

The King's Theatre: History

The King's Theatre, Edinburgh was built in 1905 by Edinburgh builder, William Stewart Cruikshank. Andrew Carnegie laid the foundation stone and the Theatre was opened in 1906 with a performance of Cinderella and managed by A Stewart Cruikshank. Initially the programming of the theatre was undertaken under contract by Howard & Wyndham and A Stewart Cruikshank became a Director (and in 1928 Managing Director) of this company which managed a chain of theatres in Britain rivalling Moss Empires. Moss Empires were the owners of The Empire Palace Theatre, which is now the Edinburgh Festival Theatre, the King's sister theatre. JB Howard and Fred Wyndham founded the company in 1883 when they built the Royal Lyceum Theatre both having trained in Edinburgh under William Murray at the Theatre Royal.

The King's Theatre became the headquarters of Howard & Wyndham and they held their board meetings there and famously their AGM on Christmas Eve - which guaranteed minimal interference from shareholders! After A Stewart Cruikshank retired, his son Stewart inherited the Managing Directorship. Howard and Wyndham sold the Royal Lyceum Theatre to Edinburgh Council in 1965 and after Stewart Cruikshank's death in 1966 a similar deal was done with the King's Theatre. The Royal Lyceum was subsequently managed by a Trust but the local authority managed the King's Theatre until July 1998 when the operation merged with the Festival Theatre and Festival City Theatres Trust now manages both Theatres.

The Theatre originally had Stalls and three circles - Dress, Family and Gallery. The Gallery was uncomfortable and latterly unsafe and was removed in the fifties reducing the Theatre to three levels with additional seating at the back of what is now called the Upper Circle. The present seating capacity is 1350. The interior décor is very ornate with nine boxes either side of the proscenium and there are fine examples of Edwardian stained glass in the foyer doors. The present Upper Circle bar area was originally a Billiard Room and there were shops either side of the entrance at street level.

A major refurbishment was undertaken in the mid 1980s when new seating was installed at every level.

The King's Theatre was built as a variety theatre and has a long tradition of pantomime with such stars as Stanley Baxter, Rikki Fulton and Jimmy Logan. There is also a long tradition of amateur operatic and musical work in Edinburgh which for some years now has taken place at the King's Theatre.

There are plans currently in motion for a new refurbishment of the King's Theatre, to bring this much loved Edinburgh theatre back up to it's former glory, to allow another century of top class drama and pantomime.