

Interior of the Georgian Theatre Royal, Richmond

An impressive array of historic British theatres are able to keep the curtain rising and the audience coming back for more thanks to the support they have received from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

From quaint Georgian playhouses to rowdy Victorian music halls, a varied range of buildings are being restored and updated to ensure that new productions can flourish and the public are given the best theatrical experience.

Performers have been able to tread the boards once more at the Leeds City Varieties Music Hall which was threatened with closure on health and safety grounds. And its London ‘cousin’ Wilton’s in the capital’s East End has been given the financial support to complete the full preservation of the Grade II listed theatre that was built in the mid 19th century behind a terrace of Georgian houses and a pub. The restoration of Wilton’s Grand Hall was completed two years ago and now the historic frontage will be repaired.

It may only be the houses fronting Wilton’s that date from the 18th century but, in the North of England, a fully functioning Georgian playhouse, the only one of its kind surviving in Britain, has been awarded a grant that will preserve its history. Georgian theatres were raucous places with frequent audience interruptions and large quantities of food and alcohol consumed throughout the performances.

It’s hard to conjure up that image nowadays looking at the compact, genteel auditorium of the Georgian Theatre Royal in Richmond, North Yorkshire. The history of the building and of 18th-century playhouses built throughout the county by entrepreneurial actor-manager Samuel Butler will soon be available to enthral visitors and students of theatre, thanks to

a grant that will help to create the Paul Iles Learning Centre. The public will be able to see for the first time, playbills and scripts that date back to those boisterous days in the 1790s.

Preserving the history of show-stopping British drama is also a feature of HLF grant awards. The Royal Shakespeare Company is restoring the beautiful Grade II-listed Swan Wing, next to its theatre in Stratford upon Avon, and so open up its unparalleled archives and collection of memorabilia in time for the 400th anniversary of the Bard's death. For the first time, the company will be able to showcase the very best from its internationally renowned production records and give visitors a hands-on opportunity to experience the theatre-making process for themselves with a new interactive exhibition.

Rehousing the archive of the National Theatre ensured conservation of material tracing the 20th century theatre-making process and gave better access to the records of seminal productions and original scripts for students, researchers, historians and producers of new plays. More recently HLF was able to support the National's major refurbishment to transform the layout and facilities within of the Grade II* listed 1970's complex on the capital's South Bank. The project included new learning programmes for schools, the local community and visitors providing many opportunities to discover the rich heritage of the building, the plays and play-making in the NT.

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Unique Georgian Theatre's history will be available to all