

## LIVERPOOL'S FIRST THEATRE ROYAL.

*Contributed by Arthur C. Wardle.*

ALTHOUGH Broadbent (*Annals of the Liverpool Stage*, 1908) deals extensively with the origin of local theatres, a recent correspondence in the *Liverpool Daily Post* might suggest a desirable footnote to that work. A play-house or dancing-school existed near the site of the present Drury Lane prior to 1727, when John Entwistle leased the property to Thomas Steers for 2,000 years.

Peet (*Thomas Steers*, p. 20) quotes Broadbent who, in turn, quotes Holt and Gregson, as authority for stating that Steers built the Old Ropery Theatre, *circa* 1740, but firm evidence thereof is lacking. That a permanent theatre did exist in the vicinity is confirmed by an itinerant visitor, in 1741 (*A Tour Through Ireland, etc.*, Dublin, 1746), who wrote: "They have their Musick Meetings, Assemblies, etc., and a neat theatre that maintains a set of comedians four months in the year very well." Peet places 1749 as the year in which Drury Lane (Liverpool) theatre was opened, while Broadbent states "1749 or 1750." Liverpool's earliest play-bill for the Drury Lane theatre is in possession of the Athenæum, and bears the date 4 June, 1756, but a recent search through the files of Adams' *Weekly Courant*, at the Manchester City Library, resulted in finding a much earlier notice, in the issue of 10 July, 1750:

By Comedians of His Majesty's several  
Companies of the Theatre Royal in  
London and Dublin.

At the New Theatre in Liverpoole.  
Tomorrow (Wednesday) the 11th of this  
Instant July, will be presented a  
COMEDY call'd  
The FOUNDLING.

On Friday, the 12th, will be presented  
the TRAGEDY of  
HAMLET

and on Monday, the 16th of July, will be  
presented a COMEDY call'd  
The CONSTANT COUPLE  
Or a Trip to the JUBILEE.

The Farces and other Entertainments will  
be expressed in the Bills.

To begin punctually at Seven.

This almost dates the opening of the theatre, which is described in Williamson's *Memorandum Book*, 1753, as the "Playhouse in Drury Lane." The accommodation consisted of pit and gallery only. In 1759, the building was reconstructed on more elegant lines, and boxes were added. Derrick, in 1760, deemed this second Drury Lane theatre "very neat," while another itinerant, Sir Harbottle Grimeston, in 1768 (*Verulam MSS.*, Hist. MSS. Comm.), stated: "there is a theatre which is small."

In 1770 "An Act to enable His Majesty to licence a Playhouse in the Town of Liverpoole . . ." received royal assent, its preamble asserting that "a licenced Playhouse in the Town of Liverpoole would be of Convenience to the said Town," and desiring the removal of certain "Laws relating to Rogues, Vagabonds, Sturdy Beggars and Vagrants, and that Letters Patent be granted" (see printed copy in Liverpool City Library). The patent was duly granted to William Gibson, passing the great seal on 30 April, 1771, and gave Gibson the right for twenty years "from Midsummer next" to establish his theatre. The *Gentleman's Magazine*, 3 May, 1771, states: "A grant of license passed the seal to William Gibson, of Liverpool, Gent. for twentyone years from Midsummer next to establish a Theatre and to form, entertain, govern, privilege, and keep a company of comedians for his Majesty's service in the town of Liverpool. They are to be called his Majesty's Company."

The theatre opened, accordingly, on 7 June, 1771, the current newspaper notices being headed :

By his MAJESTY'S COMEDIANS

At the Theatre Royal

In Drury Lane, Liverpool.

This present Friday, the 7th June will be acted

A Tragedy called

VENICE PRESERV'D

etc.

A play-bill for 23 August, 1771, in possession of the Liverpool City Library, clearly states : " At the Theatre ROYAL, in Drury Lane." During its last season under the Gibson regime and prior to the opening of its successor in Williamson Square, the Drury Lane theatre was thus, in fact and in law, Liverpool's first Theatre Royal.

