

“I’ll go to the Bull or Fortune, and there see a play for two pence” The First Public London Theatres

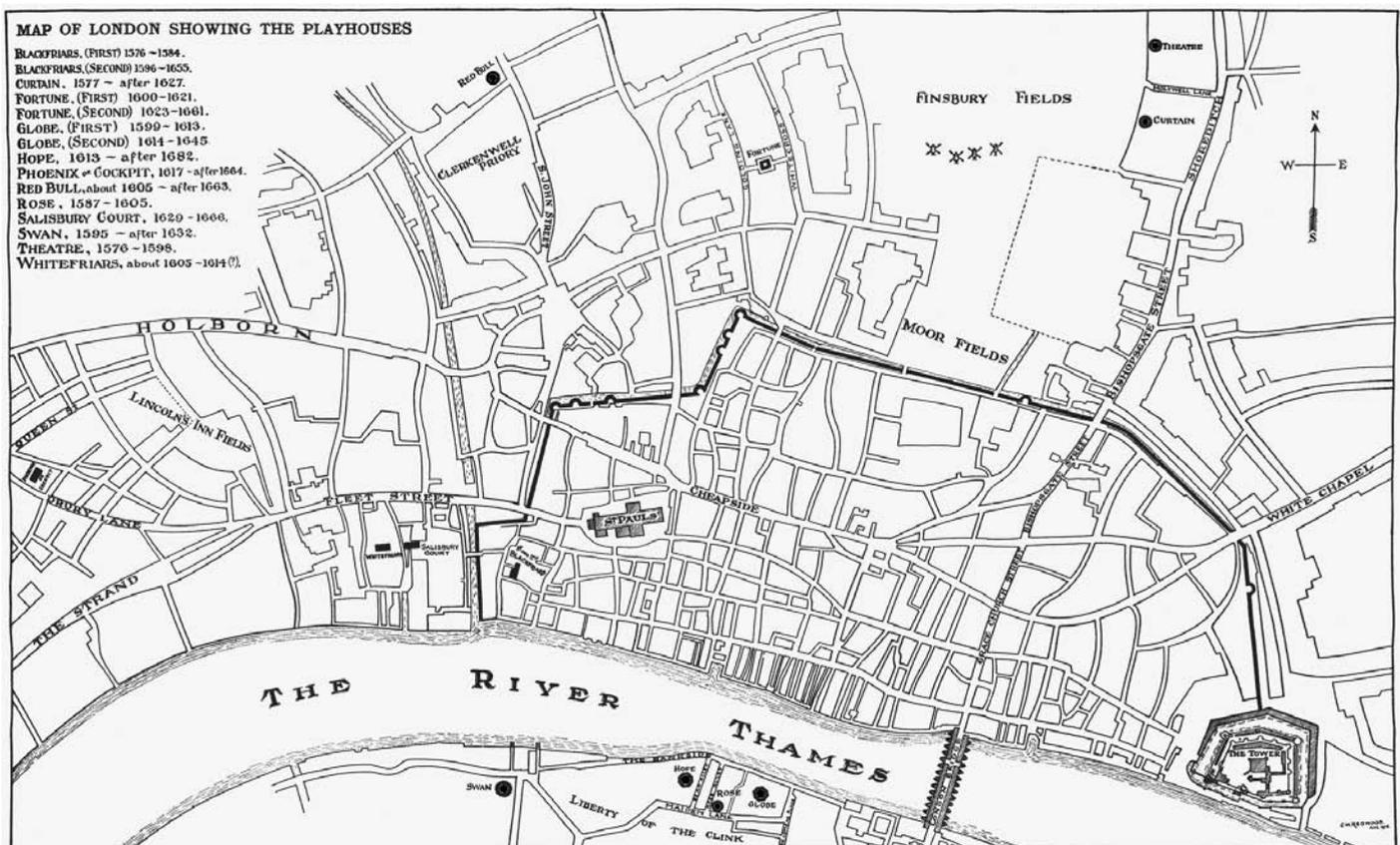
by Victoria Buckley

The first purpose-built public playhouse in London was the Theatre, constructed under the watchful eye of James Burbage in 1576. An actor by trade, Burbage was tired of touring and playing in makeshift venues; he recognised the need for members of his profession to have a permanent theatre as close to London as possible. Locating a theatre outside the city limits ensured no interference from the city fathers, who made vigorous efforts to ban plays, believing them to corrupt youth, promote idleness, and spread disease. Burbage signed a 21 year lease on a site in Shoreditch, and his brother Robert, a carpenter, began construction on the Theatre. This new playhouse, a wooden, unroofed amphitheatre modelled on the popular bear-baiting arenas in London, was described as a ‘gorgeous Playing-place erected in the fieldes’.

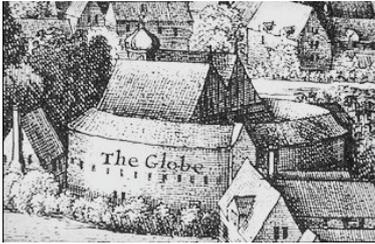
By the early 1590s, the Theatre was a flourishing venue, and in 1594 it saw the staging of several early Shakespeare plays, including *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1597 however, the lease expired, and following a legal dispute with the landlord, Burbage and his players relocated to the Bankside in Southwark and erected the Globe in 1598. The Globe wasn’t the first theatre in Southwark. The Rose, under the directorship of Philip Henslowe, had opened in 1587, and the Swan under Francis Langley had been showing plays from 1596. Like Burbage’s Theatre, these were all public playhouses, distinct from the private theatres in the City and Inns of Court which charged high admission prices to a wealthy and select audience.

The Globe was described at the time of its construction as ‘a house newly built with a garden attached... in the occupation of William Shakespeare and others.’ Public playhouses were polygonal or round buildings, built on a timber frame, with a thatched or tiled roof over the galleries. The yard, or standing area, was open to the sky, and reached via a series of entrances. The seated galleries, protected by the roof, were accessed via a series of staircases. Plays were performed daily at two in the afternoon, plague permitting, and were announced by a trumpet fanfare from the theatre’s roof, which also sported a flag which flew at high mast when a performance was underway. Several different plays a week were in repertory, never the same two in the same week, and printed handbills provided details of performances to passers-by. Thomas Platter, a German visitor to London in 1599, wrote an account of seeing a play at the Curtain:

“Thus daily at two in the afternoon, London has two, sometimes three plays running in different places, competing with each other, and those which play best obtain most spectators. The playhouses are so constructed that they play on a raised platform, so that everyone has a good view. There are different galleries and places, however, where the seating is better and more comfortable and therefore more expensive. For whoever cares to stand below only pays one English penny, but if he wishes to sit he enters by another door, and pays another penny, while if he desires to sit in the most comfortable seats which are cushioned, where he not only sees everything well,



The First Public London Theatres (cont.)



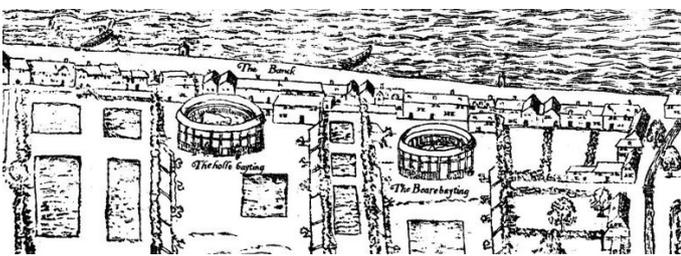
Wenceslas Hollar's detail of the Globe (1647)

but can also be seen, then he pays yet another English penny at another door. And during the performance food and drink are carried around the audience, so that what one cares to pay one may also have refreshment.”

The stage in most public playhouses extended out into the yard, which meant the audience surrounded the actors on three sides. The Lords' Rooms, which flanked the stage, were the best seats in the house. Behind the stage the actors changed costumes in the tiring house, and above the stage was an open balcony which extended the performance space. Over both the stage and balcony was a canopied roof supported by pillars, protecting the players from the elements. Known as 'the heavens' this was often brightly decorated. The stage also had a trap door and mechanical devices for lowering props and players up and down.

Philip Henslowe, owner of the Rose, includes in his list of stage props: a tree of golden apples, the city of Rome, Hell's mouth, a rainbow, lion and bear skins, coffins, tombs, and 'a robe for to go invisible'. Costumes were prized possessions. A black velvet cloak belonging to Henslowe's theatre, with embroidered sleeves of silver and gold, was listed with a value of £20.10s 6d, about a third of the cost of a house in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Due to this vast expense, the aristocracy often donated costumes to the theatres.

Sound effects were simple but effective and included cannons, bells, and trumpets. A sheet of wobbling metal simulated thunder, and plays often called for mist, lightning, flaming torches, and in one case, fireworks. Because blood made such a frequent appearance on the stage, animal entrails were used for gore, and a sponge soaked in sheep's blood, tucked under an actor's armpit and squeezed at the opportune moment, reproduced the realistic effect of a stabbing.



Detail of Bankside, prior to the construction of the Globe, from The Agas Map of London (1591)

Entry to the Globe's yard, standing room only, cost a penny. For a more comfortable experience a visitor could pay an extra penny to sit in the galleries, and a further penny rented a cushion for the duration. Available refreshments included apples, oranges, pies, ale, wine, and even a pipe full of tobacco (three pence a pipe).

Theatres on Bankside could accommodate up to 3,000 people per



Johannes De Witt's sketch of the Swan Theatre (1596)

play, and audiences were comprised of every sector of society. Only Puritans abstained for fear of corruption. Bankside wasn't the only area of London where public theatres flourished. There were playhouses in Clerkenwell, Finsbury, Lincolns Inn, and the City. There were several companies of players attached to the theatres; the Admiral's Men played at the Rose, Paul's Children at Pauls, Queen Anne's players at the Red Bull, Lady Elizabeth's at the Swan, and the King's Revels Children at Whitefriars.

In 1609, Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, acquired a second theatre at Blackfriars. Little is known of this, the first indoor public playhouse. There is some speculation it was converted from the paved hall of the old priory. Its stage was much smaller than that of the Globe, and flash young things were permitted to sit on it during performances at a cost of 2 shillings. Admission to Blackfriars was more expensive than the Globe. Six pence paid for a seat in the galleries, and half a crown bought a private box. Lit by candles, and protected from the elements, Blackfriars became a lucrative investment for the King's Men since they could stage plays all year round. In addition to the public and private theatres in London, plays were also performed at Court and at the Inns of Court. In 1612-13 the King's Men performed five plays for James I in the Great Hall at Hampton Court.

Estimates suggest that between 1574 and 1642, the playhouses in London had regular audiences well in excess of 150,000 people, demonstrating Burbage's simple decision to build a theatre in a field led to the establishment of one of the most enduring forms of popular entertainment in Europe.

About Victoria Buckley

Victoria Buckley is completing a PhD at the University of Sussex. Her thesis 'Patterns of Mischief: The Gunpowder Plot and the Jacobean Stage 1605-15' will be forthcoming for publication in 1612. She blogs on everyday life in 17th Century London at Shakespeare's England. www.ShakespearesEngland.com