

## ILFORD HIPPODROME

1909	Opened
1945	Destroyed by bombs
1957	Demolished

Opened on 8th November 1909 with 2,500 seats (and 500 standing places), the Ilford Hippodrome was designed by Frank Matcham at a cost of £35,000. The theatre's interior was green, white and gold with a ceiling suggesting the Palace of Versailles. The opening variety bill included a 14 year old boy doing a "William Tell" crossbow act. The first pantomime was "Dick Whittington" with Dan Thomas—a popular pantomime dame of that time.

The Hippodrome survived as a top variety theatre even through the advent of the "Talkies". Only very occasionally was it forced to show films for the odd week or two. In between the Wars all the top entertainers played the Hippodrome: Max Miller, Richard Tauber, Gracie Fields, George Formby, Flanagan and Allen were all especial favourites. The very young singer, Vera Lynn, was proudly acknowledged as a "local" girl.

The 1944/45 pantomime was Lew Grade's "Robinson Crusoe" with Renee Houston and Donald Stewart. During the second performance on 12th January 1945 Renee Houston was onstage singing her opening number—"The Fleet's In". At that moment a V2 rocket struck some cottages behind the theatre. The blast destroyed the theatre's back wall and dressing rooms, sent Renee Houston flying into the orchestra pit, sent one chorus girl sailing through the air into the flies and showered dust and debris into the auditorium.

Within seconds the stage manager grabbed a microphone and appealed for calm. As soon as he finished, the orchestra struck up in spite of injuries and the fact that they were being sprayed by water from broken pipes. This prompt reaction immediately evoked cheers and applause from the audience who then began an orderly evacuation from the building with no stampede and no panic.

Rescue workers and some of the audience spent the night digging out performers and stagehands from the rubble. Over one hundred people had been injured. Although there had been fatalities in the cottages behind the theatre, miraculously no one in the Hippodrome had been killed.



Two days later the roof collapsed, bringing the gallery down into the stalls. Like so many of the nation's bombed buildings, the derelict shell remained for many years until finance was available to demolish it. It was finally pulled down in 1957.

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## IMPERIAL THEATRE, Canning Town

1909	Opened as the Music Hall of Dockland
1931	Closed

See entry on Imperial Theatre, Westminster.

**IMPERIAL THEATRE, Tothill Street, Westminster**

- 1876 Opened as Royal Aquarium Theatre,  
part of the Royal Aquarium Summer and Winter Garden
- 1879 Renamed the Imperial Theatre
- 1889 Closed
- 1898 Re-opened after rebuilding
- 1899 Closed
- 1901 Re-opened after complete rebuilding
- 1907 Closed and dismantled. The interior was rebuilt as the Music Hall of Dockland, Canning Town.  
(Central Hall, Westminster currently stands on the site)

Opened in January 1876 as an “Institution for Instruction and Amusement”, with galleries open for lunch and tea, a series of “side galleries” for flowers, perfumery and glove-stalls, an exhibition of “freaks and curiosities” and, of course, fish. It soon became a notorious haunt for prostitutes and for sensation-seekers—ladies dived from roofs or were shot out of a cannon, or sat covered with hair in a cage called “The Missing Link”. Boxing humans and boxing kangaroos competed with the only known pack of performing wolves in captivity.

In the midst of all this was an attached theatre, originally intended to be an “afternoon” theatre. It opened on 15th April 1876 as the “Aquarium Theatre” and had a life of 31 years, outliving the Aquarium itself by three years. It was never a “lucky” theatre. On 1st March 1878 the great actor, Samuel Phelps, was playing Wolsey in Shakespeare’s “Henry VIII”. Halfway through the speech “Farewell, a long farewell to all my greatness” he fainted and was carried offstage. This turned out to be his last ever stage appearance.

The 1882 season under the management of Lily Langtry changed the theatre’s fortunes for a short while. However, she relied too heavily on her own reputation to draw in the audiences. The supporting actors she hired were said to be inexpensive and inferior and the public soon tired of the novelty of beauty alone.

The theatre struggled on for many years, usually occupied by “transfers” of successful plays from other theatres or by ambitious and usually unsuccessful managers attracted by its availability at a low rent.

Some major renovation was carried out in 1898, after which Lily Langtry came back into the picture. She seems to have purchased the theatre around this time and in 1901 she funded a complete rebuilding. From being one of the most uncomfortable, grubby theatres in town it was transformed into a beautiful and comfortable palace.

In 1903 Ellen Terry rented it as a showcase for her son’s (Gordon Craig’s) work on Ibsen’s plays. When this lost a fortune she staged some Shakespeare and finally surrendered her lease to Lewis Waller. Lewis Waller had some moderate successes over the next three years, but his tenancy came to an end in November 1907.

By this time the Aquarium itself had closed and the site had been sold to the Wesleyan Methodists. The existence of a theatre in the middle of their site was irksome to them. Mrs Langtry was able to command a very good price and decided to sell them the land. However, so astute a businesswoman was she, that she sold just the land. She sold the theatre itself to the owners of the Royal Albert Hall, Canning Town.

They demolished it carefully, numbering all the pieces, and re-erected it as the Music Hall of Dockland.



## INNYARD THEATRES

In 1567 James Burbage and John Brayne built a public playhouse in the courtyard of the Red Lion Inn, Stepney. This was the first time a “proper” theatre was constructed in London. Up until that time numerous public performances had been given throughout London, but these had been in temporary structures erected in inn-yards. The earliest recorded performance is in 1557, but it seems clear performances were given a long time before then. There are no known details of the nature of the staging. Many of the inns are believed to have erected a simple trestle stage at one end of their courtyard whenever the players arrived, whilst some are felt to have made a more elaborate and permanent provision for the strolling players. Neither is it known what financial arrangement was made with the players. Certainly the inns will have benefited from extra custom from those attending the performances. Some say the innkeepers allowed the players to use the space free of charge and to take a collection from the audience. Others think the players negotiated a fee.

Amongst these were:

### **BELL INN**, Gracious Street:

The last mention of this being used for performances is 1583

### **BELLE SAUVAGE INN**, Ludgate Hill

Last mentioned in 1588

### **BOAR’S HEAD**, Eastcheap

In 1557 the Boar’s Head was closed and its actors held under arrest for 24 hours following the performance of a “lewd” play called “A Sacke Full of News”. In 1598 some reconstruction led to the creation of a permanent covered stage at the Boar’s Head, which now occasionally called itself a “playhouse”. It seems to have ceased being used for performances after 1616.



*A typical Innyard Theatre in Elizabethan times (possibly the Tabard Inn in Southwark).*

**BULL INN**, Bishopsgate : The earliest mention is 1576 and the last recorded performance is 1594.

**CROSS KEYS INN**, Gracious Street: First and last records of performances are 1579 and 1596.

**RED BULL INN**, Upper Street: (See separate entry)

**RED LION**, Stepney : (See separate entry)

### **SARACEN’S HEAD**, Islington

According to Foxe’s “Book of Martyrs” (1563) the dissenter, John Rough, was arrested during a performance at the Saracen’s Head. It is last mentioned in connection with a performance in 1583.

**TABARD INN**: Little is known of its theatrical use, though it is famous as the starting place of Chaucer’s Pilgrims in the “Canterbury Tales”. It was originally built around 1307 and burnt down in 1669. The rebuilt inn was called the Talbot and was finally demolished in 1873. It is thought that some inn-yard performances were given on the 1570s and 1580s.

## INTERVAL CLUB THEATRE, Soho

The Interval Players was a group founded by the Catholic Stage Guild in 1926 for Sunday night and matinee performances. These fund-raising productions were held at a number of different venues, though chiefly at the Westminster Theatre. By 1933 the profits from these performances enabled the Guild to open a Club house in Dean Street.

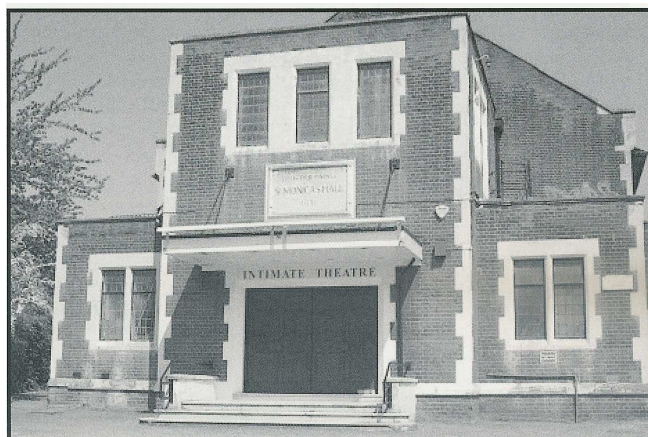
The Club premises themselves were occasionally used for performances. A small theatre with a proscenium arch was created on the first floor. Above the proscenium arch was a round medallion with an image of Mrs Balvaraid-Hewitt (the Club’s founder) holding a pair of knitting needles. The Guild suspended its activities in 1940, and did not resume until December 1950, when it re-opened with a series of fortnightly productions.

The Dean Street Interval Club was demolished in 1962 and all activities moved to 63 Frith Street. The Club finally closed in 1965, though the Catholic Stage Guild, of course, remains active.

## INTIMATE THEATRE, Palmers Green

- 1931 Built as St Monica's Church Hall
- 1935 Became a full-time professional repertory theatre called the Intimate Theatre
- 1988 Closed and used exclusively by amateurs
- 1989 Renovated, renamed and converted for multi-purpose use.

Father Gallagher designed and built this church hall as an adjunct to St Monica's Church. Three years later it was converted for theatre use. A proscenium arch and a safety-curtain were installed, additional dressing rooms were created, and the venue began its fifty year life as a repertory theatre. In 1935 it became a fulltime repertory theatre under the direction of the famous actor, John Clements.



At the end of the 1940s the Intimate's rep company achieved national status when early BBC television regularly broadcast live from the Intimate Theatre. No fewer than 14 TV plays were transmitted live. Over the years many well-known names appeared at the Intimate, but by the late 1960s repertory theatre was struggling. A change in policy saw the Intimate open its doors to touring companies and local amateur productions as well as its own in-house repertory productions. This proved a successful mix through the 1970s and the annual pantomimes under the management of Alexander Bridge and John Farrow attracted star names and made considerable profits.



"Rep" theatres were an anachronism by 1987, and in order to cover costs, touring theatres needed a bigger capacity than the Intimate could offer. The theatre closed after the pantomime in January 1988 and was then used exclusively by amateurs.

In 1989 the fixed seating was removed and removable seating was placed in the stalls. The venue's name reverted to St Monica's Hall, reflecting the return of the building to multi-purpose use.

## IRVING THEATRE, Leicester Square

- 1951 Opened
- 1964 Closed

In 1951 a triumvirate of young writers and musicians Myers, Grahame and Cass, created the Irving Theatre. It was an art gallery by day, and a theatre at night, and promoted itself as the smallest stage in the West End. It opened with musical revues—the first was *10.15* (1951) starring Betty Marsden, Gabrielle Brune, Ronnie Stevens and, in her first show, Shani Wallis. This was followed by *The Irving Revue* (1952), introducing a young lad called Larry Hagman. The original founding team then moved to the New Lindsey Theatre in Notting Hill Gate. The Irving continued with a policy of revues and musicals and a number of well-known performers made early appearances or debuts there. The Irving occasionally staged a straight play, most notably a revival of "Journey's End" with Peter Wyngarde in 1956.

It seems to have ceased production around this time, and was in regular use as a striptease venue between 1960 and 1964, after which it closed. (The name Irving Theatre was originally the proposed name for the building which eventually opened as the St Martin's Theatre)



## ISLINGTON EMPIRE

- 1860 Opened as the Philharmonic Hall
- 1870 Some rebuilding
- 1874 Closed and rebuilt as the Philharmonic Theatre
- 1883 Major rebuilding and renamed the Grand Philharmonic Theatre
- 1887 Destroyed by fire.
- 1888 Rebuilt as a much larger venue—the Grand Theatre, Islington
- 1900 Burnt down.
- 1901 Rebuilt as the Grand Theatre
- 1908 Renamed the Empire, Islington
- 1909 Renamed for a short while the Islington Palace when the concert hall of the same name closed.
- 1918 Renamed the Islington Empire
- 1932 Closed and became a cinema
- 1962 Demolished

The Philharmonic Hall was a concert venue built in 1860 at a cost of £20,000 with a seating capacity of 1,500. Its first years included concerts from the English Opera Company, but lack of real support meant that within a few years it had become home to a very mixed Variety programme, strictly excluding anything in the nature of a play with plot or dialogue because of licensing restrictions. After ten years it had gained the reputation of being something of a grubby venue, and was nicknamed “The Spittoon” because of its lack of cleanliness.

In 1870 the famous Charles Morton (the “Father of the Halls”) was appointed to clean the place up. He introduced private boxes, an elegant buffet and worked hard to obtain a licence. He achieved this in 1871 and staged “Genevieve de Brabant” an Offenbach operetta turned down by other theatres. The leading lady, Miss Emily Soldene, was acclaimed London’s newest star and the show was a huge success, even attracting the Prince of Wales. It ran for eighteen months and turned the Philharmonic in to a fashionable venue. By 1874 the venue had made enough money to afford further improvements, and closed briefly for redecoration and the installation of a new stage. It was renamed the Philharmonic Theatre. The addition of the stage had now halved the seating capacity to 758.

In 1883 the owners approached Frank Matcham, a relatively unknown architect, and invited him to re-design the Philharmonic to improve it and to increase the seating capacity. Matcham’s splendid conversion opened as the Grand Theatre, Islington on 4th August 1883. Some hours after a pantomime performance on 29th December 1887 a fire broke out backstage. Flames consumed the building and it burnt to the ground. Within a year Matcham had designed and built a replacement theatre, seating 3,000. This magnificent new building was to last just twelve years before it, too, burned to the ground - and again, the fire happened overnight after a pantomime performance, this time in February 1900.



*Grand Theatre, Islington  
(Later named The Empire) 1888*

British Museum

The fourth theatre on this site opened in 1901 and was, again, designed by Matcham. Its name changed from the Grand to the Empire, then briefly to the Palace, and then back to the Empire during a period when its management frequently changed. The last variety show was given in 1932 when the premises were converted into a cinema. The cinema was finally demolished in 1962

## ISLINGTON PALACE

- 1869 Opened as St Mary's Hall
- 1881 Incorporated into newly built Agricultural Halls  
Sometimes called New Concert Hall, & Mohawk Hall
- 1901 Renovated
- 1902 Renamed the Empire Music Hall—an early cine-variety
- 1908 Renamed the Palace and used exclusively as a cinema
- 1918 Renamed the Blue Hall Cinema
- 1951 Renamed the Gaumont Cinema
- 1963 Converted for bingo
- 1975 Closed.
- 1985 Demolished.

St Mary's Hall in Islington was in existence by the 1860s and was licensed to hold up to 3,000 people. For almost 25 years from 1876 it was a regular home of the famous Mohawk Minstrel Troupe. In 1881 the Royal Agricultural Hall complex was built, and St Mary's Hall was incorporated into the new construction, retaining its own separate entrance. (The Agricultural Hall complex included another hall known as the Berners Hall, but this had very limited theatrical involvement) After the completion of the complex, St Mary's was sometimes known as the New Concert Hall, and sometimes as the Mohawk Hall.

Some major renovation was carried out in 1901 at which time the Mohawk Minstrels moved "up West" to Piccadilly and enlarged their act as The Mohawk, Moore and Burgess Minstrels. The hall was renamed the Empire Music Hall with a mixture of early bioscope films and variety.

In 1908 it became a full time cinema, renamed the Palace. In 1918 its name was changed once again, this time to the Blue Hall Cinema. It had a seating capacity of 1,303 seats. After renovation and refurbishment it reopened on 2 July 1951 as the Gaumont Cinema, Islington. In January 1963 the cinema was converted for bingo, and the premises finally closed in June 1975. Despite a Grade II listing, the building was demolished in 1985.

According to the Theatre Trust: "As last seen, it was a rectangular hall with very restrained plaster ornament. Single balconies originally extended round three sides but later at rear only, the removal of the side balconies leaving the proscenium stage looking rather small and lonely. It was particularly interesting, even in its altered condition, as the last of the big London minstrel halls and possibly the last of its kind in Britain."

(The original Mohawk Minstrels were two brothers, William and James Francis, playing regularly at the Berners Hall from 1873 onwards. The success of these shows encouraged them to give up their day-jobs with the music publisher, Chappell's, and to become full-time entertainers. Three years later they merged with Harry Hunter's Manhattan Minstrels and moved to the larger St Mary's Hall. Harry Hunter wrote many of their songs, so they started printing programme books containing the song lyrics of their shows—thus encouraging the public to join in the choruses. Soon afterwards they decided to use their former knowledge of the music publishing business to publish their own words and music—and thus the publishing firm of Francis Day and Hunter was formed.

