

Theatre Royal, Exeter, September 1887

➤ 127 people died



Theatre Royal Exeter

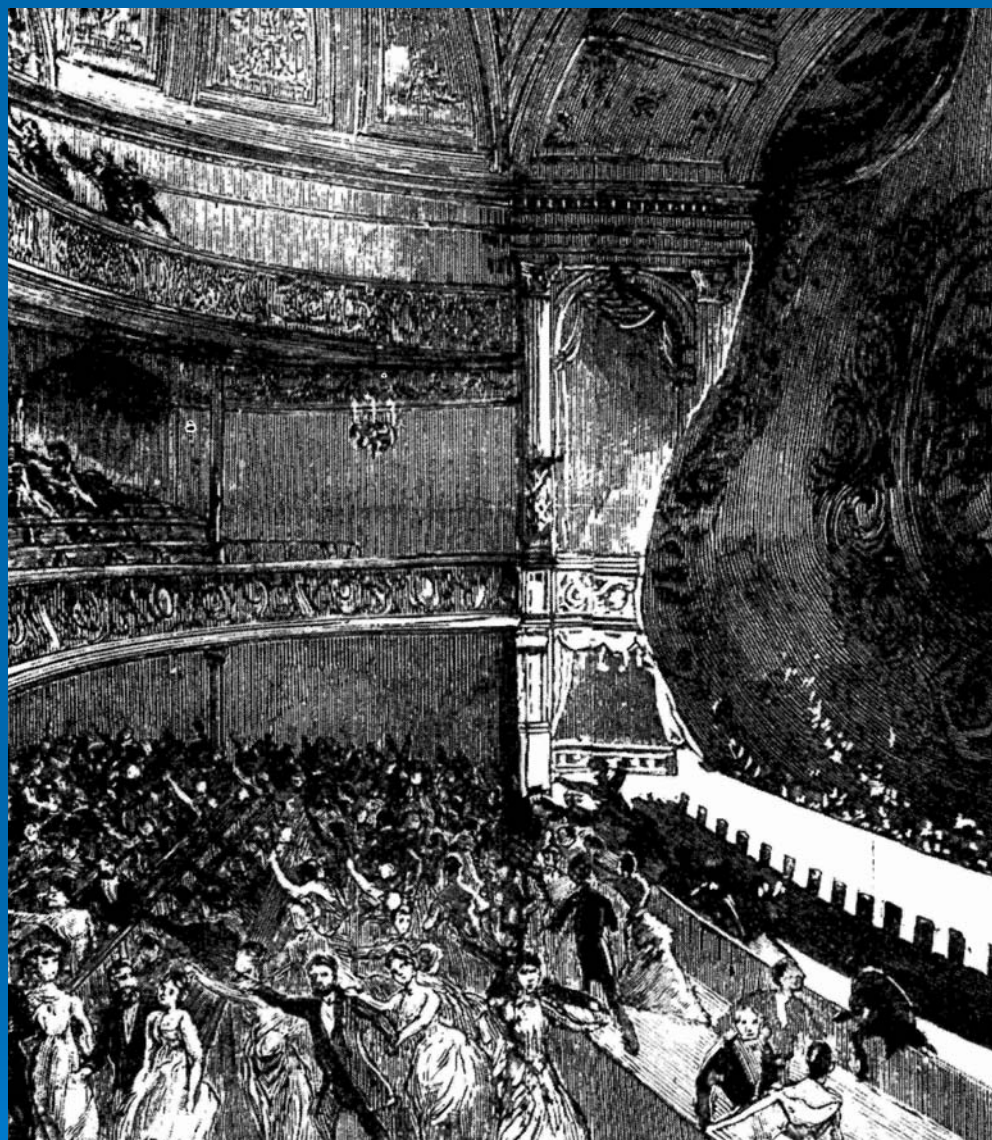
- The Council by-laws did not allow efficient control over this 8500 sq ft public building. The owner of the theatre had insisted on building a row of shops next to the theatre and this meant that only one of the two gallery escape staircases would be provided for the evacuation of the three-level public gallery capable of accommodating 300 people above the stage. At the time of the fire there were only 192 people in the gallery
- The architect declined to provide a safety curtain believing it to be unnecessary. The fire was initiated by a gas batten next to a scenery border and the act drop (curtain) was lowered. As the fire developed the act drop bulged out towards the audience (see picture), caught fire and disintegrated allowing smoke and flame to burst out across the auditorium and into the gallery.
- There was a rush for the single exit, someone tripped and fell and others fell on top of them, while others tried to climb over the pile of bodies. Down the stairwell doors were opened and this converted the single staircase into a flue for the fire gases so that those piled up were suffocated by the fire gases. Some people trying to escape fell from the gallery onto people in the upper circle.



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- The fire might have been extinguished if a hydrant had been installed in the flies – the hydrant was shown on the architect's drawings but had never been installed.
- On the lowermost gallery there was 1.5 tons of timber and shavings and the gallery was served by a single timber staircase lit by gas light burners.
- There was no smoke ventilation provided in the auditorium. The inquiry noted that if the architect had raised the roof of the auditorium several feet higher people would have had more time to escape before they were enveloped in smoke
- Captain Shaw, Chief of the London Fire Brigade, had recognised the fire hazard in a number of theatres
- “The quick shifting of light scenery in the immediate vicinity of powerful gas lights, the intense heat caused by the lights in upper parts of the flies ...a vast quantity of highly desiccated wood, a labyrinth of cordage, and a quantity of hanging drapery moving about with every draft and blast of wind”





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- Picture shows act drop (curtain) bulging out as panic sets in just before fire envelopes the seating area

