

From a Gin Palace to a King's Palace: Provincial Music Hall in Preston by David Hindle

Biographical details

David John Hindle M.A. (History) was born in Preston in 1944. Since retiring from the Lancashire Constabulary in 1992 he has been an avid researcher of local history and also has a keen interest in natural history and conservation. He is the author of five books that broadly embrace these themes. David and his wife, Dorothy, reside in the village of Grimsargh, near Preston. They have one daughter, Caroline, who lives in London.

Latest book: From a Gin Palace to a King's Palace: Provincial Music Hall in Preston. By David Hindle, Tempus Publishing (September, 2007) £12.99p. ISBN 978-0-7524-4453-6 This book will undoubtedly appeal to all those interested in Preston and its entertainment heritage including historians and students studying the evolution of theatre and music hall and its association with the social history of the former cotton town

With a foreword by Coronation Street's Betty Driver, now familiar as an actress but formerly a music-hall star herself, and a preface by Preston North End legend Sir Tom Finney the publication is an essential guide to the history of provincial music hall, not just in Preston but also across the entire country. The author takes the reader on a journey to the past by telling a complete story of the genre of music hall and fulfils a niche for the social history of the town. It thus places Preston within the historiography of music hall and may be seen nationally as a template for the 'good old days of music hall'. The introductory chapters tests this cliché to see if it had relevance in towns such as Preston. The chapters embrace the evolution and development of the genre in public house taverns and gin palaces from their inception in the mid 19th century to the lavish variety theatres of the Edwardian era. Thus the main period under review for generic music hall is circa 1840 until the time of the Great War. Gradually rivals such as cinema and television confined it to the annals of history in the mid twentieth century.

The overall structure correlates with a theatre programme viz:

The Programme

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Foreword Betty Driver, MBE

Preface Sir Tom Finney, OBE, CBE

Introduction and Historiography

The Overture Maestro, take the cue!

ACT ONE - THE VICTORIAN MUSIC HALL

Prologue	The Good Old Days of Victorian Music Hall'?
Accolade	A Gallery View of Victorian Preston - Beattie Paintings
Scene One	Early Leisure Forms and Curtain up at the Theatre Royal
Scene Two	Rivals in Leisure: The Theatre Royal versus Music Hall
Intermission	Legitimate or Illegitimate Theatre?
Scene Three	'From a Gin Palace to a King's Palace'
Scene Four	'Let's All Go the Music Hall'

ACT TWO - THE EDWARDIAN MUSIC HALL

Scene One	Edwardian Variety and the 'Battle for the King's Palace'
Scene Two	Legendary Music Hall Stars and Performance Styles
Epilogue	The Later Years
Accolade	The View from the Gallery (programmes)
Encore	
Bibliography	

SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

The Overture: Maestro, take the cue!

The story of music hall in Preston begins inside a singing saloon of a busy smoke filled public house during the early Victorian era. Centre stage right is a piano with a group of men singing and a woman clog dancing. Outside there are a number of urchins playing in the street between rows of terraced houses and a grey backcloth with a large iron mill gate leading to a yard with numerous chimneys dominating the Preston skyline.

Throughout England, performance styles developed in gin palaces, beer shops and singing saloons in pub taverns around the mid-nineteenth century and culminated in the building of concert halls or music halls. Generic music hall reached its pinnacle during the late Victorian and Edwardian eras in the new lavish and purpose-built variety theatres. After the First World War a downward spiral is apparent culminating in the industry being finally confined to the annals of social history during the mid-twentieth century. Although Preston had its own characteristics, it broadly follows the national pattern of growth with the opening of the Gaiety Palace Theatre of Varieties in 1882 and finally the syndicate owned King's Palace Theatre in 1913. Consequently, the level of progression may be seen to equate with the notion, 'from a gin palace to a King's Palace,' or, metaphorically speaking, from ugly duckling to beautiful swan.

The main outcome of the closure of the Victorian music halls in Preston led to the syndicates taking an interest in the town. The entertainment industry of the twentieth century was dominated by the success of the music halls. The Manchester based firm of W.H. Broadhead & Son opened the Royal Hippodrome in 1905 and the King's Palace in 1913. 'The Battle for the King's Palace,' coincided with a surplus of seats

for music hall when rival theatre owners raised objections to the licensing application of William Henry & Son for a brand new theatre. But this was part of the Broadhead syndicate's management philosophy in expanding their music halls with Palaces, Empires and Hippodromes to cater for the demand for this genre of popular culture and consequently the battle was won.

I was lucky to be born during the heyday of Preston's cinemas and at a time when the two major theatres, the Royal Hippodrome and the King's Palace, were enjoying a short-lived boom before the onset of the final curtains during the 1950s while the old Empire Music Hall had long switched from safety curtain to silver screen. Regular attendance at most of these venues has helped to stimulate my interest. Even now, half a century later, an enduring memory of the King's Palace is when I stood on the stage of the permanently 'dark' theatre at the eleventh hour and marvelled at the architectural Edwardian splendour surrounding the cavernous auditorium with two large gaping boxes either side of the majestic proscenium. No seats of rich crimson plush, only debris, but where carpets of rose-de-barri pink once provided a tasteful floor covering I collected some old programmes strewn amongst the debris which epitomised the famous, and not-so-famous die-hard music hall artists who strove to delight our forebears. The half-light preserved an almost mystical aura to the prevailing silence giving an atmospheric feel to the deserted theatre

Voice from the Gods

But let us suspend reality, for the ghosts of yesteryear are about to take their cue at Preston's King's Palace variety theatre while awaiting the demolition team during 1959. A voice from the gallery gods, whose identity remains an enigma, suddenly disturbs the dark, dank, eerie silence of the embattled warrior, the King's Palace. Bright lights now transform years of neglect for Preston's music hall into a pristine auditorium which again resounds to the applause of thousands of Prestonians dressed in their Victorian refinery – mothers, fathers, sweethearts, children with smiling faces, servicemen in uniform and the inevitable police constable seated at his desk to ensure good order. In the pit, the maestro's moustache develops a sudden twitch as the orchestral sounds reverberate throughout the house, while the venerable chairman mounts his podium and awaits your devout attention, gavel in hand, before introducing the acts in the finest traditions of music hall nomenclature:

Raise the tabs (curtains) for I proudly present the most popular, most scintillating and devastatingly dependable traditional music hall. A cornucopia of captivating conviviality, packed with song and dance, novelty acts, special guest turns, sidesplitting banter, and audience participation for your sincere unmitigated enjoyment and delight to be presented in the wonderful old theatres of Preston. Join in the good clean fun and family entertainment. At the end of the show even Queen Victoria would be amused I think!