

Local Studies Centre Fact Sheet Number 13

# The Empire Theatre

## A brief history of the Empire Theatre



The foundation stone was laid on 29th September 1906 by Vesta Tilley and the Empire opened less than a year later on 1st July 1907. Vesta Tilley was among the royalty of music hall, a comedienne specialising in male impersonation.

The Theatre was a partnership between Edward Moss, Oswald Stoll and local man Richard Thornton. Thornton, originally from South Shields started out as a busker and soon became the manager of a run down music hall in Union Street, South Shields. From this base he quickly became successful and wealthy and joined up with Edward Moss to form an organisation which transformed the northern provincial theatres of the early 1900's.

Thornton soon became restless in this partnership and decided to build a theatre of his own. He used local architects William and TR Milburn to create the "Empire Palace".



*The original Sunderland Empire*



*The Beatles prior to their 2nd performance at the Empire on Saturday 30 November 1963*

The Empire is a splendid example of Edwardian architecture. It has a 90ft round tower crowned with a dome and a revolving sphere which bore the statue of "Terpsichore" the Greek Goddess of dance, not as is commonly thought, Vesta Tilley. Shortly after the beginning of the 2nd World War a bomb fell nearby, badly rocking the building so the globe and statue were removed for safety. The original statue can still be seen in the hallway of the theatre and a replica stands at the top of the dome. The grand main entrance was for well-to-do customers, but as music hall was for all classes, the working-class families had their own entrances. These were on the side street with their own pay-box; a small arched hatch set in the wall. Buskers entertained customers as they queued outside, attended by hot potato & roast chestnut vendors.





## A mystery!

In 1949 Molly Moselle, a 33-year old stage manager for Ivor Novello's "The Dancing Years" went out to buy a birthday card. She disappeared down an alley by the theatre and was never seen again. The police were unable to solve the mystery.

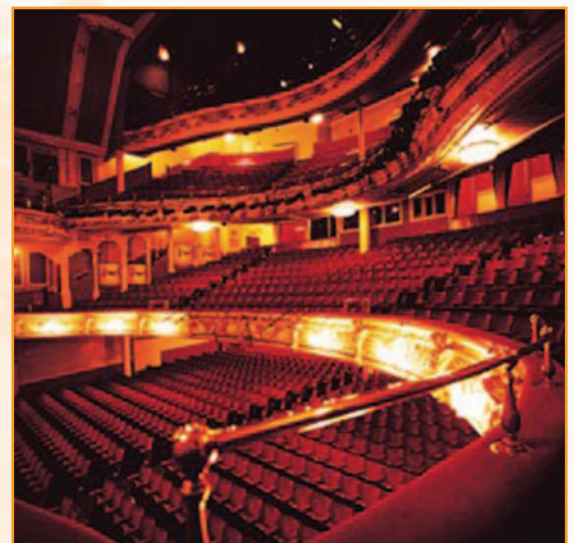
Some of the top names in entertainment appeared at the Empire, these include: Charlie Chaplin, Laurel & Hardy, George Formby and the Beatles.

Theatre attendance was low in the 1950's due to the advent of television and cinemascope, so it closed in May 1959.

Sunderland Corporation took the unprecedented step of buying the theatre for £50,000 and it became the first "number one" theatre under civic control in the U.K.

## The Present Day

Since reopening in 1960 the theatre has had several refurbishment's and alterations. 1988 saw the re-opening of the Gallery area with Billy Connolly as the star attraction. Further improvements in 1994 saw a new dressing room block, dance studio and bar at a cost of £1.1 million. Recent renovations have revealed the original marble walls under layers of wallpaper as well as original paintings in the main hall. The theatre retains its original exuberant Edwardian interior. The Empire has changed with the times and once purely a music hall venue is now the largest theatre in the region hosting major West End touring shows and is managed by Clear Channel Entertainment on behalf of the City Council. The latest refurbishment in 2004 has cost approximately £4.6m with extensive alterations increasing the backstage areas. This allows the latest state of the art productions to be performed.



*The interior of the Empire today*

## Find out more about the Empire

For more information, visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre, which has many books on the history of the Empire, such as:

- Sunderland Empire - A History of the Theatre and its Stars by Alistair Robinson (2000)
- A Century of Sunderland Cinemas by Albert Anderson (1995)
- Sunderland's Golden Age of Entertainment by Mervyn Gould

Further details can also be found on the following web site:

- [www.cclive.co.uk/sunderemp](http://www.cclive.co.uk/sunderemp)

