seemingly of rather low character. Discovered by Leslie Hotson, the record is a curiosity: placing Shakespeare with the wrong person at the wrong theater at the wrong time; although it does connect him to real estate speculation, an activity that was to mark his financial activities to the end of his days in Stratford.

**The Theatre (1576):** First London playhouse, built by James Burbage (of Leicester's Men) on leased land in Shoreditch, a northern suburb just outside the City and thus safe from attacks by the ruling London Puritans. The Theatre was apparently a polygonal, roughly cylindrical three-story structure of wood built around an open, unroofed central space. There were rows of galleries overlooking the center at each level. The stage projected from one sector into the center, the building above reserved for backstage needs. The Theatre did not reopen when the theaters were closed in 1597. Burbage's ground lease had expired shortly before his death; and his son Cuthbert disassembled the building and used the timber to build the Globe Theatre.

**Affiliations:** Leicester's Men (1576-1578); Oxford's Men (1579 and 1582); The Queen's Men (1583 and 1589); Admiral's Men and Strange's Men (1590-91); Lord Chamberlain's Men (after 1594).

## Other Performance Facilities

### Inns of Court

Grays Inn, Lincoln's Inn, the Middle Temple, the Inner Temple: law schools in London, were noted for the presentation of masques and other events.

### Some Productions of the Inns of Court

Grays Inn (1566): George Gascoigne's *Jocasta*; *Supposes*.

Gray's Inn (1595): *Comedy of Errors* (Lord Chamberlain's).

[Said to have caused a riot]

Middle Temple (1602): *Twelfth Night*.