

## **WHO WAS IRVING'S LANDLORD?**

**Michael Kilgarriff**

**G**lancing again through Bram Stoker's *Reminiscences* I was reminded that when Irving gave up control of the Lyceum Theatre there were 'some eighteen years left' on the lease. So who, I wondered idly, owned the freehold? And who held the freehold when he first became the lessee in 1878? I can now reveal, exclusively in these pages, that H.I.'s ground landlord in 1878 was Augustus Walter Arnold, and at the end of H.I.'s independent reign in 1899 the freehold was held by the 'Trustees of the estate of the late Augustus Walter Arnold', who had died ten years earlier.

### **1816**

Right from the start of my investigations I encountered confusion. If Stoker's figure was correct, eighteen years from 1899 takes us to 1917, a date which doesn't square with Görel Garlick's contention that in 1814 Samuel James Arnold had obtained a 97-year lease on 254 Strand at £531 per annum. Nor do Stoker's or Garlick's figures agree with A. E. Wilson that the lease was for 99 years at an annual ground rent of £800, though he does not cite a start date. A fourth version, by Austin Brereton, agrees with Wilson's figure for the ground rent but claims that the lease was for 99 years from 1814. Finally, a history of the Lyceum published in the 1875 *Era Almanack* says that S. J. Arnold acquired a 99-year lease in 1809, though according to Garlick (pp12-14) and every other source this must be erroneous.<sup>1</sup>

We can be sure, however, that S. J. Arnold's Lyceum Theatre a.k.a. Theatre Royal English Opera House—the first theatre in London to be lit by gas—opened on 15 June 1816; in 1830 it was totally destroyed by fire, an all too frequent event in that era. (Over twenty-five years later *The Builder* was to declare, 'The fate of a theatre is to be burned. It seems simply a matter of time.') Despite Arnold having neglected to insure the building, a committee of some two hundred members of the aristocracy and gentry, plus a few leading theatricals, met to support him and to consider the way forward.

### **1834**

The ground landlord at this time was the second Marquis of Exeter whose family had held title to the site since Tudor times. In 1832 he granted Arnold a renewed lease, and a fifth Lyceum, again built to Samuel Beazley's designs and costing £40,000, opened in 1834. The building was situated slightly west of its predecessor with the frontage on Wellington Street, a new thoroughfare constructed to provide access from Waterloo Bridge to Bow Street.

This was the theatre Irving knew. The old site eventually became a shopping arcade which lasted less than a year, to be rebuilt in 1864 as the Strand Musick Hall. Perhaps intimidated by that fanciful k, the public resolutely failed to attend; in 1868 the auditorium was rebuilt as the first Gaiety Theatre, home of 'The Sacred Lamp of Burlesque'.

Samuel James Arnold died on 16 August 1852, at the age of 78, leaving two sons. The elder was Thomas James Arnold and the younger Augustus Walter Arnold, both of whom had been involved in their father's property dealings with Lord Exeter. In 1873, according to Laurence Irving (p230) the lessee of the Lyceum was 'Mr. A. W. Arnold', but all the evidence suggests that A.W.A. was in fact the ground landlord, and had been for some twenty years.<sup>2</sup>

### **1878**

H.I. formally assumed the purple on 31 August 1878, the Lyceum lease showing Sidney Frances Bateman as the lessor and John Henry Brodribb Irving as the lessee. (See Appendix A.) It also shows that Mrs Bateman held her lease from Augustus Walter Arnold, and three years later Augustus offered to sell Irving 'the whole property' for £110,000 (L.I. p379—wrongly indexed as p279). In the event Irving declined the offer, settling for a lease at £4,500 per annum, a decision on which L.I. comments: 'No doubt he took the best advice on the matter. Yet in view of the vast sums he was to spend on reconstructing and improving the theatre, there was to come a time when, if he

had possessed the freehold, this expenditure would have been an asset instead of an irretrievable loss.’<sup>3</sup>

John Culverhouse, curator at Burleigh House, the family seat of the Cecils, informed me that so far as he could determine the Exeter estate had had no financial interest in the Lyceum site since *ca.* 1850. This is confirmed by a memorial (i.e. abstract) dated 1 April 1852:

‘And also reciting that the sd. Brownlow Marquis of Exeter had contracted with the sd. Augustus Walter Arnold for the sale to him of the fee simple in possession of the heredit[ament]s & premises therein after appointed granted or released or intended so to be subject to the therein after Indentures of Release granted to Samuel James Arnold Esq. but free from all other incumbrances....which sd. Building or Theatre is called or known by the name of the Lyceum or New English Opera House Together with the Scene Rooms Dressing Rooms and all other [illegible] Buildings Rooms Staircases and [illegible] whatsoever belonging to or used or occupied or connected with the sd. Theatre’

This would seem to show that, just three months before his death, Samuel James Arnold had been bailed out by his younger son who bought the entire property from Lord Exeter for an undisclosed sum. Despite lengthy searches in the London Metropolitan Archives I have not found any document to settle the matter beyond doubt. Samuel died intestate, but evidence to support the claim may be adduced from the value placed on his estate on 5 February 1853 by the administrator, his elder son, Thomas, at a nominal £100—scarcely the figure one would expect of a prominent West End landowner.

The Lyceum freehold was certainly in Augustus Walter’s possession by the early 1880s, for Clause 4 of his will, dated 13 March 1882, permits the disposal, should the trustees deem it advisable, of ‘my property known as the Lyceum Theatre and any property adjoining thereto’. Thomas’s will, a curiously brief document of only seven lines, was proved on 24 July 1877, and makes no mention of any specific properties, so we may assume that at the time of his death he had no financial interest in the theatre.

Further information has come to light in a deed box, now in the possession of John H. B. Irving, which as well as the August 1878 lease contains a lease between H.I. and A.W. Arnold dated 23 December 1878; why a new lease after only three months? Perhaps this was legal house-keeping to tidy Mrs Bateman out of the picture. There is also a lease between H.I. and A.W.A. dated 6 October 1885 for eight years. Arnold died in 1889 with four years of the lease still to run. If Irving signed a new lease in 1893 with the trustees of the Arnold estate, it must have been for *ca.* twenty-four years, i.e. 1893-99 plus Stoker’s ‘some eighteen years’, running until 1917. This would explain another of the disparities concerning the lapse date of S. J. Arnold’s original lease from Lord Exeter.

## 1899

If we accept that A. W. Arnold was the ground landlord in 1878, who owned the freehold when Irving sold his lease? This proved comparatively easy to discover. In the National Archives I found a document dated 21 February 1899 in which The Theatre Syndicate Ltd (incorporated 3 February) agrees to buy the lease of the Lyceum from Sir Henry Irving and the freehold from Mary Arnold and Charles Hallett (‘Trustees of the estate of the late A.W. Arnold’), and sell both to The Lyceum Theatre Ltd (incorporated only the day before).<sup>4</sup> Mary Arnold was A.W.A.’s widow and Charles Hallett, so far as I can deduce from A.W.A.’s will, was one of the Arnold family solicitors, Hallett & Co.

These transactions having been completed, The Theatre Syndicate Ltd was wound up on 21 June after a mere four months of existence. What had been its purpose? One explanation is that the formation of such a holding company helped to conceal from investors the extent of profit the directors stood to make on flotation. (See Appendix B.)

The first production under the new dispensation, *Robespierre*, opened on 5 April 1899, and once again, after twenty-one years, Henry Irving was an employee. But the elaborate romanticism of the

Lyceum style was increasingly at odds with changing times, and the theatre continued to hemorrhage money. Though the old actor was still revered, Irving's star, like his health, was waning. His final performance at the Lyceum was as Shylock on 19 July 1902; it must have been an unbearably poignant occasion.

### 1903-2006: POSTSCRIPT

After that valedictory performance of *The Merchant of Venice* the Lyceum never re-opened. The upgrading of safety and fire precautions demanded by the L.C.C., plus the costs of redecoration and refurbishment, were estimated at £15-20,000, and on 23 April 1903 the company put the entire property up for sale. (See Appendix C.)

One grandee to show an interest was the Duke of Bedford, for whom Beadel Wood of Gresham Street surveyed the building and adjoining premises, recommending an offer of £95,000. The asking price was £260,000, which Beadel Wood said was 'simply ridiculous'. The highest bid was £244,000 at which sum the property was withdrawn, or so the press reported at the time. But financial realities could not be gainsaid, and subsequent to stormy shareholders' meetings a Liquidator was appointed on 27 November.

After a raucous sale of furnishings and fittings on 2 March 1904, the Lyceum was demolished, only the front portico and part of the rear wall remaining, and the company was wound up on 30 July. The new theatre, designed by Bertie Crewe, opened as a Music Hall on 26 December with Tom Barrasford as licensee. As Irving had predicted the venture failed, and on 13 December 1906 the property was sold to 'an unknown purchaser' for £119,500, which must have represented a huge loss for the original investors. (See Appendix D.)

Land Registry records show that this 'unknown purchaser' was in fact two persons: Henry Lewis Dillman Engleheart and Thomas Maxwell Witham, who, the following year, sold the property back to the Arnold family trust. Even stranger was the discovery that twenty-five years earlier T. Maxwell Witham had been one of the witnesses to A. W. Arnold's will! For me the murky waters of such property manoeuvring remain opaque, and I can offer no rationale for any of this wheeling and dealing.

In May 1910 Walter and Frederick Melville acquired the freehold for £240,000, and the sixth Lyceum was at last enjoying steady hands on the tiller. The brothers ran the theatre profitably until July 1939, when it was compulsorily purchased by the L.C.C. to make way for road improvements. Hitler's War saved the building from such ignominy, and after a number of incarnations as a ballroom, pop venue, bingo hall, television studio and occasional playhouse the Lyceum is now, after a major refurbishment in 1996, once again functioning as a theatre. The freehold is held by The Theatres Trust, and its future is assured.

### APPENDIX A

#### *The Builder*

September 28, 1878

#### 'THE FUTURE OF SADLER'S WELLS AND THE LYCEUM THEATRE

The misunderstanding between Mrs. Bateman and Mr. Henry Irving has resulted in the former becoming the lessee of Sadler's Wells, which has recently been rebuilt... ..we learn that the interior is being handsomely decorated in anticipation of the opening some time before Christmas. Miss Bateman (Mrs. Crowe) is, we understand, to be the leading attraction; and her two sisters, Miss Isabel Bateman and Miss Virginia Bateman, will be members of the company.<sup>5</sup>

With regard to the Lyceum, it is stated that the difference between Mr. Irving and Mrs. Bateman had reference to the personnel of the company. Mr. Irving is said to have told Mrs. Bateman that he was resolved to have *actors* to act with him, and not dolls, otherwise he would no longer play at the Lyceum. The result was that Mrs. Bateman threw up the management of the theatre, and Mr. Irving takes her

place. In an address last week to an audience at the Alexandra Theatre, Liverpool, where he has been performing, Mr. Irving stated that he had not become the manager of the Lyceum solely to make money, but mainly to promote true dramatic art, and in that effort he felt assured he should be supported by his company.'

## APPENDIX B

L.I. (pp624-5) states that the directors of the Syndicate were Joe Comyns Carr, barrister, playwright and friend of Irving's, and his two brothers, one a solicitor and one a financier. It must have been this latter who drafted the well-nigh incomprehensible agreement against which Stoker inveighed so earnestly but which Irving signed. H.I. did, however, accept Stoker's advice not to take a seat on the board of The Lyceum Theatre Ltd. As we have seen, this company was founded on 20 February 1899; with Joseph William Comyns Carr as managing director, the other directors included Frank Curzon (theatrical manager), Charles Eves (chartered accountant), and William Greet (theatrical manager); the chairman was Charles Armstrong, described as managing director of a brewery. While the magic of Irving's name attracted hundreds of shareholders, the theatre's losses soon had the directors at odds. Armstrong resigned on 26 August 1901, Curzon on 17 June 1902, and Greet on 29 October 1902. Greet was replaced by Jacob Oppenheim, a cigar merchant, who in turn resigned on 24 April 1903. This can never have been a happy ship. A Liquidator (William Barclay Peat) was appointed on 27 November 1903, and the troubled company ceased to exist on 30 July 1904.

Three years after Irving's death J. Comyns Carr had the effrontery to write:

'My relations with Irving were not so close or so intimate during the later years of his life, and I prefer to think of him now as I knew him best, before the days of discouragement had overtaken him. Misfortune and bitterness and ill-health made him sometimes suspicious of his friends. In my own case I know he entirely misconceived the motives with which I had sought to recapture for him his threatened position in the theatre he made famous.'

I don't think Irving misconceived Carr's motives at all. The actor had been right royally stitched up; he knew it, and he resented it.

## APPENDIX C

### *The Builder*

9 August 1902

#### 'THE LYCEUM THEATRE

We understand that the share-holders have finally resolved to dispose of the property rather than carry out the structural alterations required by the London County Council at an outlay estimated to exceed 15,000*l.* The company was formed in March, [*sic*] 1899, to acquire for 275,000*l.* the freehold estate—covering 22,700 ft. superficial and valued at 260,000*l.*—of the theatre, with rentals of adjoining premises, and the interest of Sir Henry Irving as lessee. The Lyceum Theatre is one of the oldest established playhouses in the town. It was originally built in 1765 after designs by James Paine, as an academy and exhibition-room under that name for the Incorporated Society of Artists; Garrick purchased the lease from them that the building might not become converted into a theatre... In 1790 one Lingham, of the Strand, a breeches-maker, bought the house and opened it for music performances. Five years afterwards he leased an adjoining plot to Dr Arnold, the composer, who there built a theatre, but by reason of the strong opposition of the Covent Garden and Drury Lane managers his enterprise failed, and the house was used for exhibitions of paintings and various entertainments and shows, amongst them being Winsor's experiments (1803-4) in gas lighting. S. J. Arnold, succeeding his father, enlarged the building in 1809 for his English Opera and Ballet House, which gave way to the new theatre for, it is

said, 80,000*l.* in 1816 after Samuel Beazley's designs, and destroyed by fire on February 16, 1830. The site having been taken for the laying out of Wellington-street, 1829-30, as an approach to Waterloo Bridge, a new theatre was built on the present site that is in that street, at a cost of 35,000*l.* from plans and designs by Beazley, and opened for English Opera on July 14, 1834... Alterations of the interior, with new entrances and exit-doors, and an enlargement of the house by the taking in of the two restaurants on either side of the portico, were effected eleven years ago under C. J. Phipp's superintendence. During thirty years past the fortunes have been closely identified with Sir Henry Irving's dramatic career. Particulars of Sir William Emerson's award in the arbitration before him, as between the London County Council and the proprietors, are given in our number of July 12 last.'

## APPENDIX D

### *The Builder*

1 December 1906

'LYCEUM THEATRE.—In pursuance of an Order of the Court this property, together with Nos. 33-7, Exeter-street, and part of No. 21, Wellington-street, is offered for sale. It covers an area of 23,500 ft. and has a total frontage of 423 ft. The present building is a reconstruction for a music-hall, carried out two years ago by Mr. Bertie Crewe, of the theatre erected in 1831-4, after Samuel Beazley's designs, and enlarged on the sides of the portico by C. J. Phipps in 1891. On April 23 ("Shakespeare's Day"), 1903, the directors of Lyceum, Ltd., offered the freehold property for sale and bought it in at 260,000*l.* Some extensive structural alterations had been required by the London County Council, which the directors were not willing to undertake. The effects and materials having been sold in March of the following year, the rebuilding for a seated audience of 2,800 persons was at once begun by Messrs. J. Parkinson & Sons, of Newcastle and Blackpool, and the new house was opened on December 26 1904.'

## WORKS CONSULTED - all published in London

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & SOURCES

Alex Bisset, British Library, British Library Newspaper Library, Burleigh House, Companies House, Family Records Centre, Garrick Club (Marcus Risdell), Harbottle & Ellis, John H. B. Irving, Land Registry (Harrow office), London Metropolitan Archives, National Archives, Principal Probate Registry, Theatres Trust, Richard Wadhams (Hogbens Dunphy), Westminster City Archives.

## END NOTES

1. A ten-page closely handwritten Indenture in the Middlesex Deeds Registry, numbered 449 and dated 29 July 1851, sheds some light on these discrepancies. It is an abstract—a ‘memorial’— which shows that the site was ‘demised unto the sd. Samuel James Arnold’ on 29 September 1814 for the term of 97 years’, thus agreeing with Görel Garlick. However, it also gives details of seven further properties adjacent to the Lyceum which were leased by Samuel on various occasions in 1815, 1816, 1817, 1832 (after the 1830 fire) and again in 1835. In 1842 the New White Horse public house in the Strand, part of Samuel’s leasehold package, was sold by the Marquis of Exeter for £600 ‘in part liquidation of the arrears of interest due to him’. By 1847, if I interpret the legalese correctly, Samuel was still owing £4,780, a debt which appears to have been paid by his sons, Thomas James Arnold (1803-77), a barrister and translator, and Augustus Walter Arnold (1811-89), a solicitor.

2. In 1847 Augustus Walter Arnold was elected to the Garrick Club, having been proposed by Samuel Beazley, the architect of both the 1816 and the 1834 Lyceum Theatres. In 1873 he seconded H.I.’s re-application to the Club after the notorious blackballing. His description by the Chairman as ‘very nearly the oldest member of the Club’ (L.I. p232) refers to his twenty-seven years’ length of membership rather than his age, which was then only 62. His father was a founder member of the Club in 1831.

3. There was considerable expenditure on the fabric of the theatre even before Irving opened his first season, with many structural and decorative improvements carried out by Alfred Darbyshire, an semi-pro actor with H.I. at Manchester but by 1878 a distinguished architect. In his 1906 book *The Art of the Victorian Stage* Darbyshire wrote, ‘I need not enter into the details of my work at the Lyceum Theatre, done for my friend [i.e. Irving] and to the satisfaction of the Lord Chamberlain and Mr. Arnold, the owner. Suffice it to say that the words were of much importance, and that nothing of historic or art value was injured or destroyed.’ Quoted in Austin Brereton’s *The Life of Henry Irving* (1908) vol 1 p271-2. ‘Mr Arnold’ omitted from the index.

4. An interesting clause in the Agreement states that: ‘the Syndicate reserve the right to nominate four persons to whom the Company shall grant “ivories” conferring the right of free admission to the Lyceum Theatre at all times when in the joint or single occupation of the Company together with the right to occupy any seat in the said theatre (other than one in a box) remaining unsold at the time fixed for the commencement of the play then running in the said theatre.’ That this provision should be included shows the value of the perquisite; such privileged holders’ rights to free admission were originally inscribed on small plaques of ivory.

5. In 1871 Irving was invited to become leading man at the Lyceum by H. L. Bateman. On Bateman’s death in 1875 at the age of 62 responsibility for the theatre passed to his widow, Frances. Three years later, acknowledging that Irving was increasingly restless in the strait-jacket of employee, Mrs Bateman made over the lease to him, decamping with her three competent but uninspiring actress daughters to Sadler’s Wells Theatre, a couple of miles north.

Mrs Bateman died in January 1881 aged 57. There was a fourth actress daughter, Ellen (Mrs Claude Greppo), born 1845. Kate (Mrs George Crowe) was born 1842 and died 1917. Virginia (1855-1940), sometimes billed as Virginia Francis, became Mrs Edward Compton, mother of Fay Compton and Sir Compton Mackenzie. In 1898 Isabel, her life blighted by unrequited passion for H.I., entered an Anglican convent. She died in 1934 aged 79.