Unique Georgian Theatre's history will be available



Interior of Georgian Theatre Royal

The Grade I listed Georgian Theatre Royal in Richmond contains the only 18th century auditorium still existing in its original form. The theatre, which is still fully functioning, also possesses the UK's oldest surviving set of scenery, The Woodland Scene, which was painted between 1818 and 1836.

Although the theatre runs popular guided tours and has a small exhibition area, lack of space has created difficulties in displaying the playhouse's heritage to full advantage. Much archive material, including some from the legacy of the late Paul Iles, is not currently available to the public. Some material has never been viewed, including historic playbills, images and scripts dating from the Georgian era to the present day.

With a grant of more than £286,000 from HLF and the bequest of over £231,000 the project, now given the go-ahead, will change all that and do much more besides. A new education and learning centre, in memory of Paul Iles, will be created in the Studio Building. This is adjacent to the original Georgian theatre and will include a fully accessible classroom space with a lift, updated kitchen and new toilet facilities.

The existing theatre exhibition space behind the stage will receive a makeover with new information and layout, including the woodland scenery that could not previously be displayed to best effect.

As well as a small archive area, a new online archive will also be created with QR codes displayed within the building to provide visitors with information on smart phones as they enjoy a tour.

Volunteers are the life blood of the theatre and the project will depend on their continuing support and commitment. There will be training for theatre guides and volunteers will help create the online archive. Members of the community will also be given the chance to learn about Georgian costume making.

In addition to reinforcing the Georgian's role as an international tourist attraction, local schools will be encouraged to use Theatre visits as a teaching resource. The playhouse's award winning Youth Theatre will be invited to create a script for a dramatic performance that will focus on Georgian lifestyle, leisure and work.

A key focus of the online archive and project as a whole will be Samuel Butler, the actor-manager who built the theatre in 1788. He also built playhouses in Harrogate, Beverley, Northallerton, Ripon, Whitby, Kendal and Ulverston but the 214-seat theatre in Richmond is the only one of these to remain in existence.

Fiona Spiers, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund Yorkshire and The Humber, said: "This playhouse is a real gem with a story to tell that encompasses Georgian life both on and off stage. The project will ensure that many more people, of all ages, will have an opportunity to learn about it."

Chairman of the Georgian Theatre Royal Trust, Malcolm Bryant, said: "Much work and thought has gone into planning this project by many people and we are absolutely delighted to receive the support from HLF to make it happen. When complete it will transform the daytime life of our unique magical theatre and ensure that the individuals and groups who come will get even greater pleasure and understanding from their visits."

Notes to editors

The Georgian Theatre Royal is situated in a conservation area in Richmond and has been described as the most important theatre in the development of the English Playhouse.

Built in 1788, it was in regular use until 1830 when performances became less frequent. It closed in 1848 and was then used, at different times, as a wine merchant's storeroom and an auctioneer's sale room. It was rediscovered in 1939 but it was not until 1963 that it re-opened as a theatre following a restoration supported by a public appeal and by Lady Nancy Crathorne. A small theatre museum was expanded in 1996 and a second, extensive restoration took place in 2002 with the theatre re-opening in 2003.

Paul Iles, who was the theatre's associate director for more than ten years, died in 2011, leaving a legacy to the Georgian Theatre Royal.

Further information

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