

Although London was the centre of theatrical activity, the provinces were not neglected. The earliest of these provincial theatres which still remains today is the Theatre Royal, Bristol. Building was started in November, 1764, and the theatre was opened on the 30th May, 1766. The architect was James Paty,⁵¹ who appears to have based his design on 'an Elevation Ground Plan and Section of a Theatre Drawn by Mr. Saunders Carpenter of Drury Lane Play House' which were produced at a meeting of the proprietors on 3rd December, 1764.⁵² Although representatives of the proprietors 'surveyed and have taken the Measurements of both the playhouses in London, and have also engaged a draft of Drury-lane h^o and consulting a very ingenious Carpenter Mr Saunderson the carpenter of the h^o'⁵³ and had also sent for a Model of Drury Lane,⁵⁴ it is not clear if the drawings sent by Mr Saunders were measured drawings of Drury Lane in its then condition, or designs for a theatre prepared by him. The phrasing of the minute 'of a Theatre' and the fact that Saunders, the following year, designed a New Theatre (p.116) at Richmond, Surrey, which differed from the fan-shaped plan of both Covent Garden and Drury Lane in that its boxes formed a kind of crescent, suggests the latter. Nevertheless, in size the Bristol theatre must have been based on Drury Lane, as we learn from a contemporary comment⁵⁵ that a miscalculation on the part of the workmen engaged in setting out the foundations would have meant that 'the House would have been 8 feet larger in the Clear, than the Theatre Royal in Drury-Lane.' In fact the approximate overall dimensions of the main building, 122 feet by 55 feet, do exceed those of Wren's original building by some 10 feet in length, but are some 2 feet 6 inches to 3 feet narrower in width. The backstage areas at Bristol are very similar in their general arrangement, of a vista stage flanked by dressing rooms, to that noted in Wren's building.

The reconstruction of the theatre shown here (fig.76), represents the building as it was

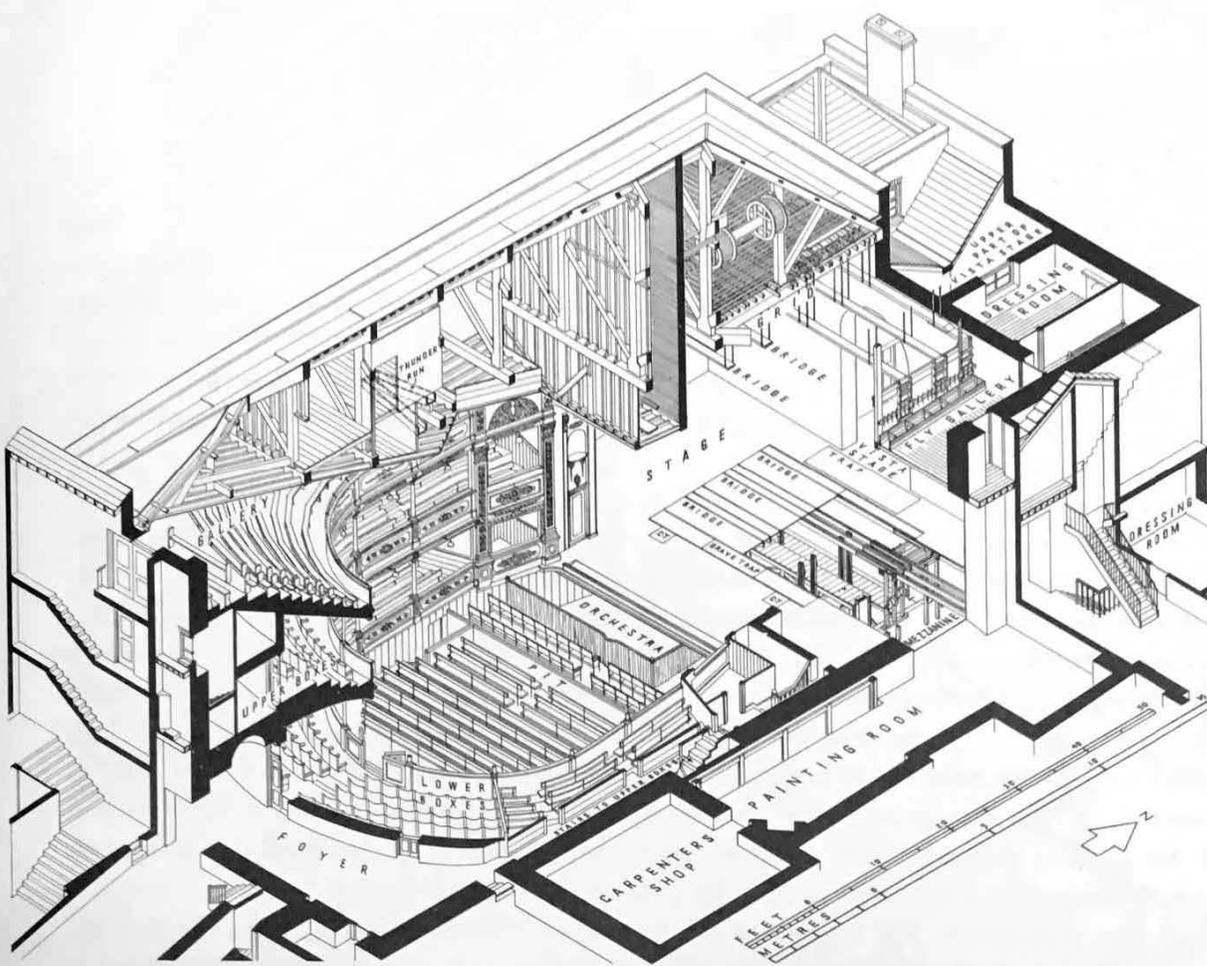


Fig.76. The Theatre Royal, Bristol, James Paty, 1764-6: scale reconstruction

Fig.77. The Theatre Royal, Bristol: auditorium 1943

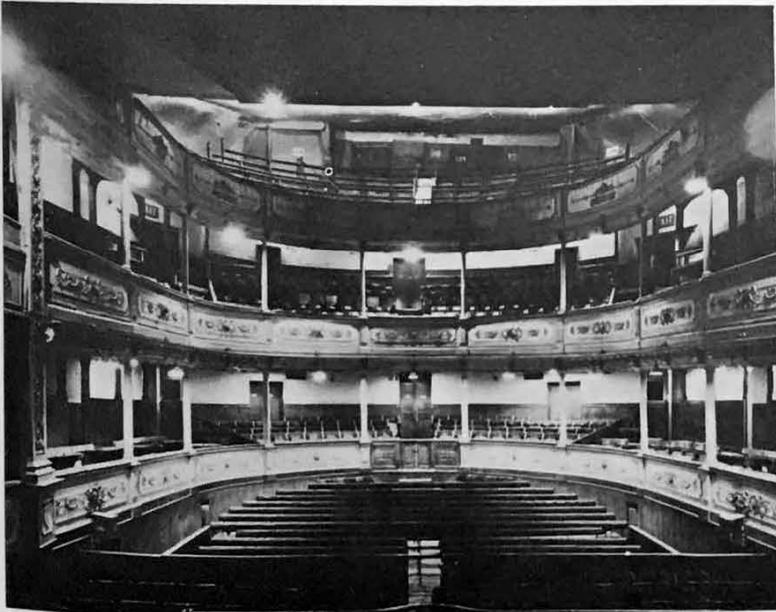
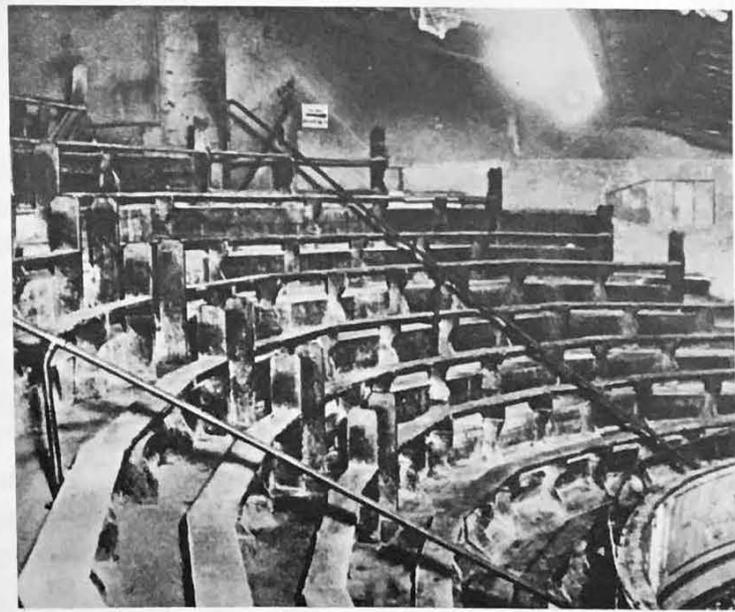


Fig.78. The Theatre Royal, Bristol: the gallery before the alterations of 1948



prior to the alterations of 1948, and as such it does not show it in its original form. Some features from the original building are, however, immediately apparent, the most notable being the four great pilasters flanking the sides of what would originally have been the proscenium stage, which projected some 9 feet further into the auditorium from the present stage front. This feature reflects the pattern already noted at this date in both the Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres, and such an arrangement was to be expected in any theatre with pretensions to grandeur.

In view of the interest in these London theatres it is not surprising to find this feature here, nor is it surprising to note that these pilasters splay outwards so that those at the front of the former stage were 4 feet further apart than the upstage pair. Beyond this point, however, the line of the box fronts changes direction and the outward splay is considerably reduced. At a distance some 2 feet 3 inches short of two bays width, the box fronts curve around on a semi-circle to enclose the pit. At first sight the lines of the box fronts might have been expected to continue the extreme fan-shape set by the first – proscenium – bay, which would then more nearly have accorded with the plan shape to be seen at both London theatres, but this arrangement may by now have been considered one of the imperfections of the London theatres which Saunders improved on when he designed the Richmond, Surrey, theatre 'as a kind of crescent' (p.116), an idea which he may have introduced to the Bristol proprietors. The suggestion has been advanced that this could well be the first use of the continental type of horseshoe auditorium (fig.67) in this country,⁵⁶ although it is possible that it is antedated by the Frankfort Gate Theatre, opened in Plymouth in 1758.⁵⁷

The pit would no doubt have been fitted with benches, but at this time they would almost certainly have been backless. It was entered through side doors set sufficiently far from the then stage front to permit the introduction of an orchestra pit some 4 feet wide. When originally built the theatre had nine lower or dress boxes encircling the pit, above which were six upper boxes, three on each side of a central gallery. It is suggested⁵⁸ that there was originally no third tier or upper gallery, but if this was the case then the springing line of the roof trusses seems to have been unnecessarily high, being some 6 to 7 feet above the point where a ceiling might reasonably be assumed to have been situated. In 1779 alterations were carried out when additional boxes were introduced into the second tier to form upper front boxes. A writer of the period described how, prior to these alterations, he used to wait 'at the Gallery door and when the door opened scampered up the stairs and then down a long row of benches for the pleasure of sitting exactly over the King's Arms, thinking it delightful to be there one hour before the candles were lighted and two before the performance began!'⁵⁹ It would seem from this description as though the centre box at the lower level was designated as the Royal Box with a coat of arms displayed above. At some later date this box front was broken through to provide a more direct access to the pit. During these 1779 alterations 'a large Commodious Scene Room', an elegant tea room and other accommodation were all added. Access to the side boxes was by a passage along the back from a foyer situated beyond a solid curved wall enclosing the rear of the audi-

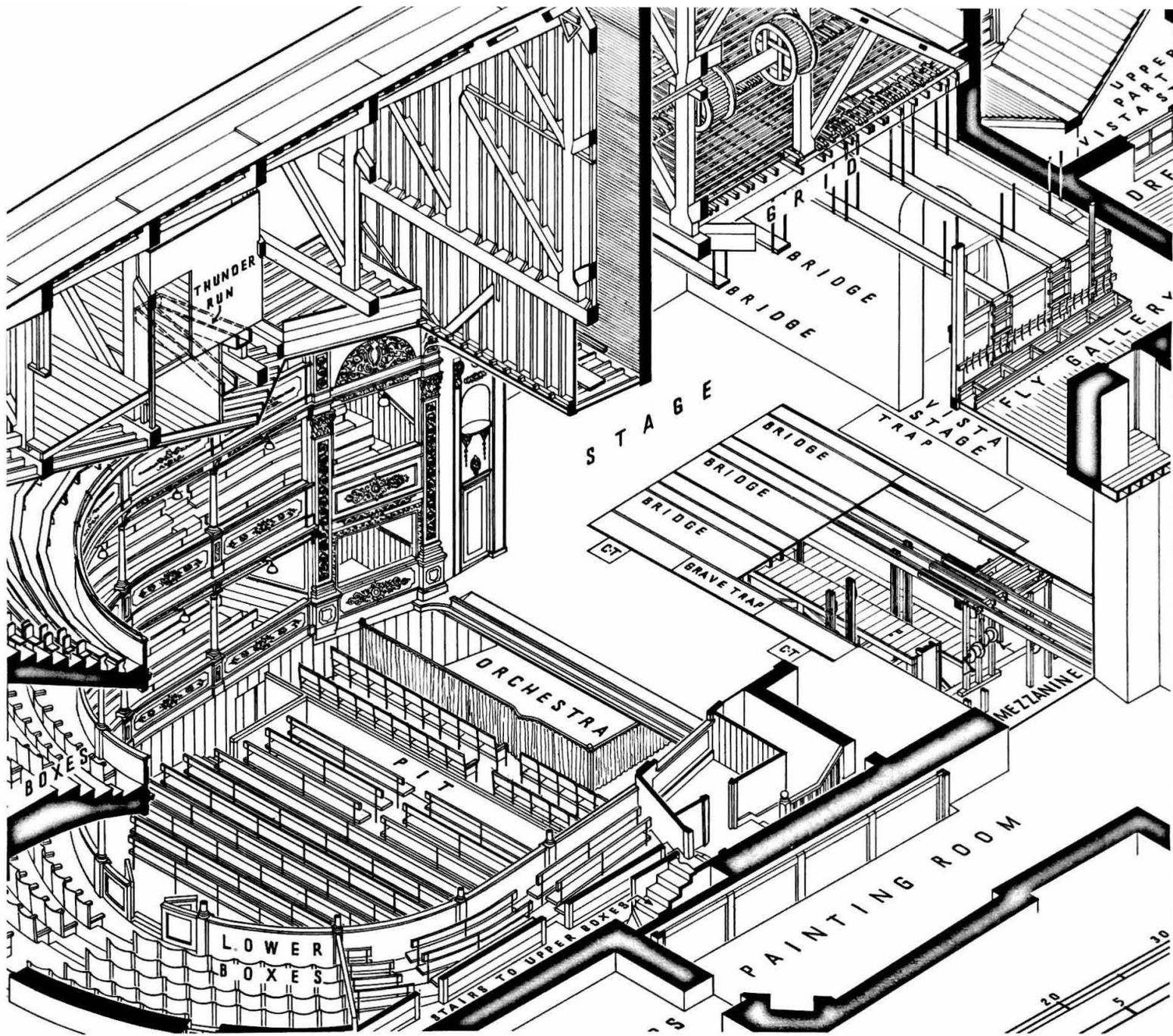


Fig. 79. The Theatre Royal, Bristol: detail of Fig. 76

torium, the two tiers of side passages being linked by winding stairs (fig.64) built into the thickness of the side walls. In 1800 further alterations included the raising of the ceiling to permit the introduction of the present gallery, and presumably the slips. In 1831 a new stage was installed, the wing space enlarged, and a new staircase built to the upper circle, together with improved access to the side boxes and slips.

There are a few spaces in the roof which were floored in, presumably for use as store rooms of one kind or another, and attached to the central roof truss over the auditorium is a thunder run, consisting of wooden channels in which cannon balls could be set running to shake the house with their movement and noise. It is highly possible that until the reconstruction of the stage in 1831, the whole of the roof space throughout the length of the building would have been used as a carpenter's shop, as was the normal practice (p.190).

There was a single fly floor, or gallery, on either side of the stage, sloping up parallel with the stage. Some of the items mentioned in the Covent Garden inventory (p.110), which could not be shown on the reconstruction of that theatre for lack of visual evidence, may now be seen here (fig.79). The grave trap and two corner traps (C.T.) are clearly indicated, as are also the wheels and barrels shown above the open grid floor attached to the roof trusses over the stage. This grid, and the nature and purpose of the other openings in the stage floor, dating as they most probably do from 1831, will be discussed when buildings of that period are dealt with (p.208).

Saunders' New Theatre at Richmond, in Surrey, was opened on Saturday, 15th June, 1765.⁶⁰ It

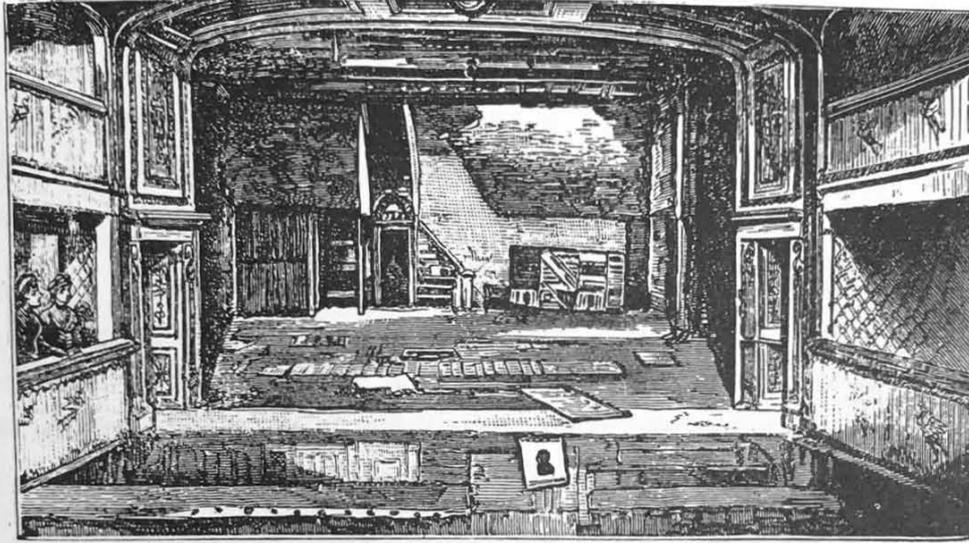
'was considered to be a marvel of elegance and completeness. "In it", says a newspaper of the day, "every imperfection in either of the Royal theatres of Drury Lane or Covent Garden is carefully avoided, and every advantage retained; the boxes form a kind of crescent, which renders them commodious; the lobby is as spacious as either of the above theatres; there is but one gallery, which, however, turns out to the advantage of the audience, as it prevents the necessity of having pillars which obstruct the view. The pite is small, but that seems no inconveniency, as the principal part of the spectators occupy the boxes; a handsome space is allowed for the orchestra; and the panels, in place of being ornamented with a ginger-bread stucco, are painted of a dark colour, which gives the stage an additional degree of light when the curtain is drawn up. The scenes are elegant, and by the connoisseurs the whole is reckoned for its size to be much the best constructed theatre in the British dominions.'"'

Drawings of the theatre (figs.80a.b.), presumably prepared shortly before its final demolition in 1884, suggest that the auditorium had changed little from the above description. The boxes were separated by the usual low partitions, and those facing the stage each had its own door, as did also the side boxes. On a visit of George III and Queen Charlotte, who would presumably have been seated in one of the stage boxes, those members of the public unable to obtain a seat in the auditorium, which was crowded to excess, were charged by an enterprising management 'for a peep at the august party through the small, glazed, circular apertures of the opposite box-door.'

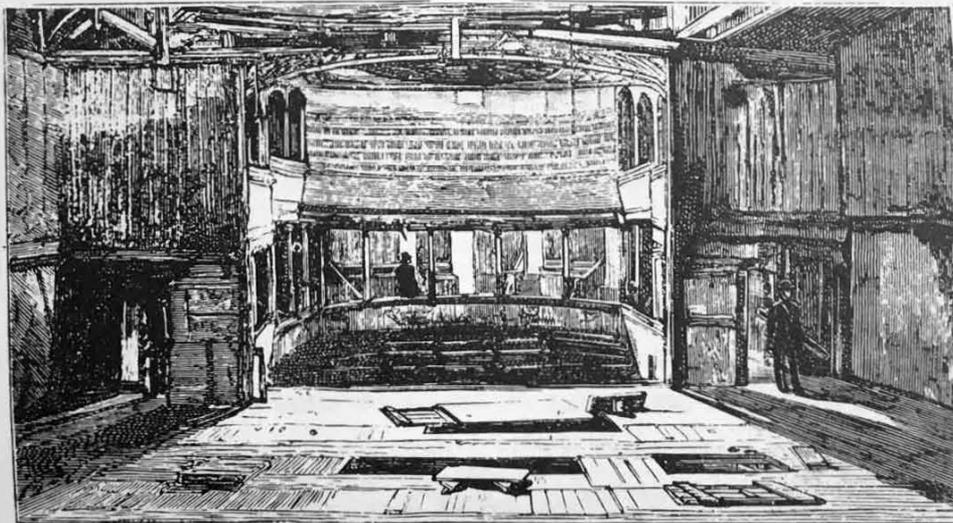
A pair of proscenium doors faced each other across the stage, each set obliquely to the box fronts, and constructed under an arch of the same width as the pilastered walls containing the doors. A further drawing⁶¹ shows a pit passage beneath the side boxes, with a door at the end leading to the understage areas, and with an indication of an adjoining door on the left which would have led up into the pit.

A further provincial theatre which it is claimed⁶² was based on Wren's Drury Lane 'at least as far as the interior is concerned', although the exterior is perhaps more reminiscent of Vanbrugh's Opera House, was the Theatre built in 1757 in Norwich. This building was opened in 1758. In 1800 it was thoroughly adapted, with a number of external additions

providing for greater width within the building. The boxes and gallery were rebuilt on an oval plan, with four private boxes next to the stage. The stage too, was rebuilt with the scenes 'worked on an improved principle, by which all the wings are moved at once. Within the first entrance are inward wings which hide the actors from the view of the spectators in the boxes till they make their appearance on the stage.' A description, following further re-decorations carried out in 1813 and 1819, shows that the pit was bounded by three tiers of boxes arranged in an elliptical curve, the centre tier being the dress boxes.



(a) stage from auditorium



(b) auditorium from stage