JEAN NAPIER BAKER

THEATRE IN THE PROVINCES IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURIES, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SARAH BAKER IN KENT

Presented for Examination for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
University of Kent at Canterbury
September, 2000

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ABSTRACT

There are four major dimensions to this thesis the focus of which is the provincial theatre of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The first concerns the activities of Sarah Baker (1736/37 - 20 February, 1816), the Kentish theatrical manager and entrepreneur, whose life and work have not only provided the data on which this study is based but, also, the inspiration for the whole project. Secondly, in order to understand and add historiographical perspective to her achievements, Sarah's career is considered in the context of the wider world in which she lived. Although the evidence indicates that, by and large, her professional life was dictated by events and concerns far removed from the day to day existence over which she had any personal control, it is also clear that her activities had a dynamic and relevance all of their own and made an important contribution in shaping the nature and character of the volatile and rapidly changing society in which she lived and worked. In the third place, Sarah's career is examined in the light of existing accounts of the eighteenth century provincial theatre and the fact that much of what has emerged about her activities does not fit happily with many of these theories has prompted the fourth and final dimension to this study. This involves an investigation into provincial theatre in the country as a whole at that time and, here, the parallels, similarities and connections with Sarah's operation in Kent suggest that a reassessment of the place and significance of the provincial theatre in the broader history of the eighteenth century is long overdue.

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INTRODUCTION

There are four major dimensions to the study that I have undertaken on the provincial theatre of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The first of these concerns the activities of Sarah Baker, the Kentish theatrical manager and entrepreneur, who was born in 1736/37 and died on 20 February 1816.[1] Her life and career have not only provided the data on which this account is based but also the inspiration for the whole project. In the second place it has been my purpose to gain some sort of perspective on Sarah's achievements by looking at them in the context of events and concerns of the wider world in which she lived and, thereby, also learn something of the role and place of the provincial theatre in that period. My third objective has been to consider what I have discovered about Sarah's theatrical career in the light of the existing literature on the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century and, finally, to use my knowledge of Sarah's activities as a starting point for a wider investigation into provincial theatre on a national scale.

Having decided that the provincial theatre of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was to be the subject of this study I was surprised to discover that, although many interesting individual studies have been published on various aspects of provincial theatre history,[2] little work has been done on its place in the wider historical context of those times. I was also disconcerted to find that general accounts of the history of theatre in this country focus overwhelmingly on London while provincial theatre history is treated as something of an irrelevance. This has meant that it is often ignored altogether, dismissed in a few perfunctory paragraphs, or, most frequently, treated as a mere adjunct to the theatre history of the capital.

Even standard works on the theatre have little to say on the subject. For example, *The Revels History of Drama in English*, in other respects a valuable and useful source of information, devotes less than one of 295 pages in Volume V (1660-1750) to the

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[1] Norma Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker (1936/37), "Governess-General of the Kentish Drama" from *Studies in English Theatre History* (Society for Theatre Research, 1952)', (Incomplete, typed manuscript in Canterbury Cathedral Archives), p.1; *Kentish Gazette*, 23 February, 1816.

[2] See 'Bibliography' below, pp.277-288, for examples.

provincial theatre.[3] In retrospect, it is also disconcerting that the Licensing Act of 1737, which aimed such a devastating blow at provincial players by ensuring that the activities of most of them remained illegal for the next half century, should have been considered by *Revels* solely in terms of its impact upon the London theatre.[4] Compounding this negative approach to provincial theatre history is the fact that Volume VI's Chronological Table of 'theatrical events' from 1737-1884 makes no mention of the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788. Neither is this act which restored the provincial theatre at large to legitimacy that year mentioned in the index to this volume.[5] In terms of what I have since discovered about Sarah Baker and the provincial theatre of this period this is a grave and misleading omission.

As one of the major purposes of my study was to consider the data that I have amassed on Sarah Baker's life and career in the context of the existing literature on the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century I turned first to what is probably, still, the most influential and important work on the subject, Sybil Rosenfeld's *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces 1660-1765* which was published more than sixty years ago in 1939.[6] There is a mass of evidence here that shows that despite the intentions of the Licensing Act, theatre continued to flourish outside of London. Rosenfeld concentrated her provincial study on what she considered the 'most productive centre' for each point of the compass, namely, Norwich, York, Bath and Canterbury and described the country as 'pretty well covered' with companies of strolling players in those years. She makes reference in her introduction both to the Licensing Act of 1737 and also to the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788 although the latter falls outside the time-span of her book.

In this work Rosenfeld states that 'everywhere during the decade 1755-65 new and imposing theatres were being built [as] inn-yards or rooms, booths and town halls were gradually replaced in the chief cities by playhouses, constructed only for purposes of

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[3] T.W. Craik (gen. ed.), *The Revels History of Drama in English, Vol. V, 1660-1750* (London, 1976), p.140.
[4] Ibid., pp.30-32.
[5] Clifford Leech and T.W. Craik (gen. eds.), *The Revels History of Drama in English, Vol. VI, 1750-1880* (London, 1975).
[6] Sybil Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces* (Cambridge, 1939).

acting'. This she maintained 'marked the end of the period of subterfuge and makeshift' and ushered in a new era of recognition and acknowledgment'.[7]

My thesis will question the accuracy of this statement and because the influence of Rosenfeld's work is acknowledged, or can be detected, in many subsequent interpretations of the history of the provincial theatre of that period, will also challenge other long-standing theories. One of the most stimulating and enduring of these is that put forward by J.H. Plumb in the early 1970s.[8] The picture that he presents of the provincial theatre is as a component of a 'leisure industry' that, he suggests, was already well established by the 1760s. By that time, Plumb contends, every town of any pretension had a well built theatre and a regular company and the days of strolling companies performing in barns and the like were already a thing of the past. Plumb identifies the Assembly Room as marking the transitional stage between elite, private culture and fully public entertainment and describes how culture 'seeped through to the masses and so became more commercially viable' by this route.[9]

Plumb's model has been widely accepted and has inspired much of the work that has since been done on the role and character of the provincial theatre in the eighteenth century. Peter Burke, for example, takes these theories one stage further and comments how '...one might have expected the English to be the pioneers of this early industrial revolution in entertainment'. He also claims that with entertainment, '...as elsewhere in the eighteenth century economy, large scale enterprises drove out small ones...' so that as the century progressed small companies of strolling players simply ceased to exist.[10] Peter Borsay, too, presents the provincial theatre as integral to the development of the fashionable urban leisure scene and maintains that it was implicated in the widening cultural gap that opened up between polite and popular society in the eighteenth century. As an example of the crucial role that leisure played in separating the ranks Borsay cites

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[7] Ibid., p.2.
[8] J.H. Plumb, 'The Public, Literature and the Arts in the Eighteenth Century', in P. S. Fritz and D. Williams (eds.), *The Triumph of Culture* (Toronto, 1972) and, J.H. Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure in Eighteenth-century England* (Reading, 1973).
[9] Plumb, 'The Public Literature and the Arts...', p.44.
[10] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), p.249.

the Licensing Act of 1737 as part of the drive to reinforce the exclusivity of polite culture in the theatre.[11]

This, then, is the predominant picture of the eighteenth century provincial theatre that anyone who has read the secondary literature on the subject will have acquired. It has also provided a fundamental point of reference for the work that I have done on Sarah's life and career. Although some useful work has been published in more recent years on various aspects of provincial theatre history[12] and Tim Harris has instigated further debate on the complexities of the cultural dynamics of early modern England, disappointingly, neither he nor any of the contributors to his book have anything new to say on the role of the provincial theatre in its broader historical context.[13] Like others who have written on the history of leisure or culture before him, Harris, too, at the end of the twentieth century, is still stressing the point that much work remains to be done on virtually every aspect of the cultural history of this country and calls for further research and exploration. Back in 1974 Plumb also commented that he was surprised that both economic and social historians had 'scarcely paid attention' to the early history of leisure in this country. Some years later Borsay, too, called for more research into the 'formidable body of recreational law' of the eighteenth century. In 1989 J. Jefferson Looney in an article on the cultural life in the provinces also noted that '...despite initial enthusiasm little advance has been made in understanding eighteenth-century leisure' and added to this that 'local case studies are badly needed'.[14]

In so saying Jefferson Looney put his finger upon one of the difficulties that has beset research into the history of the provincial theatre as lack of satisfactory or substantial data upon which to base theories and arguments is one of the problems inherent in researching this subject. It is also, undoubtedly, one of the reasons why the history of the provincial theatre has been so neglected. In this context Rosenfeld has written about

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[11] Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance, Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660-1770* (Oxford, 1989), p.304.
[12] See 'Bibliography' below, pp.277-288, for examples.
[13] Tim Harris, 'Problematising Popular Culture', in Tim Harris (ed.), *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500-1850* (Basingstoke, 1995) pp.1-27.
[14] Plumb, *The Commercialization of Leisure*, p.3; Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance*, p.304; J. Jefferson Looney, 'Cultural life in the provinces: Leeds and York, 1720-1820', in A.L.Beier, D.Cannadine & James M. Rosenheim (eds.), *The First Modern Society: Essays in English History in Honour of Lawrence Stone* (Cambridge, 1989), p.484.

how chance incidence of material in part dictated 'the arbitrary selection of towns' she included in her study of provincial theatre in the years 1660-1765. She also notes the relative ease of researching a company whose circuit included a town which had a local paper compared with those who did not. This fact, in addition to the 'glimpses and stray hints' upon which most theories concerning provincial theatre history are necessarily based can, as Rosenfeld was well aware, result in a distorted version of reality.[15]

Similar considerations have also been very much in my mind as I have worked on the data that I have collected on Sarah's activities. In many ways, however, I have been extremely fortunate as, although inevitably there are gaps, the information I have compiled does amount to considerably more than 'glimpses and stray hints'. In large part this is due to the interest and hard work of others. My own first encounter with Sarah was in the archives of the Folkestone public library where I found some hand-written notes indicating that she had once owned a theatre on the Bayle in the town.[16] It was not long before I discovered that I was far from the first to have been inspired to find out more about Sarah Baker and that some work had already been done on her life. Especially notable in this respect are Norma Hodgson's *Sarah Baker (1736/37-1816) 'Governess General of the Kentish Drama'*, which I first came across as an incomplete, typed manuscript in the Canterbury Cathedral archives and, later as a published article.[17] In addition to this, I also owe a considerable debt to John Morris's unpublished manuscript, *Taking the Town: A compleat and authentic account of Thespian Activity in the County of Kent 1737-1843*.[18] This work was brought to my notice by Dr. Jack Reading of The Society for Theatre Research and is an invaluable source of information, not only about Sarah Baker but also about the activities of other theatrical managers and entrepreneurs in Kent during this period. Rosenfeld's articles on the London fairs and

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[15] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, p.3.
[16] This was a photocopy of the Folkestone section of Peter Davey's unpublished manuscript, 'Chronicles of the old country theatres of southern England', now kept at the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden.
[17] Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker', (manuscript version); Norma Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker (1736/37), "Governess General of the Kentish Drama" ', in M. St. Clare Byrne (ed.), *Studies in English Theatre History in Memory of Gabrielle Enthoven, O.B.E.* (London, 1952).
[18] John Morris, *Taking the Town: a compleat and authentic account of Thespian Activity in the county of Kent 1737-1843* (Unpublished manuscript, Theatre Museum, London).

the players in Cambridge have also provided some valuable information about Sarah's whereabouts in her earlier years.[19]

The work of other people has also led me on to make discoveries of my own and through the use of primary sources I have been able to add considerably to what is known of Sarah's career. Local histories have supplied details about some of her theatres, and archives in the museums and libraries of all the towns where she built her theatres have filled in some of the gaps. I have also consulted the letters written to James Winston by some of Sarah's associates containing information for inclusion in *The Theatric Tourist*, his work on the provincial theatre.[20] In respect of *The Theatric Tourist* itself, A.L. Nelson's unpublished manuscript which includes photocopies of the original publication has given me access to this valuable document. In addition to this I have made good use of Winston's own notebooks in the theatre collection at Harvard University.[21] Sight of Sarah's Will and of the 1846 Sale particulars of her theatres[22] has also been crucial to my research while in terms of her entertainments, playbill collections in this country and the United States have been a valuable resource. Above all, Sarah's own advertisements, particularly those in the *Kentish Gazette* have proved an invaluable source of information about the nature of her company's entertainments as well as providing other insights in many unexpected ways.

Augmenting this material, the memoirs of Sarah's contemporaries, most notably that of Thomas Dibdin, a lifelong friend who, from a young age had worked, on and off, with her company over many years, have supplemented the facts and added a more personal dimension to my understanding of her life.[23] The same is true of articles written in the mid-nineteenth century for the *Era* by the actress Catherine Feist, who as a very young woman had been a member of Sarah's company for three years. These articles also

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[19] S. Rosenfeld, 'The Players in Cambridge 1662-1800', in M. St. Clare Byrne (ed.), *Studies in English Theatre History in Memory of Gabrielle Enthoven, O.B.E.* (London, 1952).
[20] James Winston, *The Theatric Tourist* (1805).
[21] '*The Theatric Tourist*' Collection, Birmingham Public Library; A.L. Nelson, *James Winston's Theatric Tourist, a Critical Edition with a Biography and a Census of Winston Material* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The George Washington University, 1968), Theatre Museum, London; James Winston's 'Theatric Tourist' notebooks, Ref. No. TS 1335.211, Harvard Theatre Collection.
[22] Sarah's Will, Ref. No. Prob. 11, 1582, Family Records Centre, Myddleton Street, London; Particulars and Conditions of Sale of Sarah's Freehold Theatres and other Property, Guildhall Museum Archive, Rochester.

provide valuable insights into Sarah's personality, her family and her style of management.[24] Although there may well be other sources yet to be discovered, I have, I believe, ended up with a reasonably comprehensive and reliable account of the life and career that has inspired this project.

The bare essentials of Sarah's life are that she lived from 1735/36 until 1816. From obscure beginnings as one of the two daughters of itinerant strolling players, by the end of her life she had become one of the most successful provincial theatrical managers and entrepreneurs of her day. Throughout her career Sarah's company remained a largely family business with four generations that included her mother, sister, cousins, children and grandchildren involved in its activities. Non-family members of the company also often stayed and worked with her for many years. In addition to this, players came and went, some of them going on to find work, or even make their names, elsewhere in the country and then returning for another spell with her company. Little is known of the first thirty years or so of Sarah's life as she travelled the country with her mother's troupe of players but from the 1770s she began to make her name in Kent and in later life was well-known to her contemporaries. It was not until 1789, however, when she was well over fifty years of age, that her first 'great, grand theatre' was opened in Orange Street, Canterbury. Two years after this theatre was finished Sarah purchased the adjoining house for her own use. Both her Canterbury and her Tunbridge Wells theatres, the latter of which she erected in 1802, still stand to this day. Sarah also built two other proper purpose-built theatres, at Rochester in 1791 and at Maidstone in 1798. At Rochester she also constructed an adjoining house for her own use when she was in town and at Maidstone, too, there was 'a dwelling house in front' which she used for her own accommodation. Sarah's complex and detailed Will also reveals that she owned a wooden theatre at Faversham and premises in Folkestone and at Ore near Hastings in Sussex which she also used as theatres. As well as providing valuable information about the extent of her theatrical 'empire' Sarah's Will also demonstrates that she died a

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[23] T.J. Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vols. 1 & 2 (London, 1827).

[24] Photocopies of Mrs. Feist's articles published in the *Era* between 5 June & 7 August 1853 were kindly given to me by Mr. Alexander Bisset of the Society for Theatre Research.

wealthy woman with an estate that has been calculated to have been worth something over £16,000.[25]

As well as looking at Sarah's life and work in relation to the existing literature on the provincial theatre of that period, it has also been my purpose to consider her career in the context of her own times. In so doing it has been my intention to discover something of the factors, both social and political, that contributed to her extraordinary success in such, seemingly, inauspicious circumstances. This, I hoped, would also provide new insights into the role and character of the provincial theatre itself in terms of its relationship with the wider world of which it was a part. Of the seven chapters of which this study is comprised, numbers 1-5 are therefore concerned with the political and social considerations that, I believe, were fundamental to the course that Sarah's life and career was to take. In these chapters I have engaged, wherever possible, with the work done by other historians but have also explored the issues concerned for myself and have made wide use of a number of primary sources.

The parliamentary legislation that defined and dictated the character of the provincial theatre throughout Sarah's life from 1736/37 until her death on 20 February 1816 has been the subject of the first two chapters. In Chapter 1 I have concentrated on the Licensing Act and the years 1737-1788 and considered how, and why, it remained possible for Sarah and her family to continue their theatrical activities throughout this period of illegality for the provincial theatre. Chapter 2 deals with the concerns and preoccupations of the 'crisis years' of the late 1770s and 1780s and contains a detailed study of the background and passage of the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788, which uncovers new evidence that demonstrates how closely Sarah's fortunes were linked to issues far removed from her own everyday existence. In the third chapter I consider the significance and impact of this legislation on Sarah's life and give a description of the seven theatres that are mentioned in her Will.

The Theatrical Representations Act was not the only factor involved in Sarah's increasing prosperity in the last decade of the eighteenth century and in order to

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[25] For more see Chapter 3 below, 'Sarah and her theatres', pp.70-71.

understand more of her achievements and relationship with the society in which she lived and worked, I have investigated the impact of the French wars on her theatrical activities in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 is concerned with eighteenth-century attitudes towards gender and work and whether or not it was as exceptional as it would seem for a woman to take on a managerial/ entrepreneurial role such as Sarah did at this time.

Having, in Chapters 1-5, investigated the ways in which the affairs of the world at large were deeply implicated in the progress and character of Sarah's career, in Chapter 6 I consider the impact she, through her theatres, made on the life of the rapidly evolving urban environment in which she began to prosper in the 1790s. I do this in the context of the debate about the development of class at that time and, in the process, consider Sarah's own social standing and the ways in which she established herself as an individual in the towns where she built her theatres. In this chapter I also argue that Sarah's activities influenced the character and nature of the society in which she and her company were based and that, in themselves, her theatres can be regarded as a catalyst for change.

In the final chapter of this study I look in some detail at the existing literature on provincial theatre and test what I have learned of Sarah's life and work against this model. In so doing I outline the very alternative picture that my examination of Sarah's micro-history has suggested of the role and place of provincial theatre at this period. Here, too, I also set out the reasons that, I believe, account for the discrepancies between what I have discovered and the conventional view. In this final chapter, using the Sarah Baker data as a starting point, I also consider the extent and diversity of theatrical activity in the country as a whole and draw attention to the parallels, similarities and direct connections between companies in other parts of the country and Sarah's theatrical activities in Kent. The results of this exercise, as I will demonstrate, have considerable implications for the way in which the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century is currently regarded and also underline the fact that a reappraisal of its role in the general history of this country is long overdue.

CHAPTER 1

SETTING THE SCENE: SURVIVING THE LICENSING ACT, 1737-1788

Sarah Baker was unique in many ways, but so was the century in which she lived and eventually established her reputation as one of the foremost provincial theatrical entrepreneurs of her day. While there is no doubt that much of her success was due to her personal qualities alone, the fact remains that her fortunes were also inextricably linked to the changing social and political scene in which she lived and worked. In order to understand and fully appreciate the extent and significance of her achievements and, therefore, learn something of the provincial theatre itself, it has been my purpose to place Sarah in the context of her times and explore some of the ways in which the attitudes and values of the world into which she was born, in 1736 or 1737, impacted upon her life and career.

The laws relating to the theatre are an appropriate place to start and for this reason my investigation begins with the Licensing Act of 1737.[1] This Act, whose draconian intention was to restrict all theatrical activity to only two London theatres, also introduced strict new censorship laws and removed the authority of the magistracy, both in the provinces and in London, to grant theatrical licences. Although some rights were restored to the London magistracy in 1752 it was not for another 36 years, with the passage of the Theatrical Representations Act [2] in 1788, that the powers of provincial magistrates were similarly restored. In the meantime, for the half century from the year of her birth until 1788, all Sarah's professional activities, and those of other provincial players took place in flagrant transgression of the law.

Despite the severity of the Licensing Act and the many other difficulties inherent in 'the strolling life' Sarah and her company not only survived during this period but, by 1788, were firmly established in Kent. They were thus well placed to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the Theatrical Representations Act of that year. To ascertain how it was that, until then, Sarah and her company were able to prosper in such

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[1] 10 Geo. II, c. 28.

inauspicious circumstances, I will also consider the importance of her relationship with the provincial magistracy as it was they who played the key role both in implementing and in enforcing the law in the provinces throughout the eighteenth century. Although divested by the Licensing Act of any legal right to authorize theatrical entertainments in the areas under their control the fact remained that, even in these circumstances, it was still very much upon their goodwill that Sarah and her company depended for their professional survival.[3]

The Licensing Act of 1737

The Licensing Act or 'Gagging Act', as it was popularly known, aimed at the virtual elimination of all theatrical activity in this country and the imposition of strict government controls on that that remained. While failing dismally in its immediate overall objective this legislation nonetheless exerted a powerful and enduring influence on the form and character of the British theatre that was still in evidence right up until 1968.[4] In 1737, however, nowhere was the impact and effect of this legislation more evident than in the provinces where all theatrical activity had been outlawed and, at least for the majority of those involved, would remain so until 1788.

The act that imposed this illiberal regime was presented in the form of an amendment to the Vagrant Act of 12 Queen Anne, its stated intention being to extend and make its powers more effectual specifically with regard to: '...every Person who shall, for Hire, Gain, or Reward, act, represent, or perform, ...any Interlude, Tragedy, Comedy, opera, Play, ffarce or other Entertainment of the Stage or any part or parts therein... without Authority by virtue of Letters Patent from his Majesty, his Heirs, Successors, or Predecessors, or without Licence from the Lord Chamberlain of his Majesty's Houshold...'.[5]

By far the most important clause of this act from the provincial viewpoint was the one that stipulated that from 24 June 1737 no theatrical activity whatsoever would be

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[2] 28 Geo. III. c.30.

[3] Sarah and her company's ability to survive in these circumstances was by no means unique. see Chapter 7.

[4] The clause in this act that required government censorship of new plays continued in force until the Theatres Act of 1968. See. Vincent J. Liesenfeld. *The Licensing Act of 1737* (Wisconsin. 1984). p.3.

permitted outside the confines of '... the City of Westminster, and within the Liberties thereof and in such places where his Majesty, his Heirs or Successors, shall in their Royal Persons reside, and during such Residence only'. [6] Whatever the other provisions of this act, it was this one that mattered most in the country as a whole as the activities of a thriving network of theatrical troupes and individual players were now prohibited and, for the majority at least, would remain so for the next fifty-one years.

The consequences for any player caught breaking this law were formidable as, under the terms of this act, they were '...liable and subject to all such penalties and punishments, and by such Methods of Conviction, as are inflicted on, or appointed by the said Act for the punishment of Rogues and Vagabonds...'.[7] The act also warned that '..if any Person ...act, represent, or perform, or cause to be acted, represented, or performed ...any Interlude, Tragedy, Comedy, Opera, Play, Farce or other Entertainment of the Stage, or any Part or Parts therein, every such Person shall for every such Offence forfeit the Sum of fifty Pounds...'. [8] This was a considerable amount and the means by which these fines could be levied by the sale of the offender's 'Goods and Chattels' were also set out by the act with the informer or person 'suing or prosecuting' having the right to one half of the penalty or fine while the other half went to the poor of the parish where the offence took place. Any residue was to be returned to the offender. In cases where the accused was either unwilling or unable to pay the fine, a maximum of six months imprisonment could be imposed.[9]

The section of the act that often receives most attention, but, in theory at least, was irrelevant for the majority of provincial players until 1788, is the one that imposed a strict new system of government censorship on all new material presented ,'for Hire, Gain or Reward', on the stage. Changes, or additions, made to existing material were also included in this provision. The new censorship law was all-embracing and covered everything: 'Interludes', tragedy, comedy, opera, plays, farces, prologues, epilogues '..or other Entertainment of the Stage'. Failure by 'the Master or Manager of such playhouse

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[5] 10 Geo. II, c.28, s.I.
[6] Ibid., s.V.
[7] Ibid., s.I.
[8] Ibid., s.II
[9] Ibid., s.VI.

or Place, or Company of Actors' to submit 'a true Copy' of the new material to the Lord Chamberlain of the King's Household '...fourteen Days at least before the acting, representing or performing thereof, together with an Account of the Playhouse or other Place where the same shall be, and the Time when the same is intended to be first acted etc...' was also subject to the same penalties as other transgressions of this law.[10]

The provincial theatre has a complex history and, as I will demonstrate in the course of this study, a dynamic and impact all of its own. Many factors were involved in its evolution, not least the affairs of the London theatres which were deeply implicated in the two acts of parliament that circumscribed and framed its development in the eighteenth century. Although the background to the Licensing Act is well-documented,[11] in the interests of generating a broader understanding of the issues involved in the circumstances of the provincial theatre in those years I will briefly reiterate the points that are of relevance to this account.

The London theatre was innately political and the difficulties it experienced in the eighteenth century had their origins in the political turmoil of the previous one. Before the Civil War of 1642, theatre in London had been regulated by the state under the auspices of the Lord Chamberlain and his subordinate, the Master of Revels. During Cromwell's Commonwealth, however, Parliament closed all the theatres in London and made the public performance of plays illegal. On his return to the throne in 1660 Charles II reinstated the traditional system of state supervision of the theatre while at the same time creating a theatrical monopoly by granting Letters Patent to two new companies who, alone, had the right to play the 'legitimate' drama. The 'legitimate' drama was generally defined as five-act plays, including Shakespeare's, which depended entirely on acting with little, or no, singing, dancing or spectacle. It seems that the King had hoped to safeguard standards at the highest level in this way but his optimism was misplaced as his actions merely served to create new problems and complications, the repercussions of which were to influence the development and character of theatre, not only in the capital

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[10] Ibid., ss.III, IV & VI.

[11] For example see: Liesenfeld, *The Licensing Act of 1737*; Watson Nicholson, *The Struggle for a Free Stage in London* (London, 1906); J. Loftis, 'Governmental Control of the Theatres', in T.W. Craik (gen.ed.), *The Revels History of Drama in English, Vol. V, 1660-1750* (London, 1976), pp 26-32.

but in the country as a whole, throughout the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century.

Long before 1737 the monopoly created by the King had fallen into disuse as increasing public interest in the stage had led to a proliferation of theatrical activity in London and elsewhere. Although in theory the patent houses retained the status and privileges not enjoyed by lesser establishments, in practice they had long been on a par with all the other theatrical adventurers in the city and there was little systematic control of theatrical activity either here or in the provinces. Many were critical of the falling standards generated by unregulated competition. Since the end of the previous century the stage had also proved a popular target for reformers of one kind or another and was often accused of exacerbating existing social problems concerning public order, immorality, street violence and idleness among the workers. From the 1720s, it had also widely been thought to be going too far in its abuse of the policy and methods of Robert Walpole's Whig Ministry and in its ridicule of the King on the stage. Some even believed that the authority of both men had been seriously undermined by these attacks. It is also suggested that such was the King's fury at some of the personal satires and the stage's exploitation of his differences with the Prince of Wales, that not only Walpole's future but that of his entire ministry was in the balance. To add to these worries, by the autumn of 1736 rioting in London fomented, so Walpole believed, by Jacobite rebels, the Porteous riots in Edinburgh, trouble in some of the London theatres and disturbances elsewhere in the provinces all added to the impression that the country was in crisis. [12]

A two-act farce, *The Golden Rump*, whose pointed sarcasm was directed at the King and his mistresses provided Walpole with the excuse he needed to persuade parliament of the necessity of introducing the stringent new law by which he hoped to stifle the problems posed by the theatre. In view of the precarious political situation, Liesenfeld believes that with this legislation Walpole also hoped to placate the King and thus secure his own position, restore national stability and reduce, what he regarded as, the threat of Jacobite insurrection.[13] Despite the vigorous objections of Lord Chesterfield who declared that

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[12] Liesenfeld, *The Licensing Act of 1737*, pp. 26 & 60-66.
[13] Ibid., p.61.

an occasional abuse of liberty was 'better than the fettering of liberty itself'[14] the bill was enacted on 21 June 1737. In acknowledging the Crown's absolute authority over theatrical matters, the Licensing Act demonstrated the Government's '...practical recognition of the exclusiveness of the grants of Charles II'.[15] Thus the authority of the original Letters Patent, by 1737 in possession of the Covent Garden and Drury Lane companies, was reestablished and, with it, the theatrical monopoly that would now dominate the affairs of the London theatres until finally abolished more than one hundred years later.

There is one final point to be made about the situation in London. While in the provinces it was not until 1788 that the prospect of legality became a reality for the mass of provincial players, in the capital many of the numerous establishments offering illicit entertainments of one kind or another in the wake of the Licensing Act were more fortunate. By 1752 they were causing such concern to the authorities that, in an attempt to regulate and control the situation, a bill was passed giving new powers to magistrates at quarter sessions '...within London and Westminster and twenty miles thereof' to grant 'music and dancing' licences. Initially intended as a three year experiment this act proved so effective that in 1755 it was renewed and made perpetual.[16] Entitled *An act for the better preventing Thefts and Robberies, and for regulating Places of public Entertainment, and punishing Persons keeping disorderly Houses* this legislation sought to curb the activities of the proprietors of disreputable houses where 'the lower Sort of People... [were] tempted to spend their small Substance in riotous Pleasures' and required a licence for 'any House, Room, Garden or other place kept for publick Dancing Musick or any other publick Entertainment of like Kind'.[17] At the time the prospect that this kind of licence might prove a threat to the monopoly of the patent houses was not even contemplated. But the success of the minor theatres eventually stirred up a new 'theatre war' in London which, in 1788, was, inadvertently, to have considerable implications for provincial players as well.

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[14] Ibid., p.65.
[15] Watson Nicholson, *The Struggle for a Free Stage*, p. 424.
[16] 25 Geo. II, c.36, s.II; 28 George II, c.19.
[17] 25 Geo. II, c.36, s. II.

Provincial theatre and the law before 24 June 1737

The string of events originating in the previous century that culminated in the passage of the Licensing Act in 1737 demonstrate that the stage, while increasingly popular, had also long been regarded in some quarters as a powerful, and potentially dangerous, social and political presence. Ambivalent attitudes towards the theatre were not confined to London alone as in the provinces, too, the activities and influence of theatrical companies and their entertainments were also sometimes viewed with misgiving and at least some efforts were made to control them.

Before the Licensing Act transformed the legal situation in 1737 players outside the capital were supposed to obtain official permission to perform through letters patent from the sovereign. Sometimes this took the form of a grant to a nobleman to maintain a troupe of players or a licence from the Master of the Revels or the Lord Chamberlain. In practice, however, impressive claims to noble sponsorship were often spurious and in most cases it seems to have been left to the local mayor, magistrate or corporation to grant permission for the staging of dramatic performances and entertainments in their own cities, towns and villages. This was encouraged by the long-established practice of *nolle prosequi* whereby any national jurisdiction over the activities of players was suspended on feast days and at fair-time. [18]

Control of theatrical activities in the provinces could also prove problematical when it came to restraining or closing, what were perceived of by the authorities as, unruly playhouses. For example, the 'vast success' of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* first performed at John Rich's Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre in 1728 and attacked in the *Craftsman* in February that year as '...the most venomous allegorical libel against the Government that hath appeared for many years...'.[19] was not confined to the capital alone. This piece which, as was said at the time, '...made Gay rich and Rich gay',[20] met with an enthusiastic reception from audiences not only in England but also in Scotland, in Wales and in Ireland. Not everyone reacted in this way however and in

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[18] S. Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces 1660-1765* (Cambridge, 1939), p.5; J. Morris, *Taking the Town, a compleat and authentic account of Thespian Activity in the County of Kent 1737-1843* (Unpublished manuscript, Theatre Museum, London), p.6.

[19] 'Craftsman, No. 87', 17 February 1728, quoted by Nicholson, *The Struggle for a Free Stage*, p.48.

some quarters Gay's opera was the cause of considerable consternation. In Bristol, for example, the authorities held strict moral and religious views and when *The Beggar's Opera* ran there for 43 nights in 1729, they tried to close the playhouses in the city as 'publick nuisances and nurseries of idleness and vice'[21] and issued a warrant for the arrest of one of the managers involved. The public responded by rioting.

The difficulties inherent in the uncertainties and ambiguities surrounding control of theatrical activity in the provinces are particularly clearly illustrated by the situation that existed in Cambridge in the early eighteenth century where events came to a head just three weeks before the Licensing Act became law on 21 June 1737. The problem in Cambridge lay in the fact that for a fortnight every September, the largest and most important fair in the country was held at a site just two miles outside the town. Stourbridge Fair attracted strolling players and itinerant entertainers of all kinds from all over the country. Because the University authorities and the Mayor and Corporation had dual rights of authority over theatrical activities in and around the town, players were supposed to obtain permission from both parties before they were allowed to perform. If they did not do so they were apprehended by a court of summary jurisdiction set up by the Vice Chancellor during the fair, and, usually, fined. Because of the numbers of players whose names appear in the records of this court, it seems that the fines were generally looked upon as the equivalent of a licensing fee, the whole process being far less troublesome than having to obtain advance permission from the two authorities involved.[22]

Until 1701 this system appears to have worked relatively well but from that time the University authorities seem to have taken a more serious view of, what they considered to be, the undesirable influence of the stage upon their students and they regularly tried to ban theatrical activity both from the fair and from the whole area for which they, together with the Mayor and Corporation, held joint judicial responsibility. The fact that the town authorities took a more liberal attitude to theatrical activities resulted in

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[20] Marion Jones, 'Actors and repertory', in Craik (gen. ed.), *The Revels History of Drama* Vol. V, p.126.
[21] K. Barker, *Bristol at Play* (Bradford-on-Avon 1976), p.5.
[22] S. Rosenfeld, 'The Players in Cambridge 1662-1800', in M. St. Clare Byrne (ed.), *Studies in English Theatre History in Memory of Gabrielle Enthoven, O.B.E.* (London, 1952), pp. 24-26.

frequent clashes between the two authorities with the University often being the loser. In the 1730s the University authorities changed their tactics and issued edicts banning all members of the University from attending theatrical performances in and around the town, under penalty of hefty fines. But even this, it appears, was ineffectual for on 10 March 1737 a petition was presented to the House of Commons which resulted in the drawing up of a bill '...for the more effectual preventing the unlawful playing of Interludes within the Precincts of the two Universities... and the Places adjacent'. Despite counter-petitions from Joseph Kettle, who had recently '...built upon his own ground a commodious and convenient Playhouse in the Precincts of the Town of Cambridge...' ,[23] and other proponents of the stage in the area, the bill was enacted on 1 June 1737. The Universities Act,[24] which also applied to Oxford, pre-empted the Licensing Act by only three weeks and condemned '...all Persons whatsoever who shall for Gain in any Playhouse, Booth, or otherwise, exhibit any Stage Play, Interlude, Shew, Opera, or other Theatrical or Dramatical Performance... within five Miles of the City of Oxford, or Town of Cambridge...' as Rogues and Vagabonds. As such, players, whether resident or not, were condemned to one month's hard labour or gaol with no prospect of bail. Walpole was one of the two men who drew up the Universities Act, the content of which clearly shows how determined and ruthless he was in his desire to curb theatrical activities in the provinces as well as in London.

Governing the provinces - Sarah and the Magistracy 1737 -1788

While in London the *Act for the better preventing Thefts and Robberies...* of 1752 had to some extent regularized the situation of many lesser theatrical establishments in the half-century from 1737-1788, there was no such comprehensive, ameliorative legislation enacted to deal with the proliferation of illegal theatrical activity in the provinces and throughout this period provincial magistrates had no legitimate right to authorize theatrical performances in areas under their control. Nonetheless, Sarah's professional survival (and that of many other companies of players in these years) still lay in her ability to establish a good relationship with the local mayors and magistrates in the towns and

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[23] 'Reasons Humbly Submitted Against the University Bill', quoted by Liesenfeld, *The Licensing Act 1737*, p.183.
[24] 10 Geo. II, c.19.

villages where she hoped to operate.[25] That provincial magistrates in so many towns were prepared to tolerate and, sometimes, publicly support such flagrant breaches of the law demonstrates the extent of their executive independence, even in respect of the general law of the land. Their attitude was also symptomatic of the marked indifference shown by parliament throughout the eighteenth century to the general constitution of the local government of the Kingdom and the fact that no concerted attempt had been made to organize provincial government on a national scale.[26] Although, in the eyes of the establishment, the government of the country rested solely with the King, with parliament and with the official dignitaries of the County (the Lord Lieutenant, the High Sheriff and the Justices of the Peace), until the Municipal Corporations Act provided a new foundation for provincial government in 1835, there was no coherent system of local government in England and Wales. Every town or village ran its affairs in its own way and many, as Sarah and the managers of other theatrical troupes were well aware, enjoyed a good deal of executive independence.[27]

The reason that the magistracy was of such importance in these circumstances was that, whether operating at county or borough level, it was they who both implemented and, in the absence of a police force, enforced the law. In theory, therefore, they had a pivotal role to play in developing a uniformity of practice through their implementation of common policies at a local level. In reality, however, the manner in which individual justices tackled their responsibilities was left very much to their own personal interpretation and they enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy. As Keith-Lucas points out, this practice was encouraged by the fact that even where general acts of parliament which applied to the whole country were concerned there was no clear guidance as to how the basic principles should be transformed into 'practical day to day policies'. It was also the case that there were numerous local acts of parliament that had no relevance outside one specific town or district and, in addition to this, it was common

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[25] See below, Chapter 7, for more information about extensive theatrical activity in the provinces throughout this period.
[26] S. & B. Webb, *English Local Government, Vol. 1, The Parish and the County* (London, 1963), pp.148-149.
[27] Ibid., p.148; Bryan Keith-Lucas, *The Unreformed Local Government System* (London, 1980), p.13.

for magistrates to introduce their own restrictive laws in their areas of jurisdiction with no reference to Parliament whatsoever.[28]

County magistrates were powerful figures throughout the country in the eighteenth century and as a group were both 'exclusive' and 'privileged' and, as Keith-Lucas comments, '...constituted in a very real sense, a ruling class'.[29] Appointed by the Lord Lieutenant of each county they were, with few exceptions, either country squires or beneficed clergymen of the Church of England. This was because, by law, a county magistrate had to belong to the Church of England and, also, own freehold land worth at least '...£100 a year clear of incumbrances'. The ecclesiastic benefice of a clergyman was eligible as long as it met this requirement and by the end of the eighteenth century it had become the norm for the name of virtually every beneficed clergymen and country squire to be included in the commission of the peace for their county.[30]

It is unlikely, however, that Sarah would have had any contact with the county magistrates of Kent in their official capacity. This was due to the anomalies of a system that meant that many of the county's towns and villages were exempt from the judicial and administrative jurisdiction of the county Quarter Sessions. Sandwich, Faversham, Folkestone and Dover, for example, all of which Sarah had visited with her company from the 1770s if not before, were either Cinque Port towns or their 'limbs', all with the right to appoint their own magistrates and run their own affairs. Also operating outside the orbit of the Kent county authorities were her three most important Kentish towns of Rochester, Maidstone and Canterbury, the last of which was regarded as a county in its own right.[31]

Because of the close relationship between the council and the local magistracy in these towns, the figure of authority to whom Sarah, on most occasions, would have applied for

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[28] Ibid., p.64.
[29] B. Keith-Lucas, *English Local Government in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1977), p.8.
[30] Keith-Lucas, *The Unreformed Local Government System*, p.49. Joanna Innes also confirms that magistrates were, commonly, substantial landowners and beneficed clergy or, more rarely, major industrial employers, merchants, bankers or 'substantial tradesmen', J. Innes, 'Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in later Eighteenth-century England', in E. Hellmuth (ed.), *The Transformation of Political Culture* (Oxford, 1990), p.106.
[31] Ibid., pp. 40-41 & footnote 46, p.28.

permission to put on her shows would have been the mayor. The mayor was a man of very great importance in a town with executive functions of his own. His role was also synonymous with that of a magistrate because in his year of office, he was always amongst those who, together with an 'inner circle' of members of the 'common council', sometimes known as 'jurats', sat *ex officio* as magistrates in Petty and Quarter Sessions '...exercising all the powers and jurisdiction of Justices of the Peace'.[32]

The personal background of borough magistrates could be very different to that of the county magistrates. Although, in law, to hold office they had to be communicant members of the Church of England, this ruling was not always complied with and, unlike the county magistrates, they were not subject to the requirement that they should own land to qualify for the job.[33] As a consequence, borough magistrates were often of lower status than the county magistrates. In Malmesbury, for example, thirteen local men, few of whom could either read or write and whose occupations included pig-killer, staymaker, labourer, gardener and publican, served the town in this capacity.[34] In Folkestone, too, where Sarah put on performances in a 'barn theatre' in the early 1770s the identity of the town's magistrates can hardly be described as representative of the 'ruling class'. So reluctant, it seems, were the eligible inhabitants to take on the responsibilities of office that in 1740 a bye-law was passed inflicting fines of £5 on those who refused to become common councillors and £10 on those who declined to be made jurats.[35] Once in office, however, the mayor and his colleagues appear to have been diligent in the execution of their duties although, it is worth noting that in 1765, the mayor, John Hague, was among nine people fined 6/8d each '...for having false weights and shales in their Custody, which Fines were paid into the Hands of the Overseers of the Poor'.[36]

In her larger Kentish towns it is probable that the officials with whom Sarah had contact were mostly '..church-going, well-to-do, professional men'. This was certainly the case

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[32] Ibid., pp. 20-22 & 27.
[33] Ibid., pp. 19 & 50.
[34] Keith-Lucas, *The Unreformed Local Government System*, p.16.
[35] S.J. Mackie, *A Description and Historical Account of Folkestone and its Neighbourhood* (Folkestone, 1883), p.315.
[36] E. Pole Stuart (transcriber), *Folkestone Sessions Book 1765-1769 & 1792-1811* (Folkestone Library archives).

in Canterbury where the freemen, from whom members of the town's common council and the mayor were selected, had the right to elect members of parliament.[37] James Simmons, who in 1789-90 helped Sarah achieve her ambition to open her first purpose-built theatre in the city, had been a member of Canterbury's 'common council' from 1769 and certainly fits this description.[38] Born and brought up in Canterbury, as a young man, Simmons had lived in London for ten years where he served an apprenticeship to a stationer. Upon returning to Canterbury in 1767 he established his own newspaper, the *Kentish Gazette,* and was also active as a stationer, printer, publisher, seller of patent medicines, distributor of stamps, mill owner and banker. Described as 'a remarkable and doughty man of business', Simmons, who was deeply involved in local affairs, was mayor of the city in 1776 and 1788, served as a Justice of the Peace from 1789 and, eventually, just before his death in January 1807, was elected M.P.[39]

Whatever the background or character of the many mayors and local magistrates that Sarah must have encountered on her travels, it was undoubtedly with this group that she had to establish a good relationship in order to have any chance of commercial survival in areas where they held sway. Her greatest problems arose where a rival manager had better access to the local power base than she did and this, on occasion, proved more of a threat to her career than the fact that she operated in flagrant breach of the law.[40]

The virtual autonomy of many of the authorities in Kent with whom Sarah had dealings does, to some extent, answer the question of how it was that she managed to circumnavigate the strictures of the Licensing Act with such apparent ease. But the mayors and magistrates of the towns where she and her company staged their entertainments were, on the whole, upstanding members of the establishment and their connivance at her law-breaking demands further explanation. To understand their, generally, *laissez faire* attitude towards the Licensing Act of 1737 it is important to remember that, although this legislation empowered local justices to put its provisions into practice and punish players who failed to comply, in overturning their right to issue

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[37] Keith-Lucas, *The Unreformed Local Government System*, pp.19 & 27.
[38] F. Panton, *Canterbury's Great Tycoon: James Simmons - Reshaper of his City* (Canterbury, 1990), pp. 13 & 18.
[39] Ibid., pp. 7, 27 & 35.

theatrical licences, it also undermined their own situation and status. John Morris suggests that there was likely to have been some hostility at this attempted restriction of their powers. He also believes that some local dignitaries would have regarded the passing of this Act as '...an overt political move by a Whig government sensitive to criticism and ridicule' by the likes of Gay and Fielding and that many magistrates would have been reluctant to '...act as agents for political opponents'.[41] The excessive character of the Licensing Act must also have made it virtually inoperable and contributed to the reasons why it proved so widely ineffectual and was frequently ignored.[42]

Even on the occasions where action against a troupe of players was contemplated, the provisions of the act made this difficult to effect. This was because of the clause that stated that, '...no Person shall be liable to be prosecuted for any Offence against this Act, unless such Prosecution shall be commenced within the Space of six Kalendar Months after the Offence committed'.[43] Consequently, as strollers were free to wander the length and breadth of the country and could easily pass from one jurisdiction to another, even where prosecution was contemplated, it would have been extremely difficult for the authorities, with no police force at their disposal, to catch up with the transgressors before the stipulated six month period was up. Compounding this was the fact that provincial officials knew very well that if they chose to allow illegal theatrical performances to take place in temporary 'theatres' of one kind or another within areas of their jurisdiction, there was very little that either the government or the Lord Chamberlain could do to stop them.

Sarah Baker - the first fifty years

This was the world into which Sarah was born in the late 1730s, around the time that the Licensing Act was enacted and a year or so before her parents, Ann Clark and James Wakelin (or Wakelyn), were married on 10 June 1738 at St. Luke's in Finsbury.[44] It

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[40] Charles Mate, a rival Kentish manager's close relationship with the authorities in Dover and Margate resulted in Sarah being banished from both towns. See this chapter below, pp. 33-37.
[41] John Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.6.
[42] It was not only in areas where Sarah operated that the authorities were happy to turn a blind eye to the law. See Chapter 7 below.
[43] 10 George II, c.28, s.VIII.
[44] Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.83.

must have been a worrying and uncertain time for them as Sarah's father was an actor, and her mother, an acrobatic dancer. Belonging to the transient and uncertain world of itinerant rope-dancers, jugglers and clowns, little is known of the Wakelin family in those early days except that James Wakelin seems to have disappeared from the scene while Sarah and her younger sister Mary were still young. In any event, their mother, Ann, either took over or established her own travelling troupe of rope-dancers and tumblers whom she billed, along with herself, as '...of Sadler's Wells'.

As Sadler's Wells was in Finsbury, the parish in which Ann and James Wakelin were married, it is reasonable to accept Ann's claim to being 'of Sadler's Wells' as genuine although Sybil Rosenfeld qualifies this by describing her as '....only an occasional visitor, not a regular performer' at this establishment.[45] Notwithstanding Rosenfeld's comment, the skills for which Ann and her husband were known would certainly have fitted in with the type of entertainment on offer at this venue from the mid-1720s. The 'Wells' had been established by Thomas Sadler in the late seventeenth century and, offering vocal and instrumental music and dancing as entertainment, became a popular and rowdy pleasure garden on the site of a medicinal spring in his garden at Finsbury. The enterprise flourished and 'concerts' were held in a wooden music-room which, since about 1699, had been known as Miles's Musick House. From 1717 Jacobus (or James) Miles also set up a Music Booth each year at the Stourbridge Fair just outside Cambridge thus establishing a connection between the two venues. When Mr. Miles died in 1724, the 'Wells' lost something of its reputation maybe because his successor, Francis Forcer junior, who also fitted up a booth at the Fair, introduced tumbling and dancing to the repertoire. If the Wakelin family did have a long standing involvement with Sadler's Wells, this is where Sarah would have had some of her earliest experience of the stage.[46]

It is probable that for most of the year Ann, together with her two small daughters and other members of the troupe, travelled the countryside presenting their entertainments at fairs and at other venues both in the London area and elsewhere. Advertisements in

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[45] Rosenfeld, 'The Players in Cambridge', footnote 11, p.29.

Felix Farley's Bristol Journal show that in 1766, both Sarah and Mary appeared with other members of their mother's Sadler's Wells Company at Bristol during the period of the fair.[47] Here it is interesting to note that, although on most occasions it seems that Sarah could rely on the local magistracy to turn a blind eye to her illegal activities, she, and her mother before her, were sometimes required to show some circumspection where the law was concerned. Their advertisements in the Bristol newspaper provide some evidence of this. This is because after the company's first lively notice in the 12 July edition of the newspaper for performances at the old Assembly-Room on St. Augustine's Back in Bristol, in the '...what-we-call a Theatre' as she described it, more subdued versions of the advertisement appeared in the following weeks' newspapers giving little information about the performance but pointedly stating that performances would take place 'during the Time of the FAIR only ...and positively no longer..'.[48] It would appear from this that the authorities in the city had made it clear to Mrs. Wakelin and her troupe that they were anxious to demonstrate they were not conniving at the law by allowing performances to take place but merely permitting the company to take advantage of the tradition of *nolle prosequi* that enabled them to perform, regardless of any national jurisdiction on the matter, during the time of the fair. In this instance and, it has to be assumed, on other occasions, too, Sarah's, or her mother's, actions very much reflected the attitudes and expectations of the local magistracy.

It is not certain how many fairs Ann Wakelin's Sadler's Wells Company visited during the course of a year but if, like other travelling companies at the time, they were on the road from Easter until the end of September, this could have been a considerable number.[49] Considering her apparent connections with Sadler's Wells, it is hardly surprising that Ann Wakelin and her family became regular visitors to Stourbridge Fair. Although it was not until 1762 that records confirm that she took her own Sadler's Wells Company there, it is feasible that she and her family were members of a former Sadler's Wells Company that John and Elizabeth Rayner took to this fair in 1745. That year the Rayners' advertised 'diversions' consisted of rope dancing, tumbling, postures, singing,

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[46]N. Hodgson, *Sarah Baker (1736/37-1816) "Governess-General of the Kentish Drama"*, (Manuscript, Canterbury Cathedral Archives), pp.1-2; D. Arundell, *The Story of Sadler's Wells* (London, 1965); S. Rosenfeld, 'The Players in Cambridge', p.27.

[47] Hodgson, *Sarah Baker* (manuscript), p.2; *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 12 July 1766.

[48] *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 19 & 26 July, 2 August 1766.

balancing and serious and comic dancing', all of which were consistent with the Wakelin family's talents. The two little girls, also, would have been considered a valuable asset as performers in their own right, even as young children. The company won the enthusiastic approval of 'the nobility and gentry' on this occasion and the Rayners' publicly thanked them for their support in an advertisement in the *Cambridge Journal.* The hope was also expressed that these patrons would attend the troupe's next performance when they moved on to Bury Fair at the end of September.[50] From the early 1760s when Ann Wakelin attended the fair with her own company, advertisements and court records show that she returned there on an annual basis, paying her fines and presenting her 'favourite diversions of Sadler's Wells' until 1777, the last year of which there is a record of her attendance at the fair. [51]

A vivid impression of the character of this autumn fair is given by William Hone whose description gives some idea of the sort of life experienced by Sarah as a child and young adult growing up in a family of travelling players. [52] In its hey-day, Hone tells us, the fair lasted three weeks although '...the greatest part was over in a fortnight' and it was reputed to have been the largest in Europe. He goes on to describe how a half square mile cornfield was transformed for the duration into a small and exciting town. Shops and booths 'were built in rows like streets, having each their name; as Garlick-row, Booksellers'-row, Cook-row, &c. and every commodity had its proper place; as in the cheese fair, hop-fair, wool-fair &c'. In addition, most trades that could be found in London, '...from whence they came', were also represented here and included goldsmiths, toy-men, braziers, turners, milliners, haberdashers, pewterers and china warehouses'. Hone also describes the taverns, coffee-houses and eating houses 'in great plenty' that were set up for the duration of the fair in booths, although 'six or seven brick-houses' were, apparently, also used for the same purpose. Trading at the fair, especially with regard to wool, hops and leather, was, according to Hone, 'prodigious' and attracted 'chapmen' from all parts of the country. One year, the quantity of wool sold there was said to amount to between £50,000 and £60,000 and of hops to nearly the same. A court of justice 'open from morning to night' dealt with all controversies in

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[49] William Hone, *The Every-Day Book, Vol. 1* (London, 1825), p.442.
[50] *Cambridge Journal*, 7 September, 1745, quoted by Rosenfeld, 'The Players in Cambridge', p.28.
[51] Rosenfeld, 'The Players in Cambridge', pp.28-33.

matters arising from the business of the fair and was presided over by the mayor or his deputy assisted by eight red-coats or constables. On two Sundays during fair-time, a sermon was preached from a pulpit set up in a square 'formed of the largest booths' called the Duddery.[53]

For Sarah and her sister, this must have been an exciting and stimulating environment in which to grow up. It must also have been a great meeting place for players from all over the country as well as providing an opportunity for an exchange of ideas, material and personnel. According to Hone, the chief diversions where entertainments were concerned were, 'drolls, rope-dancing, sometimes a music-booth, and plays...'.[54] This description fits well with Ann Wakelin's advertisement of July 1766 where it was promised that Sarah would contribute 'several new Airs on the so-much famed Musical Glasses' to the evening's proceedings. Also included on that occasion was 'stiff-rope dancing, [with] amazing performances by Miss Wakelin', 'equilibrial performances on the Slack-Wire', '...several curious bodily performances' such as 'Tumbling a-la-mode' by 'A Company of Fancy Ticklers', a 'new Pantomime Entertainment' and 'An extraordinary Band of Music'. All of these were included in a single entertainment.[55]

Despite the obvious attractions of the fair it was undoubtedly a tough life for those involved and Hone describes how 'the greatest inconvenience' for tradesmen, and presumably also strolling players, was the manner in which they were obliged to lodge in the night in their booths on makeshift beds '...being not more than five feet long' and laid almost neck and heels together. Hone also commented that very heavy rains and high winds at that time of year frequently added to the discomfort.[56] One cannot help but think that these miserable sleeping arrangements would have helped fuel Sarah's ambitions for a somewhat more comfortable life in the future.

In 1761, or thereabouts, Sarah married Thomas Baker, an acrobat in her mother's company and three children were born, Ann, Henry and Sarah, who was known as Sally.

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[52] William Hone. *The Every-Day Book*, Vol. I (London, 1825).
[53] Ibid., pp. 1305-1307.
[54] Ibid., p.1306.
[55] *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 12 July, 1766.
[56] Hone, *Every Day Book*, p. 1308.

As they grew up, Ann and Sally were to become great assets to their mother's company. According to Catherine Elizabeth Feist, an actress, who for three years was a member of Sarah's own company, Ann, as a young woman, had been '...very beautiful [and] ...played first tragedy with much cleverness and ability'.[57] Sally, meanwhile, '...was very pretty and very talented; her voice was rich and musical, and her singing was peculiarly sweet and pleasing [and] her high comedy was graceful and spirited'. In some roles, Mrs. Feist claimed, '...sound critics pronounced her to be scarcely inferior to Mrs. C. Kemble'.[58] Henry, it appears, did not have the talent of his sisters. His name rarely appears in Sarah's advertisements and playbills and Mrs. Feist describes him as '...of a morose and unsocial disposition' with a '...somewhat unprepossessing personal appearance'. None the less he, too, had a role to play in his mother's company, as scene-shifter.[59]

Sarah's husband was probably 'Thomas Baker the tumbler' who, according to an advertisement in the *Cambridge Chronicle* for 24 September 1769, performed with 'the Great Polander' in her mother's company at Stourbridge Fair that month. Before the end of the year, however, Thomas was dead. Left with three young children to bring up it seems that Sarah was at first content to remain as a member of her mother's troupe. It was probably at this juncture that she began to include puppetry in her repertoire. Thomas Dibdin made whimsical reference to this aspect of her career when, in 1827, he noted in his memoirs that many years previously Sarah, '...only employed actors and actresses of cherry-wood, holly, oak or ebony and dressed and undressed both the ladies and gentlemen herself'.[60] If this was so, it was typical of Sarah's versatility. To be a success a travelling company had to be adaptable and keep up with the latest fashions and by the 1770s puppets '...pretty well held the field'.[61] Confirmation that other successful players also regarded puppetry as an attractive proposition comes from the

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[57] Catherine Elizabeth Feist, 'Genuine Gossip by an old actress. Mrs. Baker and her People', the *Era*, 19 June 1853.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Catherine Elizabeth Feist, 'Genuine Gossip by an old actress. The Eccentric Mrs. Baker', the *Era*, 5 June, 1853.
[60] T.J. Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1 (London, 1827), p.96.
[61] Sybil Rosenfeld, *The Theatre of the London Fairs in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1960), p.65.

fact that Dibdin's own father, Charles, better known as an actor, dramatist and composer, himself erected a puppet theatre at the Exeter 'Change in 1775.[62]

In the early 1770s, within a year or two of her husband's death Sarah had already taken over the running of her mother's old Sadler's Wells Company. This is confirmed by the fact that from 18 November 1772, when Sarah inserted her first notice in the *Kentish Gazette* for a performance at the Theatre in Canterbury, Mrs. Wakelin's name rarely appears in the company's advertisements and playbills. A rare mention, establishing that she still retained at least some links with her old troupe occurs in a Sadler's Wells Company advertisement in the *Kentish Gazette* for 27 January 1773. This shows that an Interlude called *Linco's Travels* was to be performed on 4 February 'For the Benefit of Mr. Harper and Mrs. Wakelin' and included the information that tickets could be 'had' of her at Mr. Ferry's the Cooper in Best Lane, Canterbury, as well as of her daughter at Mr. Baskerville's the Hair dresser. She is mentioned again in January 1775 and in 1777, which seems to have been the year she retired, and ten years later she died in Rochester '...at an advanced age'.[63]

As a widow with three small children dependent upon her, it seems that Sarah, in her new role as manager, must have decided that a regular circuit in a reasonably compact geographical area was a more viable and comfortable proposition than the long distance wanderings that had been part and parcel of her own childhood and life thus far. As a result, her plans for the future slowly began to take shape. Evidence of this comes from Thomas Younger, the actor, who in a letter to James Winston informs him that '...shortly after the Decease of Mr. B., [Sarah] got leave to go to Gosport - here She clear'd a great deal of Money which enabled Her to Come into This County [Kent] and open a Campaign on a more extensive scale - this gradually rooted Her opponents out and Work'd Her into the Circuit...'. [64] This information suggests that the Wakelin/Baker family's Sadler's Wells Company had already taken some steps to establish themselves in Kent. But it was not until the early 1770s, with Sarah now in

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[62] Phyllis Hartnoll (ed.), *Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Oxford, 1995), p.669.
[63] *Kentish Gazette*, 21 June, 1787.
[64] Thomas Younger to James Winston, 6 January 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.

charge, that any real progress was made in confirming the company's presence in the county on a rather more permanent and satisfactory basis.

As manager of her mother's old company Sarah continued to visit fairs, at least into the 1780s. In 1774 she is reported to have been at Bury St. Edmunds where a member of her company, Lewy Owen, '...gave a remarkable demonstration of his powers of attracting crowds to the great discomfiture of a regular company who were left to play Shakespeare and Otway to empty benches.'[65] The following year, an old playbill shows she was also at the Bartholomew Fair performing with her company at the Greyhound Theatre. On this occasion she kept a wary eye on the Licensing Act by announcing 'a concert', between the parts of which would be given a 'medley Entertainment; consisting of a usual Diversion of Sadler's Wells [and] a new Ballad Opera...'. The ballad opera referred to was Charles Dibdin's *The Waterman, or The First of August*. In a further demonstration of her versatility as a performer Sarah appeared on stage, this time as Columbine in *Harlequin's Whim or, The Merry Medley*, a piece popular with patrons of her mother's company in the 1760s, and probably long before that. [66] In 1780, extant evidence shows that Sarah again brought her company to the Bartholomew Fair where they played in *The Quaker*, followed by a pantomime, *Harlequin Wanderer. Or The Great Turk Outwitted*. Her sister, Mary, and eleven year old daughter, Sally, were in the cast.[67] They were also at this fair in 1782 and the visit was referred to by Hone who wrote that in this year '...Mrs. Baker, proprietor of the Rochester theatre, brought here her company of comedians as "show-folk" '.[68]

Despite the fact that the well-known Norwich Company of Comedians was also there that year, the fair was reported by the *Morning Chronicle* to be losing its more respectable patrons by then, its attractions being purely devoted to '...the entertainment of the populace and the diversions of children'.[69] Sarah and her troupe had, apparently,

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[65] J. Bernard, *Retrospections of the Stage edited by his son W. Baile Bernard*, Vol. 1 (London, 1830) pp. 125-126.
[66] Undated playbill in Harvard Theatre Collection, referred to and dated by Rosenfeld, *London Fairs*, p.64; *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 12 July 1766.
[67] From Guildhall Library collection of handbills relating to Bartholomew Fair., Granger 2.1.7 cutting dated 2/9/1780, cited by Rosenfeld, *London Fairs*, p.65.
[68] Hone, *Every-Day Book*, p. 1245.
[69] *Morning Chronicle*, 5 September, 1782.

established themselves as a major attraction at this fair in the 1770s as, in September 1785, the *Morning Chronicle* remarked that in 'previous years' her company '...was always reckoned the best'.[70] By 1785, the fair was reputedly beginning to lose something of its old popularity and Sarah and her company did not attend that year. Some twenty-three years later the author of the *History and Origin of Bartholomew Fair* wrote that, after Mrs. Baker '...no comedian of respectability attended the Fair'.[71] Another account of the fair written in 1793 endorses the fact that by the mid 1780s the fair was in decline and 'theatrical performances by the better actors' no longer exhibited there. The fair, the writer continued, previously 'frequented by a great deal of good company' had become '...the resort of the debauched of all denominations' and, therefore, 'certain regulations took place, which in later days have spoiled the mirth, but produced the desired decency'.[72]

This quotation reflects the concern with law and order and moral decency that dogged theatrical activity throughout the eighteenth century and had, once again, become a major preoccupation in the late 1770s and 1780s. It also demonstrates that fairs, and especially London fairs, were a particular focus for the reformers at that time but despite this campaign, many continued to thrive. This included the enormously popular Bartholomew Fair which survived until 1855 when it eventually 'died the 'natural' death'.[73] None the less, it is logical to conclude that the activities of the reformers must have reinforced Sarah's decision that, having established her company's reputation at the likes of the Bartholomew Fair, there were now better, and more congenial, opportunities open to her and her company in Kent.

Sarah's Kentish campaign seems to have been well under way as early as 1772 for it was in November that year that she placed the first of, what would be, her many advertisements in the *Kentish Gazette*. This was for a performance on Saturday 21 November by her Sadler's Wells Company at the 'theatre at Canterbury'. By February 1773, her subsequent advertisements show the company had moved on to Faversham. In

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[70] Ibid., 5 September, 1785.
[71] 'History and origin of Bartholomew Fair' (1808), cited by Rosenfeld, *London Fairs*, p.65.
[72] 'Some Account of London' (1793), cited by Rosenfeld, *London Fairs*, p.194.
[73] H. Cunningham, 'The Metropolitan Fairs: A case study in the social control of leisure', in A.P. Donajgrodzki, *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London and Totowa, 1977), p.171.

April that year she was in Rochester and, then, reappears in Sandwich in December. Her next advertisement shows that by May 1774, she was in Dover where she stayed for about a month.[74]

For the five years from 1772-1777 that Sarah's mother, on occasion, continued to tour with her old company, these five towns were visited on a regular basis. Folkestone and Deal were also on her agenda, although Sarah's advertisements suggest that her company's visits here were less frequent. It also seems that by the early 1770s she had already made forays, first to Tunbridge Wells and then to Maidstone.[75] She also, occasionally, visited Sittingbourne and strayed over the border into Sussex where she played at the Fox and Hounds at Ore and at Lewes, '...sometimes in the town-hall , and some-times in a barn'.[76] Winston gives some information in *The Theatric Tourist* about Lewes which helps explain why Sarah made no serious attempts to establish herself in this town later in her career. Used only occasionally by any of the Kentish managers, Lewes, Winston wrote, 'from a religious tendency in its inhabitants, ...is a bad resort for players'.[77] Winston's informant, Miles Peter Andrews, country theatre manager, as well as the wealthy Member of Parliament for Bewdley, had put it even more strongly than this in his letter to Winston, commenting that, 'I think without exception this is the worst town for theatricals in the Kingdom'.[78] In any case, Sarah's main purpose seems to have been to consolidate her hold on the Kentish garrison or coastal towns of Canterbury, Rochester, Faversham, and Dover and begin to establish a reputation for her company in the spa town of Tunbridge Wells and in Maidstone.

After her mother retired in 1777, Sarah dropped the old Sadler's Wells name and, in January 1778, launched her own new Company of Comedians. At this time it seems her purpose was to consolidate the progress she had already made and build up a circuit based on Canterbury, Rochester and Faversham. She also retained her interest in

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[74] Sarah Baker's advertisements in the *Kentish Gazette*, 18 November 1772 - 18 June 1774.
[75] Thomas Younger to James Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[76] James Winston, 'The Theatric Tourist', p.39, photocopy of the original publication, in A.L. Nelson, *James Winston's Theatric Tourist, a Critical Edition with a Biography and a Census of Winston Material* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 1968), the Theatre Museum London.
[77] Ibid., p.39.
[78] M.P. Andrews to James Winston, 11 November 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham; R.G. Thorne, *History of Parliament, The House of Commons 1790-1820* (London, 1986) p.69.

Tunbridge Wells and in Maidstone and, it appears, had high hopes of Dover and of Margate. From 1778, as she gained ground in her main towns Sarah gradually reduced her company's involvement with places such as Ore, Folkestone, Lewes, Deal, Sandwich and Sittingbourne and concentrated her operation on those towns where she saw the greatest opportunity.[79]

Rivals

It was not an easy time for her. The possibility of prosecution under the Licensing Act was a permanent threat but this was not the only worry she had to contend with as she also had to compete fiercely with rival managers for custom at the most auspicious venues, a contest where failure could have dire financial consequences for the loser. Sarah, in fact, suffered few defeats at the hands of her rivals but did have some difficulties establishing her company in Canterbury in the 1770s, and, consequently, appeared there only spasmodically at that time. She was not as unfortunate, however, as two other contenders for the Canterbury slot in that decade, Messrs. Parry and Browne, both of whom 'ended [their] management in Canterbury jail'.[80] In 1780 when manager Hurst also had a disastrous season in the town and '...was obliged to fly by night' Sarah saw her chance and, in the words of the actor Thomas Younger, '...return'd to Canterbury, purchased the late Managers property and again got Possession of the town wich She has ever since retain'd.'[81]

In Dover, where her company, also, had been well received, she did not have the same luck. This was because her rival, Charles Mate, as a freeman of the town and protégé of a local member of parliament, Sir James Luteral, wielded considerable influence with the authorities there. In a letter to Winston, dated 14 January 1804, Mate informs him that in the winter of 1780 he and his company had played in 'a small place in Lass Lane' that had previously been 'fitted up' for Sarah's company. In fact her Company of Comedians had made its successful debut there in 1777 and her old Sadler's Wells Company had also 'drawn crowded audiences' to the small Lass Lane theatre. But her success had proved too much for Mate and, with the upper-hand where the authorities

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[79] James Winston also notes in his manuscript of *The Theatric Tourist*, Notebook 1, p.9 that 'Mrs. Baker had Croydon' in 1786. Item No. TS 1335.211, Harvard Theatre Collection.
[80] Charles Mate to James Winston, 14 January, 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.

were concerned, he ensured that, after her stay of three and a half months early in 1778, she did not return to the town again.[82]

In Margate where Mate, in similar circumstances, again got the better of her, Sarah suffered her most notorious defeat. This again emphasizes how important it was for an entrepreneur, such as Sarah or Mate, to establish a good relationship with 'the powers that be' in a 'theatrical' town even at a time when, in the eyes of the law, they had no legal right to condone theatrical activity of any kind. The Margate episode also demonstrates Sarah's fighting spirit and resilience in the face of potential disaster, two of the many qualities that must have stood her in very good stead at this time and contributed in no small way to the survival of her business and, eventual, prosperity.

In a letter to Winston recalling this period Mate wrote that in 1779 he had '...procured a lease of Mr. Cobb, the then Banker of Margate for an old Large Stabel standing behind the Fountain Inn'. Having 'Cleered the Stabel and mangers', he 'raised a stage 25 feet long' and converted the remaining into pit, Boxes and a Hanging gallery'. This became his theatre. Sarah, too, had also set her sights on this town. In his explanation to Winston of what had happened Mate continued that '...Mrs Beaker ...who had got possession of some of my Inland Towns enved me my little Margate Retret. She come to Mr Cobb my lanlord and Told him if he would give her permission she would bilt a new Theatre upon a better plan than that wich was then standing as Mr Cobb was in the habit of Receving £20 per year from me for his theatre it was very natural to sopose he did not Much approve of Mrs Beaker's plan so that he gave her a flat Refusial, She then told him that she had as Much Right to perform there as I had - and that tho he was a magistrate She would Bild in Margate in spit of him, and in the foloing yeare 1787 [in fact it was 1786], she kept her word and did Bild a Small Theatre near the Church and this Season Miss and her Company performd there on the same nights, the Result of wich you may esely sapose distruction to Both partys...'.[83]

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[81] Thomas Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[82] Charles Mate to James Winston, 14 January, 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham; Hodgson, *Sarah Baker* manuscript, p.3.
[83] Charles Mate to James Winston, 14 January, 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.

This demonstrated a remarkable boldness on her part and, also, that she was well aware that, despite their status, neither Mate nor Cobb had any more right on their side as far as the law was concerned than she did. Forced into a corner by her stand on the matter, they now had two choices. The first was to accept that Sarah, whose entertainment was far more popular than anything put on in their own theatre, would remain in the town. Secondly, they could legalize their own theatre through the acquisition of a patent which would then give them the right to force her out. They chose the latter option.

Mate's next move, therefore, with the support of Sir James Luteral and Mr. Cobb, who organised a petition signed by 907 local inhabitants, was to apply for a patent for his 'Stabel' theatre. This procedure, so Mate tells us, caused 'a great deal of trobel' and cost about £550 but gave the old stable legitimacy as a theatre which meant that an appeal could now be made to the Lord Chamberlain to close down Sarah's Margate theatre. This was done and Sarah was warned by him that she must 'dissist from performing at Margate or take the Consequence'. Although Sarah's bluff had been called she must have foreseen the possibility of defeat, for the theatre she had built in Margate was a portable wooden one and having fought her corner and lost, she now 'Cut her theatre in to 4 equel parts put it on Bord of a Hoy transported it to feversham war She Erected it as a new Theatre'.[84]

The Margate Theatre Bill received its second reading on 11 May 1786 and on 20 June Sarah inserted a notice in the *Kentish Gazette* advertising her theatre at Faversham as '...fitted up ...in as commodious a Manner as possible'. She concludes her advertisement by referring directly to the events at Margate and declares that: '...though she has not the Boast of Royal Sanction to her Company, conceives herself and them highly honoured in the Appellation of the SERVANTS of the PUBLIC'.[85]

From the tone of the letters written by Charles Mate to James Winston, about Sarah and other theatre managers active in the county from the 1760s, it is apparent that the life of a provincial circuit manager, particularly in the years from 1737-1788, was a particularly competitive, acrimonious and precarious one. Even when recalling Sarah's first

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[84] Ibid.

appearances at the Canterbury Buttermarket Theatre, some thirty years previously, Mate could not restrain himself from telling Winston that '...the Samness of her Exhibition would not oncewr for more than 7 or 8 nights'.[86]

This was clearly untrue as her very first advertisements in the *Kentish Gazette* show that the Sadler's Wells Company performed there continuously from 21 November 1772 until 11 February 1773 which Sarah described as being '...the last night but one of performing in the town this Season' and the following week she and her troupe moved on to 'Feversham' where their first performance took place on 18 February.[87] Mate's scornful remark is also undermined by the information contained in Sarah's publicity campaign which began with her first-ever *Kentish Gazette* advertisement in the edition of 18-21 November 1772. This stated that the Company would perform at the 'theatre at Canterbury' every Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday evening during their stay. Somewhat cautiously, the advertisement describes the entertainment to be presented on the first night as consisting of the 'usual diversions' including tight-rope dancing, tumbling, comic dancing, vaulting on the slack-rope with interludes, burlettas, operas and pantomimes 'as will be expressed in the Bills for the Day'. Her second and consequent advertisements are bolder and far more detailed giving notice of specific plays, burlettas and ballad operas as well as the 'usual diversions' to be performed by her company. For example, within a month of arriving in the city as well as 'singing, dancing, tumbling etc' the following are among the twenty-six different farces, pantomimes, interludes, operas and burlettas she advertises as included in her repertoire: *The Honest Yorkshireman* (H. Carey, 1735) and *The Old Man Taught Wisdom or, The Virgin Unmask'd* (Henry Fielding, 1735), both described as farces; *The Devil to Pay* (C. Coffey and J. Motley, 1731), described as an opera; *Midas* (K. O'Hara, 1762) and *The Portrait* (G. Colman, 1770), which are both described as burlettas.[88] In her *Kentish Gazette* advertisement of 16-19 December 1772 for a performance of *Cupid's Revenge* (F. Gentleman, 1772), Sarah drew attention to the fact that this was the first time her company had performed this work which indicates that the other pieces mentioned were already well rehearsed

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[85] *Kentish Gazette*, 20 June 1786.
[86] Charles Mate to James Winston, 22 January 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham. For more of Mate's rivalry with Sarah see Chapter 5 below 'Women in a World of Men?', pp. 166-167.
[87] Sarah Baker's advertisements, *Kentish Gazette*, 18-21 November 1772 - 10-13 February 1773.
[88] *Kentish Gazette* 2 - 19 December 1772; See also Appendix I for details of Sarah's repertoire.

staples of her repertoire. This was certainly the case with the 'pantomime entertainment' *Harlequin's Whim or Merry Medley*, also performed at this time, which her mother's company had staged at Bristol in 1766.

This list is remarkable for several reasons. Firstly, in its diversity and scope it totally refutes Mate's description of her company's capabilities and thus underlines the animosity he must have felt for Sarah ever since she first emerged as a serious contender for theatrical patronage in the towns and cities of Kent. Secondly, it shows remarkable enterprise on Sarah's part and also an amazing confidence at a time when, under the restrictions of the Licensing Act of 1737, it remained illegal '...for Hire Gain or Reward [to] act, represent, or perform, or cause to be acted, represented, or performed, any Interlude, Tragedy, Comedy, Opera, Play, Farce or other Entertainment of the Stage, or any part or Parts therein without the Authority by virtue of Letters Patent from his Majesty ...or without Licence from the Lord Chamberlain...'.[89] Thirdly, it provides irrefutable proof of connivance, if not outright cooperation on the part of the local authorities in the city, in an undertaking which was not only illegal but also subject to severe punishment.

Conclusion

Worries about the theatre were a recurring theme in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and frequently surfaced whenever a political or moral crisis threatened the *status quo*. As with previous attempts to stifle theatrical activity, the Licensing Act proved equally ineffective. Like many other troupes and individual players at that time, Sarah and her family were able to continue with their theatrical activities between 1737 and 1788, gradually reducing the geographical diversity of their operation as they became more secure in their Kentish circuit. That the legislation of 1737 was so widely abused was symptomatic of wider problems where the issue of law and order was concerned and, by the 1780s, this situation was giving rise to considerable concern in some quarters. By this time there was a growing awareness that the time-honoured methods by which the provinces were governed needed reinforcing if they were to continue to function as an adequate means of control.

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[89] 10 Geo. II. c.28.

In the next chapter I will show how escalating concerns about the deteriorating moral state of the nation prompted renewed efforts to enhance the power of the state in the provinces through coordinating and instilling new resolve into the body of the magistracy. As I will demonstrate, this campaign, in conjunction with renewed threats to the monopoly of the two patent theatres in London, constituted the catalyst that led to the passage of the Theatrical Representations Act in 1788, an event that was to transform Sarah Baker's career and, also, initiated a 'golden age' of theatre in provincial towns and villages elsewhere in the country.[90]

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[90] For evidence of this, see Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 2

BEHIND THE SCENES:
THE THEATRICAL REPRESENTATIONS ACT OF 1788

The Theatrical Representations Act of 1788[1] was, arguably, the most significant event of Sarah Baker's professional life. This was because in reestablishing the rights of the provincial magistracy to grant theatrical licences it also provided the means by which she was able to operate legally for the first time in her entire career. Thus a new era of security and prospects opened up to Sarah which, until then, could only have been the subject of her hopes and dreams. This legislation, which proved to be such a watershed in her life had a complicated history and it was purely fortuitous and hardly the intention of the majority of those involved in its passage that its major effect was to encourage and consolidate the activities of the more successful managers of strolling provincial companies, rather than to further repress them. Because the story of the passage of this bill demonstrates how closely integrated Sarah's fortunes were with issues far beyond the immediate worries generated by the activities of provincial theatre companies alone I will examine in some detail the complex series of events that preceded its enactment.

Initially, this legislation which, in its final form, permitted provincial magistrates for the first time since 1737 'to license Theatrical Representations occasionally' and, thus, made it possible for Sarah to operate her business on a legal footing, had nothing to do with the provincial theatre at all. This was because it originated in the bitter 'theatre war' being fought in London in 1787 between the two patent theatres, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, and John Palmer who, that year, had attempted to establish a new theatre, the Royalty in east London, with the right to play the 'legitimate' drama.. Palmer's initiative has been described as the first great practical test of the efficacy of the Licensing Act which, since 1737, had defended the theatrical monopoly of the two patent theatres.[2] There was considerable opposition to Palmer's venture, not only from the patentees who were desperate to retain their monopolistic rights but also, as my research has revealed, from elements in the Middlesex magistracy who had their own

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[1] 28 Geo. III, c. 30.

agenda for wanting to see this theatre closed down. Despite his defeat, however, Palmer's exertions acted as a catalyst and initiated campaigns by some of the other 'minor' theatres in London to consolidate their own standing and challenge the monopoly of the two patents through parliamentary action. His efforts, although ostensibly a failure, also generated considerable public interest in the issue of an unrestricted stage, put pressure on local licensing authorities in the London area and eventually, albeit inadvertently, led to the legislation of 1788 which was to have such an impact on Sarah Baker's career.

While the London 'theatre wars' are fundamental to the reasons why the Theatrical Representations Act was passed at this time there was another major issue involved which had its origins in the wider concerns and worries of the latter 1770s and early 1780s. This period is generally described as one of crisis and moral 'angst'[3] and I will show how the provincial theatre was caught up in the establishment's efforts to alleviate these anxieties by enhancing their control of the provinces through closer links with a strengthened, and revitalized magistracy. William Wilberforce's newly formed Proclamation Society was closely involved with this process, its fundamental aim being to reinforce the role of the magistracy and, thereby, call a halt to the state of moral degeneracy into which, it was widely believed, the country had fallen at that time.[4] By looking at the character and methods of this group I will present the evidence which suggests that the 'trusty, temperate and unobnoxious men'[5] enlisted to membership were instrumental in ensuring the passage of the Theatrical Representations Bill through parliament as part of this campaign.

The part played by William Mainwaring in the process of this bill is of special interest as he was not only directly implicated in the closure of the Royalty theatre but was also a member of the Proclamation Society's committee. Mainwaring was particularly assiduous in his work for the Society and, as chairman of the Middlesex and Westminster quarter sessions from 1781-1816 and Member of Parliament for the county

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[2] Watson Nicholson, *The Struggle for a Free Stage in London* (London, 1906), p.428.
[3] For example, Ian R. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain 1760-1815* (London, 1992), pp. 128-157; Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1992), pp.519-564.
[4] *The Life of William Wilberforce by his Sons, Vol. 1* (London, 1838), p.393
[5] William Wilberforce to William Hey Esq., *The Life of William Wilberforce*, p.133.

of Middlesex from 1784-1802, was a powerful and influential figure in the capital.[6] To discover more of the background to the passage of the Theatrical Representations Bill I will look at how Mainwaring's character and involvement in the Royalty affair exacerbated an already volatile situation in the London theatre world and led, the following year, to the enactment of the bill that was to inaugurate a new era for theatre, not in the capital as might have been expected, but in the provinces alone.

The Crisis Years

The first point to consider, however, is why fears about the nation's morals manifested so strongly at this time. Since the end of the previous century when James II had initiated the movement for the reformation of manners and morals, concern with the nation's moral well-being had remained a recurring theme. In 1773, for example, George III wrote to Lord North that he was, '... melancholy to find so little public virtue remaining in this country'.[7] Worries such as these tended to multiply during periods of national crisis which is why they flared up with particular vehemence during the later 1770s and the 1780s.

The most obvious of the many reasons why the country felt so vulnerable at this particular time was that in 1776, after thirteen years of peace, war had broken out with rebellious factions in the American colonies who had declared their independence that year. Events escalated in 1778 with the signing by the rebels of a treaty of commerce and alliance with the French and, with this, all the self-confidence and security attached to Britain's former role as supreme world power had begun to unravel. At war with the French on both sides of the Atlantic, the threat of a French invasion of British shores the following year was a frightening possibility and did much to undermine the nation's confidence. The French were also causing problems in India which further drained the nation's already over-stretched resources. The situation worsened in 1780 when, with the American campaign floundering, Spain, Holland and the League of Armed Neutrality saw their opportunity and also joined the war against Britain. The consequent loss of the American colonies in 1782 had a devastating effect on the morale of George III, his

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[6] R.G. Thorne, *History of Parliament, The Commons 1790-1820* (London, 1986), p.524.
[7] J. Fortescue, (ed.), *The Correspondence of King George the Third from 1760-December 1783, Vol. 3* (London, 1928), p.27.

government and the country at large. Many feared dire commercial consequences for a large sector of British commerce whose prosperity had, in the past, been dependent on trade with the American colonies.

Closer to home, the activities of the Volunteers in Ireland were causing considerable anxiety and in 1782, at the end of the 'disastrous' American war, the relationship of the King with his government was shaken by the Prime Minister, Lord North's, resignation. In the scramble for power that followed, North's return to office in 1783 in coalition with his old arch enemy, Charles James Fox, seemed totally 'devoid of moral scruple' on both their parts. The King's influence was undermined by this arrangement while the lengths to which the Coalition was prepared to go in order to hang on to power were, in many quarters, regarded as 'marking a new moral low-point in English politics'.[8]

The tensions of the war years had also stirred up pre-existing political and religious differences in the country at large between Dissenters who generally supported the cause of the American rebels and the Established Church, who took the opposite view. Anti-Catholic feeling also ran high, especially after legislation for Catholic relief was passed in 1778. This was designed to facilitate the recruitment of Catholic soldiers into the army but also '...unleashed a storm of anti-Catholic bigotry'[9] which manifested itself most violently in the Gordon Riots which spread from London to some provincial towns in 1780. Distrust bred by the government's poor showing in the American war, together with suspicion about financial waste and resentment over heavy taxation led to the growth of political reform movements, such as the Association Movement, at the beginning of this decade.

Social problems in general were intensified by the war and, in the country as a whole, served to emphasize the increasingly precarious state of the nation. Post-war demobilisations in the eighteenth century were habitually associated with sharp rises in prosecutions for vagrancy and crime but, as has been noted, the peak of the early 1780s

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[8] Joanna Innes, 'Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth-Century England', in E. Hellmuth, (ed.) *The Transformation of Political Culture* (Oxford, 1990), p.62.
[9] Ibid.

was 'both unusually pronounced and unusually protracted'.[10] Worries about crime levels were exacerbated by on-going worries about the form that punishment should take. As the century progressed there had been a growing awareness of the need for change in this area, especially with regard to reform of the criminal law, but despite various attempts, the first of which was in 1751, little had been achieved.[11] Growing antipathy to the blatant inconsistencies of punishment meted out by the courts was accompanied by revulsion in some quarters at the degree of dependence on the death penalty as a deterrent and increasing scepticism as to its efficacy. The loss of the American colonies and the suspension of transportation served to intensify the moral debate on the subject of penal theory and practice, the reconsideration of which now became a practical necessity.

In view of these concerns and the problems which the country as a whole faced in the 1770s and 1780s it was understandable that local evidence of social malaise assumed a new significance and that in many areas steps began to be taken to tackle the situation. Thus, as early as 1777, pamphlets, such as the one entitled *Thoughts on the Great Circumspection necessary in Licensing Public Houses,* were being produced by country justices for the edification of their fellow magistrates.[12] Similar campaigns aiming at the repression of vice and immorality in its various manifestations were also launched at this time so that by the mid-1780s at least some effort had been made by the local magistracy in every county to confront and tackle the situation in their own areas of jurisdiction.

This sort of reaction must have been encouraged by the impression that the warnings of the sermons preached to the societies for the reformation of manners earlier in the century appeared to be coming true. For their prophecy had been that a society permitting such wickedness to continue would be 'divided with itself, weakened by an infinite variety of domestic evils and become an easy prey to every invader from without'.[13] Another manifestation of these concerns was a revival of interest in the old

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[10] Ibid., p.63.
[11] L. Radzinowicz, *A History of English Criminal Law and its Administration from 1750, Vol. 1, The Movement for Reform* (London, 1948), p.448.
[12] S.&B. Webb, *English Local Government, Vol. 11, The History of Liquor Licensing in England* (London, 1963), footnote 2, p.57.
[13] 'A sermon preached to the Societies for Reformation of Manners in London, 1731', quoted by D.W.R. Bahlman, *The Moral Revolution of 1688* (Newhaven, 1968), p.8.

societies for the reformation of manners themselves and these provided a model for the reformers of the 1780s.[14]

One of the most influential of the provincial reformers of the 1780s was the evangelical clergyman, magistrate and one-time member of the Yorkshire Association, the Revd. Henry Zouch. He was based in the West Riding of Yorkshire and his campaign to '...procure the better enforcement of laws against both petty delinquency and crime', provided an effective model for others to follow. Zouch was well-known for his reforming zeal and his efforts to reinvigorate the machinery of local government in his area through a more vigorous implementation of the existing laws provided much of the inspiration for the reincarnation of the reformation of manners movement on a national scale. William Hey, another evangelical, who became Mayor of Leeds in 1787 was among those who took up his challenge. Middlesex was also recognized as a centre of reforming activity and, here, William Mainwaring, as chairman of the bench, was central to the campaign.[15]

The fact that an unofficial 'communications network' was operating among magistrates on a nationwide scale, at least as early as the 1780s, [16] suggests there was a widespread awareness, not only of these campaigns but, also, of the value of exchanging ideas and information about what was considered 'good practice' in local government. It also demonstrates that some magistrates, at least, were anxious to encourage greater uniformity of action where the implementation of the law was concerned. Despite the evidence for this and the existence of a variety of handbooks on how to handle typical cases and problems, as D. Eastwood comments, it was, nevertheless, the personal authority of the individual magistrate that '...remained the sinews of the system of justice in rural England' throughout this period.[17]

The desirability of extending the power of the state through a reinvigorated magistracy in order to combat rising levels of crime and lawlessness had also been the subject of

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[14] Innes, 'Politics and Morals', p.72.
[15] Ibid., pp.68-70.
[16] Ibid., footnote 93, p.93.
[17] D. Eastwood, *Governing Rural England: Tradition and Transformation in Local Government 1780-1840* (Oxford, 1994), footnote 12, p.78 & p.83.

debate and concern in government circles for many years. Formal consideration of these matters was initiated in 1750 when a House of Commons committee was appointed to look into the state of the criminal laws. The committee had concluded that crime levels could not be reduced until the social causes of crime had been effectively dealt with. They also made clear that the power of the state in dealing with potential and actual offenders needed reinforcing. One consequence of their deliberations and recommendations was the enactment, in 1752, of the law that reinstated the rights of London magistrates to grant 'music and dancing' licences in the capital but nothing was done to, similarly, enhance the powers of provincial magistrates.[18] Although a second Commons inquiry into the state of the criminal laws took place in 1771, here again, little was achieved and in 1787 William Pitt actually opposed the suggestion that another commission of inquiry into criminal law reform should be set up, on the grounds that '...it would be extremely dangerous to take any step which might have the smallest tendency to discrediting the present existing system'.[19]

By this time, however, there was a widespread belief in establishment circles that the 'threat' to the nation, both from within and without, had escalated to the point where concerted action of one kind or another would have to be taken if disaster was to be avoided. Although Innes has found some evidence to suggest that, from at least as early as 1781, tentative efforts were made to influence the operation of local government from the centre through direct contact with individual magistrates, there is little to indicate that any great exertions had been made in this direction.[20] Thus it was only through the personal initiative of concerned individuals from within the establishment that a centrally directed national campaign was finally set up in 1787 with the intention of achieving these ends.

The Proclamation Society, its members and its aims

The Proclamation Society was founded by William Wilberforce in response to the 'moral crisis' of the 1780s. Wilberforce was closely associated with the reforming county of Yorkshire for which he was returned as member in 1784. Like Zouch and

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[18] Radzinowicz, *The Movement for Reform*, pp. 399-449. See also, Chapter 1 above, p.15.
[19] 'Parliamentary History' (1786-1788), Vol. 26, cols. 1058-1059, quoted by Radzinowicz, *The Movement for Reform*, p.447.

Hey, who was a close friend and with whom he corresponded over many years, he, too, was an evangelical. The broad aims of the Proclamation Society were set out in a prospectus that stated its purpose was to 'enforce a stricter execution of the laws against vice and immorality' and 'to afford the Magistracy such assistance in the discharge of their duty as the nature of the case may require'.[21] From this declaration, it is clear that Wilberforce's intention was to consolidate the activities of his fellow evangelicals and a reforming magistracy that were already under way in the country. The new society sought to achieve its ends in three main ways, namely, by direct communication with the magistracy through pamphlets and circular letters and by encouraging magistrates to do the same with each other; through parliamentary action and through 'highly selective use of the law courts'.[22]

Because of the virtual autonomy of many magistrates Wilberforce had to act with extreme caution for fear of alienating them from his scheme. He was also concerned that his new Society would be seen as oppressive and high-handed. Ostensibly, therefore, he established the Proclamation Society in response to a Royal Proclamation against vice and immorality issued by George III on 1 June 1787. This was followed up by sending copies of the proclamation to the sheriff of every county, the *Custos Rotulorum* (usually the Lord Lieutenant) and the mayors of towns, together with a letter from the Home Secretary urging compliance. In this way he thought it more likely that he would be able to enlist the enthusiasm of the whole nation to his campaign. According to Beilby Porteus, the then Bishop of Chester's chronology of events, the society had, in fact, been set up in secret some time before this and he describes how the King was then recruited to the cause and 'talked into' making the proclamation by Wilberforce's friends. This version of events is again confirmed by Porteus's reference in his *Occasional Memorandums and Reflexions* to the winter of 1786/87 when the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Prime Minister, William Pitt, were involved in

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[20] Innes, 'Politics and Morals', footnote 16, p.65 & footnote 49, p.77.
[21] *The Life of William Wilberforce*, p.393.
[22] Innes, 'Politics and Morals', p.92.

'several conferences' concerning the foundation of the new society and 'expressed their entire approbation of the Scheme'. [23]

Wilberforce's tactics appear to have paid off as there was a positive and immediate response to the proclamation. In their history of English local government, Sidney and Beatrice Webb note that: 'Throughout the next two or three years we find recorded in every provincial newspaper from one end of the kingdom to the other the repeated discussions and elaborate resolutions of the county Justices as to the evils which neglect had produced, and the way to remedy them'.[24] Significantly, there was a great increase in communication between magistrates in different parts of the country and in some cases the magistrates' resolutions of one area were published for distribution in other counties.

Behind the scenes, Wilberforce's intention from the start had been to persuade members of the establishment to join his new society as, not only did he believe the manners of the 'elite' as needful of improvement as those of the 'common people', but their support was essential to the success of his campaign. Here, too, he had to tread with care, the idea being, as Beilby Porteus wrote in his diary, to proceed '...cautiously and privately to mention the Plan in Confidence, first of all to the Leading Men in Church and State, to engage their Concurrence and protection and then by degrees to sound the Dispositions, and obtain if possible, the Assistance of the Principal and most respectable characters among the Nobility, Clergy and Gentry, in and about London and afterwards throughout the Kingdom.'[25] His caution was due to the fact that his campaign was vulnerable to political attack by the Whigs as well as the Pittite establishment. In the former case it was feared the new society would be seen as an elitist, oppressive organization whose intention was to persecute the poor while in the latter, it was possible that the Pittite establishment would attack the group as interfering with affairs traditionally the concern of the Church and State. This is why Wilberforce tried to attract across the board

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[23] Beilby Porteus, *Occasional Memorandums and Reflexions on several subjects principally Religious, Moral, Ecclesiastical and Literary, 1777-1809,* Porteus MSS 2099, Lambeth Palace Library, entry for 12 February 1788.
[24] Webb, *The History of Liquor Licensing,* p.59.
[25] Porteus MSS, 5 August 1787.

support although his appeal was primarily directed at representatives of the religious and political Establishment.

In his list of 5 August 1787 of 'present members' of the Proclamation Society Porteus names forty-one men in total, fifteen of these being on the acting committee. President of the Society was the Duke of Montagu and meetings often took place at his house in Whitehall. [26] Because of the perceived necessity of acting 'cautiously and privately' in recruiting to the Society it is virtually impossible to ascertain the identities of everyone who was a member in 1787-88. Apart from Porteus's list of August 1787 the only other known record of early members is an appendix to the *Life of William Wilberforce by his Sons* which, because it still lists Porteus as the Bishop of Chester rather than of London, to which position he was appointed in November 1787, was probably compiled in the early autumn. Wilberforce's list comprises forty-nine names, eight more than Porteus records and, of the names on Porteus's list, only that of the Bishop of Winchester is missing. [27] This indicates a degree of continuity and growth at this early stage and that, despite his unpopularity in some quarters, Wilberforce had been highly successful in his drive to recruit members from 'the Leading Men in Church and State'.

Among the names he recorded were the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, seventeen bishops, fifteen peers and eldest sons of peers, many with very close associations with the royal household and two former prime ministers, the Duke of Grafton and Lord North. Although Pitt's own name was not included the majority of those on the list were Anglican and Pittite. Other denominations were also represented, however, thus avoiding the Society's identification with any one religious faction. [28]

Indicative of the Society's true nature and intent is the fact that over half the members of its committee were either evangelicals, magistrates or involved with local government. Of the fifteen committee members at least eight belonged to this group. Seven of the eight also sat as members of parliament. Noted evangelicals on the committee were Sir Charles Middleton, Comptroller of the Navy and Samuel Thornton who was closely

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[26] Porteus MSS, 5 August 1787.
[27] *Life of William Wilberforce*, p.394.
[28] Innes, 'Politics and Morals', p.80.

associated with the Clapham Sect and member of parliament for Kingston-upon-Hull which he had contested on a joint interest with Wilberforce, his cousin, in 1784. In addition to this, the two Bishops who belonged to the committee, Beilby Porteus and Shute Barrington, were noted for their consistent sympathy to evangelical causes.[29] Among the magistrates on the committee were William Mainwaring and the Revd. Dr. Samuel Glasse of the Middlesex bench, Brook Watson, who was member of parliament for London and also an alderman in the city and William Morton Pitt, member of parliament for Poole and a Dorset county justice.

The Society's declared aim, as set out in its prospectus, was to reinforce the role of the magistracy and one of the ways in which they sought to do this was through parliamentary action. Innes, in discussing the Society's parliamentary activities, notes that its successes included two acts concerning vagrancy and prison government which were passed as a consequence of resolutions taken at a magistrates' convention organized by the Society in 1790 and that the Society also played a part in promoting the Middlesex Justices Act of 1792. She also describes how, '...in all its operations, the Society displayed a notably clear-headed sense of how a body such as itself might best get things done within the loosely structured apparatus of eighteenth-century English government'.[30] It is my belief that the passage of the Theatrical Representations Bill provides a good illustration of this statement and, furthermore, demonstrates that the Society was already actively promoting its policies through parliamentary action within the first year of its existence. There are three bases to this claim. Firstly, in giving new powers to local magistrates the act admirably fulfilled the Society's stated aims; secondly, the theatre, long regarded as the very epitome of vice and immorality, was a natural target for a reforming organization such as the Proclamation Society and, thirdly, there is ample evidence to show that members of the Society played a central and crucial role in the passage of this legislation through parliament.

Before examining the complex situation that culminated in the enactment of this bill it is appropriate to look briefly at the members of the society most directly concerned with its passage through parliament and their relationship with non-members who were also

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[29] Ibid., p.74.

involved. As Innes comments, '... the Society's public initiatives were often complemented by more private and informal approaches to men whose support might be crucial to their success'.[31] In support of this statement she cites the case of a letter from Pitt to Wilberforce in the spring of 1788 when he assures him that: 'Any applications from your society shall most certainly be attended to'.[32] 'String-pulling' was also likely to have played a part in the passage of the Theatrical Representations Bill, although the evidence for this is purely circumstantial. In this context the relationship between William Hussey, whose tentative amendment to the ill fated Interlude Bill in April 1788 first alerted the Commons to the ideas inherent in the Theatrical Representations Bill, and Lord Radnor, who introduced this bill in the House of Lords, is of some interest. Radnor, a member of the Society, was a well known evangelical whose name appears on the lists of numerous charitable societies including those directly concerned, in varying ways, with 'the evil heart of man'. Ford K Brown lists him as belonging to 26 such societies, as president of four, vice-president of four and on the committee of one, although this was not the Proclamation Society.[33] Further light is thrown on his character by John Stockdale who, in the *Parliamentary Register* for 12 May 1775, noted Radnor's opposition to the proposal for the Manchester Playhouse during the debate on the bill in the House of Lords. The Earl of Carlisle's view that a well regulated playhouse provided an antidote to the 'gloomy thoughts' engendered by the Methodism that was 'daily gaining ground' proved more acceptable to the Lords than Radnor's resistance to the scheme, however, and the bill was passed without further opposition.[34] As Viscount Folkestone, Radnor had represented Salisbury in the Commons from 1771 until 1776 where 'he seemed most concerned with ecclesiastical questions'.[35] In 1776 he took his seat in the Lords. From that date until 1802 his half-brother, the Hon William Henry Bouverie, was regularly returned on the family interest at Salisbury without a contest.

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[30] Ibid., pp. 92-96.
[31] Ibid, p.90.
[32] A.M. Wilberforce (ed.), 'Private Papers of William Wilberforce' (London, 1897), p.19, quoted by Innes, 'Politics and Morals', p.90.
[33] Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians* (Cambridge, 1961), p.351.
[34] John Stockdale, *The Parliamentary Register; or History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Lords and the House of Commons, Vol. 2*, p.124.
[35] Ronald K. Huch, *The Radical Lord Radnor: The Public Life of Viscount Folkestone, Third Earl of Radnor (1779-1869)* (Ontario, 1977), p.6.

William Hussey also represented Salisbury, in his case, from 1774-1813. His family was well known in the city and he served as a common councilman and an alderman before becoming mayor, and by default also a magistrate, in 1759. He held this office for more than 50 years. Hussey's name was not on either list of members of the Proclamation Society in 1787 but two years later he was described as 'one of the most upright, able and industrious members of the House'[36], attributes that would surely have endeared him to members of the Society. In addition to Radnor's connections with Salisbury, the city's bishop, Shute Barrington, was also an enthusiastic member of the Proclamation Society and according to Porteus's account had been one of the few to attend the first committee meeting in November 1787. It was possibly more than pure coincidence, therefore, that it was Hussey who ventured on 25 April 'to feel the pulse of the House' on 'a thing that was new' and introduced the idea of enabling 'the Quarter Sessions in every place to grant players a licence....', the concept at the heart of Radnor's Act.[37] *The Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* of 26 April 1787 commented: 'From the favourable impression Mr. Hussey's proposition appeared to have made upon the House, we should not at all wonder at a Bill being brought in next sessions to relax the severity of the Acts of 10 and 25 Geo. II in regard to travelling Comedians.' In the event it was just ten days later, on 5 May 1787, that Lord Radnor presented his bill to the House of Lords.

Lord Thurlow, the Lord Chancellor, was also instrumental in ensuring the enactment of this piece of legislation and once again it is interesting to note his close association with another member of the society, Sir Lloyd Kenyon. Kenyon, the member of parliament for Tregony from 1784 until 9 June 1788, was Master of the Rolls and enjoyed a close association with the Lord Chancellor. The two men were of the same age and Kenyon had 'devilled' for Thurlow as a young barrister. Thurlow obviously thought highly of him for he twice offered to raise him to the bench and in July 1780 was instrumental in his appointment as Chief Justice of Chester against a candidate favoured by Lord North. In June 1788 Thurlow was again involved when Kenyon was appointed Lord Chief

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[36] John Stockdale, 'The Parliamentary Register', Vol. 15, p.157, quoted by R.G. Thorne, *History of Parliament, The Commons 1790-1820* (London 1986), p.664.
[37] *The Times*, 26 April 1788.

Justice of the King's bench.[38] It is, I believe, entirely feasible to assume that Thurlow's co-operation was solicited by Kenyon to ensure the successful passage of this 'common sense' act whose implementation so closely measured up to the aims of the society itself.

Whether influence was brought to bear in this way remains a matter for conjecture, however, but the evidence to support the claim that another Society member, William Mainwaring, played an important parliamentary role in translating the group's aims into action in the early months of the Society's existence is, I believe, far stronger. Porteus, in his *Occasional Memorandums and Reflexions* of 5 August 1787 included Mainwaring's name, as well as his own, among those 'many Persons of high Rank, Character and Fortune' who the previous winter had not only promised to become members of the proposed society but were also members of the Acting Committee.

Mainwaring was very active in his work for the society and his parliamentary record in the three or four months after the publicly acknowledged inaugural meeting of the committee of the Proclamation Society on 12 February 1788,[39] confirms that he was already actively seeking to implement its ideals through parliamentary action. At this time three bills which sought to strengthen the powers of magistrates throughout the country, and in which he played a major role, were presented to parliament. The first of these was the Justices Bill '...to enable those being in the Commission of the Peace for more Counties than One to act out of the Limits of the Counties in which they shall reside in certain Cases'. This legislation was intended to ease the constant difficulty in some parts of the country in gathering together a quorum of two justices for which reason quarter sessions sometimes failed to be held at all.[40] In this instance leave was given to Sir William Codrington and Mr Bearcroft to bring in the bill on 5 March but on 11 April it was Mainwaring who took the Chair of a Committee of the whole house and reported back on the amendments made to it. The bill received Royal Assent on 4 July that year.[41]

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[38] L. Namier & J. Brooke (eds.), *History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1754-1790* (London, 1964), p.6.
[39] Porteus Manuscript, 12 February 1788.
[40] J.H. Baker, *The Legal Profession and the Common Law* (London, 1986), p.277.
[41] *Journals of the House of Commons*, No. 43, pp. 295 & 381.

The second bill with which Mainwaring was concerned in the spring and early summer of 1788 sought to amend an act for the licensing of Alehouse Keepers and Victuallers and to regulate '...the Manner of granting such Licences in future, and also Licences to Persons selling Spirituous Liquors'. He, together with Robert Burton, presented this to the House of Commons on 30 May 1788.[42] Among other provisions, this bill sought to amend the act of 29 Geo. II which made it lawful '....for any Two of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace, at a Petty Sessions, to grant a Licence to any new Tenant or Occupier' to open an Alehouse or Victualling House.[43] Mainwaring's bill stipulated that 'no Licence for selling Ale, Beer, or other Liquors by Retail' should be granted without the consent of 'the Majority of the Justices present at such Meeting; nor at any adjourned or subsequent Meeting, after the same shall have been refused by such Majority of Justices as aforesaid'. Action on this legislation was deferred on 3 June 1788 and, in the event, it was not until 11 June 1792 that the bill 'to amend so much of 26 & 29 Geo. II as relates to licensing Alehouse Keepers... and for the better regulating the granting of such Licences' finally received Royal Assent.[44] None the less, the fact that Mainwaring presented this bill in May 1788 is further evidence that the Society was already actively seeking to implement its aims through parliamentary action in the first few months of its existence.

It is Mainwaring's involvement in events that eventually, and inadvertently, resulted in the passage of the Theatrical Representations Bill, that is of the most interest and relevance to this investigation. Mainwaring, as has already been noted, was a member of the Proclamation Society's original acting committee and chairman of the Middlesex Bench. He was also directly involved in the closure of the Royalty Theatre in 1787. It was this event which sparked a series of reactions that culminated in the enactment of this third bill. Despite his convincing veneer of respectability, Mainwaring was devious and corrupt and also highly unpopular with the people over whom he held sway as a

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[42] Ibid., pp. 519-520.
[43] S. Lambert, (ed.), *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the 18th Century, 'Bills', 1788, Volume 61* (Delaware, 1975), p.546.
[44] *Journals of the House of Commons,* Vol. 43, p.532; *Journals of the House of Lords,* Vol. 39, p. 472.

magistrate.[45] Had he been held in greater esteem by the people over whom he presided, I believe it unlikely that public concern and reaction over the issue of a free stage would have erupted quite as strongly as it did in the wake of the closure of this theatre. Without the furore generated by this event it is also unlikely that the Theatrical Representations Bill would have been enacted at that time and provincial theatre could well have continued the somewhat shadowy, illegal existence to which it had been condemned by the Licensing Act, fifty years previously.

Mainwaring's and, thereby, I suggest, the Proclamation Society's involvement with the acrimonious affairs of the London theatres was initiated in 1787 at the time when John Palmer, an actor at the Drury Lane Theatre became the first to 'throw his hat into the ring' and publicly challenge the monopoly of the patent theatres. Palmer had begun to build his new Royalty theatre in Wellclose Square in 1785. Two years later under provision of the act of 1752 he 'armed himself' with a licence issued by the magistrates of the Tower Hamlets and the Governor of the Tower of London in whose precincts his new theatre stood, and opened on 20 June 1787. In defiance of the monopoly and of the law with regard to 'legitimate' drama, Palmer's first night included performances of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and a play that Sarah Baker also regularly included in her repertoire at that time, Garrick's *Miss in Her Teens*. But the same evening Palmer's presentation of these two plays was declared illegal and his new theatre was closed.

There is ample evidence to show that Mainwaring was deeply implicated in this debacle. The processes that culminated in the theatre's closure were initiated at a meeting of the General Session of the Peace for the County of Middlesex of which he was chairman. The meeting took place on 24 May 1787, one week before George III's Proclamation of 1 June, and 'A Representation of the Grand Jury...' was read out. The Representation called attention to '..the Depravity and Disipation which prevail at this time..' and, along with 'disregard for the Sabbath', alehouses, vagrants, and prostitutes, 'the Great number of Places of Public Entertainment, some permitted by Authority, some in defiance of the

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[45] See, for example, L. Radzinwicz, *A History of English Criminal Law and its Administration from 1750, Vol. 3, Cross-Currents in the Movement for the Reform of the Police* (London, 1956), footnote 9, p.377; Middlesex Sessions Records (Book 29), Sessions Papers MJ/SP-WJ/SP, London Metropolitan Archives; S. & B. Webb, *English Local Government, Vol. 1, The Parish and the County* (London, 1963), pp. 562-566.

Law..' were also singled out as '...another Cause of that general spirit of Disipation and Extravagance which so particularly distinguishes the present times'. The Grand Jury concluded by calling on the Magistracy '..for a more active execution of those wise and wholesome Laws which have been framed for the Maintenance of peace and good order.[46]

Mainwaring and Samuel Glasse, another early member of the Proclamation Society, were among those appointed to consider the Grand Jury's 'Representation'. Mainwaring convened the next meeting of the Middlesex magistrates for 20 June, the same night that Palmer opened at the Royalty. Ostensibly the idea was to discuss the King's Proclamation and decide on the action to be taken. Mainwaring, however, reported that the recommendations of the committee appointed to consider the Grand Jury's Representation, had taken the Proclamation into account and, therefore, their findings were a suitable response. It was ordered that copies of this document be distributed for display in every parish in the county. At the same meeting John Staples, a Justice of the Peace for the county of Middlesex and for the Tower Royalty where Palmer had opened for the first time that evening, commenced his attack on the Royalty theatre. The General Orders of Court Book describes how he produced a hand bill advertising the evening's performances and declared his intention of putting '...the Laws in execution against such as should act any Play or other performance of the Stage not legally authorized so to do'. This, he stated, was for fear that 'inconveniences and Disorders' would arise and the 'peace and good order of the Eastern parts of the County' would be 'greatly affected' if this action was not taken. A copy of the resolution was immediately dispatched to the magistrates in whose jurisdiction the Royalty Theatre stood and Staples was warmly thanked by the meeting for '..his proper Conduct and attention'.[47]

This series of events, I believe, has a direct link with Mainwaring's membership of the Proclamation Society and could well have been staged by him in order to impress his fellow members. It was also a useful public demonstration of his worth to the Society, his supposedly high moral principles and his determination to execute the existing law

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[46] General Orders of Court Books/County Minute Books, Ref. MJ/OC/12, October 1789-December 1795, Microfilm Reel No. X80/4, London Metropolitan Archives.
[47] Ibid.

more firmly in line with the Society's objectives. But, as already mentioned, he did not always apply the same high standards where his own personal interests were involved and he was widely disliked and mistrusted among his constituents. The inhabitants of the Hamlet of Hill End Old Town, for example, responded with great ferocity to their copy of the Representation of the Middlesex Grand Jury of June 1787 that Mainwaring had ordered to be posted in every parish in the county. The report of a meeting they held at the Town House on 12 July to discuss this document constitutes a scathing attack on the Middlesex magistracy and includes the following paragraph: 'In those parts of the Country where the Magistrates are respectable both in their Characters and Fortunes and make a point of discharging their duty with a zealous activity and distinguished fidelity the effects are discoverable in the manners of the People who are at once both industrious and orderly, but where the contrary is the case, idleness, irregularity and every species of Disorder will be found to ensue.' The report goes on to describe the majority of Middlesex Justices as dissipated and depraved and as 'servile Drudges...or the busy Tools of the reigning Party at the moment'.[48]

Mainwaring can hardly have anticipated this sort of reaction. The incident demonstrates, I think, the degree of execration in which he and his fellow magistrates were held by the people under his jurisdiction and perhaps explains why his plans also went so badly awry with regard to the Royalty affair. Whatever his involvement or motivation here he can hardly have wished to provoke a ferocious public campaign for an unrestricted stage nor to initiate the beginning of a pamphlet war that helped transform 'the passive acquiescence of the preceding half century ... to an active and determined opposition to the theatrical monopoly'.[49] It is not unreasonable to suggest that his unpopularity, and that of his fellow Middlesex magistrates, fanned the flames of dissent which contributed to the circumstances leading to the enactment of the Theatrical Representations Bill, and thus to the far reaching, but unanticipated, consequences for provincial theatres across the country. As for the Royalty Theatre itself, it re-opened shortly after the events of 20 June 1787, but then operated strictly according to the restrictions laid down by the act of 1752 and there was no further attempt to include regular drama on the bill.

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[48] Ibid.
[49] Watson Nicholson, *The Struggle*, p.127.

The Sadler's Wells Bill, 1788

All the complexity, prejudice and inadequacy of the law relating to theatre as well as the powerful interests of the patentees within parliament were demonstrated in the weeks preceding the passing of the Theatrical Representations Bill on 11 June 1788. Fearful, in the wake of the Royalty fiasco, that there were moves afoot on the part of the patent or 'winter' theatres 'to commence suits and prosecutions against all others indiscriminately'[50] on 6 February 1788 Richard Wroughton and Thomas Arnold, the proprietors of the Sadler's Wells Theatre which came under the jurisdiction of the Middlesex quarter sessions, presented a petition to parliament which sought leave to bring in a bill 'to enable His Majesty to grant Letters patent for licensing and authorising ...Sadler's Wells from the 25th Day of March to the 10th Day of October in every Year for the Performance of the usual Entertainments of Dancing and Singing, and exhibiting such original Pantomimes and Musical Pieces as have not been performed at the Theatres Royal of Drury Lane and Covent Garden....'.[51]

In support of their case, the petitioners pointed out that Sadler's Wells had been 'an established House of public Entertainment during the present Century' and had also been regularly licensed by His Majesty's Justices of the Peace in General Quarter Sessions according to the law passed in 1752.[52] Although they admitted that some parts of the Entertainments put on at Sadler's Wells were in fact prohibited by the Licensing Act of 1737, they believed that in applying for and being granted an annual licence year after year by the Middlesex Quarter Sessions they had acted in good faith and precedents had been set. Furthermore large sums of money were at stake. The Petitioners had purchased Sadler's Wells for a sum exceeding £12,000 'under the Faith that the Entertainments usually exhibited there were strictly legal' and in fitting up the House considerable sums of money had also been spent.[53]

Their case was referred that day to the consideration of a committee which included William Mainwaring. Following the cross examination of witnesses, one of whom was Henry Collingwood Selby Esq, Clerk of the Peace for the County of Middlesex,

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[50] William Cobbett. *The Parliamentary History of England 1788-1789,* Vol. 27, p.160.
[51] *Journals of the House of Commons, No. 43,* 6 February, 1788, p. 184.
[52] 25 Geo. II, c.36.

parliament was satisfied that the petitioners had a genuine case and on 10 March 1788 Mainwaring, Mr Ladbroke and Sir Walter Rawlinson were instructed to prepare and bring in the Sadler's Wells Bill which was read for the first time in the Commons the following day.

On Friday 8 February, two days after the initial presentation of the Sadler's Wells petition, Mainwaring, himself, sought to present a petition signed by 5000 persons, inhabitants of the county of Middlesex. This was in support of another petition submitted by his colleague Michael Angelo Taylor in an attempt to achieve the same status through parliamentary action for Palmer's Royalty Theatre.[54] On this occasion the petition was rejected but it was not the last time in those months that Mainwaring would seek to intervene on behalf of the Royalty Theatre. One can only assume that pressure of public opinion in his constituency, 'an intermittent influence on his political conduct'[55], prompted this action on his part. These moves on behalf of individual theatres were the first in a series of parliamentary manoeuvres that culminated in the enactment of the Theatrical Representations Bill four months later.

The commercial and financial implications of this action on the part of the minor theatres were exposed in the Commons on 11 March 1788 when the Sadler's Wells Bill was vigorously challenged by one of the patent theatres strongest advocates, the member for Stafford, Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Sheridan interpreted Sadler's Wells attempt to regularize and legalize their situation and ensure the Theatre's future as a bid to create 'a monopoly for a certain class of performances'. His strongest objection to this, he declared, was that parliament was being asked to sanction what, by the Theatre's own admission, had been and continued to be an illegal operation. In other words, Sadler's Wells like many other 'minor' houses frequently included the proscribed drama in their programmes. Sheridan also attacked John Palmer's attempt to establish the Royalty Theatre as 'a scheme set up upon false pretences, and supported by a conspiracy of

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[53] *Journals of the House of Commons*, No. 43, 6 February, 1788, p.184.
[54] J. Debrett, *The Parliamentary Register or History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons 1787-88*, Vol.. 23, Friday 8 February, 1788.
[55] Thorne, *History of Parliament*, p.524.

Justices of the Peace to defeat the law, which they were bound, by their oath to execute'.[56]

With Sheridan's onslaught the commercial struggles, high stakes and personal risks taken by those involved with the London theatres spilled over onto the floor of the House of Commons. For Sheridan, as a patentee of the Drury Lane Theatre, was far from a disinterested observer in this case and had pressing personal and financial reasons for resisting any move to strengthen the standing and appeal of the 'minor' theatres. In June 1776 he, together with Thomas Linley and Richard Ford, had bought a half of the Drury Lane patent for a total of £35,000. To do this they had borrowed heavily and Sheridan, together with his wife, the actress Elizabeth Linley, had personally 'raked up' £1,300. He anticipated making at least £3,500 a year from this investment and it was his opinion that: '..while this is cleared the proprietors are safe, but I think it must be infernal bad management indeed that one does not double it'.[57] He made himself business manager and opened his new theatre on 21 September 1776 with a revival of his own play *The Rivals*. The theatre had some brilliant successes and in acquiring a further share of the patent which involved mortgage repayments Sheridan committed himself even deeper to the theatre's financial fortunes. Despite his optimism, however, the takings at Drury Lane never kept pace with the expenses and Sheridan was always in financial difficulties, the mortgage quickly becoming 'a millstone about his neck'. To attract as wide an audience as possible and appeal to those who attended the 'minor' theatres he included pantomime and 'interludes' as well as 'legitimate' drama in his bills. In his precarious financial predicament the prospect of parliamentary sanction for the 'minor' theatres must have seemed the final straw.

Sheridan had the backing, among others, of Charles James Fox, a political ally and personal friend, who spoke up in his support during the debate. Between them they had little difficulty in postponing the second reading of the Sadler's Wells Bill until 4 April with forty-eight in favour and thirty-nine against.[58] This had a damaging financial effect on Sadler's Wells which, as was made clear in a notice in *The Times*, felt obliged to

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[56] Cobbett, *Parliamentary History*, p.159.
[57] W.J. Macqueen Pope, *Theatre Royal Drury Lane* (London, 1945), p.190.
[58] Cobbett, *Parliamentary History*, p.163.

postpone the traditional opening on Easter Monday of their most profitable season of the year until the situation was clarified. [59]

The Interlude Bill, 1788

Meanwhile, on 8 April 1788, William Mainwaring, whose action with regard to the Royalty Theatre ten months previously had effectively opened up this can of worms, sought leave to introduce another bill. The Interlude Bill was 'of a more general and far-reaching nature' than the Sadler's Wells Bill in that its aim was to amend and clarify the existing theatrical laws of 10 Geo. II, c.28 (1737) and 25 Geo.II, c.36 (1752) in order to make them, and the justices who granted theatrical licences, more effective.[60] This was directly in line with the stated purpose of the Proclamation Society 'to promote a spirit of decency and good order, and enforce a stricter execution of the laws against vice and immorality'.[61]

On 9 April 1788 both *The Times* and *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* carried accounts of Mainwaring's speech and something of his concern and purpose can be found here. The *Morning Chronicle's* report of the speech quoted Mainwaring as saying that he considered:

> '... the restraining the numerous illegal performances now spread in every part of the country, to be a matter of national importance; ...It was notorious that numerous places in every part of the kingdom, and in and about the metropolis in particular, had been licensed by the justices under the act of the 10th and 25th of his late Majesty; and it was equally notorious that the persons who had obtained such licences, had violated them, either innocently and through mistake or by wilful misinterpretation....and had performed plays, interludes, and farces, which by those Acts, they were not authorized to perform'.

Mainwaring also criticized the magistracy itself in his speech and *The Times* reported this as follows:

> '....several persons had obtained licences, and others [magistrates] had consequently granted them [licences] beyond the meaning of these acts [and] he thought it was necessary some measure might be adopted to prevent such an abuse of the existing law in future. ...either the licences were granted through ignorance; a pretended misunderstanding of what the law actually forbad, or a

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[59] *The Times*, 22 March, 1788.
[60] *Journals of the House of Commons, Vol. 43*, p.374.
[61] 'The Prospectus of the Society for Enforcing the King's Proclamation', *The Life of William Wilberforce*, p.393.

> willful intention of performing such pieces in defiance of these Statutes. To prevent the existence for any plea of either of these pretences was the object of the Bill he intended, with their leave to bring forward. Its purpose was to ascertain clearly to what extent these licences should be granted by the Justices of the Peace.'

The report continued that Mainwaring, in his desire to be absolutely specific with regard to the sort of entertainments for which justices would be empowered to grant licences, '...intended that his Bill should specify the representations that were not to be exhibited or performed'. A further clause stipulated that 'the person applying shall give previous notice to the Clerk or the Overseers or Churchwardens of the parish where he resides, and the said performances are meant to be displayed.'

Despite Mainwaring's reported concern with the nation at large, the Interlude Bill at first referred only to London and its environs. Before it was ordered to be engrossed in the Commons on 21 April 1788, however, *The Times* carried a report that a further clause 'brought up by a Member, whose name we could not learn' was annexed to this bill. 'The purpose of this clause', *The Times* stated 'was, that, except in London, Justices of the Peace, at the Quarter Sessions, should grant licences for places of amusement in those districts over which they presided'.[62] This report presents something of a puzzle as the clause referred to is not mentioned in any of the other sources that I have consulted and a few days later, on 25 April, William Hussey referred to his similar proposal as 'a thing that was new'.[63]

The Sadler's Wells petition was also annexed to this legislation and it was this that caused controversy and the eventual downfall of the bill. Watson Nicholson comments that '..had that bill been stripped of its special features, which were tacked to it in the interest of private individuals, it would have passed'.[64] On hearing that this clause was to be annexed to the bill, *The Times* of 10 April 1788 had complained that its inclusion looked like '...what the Constitution of England abhors, partiality and monopoly'. In this form, however, the motion was agreed to by the House without opposition.

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[62] *The Times*, 21 April, 1788.
[63] *The Times*, 26 April, 1788.
[64] Watson Nicholson, *The Struggle*, p.137.

Unsurprisingly, other 'minor' theatres were quick to take note of the advantage this legislation would bring to Sadler's Wells and the Royalty was the first to follow their example. Mainwaring again played a leading role here in that it was he who presented a petition to parliament on their behalf for a clause similar to that concerning Sadler's Wells to be inserted in the Interlude Bill. The Speaker of the House ruled the Royalty petition out of order and the same fate befell the petition presented by Lord Newhaven on behalf of the Royal Circus on 26 April 1788. There was considerable resentment both in parliament and in the national press at the treatment of the 'minor' theatres. In a letter to the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* of 18 April 1788 a 'correspondent' wrote of the great convenience 'the licensing of Summer Theatres in the different quarters of the vicinity of London [would bring to] the multitude of inhabitants which they contain. To compel them to seek for recreation,' he continued, 'at such immense distances, as the majority would be obliged to go, if there were only two small theatres, the Haymarket and Sadlers Wells, would be certainly unjust, as it would be compelling them to be at an extraordinary expense, or debarring them from innocent amusements which they have a right to enjoy'. In similar terms in a lengthy open letter to Lord Thurlow in *The Times* of 18 April 1788, 'an established tradesman in the borough of Southwark' protested vigorously and eloquently at the lack of a theatre in his part of the town and the extra cost involved in transporting his large family across London to see a show.

The Parliamentary Intelligence column in *The Times* on 22 April 1788 had the following comment to make on the unfairness and illogic of the situation:

> 'If the objections which are made to permitting the present existing Theatres or places of public amusements to continue, arises from a principle of morality, which indeed is the only plea of opposition which can be alleged; it is somewhat strange that the only exception should be made in favour of Sadler's Wells, at which place *alone* it is worthy of remark, a man may if he chuses get drunk. A pint of liquor is included in the price of admittance, but as much more may be had, as any person chuses to call for. The heat of the place is a great inducement, and we believe many *females* have from that cause drank more than has let them depart in their sober senses, the consequences of which are obvious. This is not permitted at Astley's, the Circus or the Royalty'.

In the Commons Michael Angelo Taylor, member for Poole and 'a staunch supporter of fair play and an unshackled stage' also argued that there ought to be a theatre in the East End of London. He insisted, it was reported, 'that a playhouse in Whitechapel could not injure the theatres [Covent Garden and Drury Lane] and that the inhabitants of that part of the town ought to be indulged with a Theatre as well as those of the West'.[65] The bill caused similar dissension in the House of Lords with the various vested interests of the patent theatres, Sadler's Wells and other 'minor' London theatres, (the Royalty, Astley's and the Royal Circus) all embroiled in heated discussion. The Lord Chancellor, Lord Thurlow, professed himself to be 'a friend to the rights and property of the Royal Theatres' but failed to understand why special privileges should be granted to Sadler's Wells alone 'whose proprietors now came forward with the modest plea of being the oldest offenders against the law, in order to induce their Lordships to punish the junior criminals, and regard them for their veteran contumacy'.[66] He then moved that 'the indulgencies contained in this [the Interlude Bill] should extend to all those places of public entertainment, licensed by the Magistrates, under the 25th of George II'. Amended in favour of the 'minor' theatres, the bill was then returned to the Commons but here the interests of the patentees proved insurmountable.

Sheridan was scathing in his criticism of the amended bill which, he said, had 'come back in such a state, as he believed no bill had ever before been returned into that House.... The noble personage...that had made the amendments', he continued, 'appeared to be possessed of something like a dramatic mind, and to have converted the bill into a perfect harlequinade, full of theatrical shifts and changes.' Describing the bill as 'incongruous, inconsistent and absurd', Sheridan went on to declare that: 'as it stood, it went to affect private property to a very considerable amount, and to destroy security that had been established for more than a century on the sanction of parliamentary faith...' In stating his belief that the House would never consent to this bill because it 'would never do so violent an act of injustice to individuals, as to injure their most essential interests...' he was correct and his motion, that consideration of the amendments be postponed for three months, was agreed unanimously.[67]

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[65] *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 16 April, 1788.
[66] Debrett, *The Parliamentary Register, House of Lords*, Vol. 24, 19 May, 1788.
[67] Debrett, *The Parliamentary Register, House of Commons*, Vol. 24, 25 June, 1788.

Discussion during the passage of the Interlude Bill had demonstrated the pressing need for reform of the law with regard to theatre but Mainwaring's initial purpose 'to ascertain clearly to what extent [theatre] licences should be granted by Justices of the Peace' had been swamped by the vested interests and concerns of the protagonists involved in London. Nonetheless it was in a proposal put by William Hussey to the House of Commons as the Interlude Bill proceeded to its third reading on 25 April 1788 that the Theatrical Representations Bill had its genesis. The following day *The Times* reported that he had drawn the attention of the House to the unsatisfactory state of the law with regard to 'strolling players'. They, he had commented, 'never found any difficulty in obtaining permission to act from the Magistrate; but then any individual (as an act of private revenge) might, after they had acted, bring them before a Magistrate; and upon conviction, they were subjected to imprisonment , and a fine of £50'. Hussey's proposal sought to enable 'the Quarter Sessions in every place' to grant any company of players a licence to act plays for forty nights in the course of a year in any town or city within their jurisdiction on the condition that no licence should be granted within 30 miles of London or within 15 miles of any patent theatre. This was something quite outside the controversies of the capital and although Hussey intimated that it had only been his purpose 'to feel the pulse of the house on this subject' was told that 'he might bring in a bill to answer the purpose of his motion'.[68]

The Theatrical Representations Act, 1788

With agreement on the Interlude Bill looking increasingly unlikely, the Theatrical Representations Bill which sought to 'explain and amend' the Licensing Act of 1737 'as relates to common Players of Interludes' was introduced by Lord Radnor in the House of Lords on 5 May 1788. Earlier that day the Lord Chancellor, Lord Thurlow, had suspended the Duke of Norfolk's attempt to move a bill for licensing 'a theatre at Brighthelmstone'. The Duke had stated that there could be no possible objection to 'the establishing of a theatre in that town... the place being merely a resort in the summer months for persons of fashion, and not a constant residence for any manufacturers, whom public entertainments might estrange from the pursuits of industry'. The Lord

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[68] Debrett, *The Parliamentary Register, House of Commons*, Vol. 23, 25 April, 1788.

Chancellor's disapproval lay in the fact that 'it had been too often the case, that persons of property and influence had, through these means, obtained exclusive rights, highly injurious to those whose entertainments, if not superior, had at least equal merit and morality..... If a theatre was necessary for the good of a town, and the amusement of its frequenters,' the Lord Chancellor continued, 'the Justices of the Peace for the county, or a majority of them at the quarter sessions, were the best judges of that necessity and of the proper person on whom the licence should be bestowed.'[69]

The Duke then drew attention to the fact that as the law stood provincial magistrates were not empowered to grant theatrical licences and therefore 'the persons who had erected the theatre had no other mode than applying to Parliament.' Brighthelmstone had as much right to a theatre as the cities of York or Edinburgh, he continued, and the theatre's proprietors, before they could take any steps for opening this season were anxious for their Lordship's decision. At this point the Lord Chancellor requested that the Duke should withdraw his bill as he understood that it was the intention of Lord Radnor to introduce a bill which 'in some measure, agreed with the idea he [the Lord Chancellor] had thrown out'. Radnor then introduced his bill 'for explaining and amending the acts of George the Second, relative to stage entertainments, and to impower the magistrates of counties, under certain restrictions, to grant licences, and it was read a first time.[70]

On 20 May 1788, it was ordered in the Lords that 'the said Bill be Committed to a Committee of the whole House'. After adjourning for some time the House was resumed and Lord Hawke reported on the amendments that had been made. The amended bill made no mention of the problems of the capital but concerned itself solely with the provinces and with extending the powers of local Justices of the Peace so that, within rigid guidelines, they were permitted to licence theatrical representations within their jurisdictions. Hussey's proposals, together with elements of Mainwaring's bill were incorporated into the legislation and, consequently, the bill entitled: 'An Act to enable Justices of the Peace to licence Theatrical Representations occasionally, under

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[69] Debrett, *The Parliamentary Register, House of Lords,* Vol. 24, 5 May, 1788.
[70] Ibid, 5 May, 1788.

Restrictions therein contained' received the assent of both Houses without further amendment. Royal Assent was granted on 11 June 1788.[71]

Although this act reestablished the right of the provincial magistracy to grant theatrical licences in areas for which they had responsibility, as stated in the preamble, it was not its purpose '...to permit the Establishment of a constant and regular theatre' in the country which, it continued, would have been '...highly impolitic, inexpedient, and unreasonable' and the existing censorship requirements, as stipulated by the Licensing Act of 1737, remained firmly in place. This meant that licences would be granted only to those '...making Application for the performance of Tragedies, Comedies, Interludes, Operas, Plays or Farces as now are, or hereafter shall be acted at either of the Patent or Licensed Theatres in the City of Westminster...', or, alternatively, had been submitted in the previously approved manner to the Lord Chamberlain.[72] Thus Sarah's custom of describing her new productions, '...as performed at Covent Garden' or Drury Lane etc., was not necessarily an advertising gimmick alone but also a public demonstration that she was fulfilling the terms of her new licence.

Other rigid controls were also written into the new legislation with the intention of ensuring that provincial magistrates were prevented from interpreting their new-found powers too liberally. Under the act's provision, therefore, any one theatrical 'season' was to be limited to sixty days within a specified four month period and only 'one licence' was to be in use at any one time within a jurisdiction. No licence was permitted within twenty miles of London, eight miles of a patent or licensed provincial theatre, fourteen miles of Oxford and Cambridge, ten miles of a royal residence or, '...within two miles of the outward limits of any city, Town or Place having peculiar Jurisdiction'. The Act also laid down that no licence could be granted more than six months in advance of a proposed season which meant that a travelling company was unable to plan too far ahead and had no guarantee they would be able to work in the same place two years running. It also specified that '...no licence ...shall have been had or exercised at the same Place, within eight Months then next preceding' and notice of the intention to petition for a theatrical licence had to be given to the 'Mayor, Bailiff or other Chief Civil

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[71] *Journals of the House of Commons*, No. 43, p.545.

Officer' at least three weeks in advance of the meeting at which the Justices would make their decision on the matter thus allowing ample time for those inhabitants who objected to theatrical activity of any kind in their neighbourhoods to voice their protests.[73] All these provisions can be imagined to have caused considerable logistical difficulties to a hard pressed travelling company and to have added to the problems they already faced.

The nature and detail of this Act adds to the theory that the Proclamation Society instigated the passage of this bill and that William Mainwaring, already embroiled in the theatrical shenanigans of the capital, was a key player in the process. Further confirmation of this is also to be found in the fact that, as well as the major players involved, the support of other members of the society was also, it seems, called upon to ensure the safe passage of this legislation. Evidence for this is contained in *The Journals of the House of Lords* for 1788 which show that no less than eleven members of the Society were present in the Chamber on the day that the amended bill was put to the House for its approval on 27 May, 1788. On 20 May, 1788 when the whole House was put into a committee and the bill amended to incorporate Hussey's ideas, seven members of the Proclamation Society had attended while on 5 May, when Lord Radnor had first introduced the Theatrical Representations Bill in the Lords only three other members of the Proclamation Society had been present.[74] These figures indicate that a concerted effort was made by the group in a bid to ensure that this legislation, so closely aligned to the Society's declared purpose of giving the magistracy '...such assistance in the discharge of their duty as the nature of the case may require',[75] was enacted.

Conclusion

There is enough evidence, I believe, to claim that, despite the convoluted processes by which it came about, the Theatrical Representations Act was one of the Proclamation Society's early successes. Many of the Society's members and their close associates were involved in its passage and it certainly fulfilled the Society's aim of enforcing 'a stricter execution of the laws against vice and immorality' through a strengthened and

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[72] *Statutes at Large*, Vol. 11, pp.422-423.
[73] Ibid.
[74] *Journals of the House of Lords*, Vol. 38, pp.168,179 & 196.

revitalized magistracy. The passage of this act also provides some insight into the ways in which the Society achieved its ends and shows how chance, opportunism and influence, as well as sheer determination, all played a part. Despite his personal peccadillos and dubious motives for wishing to associate himself so closely with the Society, William Mainwaring was an influential and experienced magistrate and, as such, he played a key role in its parliamentary campaign for reform of the magistracy. Once he had made his initial mistake in failing to anticipate the consequences of his 'set piece' involving the Royalty Theatre, he was drawn into events which quickly developed a momentum of their own and over which he had little control. His initial concern with theatrical affairs in parliament had been with problems in the area immediately under his own magisterial control that had erupted in the wake of the Royalty fiasco. With the introduction of the Interlude Bill which applied to the whole of the London area and was intended to clarify and strengthen the existing theatrical laws, the influence and ideals of the Proclamation Society can, I believe, be detected. As the debate raged on, the possibility of this legislation ever becoming law faded and at this point, it seems, it was decided to make the best of a bad job and salvage at least something of its intentions. While parliamentary wrangles over the Interlude Bill continued until the end of June 1788, the Theatrical Representations Bill was, in the meantime, enacted without any further incident. This Act, which combined Mainwaring's and Hussey's ideas did nothing to solve the problems of the status of the minor theatres in London and, in legal terms at least, the monopoly of the patent theatres was unaffected. But by excluding the specific problems of the capital and focusing on the better regulation of the provincial theatre, two purposes were served. In the first place, where London was concerned, this legislation was uncontroversial and therefore passed through both Houses without any problems. Secondly, in granting new powers to justices in the provinces under strict restrictions laid down by parliament, the declared aim of the Proclamation Society to raise the moral standards of the nation through a stronger and more vigorous magistracy was, demonstrably, being met and, this, within weeks of the group's first meeting.

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[75] 'Proclamation Society Prospectus', *The Life of William Wilberforce*, p.393.

The Theatrical Representations Act of 1788 appears to have been designed with the intention of controlling the activities of strolling provincial companies such as Sarah's and, on the face of it, should have added to the already considerable difficulties of such a life. But in enabling her to operate within the law for the first time in her life it had precisely the opposite effect and its enactment marked a turning point in her career. In the next chapter I will look at the evidence that demonstrates just how effectively Sarah managed to exploit the opportunities that opened up to her at this point and consider the reasons why, in such seemingly unpromising circumstances, this legislation was fundamental to her transformation from hard-pressed manager of a strolling company to successful theatrical entrepreneur, property owner and woman of wealth.

CHAPTER 3

SARAH BAKER AND HER THEATRES

From obscure beginnings, by the end of her life in 1816 Sarah Baker had become one of the most successful provincial theatrical entrepreneurs of her day. An entirely 'self-made' woman by the time of her death she was also extremely wealthy and, having dominated the Kent theatrical scene for some forty years, she was widely regarded by her contemporaries as a 'powerful figure'. As the so-called 'Governess-General of the Kentish Drama'[1] the scope and scale of her considerable achievements are revealed in the complex will she made when she retired in 1815.[2] This indicates that, as well owning 'Stocks, ffunds and Securities', much of her wealth was tied up in her theatrical 'empire'. Not only did she own theatres, or buildings that were used as theatres, at Canterbury, Rochester, Tunbridge Wells, Maidstone, Faversham, Folkestone and at Ore near Hastings in Sussex but dwelling houses in the first four of these and 'messuages', land and tenements elsewhere. Among her other assets, she had also amassed a substantial quantity of silver plate which upon her death, her will directed, was to be divided equally between her three children, Henry Baker, Ann Baker and Sally Dowton, her sister, Mary (or Moll) Wakelin and her Dowton grandsons, William and Henry.[3]

Sarah's will, which was drawn up in 1815, also stated that all her theatres had been 'lately leased' by herself to William Dowton senior 'for the term of seven years from the 16th of June last'.[4] This information is confirmed by Dowton's own announcement in the *Kentish Gazette* of 25 April 1815 that all her theatres would shortly '..devolve into his hands and management'. Until then, Sarah, although around eighty years of age, had continued to manage her own theatres. With her death on 20 February 1816 her will instructed that her entire estate, including her theatres, should be sold at the discretion of her executors, either immediately or at such time as they thought 'proper'.[5] A proviso

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[1] T.J. Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1 (London 1827). Contents page.
[2] Sarah Baker's Will. Ref: Prob. 11/1582, Family Records Centre, Myddleton Street, London.
[3] Ibid., pp.1 & 2.
[4] Ibid., p.1.
[5] It was not until 1846 that her Rochester, Maidstone and Canterbury theatres were finally sold by the family. See, 'Particulars and Conditions of Sale of Freehold Theatres and other Property, 27 January, 1846', Guildhall Museum, Rochester.

was added that should either of her Dowton grandsons wish to purchase one or more of her theatres with the '...Scenery, Machinery, ffixtures and Properties in and about the same...' at a fair price, they should be allowed to do so within seven years of her decease.[6] Two trust funds were to be set up with the proceeds of her estate. The first of these, for the benefit of her sister and her own three children and their heirs, was for £12,000, while the second, consisting of the surplus, was for her Dowton grandsons with provision also made for their heirs.[7] While the exact extent and value of all of Sarah's assets and estate is not known, it is recorded that between 1789 and 1802 she had spent at least £9000 of her own money in acquiring land and building 'proper' theatres at Canterbury, Rochester, Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells, without ever getting into debt.[8] In the circumstances, Thomas Dibdin's allusion in his *Reminiscences* to the fact that she died worth at least £16,000[9], a considerable fortune in those days, is probably a conservative estimate of her real wealth.

In her will Sarah also 'forgave and released' her son Henry of a debt of £500 and instructed that her Rochester house should not be sold as long as her sister or either of her two daughters lived and wished to reside there. They should be allowed to do so, her will stated, rent-free but upon condition that they kept the same in good repair and the furniture, fixtures and utensils etc. were also theirs to 'use and enjoy' during their respective natural lives.[10] The will also specifically mentioned Sarah's '..stock of wines and liquers, provisions and food' which again were for 'the joint and several use' of the same three women.

The turning point

If the Theatrical Representations Act had not been written into the Statute Book in 1788 it is unlikely that Sarah would have ended her days in such comfortable economic

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[6] Sarah Baker's Will, p.6.
[7] Ibid., pp.3-5.
[8] Thomas Younger to James Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist Collection', Birmingham Public Library; N. Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker (1736/7-1816) "Governess-general of the Kentish drama" from Studies in English Theatre History (Society for Theatre Research, 1952)' (Incomplete, typed manuscript, Canterbury Cathedral Archives), p.6.
[9] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1, p.96; See also Chapter 5 below, 'Women in a World of Men?', p.176.

circumstances. This is because it was only as a consequence of the legality and security afforded by this act that, at last, she was able to begin constructing her own proper purpose-built theatres in her main towns. It is these theatres that constitute the physical manifestation of her new found professional legitimacy and years of hard work. Having said this, it is also true that by 1788 Sarah had already achieved a great deal and was certainly well-established in her main circuit towns of Canterbury, Rochester, Maidstone, Faversham and Tunbridge Wells. She also still visited Deal and Sandwich with her company. Her excursions to Sittingbourne and Folkestone and to Ore and Lewes in Sussex had dwindled, however, probably because business was not so good in these towns, while in Margate and Dover, Charles Mate's opposition had ensured that she was unable to make further headway here. Despite these setbacks her company's reputation had also continued to grow and by the early 1780s her increasingly ambitious repertoire now often included Shakespeare and the 'legitimate drama' as well as retaining some of the less demanding entertainments of her earlier advertisements.[11]

By 1788, Sarah was already over fifty years of age and, although relatively successful, could hardly have been described as 'a woman of substance'. Although she owned a building in Folkestone which was fitted-up as a theatre, some premises adjacent to the Hare and Hounds public house at Ore, near Hastings in Sussex, a portable wooden theatre that she took to fairs[12] and the theatre she had cut into four pieces and taken from Margate to Faversham in 1786, the fact remained that she had no proper purpose-built theatres of her own in any of her main towns. In addition to this, her activities remained illegal, she had little security and no permanent home and, to all intents and purposes, was still leading the itinerant strolling lifestyle with the ever-present threat of prosecution under the Licensing Act of 1737 hanging over her head.

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[10] Sarah Baker's Will, p.1; The deaths of Ann Baker, aged 56 and Sally Dowton, aged 48 were reported in the *Maidstone Journal*, 21 October 1817. Hodgson in, 'Sarah Baker', *Studies in English Theatre History*, p.82, footnote 29, also records that Sarah's sister, Mary Wakelin, was dead by 1827.

[11] See Appendix 1, 'Sarah Baker's Repertoire'.

[12] James Winston, 'Theatric Tourist' Notebook No. 1, (c.1802-4), p.65, Harvard Theatre Collection, Ref.. No. TS 1335.211. Here Winston refers to 'A wooden theatre bought of Mrs Baker[by Sampson Penley] which she used to travel with to fairs'. He describes it as 'very neat inside though shabby without - holds 25 pounds'. Penley set this up on a more permanent basis at Peckham.

For the most part, throughout this period, Sarah and her troupe, like many other provincial companies, had little choice but to play in a transportable booth of some kind or in whatever other makeshift, temporary facility was made available to them. Thus William Hogarth's engraving of 1738 depicting *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn* [13] was every bit as relevant to Sarah's era when travelling companies still frequently played in barns or warehouses or any other place where a temporary theatre could be 'fitted up'. Thomas Younger, in a letter to James Winston noted that the Sadler's Wells Company's first performances in Faversham were in a barn belonging to a Mr Pearce[14] while, according to Winston's *Theatric Tourist* notebooks compiled in the first few years of the nineteenth century, Folkestone, where Sarah's company also played in the early 1770s, '...was 30 years a Town that anybody could get, sometimes played in a Barn other times in a Room....'.[15] In his account of the Lewes theatre that featured in one of the eight numbers of *The Theatric Tourist* actually published, Winston also mentions that '...Mrs Baker, with many others, performed here, sometimes in the town-hall and sometimes in a barn'.[16] A barn also sufficed as a playhouse in Sandwich and Sarah and her company played here regularly from the early 1770s right up until 1789.[17] In Rochester, according to Winston's correspondent, Thomas Younger, Sarah's first appearances were in a Warehouse, while in Maidstone she also '...first play'd in a large Warehouse the corner of High Street, near the Water belonging to a Mr Mercer'.[18] An old Assembly Room on St. Augustine's Back in Bristol had, according to the company's own advertisement, served as a '...what we call a Theatre' when Sarah, with her mother's Sadler's Wells Company, had played in the city in the summer of 1766 while, with reference to Gosport, Winston made note of '...a former theatre in a dirty hole' that, he believed, at one time had been associated with Mrs. Baker's theatrical activities in that vicinity.[19]

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[13] D. Bindman, *Hogarth and his Times* (London, 1997), p.162.
[14] Thomas Younger to James Winston, writing from Maidstone, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham Public Library.
[15] Winston, 'Theatric Tourist' Notebook No. 1, p.64.
[16] James Winston, 'The Theatric Tourist', p.39, photocopy of the original publication in, A.L. Nelson, *James Winston's Theatric Tourist, a Critical Edition with a Biography and a Census of Winston Material* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 1968), Theatre Museum, London.
[17] John Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.39.
[18] Thomas Younger to James Winston, writing from Maidstone, 5 December 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[19] *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 12 July, 1766; Winston, 'Theatric Tourist' Notebook No. 1, p.10.

In Dover in the 1770s, Sarah had played in a 'theatre' fitted-up for her in Lass Lane, but it is also possible that she played, too, in the 'theatre' at the old Store House on Snargate Street referred to by Charles Mate in one of his letters to James Winston. She also played in Deal in the 1770s and 1780s, where the original 'theatre' had been set up in an old Malt House while in Canterbury, her company's performances took place in a room above the Buttermarket. [20]

Although the authorities in the areas where Sarah operated must have looked kindly upon her troupe, they had no legal right to authorize any of her activities and, while prepared to tolerate her entertainments it is apparent that, until 1788, they did nothing to encourage or assist her in the building or acquisition of any permanent or purpose-built theatres of her own in their towns. The Theatrical Representations Act was to transform this situation and in August 1789, little more than a year after this legislation restored the rights of the local magistracy to grant theatrical licences, Sarah, after more than half a century in the business, announced the opening of her own 'commodious and elegant' new theatre at Canterbury in the local press.[21]

It is my contention that the key to understanding the impact of this legislation lies, primarily, in the effect it had on local elites. This aspect of the act's influence has, I believe, been generally overlooked. While the new law itself gave no encouragement to theatre building *per se*, there is little doubt that the splendid new urban theatres that Sarah financed and built in her main towns from this date reflected, and were symbolic of, the extension of the local power and status the act bestowed on the town's civic leaders. In Canterbury, Sarah even had the personal financial backing of the mayor, James Simmons, who had recently overseen a comprehensive modernization of the city and was happy to associate himself publicly with her venture.[22]

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[20] Charles Mate to James Winston, writing from Dover, 14 January, 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.

[21] *Kentish Gazette*, 14-18 August 1789.

[22] F. Panton, *Canterbury's Great Tycoon: James Simmons, Reshaper of his City* (Canterbury, 1990), p.13; 'Particulars and Conditions of sale of Freehold Theatres and other Property, 27 January 1846', Guildhall Museum, Rochester.

Despite the Theatrical Representations Act's seemingly bleak intentions it is also true that, in practice, it favoured a provincial company such as Sarah's, which, having already established a relationship with the local authorities in the towns where she operated, was far more likely to be granted one of the new theatrical licences than any outsider would have been. In addition to this, under the terms of the act no two licences were allowed in any one jurisdiction at the same time. This meant that, once licensed, a company such as Sarah's, with the law on its side, enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the towns where it held sway. For the first time in her life, the future looked secure and Sarah responded by investing in her own theatres and dwelling houses in each of her four main towns.

Any doubts that there was not a direct link between this legislation and the theatre building programme that Sarah embarked upon in the following year is totally dispelled by the 'Occasional Address' spoken by her actor/stage manager, Jem Gardner, at the opening of her new Canterbury theatre on 24 August 1789. Here, the delight and relief with which she and her company welcomed this act are palpable and so too are the company's hopes and expectations for a better future:

> 'Through wilds of life no longer doom'd to roam,
> And Scythian like explore some doubtful home;
> The prowling Heroes of Thalia's reign,
> No more are number'd with the *vagrant train*;
> Sanction'd by law, now dare their studies own,
> And look securely up to Candor's throne;
> Such troubles past be gratitude our theme,
> And may our labours merit your esteem;
> 'Tis your protection which we most implore,
> Escap'd from tempest and just cast on shore...'[23]

From this point Sarah's life and prospects were transformed. With the advances she had made in Kent in the 1770s she had already been able to cut back on the distances she had been forced to travel in the past in search of an audience and a living. This process accelerated in the 1780s as Sarah consolidated her hold on the county. With the building, in the wake of the act, of her four major purpose-built theatres in Canterbury, Rochester, Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells, Sarah cemented her claim to these towns

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[23] *Kentish Chronicle and Canterbury Journal*, 18-25 August, 1789.

and was able to make a good living for herself and her company members by concentrating her energies in these four areas. Having her own theatres and 'very respectable dwelling houses'[24] also made the logistics of the whole operation easier. For example, all her stages were built on similar lines so '...the scenery which was suitable to one fitted them all'[25] and, with her own houses waiting for her, she did not have to worry about finding lodgings any more. In addition to this, Sarah now had the option of hiring out her own proper purpose-built theatres for use by other companies, organizations or businesses and thus acquired a further, valuable source of income to supplement that derived from the activities of her own company.[26]

Sarah's Theatres

In this section of my account of Sarah's progress as a theatrical manager and entrepreneur I will focus on the seven theatres mentioned in her will as it is their histories which demonstrate just how momentous a turning point the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788 was, not only in terms of her own career, but also in respect of the evolution and place of provincial theatre itself in a rapidly changing world. While the four main theatres she built after this watershed date are reasonably well documented her previous, somewhat shadowy and illegal existence has meant that information about the premises that she acquired in the years before 1788 is far more obscure and hard to come by. While I have been able to piece together fragments of information about her Folkestone theatre, I have been able to discover very little about Sarah's activities at Ore. As these premises were probably her first acquisition, however, this is where I will begin.

ORE c.1771 (See Fig. 1, p.100)

Less is known about Sarah's Ore 'theatre' than of any of her other theatres. Attached to, or near, the Hare and Hounds public house, about a mile and a half from the centre of Hastings, this 'theatre' was just outside the jurisdiction of the town magistrates and was first mentioned in 1771 although it was 'probably quite old' by then.[27] The fact that there is so little to go on does suggest that this 'theatre' was probably Sarah's first

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[24] Ann Mathews, *Anecdotes of Actors* (London, 1844), p.36.
[25] Charles Dickens, *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi edited by "Boz"* (London, 1883), p.96.
[26] See this chapter below. Mrs. Feist's 'Genuine Gossip by an old actress, Chapter 16, Trifles Light as Air' the *Era*, 7 August 1853 also refers to Sarah's theatres being 'let out' to amateur performers.
[27] J. Manwaring Baines, *Historic Hastings* (St. Leonards-On-Sea, 1986), pp. 306 & 363.

acquisition and was bought, or leased, at a time when she had yet to firmly establish her company's position in Kent. It is unclear whether, or not, she continued to use these premises as she became increasingly securely entrenched in her more lucrative towns. She did remain the lessee or owner, however, right through until her death in 1816 and the building continued to be used as a theatre both before and after this date. In the early years of the nineteenth century, Winston, noted that the 'theatre' at Ore 'held 30 pounds all the winter and good houses'. He also referred to the fact that Sampson Penley, who had taken out a lease on Sarah's Folkestone theatre at about this time, planned to go to Ore the following May where he 'means to erect theatre as before'.[28]

There is a certain mystery attached to Sarah's Ore 'theatre' as despite the fact that her son-in-law, William Dowton, had taken out a seven year lease in 1815, in 1817, the year after Sarah's death, a seven year lease for 'all that theatre edifice or building ...now standing and being upon the ground and premises belonging to the ...Hare and Hounds' was granted by the owner of this public house to William Blenkinsopp, painter, and Samuel Sidden, builder, the two executors of Sarah's will. Blenkinsopp and Sidden's lease, which was dated 10 May 1817, also referred to 'a certain building opposite thereto called the Coffee Room' for which a charge of '5s. a week if needed' would be made. The annual charge for lease of the theatre itself was £4 10s plus any rates.[29] Blenkinsopp and Sidden would have still been the lessors of this theatre in 1821 when Edmund Kean came to the aid of a struggling touring company by making an unscheduled, one-night appearance at this theatre as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.[30] Many years later while giving evidence to the parliamentary Select Committee on Theatrical Licences and Regulations in 1866, J.B. Buckstone, who as a very young man had been a member of the cast that night, reported that, at that time, the Ore theatre was '...in a sort of a barn, a mile and a half up a hill, close to a public house called the "Fox [this must have been a slip of the tongue on Buckstone's part]and

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[28] Winston, 'Theatric Tourist' notebook No.3, p.66.
[29] *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 10 March, 1823, quoted by Manwaring Baines, *Historic Hastings*, footnote 18, p.405.
[30] *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 2 October, 1821, referred to by Manwaring Baines, *Historic Hastings*, footnote 20, p.306.

Hounds" '. The old theatre still existed, added Buckstone, but was, currently, being used as 'a sort of stable and coal cellar'. [31]

FOLKESTONE c.1775 (See Figs. 2 & 3, pp.101 & 102)

Sarah's new 'theatre' on the Bayle in Folkestone was probably her second venture into 'real estate', and was first mentioned in her *Kentish Gazette* advertisements in January 1775. It was never one of her major venues, however, and in 1775 she was certainly not in the position to advertise it as proudly in the local press as she did her Canterbury theatre some fifteen years later. There were, of course, good reasons for her reticence at this time as such a theatre constituted a flagrant breach of the law and even with the encouragement, or connivance, of the local hierarchy she and her company were still officially classified as rogues and vagabonds and subject to the full rigours of the Licensing Act. This helps explain why the history of her Folkestone 'theatre', like that at Ore, is poorly documented and, therefore, so difficult to trace.

Sarah's first advertisement for 'the New Theatre Folkestone' appeared in the *Kentish Gazette* of 25-26 January 1775 for a performance on February 4. But the following week another advertisement informs readers that, '...on Account of some unforseen incident', the opening was postponed till Thursday the 16th'. It is possible the new theatre was not quite ready for opening on 4 February. On the other hand, Sarah was nothing if not an opportunist and was enjoying a particularly successful season at Dover. On the evening she should have opened at Folkestone she was, in fact, presenting *The Beggar's Opera* at the Dover Theatre. Still at Dover the following week, the Company performed four further nights there concluding on Saturday 11 February, '...by Particular Desire of the Hon. Charles Cunningham and the Officers of the Lion West-Indiaman' with a performance of *The Spanish Lady*. Eventually, on Thursday 16 February she finally opened at Folkestone with a burletta by George Colman entitled *The Portrait*.

This was followed on Saturday 18 February by a programme that included the Sadler's Wells Company's 'usual Diversions...' plus, David Garrick's farce, *Miss in her Teens*.

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[31] *Report of Parliamentary Select Committee on Theatre Licences and Regulations*, 27 April, 1866.

Her advertisement in the *Kentish Gazette* of 11-15 February 1775 informs her 'Friends' that 'she has spared no Expence to make the Performance worthy of the most polite Audience; and that the Machinery is all entirely new and [they] may depend upon its being displayed to the greatest Advantage'. The advertisement also shows that during the week of 18-25 February her company's performances included, on the Monday, F. Gentleman's *Cupid's Revenge*; on Tuesday, W. O'Brien's farce, *The Cross Purposes*; on Thursday, *Midas*, a burletta, by K. O'Hara and, finally on the Saturday, a 'Musical Entertainment' called *The Wedding Ring* by Charles Dibdin. It seems that Sarah's Folkestone season did not get off to a very good start as, at the beginning of March, she announced that her Company's stay in the town would be 'very short' and 'humbly' hoped 'for the early Indulgence of her Friend's [sic] Presence at the New Theatre...'.[32] Things must have looked up, however, as, although she declared the week beginning Saturday 1 April as 'positively the last Week' in the town that season, in fact, she stayed on until Tuesday 11 April when Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer; Or The Mistakes of a Night* was included in the company's final performance.[33]

As in Dover, advertisements show that the company performed specific plays 'by particular Desire' of local patrons. It is of particular interest that in Folkestone, long before the act of 1788 conferred legitimacy upon Sarah's activities, the local vicar, the Rev Ralph Drake-Brockman requested a performance of Dibdin's *The Wedding Ring*. A Mr. John Gill and Mr. Clark also desired certain pieces to be performed as did several other anonymous 'ladies and gentlemen'.[34] Prices at her Folkestone theatre started at 6d for the Upper Gallery with 1s. charged for the First Gallery, 2s. for the Pit and 2s.6d for the Boxes.[35]

About the 'New Theatre' building in Folkestone, there has been considerable debate.[36] The fact that Sarah was still the owner of these premises at the time of her death in 1816

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p.123; Manwaring Baines, *Historic Hastings*, p.307.

[32] *Kentish Gazette*, 1-4 March 1775.

[33] Ibid., 29 March-1 April & 5-8 April 1775. See also Appendix 1 for information about Sarah Baker's repertoire.

[34] *Kentish Gazette*, 8-11 Feb & 29 March- 1 April 1775.

[35] Ibid., Feb-April 1775.

[36] See for example letters of the 1940s and 1950s in Folkestone Library Archives from R.P. Mander, Norma Hodgson and Arthur Marsh to the Borough Librarian, Peter Davies, and his replies. Also see, Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.53.

is, however, irrefutable. As well as the reference in her will, James Winston, in the notes he made prior to the publication of *The Theatric Tourist* in 1805, also confirms that Sarah owned a theatre in the town. Folkestone, he wrote, 'Was 30 years a town that anybody could get - sometimes played in a barn, other times in a room - Mrs. Baker was the first regular company that went there, she built the present [theatre] in a brick building. Penley [manager of another theatrical troupe]bought it of her [in fact leased it from her] about 8 years ago, enlarged and beautified it - goes there every 2 years'. This theatre, again according to Winston, had also been used on occasion between 1779-1786 by Charles Mate, another of Sarah's Kentish rivals.[37]

Confusion over the history of Sarah's Folkestone theatre seems to have stemmed from an article in the *Folkestone Herald* of 7 December 1912 about the construction of the new Herald printing works 'on the site of the old Harveian Institute, immediately opposite the Bayle Pond'. This was also the site of Sarah's old Folkestone theatre. The article notes that 'the structure [of the Institute] was originally a barn-like wooden building, black-tarred' but had been modified in 1846 when the Harveian Literary Institute, as it was then known, was established. The *Herald* article also went on to state, erroneously, that the old wooden building '...was *first* used as a Chapel of ease to the Parish'. In the early 1840s it had also served as 'a chapel for the navvies who were engaged in constructing the railway....' before, eventually, being converted into a theatre, "the" theatre of Folkestone. This must have been in 1844 as the railway project was completed and the first permanent station opened on 18 December 1843. The article then gives a brief description of the theatre and of the times when 'all the town' would turn out for a performance by either a travelling company or a famous player.[38]

Some eleven years later a further article in the *Folkestone Herald* delves deeper into the history of the site but, again, there is no mention of Sarah Baker. The writer reiterates the fiction that the old building was originally used for religious purposes. This conclusion is based on evidence from the Manor Office plans of 1782 which give the first dated record of buildings upon the site. The numbered buildings on this plan show that '30' refers to 'two houses or tenements'; '30a' is a 'Baptist Meeting House, yard etc'

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[37] Winston, 'Theatric Tourist' Notebook No. 1, p.64, Harvard Theatre Collection.

and '31' is down as 'Carpenters' shop and yard'. The owners of numbers '30' and '30a' are given as John Brett and Lawrence Sturgess and number '31' as John Bateman.[39]

The proof that the Baptist Meeting House did, in fact, have a former life as a theatre is contained in a licence application dating from 1781. This application, whose signatories included John Brett and William Sturges, was for a religious licence. Addressed to 'the Honourable His Majesty's Justices of the Peace for the Eastern parts of the County of Kent....' the document is worded as follows:

> 'The humble petition of the protestant Dissenters of the Church of England (Nominally Baptists) Sheweth ... That your petitioners residing at Folkestone have now in the occupation of Mr Wm Sturges and Mr J Brett... a house formerly known by the Name of the Theatre... [and] do most humbly intreat of you to grant them a licence to enable them to carry on in the said place the Divine worship of God, agreeable to their own conscience etc.'.[40]

This evidence pinpoints the exact position of Sarah's old theatre on the Folkestone map of 1782. It also fits in with what can be proved about Sarah's visits to the town and, seemingly, confirms her increasing involvement with the larger towns in her circuit. It is also possible that the numbering of the Manor Office plan dates from 1796, the year when a private Act had been passed in Parliament for 'Paving, Repairing and Cleansing the highways, streets and lanes in the town...' Among the duties of the Commission of Pavements set up at the time was to put up street names and number the houses.[41] If this was the case then the old theatre was still being used as a meeting house by this break-away group of Baptists in 1796.

The most likely explanation for this theatre's somewhat muddled history is that it led a double life and that Sarah rented it out to more than one organization at times when she was busy elsewhere. In 1789, for example, the year that she was in the process of erecting her first proper, purpose-built theatre at Canterbury, Charles Mate and his company were, again, at her Folkestone theatre. Evidence for this comes from Dibdin who, in his *Reminiscences*, recalled the day when, as a young actor, he was offered the

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[38] *Folkestone Herald*, 7 December, 1912.
[39] Ibid., 26 May, 1923. See also 'Illustrations', Fig. 2.
[40] Microfilm roll No. 256, Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone.
[41] C.H. Bishop, *The History of Folkestone* (London, 1973), p.70.

choice between becoming a 'probationary member' of Mate's legitimate Margate theatre or 'an immediate engagement ...on a footing with the first actor' with the Dover company, then performing at the theatre in Folkestone. Dibdin decided that '...to be the Garrick of Folkestone appeared infinitely preferable to remaining the walking gentleman of Margate' and set off to find his new company.[42]

By 1804, however, neither Mate nor the dissenting Baptists remained in evidence at the Folkestone theatre and, that year, John Jonas and Sampson Penley, describing themselves as 'the two proprietors', declared that they had 'for several years been permitted to perform Theatrical representations' at Sarah Baker's old theatre. This statement was included in their petition of 30 April addressed to 'his Majesties Justices of the Peace acting in and for the Town of Folkestone ...' for a theatrical licence. They then go on to say that 'relying on further permission they have been induced to purchase the Building in which they performed, and have lately, by making considerable improvements therein, laid out a very considerable Sum of Money...' .[43] As this theatre still belonged to Sarah in 1816, it seems that Jonas and Penley had taken out a lease on the building and carried out the improvements in full confidence that their request for a licence would, again, be granted which indeed it was.[44]

The renovations were carried out shortly after the streets of the Bayle area were paved for the first time following an order by the Commissioners of Paving dated 23 June 1802 so this, too, might well have had some bearing on their decision to invest so heavily at that time.[45] As far as the works themselves were concerned it appears that Jonas and Penley extended the original theatre/Meeting House westwards to incorporate the two small tenements previously occupied by Brett and Sturgess. They were still playing at the theatre at least as late as 13 March 1810 when 'by desire of the Temple Lodge No 150' they presented a Masonic Prelude and included a performance of Susannah Centilivre's *The Wonder, A Woman Keeps a Secret* as part of the evening's

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[42] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1, p.50.
[43] E.G. Atkinson, *Report on Municipal Records, Borough of Folkestone* (Folkestone Library Archives), p.15.
[44] *Folkestone Sessions Book*, 30 April, 1804 (Folkestone Library Archives).
[45] *Commissioners of Paving Minute Book* (Folkestone Library Archives).

entertainment.[46] Further development of the site took place about forty years later when the adjoining carpenter's shop was converted to form a long passage with two rooms on either side of it which became a part of the new Harveian Literary Institute. At a later date this also functioned, in part, as a theatre.

Sarah's Folkestone theatre, as per the plan of 1782, is calculated to have been about '40ft long and 21ft wide and to have had an entrance on the south side'.[47] A photograph dating from c.1890 clearly shows the partly hipped roof and arched window of Jonas and Penley's improved theatre of 1804 behind the Harveian Institute which was built on the site of the old carpenter's shop and yard in 1846, or thereabouts, the year that Sarah's Rochester, Maidstone and Canterbury theatres were, finally, put up for sale by her family and executors.[48]

The best written description of the original theatre comes from the *Holbein's Visitors List and Folkestone Journal* of 11 March 1891. Here E. Dale writing under the pseudonym of 'A Native' states that:

> 'The old Folkestone playhouse.... Had wooden weather-boarded well-tarred walls; while the timbers in the roof were like the building of a ship : in fact, the shape of the roof was not dissimilar in appearance to an old boat being placed keel uppermost for the purpose. It had a wooden gallery for the gods, close up to the roof and reached by a steep wooden ladder; and crowding in this part overflowed to the wooden beams and rafter, a "full house" looking as if that part of the audience had gone to roost in the cock-loft! Under the gallery were the boxes - also of wood - reaching round each side of the auditorium, and their ends becoming the "stage boxes". The pit had of course a wooden floor, sloping down to the stage with fixed wooden benches without backs. The stage was wood, the proscenium was wood, over the stage was a wooden green-room garret, and under it the stage-carpenter's wooden workshop was filled with wooden shavings! Added to this against the front of the playhouse was a rickety wooden shed used as a stable and serving the double purpose of perfuming the theatre and keeping on hand a ready supply of straw, wherewith to start a blaze...'

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[46] 'Folkestone: Then and Now, No.25, The Old Playhouse, By a Native', *Holbein's Visitors List and Folkestone Journal*, 11 March, 1891.
[47] *Folkestone Herald*, 26 May, 1923.
[48] Photograph in W.H. Elgar, *Record of a Mediaeval House which until 1916 stood on the Bayle Folkestone* (Folkestone, 1916), p.32; Particulars and Conditions of Sale of Sarah's Freehold Theatres and other Property, Guildhall Museum Archive, Rochester.

While some doubt has been cast on the authenticity of his description of the Folkestone theatre,[49] in the light of the new information I have uncovered about the building and the evidence provided by the photograph of c.1890, Dale's portrayal of the old theatre appears to fit in well with the facts. In addition to this, in 1891 some of the older inhabitants would have had memories of this theatre which *Tiffen's Guide* noted in 1823 was still under the management of William Dowton.[50] The theatre is also known to have been in use in 1835 when Davenport was manager although the following year, on August 15 1836, the Folkestone Rate Book describes the building as 'Barn late Theatre'. [51] In these circumstances it would have been unlikely, I suggest, for Dale's description to have been solely the product of his imagination.

FAVERSHAM 1786

Sarah's first advertisement for this town appeared in the *Kentish Gazette* of 10-13 February 1773. This shows her Sadler's Wells Company was then playing at 'the Theatre in Preston Street' which, according to Thomas Younger, was a barn belonging to a Mr. Pearce. This barn stood on the opposite side of the same street in which, thirteen years later in 1786, Sarah set up the wooden theatre she had cut into '4 equel parts' and transported by hoy from Margate following her altercation with Charles Mate.[52] Dibdin referred to this structure as 'a slight edifice',[53] its probable dimensions being 70 feet 10 inches in length with a width which graduated from 38 feet 4 inches to 32 feet 7 inches.[54] According to Younger this wooden theatre cost Sarah £500 to construct and stood on 'a piece of Ground She has taken on Lease of Justice Smith Situated in Preston next to Miss Gambier's Boarding School'. [55] In her will it is said to be freehold, a tenure which she could have acquired later. Her company played there fairly regularly in the 1790s but in 1803 Younger commented that she went to the town only once in two or three years, although also noting that 'This town generally turns out

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[49] Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.53.
[50] W. Tiffen, *The Sandgate, Hythe and Folkestone Guide* (Hythe, 1823), p.107.
[51] Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.54.
[52] Thomas Younger to James Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham Public Library. See also Chapter 1 above 'Setting the Scene...'.
[53] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, p.223.
[54] From a conveyance in the County Archives, Maidstone, dated 6 July 1834, referring to a building formerly used as a theatre/playhouse...in the parish of Preston next Faversham, quoted by Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.49.
[55] Younger to Winston, 5 December 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham Public Library.

well - tho small the inhabitants are fond of Theatricals...'.[56] In 1810 and 1812 she let her theatre to Jonas and Penley but returned once more in 1814. Having taken on the lease of the Faversham Theatre in 1815 Dowton played there every Wednesday during his Canterbury season in 1818. Various other companies also appeared at this theatre but by the early 1830s it seems that it was no longer used as such as in 1834 the lease passed from Robert White an upholsterer to Richard Lewis, a labourer. [57] It was certainly not included among the lots listed in the sale particulars of Sarah's old estate in 1846 and finally, in 1859, this old wooden theatre was demolished to make way for the railway.

CANTERBURY 1789 (See Figs. 4 & 5, pp.103 & 104)

Sarah's first real break came in the wake of the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788 when, on 24 August 1789, she opened her first substantial, permanent theatre in Orange Street to coincide with the city's race week. The event was reported in the *Kentish Gazette* as follows:

> 'Last night the new and elegant Theatre, built by Mrs. Baker in Orange-Street, in this city, was opened for public entertainment, before a very numerous and respectable audience, who expressed themselves highly pleased with the elegance and beauty of the house, the new scenery, decorations &c. Great praise is due to this enterprizing Manager for her attention at all times to the public amusement, and it is to be wished that her success may be equal to the great expence she has incurred'.[58]

Five years before this, in 1784, she had come to an arrangement with the City Council and taken out a seven year lease on the old Buttermarket 'theatre' which established her position in the city.[59] Following the first meeting of the Canterbury Pavement Commissioners on 9 April 1787, town improvements threatened her with disaster as the old Buttermarket was deemed 'something of an obstruction' and was condemned to be demolished with approximately two years of her lease still to run. Having agreed in December 1787 to surrender the remainder of this lease, Sarah was left with the prospect of being without a venue in one of her most important towns. [60] Despite this

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[56] Ibid.
[57] Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.49.
[58] *Kentish Gazette*, 21-25 August, 1789.
[59] Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.88.
[60] Ibid., p.87.

setback, in August 1788, she and her company, were back at the Buttermarket which seems to have been reprieved for a few extra months. This building was still 'intended to be pulled down', however, and Sarah, at a loss as to where she would perform on her next visit to the city, complained in an advertisement of 'the Impossibility of erecting another [theatre] for the succeeding Season'.[61]

All importantly, in this situation, Sarah had the support and backing of James Simmons who, in 1788-89, was serving his second term as mayor of Canterbury. An influential figure in both the civic and commercial life of the city, Simmons owned a stationer's and printing business in the city and in 1768 had founded the *Kentish Gazette*, thus providing Canterbury and east Kent with a quality newspaper. Simmons was also a prime mover in the scheme to modernize the city which, as his newspaper reported, with '...the paving and lighting ...nearly completed [and] ...an air of neatness perceptible in every street', was well underway by the summer of 1788.[62] As chairman of the committee that decided the old Buttermarket should be demolished Simmons was, also, inadvertently responsible for Sarah's potentially theatreless plight that summer.[63]

It is impossible to know for certain the reasons why he now chose to help Sarah acquire her first permanent purpose-built theatre. Maybe, as the author of her, temporary, misfortune he felt a personal responsibility for finding some suitable new premises for her company. The most likely explanation, however, is that at about the same time as the city improvements were almost completed, the Theatrical Representations Act passed into law. This was fortuitous timing as, although the act gave no encouragement to theatre building *per se*, it would have been surprising if a go-ahead, entrepreneurial figure like Simmons, having overseen the comprehensive modernization of his city and with his right to grant theatrical licences legitimized, had not thought it an appropriate moment to encourage the establishment of a more fitting and elegant venue for the city's theatre.

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[61] *Kentish Gazette*, 19-22 August, 1788.
[62] Panton, *Canterbury's Great Tycoon*, pp. 8 & 13-19; *Kentish Gazette*, 12-15 August 1788.
[63] Panton, *Canterbury's Great Tycoon*, p.19.

In any case, it was to Simmons, himself, that Sarah's new Orange Street Theatre was 'mortgaged by two separate mortgagees..' in 1789. This is revealed by the 'Particulars and Conditions of Sale' of this theatre in 1846 which also shows that, by then, both mortgages were discharged although no date was given for this.[64] In a letter to James Winston in 1803, Thomas Younger informs him that these premises were 'Freehold and Stood Her in near £3,000.' The House, he added, held nearly £90 and the prices were: Boxes, 3s; Pit, 2s; Gallery, 1s; and 'Half price was taken'.[65]

Younger goes on to describe this theatre telling Winston that Sarah had 'purchased some Premises in Orange Street known by the name of the Old Dancing School or Assembly Rooms - these She Metamorphase'd into the present elegant Theatre which is by far the best in Her Circuit...'. The walls of 'the Canterbury House', he informed him, '...are not new but the same as encase'd the Assembly Rooms - repair'd colour'd Pointed etc.'.[66] A water colour that Winston, himself, made of the theatre shows it to have been an imposing two storey building with a large arched window and two further windows above a centre door. This was flanked on either side by a 'blind' window and a further smaller door. Winston himself noted that the house adjoining the theatre, just visible on the right of the painting, belonged to Sarah. According to Younger, she purchased this for her own accommodation the second year after the theatre was finished. In fact, Sarah's own advertisements show that she was selling tickets from 'her House next the Theatre' as early as January 1790.[67]

The dimensions of the Canterbury theatre were 71 feet 6 inches by 45 feet [68] and, according to the *Kentish Chronicle* of 18-25 August 1789, the interior was 'extremely pleasing'. The article also described how:

> '... the Boxes, which are twenty-one in number, are neatly papered and painted and ornamented with festoons and curtains and form a half circle around the house. The pit and gallery are very spacious and the seats well elevated to

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[64] 'Particulars and Conditions of Sale.... 1846'.
[65] Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[66] Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803 & 6 January, 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[67] Ibid; Winston, 'Theatric Tourist' Notebook No.3, p.12.; Sarah's advertisements in the *Kentish Gazette*, 12-18 January 1790.
[68] Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.62.

> command a prospect of the Performers. Of the scenery we have just reason to pass every compliment, the frontispiece contains emblematic trophies of Tragedy and Comedy and in the centre two Cupids holding up a garter with the following motto: "May Scenic Virtue form the Rising Age and Truth diffuse the Radiance o'er the Stage".'

Although the theatre first opened in the summer of 1789 to take advantage of one of the busiest weeks in the year it seems that other works were still necessary to bring it up to scratch as the major new venue for theatre in the city. Initially Sarah had hoped to open for the winter season the following November but that month she was still waiting impatiently in Deal for the work to be completed. Dibdin describes how she told him she was, in her own words, ' "filling up the time, and keeping her people together, just from hand to mouth.... till her new 'great grand theatre' (a figure of description she was very partial to) at Canterbury should be quite finished" '.[69]

Eventually, in January 1790 the formal opening of the Orange Street theatre was heralded with a blaze of publicity . The Royal coat of arms were prominently displayed at the top of the advertisement and the ensuing week's entertainment announced as 'By authority of Parliament' and 'By desire of the Mayor'.[70] This sort of presentation was very different to any previous announcement she had made and, in acknowledging the public support that Simmons now felt able to give her following the passage of the Theatrical Representations Bill in 1788, demonstrates a dramatic new confidence on both their parts.

The 'locality of the property' was described in the Sale particulars of 1846 as being 'peculiarly advantageous' to the theatre and the following reasons were given: '...it is in the heart of a most respectable and populous Neighbourhood. The Races are held Annually in the month of August and during the Race Week upwards of £200 have been frequently taken at the Theatre... There is also a Military Depot in this neighbourhood.'[71]

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[69] *Kentish Gazette*, 25-28 August, 1789; Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, p.93.
[70] *Kentish Gazette*, 12-15 January, 1790.
[71] 'Particulars and Conditions of Sale..., 1846', p.2.

These were the very factors that had attracted Sarah to the city in the 1770s. From the first, Canterbury Race Week had been an important venue for her and she always endeavoured to be in the city at that time and went to great lengths to ensure that she made the most of the occasion. This was especially true of the 1770s when she was trying to establish her reputation in the city and in July 1775 her advertisement promised that: 'Any Ladies or Gentlemen that may not find it convenient to be at the Theatre in the Evening, may have a private Performance, any Time in the Day, by giving Half an hour's Notice'.[72] The importance of the military to Sarah's fortunes was also noted by Thomas Younger who commented that Canterbury, 'being a very large Garrison, the theatre is much assisted by the Military'.[73]

Sarah's first season in her elegant Orange Street theatre was, it seems, a triumph and, in the 26-20 March edition of the *Kentish Gazette* an article described how a performance that week:

> '...drew a more brilliant assemblage than was ever known on such an occasion in this city; at half past four o'clock, all the avenues to the Theatre were so crowded that many carriages could not draw up to the door.' Inside the theatre, 'Several Ladies, by the help of steps got from the stage over the spikes into the side boxes, and we are happy to learn no accident whatever happened.....had the Theatre been three times larger than it is, it would have been filled.'[74]

When Dowton leased and took over the management of this theatre from Sarah in 1815 he spent large sums in re-decoration and embellishment, adding a Grecian portico, windows 'in the Egyptian style' and an elaborately painted ceiling showing the Goddess Aurora and her winged steeds'.[75] Unfortunately, only the external walls of the old theatre still exist and now house the Merchant Chandlers shop in Orange Street at the back of the public library.

ROCHESTER 1791 (See Figs. 6, 7, 8 & 9, pp.105, 106, 107 & 108)

Sarah enjoyed great success and prospered in this city, choosing to end her days there. As in Canterbury and elsewhere, her reputation and hold on Rochester had been slowly

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[72] *Kentish Gazette*, 12-15 July 1775.
[73] Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[74] *Kentish Gazette*, 26-20 March, 1790.
[75] Hodgson, *Sarah Baker* manuscript, p.4.

established over a number of years until on 25 April 1791 she opened her newly built theatre on Star Hill. According to Younger, Sarah had previously played in at least three other venues in the city. These were '...a Warehouse belonging to a Cooper But now Known as Franklins Coach Yard', at the Assembly Rooms in Free School Lane and in 'a large Place fitted up for the Occasion' in the yard of the Star Inn where she had continued to play until, in about 1791, 'She purchas'd a piece of ground of a Mr Wellard opposite the last mentioned play House and Built a Theatre and Dwelling House which cost her £2,500'.[76] Sarah's will, however, states that this freehold was, in fact, purchased from a 'Thomas Stevens Esq'. Stevens had been Mayor of the city in 1787, and this is important because, once again, it demonstrates the closeness of the relationship between Sarah's theatrical activities and the local establishment. [77] Further evidence linking Stevens with the establishment of Sarah's Rochester theatre and dwelling house is the fact that a row of adjoining houses was known as 'Stevens Row'.[78]

Winston's water colour [79] of Sarah's Star Hill theatre shows that it was a three storey building on a hill sandwiched between two substantial dwelling houses, one of which also belonged to Sarah. Unfortunately, there is no record of the dimensions of this theatre but in his notes Winston described it as 'a neat brick building prettily fitted up and tolerably stocked with scenery and machinery'. As with her other theatres there is a wide centre-opening door, in this case, with two narrow doors of the same height on either side. All five doors are surmounted by decorative mouldings in the form of large shells. Framed above the left hand outer door is the standing figure of Tragedy while a similar figure representing Comedy stands over the equivalent door to the right.[80] Immediately over the centre door the words 'Rochester Theatre' can be clearly discerned while above that an arched niche contains a sculpture. Internally, the theatre was 'well fitted' according to the sale particulars of 1846, with lower and upper boxes as well as

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[76] Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[77] Sarah Baker's Will, p.1; F.F. Smith, *A History of Rochester* (Rochester, 1928), p.497; a playbill dated 31 May 1787 in the Guildhall Museum, Rochester shows that Sarah's company was in the city that season and, therefore, must have had official dealings with Stevens.
[78] Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[79] Reproduced in *Theatre Notebook*, Vol. 19, No.2, 1964/65 by courtesy of the Mitchell Library, Sydney.
[80] Winston, 'Theatric Tourist' Notebook No. 2, p.14.Harvard, Theatre Collection.

the usual pit and gallery and dressing rooms in the rear. Prices at this theatre in 1802 were 3s. for upper and lower boxes, 2s for the pit and 1s. for the gallery.[81]

Some idea of the size and layout of Sarah's house is also provided by these particulars. It is described as 'brick built with a walled garden in the rear' and as containing '...on the Basement a good Cellar and Kitchen, and a Wash-house attached thereto, in which there is a Pump of excellent Water. On the Ground Floor -Two Parlours. On the First Floor - Drawing Room and Bedroom adjoining. On the Second Floor - Two Rooms. And on the Third Floor - Two Attics'. Apparently, Sarah was also able to furnish this house with some style as Dibdin remarked that all her dwelling houses were 'well furnished' and also noted that she owned a 'massy silver ink-stand ...a superb pair of silver trumpets, several cups, tankards, and candlesticks of the same pure metal', all of which, he commented, '... it was the lady's honest pride to say she had paid for with her own hard earnings'.[82]

Rochester was also described in the sale particulars of 1846 as a city whose 'circumstances [were] peculiarly favourable for the prosperity of all Theatrical Establishments'. As with Canterbury this was because of the races '...held Annually in the month of September', the proximity of a 'large Military Establishment' in the neighbouring town of Chatham and additionally in this case, because 'Ships are continually fitting out there'.[83] It is interesting to note that at least some of these factors were common to all four of Sarah's most successful towns.

MAIDSTONE 1798 (See Figs.10, 11 & 12, pp.109, 110 & 111)

Maidstone had all the prerequisites desired of a 'good theatre town'. As the County Town of Kent, the Assizes were held there twice, and sometimes three times, in a year and the County Quarter Sessions, which also attracted a good crowd, took place every three months. Coxheath, which had long been used as a military training ground, was

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[81] *Kentish Gazette*, 26 January, 1802.
[82] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1, pp. 95 & 223.
[83] 'Particulars and Conditions of Sale..., 1846', p.2.

nearby and, in 1797, a depot for the cavalry regiments serving in India was established in the town. Three fairs were also held in Maidstone every year.[84]

Sarah had visited this town with her company on a regular basis since the early 1770s and until she opened her new theatre on the night of 12 April 1798, she, as managers of other companies had done before her, 'rented by the season' a large warehouse at the corner of the High-street, 'near the waterside'. These premises were far from satisfactory as, being so near the river, '...it frequently happened ...that the tide prevented her performing, or opening the doors for weeks...'.[85]

Her own new, permanent theatre also stood in the High-street and was erected opposite the spot where, until 1792/93, the old water conduit had stood. This had been destroyed as part of the 'improvement works' carried out by the Commissioners of Pavements following the passage of the Maidstone Improvement Bill in 1791.[86] In these circumstances, as in Canterbury, it is not surprising that Sarah had the whole hearted backing of the local authority for her plan to build an elegant, and legitimate, new theatre in the town. In Maidstone the approbation of the local establishment was expressed in a particularly explicit and personal manner. This was because, in a very public gesture of civic support for Sarah's venture, William Jefferys, who had been mayor of the town in 1796, had, himself, painted the striking representation of William Shakespeare in the large arched niche above the main door of her new theatre. This painting is merely hinted at in Winston's pen and wash sketch but clearly defined in the published engraving of the theatre.[87] Jefferys, who did eventually acquire '...some celebrity by his fruit and flower pieces which were exhibited in the rooms of the Royal Academy', was in business in the town as a general painter and must have been more than happy to display his talents, as well as his support, so publicly on the facade of the new theatre.[88]

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[84] Ibid.; J.M. Russell, *The History of Maidstone* (First published 1881: This edition, Rochester, 1978), p.368.
[85] James Winston, 'The Theatric Tourist', p.49, photocopy of the original in, Nelson, *James Winston's Theatric Tourist, a Critical Edition*...
[86] Peter Clark & Lyn Murfin, *The History of Maidstone: The Making of a Modern County Town* (Maidstone, 1995), p.105.
[87] See Figs. 10 & 11.
[88] Russell, *History of Maidstone*, p.346.

Measuring 85 feet by 23 feet, [89] Sarah's brick-built theatre 'with a dwelling house in front' was erected, according to Younger, 'entirely at Her own expence'. For the 'Peice of Ground it Stands on', he noted, she paid £600 and for the building itself, which was freehold, £1300.[90] Winston's pen and wash sketch of this theatre shows that the building was three stories high and includes specifications for the brickwork as well as notes on the colours of the brick and of the paintwork. The two side doors, for example, were yellow; the shutters, on the single ground floor window that had them, were green and the chimney pots red. The finished engraving in *The Theatric Tourist* reflects the preliminary work in this sketch but is more detailed and clearly shows two attractive wrought iron and glass lamps, only hinted at in the sketch, hanging on either side of what Younger described as the 'large folding doors in the centre' which were common to all her theatres.[91]

Winston supplies the information that this same large door was, on occasion, used for the shop of a fruiterer, when Sarah and her company were not in town. As with all her theatres this one central door was the only external admission and the two smaller side doors opened solely at the close of performances 'for the more expeditiously clearing the House'. The theatre was also 'very neatly finished inside' and held £60, all at full price, the prices of admission being Boxes 3s; Pit 2s; and Gallery 1s.[92]

Younger in his letter to Winston of 5 December 1803 commented that the Company did not go annually to Maidstone '...but once in two or three years which operates in favor of the House when open - as the inhabitants by this mean are not cloy'd with Theatricals...'. According to Mrs. Feist in her 'Genuine Gossip' column, Sarah 'greatly disliked' Maidstone. The reason she gave was because of the 'small and inconvenient' house which she used while she was in the town. [93] Morris has suggested that this 'house' was possibly incorporated within the walls of the theatre building itself and that the one shuttered window to the right of the theatre's main door could indicate that this

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[89] Ibid.
[90] Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[91] Younger to Winston, 6 January, 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[92] Winston, 'The Theatric Tourist', p.49 in, Nelson, *James Winston's Theatric Tourist, a Critical Edition*...
[93] Catherine Elizabeth Feist, 'Genuine Gossip by an old actress. The Eccentric Mrs. Baker' in, the *Era*, 5 June, 1853.

part of the building was used for domestic purposes.[94] In any case, Mrs. Feist assured her readers that this accommodation compared unfavourably with the 'comfortable dwelling houses' attached to Sarah's other three main theatres. Another possible reason for Sarah's dislike of the town is supplied by Younger who noted that: Theatricals does not seem to have been much notic'd [in the town] till Mrs B time nor greatly then'.[95] Nonetheless, this theatre remained in the family's hands long after Sarah died in 1816 and in 1839, her grandson, William Dowton took over the management for a short time before the theatre was finally sold in 1846.[96]

TUNBRIDGE WELLS 1802 (See Figs.13 & 14, pp. 112 & 113)

Sarah's last proper purpose-built theatre was erected on the Parade at Tunbridge Wells in 1802 by which time she was approximately 66 years old. According to Winston, using evidence supplied in a letter from Thomas Younger, she and her company had first played in the town some thirty years previously in 'a temple to the muses' which she had erected on Mount Sion 'but a small distance from the place' where the author Richard Cumberland lived from 1782. In his letter, Younger relates how she had used this 'place' for only two seasons and that her company and one of which Joseph Glassington was the manager had '...both Perform'd on the Same evenings in direct opposition to each other...'. This was a situation that could not continue and '...at length Mrs B's party beat the other out of the field and obliged the man Mr. G, to strike his colours...'. On her third season in Tunbridge Wells, Younger informs Winston: '...at the request of several particular friends' Sarah demolished her 'temple to the muses' on Mount Sion and 'took a lease of Some Premises near the Sussex Tavern which She Clear'd away' and using materials from the old building erected a new theatre on the spot . Here, he added, 'She remain'd unmolested...'.[97]

There is considerable doubt about the accuracy of the dates and chronology of events put forward by Winston and Younger in this account of Sarah's early involvement with Tunbridge Wells. While Sarah could well have been playing somewhere in the town in

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[94] Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.66.
[95] Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[96] 'Particulars and Conditions of Sale...' 1846; Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.67.

the early 1770s, there is evidence to demonstrate that her battles with Glassington and the removal of her theatre from Mount Sion to the site near the Sussex Tavern on the Pantiles did not in fact take place until 1786-1789. This is confirmed by advertisements and news reports in the local press that show it was in 1786 and 1787 that she and Glassington, who in 1785 had still been a member of Sarah's own company, were struggling for theatrical supremacy in the town. Glassington erected his new theatre 'near the New Inn on the road leading to the Wells' in the early summer of 1786 while Sarah, in this and the following year, was still using her theatre on Mount Sion.[98] From their advertisements and comments in the press it is clear that there was considerable rivalry between these two illegal companies and, therefore, in this respect at least, Younger's description was accurate.[99] An indication that Sarah and Glassington were still in contention shortly before the Theatrical Representations Act passed into law in 1788, is that on 26 May the *Morning Chronicle* reported that: 'The two rival companies of Mrs. Baker and Glassington... the former of which is most approved of by the resort of company, the latter by the town... will, it is said, again meet at Tunbridge Wells.'[100] In the event, although Glassington optimistically advertised his programme in late June that year,[101] this confrontation never took place. This was because, under the terms of the new law, local magistrates now had the authority and duty to restrict the number of theatrical licences allowed at any one time in the area under their jurisdiction, to one.[102] Although Sarah and her rival both petitioned for licences to play in Tunbridge Wells in the summer of 1788, it was she who was granted the licence while Glassington's application for the same four months was rejected.[103]

The enormous significance of this act to individual strolling companies is clearly demonstrated by the fact that, without a licence to play in the town, Glassington had little choice but to 'throw in his hand' in Tunbridge Wells. The following summer an

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[97] Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham; Winston, 'The Theatric Tourist', p.16 in, Nelson, *James Winston's Theatric Tourist, a Critical Edition...*; Winston, 'Theatric Tourist' Notebook No. 2, pp. 10-11; Richard Cumberland, *Memoirs* (London, 1806), p.440

[98] *Kentish Gazette* 9-13 June 1786; *Maidstone Journal* 4 September 1787.

[99] Ibid & *Maidstone Journal,* 18 & 25 July 1786; 1, 8, 22 & 29 August 1786; 5 & 12 September 1786; 31 July & 16 October 1787.

[100] *Morning Chronicle*, 26 May, 1788.

[101] *Maidstone Journal*, 24 June 1788.

[102] See above, Chapter 2, 'Behind the Scenes...', p. 66.

[103] Morris, *Taking the Town*, p. 50.

advertisement in the *Maidstone Journal* shows that he had put his theatre up for sale with the advice that the building '...may be easily converted into dwelling-houses or Shops and is very desirable for any Business that requires an extensive Front'.[104] For Sarah, the removal of her rival was only one of the changes for the better that took place at this time. For according to *The Diary of Woodfall's Register* it was in 1789, and not as Winston and Younger had erroneously stated, in the mid- 1770s, that Sarah 'pulled down her little playhouse' on Mount Sion and removed it to the Pantiles which, as *Woodfall* commented, was a far more 'eligible and convenient' [site] for those who think proper to amuse themselves now and then with a play...'.[105]

Once removed to the Pantiles, the reputation of Sarah's small, probably wooden, theatre as 'the resort of company' continued to grow. As Winston remarked: '..the success of this place, and consequently of the theatre, is wholly dependent on its visitors, which are numerous and fashionable..'.[106] A large collection of playbills advertising performances at this theatre in 1795, 1796, 1797, 1800 and 1801 bears this out and shows that many aristocratic and high ranking men and women were among those who were happy to publicly associate themselves with Sarah's company's activities by allowing their names to be used on her bills.[107] Among them, for example, were Viscountess Gallway, the Duchess of York, the Lord Chancellor and Lady Loughborough, the Honorable Mrs. Fox, Lady John Russell, the Earl and Countess of Erroll and the Marquis of Huntley. In 1796, extant playbills show that twenty-seven high-ranking visitors lent their names to Sarah's publicity and in 1797, George III's fifth son, Prince Ernest Augustus was probably the most distinguished of the twenty-one patrons whose names appear on Sarah's playbills that year.

Evidence of the on-going importance of the military to Sarah's success is also to be found in her Tunbridge Wells playbills which provide the information that at least two volunteer regiments, two colonels, a captain and an admiral gave public support to her theatre in these years. She also had a close connection with her former Mount Sion

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[104] *Maidstone Journal*, 30 June 1789.
[105] 'The Diary of Woodfall's Register', 3 June 1789, quoted by Hodgson, *'Sarah Baker'* manuscript, p.5.
[106] Winston, 'The Theatric Tourist', p.17, in Nelson, *James Winston's Theatric Tourist, a Critical Edition*...
[107] Playbills, Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum.

neighbour, the former diplomat and Secretary to the Board of Trade, Richard Cumberland, both in his role as a well-known dramatist and also as commander of the Tunbridge Wells Company of Volunteer Infantry. Sarah often presented his plays at her theatres and, in Tunbridge Wells, he frequently supervised their rehearsal.[108]

In 1801 this theatre, too, began to show signs of wear and tear and once again Sarah pulled it down and built a new one, 'on an extensive and more elegant scale' on the same leasehold site. Work on the project began in late 1801 and the new brick-built theatre opened for the first time on 8 July 1802. In 1815, this theatre was among those Sarah leased to Dowton. It was later used as a corn exchange, at which point the auditorium was demolished, but the original Pantiles facade of this building exists to this day. Described by Younger as 'a very neat theatre' with a 'good dwelling house in front', Winston, on the other hand grumbled that the theatre's decorations and the scenery left something to be desired and the dressing rooms under the stage were 'bad'. The engraving published in *The Theatric Tourist* shows the theatre with its dwelling house in front to have been a flat roofed, three-storey building with a single large, pannelled central door. To either side of the door is a single window and there are three more glazed windows symmetrically arranged on each of the two upper stories. In keeping with the nature of this resort, the theatre is shown in a woodland setting, only hinted at in Winston's preliminary sketch, with a rustic paling fence in the foreground. A feature of this theatre was that it straddled the county boundary with the stage being in Sussex and the auditorium in Kent. As Winston, who was himself an actor, wryly remarked this could have been extremely fortunate 'for the members of the sock and buskin in a migrating company, as they may easily evade the hand of justice by *stepping* into another jurisdiction'. The new theatre, which in Sarah's will was described as 'leasehold' cost between £1500 -£1600 to build and could hold a house of £60. Although box prices in her new theatre went up from 3s to 4s, it is interesting to note that, despite her many distinguished patrons, the prices of the pit, gallery and upper

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[108] Winston, 'The Theatric Tourist', p.17 in, Nelson, *James Winston's Theatric Tourist, a Critical Edition…*; For more about Cumberland's involvement with Sarah and her Tunbridge Wells theatre see below, Chapter 4, 'Theatre and War…', pp.139-140 &145-146 & Chapter 5, 'Women in a World of Men?' pp.167-169.

boxes or slips remained the same as they had for years, both in this town and elsewhere in her circuit at 2s and 1s respectively.[109]

Conclusion

In comparison to many other companies, Sarah was already a success by 1788. She had firmly established herself in Canterbury, Faversham, Rochester, Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells and had also acquired premises in which to put on her theatrical entertainments in Folkestone and Ore. The prospect of building her own theatres in her main towns, however, still evaded her demonstrating that, even after half a century, the Licensing Act was, in some respects, still very effective. On the other hand, in denying provincial magistrates the right to control theatrical activity in areas of their jurisdiction, the same act positively encouraged the proliferation of unregulated theatrical troupes and in this 'free market' situation Sarah, like other managers, was forced to do battle with other companies in order to make a living. She was also obliged to play where she could in an assortment of incommodious or make-shift 'theatres' and, with no permanent base, was on the move all the time.

Initially, the most striking characteristic of the Theatrical Representations Act was the dramatic effect it had on the attitude of the local authorities in the towns where Sarah had already made her mark. With the law behind them they now did all they could to encourage her entrepreneurial activities and assist her in transforming her success into a more tangible reality. This act also came at a particularly fortuitous moment because with town improvements either completed, underway or in the offing in all the towns where Sarah operated, there had never been a better moment to encourage the establishment of a more fitting and elegant venue for the theatre. The 'Occasional Address' spoken at the opening of Sarah's first proper theatre in Canterbury underlines her own awareness of the significance and importance of this act. Not all companies were as fortunate as Sarah's, however, and the experience of her rival in Tunbridge Wells demonstrates that because of the stringent conditions laid down by this act, there were losers as well as winners in this new situation.

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[109] Winston, 'The Theatric Tourist' p.16, in Nelson, *James Winston's Theatric Tourist, a Critical Edition...* '; Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham; Sketch in Winston's 'Theatric Tourist' Notebook No.4, Harvard Theatre Collection.

Sarah was certainly one of the winners and having already established her company's reputation and a good relationship with the authorities in the towns where she operated, she was well placed to take advantage of the potential security and prospects offered by this act. For fifty years she had been 'number'd with the *vagrant train'* and, only now, with the law on her side at last, was she able to begin erecting her own permanent purpose-built theatres with their attached dwelling houses in the towns where she had long enjoyed her greatest success.

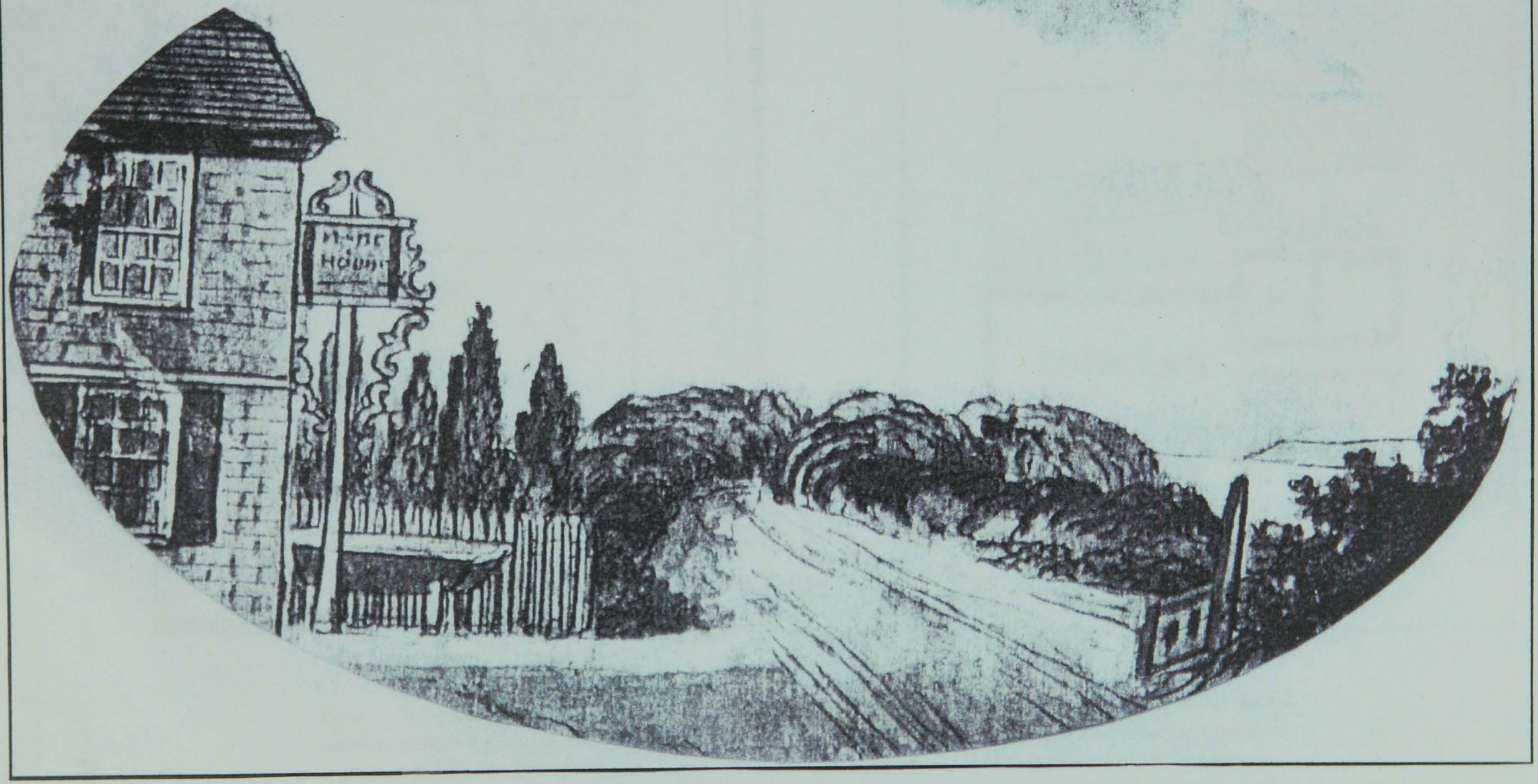
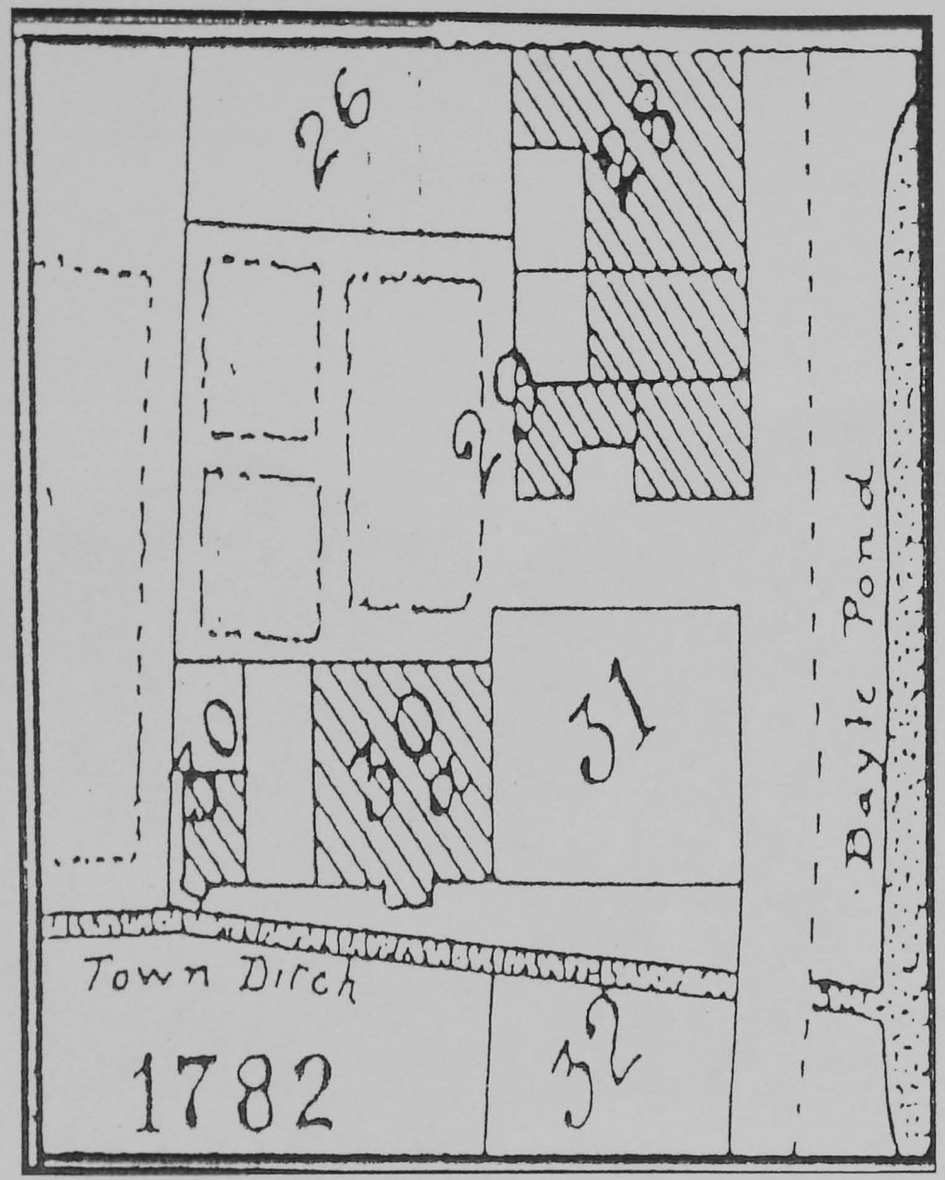


Fig. 1 "The Hare and Hounds", Ore c. 1790. The leasehold 'theatre' attached to, or near this public house still belonged to Sarah Baker at the time of her death. Sketch by Francis Grose in J. Manwaring Baines, *History of Hastings* (First published 1955: St. Leonards on Sea, 1986).



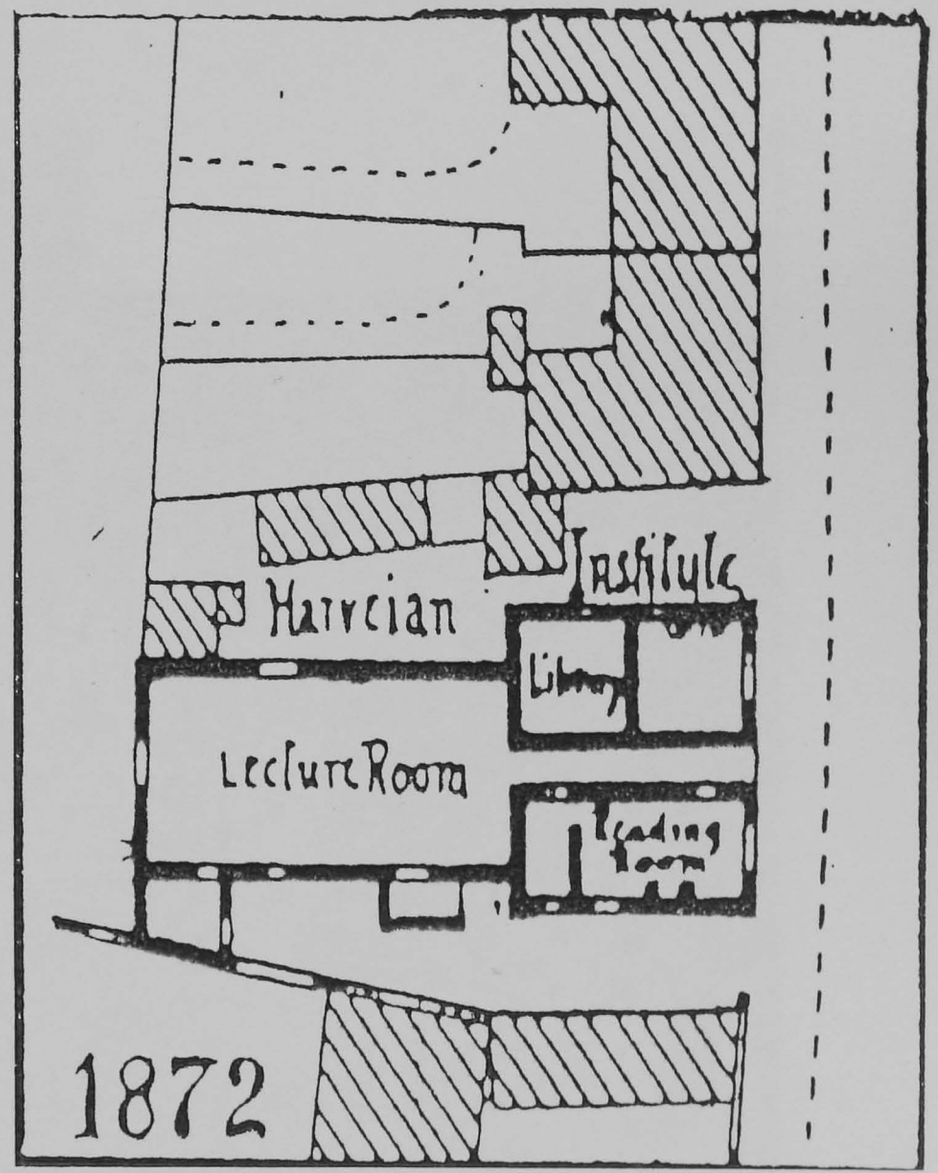


Fig. 2 The Folkestone Manor Office plan of 1782 showing 'the house formerly known by the Name of the Theatre' (Nos. 30 &30a) and the adjoining carpenter's shop and yard (No.31). Sarah had first used this building as a theatre in 1775 and in 1815 it was one of the seven theatres mentioned in her Will. The site marked 'Lecture Room' on the Ordnance plan of 1872 shows how the theatre was extended by John Jonas and Sampson Penley who had leased the building from Sarah in 1804. This plan also outlines the conversion, in 1846, of No. 31 into a library and reading room to accommodate the needs of the new Harveian Institute. Plans taken from an article by W.H. Elgar, the *Folkestone Herald*, 26 May 1923, Folkestone Library archives.

Fig. 3 Sarah Baker's Folkestone theatre. Photograph taken c. 1890 showing, in the background on the left, the partly hipped roof and arched window of this theatre. The building probably already looked much like this following the 'considerable improvements' carried out by the lessees, Sampson and Penley, in 1804. This freehold theatre still belonged to Sarah at her death in 1816. Photograph in W. H. Elgar, *Record of a Mediaeval House which until 1916 stood on the Bayle Folkestone* (Folkestone, 1916), p.32.

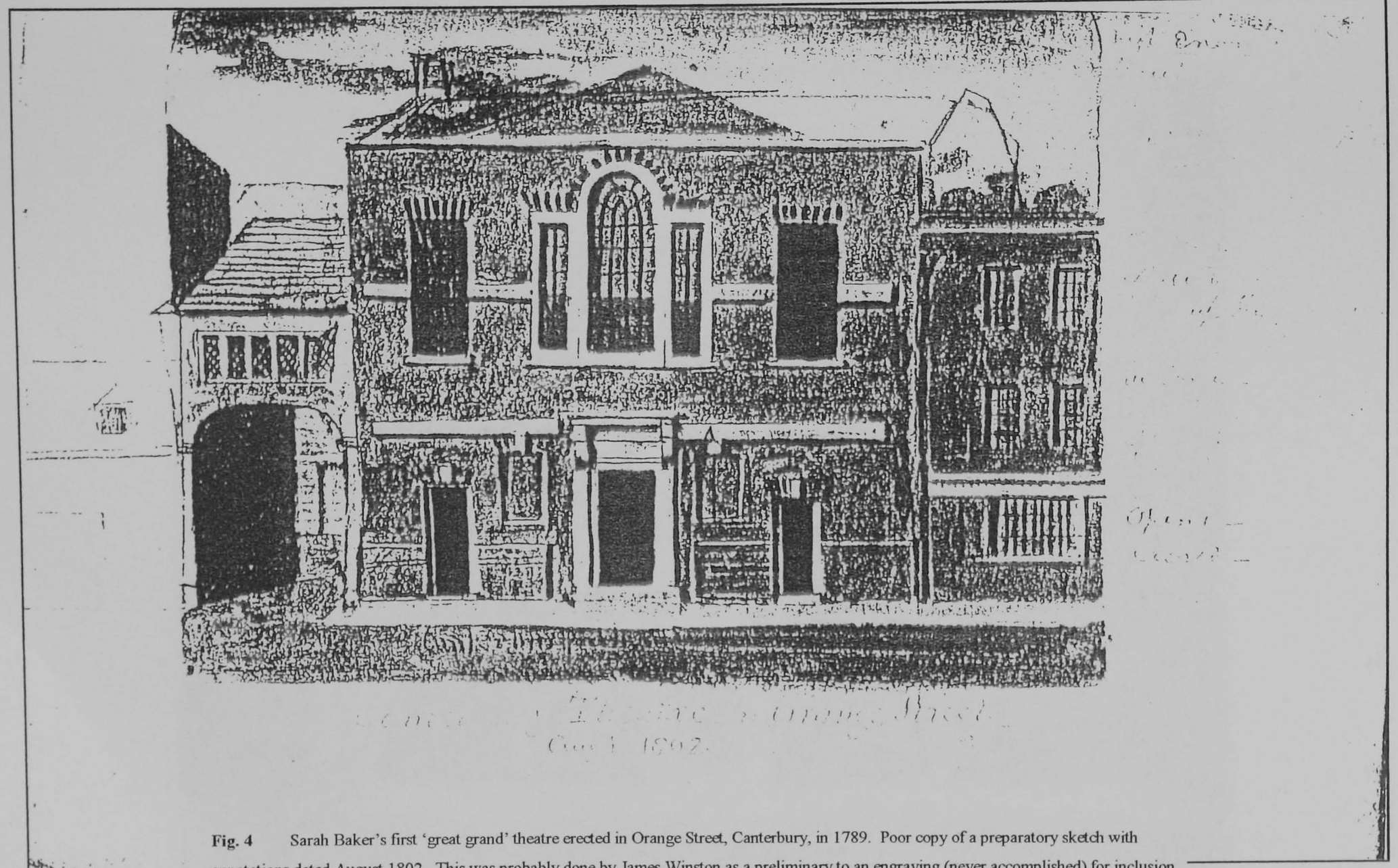


Fig. 4 Sarah Baker's first 'great grand' theatre erected in Orange Street, Canterbury, in 1789. Poor copy of a preparatory sketch with annotations dated August 1802. This was probably done by James Winston as a preliminary to an engraving (never accomplished) for inclusion in his publication, *The Theatric Tourist*. Winston envisaged *The Theatric Tourist* as a 'part work' on the provincial theatre '...replete with useful and necessary information to theatrical professors, whereby they may learn how to chose and regulate their country engagements...'. His intention was to issue a total of thirty numbers over a period of three and a half years each containing engravings and accounts of three theatres. In the event only eight numbers were ever published, the venture was a financial failure and Sarah's Canterbury theatre was not among the twenty-four theatres featured. The reproduction of this sketch is from the Canterbury Library archives.

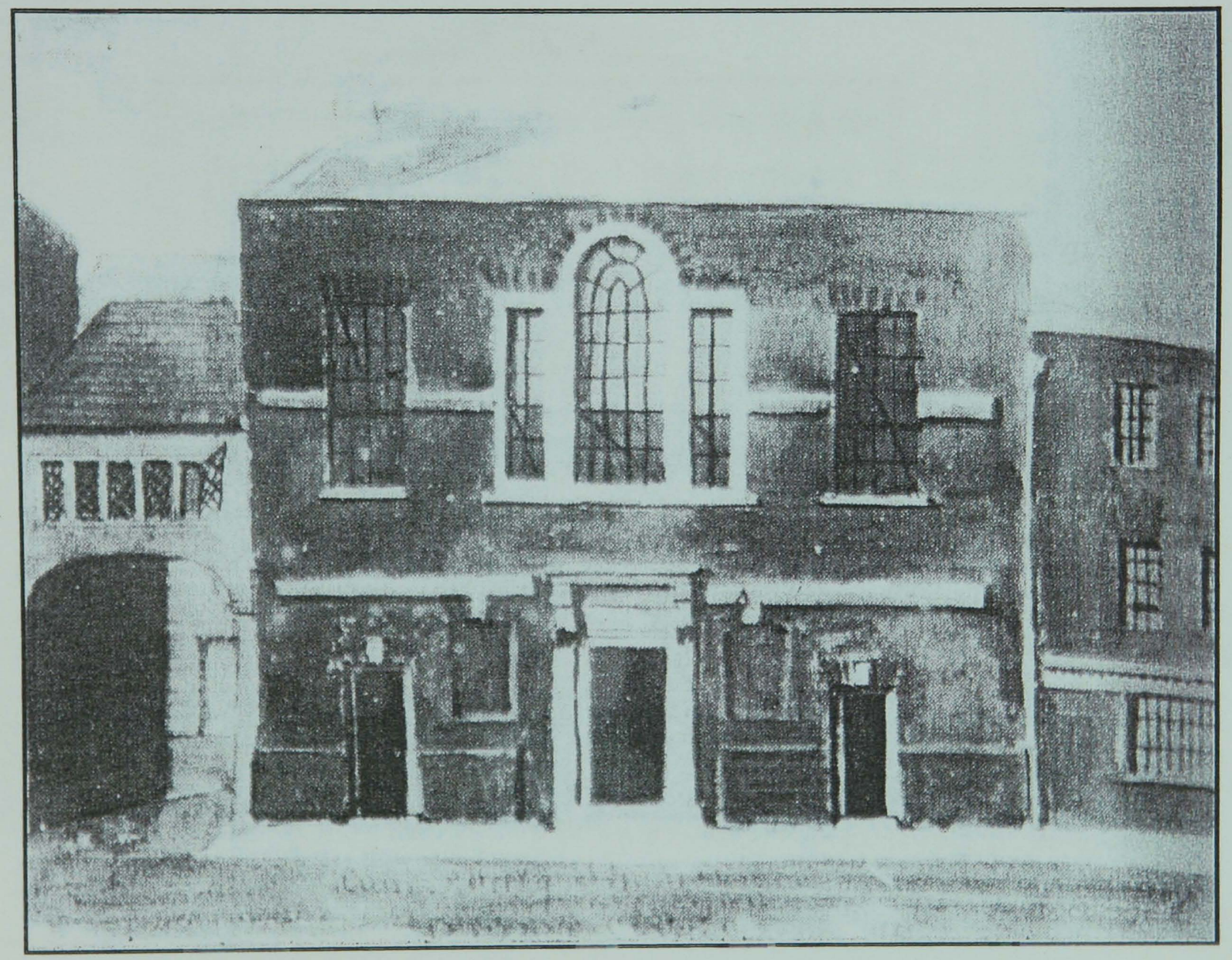


Fig. 5 Sarah Baker's first 'great grand' theatre, Canterbury 1789. Preparatory pen and wash sketch by James Winston. The building to the right of this theatre could well be Sarah's 'house next the theatre' from where she sold tickets for her shows. This is one of some twenty-six sketches and pencil drawings of English provincial theatres in Winston's 'Theatric Tourist' notebook, the Mitchell Library, Sydney, Australia. Reproduced by Eric Irvin, 'More Drawings for Winston's Theatric Tourist' in, *Theatre Notebook*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Winter, 1964-1965).

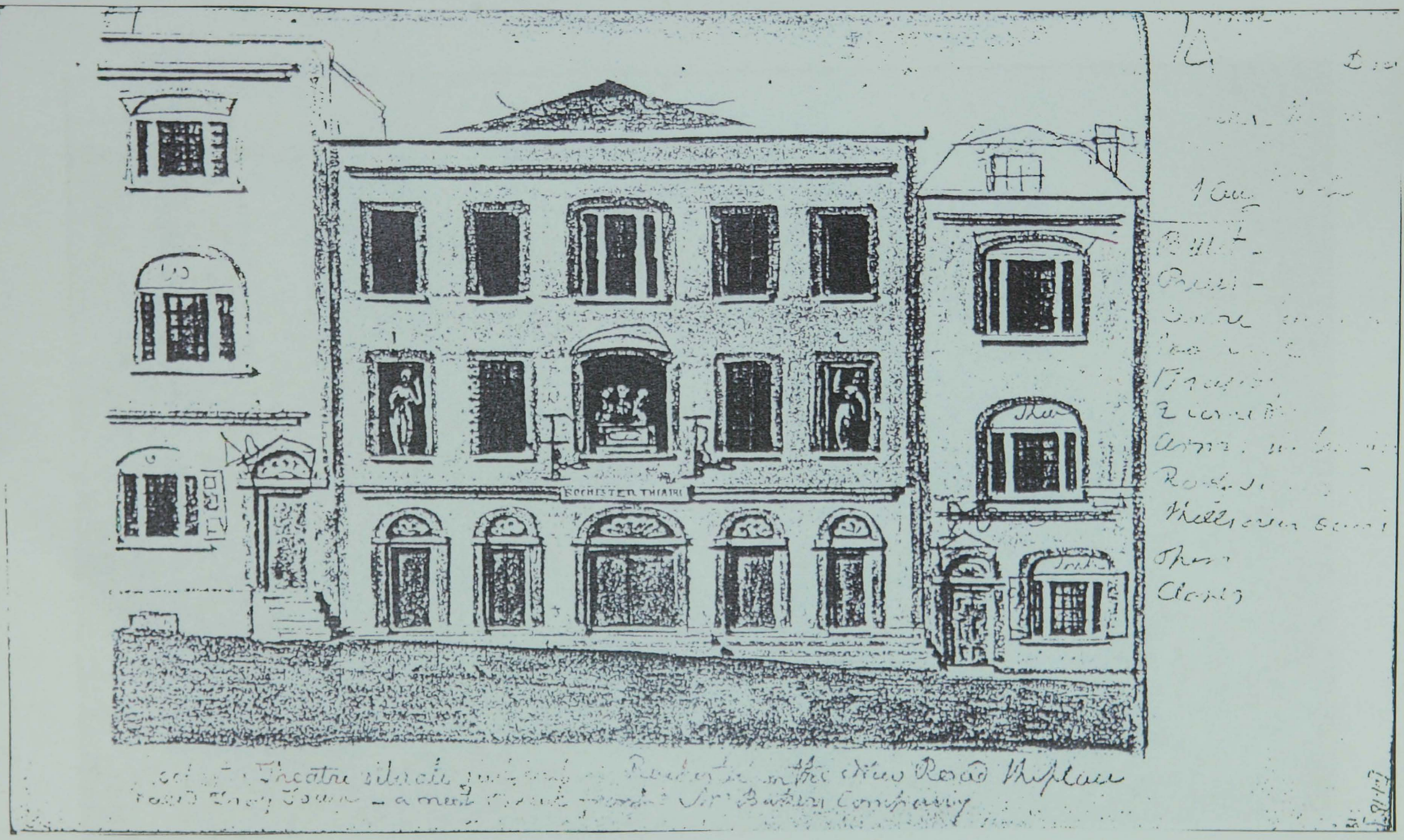


Fig. 6 Sarah Baker's Rochester theatre erected on Star Hill. in 1791. Preparatory sketch with annotations, probably by James Winston. This illustration clearly shows the figures of two of the three Greek muses particularly associated with the theatre. Over the door on the left stands Melpomene, the tragic muse while on the right is Thalia, the muse of comedy. Above the centre door is an unidentified statue. The reproduction of this sketch comes from the Guildhall Museum, Rochester.

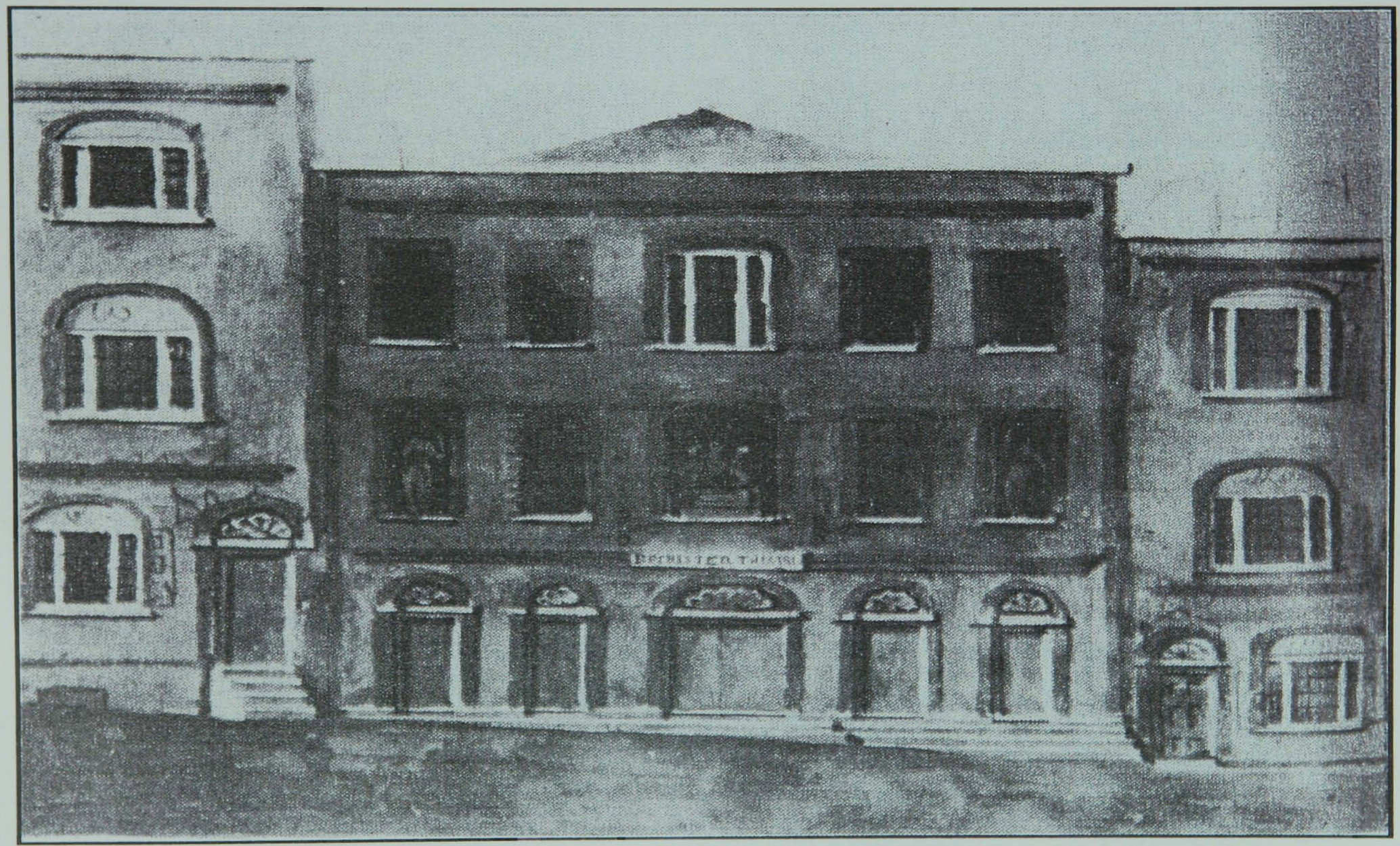


Fig. 7 Sarah Baker's Rochester Theatre erected on Star Hill in 1791. Preparatory pen and wash sketch, c.1802-3, by James Winston. In Winston's 'Theatric Tourist' notebook, the Mitchell Library, Sydney, Australia. Reproduced by Eric Irvin, 'More Drawings for Winston's Theatric Tourist' in, *Theatre Notebook*, Vol. 19, No.2 (Winter, 1964-1965).

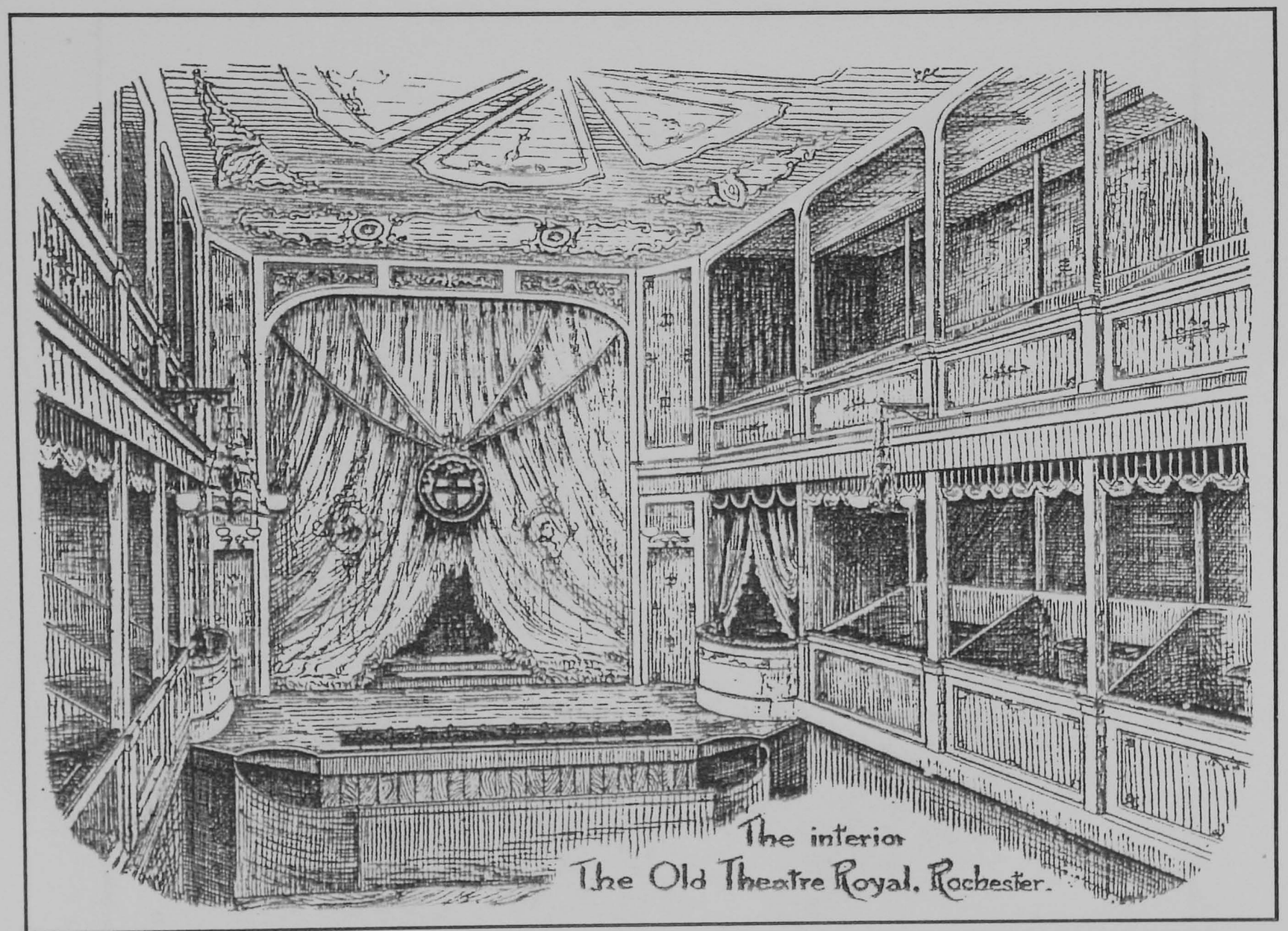


Fig. 8 The interior of Sarah Baker's theatre on Star Hill, Rochester from a drawing by T. Caddel. Reproduced by T. George Banks, 'The Old Rochester Theatre' in, the *Gravesend Magazine and Kentish Pictorial*, Vol. 5, No. 53, February 1916, Guildhall Museum, Rochester.

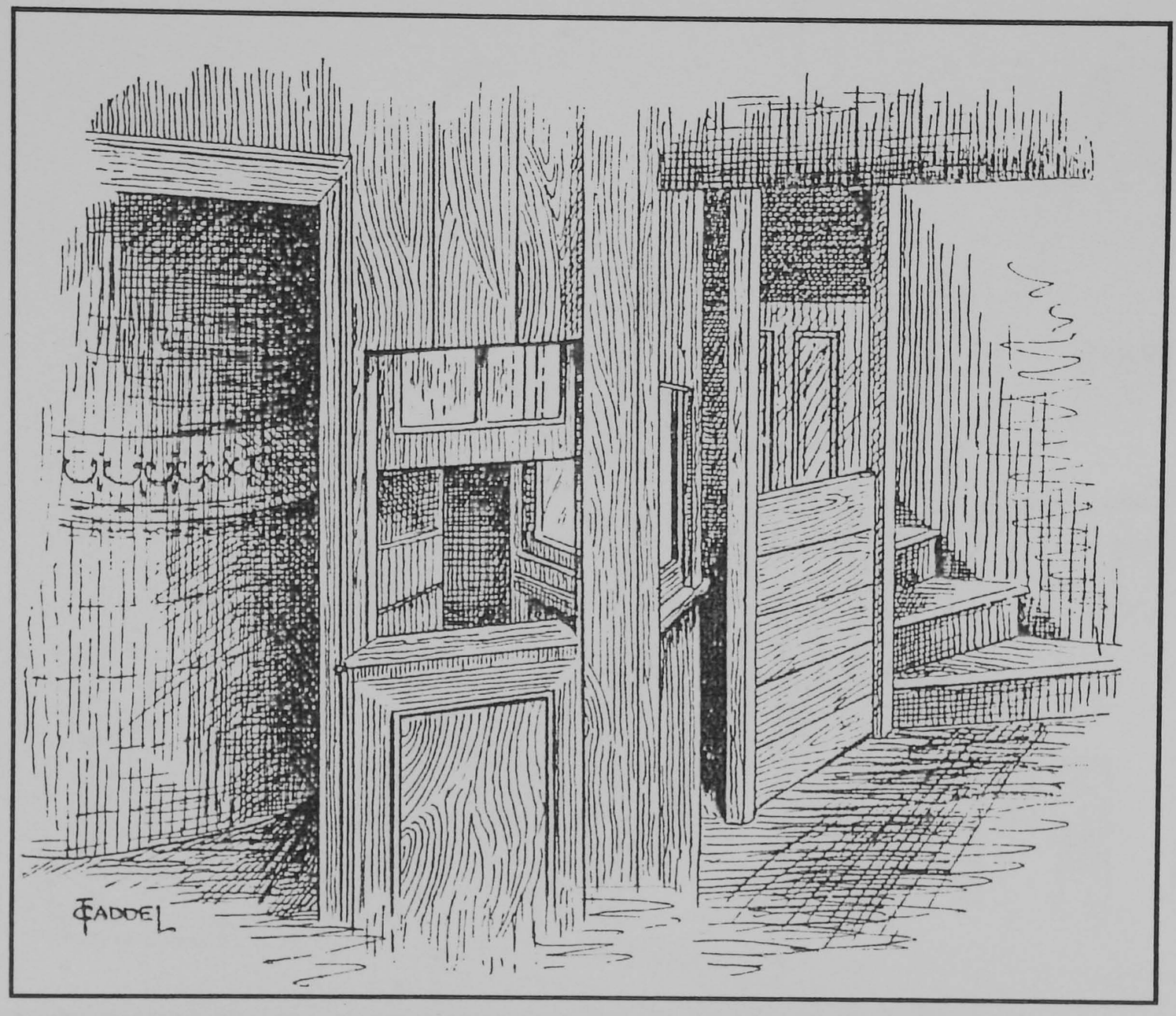


Fig. 9 The old 'Pay Box' at Sarah Baker's theatre on Star Hill Rochester from a drawing by T. Caddel. Reproduced by T. George Banks, 'The Old Rochester Theatre' in, the *Gravesend Magazine and Kentish Pictorial*, December, 1915, Guildhall Museum, Rochester.

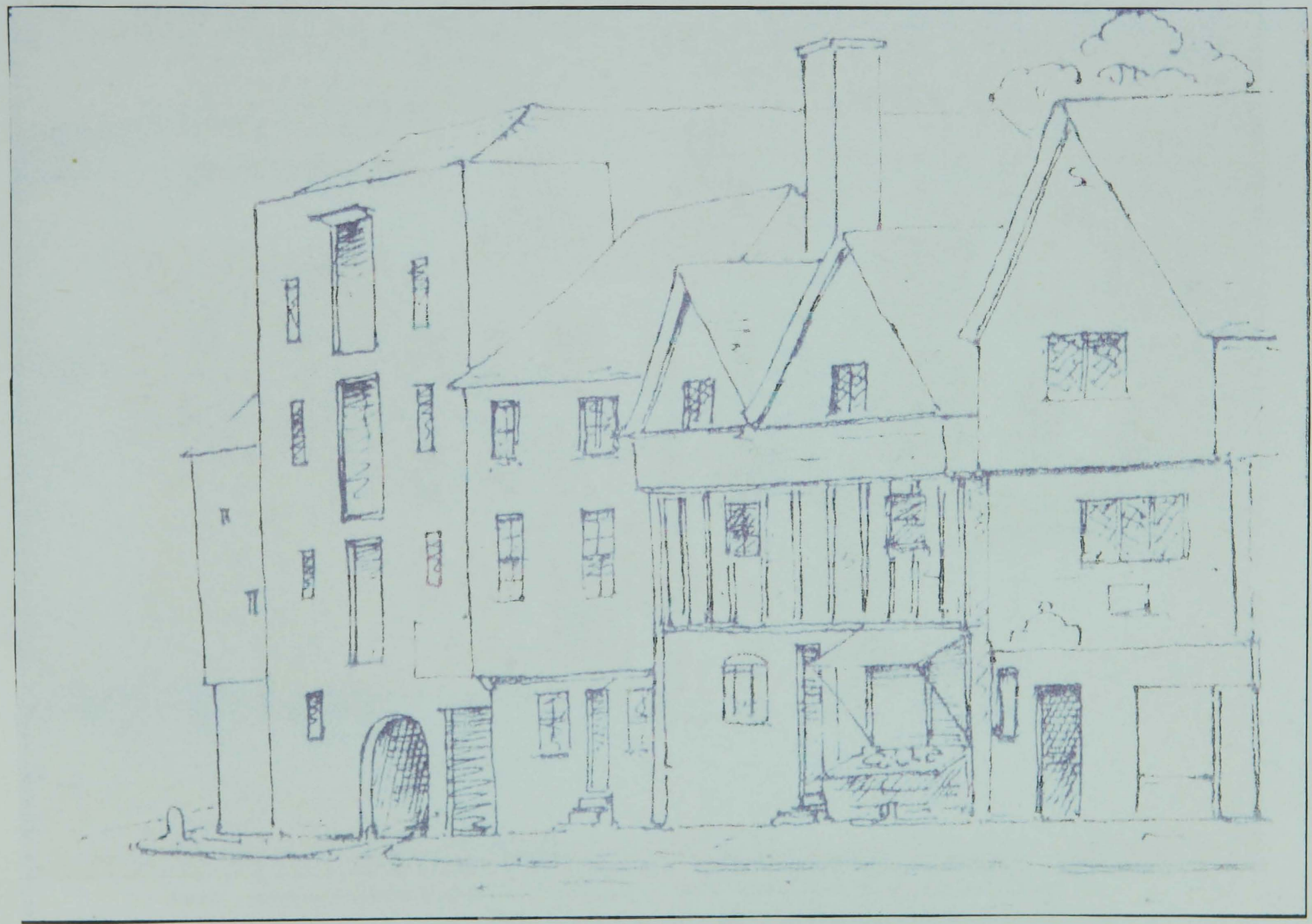


Fig. 10 The 'large warehouse' at the bottom of the High-street, Maidstone. This building, only partly visible on the extreme left of this sketch, is where Sarah's company performed before she built her own purpose-built theatre in the town in 1798. Just a few doors down from a lodging house known as 'Louse Tavern' (on the extreme right), this building was near the river and prone to flooding. From J.M. Russell, *The History of Maidstone* (First published 1881: This edition, Rochester, 1978), p.347.

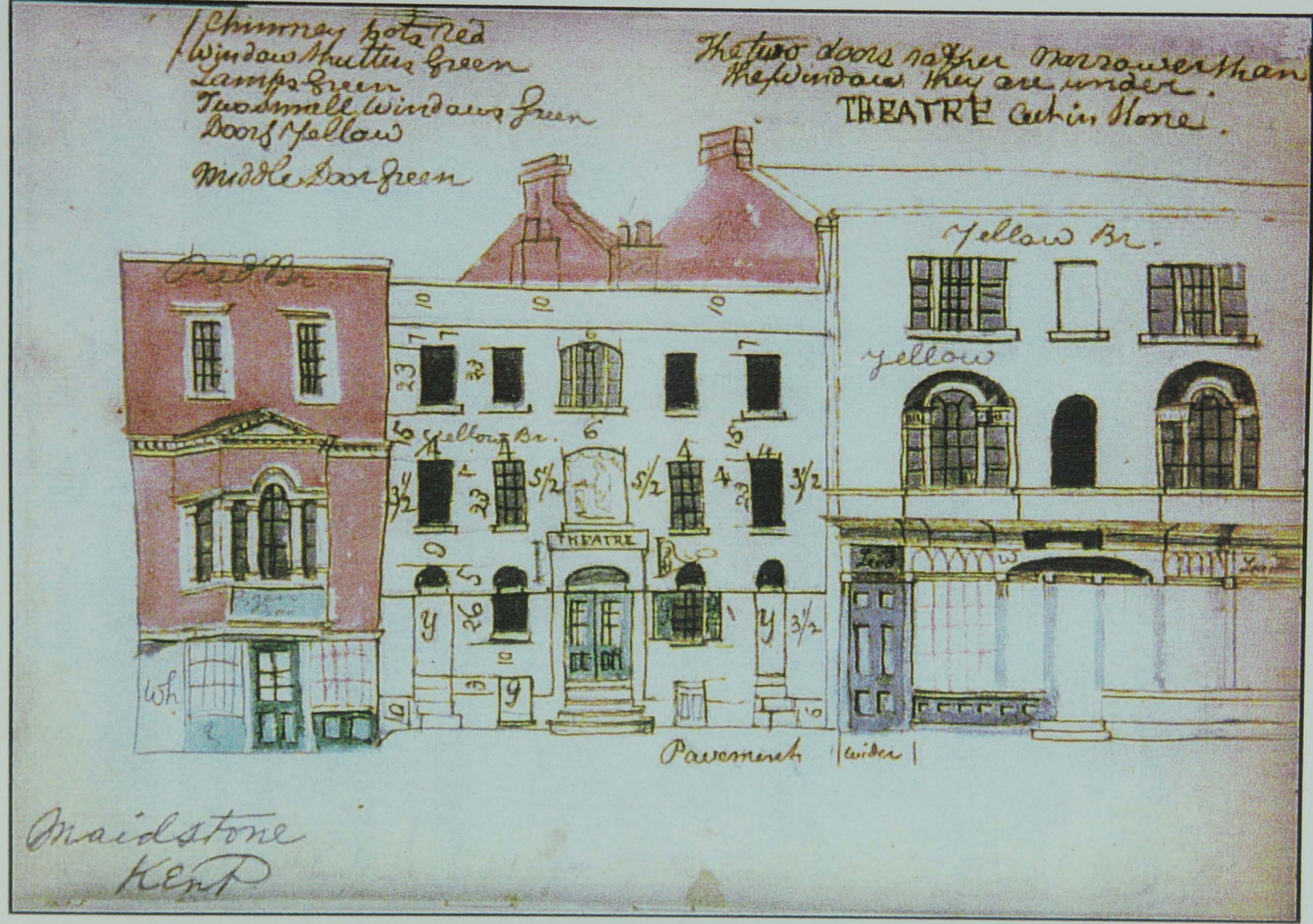


Fig. 11 Sarah Baker's Maidstone theatre erected in the High-street in 1798 opposite the spot where the old water conduit had stood. This annotated pen and wash sketch is by James Winston and the published engraving of this theatre is based upon this work. The green shutters on the ground floor window to the right of the main door indicate that this was probably part of the 'small and inconvenient house' in front of the theatre that Sarah occupied when she and her company were in town. From James Winston's 'Theatric Tourist' Notebook No. 4, Ref: TS 1335.211, Harvard Theatre Collection.

Fig. 12 Sarah Baker's Maidstone theatre, 1798. Engraving from James Winston's *The Theatric Tourist*, 1805. Although a failure as a 'part work' the eight published numbers of *The Theatric Tourist* were bound together and published as a single volume in 1805. Descriptions and engravings of Sarah's Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells theatres were included. In this depiction of Sarah's Maidstone theatre, William Jefferys' portrait of Shakespeare is clearly visible in the niche above the main door. Engraving reproduced in Peter Clark & Lyn Murfin, *The History of Maidstone: The Making of a Modern County Town* (Maidstone, 1995).

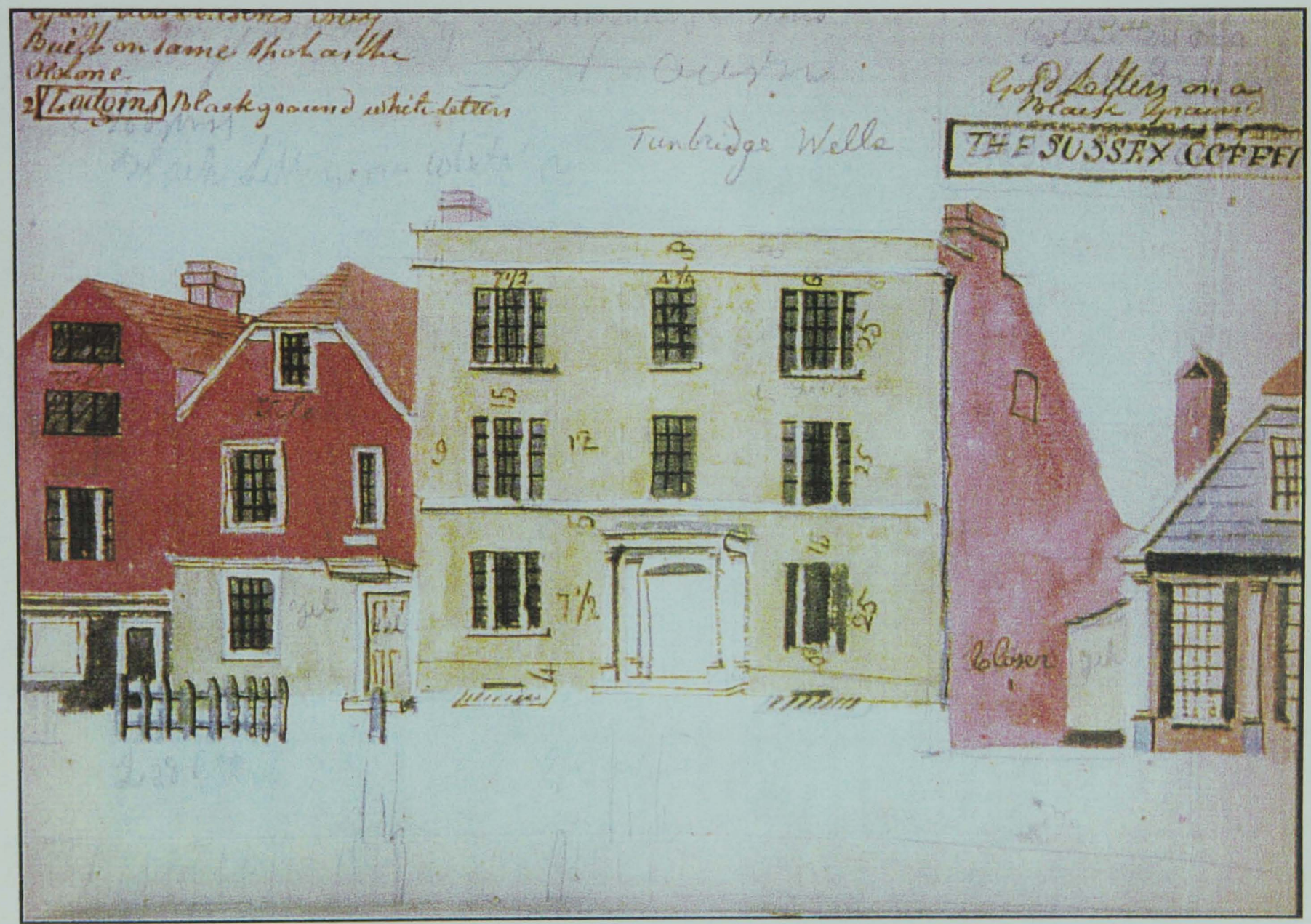


Fig. 13 Sarah Baker's Tunbridge Wells theatre, 1802. Annotated pen and wash sketch by James Winston of the 'very neat theatre' with a 'good dwelling house in front' erected on the site of her old wooden theatre in the Pantiles. The published engraving of this theatre in *The Theatric Tourist* is based on this sketch. From James Winston's 'Theatric Tourist' Notebook No. 4, Ref: TS 1335.211, Harvard Theatre Collection.

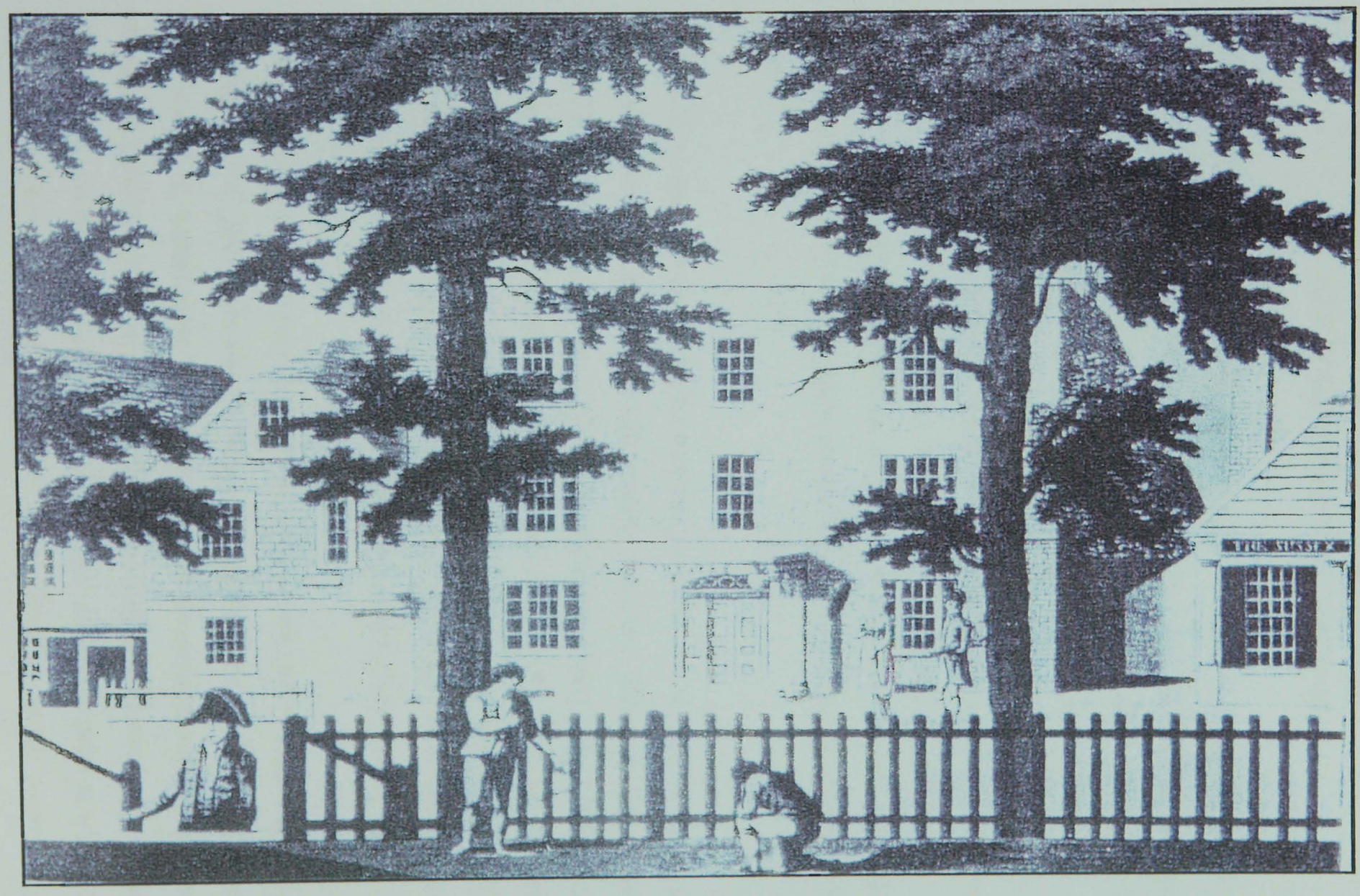


Fig. 14 Sarah Baker's Tunbridge Wells theatre, erected on the Pantiles, 1802. Engraving from James Winston's *The Theatric Tourist*, 1805. This clearly shows the wooded setting and palings only hinted at in Winston's preliminary pen and wash sketch of this theatre. Reproduced in Alan Savidge, *A History of a Spa Town: Royal Tunbridge Wells* (Tunbridge Wells, 1975).

CHAPTER 4

THEATRE AND WAR: SARAH BAKER , THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND WAR WITH FRANCE 1793-1815

In August 1789 Sarah had announced the provisional opening of her first purpose built brick theatre. This was in Orange Street in Canterbury and the opening was planned to take advantage of one of the busiest times of the year in the city - race week. The event was reported and declared a great success in the *Kentish Gazette* of 25 August. This was an auspicious moment both for Sarah and for Canterbury. Coinciding with this milestone in her career, however, events of an infinitely more far reaching nature were unfolding in France as the Revolution gathered pace. That month in Paris the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* condemned the practices of the *ancien régime* and established the principles on which the new constitution of France would be founded.

Neither Sarah nor anyone else at that time can have had any idea of the impact of these events on the lives of inhabitants in this country. Less than four years later, however, the French National Convention declared war on Britain and apart from a brief period following the Peace of Amiens in 1801-1803 the two countries remained at war for the next twenty-two years. The last ten years of the eighteenth century also proved a particularly testing time for the British government on the home front and some historians believe that this country, too, came close to revolution at that time.[1]

During these years of war Sarah's theatrical empire continued to expand and by the time she died in 1816, just a year after Wellington's victory at the Battle of Waterloo, Sarah was a woman of considerable wealth. As far as her financial circumstances were concerned it seems that her death occurred at an opportune moment, for the end of the French wars also coincided with what is widely regarded as the point at which that period of rapid development and expansion often referred to as the 'golden age' of the

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[1] For example, R. Wells, *Insurrection, the British Experience 1795-1803* (Gloucester, 1983).

theatre came to an end.[2] This generalization also applied to Sarah's theatrical 'empire' as for many years before their eventual sale in 1846, her theatres were already far from the flourishing concerns they had been in her day.[3]

In order to understand how Sarah managed to build such a successful career for herself in such seemingly inauspicious circumstances I have already looked at the parliamentary legislation that gave her operation a legal status and, thereby, a stake in society which was fundamental to her eventual achievements. The importance of this in terms of what it enabled her to accomplish in the last twenty-eight years of her life, can hardly be exaggerated but the impact of the Theatrical Representations Act alone does not fully explain how she managed to develop her business to such an extent in its wake. I have looked, therefore, for other factors that might have contributed to her prosperity in these years and, in the light of Gillian Russell's hypothesis that in the eighteenth century '...war and the theatre were mutually sustaining, not only in material terms but also culturally, ideologically, and politically', have investigated whether this theory is relevant to Sarah's experiences.[4] In investigating the links between Sarah's success and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars I have also considered the significance of the increasingly close relationship that developed between her theatres and the local establishment in the towns where she established her permanent theatres.

All Sarah's purpose-built theatres were constructed between 1789 and 1802 against a background of the French revolution and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars with France. This evidence, while purely circumstantial, fits very satisfactorily with the notion that it was likely there was some connection between Sarah's burgeoning career and the situation in Europe. Russell in *The Theatres of War* notes that many new playhouses took their place beside the expanding dockyards and barracks at this time and explains this phenomenon as '... a response to the leisure economy of war'.[5] In taking this idea a stage further my aim has been to find out whether war was intrinsic to Sarah's achievements, and, if so, how this manifested in terms of the material she was

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[2] G. Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics, and Society, 1793-1815* (Oxford, 1995), p.179.
[3] See concluding paragraph of this chapter.
[4] Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.179.
[5] Ibid., p.97.

presenting and in other ways. In this respect I have been particularly interested in the relationship between her theatres and the government's campaign to drum up enthusiasm in the community for its policy of war with France. Initially, however, I have tried to establish the extent to which the people of Kent, among whom Sarah lived and worked, were aware of, or involved in, the French wars of the 1790s and early nineteenth century and why they, and the increasing numbers of military and naval personnel in the county should have been drawn in large numbers to her theatres at this time.

Wartime patrons

It has often been claimed that in eighteenth-century Britain, war was the preserve of politicians, bureaucrats and professional soldiers, '...an active minority, surrounded by an indifferent multitude' and this supposition has persisted over many years.[6] This argument is based on the grounds that in this period Britain, unlike most of its European neighbours, had never experienced a major invasion by another nation. As far as the Revolutionary and French wars are concerned, this view is now disputed. Clive Emsley even suggests that '...if there was a common experience shared by all Britons in the last decade of the eighteenth and the early years of the nineteenth centuries, it is to be found less in the changes resulting from the industrial revolution and more in the demands of war.' Britain's participation in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, he continues, '...put enormous strains on her government, her economy, her finances and her manpower. The demands for men and especially money affected all ranks of society.'[7]

Emsley was writing of the country as a whole, but nowhere could the reality of war have been more apparent to the general populace than in the 'front-line' county of Kent. Here, the 'industrial revolution' had caused barely a ripple but from 1798-1805, the conquest of Britain was Napoleon's primary strategic objective and on a clear day, the encampments of the 'immense' French invasion force, a little more twenty miles away, were clearly visible and the sound of heavy gunfire was frequently heard from the Kentish coast. Thomas Pattenden who lived in Dover at the time kept a diary which is full of references to the comings and goings of the war. On one occasion he described how with the aid of his 'glass' he could see '...the Rows of Tents on the hills on both

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[6] L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London, 1992), p.3.

sides of Boulogne...'. [8] He also writes of a skirmish he witnessed between 'Ships and Bombs under the command of Lord Nelson' and Napoleon's 'gun brigs and Boats at Boulogne'. On that 'very fine hot day' in August 1801, Pattenden describes how 'The fire and smoke from the ships and from the French Batteries on shore was seen very distinctly. The [Dover] hills', he comments, ' were full of spectators all the day'.[9]

The Kentish landscape also changed quite dramatically during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. Existing coastal fortifications were strengthened from 1793 and gun batteries established at Dover Castle and on the Western heights the same year. [10] As the war progressed an extensive programme of fortification was carried out along the coast from Gravesend in the Thames estuary to Dungeness and beyond. Seventy-four Martello Towers were built between Folkestone and Seaford near Eastbourne, and in October 1804 work began on the great military canal that runs from Shorncliffe through to Cliff End in Sussex. [11] During the 1790s huge barracks were built to accommodate the military who until then had been billeted upon the local population. In Canterbury the cavalry barracks were constructed in 1794 at a cost of £40,000 and four years later barracks for 2,000 infantry were erected nearby.[12] Maidstone had been an important military centre since the time of the Restoration and in the second half of the eighteenth century was home to the West Kent Militia. In 1797 new barracks were built in the town on the banks of the Medway for the use of the King's regiments of cavalry serving in the East Indies and the Cape of Good Hope, and also for drilling recruits previous to embarkation.[13] Barracks were also built in 1794 at Deal and at Shorncliffe near Folkestone as well as at Hythe.[14] The Royal Dockyard at Chatham, just down the road from Rochester, developed as a major base for the regular army and two large new barracks, the Brompton and St Mary's, were added to those that already existed in 1804-6 and 1808-12 respectively.[15] Military camps were also established at Coxheath,

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[7] C. Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars 1793-1815* (London, 1979), p.4.
[8] P. Bloomfield, *Kent and the Napoleonic Wars* (Maidstone, 1987), p.63.
[9] Ibid., p. 62.
[10] T. A. Bushell, *Kent: The Principal People, Places and Events of the County's History in Date Order...* (Chesham, 1976), pp.78-79.
[11] G. Hutchinson, *The Royal Military Canal* (Ore, 1995), p.9.
[12] *Lewis's Topographical Dictionary of England,* Vol. 1 (London, 1842), p.399.
[13] Ibid., p.194.
[14] Bloomfield, *Kent and the Napoleonic Wars*, p.28.
[15] Ibid., p.25.

Chatham, Barham Downs, Ashford, Dover and Shorncliffe [16] while a camp for 7,000-8,000 men from 12 regiments was also pitched in Waterdown Forest at Tunbridge Wells in July 1793 and troop movements became a regular feature of life in the town there too. [17] In the circumstances it is hardly surprising that 'all Kent was full of soldiers' and that 'the roads were lively with marching regiments [and] even the quietest towns transformed into centres of bustle and activity.'[18]

The pages of the *Kentish Gazette* from 1793 are also filled with reports of war and of the potential terror of a French invasion. In one such article 'Britannus' described the horrors of the equipment and weaponry to be deployed against Britain by the French invasion force as follows: 'The French have threatened to destroy our naval greatness by the construction and use of enormous rafts of timber, bomb proof, well lined with artillery and capable of transporting 10,090 soldiers'. A 'new chemical invention' was also mentioned and there were dire warnings about the ferocity of Napoleon's troops. It was also reported that '...the immense armies that are now encamped on the opposite coasts of France are all of them veteran troops, ...not only flushed with victory [but also] ...willing to encounter any difficulties in search of better quarters. ...They are led to expect that they shall be able to possess themselves of those better quarters in England', the article continued, and concluded: 'It remains therefore, for Englishmen to tell them another story, from the mouths of their cannons and, if they will come, to receive them on the points of their bayonets...'. [19]

In the circumstances it would have been unthinkable for the war not to have been a major preoccupation and concern to the civilian population of Kent who, in one way or another, were reminded of it virtually every day. It goes without saying that the same was true of the additional numbers of military and naval personnel in the county at this time. Theatre-going had long been very popular with this group and the increase in their numbers was obviously a great asset to Sarah's business. John Bernard, another theatrical manager and contemporary of Sarah's, was in no doubt about the historical importance of the navy, in particular, to the well-being of the provincial theatre. At

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[16] H.F. Abell, *History of Kent* (Ashford, 1898), p.290.
[17] A. Savidge, *A History of a Spa Town, Royal Tunbridge Wells* (Tunbridge Wells, 1995), p.106.
[18] Abell, *History of Kent*, p.292.

some point in his career, he was involved with the management of theatres at Plymouth, Brighton and Guernsey[20] and noted that 'Sailors in general ...are very fond of playhouses'. He believed that this might have been, '...partly because they find their ships workhouses, and partly because the former are the readiest places of amusement they can visit when they are ashore'.[21]

The navy was certainly also an important component of Sarah's early success as, according to Thomas Younger, her career 'took off' following a trip to Gosport in the early 1760s.[22] Gosport is in close proximity to Portsmouth which was one of the country's busiest naval bases in the eighteenth century and it is likely that Sarah chose this venue because of the large naval presence in the town. For this reason it is probably more than pure coincidence that this was where she had her first lucky break.

Some years later another incident also illustrates the importance of the naval fraternity to her business. On this occasion in early February 1775, she should have opened at her new Folkestone theatre.[23] The following week, however, an advertisement in the *Kentish Gazette* informed 'her Friends and the Public in general' that 'on Account of some unforeseen incident' the opening was postponed and she was to remain instead at the theatre in Dover. She was still there for another four nights the following week. The reason for her change of plan becomes clear with her announcement in the press that, on Saturday February 11, 'by Particular Desire of the Hon Charles Cunningham and the Officers of the Lion West-Indiaman', the Company will finally conclude their stay in the town with a performance of *The Spanish Lady*.[24] She obviously enjoyed a huge success with her naval patrons and, opportunistic as ever, chose to remain in Dover rather than move on, as originally intended, to Folkestone. Her farewell to her patrons at the Dover Theatre, also published in the *Kentish Gazette*, informs them that: 'The great Indulgence Mrs Baker has met with in this Town, calls for her most grateful Acknowledgments... She then goes on to 'beg leave' to assure her Friends that she shall

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[19] *Kentish Gazette*, 16 January, 1798.
[20] *Dictionary of National Biography*, p.382.
[21] John Bernard, *Retrospections of the Stage*, Vol. 2 (1830), p.128.
[22] Thomas Younger to James Winston, 6 January, 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham Public Library.
[23] *Kentish Gazette*, 25-28 January, 1775.
[24] Ibid., 8-11 February, 1775.

ever retain a due Sense of the vast Obligations; and likewise, that it shall ever be her essential Care to maintain and merit their Countenance and repeated Favours ...' With her '...most hearty Thanks', she took leave of the town and moved on to Folkestone. [25] Her thanks to her patrons were often fairly excessive but this notice is one of the most effusive I have found and, I believe, signifies the importance, even at that stage of her career, of the naval or military fraternity to her success.

All the towns and cities in which Sarah built her permanent theatres had a military or naval presence. The benefit of this, which had been remarked upon by Thomas Younger in 1803, was, apparently, still as relevant more than forty years later when, in 1846, Sarah's Canterbury, Rochester and Maidstone theatres were put up for sale. At that time specific note was made in the sale particulars of the proximity of a military or naval establishment to each of these three towns, a situation, it was pointed out, that was 'peculiarly favourable for the prosperity of all Theatrical Establishments'.[26] J.L. Thornton, who purchased Sarah's old Rochester theatre at this time acknowledged its long standing connections with the navy and the military when he commissioned commemorative scenes of Britain's greatest naval and military victories to be painted on the panels of the boxes.[27]

The reason that both the civilian population and increased numbers of military and naval personnel were drawn to Sarah's theatres at this time was because, enterprising entrepreneur that she was, she made the most of their preoccupation with the war and tailored her shows accordingly. As I have described, Kent was full of reminders and images of war at this time and Sarah, who was always keen to be seen as topical and up to the minute with her productions, exploited this. It has been suggested that: 'In an age without television or film, and with a journalism capable of being read only by the literate minority and very inadequately illustrated, if illustrated at all, the stage played its part in attempting to put on show the exciting current events that audiences were eager

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham; 'Particulars and Conditions of Sale of Freehold Theatres and other Property, 27 January, 1846', Guildhall Museum archive, Rochester. See also Chapter 3 above. 'Sarah Baker and her Theatres'.
[27] A. Rhodes, *Our Local Scrapbook* (Unpublished manuscript in archives at Rochester Library), p.81.

to hear about and see. Theatres had a 'news-reel' function'. [28] The sort of theatrical comment on current affairs in which Sarah specialized was extremely popular and in wartime with hoards of curious people wanting to celebrate or 'experience' events for themselves, she made the most of it. This obviously contributed significantly to her commercial success.

Politics and the theatre

While all this seems straight forward enough, Sarah, despite her new-found legality, still had to be extremely careful with regard to the material she presented in her theatres. This was for fear of falling foul of the local magistrates who granted her theatrical licences and upon whom she, therefore, depended for her professional survival. Her response to the French revolution provides an interesting example of how she managed to avoid trouble. This, I suggest, not only illustrates her own political awareness but also the potential of the, now, closely regulated provincial theatre as a political platform for local elites, at the very heart of their community.

In the early days of the French Revolution in the summer of 1789, reaction in this country was generally favourable. One of the reasons for this was that the majority of Britons echoed George III's opinion that '...the beauty, excellence and perfection of the British Constitution as by Law Established...' [29] was superior to all others and welcomed the idea that the French had finally come to their senses and decided, or so it seemed, to follow our example. This interpretation of events was probably given some credence by the fact that in 1789 the centenary celebrations of our own 'glorious revolution' of 1688 were only just over and it was felt that this must have had some influence in France. Many envisaged an end to the tyranny of the *ancien régime* and all that it stood for and looked forward to a more cordial relationship with the country in the future. Revolution clubs set up here for the centenary celebrations, exchanged letters and ideas with their counterparts in France. It was also thought by some people that the overthrow of the old regime was bound to weaken France's potential as an enemy.

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[28] D. Forbes, 'Water Drama', in D. Bradby, L. James & B. Sharratt (eds.), *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama - Aspects of popular entertainment in theatre, film and television 1800-1976* (Cambridge, 1980), p.94.

[29] John Fortescue (ed.), *The Correspondence of George III, 1778-1779*, Vol. 4 (London, 1928), p.221.

This response was reflected in the shows put on by the minor theatres in London and also in the provinces. Late in 1789, just four months after the storming of the Bastille, Sarah was playing at Deal while the final touches were made to her new Orange Street Theatre in Canterbury before she opened there early in the new year. Always keen to emulate the London theatres, her advertisement in the *Kentish Gazette* of 10-13 November 1789 shows that her Company's presentation that week constituted a full scale celebration of the previous summer's events in France. The evening began with a comedy *The Beaux Strategem* to which was added 'an entire new and splendid Entertainment founded on the subject of the French Revolution called *Triumph of Liberty, or, the Destruction of the Bastille*. This was followed by Mr Gardner's rendition of the 'speech delivered on July 29 to the French Troops by Mons Moreau de St. Merry on the Destruction of the Bastille'. Sarah then went on to promise her patrons 'A View of the Outside of The Bastille and draw-bridge', followed by a 'picturesque view of the inside of the Bastile with the various Instruments of Torture, the different Gratings, Dungeons, and Cells, from which the several miserable Objects made their Emancipation'. The evening concluded with a 'Triumphal Entry to the Temple of Liberty, (a new scene) and a grand chorus of *Vive La Liberte*.

The next week, the *Kentish Gazette* contained an appreciative review of this performance declaring that:

> '... Mrs Baker in the Deal Theatre hath brought forward this piece with a liberality that does her infinite credit. When the effect is produced on so small and confined a stage the performers do themselves double honour and criticisms were unjust. The storming of the Bastille is conducted in a very impressive and spirited manner and [meets] with the applause it justly merits. But when we view the scenery and performance of the second act, the emancipation of the prisoners, the tortures etc., a horror takes possession of our minds so forcibly to seem for a moment to forget it is a representation only...' [30]

This performance demonstrates Sarah's extraordinary topicality and enterprise in keeping up with the latest shows of the metropolis in response to the demands of her patrons in the provinces. Such an event was eminently suitable for representation as

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[30] *Kentish Gazette*, 17-20 November, 1789.

'spectacle', the kind of theatre in which the minors specialized due to the limitations imposed upon them by the Licensing Act of 1737. In late July and August 1789, a 'Bastille war' had taken place in London, as the minor theatres vied with each other to stage spectacular re-enactments of the events in Paris of 14 July. *The Triumph of Liberty* had run for 79 nights at the Royal Circus and at the Royal Grove, Philip Astley had procured waxwork models of heads of notable victims of the Revolution from Madame Tussaud's for his rival show *Paris in an Uproar; or the Destruction of the Bastille*.[31]

But the nature of the Bastille spectaculars was very different to the normal sieges, battles and naval engagements re-enacted on the British stage. This was because the fall of the Bastille was not a depiction of British heroics against a common foe but an act of rebellion by 'an exasperated populace' against a symbol of despotic monarchy. Russell draws attention to the fact that the minors were well aware of the dangers and significance of this and consequently sought to defuse the situation and divert any accusations of subversion by disguising the dissident nature of the spectacle with a show of British patriotism. At the Royal Circus *The Triumph of Liberty* concluded with a patriotic address claiming the French had caught the 'Patriotic flame' from Britain'. This was given by an actress dressed as Britannia flanked by two large transparent portraits of George III and Queen Charlotte and the evening ended with a rousing chorus by the whole company in praise of Britannia. At Sadler's Wells, the management linked the 'potential subversiveness' of *Gallic Freedom* with another piece, *Britannia's Relief*, claiming in their publicity that the latter formed 'a striking picture of national happiness when contrasted with the present situation of our neighbours on the continent'.[32]

Sarah was also quick to react to any potential criticism of her interpretation of the revolution in France by linking these performances with other pieces that made it very clear where her theatre's political affiliations lay. For example, an after-piece entitled *British Loyalty or a Squeeze for St. Paul's* which celebrated the King's recovery from

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[31] Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.67.
[32] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 'Collection relating to Sadler's Wells', British Library, Vol.2 fo. 69, quoted by Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.69.

illness earlier in the year was given on Thursday 19 November 1789 shortly after a performance of *The Triumph of Liberty* earlier in the week. [33] Then, in a striking advertisement in the *Kentish Gazette* of 20-24 November, she specifically drew her patrons' attention to the fact that the after-piece, *The Benevolent Planters*, was 'Founded on that aimiable Philanthropy, which has so long summoned the attention of the Senate of Great Britain, and fired the Hearts of our generous Countrymen - The Abolition of the Slave Trade'. By so doing she cleverly linked the overthrow of a tyrannical regime in France with the campaign in this country for the abolition of the slave trade which was then in full swing.

An anti-slavery play, *Inkle and Yarico* (1787) was also the choice for the first performance at Sarah's new Canterbury theatre on 21 January 1790.[34] What Sarah herself thought about the slave trade I do not know but it is clear that the political flavour of her entertainments could not deviate too far from the views of the local elites who granted her licences or were otherwise involved in her professional survival. On his tour of Kent in 1790, John Byng, the author of *The Torrington Diaries*, referred to the newly erected theatre in Dover as a '..mischevious Play House' [35] which, I think, underlines the fact that the theatre was still looked upon with some suspicion by at least some sections of the community and Sarah had to be careful.

In Canterbury she took no chances at all and during election time in 1790, for example, her entertainments took on an explicitly political slant which reflected the views of her mentor, James Simmons, and his friends. As an alderman and former mayor Simmons was an influential and powerful presence in the city and the previous year had helped Sarah financially with the erection of her Orange Street Theatre.[36] In 1788 he had also established the Canterbury Bank in partnership with Henry Gipps. Henry's uncle, George Gipps, an old friend of Simmons and the M.P. for Canterbury since 1780, was also involved in this venture. As well as participating in local politics, Simmons was

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[33] *Kentish Gazette*, 10-13 November, 1789.
[34] Ibid., 12-18 January, 1790.
[35] C. Bryn Andrews (ed.), *The Torrington Diaries, 1781-1904* (London and New York, 1970), p.162.
[36] See Chapter 3 above 'Sarah Baker and her Theatres', pp. 86-87.

concerned, too, with politics at national level [37] and in 1781 and early 1782 had used the columns of his newspaper to attack the, then, prime minister Lord North's conduct of the American war and bolster support for the Rockingham Whigs. After North's resignation at the end of March 1782, Simmons' subsequent appointment by the new administration as Distributor of Stamps for east Kent was, in all probability, a reward for his earlier support.[38]

As well as the columns of his newspaper it appears that Simmons also regarded Sarah's new and legitimate theatre as a useful medium through which to promote his political interests and ideas, and those of his friends. This is clearly demonstrated by the performance that took place at Sarah's Orange Street theatre on the evening of 13 April 1790. On this occasion, Simmons' friend George Gipps and Sir John Honeywood, who were both seeking election as members of parliament for Canterbury, 'desired' a performance of Sheridan's *The Critic; or A Tragedy Rehearsed*.[39] Both these men were supporters of William Pitt's administration so their choice of *The Critic* with its disparaging allusions to the inept performance of North's administration during the American war and its very personal and satirical treatment of the individuals involved made it a highly suitable vehicle for their political views at election time.

Like a lot of the material that Sarah presented on her stages, this play was inherently ambiguous and could be adapted very easily to accommodate the personalities and issues of the day. One of the reasons for this was that Sheridan knew that under the terms of the Licensing Act all new plays were scrutinized by the Lord Chamberlain's office and had, therefore, been careful to include a pledge of loyalty to King and country in this work. *The Critic* also contained a 'play within a play, 'The Spanish Armada', which, because of the potent and symbolic images this conjured up had considerable propaganda value, and added to the ways in which it could be exploited and, I believe, used, on this occasion at least, for electioneering purposes.[40]

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[37] In 1806 Simmons was elected M.P. for Canterbury but died shortly afterwards. F. Panton, *Canterbury's Great Tycoon* (Canterbury, 1990), p.35.
[38] Panton, *Canterbury's Great Tycoon*, pp. 8, 18 & 22.
[39] *Kentish Gazette*, 9-13 April, 1790.
[40] See J. Loftis, *Sheridan and the Drama of Georgian England* (Oxford, 1976), pp..32-33 & 120-121.

One final point to be made here is the significance of the fact that Gipps and Honeywood regarded Sarah's theatre as a desirable and appropriate place in which to promote their political campaign. The provincial stage had for many years been regarded as a powerful, and potentially subversive, medium through which to deliver a political message, for which reason it had been banned altogether in 1737. By the time of the Canterbury election in 1790, however, Sarah's professional survival in the city was firmly dependent on a good relationship with the authorities there and, as a consequence, it was they who could now make use of the stage in order to promote their own agenda and ideas. As far as Gipps and Honeywood were concerned, it has to be assumed that this was an effective method of canvassing support as, in the ensuing election, both men were returned to parliament as members for Canterbury.[41]

Sarah's theatres had also long been used less formally by her patrons as places where they could give voice to their political allegiances and vent to their grievances. Russell describes how playhouses of the late eighteenth century constituted '... a site for the articulation of social and political tensions' and how this was encouraged by the 'socially encoded hierarchy of box pit and gallery'.[42] E.P. Thompson also draws attention to this phenomenon and states that from the early 1790s the provincial theatre was widely recognised as 'a forum in which ...opposed factions confronted each other'.[43] Theatres, were, in general, rowdy places but this was the norm and individual incidents were rarely reported in the press. Of the few known occasions when disturbances did take place in any of the Sarah's theatres, the military were always involved.

The cause of the first such incident, on 28 April 1783, [44] is unknown but a second incident, some years later in 1794, also involving Sarah's Rochester theatre, is better documented and provides further evidence that the military sometimes used the playhouse as a venue for 'performances' of their own. The riot of 1794 was clearly political in origin. In this instance members of the Royal Irish Artillery initiated the

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[41] *Kentish Gazette*, 22-25 June 1790.
[42] Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.16.
[43] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1982), p.808.
[44] Hugh Debbing, Colonel Commanding the Chatham Barracks, to the Mayor of Rochester, 1 May 1783. Guildhall Museum archive, Rochester.

trouble when they demanded that patrons should remove their hats in honour of the King. Similar incidents took place throughout the country during the 1790s as in Sheffield, for example, when 'the lower class of patrons of the upper gallery...threw printer's ink and bricks and stones at those loyal members of the audience in the pit who had participated in the singing of 'God Save the King' '.[45] Few episodes appear to have been as serious as the 1794 Rochester incident, however, when '...swords were drawn, many were wounded, an officer jailed, troops stormed the prison and firearms were discharged'.[46]

There was trouble, too, at Sarah's Maidstone theatre. Thomas Dibdin, in his *Reminisences*, describes one such occasion, on Easter Monday in 1797 as follows: 'Political party at that time ran very high in Maidstone; and a fierce dispute, amounting almost to a tumult, occured in the course of the evening, respecting an encore of "God save the King!" Lord Romney haranged the house; replies were made; when, in a low comedy frock, I was pushed on the stage by Mrs Baker, and with much humility, between joke and earnest, begged the audience, before they proceeded in their debate, to hear my "simple song"...'.[47]

In the autumn of 1798 there had been such serious problems in Rochester that Sarah's licence was refused by the local magistracy and her theatre threatened with closure. Sarah's response to the magistrates' decision had been to go, over their heads, directly to parliament with a petition for a royal patent for her Rochester theatre. This was an act of great boldness on her part which, if successful, would have effectively over-ruled any further attempts by the local magistrates to close her down.

Significantly, in her bid to stay open Sarah had the support of some powerful people whose influence and connections extended far beyond the bounds of the city of Rochester. Her petition was presented by Hiley Addington, whose brother, Henry, was at that time Speaker of the House of Commons and would become Prime Minister in

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[45] Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.16.
[46] J. Morris, *Taking the Town, a compleat and authentic account of Thespian activity in the County of Kent, 1737-1843* (Unpublished manuscript in the Theatre Museum, London), p.138.
[47] T. Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1 (1827), p.209.

1801.[48] Hiley enthusiastically supported Pitt's policy of war with France and had expressed the hope that it '...would be prosecuted till the security of this country, both internal and external, was fully ascertained'.[49] After the Petition was considered in Committee, the resulting Rochester Theatre Bill was brought in by Sir William Geary, County member for Kent, and was read for the first time on 21 December 1798. John Matthews was another influential figure who spoke up on her behalf as a witness in the House of Commons. Matthews, an alderman of the city, had also been mayor of Rochester in 1789 and 1792 and worked as 'Clerk of the Checque in the Victualling-Office at Chatham.[50] *The Universal Directory for Rochester* noted at that time that: 'This city, owing to its being in the vicinity of Chatham, feels the influence of the admiralty, dock-yard, custom-house, and revenue officers, too powerful to assert a claim to actual independence' [51] which indicates that Matthews, too, may well have had friends in high places.

Sarah's action resulted in a counter-petition being presented to the House of Commons on 31 January 1799 by the Rochester Corporation. In this they drew parliament's attention to the '...considerable Degree of Warmth and Exasperation' that remained in the minds of many persons in the city and the fact that the disturbances were not easily prevented by the civic authority and had not been '...quelled without considerable Difficulty and Danger'. They feared that to open the Theatre again at that particular Juncture would lead, once again, to '..the Violation of the Public Peace, and to the Injury of Individuals..'.[52]

This put a stop to the parliamentary progress of the Bill but a behind the scenes compromise meant that her Rochester theatre remained open. *The Times* reported this news on 24 May 1799 as follows: 'In consequence of a compromise between the contending parties, leave was given to withdraw the Rochester Theatre Bill.' The Meeting Day Book of the Rochester Corporation for 10 June 1799, noted tersely, that due to the Corporation's counter-petition '...Mrs Baker has thought proper to withdraw

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[48] *The Times*, 24 November, 1798.
[49] R.G. Thorne, *History of Parliament, 1790-1820,* Vol. 4 (London, 1986), p.47.
[50] *Kentish Gazette*, 9-13 October, 1789; Clive Wilkins-Jones (ed.), *The Universal British Directory 1793-1798,* Vol. 2 (Facsimilie Text Edition,Kings Lynn, 1993), p.656.
[51] Wilkins-Jones (ed.), *The Universal British Directory 1793-1798*, Vol. 4, Part 1, p.330.

the Bill...'. Sarah's version of events, conveyed in a letter from Thomas Younger to James Winston, was somewhat different in tone. Here it was maintained that as far as the Patent was concerned, she '...would no doubt have carried her point but while the matter was in agitation the Magistrates relented and permitted her to come provided she would withdraw the Bill. This She did and everything was accomodated...'.[53]

It is tempting to surmise that the reason that Sarah received such whole-hearted support in government circles for her Rochester petition in 1798 was that by this time she, through her theatres, was playing a significant role in generating support and enthusiasm for the government's war effort. Despite the temporary difficulties and dangers in Rochester, those at the highest level were determined, it seems, that, one way or another, this theatre should stay open and so it did.

Wartime entertainments

One of the ways in which Sarah attracted patrons to her theatres in the 1790s and thereafter, and, at the same time, endeared herself to the authorities, was by including a considerable amount of patriotic material in her shows. Her newspaper advertisements and extant playbills demonstrate that, from 1793 onwards, war was a recurring theme in her entertainments, particularly so until 1805 when fears of invasion receded. Although the record of performances is incomplete, the information that is available shows that plays or musical pieces concerning the navy or military often featured in her entertainments and re-enactments of famous sieges, battles and victories also became a regular staple in her repertoire.[54]

The theatre was a powerful medium through which to mediate the reality of war and, in the case of Sarah's theatres, this becomes even more evident at times of particular alarm such as during the period of the first Great Terror. This lasted from the autumn of 1797 until the spring of the following year when Napoleon's huge army was encamped on the Boulogne hills waiting for the moment to strike. In the months before the Terror began the entertainment presented in Sarah's Tunbridge Wells theatre had followed a similar

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[52] *Journals of the House of Commons*, Vol. 54, p.149.
[53] Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[54] See Appendix 1 below for these years.

pattern to that of the previous year. From September 1797, however, extant playbills demonstrate a dramatic change of mood. Not only did preoccupation with the war reach fever-pitch in terms of the material she presented but it was also fervently patriotic. For example, *The Times; Or a Fig for Invasion* (Being the Loyal Production of a British Officer in the Neighbourhood) was first presented on 13 September and then again by desire of Lt. Col. Stuart Wortley on 16 October. The Prologue to this piece was spoken by Jem Gardner, who played the part of all the heroes in Sarah's company,[55] in the character of 'a Volunteer of the Tunbridge Wells Troop'. Three nights later an epilogue was performed by Mrs. Dibdin in the character of 'a Kentish Yeoman' and *Harlequin's Invasion* was given on 30 September 'by desire' of Admiral Affleck. A scene representing '...a calm sea with a view of His Majesty's Ship Britannia, at Anchor' and a chorus of 'Rule Britannia' was also included in the programme. *Harlequin's Invasion* filled the bill on 30 September. On 23 October *The Boys of Britain; or A Fig for the French and the Dutch* was performed by Tom Dibdin under the patronage of His Royal Highness Prince Ernest Augustus and this was repeated on 28 October.[56]

A further example of the degree to which Sarah's theatres were actively involved in the propaganda of war concerns her response to the mutiny of the British navy at the Nore in the late spring of 1797, an episode that constituted one of the most dangerous and threatening periods of the whole war. Although the mutiny was suppressed by Volunteers and regular troops, considerable damage had been done to public morale because it had demonstrated how frighteningly dependent the country was on the loyalty of the navy for its security. On 11 October, the victory of the North Sea Fleet under Admiral Duncan's command at Camperdown provided the authorities with the opportunity to restore public confidence in the navy with a celebration of this success. Consequently, on 31 October, George III sailed down the river from Greenwich to review the fleet at the Nore in commemoration of the victory.

Only two days after this, the King's tribute to the fleet was celebrated at Sarah's Tunbridge Wells theatre with a performance of *The Royal Visit to the Nore.* Written and sung by Dibdin, this piece also paid tribute to Duncan's naval triumph and, as the

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[55] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. I, p.98.

playbill boasts, was 'accompanied with a scenic representation of the Grand Fleet and the Dutch Prizes'.[57] The speed with which this performance followed the event it commemorated indicates that Sarah's initiative and ability to exploit 'the news' were not the only considerations involved here. It is also worth noting that the actual review at the Nore had failed to take place due to bad weather.[58] In the circumstances it is not unreasonable, I think, to conclude that this performance could even have been part of a centrally orchestrated campaign. This view is encouraged by the fact that on 9 November, a week after the performance at Sarah's theatre, the same event was commemorated at the Drury Lane Theatre with a first performance of Andrew Franklin's *A Trip to the Nore* which Russell describes as , '...directed towards the enhancement of patriotic values'.[59]

Despite Duncan's victory, Napoleon's army remained on the Boulogne hills and the 'Great Terror' continued into the new year. On 1 March 1798, Dibdin's 'new grand spectacle in one Act', *War and Peace* , advertised as 'Calculated to display the united firmness of the Country in opposing the Common Enemy ...' was performed at Sarah's Canterbury theatre. The scenery included 'An exact View of the King's Barracks', 'A grand Picturesque Scene of the Cavern of War' decorated with military trophies, 'Transparent Representations of a Beseiged Town on Fire' and 'A Sea Fight'.[60]

By 1800 extant playbills show that pieces such as Sheridan's *Pizarro*, which, like *The Critic*, also contained a patriotic pledge of loyalty to King and country, were frequently performed at Sarah's Tunbridge Wells theatre and there were continued references to the military and the navy, although these seem to have been less overtly jingoistic than in the autumn of 1797. The record is far from complete for 1801 but the evidence that does exist demonstrates a continuing pre-occupation with the war. For example, on 15 and 28 October 1801, Sarah's benefit night, a Mrs. Askey appeared as Britannia and Dibdin's new musical interlude *The Naval Pillar* was performed, with a 'Representation of the Pillar to be erected in honour of our Naval Commanders'. The prospect of peace

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[56] Playbills in the Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum.
[57] Playbill in Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells, for 2 November, 1797.
[58] *The Times*, 1 November, 1797, referred to by Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.64.
[59] Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.65.
[60] Playbill in Harvard Theatre Collection.

was also in the air at this time and the evening concluded with *An Ode on the Return of Peace*.[61]

Early in 1802 the Peace of Amiens was signed which gave approximately a year's respite from the fighting. Little over a year later Simmons' *Kentish Gazette* carried reports of the imminence of renewed hostilities and, in the same edition, also published the prologue to Dibdin's new patriotic play *John Bull; or An Englishman's Fireside*. The following August, with the renewed outbreak of hostilities now inevitable an advertisement in the *Kentish Gazette* shows that this was the play Sarah's company would be performing on the first night at her Canterbury theatre during race week.[62]

The part that Thomas Dibdin played in Sarah's company is of particular interest as by the time he rejoined her for an eighteen month engagement on 14 October 1797, a critical stage in the war, he was already renowned as a writer and singer of patriotic and nautical pieces.[63] From this point, throughout the years of war with France, his work played a prominent role in Sarah's repertoire. As an eighteen year old he had originally joined Sarah's company for a season in 1789-90 and five years later, on 19 September 1795, his first big London success, a burletta called *Rival Loyalists, or, Shelah's Choice*, was presented by Sarah at her Tunbridge Wells theatre. Although he was employed at Sadler's Wells for three years from early 1794,[64] a playbill in the Harvard Theatre Collection shows that he was also performing some of his own material at Sarah's Canterbury theatre on 20 February 1796.

It was also while working for Sarah at Canterbury in early 1797 that Dibdin received a commission to write a piece for his former employers at Sadler's Wells.[65] This was to be called *The British Raft* . '...in ridicule', as he explained, 'of the grand Gallic machine of that description which we were told was preparing to transport troops from France,

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[61] Playbills in Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells.
[62] *Kentish Gazette*, 11 March & 19 August, 1803.
[63] Playbill in Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells; Norma Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker (1736/37-1816) "Governess General of the Kentish Drama" ', in *Studies in English Theatre History in Memory of Gabrielle Enthoven, O.B.E.* (London, 1952), p.76.
[64] D. Arundel, *The Story of Sadler's Wells* (London, 1965), p.53.
[65] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1., p.196.

for the invasion of this country'.[66] A song from this piece, '*The Snug Little Island*' became an enormous nationwide 'hit'. Among his other war time triumphs was *Mouth of the Nile* which re-enacted Nelson's victory over the French fleet at Aboukir Bay in 1798. He was still involved with Sarah's company as late as August 1814 when a playbill shows that he had written two songs, *Emperors, Kings, Heroes, or Rare Doings in London* and *The Wonders of 1814*, 'expressly' for Sarah's sixteen year old grandson, Henry Dowton.[67]

As a popular and well known exponent of the patriotic song, the fact that Dibdin's re-appearance in Sarah's company coincided with the start of the first Great Terror is, I believe, of more than a little significance. This is because there were concerns about the loyalty of the people of Kent to the government's policy of war at this time and they were doing everything they could to boost morale. In this context the value of the patriotic song was widely acknowledged, to the extent that it was not unknown for bundles of such songs to be delivered at the door of a theatre, free of any charge, but accompanied by '...polite requests from persons of consequence..' that they should be sung during the course of the evening's entertainment.[68] In the same way, Dibdin related how Richard Cumberland, the dramatist and former Secretary to the Board of Trade had once made him a present of a farce he had written satirizing 'the absurdity of the red-hot French ideas of equality'. But 'even during the peculiar time it was written for', Dibdin commented, 'its success on the stage ...would have been very doubtful'.[69]

There were no such doubts about the efficacy of his own work, however, nor that of his father, Charles Dibdin the elder, who was described as '...the most notable exponent of the patriotic nautical song'.[70] Although Tom Dibdin noted that, while in Kent in 1797-98, he received 'constant invitations from most of the respectable families' and also referred to the friendships he made with members of parliament, mayors and various aristocrats in all the towns where he played with Sarah's company at this time,[71] there is

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[66] Ibid., p.208.
[67] Playbill in Harvard Theatre Collection.
[68] 'Henry Lee, Memoirs of a Manager; or Life's Stage with New Scenery', Vol. 2 (Taunton, 1830), p.12, quoted by Russell, *Theatres of War*, p. 101.
[69] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. I, p.444.
[70] Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.101.
[71] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. I., p.203.

no record that he received any formal acknowledgment from the government for his work. His father, on the other hand, received a government annuity of £200 in recognition of his work to '...keep up the national feeling against the French'[72] and upon his death in 1814 a statue was erected at the Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich. This was paid for by a subscription dinner at which the Duke of Clarence was the principal guest.[73]

Trouble in Kent

As well as including considerable amounts of patriotic material in her shows Sarah was also closely involved with the Volunteer Force. Ostensibly, the main purpose of the Volunteers who were authorized by the government in 1794, was to supplement the militia and deal with both internal and external threats of subversion. But Pitt and his ministry faced considerable difficulties in the 1790s in generating a consensus in this country for their policy of war with France and it has been suggested that the primary significance of the Volunteer Force was as an instrument of government propaganda to boost enthusiasm and support for the war effort.[74]

Before elaborating further on Sarah's relationship with the Volunteers I will first assess the nature and extent of the problems that confronted Pitt in the 1790s, especially as far as Kent was concerned. Much has been made by some historians of the unrest and potential for violent revolution elsewhere in the country during the 1790s so that it could easily be assumed that, apart from London, the south escaped these troubles altogether.[75] This was not necessarily the case, for evidence exists that reveals the government also had cause to be concerned about the loyalty of the people of Kent. This evidence, I suggest, puts Sarah's contribution to the war effort into perspective

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[72] George Hogarth, 'The Songs of Charles Dibdin', Vol. 2 (London, 1848), p.383, quoted by Scot Hughes Myerly, *British Military Spectacle* (London, 1996), p.157.
[73] Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.101.
[74] See J.R. Western, 'The Volunteer Movement as an Anti-Revolutionary Force, 1793-1801', *English Historical Review* Vol. 281 (October, 1956) pp. 603-614; H.T. Dickinson, 'Popular Loyalism in Britain in the 1790s', in E. Hellmuth (ed.), *The Transformation of Political Culture* (Oxford, 1990) pp. 503-533; J.E. Cookson, 'The English Volunteer Movement of the French Wars, 1793-1815: Some Contexts', *Historical Journal,* Vol. 32, No. 4 (1989) pp. 867-891; Russell, *Theatres of War*, especially pp.13-14.
[75] For example, Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class.*

and adds to the theory that her theatres played a key role in generating support and enthusiasm in the county for the *status quo* and for Pitt's policy of war with France.

In 1793 this country was ill prepared for war with such a seemingly formidable enemy as revolutionary France, whose armies presented a far greater threat than those of the *ancien régime* had ever done. At the end of the American war ten years previously, the size of the regular army in this country had been rapidly reduced with the result that it was now desperately short of men. To find new recruits for the army and the navy proved a difficult and ongoing concern, exacerbated by the suspicions of the populace at large that a standing army was no more than a tool of government tyranny. To add to the problems, the influence and ideology of the American War and of the French Revolution meant that the nature of this war was very different to that of preceding eighteenth-century wars. Britain now faced a 'people's army', an enemy, moreover, fighting for ideological principles and who believed in 'the unity of the republic and the hatred of kings'.[76] In his *History of Kent*, H.F. Abell noted how preoccupied people had been in the 1770s and 1780s with the American war and remarked '.... how general the feeling was against it, especially in Kent'.[77] In 1793 many in this country also had considerable sympathy with the revolutionary ideals of the new French government and condemned Pitt for allying with a confederation of absolute monarchs in Europe.

The French Revolution had also inspired a new generation of radical societies in this country which caused considerable fears in government circles that revolution was a very real possibility here too. The debate as to how well organized, dangerous or subversive these societies were began in the eighteenth century and has continued ever since.[78] The Committee of Secrecy's reports to parliament in the 1790s refer only briefly, with the exception of London, to the existence of radical societies in 'south Britain',[79] and research has largely been confined to the capital and the north. Despite this, it has to be noted that one of the most dangerously subversive events of the entire war, the Nore mutiny, took place at Sheerness in 1797. Other evidence also exists to show that Kent was far from immune to 'seditious' influences and that Pitt's government certainly

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[76] From the decree of the *levée en masse*, August 1793, quoted by Emsley, *British Society*, p.3.
[77] H.F. Abell, *History of Kent* (Ashford, 1898), p.278.
[78] See, for example, Wells, *Insurrection*; Dickinson, 'Popular Loyalism in Britain'.

perceived the possibility of revolution as a very real menace and took steps here, as elsewhere, to eradicate the threat this posed.

As a 'front line' county, Kent could justifiably be regarded as particularly vulnerable to attempts by the French Convention to foment revolution in this country. As early as October 1789 the *Kentish Gazette* reported that French emigrés in the county were already '...so numerous they are to be met with in every public place'.[80] By 1792 there were fears that among them were saboteurs and spies and the Bow Street Police were sent to investigate the situation in many Kentish towns between the coast and London.[81]

That year, too, Pitt initiated a programme of what many regarded as a decade of repressive legislation in an increasingly determined attempt to undermine the influence of the radicals and stifle any hint of rebellion or sedition and, in Maidstone, a wheelwright and a carpenter received heavy prison sentences for proclaiming: 'success to Tom Paine and his *Rights of Man* ...and damn the West Kent and all your officers, and damn your King and constitution, your constitution is not worth a damn'.[82] Pitt's heavy handed approach proved highly contentious and unpopular in some sections of the community in Kent. For example, following the acquittal of some London radicals for treason in late 1794, more than a hundred of Maidstone's 'respectable classes' drank anti-government and radical toasts at a Celebration dinner in the town [83] while in 1795 petitions against the government's 'Bill for more effectually preventing seditious meetings and assemblies' were sent to parliament by the 'Mayor etc. of the City of Rochester and Parts adjacent' and, also, 'the Freemen and Citizens of the ancient city of Canterbury'. [84]

Two opposing petitions were sent from Maidstone on 24 November 1795 which give some idea of the intensity of feeling and potential for trouble in the town at that time. The first was from the 'loyal inhabitants' who were in favour of the Bill and deplored

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[79] *Journals of the House of Commons*, Vol. 49, p.671.
[80] *Kentish Gazette*, 23-27 October, 1789.
[81] Emsley, *British Society*, p.15.
[82] Maidstone Borough Quarter Sessions Records,1793, Md/JQr4, quoted by P. Clark & L. Murfin, *The History of Maidstone: The making of a Modern County Town* (Maidstone, 1995), p.102.
[83] Ibid., p.102.
[84] *General Index to the Journals of the House of Commons*, Vols.46-55, 1790-1801, 'Sedition'.

'...the factious and Republican Spirit which has gone abroad amongst a Part of His Majesty's subjects'. This petition placed the blame for '...a variety of disorderly Proceedings.. [on]..the influence of certain Political Meetings in which the greatest Efforts are made, by artful and wicked Men, to sow the Seeds of Discontent and Disaffection...'. The second petition, this one from 'the inhabitants' of the town, condemned the Bill declaring that, '...whenever Symptoms of Inquietude may have appeared, they solely originated in the real Distress to which the present calamitous War has reduced the Country...'.[85] These two petitions add to the evidence that, at least from the early 1790s, there was a lively radical, anti-war element in the town which caused considerable concern to 'loyal' members of the establishment.

Included in this group was Maidstone's M.P. Clement Taylor, the paper manufacturer, who opposed the war with France and also voted against the government's anti-sedition laws in 1795.[86] In 1796, he and another leading paper- maker, James Smythe, welcomed John Gale Jones, a leading reform spokesman and delegate from the London Corresponding Society, to the town where he addressed several meetings. During the visit it was resolved to establish, or re-establish, the Maidstone Corresponding Society and sixty new members were enlisted to the cause. Gale Jones was arrested for sedition at Warwick in April 1797, while in June, another delegate from the London Society, Henry Fellowes, was arrested in Maidstone on the grounds that he had incited soldiers in the town to mutiny. Fellowes had been caught distributing handbills to the military and, it transpired, had written to London requesting further bills, including material especially designed for distribution to Irish soldiers. The Nore mutiny had only been put down a few days previously and, in reaction to these events, in July, two further Acts were passed which imposed the death penalty for illegal oaths and for attempts to seduce the armed forces from their duty and allegiance.[87]

In May 1798, the Ministry's worries that Irish rebels were plotting with French Revolutionary forces to overthrow the British Government erupted in Kent with the trial

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[85] Ibid.
[86] Thorne, *History of Parliament*, Vol. 4, p.338.
[87] Philip MacDougall (ed.), *A Political Tour through Rochester, Chatham, Maidstone, Gravesend, &c. By John Gale Jones* (First published 1796: Rochester, 1997), pp.36-38; Clark & Murfin, *History of Maidstone*, p.102; Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p.185.

at Maidstone of five Irishmen, including Arthur O'Connor, proprietor of a Dublin newspaper, and Father James O'Coigley, on charges of high treason. It is tempting to surmise that because it was decided that this high profile trial should take place in Maidstone rather than in London where they had been imprisoned in the Tower on charges of high treason,[88] that it was, in fact, a show trial staged to make an example of these five men and bring radical elements in the area into line. Described as 'one of the most remarkable trials ever held...' in the county [89] the event attracted tremendous national interest especially as Charles James Fox, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Charles Grey all spoke up as character witnesses in O'Connor's favour. Many other leading Whigs, both peers and commoners, were also present 'as friends of O'Connor'. 'Never before', commented JM Russell, 'had the Town Hall ...held within its walls at one time such a muster of eminent men'. [90]

There was also much support for O'Connor among the people of Kent who believed that the prosecution was misplaced. William Twopeny of Rochester, who served O'Connor with the warrant for his arrest, feared for his life for many weeks after and took to carrying a loaded pistol in his pocket. Fearful of trouble, the authorities called out the Maidstone Volunteers to guard the entrance to the town hall for the duration of the trial. Eventually, O'Connor was acquitted but, on 7 June, O'Coigley, escorted by a company of the Maidstone Volunteers, was taken to Penenden Heath and hanged.[91]

Compounding all this and adding to Pitt's worries was the suffering caused by two famines that affected the whole country. The first of these in 1794-6 lasted for eighteen months and the second in 1800-01 for twenty-two months. [92] In Kent, food shortages led to trouble in many of the towns where Sarah built her theatres. The winter of 1795 was also extremely cold, bread prices were quite high and many men were out of work because of the snow. In Canterbury, a fund was set up by the Cathedral to give tickets

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[88] Russell, *History of Maidstone*, p.294.
[89] Wilkins-Jones, *Kent: The Principal People...*, Vol. 1, p.79.
[90] Russell, *History of Maidstone*, p.295. Fortunately for Sarah, her new Maidstone theatre had opened only the previous month (see Chapter 3 above, 'Sarah Baker and her Theatres', pp.91-94) and many of these distinguished visitors attended her theatre after the day's proceedings were finished. See Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1, pp.212-213.
[91] Wilkins-Jones, *Kent: The Principal People...*, Vol. 1, p.79; Russell, *History of Maidstone*, p.294.
[92] Wells, *Wretched Faces*, p.2.

for bread and flour. Over £500 was dispersed in four weeks and in all about 2,500 men, women and children were relieved each week in this way.[93] On 28 March 1795, the local militia rioted in the City as they could not afford to pay the prices asked by butchers and bakers for meat and bread. On this occasion the City Volunteers took up arms and the Mayor sent to Dover for assistance from the regular army. Butchers had also been the target of discontent at Chatham the previous week when shipwrights had been the primary participants in the ensuing riot. They had been joined in their protests by the locally based Middlesex Militia who were immediately withdrawn from the area and replaced by the East Norfolk Militia. On 19 September 1800, rioting in towns to the south of the Thames estuary commenced with 'a massive demonstration' at Rochester followed, the next night, by trouble in Sheerness, Canterbury and Deal. No region was entirely unaffected by the September riots that year. Margate and Sandwich witnessed protests on the twenty-second and even the inhabitants of Tunbridge Wells rose up to put an end to secretive dealing in the market room of one of the towns inns.[94] Maidstone, too, did not escape the trouble and in July 1804 there were riots in the town due to dearness of provisions. Consequently, twenty-four officers and more than 300 rank and file of the Yeomanry Cavalry of Kent were on permanent duty in the town for 12 days in an attempt to keep the problem under control. A bill for this duty, of £535 14s 6d,was submitted by the corps to the War Office on 30 November 1805 and eventually paid in August 1810.[95]

Further evidence that these were troubled times for the county is contained in the words of an 'Address to the Volunteers' written by 'Major' Richard Cumberland, who in 1800 had been appointed Commanding Officer of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Volunteer Troop. This address was given as part of a performance 'desired' by the Volunteer Companies of Infantry at Sarah's theatre in the town on 7 October 1801. The troop had been embodied some six years previously and, in blank verse, Cumberland paid tribute to his men and claimed that, in the unlikely event the French had escaped Nelson's 'death-doing hand' and reached English shores, the Volunteers would have been victorious.

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[93] F. H. Panton, *Finances and Government of Canterbury, Eighteenth to Mid Nineteenth Century* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1998), p.142.
[94] MacDougal, *A Political Tour*, p.vi; Wells, *Wretched Faces*, pp.131, 180 & 145.
[95] Rhodes, *Our Local Scrapbook*, p.35.

There had, of course, been no invasion and, as the 'Address' went on to make clear, it seems that any real trouble they had faced had arisen at home. In Cumberland's words:

> In the hour of distress you stood firm for the law
> And kept the mad spirit of Plunder in awe;
> When fierce hunger attacked what the Farmer had stor'd,
> Though yourselves felt the want, you protected his hoard;
> When the rabble broke loose, and the thundering drum
> Beat to arms, and cried - Come, come away, my hearts come
> At the word to Fall in, high waving in air,
> The gay-plum'd Volunteer to his post would repair;
> Firmly shouldered his musquet, full furnished his pouch,
> With his heart like his flint, that gives fire at the touch;
> Sedition look'd on, and appall'd at the sight,
> Slunk off, like a thief, in the shades of the night,
> Him time shall record as Old England's best friend,
> Till Old England herself and Old Time have an end. [96]

Soaring food prices and unprecedented tax increases also hit those higher up the social scale and there is considerable evidence of disillusion and opposition to the war even among the 'middling sort' in Kent. They, too, were a target for propaganda by those opposed to Pitt and the war, an example of which is a 'letter' from a Mr. W. Austin, a farmer in West Kent to his friend Tom. Tom had, supposedly, written to him hoping that he would give his vote at the forthcoming County election to a Pittite candidate. In his reply written on 1 June 1796 Austin, in a bitter attack on the war effort, set out his reasons for his 'desertion of the Good Cause'. In a swingeing attack on Pitt and his policies he continued, 'As to myself Tom, I am heartily sick of the war. I find I pay twice as much taxes as I did before it began and am likely to pay as much more before it is ended.... As to Mr Pitt, I certainly was at first attached to his ministry, from his avowed principles, and professed determination, to reform Parliament; and a number of other fair promises, not one of which he has performed.' His vote would go, he continues, not to the Pittite candidate but to a man who '...has shewn a steady aversion ...to the war - to the partial taxes - and in fact to all those measures that have brought all the poor farmers to their present distress. ..The great men may drive their tenants and dependants, but I pride myself upon being one who is not to be biased by their threats or

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[96] Document dated 1801 in Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum.

cajoled by their Entertainments...' He concludes with the words, '...wishing you better Times'.[97]

The impact of this sort of propaganda is unclear but it certainly brings up all sorts of issues that must have been the concern of enfranchised members of the community at election time in 1796. An indication that feeling was running against Pitt in the county that year is that both George Gipps and John Honywood, who had patronized Sarah's theatre during their successful election campaign at Canterbury in 1790, were defeated at their first attempt in 1796. This election was voided and despite a second defeat, both men were eventually seated on petition.[98] That wealthier sections of the community reacted so fiercely against Honeywood and Gipps in 1796 further indicates the seriousness of the situation which faced the government.

In Kent, as elsewhere, there were also many who defended the government's policy of war with France as both 'just and necessary' and regarded the radicals and their ideas as dangerously subversive. Reaction against the French Revolution had been initiated by Edmund Burke with his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* which first appeared in November 1790. His treatise had been aimed at an intellectual readership and it was not until late 1792-3, when war with France had become an inevitability, that counter-revolutionary pamphlets, broadsheets and ballads, targeted at a wider public, began to appear in great numbers.[99]

Although much is made of the fact that the radical press gained in strength at this period, many provincial newspapers were, in fact, owned by independent middle class 'conservatives' who also did much to promote the establishment cause. In Canterbury, James Simmons fought hard through the pages of the *Kentish Gazette* to combat the radical 'threat', blaming, for example, the translation into Irish of Paine's *Rights of Man* and *Age of Reason* for '..all the murder, massacres and assassinations which now

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[97] 'A letter from a farmer in West Kent to a Farmer in East Kent', the Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum.
[98] Thorne, *History of Parliament*, p.222.
[99] R. Hole, 'British Counter-revolutionary Popular Propaganda in the 1790s', in C. Jones (ed.), *Britain and Revolutionary France: Conflict, Subversion and Propaganda* (Exeter, 1983), p.53.

convulse that unfortunate Country'.[100] Newspapers, like the *Kentish Gazette,* also played a leading propaganda role in generating support for the government's war policy by publishing numerous articles drawing the attention of readers to the horrors awaiting them if they did not stand up and fight in the case of a French invasion. They also gave wide publicity to the voluntary funds set up to finance the war effort and detailed accounts of those who contributed to these funds.

It is clear that Pitt and his ministry enjoyed a considerable degree of support among some sections of the community but the problem was that this was characterized by a total lack of coordination or control. From the early 1790s, therefore, the government were already making conscious efforts to cultivate their existing 'grassroots' support through the encouragement of loyalist organizations. The first of these was John Reeves' Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, founded in November 1792 and, subsequently, a great many such organizations were set up. In Rochester, approximately 3,000 people turned up at the Association's first meeting in the city [101] which must have further discouraged and undermined the impact of any radicals in the neighbourhood.

The Loyalist Associations were also behind the publication of many anti-radical and counter-revolutionary pamphlets. In Maidstone, for example, the Mayor distributed 6,000 copies of Association tracts in the town and more than 1,000 in the surrounding countryside.[102] Cartoons were also considered an effective weapon against the radicals and work was commissioned by the Association from Isaac Cruickshank, Thomas Rowlandson and James Gillray who, for example, executed an unflattering caricature of John Gale Jones addressing a meeting at Copenhagen Fields in November 1795 with the 'Resolutions of the London Corresponding Society' in his hands.[103]

At this point it is important to note that despite the impact of pamphlets and the press, Robert Hole has found that: 'In the early years of the Revolution, and indeed throughout

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[100] *Kentish Gazette*, 2 February, 1798.
[101] Dickinson, 'Popular Loyalism in Britain...', p.520.
[102] Ibid., p.528.
[103] H.T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution 1789-1815* (Oxford, 1985), p.31 & MacDougall (ed.), *A Political Tour*, Illustration No. 5.

the 1790s, much, perhaps most, propaganda in Britain took an oral form'.[104] This is a significant statement when applied to Sarah's activities at this time and adds further credibility to the claim that her theatres had a key role to play in promoting the establishment cause.

Sarah and the Volunteers

As well as their efforts to counteract radicalism the Loyalist Associations also stood the government in good stead when it came to creating a consensus and enthusiasm for the war with France. This was because the Volunteer Force was, in many cases, based on existing loyalist organizations. The first recruits were raised with considerable rapidity because a clause in the Act of 1794 exempted them from service in the Militia.[105] In Kent, Alfred Rhodes described how a '...vast citizen army sprang into existence' in the first six months of the movement's existence and recorded that '...in every town there were several corps, and even remote villages furnished squads of Armed Associations'. The Government had asked for 4,633 volunteers from the county but, according to Rhodes, 18,996 actually responded to the call and he described how: 'Country squires and local magnates curvetted in cocked hats in command of their tenants and workmen, [and] ladies embroidered colours which were presented amidst grand ceremonials...'.[106]

Although a complete record of performances in Sarah's theatres does not exist it is clear that from 1795 the patronage of the Volunteers and other military organizations constituted an important and regular feature at all of her theatres. In Canterbury, for example, the East Kent Volunteers, the Canterbury Volunteers, the East Kent Yeomanry and the Canterbury Yeomanry all lent their names to performances. The scale of their involvement with her theatre in 1795 can be gauged from Sarah's advertisements which show that of the six known performances claiming patronage that year, five were by the military. In 1796, one of the three publicly patronized performances was by the military while in 1797 five of the nine performances were

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[104] Hole, 'British Counter-revolutionary Popular Propaganda...', p.53.
[105] J. Fortescue, *History of the British Army*, Vol. 4, Part 1 (London, 1915), p.218.
[106] Rhodes, *Our Local Scrapbook*, p.34.

publicly advertised as 'by desire' of one or other of the military units in the area.[107] It is more than likely that the total number of performances 'by desire' of the Volunteers is somewhat higher than these figures suggest as Sarah did not always advertise her entertainments in the press. The Volunteers were also in evidence at her theatre in Maidstone. On Easter Monday 1797, for example, Thomas Dibdin described how the season commenced with a performance patronized by the town's Volunteers.[108]

The large number of playbills that still exist for the Tunbridge Wells theatre for the years 1795, 1796, 1797, 1800 and 1801, provide a good deal of information about the extent to which the Volunteers were increasingly involved with this theatre and also give an idea of the sort of entertainments with which they chose to associate themselves. From this source, it appears that in 1795, only one of eight publicly patronized performances was by desire of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Volunteer Troop. The following year, four of the twenty-five named patrons, had obvious military connections. Of these, the Royal Tunbridge Wells Volunteer Troop and Richard Cumberland's wife 'desired' performances on 7 and 28 September respectively. As wartime anxieties escalated in the autumn of 1797 and Sarah's entertainments took on an increasingly jingoistic and patriotic mien, the Volunteers also strengthened their ties with this theatre. On 13 September, Viscountess Boyne, whose husband, Lord Boyne, commanded the Tunbridge Wells Yeomanry, lent her name to a performance and, that year, seven of the twenty-four extant playbills show that performances were 'by desire' of either the Volunteers or the military.[109]

It has also emerged from this study that, in addition to her formal relationship with the Volunteers, Sarah, her family and company members also had a close personal involvement. At least one of her company, Thomas Younger, was himself a Volunteer. In November 1803 he had written to James Winston from Maidstone where he was performing, telling him, '..I am very busy at present as I have fourteen days Soldiering (Volunteering) to go thro!'[110] He had probably been a Volunteer for some time as, two

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[107] Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.16.
[108] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, p.209.
[109] Playbills in the Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum; A Savidge, *Royal Tunbridge Wells*, p.107; See also Appendix I below.
[110] Younger to Winston, 22 November, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist Collection, Birmingham.

years before this, the Tunbridge Wells Volunteers had given their public support to his benefit night on 24 October 1801. As they occasionally patronized other members of her company, it is likely that Younger was not the only Volunteer in Sarah's company.

Sarah also had close links with the Volunteers at Rochester. Following the Peace of Amiens the city's two companies of Volunteer Infantry were disbanded and 4 June 1802, the King's birthday, '...paraded through the town, fired three volleys on Rochester Bridge then marched to the Bull where they gave up their arms after which all ranks sat down to a supper provided by the officers'. Among this group was the man who took over as Captain of one of the two companies of the Rochester Volunteer Infantry that reformed when hostilities were resumed in 1803. His name was William Blythman Blenkinsopp and in 1815 he figures as one of the two executors named in Sarah's will. In this document he is described as a painter and his fellow executor, Samuel Sidden, as a builder and both were left mourning rings by Sarah to the value of ten guineas each.[111]

In Tunbridge Wells, too, Sarah had a close relationship with the Volunteers through her friendship with the well-known dramatist Richard Cumberland who was Commanding Officer of the Tunbridge Wells Troop of Volunteer Infantry. Cumberland often supervised the production of his own plays in Sarah's theatres and his works such as *The West Indian* (1771), *The Jew* (1794) and *The Wheel of Fortune* (1795) became a regular feature of her repertoire. During the war years he also wrote material with a particularly patriotic flavour for performance by one or other of Sarah's family or company on the evenings when his troop patronized a performance. On 7 October 1801, for example a performance of Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) was followed by Cumberland's 'An Address to the Volunteers' and 'A Volunteer Song'. The evening concluded with a piece entitled *The Deserter*.[112]

The central role of Sarah's theatre to the pageantry and promotion of the Volunteer movement is again confirmed by the fact that it was at her theatre in the town that the Tunbridge Wells Volunteer Infantry gave up their arms on 20 September 1802 when

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[111] Rhodes, *Our Local Scrapbook*, p.41; Chapter 3 above 'Sarah Baker and her theatres', (Ore); Sarah Baker's Will, Ref. No. Prob. 11/1582, Family Records Centre, Myddleton Street, London.
[112] Playbills, Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum. See also Appendix I.

they were temporarily disbanded. In this instance, Sarah's daughter, Sally Dowton played a central role in the ceremony as she delivered the address, written this time by Cumberland's friend and associate, Sir James Bland Burges. Again, the Volunteers' key role on the home front is stressed in the following words:

> 'When stern invaders hover'd on our coast,
> When Europe echoed with their savage boast,
> When home-bred traitors England's safety shook,
> In our defence their patriot arms they took.'[113]

The appeal of the Volunteers lay in their theatricality. As both Colley and Russell have found, this had an important role to play in Georgian society at large. The authority of the King, for example, was increasingly sustained in the public eye by the pageantry of state occasions. The service of thanksgiving at St Paul's following his recovery from illness in April 1789 was, in essence, a 'performance', engineered to demonstrate in a very public fashion that the King was alive and well and in control. Similarly, in December 1797, George III processed in state through London to give thanks at St. Paul's for British naval victories over the Dutch, French and Spanish fleets.[114]

Pageantry and show were also important elements of life in the provinces. For instance, in Faversham on 5 May 1790, everybody, from the Mayor, the Jurats and Common Council in their gowns, the vicar, constables with staves, two serjeants at mace, the children from the two charity schools and many others turned out to march in procession through the town to the accompaniment of the band of music of the Chatham division of marines and the ringing of the bells of the Church. This was to celebrate the laying of the first stone of a new pavement.[115]

Theatricality also mediated the way most people perceived the army and the navy. The spectacle of war had long been immensely popular, and dramatic military displays were frequently staged, especially at times of particular crisis. Since August 1778, when France entered the American war, Britain's new sense of vulnerability had resulted in a series of military camps being established in the south of England. These effectively

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[113] Document dated 1802, Sprange Collection, Tunbride Wells Museum.
[114] Colley, *Britons*, pp. 215-216; Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.17.
[115] *Kentish Gazette*, 7-11 May, 1790.

constituted public entertainment on a large scale and had a significant impact on attendance at both the London and provincial theatres that summer. The largest of these camps was at Coxheath near Maidstone where 17,000 soldiers were assembled in order to undertake 'large scale manoeuvres in imitation of the conditions of a real war'. The camps were remarkable for their visibility and were a huge attraction to the general public. The *Morning Post* even advertised guided tours to Coxheath and also included, among other places, the camps at Tunbridge Wells and at Maidstone.[116]

During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, there was a real craze for this sort of thing and a contemporary described how, in those years, the parade and review 'formed the staple of men's talk and thoughts' across the country.[117] In Kent on 21 April 1797 over 5,000 persons assembled in Cobham Park on the occasion of the presentation of colours by Lady Darnley to the troop of Cavalry and similar ceremonials also took place there on 9 June and 10 November that year.[118] A massive review was also held at Mote Park near Maidstone in 1799 where the Kent Volunteers were reviewed on 1 August by the King. With the re-commencement of hostilities in 1803 the *Kentish Gazette* of 18 October described how '..an immense concourse of spectators ..among whom was an assemblage of the most beautiful women' attended a grand field day at Shornecliff Camp on 13 October to witness a mock battle during which 'brisk fire was kept up for a considerable time'. The 'grand military scene' this presented was described as '...not only pleasing, but sublime and highly interesting.'

Despite this, the army was widely regarded with considerably more suspicion by the general public than was the navy. This was in some part because the army had no equivalent of one of the most important theatrical constructs of the eighteenth century, that of 'Jolly Jack Tar'. Jack Tar was enormously popular at all levels of society and was usually represented as down to earth, fond of his drink, of women and of song but, also, honest and loyal to his ship, his country and his king. J.S. Bratton describes how the generic figure of Jack Tar was: '..as recognizable as a king in his uniform, and as distinctive in his known attributes'. She continues that: '...stepping on stage he

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[116] 'Morning Post', 16 July 1778, referred to by Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.35.
[117] Myerly, *British Military Spectacle*, p.140.
[118] Rhodes, *Our Local Scrapbook*, p.35.

carried with him a large statement of intent and many interwoven meanings, before he so much as moved or spoke.'[119] Jack Tar's potency, Bratton demonstrates, was still as relevant at the end of the nineteenth century when the figure, '...was used to engage with central issues in the negotiation of imperialist and domestic ideology' as it had been during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars.[120] Russell, too, argues that, in the late eighteenth century, the appeal of Jack Tar helped allay the public's fears of the navy and served as a form of social control in that it reinforced the image of 'how a sailor should be', both in the mind of the sailor himself, and in the eyes of the populace at large. Through this means, any widespread doubts about the navy's loyalty and reliability could be contained.[121] Russell further suggests that 'Jolly Jack Tar' was also a useful, and safe, 'locus of patriotic identity ....morally superior to his betters but always malleable and unquestioning' and, moreover, one with which the 'lower orders' were able to identify. [122]

The Volunteer was also a highly successful theatrical construct. The colourful uniform, the music and the ceremonial together constituted the very epitome of what it was to be a soldier and fight in a war. The Volunteers provided a powerful image and therefore served a useful purpose in terms of recruitment, morale and loyalty to the crown. Furthermore, with the advent of the Volunteer force, any man could now act out the part of a soldier and this was particularly attractive to the urban middling sort, although thousands of poorer men also joined their ranks especially when the Volunteers were re-embodied in 1803.

Sarah's crucial involvement with the Volunteers was that her theatres provided a public forum for their activities and the ideals they represented right at the heart of the local urban community. Her theatres, popular with the aspiring middling sort, were very much the place to be seen and also, as I have shown, provided a political platform for the local establishment. Here the Volunteers in all their splendour, with their speeches and their rousing patriotic entertainments reinforced their image as patriots and military men and

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[119] J.S. Bratton, 'British heroism and the structure of melodrama', in J.S. Bratton, Richard Allen Cave, Breandan Gregory, Heidi J. Holder and Michael Pickering (eds.), *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790-1930* (Manchester, 1991), p.34.
[120] Ibid., p.59.
[121] Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.99.

served as a model for the local community. This role was certainly acknowledged at the time and a report in the *Philanthropist* of 22 June 1795 described how '...the theatre is generally the field in which the Volunteer Officers fight their Campaigns'.[123]

From the government's point of view, as J.R. Western argues, the huge success of the newly created force lay in its appropriation and manipulation of a conservative patriotism.[124] This was because for most of the eighteenth century patriotism had been the preserve of oppositional figures such as John Wilkes and associated with the struggle to defend and maintain the political liberties inherent in the British constitution against the tyranny of governments and kings. But Colley suggests that Wilkite support for the colonists during the American War of Independence, especially after France and Spain became involved on the side of the Americans, to some extent undermined the claims of the radicals to the patriotic high ground in this country.[125] Consequently, there had been considerable debate in both court and government circles as to the means by which they could exploit this situation and reclaim patriotism for themselves. The popular success of the extravagant fetes and festivals staged by the new French leaders in the early 1790s inspired the King and authorities here to greater elaboration and better stage management of royal ceremonials in this country. This proved a hugely successful tactic and, in conjunction with the King's appeal as a family man with many of the same problems and concerns as his subjects, a new kind of 'royal magic and mystique' evolved which the people could not only empathize with but also respect.[126]

From 1794 the Volunteers also proved a potent means through which the establishment sought to generate the loyalty of the nation. In fact, Western argues, the exploitation of the Volunteer movement for this purpose proved so successful that, as a result, a majority of the propertied classes and traditionalists were politicized and 'fused' into a fairly solid 'party of order' for the first time.[127] As far as Sarah was concerned, her close association with the Volunteers further consolidated her place at the centre of the social

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[122] Ibid., p.102.
[123] Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p.808.
[124] Western, 'The Volunteer Movement', p.608.
[125] Colley, *Britons*, pp.141-142.
[126] Russell, *Theatres of War*, p.5.
[127] Western, 'The Volunteer Movement', p.603.

scene in the rapidly developing urban communities of Georgian Kent where she had chosen to concentrate her efforts.

Conclusion

From all the available evidence it is difficult to come to any other conclusion but that Sarah did well out of the complex circumstances that culminated in an extraordinarily difficult decade for the government in the 1790s. The theatre had always been attractive to both the military and naval fraternities and this was accentuated by the war.

This was because, as well as providing straightforward entertainment, she also dealt with the issues and concerns of the day. As a visual medium, the theatre lent itself to reenactments of famous battles and the drama of war. The popularity of such shows demonstrates the fascination this sort of entertainment had for the curious crowds that flocked to see them either to celebrate or to 'experience' the events for themselves. Sarah, as an enterprising entrepreneur, made the most of the opportunities that war afforded her in this way and this was a major reason for her success in these years.

Because she had to take account of the views of those who granted her theatrical licences, Sarah's entertainments were bound to reflect these views and thus her theatres became extremely effective as a medium through which to promote the establishment cause. This was of the utmost importance to the government when the country was at war as it provided a means by which to manipulate public opinion through the material performed on her stages. The government's attempts to gain the backing of a politically fragmented and frequently hostile populace to their war policy through the appeal and example of the Volunteers also helped Sarah consolidate her status and place in the community. This was because, the image of the Volunteer, like 'Jolly Jack Tar', also constituted a form of social control in terms of encouraging a conservative patriotism with which huge numbers of the population could, and wanted to, identify. Sarah's theatres allowed this message to be taken right to the heart of the local community. In her capacity as facilitator of, and buttress to the government's war effort, Sarah rendered herself and her theatres an indispensable fixture at that time. Only this, I suggest, can explain the support of the influential group who, in 1798, a year of crisis for the

government, helped her keep her Rochester theatre open when it looked as if she would be forced, by the local magistrates, to close.

For these reasons, therefore, I believe that war constituted a fundamental component of Sarah's success in those years. It is also apparent that war was then widely regarded as useful to the theatre in general. The fate of Sarah's own theatres certainly seems to confirm this belief. In June 1815, eight months before her death, Sarah's son in law, William Dowton, had taken over responsibility for her Kentish circuit. He had proceeded to spend a small fortune on their renovation and refurbishment but, despite this, their popularity continued to decline. Dowton's son, also William, made a final disastrous attempt to revive the circuit's fortunes in 1839 but this left both him and his father virtually destitute. The situation for William the elder was so bad that a charity performance of *The Poor Gentleman* was given for his benefit at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1840. A few years later, William the younger, Sarah's grandson, abandoned the stage altogether and was admitted as a Brother of the Charterhouse.[128] In his memoirs, Thomas Dibdin's brother, Charles, commented that '...theatres prosper most during War ...as soon as the Peace was announced, our receipts suddenly fell off to a very serious degree'.[129] He was referring to Sadler's Wells but if Sarah had lived long enough, I feel she might well have had cause to make the same remark.

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[128] Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker' in, *Studies in English Theatre History*, p.82.
[129] George Speaight (ed.), 'Professional and Literary Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger' (London, 1956), p.59, quoted by Forbes, 'Water Drama', in Bradby, James & Sharratt, *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, p.102.

CHAPTER 5

WOMEN IN A WORLD OF MEN?

At this point in my study of Sarah Baker's career as manager of a provincial troupe and as entrepreneur I have come to some conclusions about the factors involved in her success. In the first place, the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788 constituted a turning point because, for the first time, it gave her operation a legal status and, thereby, a stake in society which was fundamental to the subsequent development of her theatrical 'empire'. Secondly, all Sarah's major purpose-built theatres were constructed between 1789 and 1802 against a background of the French revolution and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars with France. Theatres in general did well in wartime and by erecting all her new playhouses in towns with a substantial military or naval presence Sarah was well-placed to take advantage of the opportunities this presented. I have also shown how her close relationship with the local authorities in areas where she operated meant that her theatres were important as a medium through which to promote the establishment cause. This was accentuated during the wartime years when her theatres played an important role in the government's efforts to gain the backing of a politically fragmented and frequently hostile populace to their policy of war with France. In this way Sarah further cemented her place and social standing in the local communities where she chose to open her new theatres.

To exploit so successfully the opportunities that these situations presented must have required tremendous personal qualities, determination and courage. The fact that it was a woman who displayed these characteristics and achieved so much at a time when, it would appear that this sort of enterprise in the public sphere was, overwhelmingly, the preserve of men, adds another whole dimension to Sarah's endeavours. This chapter is therefore concerned with the question of whether or not it was as exceptional as it would seem for a woman, at the end of the eighteenth century, to take on a managerial/ entrepreneurial role in her own right as Sarah did at this time. In seeking an answer to this question I will use current theories on women's economic and social status in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a starting point and go on to investigate the degree to which Sarah's life fits with any of these models.

I have also taken account of Olwen Hufton's opinion on the value of 'micro-history' in understanding the relative position of men and women in a given society. She defines 'micro-history' as 'the close examination of small incidents or case histories so as to give not merely a narrative account but an interpretation of events...'.[1] This is achieved using 'ego documents' such as autobiographies, memoirs, letters, diaries and so on, some written by women themselves, which can, she suggests, 'shed immense light on how ideas on gender influenced an individual life...'.[2] Unfortunately, it is also the case that one of the difficulties inherent in researching women's history of this period, is the lack of first hand accounts by women themselves of their own experiences and view of the world at that time.[3] Because Sarah Baker left no record of her own life, to a large extent I have, therefore, had to rely on, and interpret, the impressions she made on her contemporaries. In this respect T. J. Dibdin's response to her has proved especially helpful and does, I suggest, provide a particularly useful insight into some of the reasons for her success.[4] Here, I have taken account of J.S. Bratton's view that Dibdin's attitude to Sarah as a successful woman in a world where this was not the norm served to marginalize her achievements and have outlined my reasons for believing her argument is somewhat overstated.[5]

To provide a chronological context in which to assess Sarah's achievements I have looked for evidence of other women working in a similar role from the early eighteenth century until the latter half of the nineteenth century. In addition to this, to understand more of the extent to which it was possible for a woman to succeed in male dominated areas of work at that time I have investigated work already done in this area,[6] and also taken my own 'snapshot' survey of the occupations of traders in three of Sarah's main towns in the years 1793-97 using the lists in John Wilkes' *British Universal Directory* to

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[1] Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, Vol. 1, 1500-1800* (London, 1995), p.4.
[2] Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her*, p.4.
[3] P. Sharpe (ed.), *Women's Work: The English Experience 1650-1914* (London, 1998), p.5.
[4] T.J. Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vols. 1 & 2, (London, 1827).
[5] J.S. Bratton, 'Sarah Baker: The Making of a "Character" ', in Richard Foulkes (ed.), *Scenes from Provincial Stages* (London, 1994) pp.43-54
[6] Peter Earle, 'The female labour market in London in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', in Sharpe (ed.), *Women's Work*, pp.121-149.

do so.[7] I have also looked in general at some of the obstacles encountered by independent women in forging careers for themselves and, specifically, at examples of difficulties Sarah herself faced, simply because she was a woman. To understand more of Sarah's status within society I have investigated the complex public attitudes towards 'theatrical women' in this country in the eighteenth century and considered the question of whether the world of the theatre and, specifically, provincial theatre, provided Sarah, as a woman, with special opportunities to 'get on' in life that she would not have found elsewhere. For comparison with Sarah's life, I have looked for first hand accounts by other actresses of the eighteenth century and used the less successful Charlotte Charke's *Narrative* as a reference point.[8] This is in order to help identify the reasons why Sarah made such a success of her life while other women, in seemingly similar situations failed to do so.

Research into the history of women in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a comparatively new area of study and, therefore, constantly subject to reinterpretation and reappraisal. One of the difficulties has been a relative lack of individual studies which means the information that is available is patchy and localized,[9] but despite these drawbacks, Sharpe describes how an economic and social history, '....increasingly sophisticated in describing the economic context and the family and household setting of much of women's labours' in combination with '..a pastiche of studies of certain industries and localities' is now beginning to shed some light on how the economic and social roles of women developed during this period.[10]

Women's history: some theories

In the context of this essay, therefore, it will be useful to consider briefly some of the main theories upon which our understanding of women's economic and social history of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century are based and apply these to what is known of Sarah Baker's career. One theory that has been given much credence over the

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[7] Clive Wilkins-Jones (ed.), *The Universal British Directory 1793-97*,Vols. 1-5 (Facsimilie Text Edition, King's Lynn, 1993).
[8] Charlotte Charke, *A Narrative of the life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* (First published 1775; London, 1929).
[9] H. Barker & E. Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (Harlow, 1997), p.9; Sharpe, *Women's Work*, p.6.
[10] Sharpe, *Women's Work*, p.6.

years is that the pre-industrial economy of the late seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries constituted a 'golden age' for women's work in terms of status and job opportunities.[11] The hypothesis here is that, in the era before 'industrial take-off' towards the end of the eighteenth century, 'thriving mini-industries' were frequently run from the family home and thus the household was at the centre of the economic and social world. In such an environment, so it is sometimes claimed, it was not only possible for women to develop their own skills but also to learn 'male' trades from family members who may have served an apprenticeship or had some other kind of formal training. In this way women, as well as men, were able to contribute to the family income and, it is argued, wielded far more influence in their own homes and in the local community than would have been the case if they had worked in units of production elsewhere.

There are different views as to the impact of the 'industrial revolution' and the emergence of capitalism on the lives of women in this country. 'Optimist' historians' claim that industrialization marked the beginning of a new era of opportunity that ultimately brought more economic and social independence for women.[12] The 'pessimists', on the other hand, tell us that industrialization resulted in a new and distinct division of labour between the sexes. Bridget Hill's reading of the period, for example, associates capitalism, and the onset of industrialization, with the demise of the family economy as a powerful economic unit. For Hill, 'the industrial revolution' constituted a significant watershed in the history of women and, meant that, from the mid eighteenth century, large numbers of women were denied any possibility of working in paid employment at all, while others became drudges, doing the most menial jobs for meagre wages.[13] Other historians also point to the implications the emergence of capitalism had for the women of the burgeoning 'middle classes' whose expected role now became a private, domestic one while their husbands pursued successful careers

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[11] This is referred to, among others, by: A. Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English Women's history', *Historical Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (1993) pp. 401-402; Barker and Chalus, *Gender*, p.10; Sharpe, *Women's Work*, pp.7-8.

[12] For example, Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (First published 1930, 2nd edition, 1969); N. McKendrick, J. Brewer & J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: the Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1983).

[13] B. Hill, 'Women's History: a study in change, continuity or standing still', Sharpe, *Women's Work*, pp.42-58; B. Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1994).

and status in the public domain. This model, on occasion, is even used, as a definition of middle class.[14]

There are now many critics of the 'golden age' theory, firstly, because there is increasing evidence that neither the status nor experience of women working at that period within the family economy can, in any way, be regarded as particularly superior or different to those who followed or preceded them and, secondly, because of the considerable difficulties in locating exactly when the so called 'golden age' occurred. Hufton is one such critic. She believes the image of a 'golden age of women's work' was created, in part, earlier this century, by pioneering women historians as it became increasingly apparent to them that the idea of industrialization as 'a great liberating force for women', needed some revising.[15]

Neither the 'pessimist' nor the 'optimist' interpretation of women's post-industrial history provides a particularly useful framework in which to consider Sarah Baker's place as a successful female, theatrical entrepreneur at the end of the eighteenth century. The 'pessimist' view that 'the transition to industrial modernity robbed women of freedom, status and authentic function'[16] in no way fits with what we know of Sarah's economic and social role in society at that time. Likewise, the 'optimists' argument, that increased pay and opportunities for women were a direct consequence of industrialization, seems of little relevance in respect of Sarah's life as a strolling player.

Continuity rather than change

A far more realistic context in which to consider Sarah's success is sustained by recent economic and social research which demonstrates that continuity rather than 'profound and rapid' change characterized women's experience of work from the late seventeenth right through into the nineteenth century.[17] This is because many historians now believe that industrialization took place gradually and unevenly over a long period of time rather than as a cataclysmic event, as previously assumed, some time in the latter half of the

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[14] For example, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London, 1987).
[15] Olwen Hufton, 'Women in History: Early Modern Europe', *Past and Present*, Vol. 101, (1983) pp.125-141.
[16] Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres?', p.401.

eighteenth century. Consequently, many of the previously accepted theories concerning women's work experience are undergoing considerable revision. For example, Amanda Vickery raises many doubts about the 'golden age'/ 'separate spheres' account of women's history and makes a powerful case for a more open minded approach to the subject.[18] She is particularly critical of 'the systematic use of 'separate spheres' as *the* organizing concept in the history of middle class women' at the end of the eighteenth century and believes it extremely difficult to sustain the argument that '...sometime between 1650 and 1850 the public/private distinction was constituted or radically reconstituted in a way that transformed relations between the sexes.[19] This is particularly relevant as far as Sarah Baker is concerned as it seems to indicate that it was no more unusual for a woman to operate successfully on equal terms with men in her day than it had been, or would be, at any other time during this whole period. This idea is somewhat qualified, however, by Vickery's statement that in general, '...eighteenth and early nineteenth century women were associated with home and children, while men controlled public institutions', but, as she adds, this division could equally well apply to almost any century or any culture.[20]

Recent research is also beginning to undermine the long held conviction that female enterprise decayed substantially between 1700 and 1850.[21] Here again, as Vickery points out, when businesses pursued by women in their own right are considered, '...continuity is more apparent than change'.[22] Earle's analysis of female employment in London in the first quarter of the eighteenth century which he compares with information contained in the census of 1851 confirms this, as it demonstrates that the general structure of occupations in both periods is very similar.[23] Although more women appear to have worked for their living in the earlier period, Earle believes this was because they were poorer and, therefore, forced by circumstances to do so. He

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[17] Barker and Chalus, *Gender*, p.13.
[18] Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres?', pp.383-414.
[19] Ibid., pp. 411-412.
[20] Ibid., p.413.
[21] Earle, 'The female labour market', pp. 121-149; Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres?', p.408; Barker and Chalus, *Gender*, p.12.
[22] Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres?', p.409.
[23] Earle, 'The female labour market', pp.121-149.

finds 'little evidence of a narrowing of women's employment opportunities as a result of the industrial revolution or of Victorian mores'. [24]

The 'continuity theory', that between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, women's opportunities and experience of work remained broadly unchanged certainly fits with the somewhat limited information we have about women theatrical managers and entrepreneurs of this period. In the nineteenth century there are many examples of women who either owned or managed theatres and theatrical companies in their own right. In London, for example, in 1839, the actress, Fanny Kelly built a small theatre in Dean Street, known as the Royalty which she used in conjunction with a school of acting. This enterprise was not a success and the theatre closed in 1849 although it re-opened the following year as the Royal Soho. [25] Somewhat better known was Elizabeth Vestris, who in the 1820s was already famous in London as an actress and ballad-singing comedienne. Divorced, and disillusioned with the 'capricious' rule of the lessees and managers of the London theatres for whom she worked, in 1831 she raised the money to lease the Olympic Theatre in Wych Street, Drury Lane. During her eight years there, she continued to appear on the stage and proved herself a popular and extremely successful manager. Some time after her marriage to Charles Mathews in 1838, Vestris and her husband were involved, less successfully, as lessees of Covent Garden. Her rule as manager there ended in financial disaster. In 1847, however, she and her husband leased the Lyceum, the last of her ventures, which they struggled to keep going despite a stint or two in debtors prison for Mathews, until 1855 when ill health forced her into early retirement. She died the following year.[26] Two other actresses involved with the management of a London theatre in the nineteenth century were Mrs Waylett who ran the Tottenham Street Theatre in 1829 and Mrs Nisbett who reopened the same theatre as The Queen's in January 1831.[27]

Elsewhere in the country there are instances of other women managing or owning theatres in the nineteenth century. Sarah M'Cready, for example, took on the lease of

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[24] Ibid., p.136.

[25] Harold Oswald, *The Theatres Royal in Newcastle upon Tyne* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1936), Footnote 2, p.74; P. Hartnoll, *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Oxford, 1995), p.716.

[26] R. Gilder, *Enter the Actress: The First Women in the Theatre* (London, 1931), pp. 258-291.

the Theatre Royal at Bristol in 1833, after four years of chaos there following her husband William M'Cready the elder's death in 1829 and, in extremely difficult circumstances managed to keep the theatre going for 20 years.[28] In Brighton, Ellen Elizabeth Nye Chant took over responsibility for the management of the Theatre Royal, Brighton from her husband upon their marriage in 1867. She continued her career as an actress and when her husband died in 1876 assumed sole responsibility for the theatre. By the early 1880s the theatre was extremely prosperous and this state of affairs continued until she died in 1892, her estate valued at £37,916 14s 4d.[29]

In Kent, the Theatre Royal at Margate had three women managers during the nineteenth century. Of these, Miss Joyner, a young actress, who briefly managed a company that played there in 1846 and Florence Webster who was there in the summer of 1866 made little impact on the theatre's fortunes. In 1867, however, another woman took over the lease of the theatre and apart from a break of six years, her regime continued until 1899. Arguably, the most successful manager, male or female, of any theatre in Kent in the later nineteenth century, Sarah Thorne came from a theatrical family who 'regarded the theatre as a family business'.[30] Her grandfather W.B. Thorne had been a strolling player and her father, Richard, had also played in 'fit-ups' and portable theatres as a child. After periods of management at Bolton, Blackburn, Preston and then at the Pavilion Theatre in the East End of London, Richard Thorne took over the lease of the Margate Theatre in 1855. Sarah was one of ten children, most of whom were involved in the business, and made her debut as a teenager the year the family arrived in Margate. She was an immediate 'hit'.

In 1867, Sarah Thorne persuaded her father to make over the lease of the theatre to her and the business went from strength to strength. In 1885, she opened a School of Acting in the town which also thrived, and in 1895 secured a lease on the Lecture Hall in Chatham which she opened as a second theatre. Like Sarah Baker before her, she found it convenient to own a home in each of her theatrical towns and her stock company alternated between the two places.

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[27] Ibid., p.259.
[28] Kathleen Barker, *Bristol at Play* (Bradford-on-Avon, 1976), p.26.
[29] A. Dale, *The Theatre Royal, Brighton* (Stocksfield, 1980), pp.40-54.

Looking back to the earlier eighteenth century, once again, it does appear to have been fairly common for women to manage their own theatrical companies. There were even women involved in the management of theatres in the capital in the seventeenth century. For example, Lady D'Avenant owned, and to a certain extent, directed her husband's Lincoln's Inn Field theatre after his death in 1668[31] and Elizabeth Barry and Anne Bracegirdle co-managed patent companies with Thomas Betterton at the end of the seventeenth century.[32] Likewise, it also seems that it was not so unusual for a woman to manage one of the itinerant strolling companies that were so popular in those early days. Because of the precarious legal status of these companies whose entertainments, despite this fact, were performed in 'fit-ups', booths and fairground theatres in towns and villages across the country throughout this period, mere glimpses of those who ran them emerge from the shadows of the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Among the names of the few pioneering theatrical entrepreneurs that do survive from this period are those of several women. A Mrs Saffery, who had a theatrical booth at Bartholemew Fair in 1682 also put in an appearance at the Stourbridge Fair that year where she was fined 7s 4d for 'an unlawfull show or Playe'.[33] Elizabeth Leigh and her mother Mrs. Mynns were also briefly noted as managers of theatrical companies between 1687 and 1703.[34] In 1745, a company from Sadler's Wells was at the Music Booth at the fair and although John Rayner was named as master of this company, a court payment of 3s 6d was made by his wife, Elizabeth, who returned alone in 1749 with her company of comedians who enjoyed a successful stay there.[35]

In Yorkshire, Tryphosa Brockell, daughter and granddaughter of clergymen, managed the company that played in Richmond from the mid-eighteenth century, taking over this role, it seems, on the death of her first husband and then, again, when her second husband, J. Wright, died. In 1773, at the age of 46, she married Samuel Butler, who

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[30] M. Morley, *Margate and its Theatres 1730-1965* (London, 1966), p.76.
[31] Gilder, *Enter the Actress*, p.259.
[32] R. D. Hume, *The London Theatre World* (Carbondale and Edwardsville), p.8; P.H. Highfill, K.A. Burnim and E.A. Langhams (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors... in London 1660-1800,* Vol.1 (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1973), pp.318-319.
[33] S. Rosenfeld, 'The Players in Cambridge 1662-1800', in M. St. Clare Byrne (ed.), *Studies in English Theatre History in Memory of Gabrielle Enthoven O.B.E.* (London, 1952), p.26.
[34] Highfill et al., *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors*, Vol. 9, pp.228-229.
[35] Rosenfeld, 'The Players in Cambridge', p.29.

was half her age, and handed over control to him. In 1788, Butler built 'a proper theatre' in the town and the original Richmond company went from strength to strength. By the time Tryphosa died in 1797 at the age of 70 she probably had little to do with the running of the theatre. Her long involvement with the Company, however, had not only ensured a certain continuity but also, it would seem, its very survival.[36]

Mrs Penley, 'the progenitor of at least three generations of actors actresses and managers', [37] was also an influential and well known presence in theatrical circles being the manager of her own troupe of players in the eighteenth century. John Richardson who, with his portable theatre, was later to become one of the most famous travelling companies in the country recorded how his first break came in 1782 when he joined her company who were performing at the Paviour's Arms near New Gravel Lane. [38] Later he, himself, engaged a Mrs Fitzgerald who on leaving his company, '...in the course of a few years, was the manageress of the York circuit'.[39]

Sarah's own mother Anne Wakelin (or Waklyn) was, of course, manager of her own company of strolling players and she must have served as a role model for her daughter. She is first heard of at the Stourbridge Fair at Cambridge in 1762 from which time, and possibly earlier, she, with her Sadler's Wells Company, was a 'constant' visitor until about 1777.[40]

From the late seventeenth, right through until the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, it was relatively common, and generally acceptable, for a woman to manage, or own, a theatre in her own right, although, on the whole, this remained the preserve of men. Not one of the examples I have found, however, achieved as much as Sarah Baker did either in terms of the number of theatres they built or their financial success without the involvement, at some stage, even if only a preliminary one, of a husband or a father. From 1737 until the passage of the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788, it would

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[36] S. Rosenfeld, *The Georgian Theatre of Richmond Yorkshire and its circuit: Beverley, Harrogate, Kendal, Northallerton, Ulverston and Whitby* (London and York, 1984) pp.2-25.
[37] John Morris, *Taking the Town, a compleat and authentic account of Thespian Activity in the County of Kent 1737-1843* (Unpublished manuscript, Theatre Museum, London) p.18.
[38] John Richardson's account in Pierce Egan, *Life of an Actor* (First edition 1825: London, 1904), p.197.
[39] Ibid., p.208.
[40] Rosenfeld, 'The Players in Cambridge', p.29-33.

have been impossible for any man or woman to do what Sarah did in the period immediately after this date because, until then, it would have been a blatant transgression of the law. During the years of Sarah's greatest success, from 1789-1816, it does seem to have been rather unusual for a woman to manage a theatre and despite a search, admittedly somewhat limited by lack of available evidence, I have not been able to trace any other woman in an equivalent situation for the period. During those years, however, and for many before this, it is certain that Sarah was not only the most successful theatrical entrepreneur in Kent, but also the only woman and, as such, she competed fiercely and on equal terms with all her male rivals.

Expectations and experience of work

This evidence, I suggest, adds further credence to the hypothesis that, by and large, women's experience of work throughout the period was one of continuity rather than great change. Regardless of the 'continuity' debate, however, it is apparent that in Sarah's era that spanned the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, men's and women's expectations and experience of work were, on the whole, very different from each other. This view is corroborated by a newspaper account of January 1815 which contrasts the status of female workers in France with those in this country. Headed, 'Female Industry in France', the report states that:

> 'In every part of France, women employ themselves in offices which are deemed with us unsuitable to the sex. Here there is no sexual distinction of employment: the women undertake any task they are able to perform, without much notion of fitness or unfitness. - This applies to all classes. The Lady of one of the principal clothiers at Louviers', the report continued, 'conducted us over the works ...ordered the machinery to be set in motion for our gratification, and was evidently in the habit of attending to the whole detail of the business... In every shop and warehouse you see similar activity in the females...in Paris, women in their little counting houses are performing the office of factors, in the sale of grain and flour. In every department they occupy an important station, from one extremity of the country to the other.'[41]

The assumption of this article is that, in this country, a division of labour between the sexes was taken for granted at that time. According to Earle , this had remained the case for many years with the first four occupations for London women in both the early

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[41] *Morning Chronicle*, 26 January 1815.

1700s and 1851 remaining the same. These were 'domestic service, making and mending clothes, charring and laundry'.[42] As far as women carrying on their own businesses were concerned , Earle found they were overwhelmingly employed in the so-called feminine trades such as petty retail, food and drink or textiles.[43] There is no doubt that women were sometimes very successful in these sorts of occupation and this is confirmed by the fact that the *Universal British Directory* includes female milliners, victuallers, grocers and bakers alongside the men in the 'Traders &c.' lists of 'principal inhabitants' of the various towns surveyed in 1793-97.[44]

Despite Earle's findings that most women were employed in the so called 'feminine trades', he does, in passing, note the minority who worked, for example, as fanmakers, chair-caners, school teachers, brick, pipe and pottery makers and he also mentions 'the mistress of a company of comedians normally based at Epsom'.[45] Similarly, in a study I have made of the occupations of women in three of Sarah's main towns, Rochester (plus neighbouring Chatham), Canterbury and Maidstone, using lists in the *Universal British Directory* for the years 1793-98, I have also discovered that small numbers of women were running businesses outside the parameters regarded as 'normal' and their names were also among those on the 'Traders &c.' lists of 'principal inhabitants'. For example, this group included a watchmaker, a plumber and glazier, a blacksmith whose male relative was a hairdresser, a tea-dealer, a staymaker, a brickmaker and a taylor.[46] It is strange, however, that Sarah's name is not included on any of these lists and I can only conclude that this was because she was not a permanent resident in any of these towns. Of the thirty-eight women listed for the four towns, only five seem to have been working in the same occupation as their husband or male relative, for example Anne Gorely, described as a hatter is followed on the list by James Gorely, also a hatter. Most of those one could assume to be married couples, however, followed different occupations such as Henry Jury and Elizabeth Jury of Maidstone who were, respectively, a taylor and a glazier.[47]

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[42] Earle, 'The female labour market', p.134.
[43] Ibid., p.134.
[44] Wilkins-Jones (ed.), *Universal British Directory 1793-97.*
[45] Earle, 'The female labour market', p.134.
[46] Wilkins-Jones (ed.), *Universal British Directory 1793-97*, Vol. 2, pp. 504-507 & 657-658; Vol. 3, pp. 874-876; Vol. 4, pp. 333-334.
[47] Ibid., Vol.3, p.875.

Critics of the 'golden age of women's work' hypothesis point to the fact that, in the past, whatever her economic activity, a woman's identity and status usually depended upon her marital circumstances alone while a man's place in society was determined solely by his occupation.[48] It is therefore particularly interesting that in the *Universal British Directory* lists, only two women, a basket maker from Canterbury and a boarding school owner from Maidstone, are identified by their marital status as well as their occupation, while all the others are identified by their occupation alone.

Apart from this fact, the diversity of the work done by women regarded as among 'the leading inhabitants' of their town or city in the last decade of the eighteenth century is also of significance in the context of Sarah Baker's career. It has to be added, however, that these 38 women constituted a very small minority, as did the men on the 'Traders &c.' lists of 'principal inhabitants' who, for Rochester (plus Chatham), Maidstone and Canterbury combined, numbered only 864 persons. To put this into some sort of perspective, the *Universal British Directory* for 1793- 97 records that, in Canterbury alone at that time, between six to seven hundred anonymous persons were working in the worsted manufactory while some of 'the numerous poor who have been reduced to great distress by the decline of the silk trade' were employed in the production of Canterbury muslins at John Callaway's cotton-mill just outside the city.[49] Although the *Universal British Directory* does not specify, it is likely that many of these were women, working out of dire necessity for minimal wages.

None the less, whatever the general expectations were for women at that time the *Universal British Directory* lists do show that it was at least possible, albeit unusual, for women to compete directly and on a par with men in male dominated areas of work. Moreover, their inclusion on the lists demonstrates that these women were not only accepted by their male counterparts but, also, that their achievements in the workplace were publicly acknowledged in exactly the same manner as those of the men. This has considerable implications as far as Sarah Baker's business enterprise was concerned as it

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[48] Sharpe, *Women's Work*, p.8.
[49] Wilkins-Jones (ed.), *Universal British Directory 1793-97*, Vol. 2, p.502.

demonstrates that it was not quite as extraordinary for a woman to succeed in a predominantly male working environment as might have been anticipated.

Although they were not defined as such, it is likely that many of the business women on the *Universal British Directory* lists, like Sarah, were widows. Although Earle found that women were 'generally barred by custom, law or their own inclinations from sharing in 'men's work'...'[50] it was not that unusual for widows to achieve economic autonomy through taking over their husband's businesses when they died. For example, between 1688 and 1775 a quarter of British jails had a widow as keeper.[51] But this was not always as straightforward as it might seem and widows often had to fight hard for the right to continue running their husband's businesses, even if they had been involved for many years.

This was especially true of artisans' widows because of the power of the guilds to dictate the manner in which individual businesses could be conducted. Many widows had not done an official apprenticeship and were therefore particularly vulnerable at a time when they most needed assistance. Guilds, in general, had a very ambivalent attitude towards widows, their primary concern being to keep up standards and prices by restricting the number of outlets for items produced by guild members. This was particularly true when times were hard and sales poor because businesses run by widows were easy prey and 'good' reasons could always be found by the guilds for closing them down.[52] There were also restrictions as to what sort of jobs women were allowed to do in their own right. Some, such as baking, brewing, dressing meat and running a print shop were regarded as appropriate. But women were not allowed to work as masons or carpenters, (although they could organize the business and carry loads on the building site) nor could an undertaker's widow step into her husband's shoes if he died. In addition to this, women were not usually allowed to work as tanners, smiths or cabinet makers.[53]

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[50] Earle, 'The female labour market', p.138.
[51] Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her*, p.238.
[52] Ibid., p.241.
[53] Ibid., p.239.

Obstacles

Thus, although women could, and did, run successful businesses in competition with men, in many instances, considerable obstacles, as Vickery points out, were put in the way of single women or widows seeking '...to run a male business in a male world'.[54] This could also be the case in the world outside the tight control of the guilds for other exclusively male 'clubs', such as the Freemasons, sometimes appear to have closed ranks on Sarah in favour of a male rival and thus added to the difficulties she encountered in establishing a business of her own in a 'man's world'.

One of the few setbacks that Sarah experienced during her early Kentish campaign was, it seems, in exactly these circumstances. By 1783, Sarah was so firmly established in Tunbridge Wells, Rochester, Canterbury, Faversham and Maidstone that her great rival Charles Mate did not even try to compete. In Dover, however, as a freeman of the town and friend of Sir James Luterel one of the local M.Ps., Mate wielded more influence.[55] When, following her Company of Comedians successful debut at the small Lass Lane theatre in the town, Mate felt threatened he was able, with the help of his friends, to force Sarah to withdraw.[56] The same thing happened in Margate in 1786 when, after Sarah's company had again proved far more popular than his own, Mate, who was a Freemason and also had influential friends in that town, made use of his connections to compel Sarah and her company to leave. Relating the story to James Winston many years later, Mate recalls how ' ...the Laying of the foundation Stone [of his new Royal Theatre] was attended with the Lodges of Free Masons of Margate deal Dover & Contorbury' and 'an Oraiton was deliverd by Brother Thomas Robson' who had joined him in this venture.[57]

Sarah must have been well aware that as an ambitious single woman she was particularly vulnerable to this sort of treatment at the hands of her male rivals but she had been brought up in a 'hard school' and could certainly fight her corner if this was what was required. According to Dibdin, she could: ' "in a good cause and with the law on her

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[54] Vickery 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres?', p.409.
[55] Charles Mate to James Winston, 14 January 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham Public Library.
[56] N. Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker (1736/37-1816) "Governess General of the Kentish Drama"', manuscript version, Canterbury Cathedral archives, p.3.

side", sometimes condescend to lingual expression more idiomatic of Peckham-fair technicals than the elegance to be expected from a directress of the British drama'.[58] On the other hand she must have been equally adept at endearing herself to the local establishment of Freemasons and their like as, once her theatres were up and running, they, and the Foresters, as well as Gentlemen's 'catch-clubs' all patronized performances in her establishments.

Over the years Sarah and her company proved themselves more than a match for Mate and his operation and this obviously still rankled with him more than twenty years later when, in his letters to James Winston for inclusion in the *Theatric Tourist*, he tried to belittle her success.[59] In his letter dated 22 January 1804, Mate also recalled a row the two had had about twenty years before, for which '..the poor deare old girl has never yet forgiven me'. On that occasion Mate had publicly insulted her by suggesting that she was having a sexual relationship with a member of her company whose name was Rugg and he was obviously happy to have an opportunity to repeat the story of his visit to Sarah's company at Canterbury in the early 1780s: '...I went to see them', he wrote, 'when I found som unlucke dog had wrought over Mrs Beakers dressing place as falows, Beakers wife, once in her life, had her oven stopt up Snug, But now thay say, instead of Clay She Stops it with a Rugg - She accused me of having don this But I denied it..' at that instant Mate continued she was called to go on stage so he 'tuck a pice of witing that lay thare and write - dam your abuse, She makes no use of Rugg as you have said, tis true thay say - and well thay may, Rugg covers her in bed...'.[60] That Mate did his best to undermine Sarah's sexual reputation and, thereby, create problems for her in her dealings with the 'respectable' world of which she had worked so long and so hard to become a part, was no doubt due to their intense rivalry.[61]

Sarah Baker and Richard Cumberland

Apart from this one incident, Sarah seems to have got on very well with the men among whom she lived and worked. Despite their totally different backgrounds, the playwright

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[57] Charles Mate to James Winston, 14 January 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[58] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, p.94.
[59] Charles Mate to James Winston, 22 January 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[60] Ibid.
[61] For more of Mate's rivalry with Sarah see Chapter 1 above, 'Setting the Scene...', pp.33-37.

and former secretary of the Board of Trade, Richard Cumberland, is one such example. With the collapse of Lord North's administration in 1782 Cumberland, who was only a year or two older than Sarah, had found himself hard up and moved with his family to Tunbridge Wells.[62] Here, he was one of Sarah's neighbours when she had her theatre on Mount Sion.[63] In the 1790s Sarah put on more of his plays at her Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone theatres than those of any other contemporary playwright [64] and, according to James Winston, Cumberland himself usually superintended '... the getting up of his own pieces' at her theatre in the town.[65] Although he made no mention of Sarah in his *Memoirs*, he certainly knew the Baker family very well and involved them personally in the activities of his Volunteer Force at her theatre during the French wars.[66]

The only member of the family that he does mention by name, and praises warmly in his *Memoirs*, is Sarah's son-in-law, William Dowton, who went on to become a well known actor on the London stage.[67] In addition to this, however, Cumberland does write with great affection of his 'humble' neighbours in the town stating that:

> '...wheresoever my lot in life has cast me, something more than curiousity has always induced me to mix with the mass, and interest myself in the concerns of my neighbours and fellow subjects, however humble in degree; and from the contemplation of their characters, from my acquaintance with their hearts and my assured possession of their affections, I can truly declare that I have derived and still enjoy some of the most gratifying sensations, that reflection can bestow.'[68]

His neighbours, he found, had '...not only a distinguishing cast of humour, but a dignity of mind and principle about them... but if mistaken or misused,' he added, 'you will find them quick enough to conceive, and more than forward enough to express their profound contempt and resolute defiance of you'.[69]

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[62] Richard Cumberland, *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland written by himself. Containing An Account of his Life and Writings interspersed with Anecdotes and Characters of several of the most distinguished Persons of his Time with whom he has had intercourse and connexion* (London, 1806), p.440.
[63] Thomas Younger to James Winston, 5 December 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[64] Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker' manuscript version, p.8.
[65] James Winston, 'The Theatric Tourist', p.17 (Facsimilie), incorporated in, A.L. Nelson, *James Winston's Theatric Tourist, a Critical Edition with a Biography and a Census of Winston Material* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 1968).
[66] See Chapter 4, 'Theatre and War...', pp. 139-140.
[67] Cumberland, *Memoirs*, p.514.
[68] Ibid., pp.441-442.
[69] Ibid., p.442.

This, then, is as near as we can get to Cumberland's opinion of Sarah. But he must have thought highly of her if, as I believe is highly likely, he was involved with the establishment of her second theatre in the town. The evidence for this is circumstantial but, none the less, worth noting as Cumberland's Tunbridge Wells landlord, Mr. John Fry, was also the owner of the 'tavern at the Sussex' where Sarah erected her new theatre with 'its communication with some of these rooms' in about 1789.[70] In addition to this, Thomas Younger's information, direct from Sarah herself, that it was at the request of 'Several Particular Friends' that she dismantled her old Theatre on Mount Zion and re-erected it on a spot near the Sussex Tavern where 'she remain'd unmolested...',[71] adds to the impression that Cumberland must have been involved.

If it was Cumberland and his associates who helped Sarah on this occasion, it is curious that she did not identify him by name in the information she gave to Thomas Younger in 1803 as she had no scruple in using the names of other well known people in her handbills and newspaper advertisements. Similarly, it is also disappointing, that Cumberland made no mention of Sarah in his *Memoirs*. This could have been because it was not Cumberland's style to write directly of anyone beneath his own social level although, for example, he does mention his 'true and trusty servant Thomas Camis' by name.[72] It is far more likely, I think, that it was because of the somewhat ambivalent feelings that characterised 'polite' society's attitude to actresses and women of the theatre at that time. When Cumberland does mention a particular actress in his *Memoirs* his comments are usually obsequious and generally confined to a performance in one or another of his plays at a London theatre. His relationship with Sarah and her actress daughters, on the other hand, must have been as a friend, neighbour and collaborator but, at that time, it would have been unthinkable for a man of his standing and personality to include this sort of information in his *Memoirs*. In the same way, while it was socially acceptable for Sarah to use well known names in her publicity, she, too, I believe, would have been well aware of the embarrassment and damage she could cause if she had revealed who her 'Several Particular Friends' were in inappropriate circumstances such as this.

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[70] 'The Diary of Woodfall's Register, 3 June 1789', quoted by Hodgson,' Sarah Baker' manuscript version, p.5.

[71] Thomas Younger to James Winston, 5 December 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.

A special niche

While, to some extent, involvement with the stage remained a social disadvantage at the end of the eighteenth century, in other ways it opened up opportunities undreamed of by women in more run of the mill occupations. This was because of the paradoxical nature of 'polite' society's response to actresses or women of the theatre that ranged from moral outrage to total enrapture. The reasons for this originated in the sixteenth century when, because many of the plays performed contained 'prophane, obscene and scurrilous passages...', [73] women, in this country, were banned from the stage altogether, their parts being played by men, or mostly by boys. For many years it was considered outrageous for a woman to appear on stage and when, during the reign of Charles I, a French company, complete with actresses, appeared in London, the public were incensed. During Cromwell's Commonwealth, the theatre was banned altogether and it was not until the restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660 and his campaign to reinstate and clean up the theatre through the creation of the two Patent theatre companies in London and the censoring of plays '...conteyning anie passages offensive to pietie or good manners'[74] that women were at last allowed to take their place on the English stage.

In addition to continuing moral concerns about the material presented on stage, since time immemorial prostitutes had plied their trade at the theatre and, unsurprisingly, this reinforced the association in the public mind between immorality and the stage. It follows, therefore, that at the beginning of the eighteenth century actresses, themselves, were also readily conflated with whores. The notorious behaviour of some of them encouraged this belief and at the time it was even suggested that should all the theatres be closed down, actresses still had a viable means of supporting themselves.[75] It has also been pointed out that it was part of an actress's professional role to 'advertise and capitalize on her physical attractions as well as appeal to the higher emotions of her audience' and, therefore, it was easy for any rival or enemy to present an actress as no

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[72] Cumberland, *Memoirs*, p.443.
[73] Charles II's King's Own Company Charter granted to Thomas Killigrew in 1661, quoted by W. Macqueen Pope, *Ladies First: The Story of Woman's Conquest of the British Stage* (London, 1952), p.28.
[74] Ibid., p.28.
[75] Barker and Chalus, *Gender*, p.60.

different to one of the prostitutes who also worked in the theatre.[76] In such circumstances it is easy to understand why the taint of immorality continued to haunt any woman who took to acting as a career and that this remained the case right through to Sarah Baker's era and beyond.

By 1800 the association between prostitutes and actresses was not as strong as once it had been. Kimberly Crouch identifies several reasons for this, one being that it was increasingly recognized that a degree of intelligence and 'education' was a prerequisite of a career on the stage.[77] In addition, because of their earning ability, some actresses were able to '...purchase the accoutrements of gentility ' and thus '...mirror the social and economic life of the upper classes'.[78] It is also clear that an actress's innate ability to mimic the manners of the social elite could also stand her in good stead. Indeed, some had been so successful in this respect that they, themselves, were depicted as role models for 'women of quality'. Even actresses from the humblest background could, and did, make alliances with men and women of the highest social order or, through fortuitous marriages with members of the aristocracy, became part of the establishment themselves Lavinia Fenton, for example, married the Duke of Bolton in 1728 and Elizabeth Farren became the Countess of Derby in 1797 .[79] By the end of the century many actresses were consciously choosing to present themselves as gentlewomen as a defence against scandal but, despite their efforts, the ambivalent public image of 'the actress' persisted, which meant they often remained the focus of prurient public comment and interest.

This was not always to their social or economic disadvantage, however, as many actresses made the most of the equivocal situation they found themselves in to further both their private and public lives. As Crouch points out, they well knew how to appeal to their wealthiest and most socially secure patrons but, also, were not above exploiting the more notorious aspects of their reputations to bolster their professional appeal.[80]

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[76] Ibid., p.61.
[77] Kimberly Crouch, 'The public life of actresses: prostitutes or ladies?', in Barker and Chalus, *Gender*, pp.58-78.
[78] Ibid., p.58.
[79] Ibid., pp.63-64.
[80] Ibid., p.65.

In the light of Crouch's research into the status of actresses in the eighteenth century, it can be concluded that they, and other women of the theatre, occupied a very special niche in Georgian society with unique opportunities, both social and economic, that were denied to the vast majority of women. I also believe that the potential advantages, enjoyed by this group of women, applied as equally to Sarah Baker as they did to the more famous London based actresses of her day. As a young woman Sarah had acted in her mother's strolling company and acquired, like so many other actresses, '...much of the appearance and manners of a gentlewoman'.[81] Dibdin's opinion was echoed by the actress and author Ann Mathews who, somewhat grudgingly conceded that Sarah '...certainly could, when she wished to do so, assume an air and tone of good manners, and was moreover very hospitable ...and did the honours of her table with grace'.[82] These attributes must have stood Sarah in very good stead as, despite her origins as a strolling player, it seems she had no problem in mixing with, what Dibdin referred to as, '...most of the respectable families' in Kent.[83] Doctors, in Sandwich and Rochester, naval and military officers, mayors, magistrates, princes, members of parliament and of the aristocracy were all counted among the 'friends' who not only patronized performances, but also invited members of the company into their private homes and, certainly, as far as Dibdin was concerned, visited them in theirs. [84] It is difficult to imagine how other women from equally humble backgrounds could have made their way in the world quite as effectively as Sarah did through her connections with the theatre.

In contrast to many more famous actresses there is no hint of scandal attached to Sarah's name apart, that is, from Charles Mate's crude attack on her moral character which tells us rather more about his personality than hers. Prostitution, however, remained a problem to the theatre in general right through into the nineteenth century and on one occasion Sarah came close to losing the licence for her Rochester Theatre on this account. In October 1811 the licensing authority in the city announced that it was only 'upon the express Condition that she enclose the lower boxes and fits up the interior of the house so as to exclude all improper women' that they would consent to

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[81] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1, p.94.
[82] Ann Mathews, *Anecdotes of Actors* (London, 1844), pp.37-38.
[83] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1, p.203.
[84] Ibid., pp. 106, 205- 207.

her application for a four month licence.[85] This was an occupational hazard for theatres in general and does not seem to have imputed that other female members of her company and family enjoyed anything less than blameless reputations. Dibdin, for example, describes Sarah's unmarried sister Mary as '...her virgin relative' and praises her talents as 'principal comic dancer, occasional actress, wardrobe-keeper, and professed cook.' [86] Ann, the elder daughter, seems to have followed in the steps of her aunt while Sarah's younger daughter, Sally, married William Dowton in 1794, three years after he had joined her mother's company and also appears to have been a model of propriety. Their sons William and Henry were born in 1797 and 1798 respectively but, meanwhile, William senior had become a star at Drury Lane where Sally later joined him. Despite their celebrity, William and Sally often returned to Kent to play in her mother's company for a few nights during the London season or for longer periods during the vacation.[87]

As Crouch notes, actresses could do a lot to create a favourable public image for themselves by 'exposing their private qualities ...to public scrutiny', and it seems that Sarah and her family worked hard in this respect.[88] On more than one occasion, for example, Sarah organized benefit performances in aid of the poor debtors in Maidstone jail, for which she was publicly thanked in the press. Her company also performed, *gratis*, in aid of the Kent and Canterbury Hospital, certainly in 1802 and 1806 and probably more frequently, and in 1811 she gave the free use of her theatre for a charity event in aid of the same cause. The Chatham free schools also benefited from a performance of *Othello* that took place at her Rochester theatre in October 1811. In addition to her charitable works, the image of her theatres was also enhanced by the regular patronage of educational establishments. In Canterbury the King's School gave their support from 1791 and a few years later Miss Jeudwine's School joined them while,

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[85] *The Sussex Advertiser*, 21 October 1811, quoted by Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker' manuscript version, p.5.
[86] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, pp.94-95.
[87] Ibid., p.96; Sarah Baker's playbills for Tunbridge Wells 1794-1802, the Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum; Sarah Baker's advertisements in the *Kentish Gazette*; *Dictionary of National Biography*, p.1313; Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker "Governess-General of the Kentish Drama"', in M. St. Clare Byrne (ed.), *Studies in English Theatre History in Memory of Gabrielle Enthoven O.B.E.* (London, 1952), p.81.
[88] Crouch, 'The public life of actresses', p.67.

in Maidstone, the names of two boys' schools were linked with the theatre there in 1788, 1794 and 1811.[89]

Personal attributes and T.J. Dibdin

What Sarah did not do, however, was to leave a first hand account of her own life but this is a problem inherent to the study of women's history of this period.[90] Although Thomas Younger's letters to James Winston give a first hand account of information she gave him in answer to his questions about her various theatres, these reveal little of Sarah herself and the only extant example of her own writing that I have come across consists of a single signature on an application for a theatrical licence for Tunbridge Wells in 1789.[91] Possibly the closest we can get to her own thoughts or perspective on life is through the special notices she sometimes included in her advertisements and handbills. For example, following her 'defeat' at Mate's hands in Margate in 1786 she alludes wittily and with some bravado in her *Kentish Gazette* advertisement of 20 June 1786 to his petition for a royal patent and concludes her appeal to the people of Faversham for their patronage by declaring that '...though she has not the Boast of Royal Sanction to her Company, conceives herself and them highly honoured in the Appellation of the SERVANTS of the PUBLIC'. There is a ring of truth and authenticity about this which in a way brings us closer to the woman herself than any purposeful memoir or biography.

The same is true, I suggest, at least in some measure, of Thomas Dibdin's account of what he knew of Sarah. The main purpose of his *Reminiscences,* published in 1827, was to set down the details of his own career and, therefore, I can see no reason why he should not have portrayed Sarah in any other fashion than as he had found her. Although J.S. Bratton has eloquently argued that by constructing Sarah as a "character" he undermined and marginalized her achievements as 'a successful independent woman in the theatre...',[92] I believe that if his somewhat mannered and portentous style of writing is treated as no more nor less than typical of that period we are left with a

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[89] Hodgson 'Sarah Baker' manuscript version, p.8; Morris, *Taking the Town*, p. 17; *Kentish Gazette*, 26 January, 28 May, 22 June, 10 August 1802; 15 April & 24 October 1806; 1 & 5 March, 22 October 1811.

[90] Sharpe, *Women's Work*, p.5.

[91] General Quarter Sessions Papers (Kent) Q/SB 1789 pt.-1790, Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone.

valuable first hand record from a man who had known Sarah well for more than twenty years. Bratton maintains that the use of the word "character" to describe an eccentric or unusual person was new in Sarah's day. She adds that: 'The development of a new sense to a word is always likely to indicate a new cultural development'.[93] From this premise, Bratton goes on to argue that in the drive to free the theatre from the clutches of the patentees, a new history was constructed in the 1830s by the 'educated gentlemen' of the theatre who led the campaign. While reliant on lower class entertainers to add legitimacy and substance to their demands for a free theatre, at the same time the reformers were careful to distance themselves from the less acceptable aspects of the theatrical past. This included the dubious morality of some entertainers and 'the appearance of women on and about the stage in positions of influence and power'.[94] A convenient way of achieving this objective, Bratton shows, was to convert awkward, but necessary individuals associated with the theatrical past, such as Sarah Baker, into "characters". As Bratton herself dates this 'trope' from the publication of works by John Payne Collier in 1831 and the Revd. John Genest in 1832[95] it seems unlikely that Dibdin, whose work was published five or six years before this, would have felt the need to be quite as manipulative in his treatment of his old friend and colleague, Sarah Baker. It is my view that Bratton's argument is far more convincing when applied to accounts of Sarah by those who knew her less well such as those that appear in Charles Dickens' *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, edited by "Boz" (London, 1838) or Ann Mathews' *Anecdotes of Actors* (London, 1844).

At the time of publication of the *Reminiscences*, Sarah had been dead for about ten years, and Dibdin's memories of her, after twenty years of professional collaboration and friendship would, I believe, have remained vivid. He had known her well from when she had shown him great kindness as a young man when he joined her company at Deal late in 1789. At this time, entirely due to her own hard work, so Dibdin tells us, she was '...just beginning to realise the very considerable property she since died possessed of'.[96] It is apparent, from everything he says of her, that he and his wife, Nancy, 'to

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[92] Bratton, 'Sarah Baker: The making of a "Character" ', pp.46-48.
[93] Ibid., p.45.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1., p.94.

whom Mrs B. was extremely partial',[97] held her in great affection and had considerable respect for her both as a person, and, for the manner in which she ran her business. The two families remained on the closest of terms, Nancy acting as executrix for Sarah's sister Mary Wakelin when she died in October 1817.[98]

Dibdin also praises Sarah's industry, business methods and acumen, comparing her success with his own failure at the Surrey Theatre. He describes how she '....prepared for the important five-hours station of money-taker at box, pit and gallery doors, which she very cleverly united in one careful focus [at all her theatres] and saved by it as much money in her life-time as I lost at the Surrey Theatre in six or seven years.'[99] This, according the *Dictionary of National Biography* amounted to approximately £16,000.[100] 'No individual ever persevered more industriously or more successfully in getting money than Mrs. Baker, who', declared Dibdin, 'as fast as she realized cash, laid it out in purchasing or building the several theatres she died possessed of'.[101] Once persuaded by Dibdin to invest her ever increasing savings with 'a highly respectable stock-broker', he and his wife 'had the pleasure of a half-yearly visit from her in town, when she came, not to take away, but to add to her dividends the very comfortable profits she still continued to realize'.[102]

She was also generous to those she employed and Dibdin relates how she insisted, before he had worked one day for her, that he took a week's salary in advance as she would not have '...my young men get in debt in the town'.[103] He considered the terms she offered, '... rather better than sharing, and at what was then thought a respectable salary...', as almost comparable with '...a situation in a theatre royal, the grand aim of my ambition'.[104] The financial package she offered members of her company as 'a salary establishment' was considerably more attractive, according to Dibdin, than the sharing system operated , for example, by the rival company of Mr Richland and Charles

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[97] Ibid., p.203.
[98] Ibid., p.95.
[99] Ibid., p.96.
[100] *Dictionary of National Biography*, p.916.
[101] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1., p.223.
[102] Ibid., p.225.
[103] Ibid., p.102.
[104] Ibid., pp.91-92.

Mate.[105] Again, in the 1790s Dibdin and his wife 'received an offer superior to my Sadler's -Wells engagement' from Sarah which brought them back in to her company.[106]

Much has been made of Dibdin's comment that Sarah could '...read but little, and had learned no more of writing than to sign her name...'. [107] Dibdin's statement has, frequently, been interpreted as meaning that she was illiterate but I suggest that it is highly unlikely that a woman who kept her own accounts, sometimes worked as prompter, constructed her own playbills,[108] and ran her business so intelligently would not, at some stage of her career, have learned, in some degree, to read and write. Dibdin's additional statement that, 'her practice in reading had not been very extensive' seems to indicate that, indeed, she could read, but maybe not as widely as he, who, it has to be remembered, was writing from the perspective of a well educated man. [109] His formal education had begun at eight when he entered the choir of St Paul's Cathedral. This was followed by a year of study at a London academy after which he was sent up to Durham for three years to study the classics.[110]

From Dibdin, therefore, we learn that Sarah was an astute business women, a sound employer, a fine manager of people and also capable of inspiring great loyalty and friendship in those who worked for her. The fact that he had such respect for her is in itself revealing for he came from a theatrical family with strong connections with the legitimate London stage. David Garrick had been one of his godfathers and, in 1775, as a four year old, Mrs Siddons had led him on stage at Drury Lane where he played Cupid in a revival of Shakespeare's *The Jubilee*. Despite his parentage, his family did not entirely approve of his desire to become an actor when, as he put it, 'I ought to be paving my way to the magistracy of the great metropolis'.[111] He was quite an exceptional man in his own right, but certainly had no hesitation in generously acknowledging this quality in Sarah as well.

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[105] Ibid., p.80.
[106] Ibid., p.202.
[107] Ibid., p.93.
[108] Ibid., pp.95, 97.
[109] Ibid., p.97.
[110] *Dictionary of National Biography*, p.914.
[111] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, p.92.

Charlotte Charke

While it appears that we know rather more about some of the better known actresses of the eighteenth century than we do about Sarah or many other women living at that time, as Claire Tomalin points out in the foreword to her life of the remarkable Georgian actress, Dora Jordan,[112] it was not considered respectable for actresses to write their autobiographies before the mid nineteenth century and very few did so. For this reason, therefore, the authentic voice of the eighteenth century actress is rarely heard and, in most cases, the image we have, especially of women who were well known at the time, reflects the prejudices of those who wrote about them, either during their own lifetime, or in retrospect. Of those who even contemplated committing their memoirs to paper, one was Elizabeth Inchbald, an actress turned playwright and good friend of Dora's, whose plays such as *Everyone has his Fault* (1793), *Wives as they Were* (1797), *Animal Magnetism* (1788) *Midnight Hour* (1789) and *The Wedding Day* (1794) were frequently performed in Sarah's theatres.[113] Unfortunately, when it came to publishing her memoirs, Elizabeth lost her nerve and, on the advice of her confessor, destroyed her own manuscript in 1821.[114]

A rare example of an eighteenth century woman writing directly of her own life is contained in Charlotte Charke's vivid, first hand account of what it was like to try and make a living as a strolling actress in the eighteenth century.[115] Charlotte was born in 1713 and, although a generation older than Sarah, her *Narrative* is particularly useful as, in contrast to Sarah's experience, it gives us a graphic description of the trials and tribulations of the life of a not very successful strolling actress of, more or less, the same era. In addition to this, Charlotte's book serves as an extremely helpful reference point when it comes to defining the reasons why, in social and economic terms, Sarah was able to achieve so much more as a woman of the theatre, than Charlotte ever managed.

Charlotte was the unconventional, courageous, breech- wearing daughter of Colley Cibber, the actor and playwright who, from 1711, was also joint manager of the Drury

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[112] Claire Tomalin, *Mrs. Jordan's Profession* (London, 1994).
[113] Sarah Baker's playbills, Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum; Sarah Baker's advertisements, the *Kentish Gazette* and *Maidstone Journal*.
[114] Tomalin, *Mrs. Jordan*, p.xviii.

Lane Theatre. Cibber was very well known and described as 'well educated and destined for a learned profession' [116] until he became an actor against the wishes of his family. For over a century his work was thought of as representative of 'English high society' but in reality, he 'only moved on the fringe of the company he depicted...'.[117] His daughter had none of Inchbald's scruples about the publication of her autobiography which first appeared in eight weekly parts in the early spring of 1755. This caused quite a stir and, subsequently, went into two editions which sold for two shillings and sixpence.

Charlotte's prospects as a child must have seemed considerably brighter than those of the young Sarah Wakelin some twenty-five years later. In the first place, Charlotte came from a relatively respectable background and had a good education which she described as 'not only a genteel, but in Fact a liberal one, and such indeed as might have been sufficient for a Son instead of a Daughter'.[118] But her mother died, her father dispossessed her and she was deserted by her husband. Consequently, her *Narrative* is an account of the considerable hardships involved in the itinerant lifestyle of a not very successful freelance actress. She and her child were often hungry or ill and lived a hand to mouth existence. Occasionally she ended up in gaol or found herself dependent on the kindness and generosity of friends, distant relatives or fellow actors, including the famous Peg Woffington. One time, when she was in dire trouble 'all the Ladies who kept Coffee-Houses in and about the *Garden* ....' rallied round '..each offering money for my Ransom..' [119]

For the most part, however, she managed to support herself through a variety of jobs. When work in the London theatres did not materialize she engaged as a strolling player and travelled the country. On other occasions she had worked as a gentleman's 'gentleman' in the house of an Irish lord, sold home-made sausages in Newgate-Market, was employed as a pastry cook, as a proof reader on a Bristol newspaper and as a lodging house keeper. At no time, she protests, did she '...prostitute my Person, or use

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[115] Charlotte Charke, *A narrative of the life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* (First published 1755: London, 1929)
[116] Phyllis Hartnoll (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Oxford, 1995), p.155.
[117] Ibid., p.155.
[118] Charke, *Narrative*, p.19.

any other indirect Means for Support that might have brought me to Contempt and Disgrace'.[120] She appeared, possibly for the last time, in *The Busybody* at the Haymarket Theatre on 28 September 1759.[121]

The contrast with Sarah Baker's lifetime achievements is starkly illustrated by the brief obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* shortly after Charlotte's death on April 6 1760, which declared:

> Death to you is profitable:
> Now you need nor pot nor table:
> And what you never had before,
> You've a house, for ever more.[122]

Adding to this grim comment on her life is a first hand description of the penurious and wretched state in which the middle-aged Charlotte had been living in 1755, just a few months after the publication of her *Narrative*. This comes from a Mr. Samuel Whyte of Dublin who, with a young bookseller friend, called on her with the idea of buying a recently completed novel that she had mentioned in her memoir.[123] Charlotte's 'habitation', wrote Whyte, 'was a wretched thatched hovel, ...not very distant from the New-river Head; where at that time, it was usual for the scavengers to leave the cleansings of the streets...' Heavy rain had rendered her hovel almost inaccessible, 'so that in our approach...', Whyte grumbled, 'we got our white stockings enveloped with mud up to the very calves'. [124] Charlotte, herself, they found '...sitting on a maimed chair ...by a fire merely sufficient to put us in mind of starving'. At her feet, '...on the flounce of her dingy petticoat', Whyte continued, ' reclined a dog, almost a skeleton'.[125]

A strong family unit

Whyte's description of this visit adds to Charke's own tale and contrasts vividly with Sarah Baker's increasingly comfortable lifestyle at a similar stage in her career. It also begs the question why it was that Sarah should have thrived while Charlotte who, it

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[119] Ibid., p.78.
[120] Ibid., pp. 111, 113 & 115.
[121] Ibid., editorial note, p. 9.
[122] Ibid., editorial note, p. 10.
[123] 'Account of a visit to Mrs. Charlotte Charke by Mr. Samuel Whyte of Dublin; Taken from Baker's "Biographiaa Dramatica" Vol. 1, p.106 ,1812', in Charke, *Narrative*, p.223.
[124] Ibid., p.221.

seemed, had started out in life with so many of the advantages denied to Sarah as the daughter of itinerant strolling players, did not. After all, both were women of the theatre with the advantages and disadvantages this bestowed. Both women had determination, imagination and courage and although Sarah reaped the benefits of the Theatrical Representations Bill in the 1790s, she was well into her fifties by then. Charlotte had died at the age of forty-seven and even if she had been an exact contemporary of Sarah's and had lived long enough, it is still hard to imagine that she would have achieved as much.

The key factor in Sarah's success and in Charlotte's relative failure was, I suggest, that, throughout her life, Sarah was part of a strong family unit that also constituted a powerful economic force, while Charlotte was on her own. This gave Sarah huge advantages both in economic and personal terms and also helps explain how she managed to outdo many of her male rivals as they, too, I believe, were also at a considerable disadvantage if they did not have a similar family power base. A few years ago this would not have been a popular theory as, in the 1970s, historians of women's history considered the family 'a central institution of women's oppression'.[126] Revisionists such as Rosemary O'Day, however, reject this model and argue that 'the family' should be treated as '...a flexible institution, made up of individuals who adopted, adapted or refuted current behavioural ideals and that the relationships among these individuals were not fixed but changed according to time and circumstance'.[127] As Barker and Chalus note, this is especially relevant to the study of women's history of the eighteenth century, and therefore, I maintain, also to my theories concerning the underlying reasons for Sarah's success.[128]

The above description of 'the family' is also reminiscent of the ideas associated with the pre-industrial 'golden age of women's work' view of women's history where family

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[125] Ibid., p.222.
[126] Ellen Dubois, 'The radicalization of the woman suffrage movement, notes toward the reconstruction of nineteenth century feminism', *Feminist Studies* Vol. 3 (1975), p.63, quoted by Barker and Chalus, *Gender*, p.16.
[127] Rosemary O'Day, 'The Family and Family Relationships, 1500-1900: England, France and the United States of America' (Basingstoke and London, 1994), pp.266-274, cited by Barker and Chalus, *Gender*, pp. 16-17.
[128] Ibid., p.17.

groups worked together as effective economic units. Although, from the mid eighteenth century, the 'family economy' supposedly suffered an irreversible decline there is irrefutable and widespread evidence that this was certainly not the case as far as theatrical family businesses were concerned.. As John Morris points out, in Kent alone in the later eighteenth century there are many examples of strolling companies that to all intents and purposes can be regarded as family concerns. In addition to the Wakelin/Baker/Dowton company and Mrs Penley's troupe of players, there were also, for example, the Glassington's, the Beverleys, the Jerrolds, the Copelands, the Diddears and the de Camps.[129] Carol Carlisle has also made a study of the Faucit Saville brothers who, again, were associated with Kent and although she concentrates on the nineteenth century, notes that the family's theatre history in fact began in the eighteenth century and continued into the twentieth.[130]

As Morris and Carlisle both demonstrate, such was the strength of these theatrical families that, in many cases, their influence continued through several generations. Their impact was also felt, not only the length and breadth of this country but, from the early years of the nineteenth century, also in the United States of America. Like many other theatrical families, the Wakelin/Baker/Dowton family was indeed a 'flexible institution', not only in their personal relationships with each other but also with regard to the survival of the family business. In the early 1770s, Sarah, although a young widow, took over responsibilities for the family troupe, not from her dead husband, but from her mother. At that time, with three young children to support, she was considerably more fortunate than Charlotte Charke, largely because she continued to enjoy the assistance of her mother and her sister, both on a personal and professional level. Members of her wider family were also involved. These included her cousin Mr. Ireland, the bandmaster, and his family who performed with Sarah's company for at least thirty years.[131] As her own children grew up they, too, became invaluable members of the company and her son-in-law and grandsons also played an active role within the business, both on and off stage.

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[129] Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.18.
[130] Carol Carlisle, 'The Faucit Saville Brothers; or Theatre and Family', in Richard Foulkes (ed.), *Scenes from Provincial Stages* (London, 1994), pp. 114-126.

Sarah also 'inherited' several long standing members of her mother's old Sadler's Wells company such as Messrs. Owen, Harper and Rugg. Maybe because she was a generous and caring employer who paid her 'people' fixed and regular salaries and helped them out when they were unable to help themselves, Sarah inspired considerable loyalty in those she employed.[132] For example, in July 1785 a benefit was given for Mr. Newton, a company member who had 'long laboured' under 'a very severe and tedious illness' when he was too ill, himself, to appear on the stage.[133] Of many other long serving members, Jem Gardner, after fifteen years service, was still with the company when he died and Bony Long also worked with Sarah's company for at least twenty-one years.[134] A brief obituary in the *Kentish Gazette* of 14 January 1800 shows, too, that a Mr. Williams who had 'lately died at Sheerness' had also been '...for many years of Mrs. Baker's company of comedians'.

Those who belonged to a theatrical 'clan' such as Sarah's were, as Carlisle stresses, greatly advantaged over those who had to make their own way in the world of theatre. Among the benefits, she notes, were 'ensured opportunities for the novice' and 'a support system (not exclusively financial)...' that constituted a tremendous advantage when times were hard.[135] Tracy Davis also refers to the 'centuries old tradition of family based companies' and goes on to remark on the vulnerability of actresses who did not enjoy '...the advantages of physical and financial security within the family compact'.[136] Here she was referring to later Victorian actresses at a time when the power of the old theatre-owning managerial families was in decline. Her statement, however, is equally valid when applied to the contrasting experiences of Charlotte Charke and Sarah Baker in the previous century and goes a long way, I believe, in explaining why Sarah was able to succeed while Charlotte, on her part, was not.

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[131] Advertisement in the *Kentish Gazette*, 3-6 March 1773 announces a benefit for Mr. and Mrs. Ireland for 13 March. Thirty years later, a Rochester playbill for 5 May 1803 shows that the Irelands' were still with the company. (Playbill, Hertford Museum collection).

[132] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1, p.91; Catherine Feist, 'Genuine gossip by an old actress: The eccentric Mrs. Baker', *Era* (5 June, 1853)

[133] *Kentish Gazette*, 28 June- 1 July 1785.

[134] Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker', *Studies in English Theatre History*, p.80.

[135] Carlisle, 'The Faucit Saville Brothers', p.114.

[136] Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London and New York, 1991), p.7.

Conclusion

In chronological terms, Sarah, as a successful female theatrical entrepreneur, was not unique. As I have shown, there were many female managers of troupes and theatres both before and after her day. This evidence seems to support the theory that, for women in general, continuity rather than change characterized their experience of work from the earliest eighteenth right through to the late nineteenth centuries. I have also demonstrated that, although unusual, it was not unknown for women, at the end of the eighteenth century, to compete successfully with men in male dominated areas of work.

It has to be added, however, that, for a woman to achieve so much, working in a world that was overwhelmingly the preserve of men, Sarah must have been an exceptional person. Not only was she the only female theatrical entrepreneur that I have been able to find working in that specific period (although it is not certain that others like her did not exist), but she was also far more successful than any of her contemporary male rivals in terms of reputation, the number of theatres she owned and the period of time during which she dominated the theatrical scene in Kent. Furthermore, unlike all the other female theatical entrepreneurs I have investigated, there was no husband or father to help her on her way and, in terms of bricks and mortar, she constructed her theatrical empire from scratch, solely by dint of her own hard work and perseverance.

Because of their ambivalent and unique situation, women of the theatre benefited from opportunities and choices that were unavailable to the vast majority of women in the eighteenth century but, at the same time, as I have demonstrated, the freedoms they enjoyed could make them especially vulnerable. Sarah's strength, both as an individual and as a professional woman, owed much to the fact that she had a strong family background. Her family remained her major economic resource throughout her life and with the changing circumstances and attitudes to the theatre she was well placed to take advantage of any situation. As in every facet of her career, however, without the qualities that Dibdin admired so much, it is certain she would never have achieved the success that she did.

CHAPTER 6

SARAH BAKER: CULTURE AND CLASS

So far, in trying to evaluate and understand Sarah Baker's achievements, I have focused on the ways in which the social and political environment in which she lived determined the course of her life and work. In this chapter, I will consider the idea that Sarah's activities, themselves, had an important contribution to make in shaping the nature and character of society in the rapidly evolving towns where she built her theatres. This investigation has been prompted by the realization that much of what I have learned about the development of Sarah's 'theatrical empire' and the way she ran her business does not fit happily with some current theories that stress the increasingly divisive role played by 'culture' in the emergence of a 'class' society at this time.

In addressing these issues I will argue that, far from conforming to this model, Sarah's activities counteracted both the cultural and social polarization that, it is claimed, was taking place at this time. I will also suggest that her 'great grand' new theatres provided exactly the kind of public forum that was vital to the social evolution of the so-called 'middling' sort in the rapidly changing environment of the late eighteenth-century towns where she settled in the 1790s. In this context I will look at the social identity of those who attended her shows, at the entertainments she presented within her theatres and at her own idiosyncratic style of management which, in combination, I believe, made a very positive contribution to the changes taking place. In addition to this I will contemplate the question of Sarah's own social position and whether by the end of her life she, at one time a complete outsider who broke many of the conventions of 'polite society', could herself be described as one of the 'middling' sort.

Urban Renaissance

The key to the importance of the role that Sarah and her company played at this period lies in the volatile and fast-changing environment in which she gradually managed to establish both herself and her theatres towards the end of the eighteenth century. This period is generally regarded as one of urban renaissance which was stimulated by a variety of demographic, economic and social changes. Many new turnpikes were

constructed facilitating travel and numerous Improvement Acts meant that towns and cities across the country, now paved, lit and properly drained for the first time, were stimulating and pleasant places to be. Increasing numbers of people from all walks of life were attracted to these burgeoning towns which have been described as 'the crucible of change'.[1] York and Canterbury, for example, were full of visitors when the races were on. Here, and at similar events across the country it was not only the gentry and their families and the 'upper and middling ranks' who attended but also apprentices and working people who flocked there in unprecedented numbers.[2] Many wealthy families found the improved urban environment so congenial that they moved in for the duration of the season or even settled permanently. This inevitably led to an enlarged working population in these towns.

By the early 1780s Sarah, too, as the manager of a company of strolling players was increasingly attracted to the opportunities afforded by these thriving provincial centres. It was also the case that the fairs, where she had previously enjoyed much success and established her company's reputation, were, again, under attack from moral reformers at this time and losing much of their former popularity. Although she owned premises in Ore and Folkestone, which she certainly used as theatres in the 1770s, and erected her portable wooden theatre in Faversham in 1786, it was not, as I have described, until 1789 that she was at last able to open her first 'great grand' theatre in Canterbury. By 1802 she also owned substantial theatres in Rochester, Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells but until all these were built, like many other provincial companies, she was still obliged, on occasion, to perform in less congenial surroundings just as she had done all her life.[3]

Cultural division and social polarization

The hypothesis propounded by some historians that is so much at odds with what I have discovered about Sarah's activities in the burgeoning towns of this period is that by the end of the eighteenth century there was a great divide between 'elite' and 'popular' culture that had been developing since the early sixteenth century. According to this

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[1] P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance, Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660-1770* (Oxford, 1989), p.317.
[2] Ibid., p.319.
[3] See Chapter 1 above, 'Setting the Scene...', especially p.30 & Chapter 3 above, 'Sarah Baker and her theatres', especially pp. 72-74.

theory, the eighteenth century urban renaissance generated the emergence of a new social group, 'the middling sort', whose existence encouraged and accelerated this trend. This was because the lifestyle and behaviour of this group was increasingly 'exclusive' as opposed to 'inclusive' of the lower orders as they deliberately distanced themselves from, for example, the cultural activities that had previously been enjoyed by everybody.[4]

Peter Burke claims that, by 1800, European elites in general '...had abandoned popular culture to the lower classes from whom they were now separated as never before by profound differences in world view'.[5] This had happened, Burke maintains, as social and economic change polarized and exacerbated divisions in society and the culture of 'ordinary people' was increasingly derided and attacked by the upper and middling ranks.[6]

Peter Borsay, too, writes of 'increasing cultural differentiation' and 'social polarization' which he associates with the withdrawal of the 'elite' from participating in or patronizing the activities of ordinary people in the eighteenth century. This is qualified somewhat by his reference to the 'public character of urban leisure' in the 'renaissance' towns of the later eighteenth century where the entertainments on offer were generally freely open to all 'respectable' people and deliberately designed to promote social contact.[7] He cites the races and the promenades of York or Tunbridge Wells as good examples of this and goes on to say that many plays, concerts and assemblies were also generally accessible.

However, Borsay goes on to add that despite the appearance that new channels of communication were opening up, in reality, access to fashionable urban life was restricted and society was becoming increasingly polarized. This, he argues, was because the 'polite' nature of urban leisure in many ways contradicted the character of traditional customs and recreations and thus the 'urban renaissance' of that era '...attempted to

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[4] See especially Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance,* pp.284-308 & P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), pp. 270-281.
[5] Burke, *Popular Culture,* p.270.
[6] Ibid., pp. 270-281.
[7] Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance*, p.314.

drive a cultural wedge between the new expanded elite and the rest of society, and strove continuously to sustain the fissure between the polite and popular spheres'.[8]

In the course of his study Borsay draws particular attention to what he describes as the 'crucial role' that art and leisure played in separating the social ranks during the eighteenth century. To illustrate this point he describes how anxieties about the 'vulgarization of polite culture' was part of the reason for the passage of the Licensing Act of 1737, the intentions being to reduce 'popular participation' in 'cultural' activities such as theatre.[9]

One of the major difficulties of these theories in respect of my research into Sarah's career concerns the use of the term 'popular culture' and the question of whether this phrase remains appropriate when used in connection with her entertainments once she was established in her elegant new theatres of the 1790s. Burke's definition of 'culture' is: '...a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms (performances, artifacts) in which they are expressed or embodied'. In his terms eighteenth century 'popular' culture meant the culture of 'ordinary' people as opposed to that of the 'elite'.[10]

Although Burke's interpretation seems reasonable enough the definition becomes problematical when applied to Sarah's entertainments. This is especially true in respect of the theories concerning the huge gulf that both he and Borsay maintain existed between 'popular' culture and the 'elite' culture associated with the urban renaissance of the latter eighteenth century. Problems arise, for example, because for decades before Sarah finally became legally established in her first fashionable purpose-built theatre at Canterbury in 1789, both her mother's and her own company's illegal entertainments can hardly be classified as anything other than 'popular culture'. Performances had been widely accessible to the *hoi polloi* and a 'vulgar' public as well as more distinguished patrons and had taken place in fairgrounds, barns, fit-ups and other makeshift 'theatres' in towns and villages across the country.

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[8] Ibid., p.307.
[9] Ibid., pp. 303 & 304.

Even after the opening of her first elegant theatre in Canterbury in 1789, in the towns and villages where she had yet to erect a theatre of her own, Sarah and her company still had occasion to use 'fit ups' and makeshift 'theatres' of one kind or another as she had done throughout her life. It is also the fact that her last known fairground performance took place in 1782, only a few years before she opened her splendid new Canterbury theatre.[11]

Following on from this is the difficulty of identifying the moment when her entertainments could be considered to have crossed the divide and become 'elite'. Although throughout her career Sarah continued to add to her repertoire, many of the plays presented in the early days remained staples of her entertainments. The same was true of the 'usual diversions' mentioned in her first *Kentish Gazette* advertisement in 1772 such as 'comic dancing, interludes, burlettas, operas and pantomimes' which continued to figure in her shows well into the nineteenth century. By this time her purpose-built town theatres, still popular with the 'lower orders', had also long been patronized by the aristocracy and a wide cross section of other inhabitants in the towns where they were based.[12] A further point to be made here is that Sarah's family and other long-standing members of the company continued, as they had always done, to perform in her shows whatever the piece and whatever the venue.

In the circumstances it is hard to see how her entertainments, wherever, or, for whomever they were performed, could ever escape from their traditional/popular roots or be classified as anything other than 'popular' culture. This finding is very much at odds with Borsay's ideas about the association of 'high' or 'elite culture with the elegant new theatres of the urban renaissance and also with Burke's depiction of the cultural chasm that had opened up between the 'ordinary' people and a cultural elite .

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[10] Burke, *Popular Culture*, Prologue, p.1; See also Tim Harris, 'Problematising Popular Culture', in Tim Harris (ed.), *Popular Culture in England c.1500-1850* (London and Hampshire, 1995), pp.1-27.
[11] William Hone, *The Every-Day Book*, Vol. 1 (London, 1825), p.1245
[12] *Kentish Gazette*, 21 November 1772; Sarah Baker's playbills for Tunbridge Wells 1794-1802, Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum; Sarah Baker's playbills, Harvard Theatre Collection; Sarah Baker's Rochester playbills, Hertford Museum. See also Appendix 1.

Sarah's patrons

While country house balls and private musical evenings had always been the prerogative of the wealthy, there is some evidence to suggest that rich patrons did look for new and more exclusive pleasures as the eighteenth century progressed. John Brewer, for example, suggests that concert-goers who paid fabulous sums for the privilege of hearing the music of Haydn and Mozart for the first time'...were concerned to establish the distinctiveness of a musical world separate from the playhouse.. because they offered a venue free from the hoi polloi'.[13]

This may well have been so but it is also clear that many powerful, wealthy and aristocratic patrons continued to patronize and enjoy the less rarefied pleasures on offer at all of Sarah's provincial theatres and were particularly in evidence at Tunbridge Wells in the 1790s and early nineteenth century. This is confirmed by the fact that royalty, and many other high ranking people, allowed their names to be used on her bills.[14] Her Canterbury theatre also enjoyed the patronage of a 'respectable audience' and in August 1789 the *Kentish Gazette* noted that: 'Mrs. Baker's company have been remarkably successful this summer as it is in fashion for ladies of rank to order plays and on such occasions bring all their friends to the theatre'.[15] The individual names of these patrons are not mentioned in her newspaper advertisements for 1789 but the following year, after its official opening, they are happy to publicly associate themselves with performances at her Canterbury theatre. At Rochester and at Maidstone, too, as T.J. Dibdin recalls in his *Reminiscences*, many distinguished men and women were also regular visitors to Sarah's theatres.[16]

Despite her popularity with this group, by no stretch of the imagination could Sarah's theatres be described as 'exclusive' for as well as her elite and titled patrons, throughout her career, her audiences also included numerous more ordinary men and women as well as representatives of the so-called 'hoi-polloi'. At the more 'respectable' end of this market, it was not unusual for army and naval officers to publicly sponsor performances

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[13] J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination, English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997), p.406.
[14] Sarah Baker playbills in Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum.
[15] *Kentish Gazette*, 14-18 August 1789.
[16] T.J. Dibdin, *Reminiscences,* Vol. 1 (London, 1827), pp.205-213.

by her company both before and after the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788 conferred legality on the provincial theatre. The first example of this that I have encountered was for a performance at Dover in February 1775. Again in 1775, when theatrical performance with its 'trickery ..deceit ..illusions and magic' was still widely regarded as highly suspect and morally subversive,[17] the vicar of Folkestone the Rev. Ralph Drake Brockman, publicly 'bespoke' a performance of Charles Dibdin's *The Wedding Ring* at Sarah's theatre in the town.[18] This was a bold statement on his part and would undoubtedly have helped establish Sarah's reputation among the more respectable inhabitants at the time. By the 1790s a broad spectrum of local groups and associations such as the Freemasons as well as educational establishments like the King's School and Miss Jeudwine's School for young ladies, both at Canterbury, and two boys' schools at Maidstone also regularly patronized Sarah's new theatres.[19]

While Sarah must have appreciated this sort of patronage it is also the case that she welcomed virtually anyone, whatever their social rank or background, to even her smartest new theatres. This claim is substantiated by the concern of the Rochester Corporation when she petitioned for a Royal patent for her theatre in the city in 1798 and, in their counter-petition, they noted that, as well as her more distinguished patrons, Sarah's theatres also attracted many local inhabitants '...whose Subsistence, and that of their Families, depend in a great Measure upon their Labour'. The Rochester authorities concern that, in this group, '..Habits of Industry and Frugality should be encouraged, and Dissipation and Licentiousness discountenanced.....' and their belief that the theatre undermined these aims makes it very clear that the 'lower orders' were also well represented in Sarah's theatre in the city. It was, in fact, trouble in the theatre between this group and large numbers of marines, land forces of different descriptions and sailors who were stationed in the vicinity, that prompted the Corporation's opposition to Sarah's petition.[20]

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[17] Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.333.
[18] *Kentish Gazette*, 11 February 1775.
[19] John Morris, *Taking the Town, A Compleat and Authentic Account of Thespian Activity in the County of Kent 1737-1843* (Unpublished manuscript, Theatre Museum, London) p.17.
[20] *Journals of the House of Commons*, Vol. 54, 1798-1799, p.149.

Other evidence that Sarah welcomed all and sundry to her theatres whatever their social background is also contained in her advertisements. These show that, as a rule, even on evenings where the entertainment was presented by particular desire of a wealthy patron, tickets were still widely available at the inns and libraries of the town as well as at the theatre where she, herself, always took the money. Her usual prices of 3s. or 3s. 6d for boxes, 2s. for the pit and 1s. for the gallery had remained more or less the same, despite inflation, since she first advertised in the *Kentish Gazette* in 1772. It does appear, however, that, around 1804, Sarah did try to increase 'half price to the Boxes', to 2s. and made a point of noting this in her playbills. This was a move that would have affected her wealthier, rather than her poorer, patrons but according to Thomas Younger in a letter to James Winston, '...some of the Inhabitants will not give it, considering it of imposition.'[21] This, in itself, is interesting as it indicates that, as well as being reluctant to pay more for this privilege, at least some of Sarah's wealthier patrons had no desire to see the boxes becoming more 'exclusive' through a rise in prices.

'Half price' was also often taken in respect of the pit and gallery, as well as the more expensive box seats, at all of Sarah's theatres including Tunbridge Wells. As Younger noted, this offer depended '...upon Circumstances' so that if the theatre was particularly busy, the half price offer was temporarily withdrawn. Sarah, it seems, responded to market forces as she found them which meant that her theatre was, very occasionally, completely taken over by an elite group as at Tunbridge Wells on 26 September 1795 when the Duchess of York commanded a performance of *My Grandmother* and part of the pit and slips were 'laid into Boxes'. In 1802 when her last theatre opened in Tunbridge Wells, prices of gallery and pit seats remained the same but Sarah obviously felt she could charge more for boxes and raised the price to 4s. Alternatively, if business was slow, she made a specific point of mentioning that 'half-price' was available in her bills of the day.[22]

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[21] Tunbridge Wells playbills in Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum; Thomas Younger to James Winston, 6 January 1804, Theatric Tourist Collection, Birmingham Public Library; Playbills for Sarah Baker's Rochester Theatre for 12 & 19 November, 1804, Hertford Museum.
[22] Tunbridge Wells Playbills for 15 & 22 October 1801, Sprange Collection.

As a rule, 'half price' meant cut price admission half way through a show for all her potential patrons. It was this that would have enabled some of the poorer residents in the towns where she operated to enjoy and experience an evening at the theatre. [23] Catherine Feist recalled that when she had been a member of the company Sarah sometimes 'lent' money to boys who would, otherwise, not have been able to afford the cost of a ticket for 'the play'.[24] Another actress, Ann Mathews also recorded that after 'half-price' time Sarah would sometimes let children, 'little stage-bitten vagrants' as she called them, into the theatre for a few pence or, 'acting as a sort of unlicensed pawn-broker,' would accept small tokens such as knives, scissors, even on one occasion a dove, all of which had to be redeemed before breakfast the following day at the full price of a pit seat'.[25] In this case it was Sarah's good-nature that meant children as well as those who were so poor they could not afford even the cheapest ticket were also, on occasion, exposed to the culture of her shows.

Even in Sarah's proper purpose-built theatres there was never any attempt to segregate the poor from the rich through the use of different entrances to the various parts of the house. According to Younger, despite the fact that '...in all Her Theatres but Faversham and Tunbridge Wells there is Doors to every part of the House from the front ...' these, he stresses, were not used until the performance was over when they were '...thrown open for the purpose of Clearing the House'. When entering her theatres, everybody used the same '...large folding doors in the centre' which were common to all of her theatres and 'only open'd at the time of taking the admission money ...which she always does herself'.[26] Once inside, the dimensions of the auditorium meant that, whatever they had paid for their tickets, the entire audience was contained in a confined and intimate space that rendered any separation of the various social elements in the theatre, virtually impossible.

In 1815, her son-in-law, William Dowton, took over the running of Sarah's theatres and spent large sums on their refurbishment. It was not, however, until January 1817, almost

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[23] Sarah Baker's advertisements in the *Kentish Gazette*; Sprange Collection playbills; Harvard Theatre Collection playbills; Hertford Museum playbills; Thomas Younger to James Winston, 5 December 1803 & 6 January 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[24] Catherine Feist, 'Genuine Gossip by an old actress: The eccentric Mrs. Baker', *Era*, 5 June, 1853.
[25] Ann Mathews, *Anecdotes of Actors* (London, 1844), p.37.

a year after her death, that any special concessions were made to her wealthier patrons. At that time Dowton announced in the *Kentish Gazette* that 'the grand entrance [of the Canterbury theatre] will in future be appropriated to the Dress Circle only, and that a commodious lobby has been fitted up for their convenience'. He also raised the price of boxes to 4s. but soon had to go back to the old charge. Another innovation of his at Canterbury in 1817 was a 'Fashionable Night' on a Tuesday but this raised a storm of protest and his manager, Vincent De Camp, had to apologize for the 'unintended snobbery'.[27]

This evidence all goes a long way to prove that Sarah's even handed approach to her patrons was not a conscious piece of altruistic social engineering but, more likely, due to hard headed commercial necessity on her part. By the end of the century she had established her own 'theatrical empire' in terms of bricks and mortar, but the problems of filling her 'great, grand' theatres remained a perpetual challenge. Younger, for example, in one of his letters to James Winston refers to the difficulties of getting people to her theatre in Maidstone and even in Canterbury the 'business', while 'always great at Race times', was only 'tolerable' on other occasions.[28] For this reason, financial considerations alone must have underlain most of Sarah's decisions about her theatres and there can be little doubt that this was the case with the 'democratic' prices she charged her potential patrons.

Sarah's repertoire [29]

Additionally, Sarah's commercial 'nose' meant that she was equally pragmatic when it came to her repertoire. From the late 1770s, for example, she worked hard to link her company's reputation to that of William Shakespeare who '... epitomized a moral inheritance not monopolized by one particular group or view...'.[30] The Licensing Act of 1737 had banned these plays from provincial stages but many local authorities regarded the legislation as partisan and high handed. For this reason, it seems, she was

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[26] Younger to Winston, 6 January 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[27] N. Hodgson 'Sarah Baker (1736/37-1816) "Governess-general of the Kentish drama" from *Studies in English Theatre History* (Society for Theatre Research, 1952)' (Incomplete, typed manuscript, Canterbury Cathedral Archives), p.8; Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.40.
[28] Younger to Winston, 5 December 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[29] See also Appendix 1.
[30] Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.241.

able to get away with advertising regular performances of one or other of Shakespeare's plays from the 1770s. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Richard III* and *Hamlet* were all in her repertoire in this decade. From 1780 her advertisements show that *Henry II*, *King Lear*, *Henry IV*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth*, *As you Like it*, *Twelfth Night*, *Coriolanus*, *Catherine & Petruchio* and *The Tempest* were also regularly on the bill. Like David Garrick before her, she knew that Shakespeare generated an image which her company, endeavouring to establish a respectable reputation for itself in difficult circumstances, sorely needed. Later, in the 1790s, now firmly entrenched in her five main towns, she still included Shakespeare in her repertoire but far less often as demand was then for the most recent London pieces. These, in line with the stipulations of the Theatrical Representations Act as well as for more obvious publicity purposes, she often billed as having been performed at either Covent Garden or Drury Lane.[31] More traditional items such as hornpipes and songs of specific local significance such as 'The Tunbridge Wells Landlords' which refers to various local inns were also often included.

Political consciousness

Burke has stated that: '..If anything made politics part of ordinary life for ordinary people in the eighteenth century ..that thing was surely the newspaper..'[32] It is also very clear, however, as I have already demonstrated, that Sarah's theatres also made a significant contribution in raising the political consciousness of her provincial audiences. Her advertisements and playbills often alluded to major national concerns and current affairs and, for example, included reference to the revolution in France, the French wars, and the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade. Local issues were also addressed and there is reference in her advertisements, for example, to events such as the election in Canterbury in the spring of 1790 and to the dedication of a new Freemasons Hall in the city which was celebrated by the performance of an ode.[33] Many of the plays she presented throughout her career lent themselves to elaboration and improvisation to suit the concerns and demands of the day. I have already referred to Sheridan's *The Critic: Or a Tragedy Rehearsed*[34] and other examples include George Farquhar's *The*

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[31] See Chapter 2 above, 'Behind the Scenes...', p.66.
[32] Burke, *Popular Culture*, p.264.
[33] *Kentish Gazette*, 13-16 & 27-30 April 1790, 11-14 May 1790. See also Chapter 4 above, 'Theatre and War...'.
[34] See Chapter 4, 'Theatre and War...' above, p. 125.

Recruiting Officer, George Lillo's, *The London Merchant*, Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian* and George Coleman the younger's *Inkle and Yarico*, all of which were regularly on the bill.[35]

The overtly patriotic flavour of many of her shows, particularly at times of crisis during the French wars demonstrated that her theatres constituted a useful forum for generating enthusiasm and support at all levels of the community for the war effort. By associating herself so closely with the sort of patriotism promoted by the likes of Richard Cumberland, Commanding Officer of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Volunteer Troop and, thereby, with the establishment cause, Sarah was, at the same time, able to reinforce her own respectability and standing in the town.

Patriotism has always been a useful weapon to whoever manages to commandeer it, especially at times of national instability such as existed in the 1790s and early 1800s. Both the government and, inadvertently, Sarah, herself, gained much through its appropriation. In addition to this, as Hugh Cunningham has pointed out, patriotism also has another less obvious role to play. This is that both 'admirers and opponents' alike see patriotism as '...a counterweight to class consciousness'.[36] In terms of the heterogeneous crowd that gathered in Sarah's theatres, this is of particular significance for a demonstrative, noisy, shared patriotism must have constituted a powerful bond among an otherwise disparate group of people.

A shared culture

Sarah's performances, therefore, entertained, informed, educated and influenced her audiences across the social divide and for these reasons it is difficult to see how her theatrical enterprise fits in with Borsay's contention that the theatre was among the cultural activities that '...strove continuously to sustain the fissure between the polite and popular spheres'.[37] Far from driving a 'cultural wedge' between the upper and middling ranks and the general populace, I believe Sarah's prosaic approach achieved

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[35] See Kathleen Wilson, 'The good, the bad, and the impotent: Imperialism and the politics of identity in Georgian England', in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (eds.), *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text* (London, 1995), pp. 245-248; See also Appendix 1.

[36] H. Cunningham, 'The Language of Patrioism, 1750-1914', *History Workshop Journal*, No.12 (Autumn 1981) p.8.

exactly the opposite effect. While it's clear that patriotism played a useful part in cutting across class barriers in her theatre, in other ways, too, as I have shown, her theatres had a leavening effect. Borsay cites the Pump Room and facilities at Bath as being 'an extraordinarily rich and bustling market for the exchange of news, gossip, knowledge, ideas and fashions among the nation's elite'.[38] I would suggest that Sarah's theatres offered an equally rich and rewarding experience, but one that encompassed both 'elite' and less elevated members of society.

Many historians portray the landed elite, not the urban 'middling sort', as responsible for the growth of a national culture.[39] In contemplating this issue, however, Jonathan Barry does concede that 'the elite could have been influenced by the values of the middling sort with whom they had close contact in the urban arena where they were spending increasing periods of the year'.[40] I believe that this was true of Sarah's theatres but that the process went even further than this. Sarah's pragmatism and commercial acumen meant that her theatres were patronised by all classes. Closely associated with the urban renaissance of the late eighteenth century, it can be argued that she, through her theatres, had an involvement in creating a 'shared culture' for the 'middling' sort in the provinces. T. J. Clark's description of social mobility in nineteenth century France where '...consciousness of individual freedom involved more and more an estrangement from older ties'[41] has its parallels in Sarah's theatres almost a century before that. For, in effect, her auditoriums were an interface where a broad cross section of society came together to enjoy an eclectic range of entertainments that reflected their mixed tastes and expectations and at the same time provided a common social experience. In this way her theatres constituted a forum that facilitated change.

The 'middling' sort

I have already considered the question of why Sarah's theatres were not only tolerated but, from the 1790s, positively encouraged by local elites as a, seemingly, essential component of the fashionable urban scene and have shown that the Theatrical

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[37] Borsay, *English Urban Renaissance*, p.307.
[38] Ibid. p.314.
[39] J. Barry, 'Introduction', J. Barry & C. Brooks, (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (London, 1994), p.8.
[40] Ibid. p.8.

Representations Act of 1788 lay behind this transformation. I have also suggested that the key to understanding the impact of this legislation lies, primarily, in the effect it had on local elites and that the splendid new urban theatres that sprung up at this time were synonymous with, and symbolic of, the extension of the local power and status of the town's civic leaders.

Another reason for the popularity of such projects at this time was that they provided the opportunity for the aspiring 'middling sort' to establish a positive social status for themselves in a society that was characterized by conditions of flux and mobility and where 'urban identities rested as much on the permanence of buildings ...as on people'.[42] Barry struggles to define 'the middling sort' but accepts a 'compact' definition as 'independent trading households who had to work for their income, trading with the products of their hands...or with the skills in business or the professions for which they had trained.'[43] Economically, therefore, the 'middling sort' were fragmented by the need to work for their incomes using innumerable different skills which divided them into many categories. Barry emphasizes the degree to which urban association was devoted to bringing unity out of such diversity. As property owners with an increasing stake in the status quo, the 'middling sort' not only needed the safeguards provided by the law and local and national government but also other forms of public and private association through which to reinforce and bolster their identity as a group and, here, the development of a common cultural identity was as important as any other aspect of the process.[44]

Sarah - one of the 'middling' sort?

But where did this leave Sarah herself in terms of her social position? On the face of it she was an unlikely candidate for acceptance by 'the middling sort', which, according to Barry, grew from 'interrelationships within the group rather than from relationships with those above or below them'.[45] Furthermore, she hardly fits with the theory that the

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[41] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (London, 1985), p.3.
[42] Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism? Urban Association and the Middling Sort', in Barry & Brooks, (eds.), *Middling Sort of People*, p.84.
[43] Barry 'Introduction', p.2.
[44] Ibid, p.26.
[45] Ibid, p.24.

'middling sort' were 'centred on the figure of the adult male householder'.[46] Additionally, the theatre was still subject to much suspicion and regular attack by moral reformers and, here, Brewer underlines the fact that it remained extremely difficult for theatrical personnel to 'become respectable'.[47] As a strolling player Sarah was still officially classified as 'a rogue and a vagabond' until 1788 and potentially subject to all the penalties and punishments inflicted on such people. Moreover, as a successful business woman at a time when distance from work was a prerequisite of middle-class identity for most women, she was also in an invidious position.

On the other hand some historians theorize that the middle classes are 'continuously making themselves'[48] and, therefore, in some respects there are no hard and fast rules as to who can or cannot be categorized as such. Once established in her theatres Sarah, herself, certainly did not want to be reminded of her 'strolling days' and Catherine Feist in her 'Genuine Gossip' column tells of her anger when, in the early nineteenth century, one of her aristocratic patrons at Tunbridge Wells made reference to her company's strolling origins. According to Mrs. Feist, it was the 'affable' Marquis of Donegal whose 'bespeak' had taken place at the theatre the previous evening who remarked to Sarah: 'You have an excellent company Mrs. Baker, indeed I think yours is the very best strolling company I ever saw'. His comment was meant as a complement but Sarah was thoroughly insulted and 'cuss[ed] his impudence' for calling 'her people' strollers.[49]

It is not surprising that Sarah was angered by this comment as she and her company had come a long way since her 'strolling' days and by that time had certainly acquired many of the attributes characteristic of the growing ranks of the 'middling sort'. In this context it is relevant to note that in his *Reminiscences*, Dibdin advised the theatrical fraternity in general that, to achieve success, they must, '...in spite of saints, critics, and snarlers of every sect and sort, endeavour to make their calling respectable by the undeviating propriety of their own conduct'.[50] This, she had certainly done when, for example, in 1802 she twice gave all the profits of performances at her Canterbury

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[46] Barry, 'Introduction', p.2.
[47] Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.419.
[48] P. Earle, 'The Middling Sort in London', in Barry & Brooks, *Middling Sort of People*, pp. 141-158; Barry, 'Introduction', p.24 also cites E.P. Thompson's theories about class formation.
[49] Catherine Feist, 'Genuine Gossip...,' *Era*, 5 June, 1853.

theatre to the Kent and Canterbury Hospital.[51] On the second of these occasions, a list of contributions to this cause, shows that the £24 2s. 6d. 'Produce of a Play at the Theatre, by Mrs. Baker' was a considerably larger sum than virtually any other in the long list of donors.[52] At her Rochester theatre, too, there is a record of a performance 'for the Benefit of the Poor' when, according to the *Kentish Gazette*, 'the receipts amounted to £76 13s. 6d. the whole of which, to the honour of Mrs. Baker, was deposited in the hand of the Mayor...'.[53]

Dibdin, who had known Sarah well for the last twenty-seven years of her life considered that 'she owned an excellent heart, with much of the appearance and manners of a gentlewoman...'.[54] The latter attributes were especially important in the new urban environment where 'polite behaviour and sociability' were particularly 'effective in ensuring the safe pursuit of status... unimpaired by barriers of rank or birth'.[55] Sarah also measures up to Barry's 'compact' definition of the 'middling sort' and seems to have personified the classic, 'success bringing' and much admired virtues of this group which he describes as - 'industry, thrift, self-discipline, [and] credit worthiness'.[56] By the 1790s Sarah had also acquired many of the material trappings and possessions such as property, silver plate and good furniture which Barry maintains were 'associated with the pursuit of status and consolidation of position in society...[and].. allowed more and more people access to gentility'.[57] Finally, Sarah also sought to ensure the survival of her estate through a complex will which involved complicated trust funds set up in favour of her grandsons thus ensuring the standing of her family in the future. Here again she conforms to Barry's criteria of middle class consciousness.[58]

A final point to make about Sarah is the manner in which she was remembered by her contemporaries, and subsequently always written about, as 'a character'. J.S. Bratton is

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[50] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol.1, p.205.
[51] *Kentish Gazette*, 22 June &10 August, 1802.
[52] Ibid., 17 August, 1802.
[53] Ibid., 30 March, 1802. See also Chapter 5 above, 'Women in a World of Men?', pp. 173-174.
[54] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1, p.94.
[55] Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism', p.318.
[56] Ibid, p.15.
[57] Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism', p.316.
[58] Barry, 'Introduction', p.26.

very critical of what she regards as '...the marginalisation of a successful independent woman in the theatre...' to fit the sensibilities of a new and 'respectable' era of theatrical activity following the Reform Act of 1832.[59] One of the best accounts we have of Sarah is that of Tom Dibdin who, together with his wife, Nancy, was employed by and remained friendly with Sarah and her family for many years. In his memoirs, he is at pains to describe the 'idyllic' time he spent with her and her kindness and competence in organizing the company's affairs, but he also presents her as 'a character', and comments that, 'she had many eccentricities.[60]

Catherine Feist, too, refers to Sarah as 'eccentric'. She first met Sarah when she was already between seventy and eighty years old but comments that apart from the fact that she was very lame by then, '...time had dealt gently with her; her faculties were unimpaired, and she was hale and hodge. Her figure was short slim, and upright, and her face yet showed the "remains of beauty once admired".' Her dress, however, was described as:

> '...peculiar and sorted well with her eccentricities of behaviour. Winter or summer it never varied. She wore a dark gown, over which was drawn a still darker shawl, pinned so tightly round her throat as to suggest the idea of incipient strangulation. A small black bonnet, with three short and strongly curled black feathers, surmounted her head - and this bonnet she wore indoors and out, and indeed it was a moot point with many persons, ...whether or not she ever substituted a night-cap for it.'[61]

I do not believe that either Dibdin or Mrs. Feist, who was also generous in her praise of Sarah, had any ulterior motive in their descriptions of her but, rather, that it was possible that Sarah deliberately cultivated this image for herself. Brewer describes how Garrick '..played the part of the cultivated gentleman scholar with as much skill as he ever acted Richard III' in order to be assimilated by high society and comments that the energy he devoted to this demonstrated how difficult it was for an actor, even of his standing, to become respectable.[62] If this was the case with Garrick, how much more difficult it must have been for Sarah, as a woman, to achieve any kind of acceptance by 'the middling

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[59] J.S. Bratton, 'Sarah Baker: The Making of a "Character"', in Richard Foulkes (ed.), *Scenes from Provincial Stages* (London, 1994), p.45.
[60] Dibdin, *Reminiscences* Vol. 1, p.94.
[61] Feist, 'Genuine Gossip...,' *Era*, 5 June, 1853.
[62] Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.420.

sort' in the provinces. In conventional terms she would have been beyond the pale but as 'a character', it seems she was more readily accepted and, therefore, better able to thrive in that environment.

Conclusion

Sarah's life and experience was inextricably linked to the 'urban renaissance' of the later eighteenth century and she and her company benefited from the changes that were then taking place. It was a particularly challenging time for a woman in Sarah's situation but with her flair and ambition and pragmatic approach to problems, she took advantage of every opportunity that presented itself. Because of her company's origins and the eclectic nature of her repertoire which for commercial reasons had to appeal to such a broad social spectrum, as well as conform to the expectations of the local elites who granted her licenses, I believe that her entertainments counteracted the cultural polarization identified by some historians as characteristic of that period. At a time of social flux and mobility, her theatres also constituted tangible proof of the new status of a town's civic leaders as well as providing a useful public forum where anybody could seek to reinforce or bolster their identity as one of the 'middling sort'. In this way, I believe she and her theatres made a positive contribution to the character and nature of the society in which they were based. It is also the case that, despite her inauspicious start in life, by the 1790s, Sarah, herself, through her own hard work, material success and attitude to life, met many of the criteria expected of those whose aspiration was to become one of the 'middling' sort.

CHAPTER 7

RE-WRITING PROVINCIAL THEATRE HISTORY

The evidence I have amassed on Sarah Baker's career as manager of a theatrical troupe and entrepreneur has thrown up a lot of challenges to existing accounts of the history of the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century. Many of these challenges emanate directly from the fact that little, if any, account has been taken of the profound effect that the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788 had on provincial players such as Sarah whose activities, problematical enough at the best of times, had, until then, also been illegal. In this context my research has demonstrated that the widely held theory that by the 1770s strolling players and their entertainments were 'a thing of the past' certainly did not apply where she and her troupe were concerned. Neither does what I have learned of Sarah's career fit with the claim that by 1760 the leisure 'industry' in this country had already taken off. Even more significantly, the suggestion that 'leisure' played a socially divisive role in separating the ranks and that the elitist entertainments of the provincial theatre epitomized the gap that had opened up between polite and popular culture, simply does not hold water in the case of Sarah's activities. In the course of my research it has also become increasingly clear that to conceive of the theatre of the provinces as a mere extension of the London scene with no dynamic or life of its own, constitutes a serious misreading of its relevance and place in the context of the broader history of that time.[1]

My investigation into Sarah's career has focused, in the main, on Kent but in the course of this project I have, inevitably, come across considerable amounts of information about theatrical companies elsewhere in the country and been struck not only by the extent and diversity of their activities but also by the parallels, similarities and direct connections

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[1] These accounts come from: P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance, Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660-1770* (Oxford, 1989); P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978); J. H. Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure in Eighteenth-century England* (Reading, 1973); J.H. Plumb, 'The Public, Literature and the Arts in the Eighteenth Century', in P. S. Fritz & D. Williams, *The Triumph of Culture* (Toronto, 1972); John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (London, 1997); John Brewer, ' "The most polite age and the most vicious": Attitudes towards culture as a commodity, 1660-1800', in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (eds.), *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text* (London, 1995).

with Sarah's Kentish company. The first point to make here is the correlation that I have found between the material Sarah presented on the stages of her various theatres and that produced by other provincial companies elsewhere in the country at very much the same time. Another similarity is that the seat prices which made her theatres so accessible to all ranks of people were virtually identical with those of other theatres throughout the provinces. It was also the case that most other troupes, as well as individual players, travelled considerable distances in order to work and it was not uncommon to find the name of a member of Sarah's troupe on the playbill of another company.[2] Occasionally Sarah actually made reference in her advertisements to theatres in various parts of the country where temporary or new members of her company usually, or had previously, played. Thus we know that players from London, Weymouth, Cheltenham, Dublin, Edinburgh and Birmingham all performed at one time or another in her theatres. Like Sarah, many eighteenth-century players were born into theatrical families that went back one, two or even three generations and in general, there was a tremendously high level of interaction, both professional and personal, between players in the country as a whole. As in Sarah's case, most companies played in a motley collection of 'theatres' such as fairground booths, fit-ups, barns, malt-houses and inn-yards as well as in more conventional premises if the opportunity arose. In some instances this pattern continued well into the nineteenth century. Other companies, like hers, also competed fiercely for the right to play in a town or village particularly at fair-time or when the assizes or races were on and the biggest profits could be made. Before the Theatrical Representations Act was passed in 1788, the vast majority of provincial troupes also performed illegally, as Sarah had done, usually in a makeshift 'theatre' of one kind or another, under the watchful eye of the local authority.

A defining factor in Sarah's success, both before and after the Act of 1788, was the good relationship she established with the local authorities in areas where she performed with her company. It is apparent that this was also the case with other successful itinerant companies. The opening of Sarah's first proper purpose-built theatre in the wake of the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788 coincided, too, with a flurry of provincial theatre

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[2] For example, Mr. and Mrs. Worsdale with Sarah's company in 1796, 1797, 1800 and 1801 were playing at the Exeter Theatre in 1812 and 1813; Mr. and Mrs. Stanwix, with Sarah's company in 1794

building elsewhere around the same time which further indicates that the conditions involved in Sarah's success also applied in other areas.

The overall image of provincial theatre that has emerged from my research is of an eclectic but none-the-less integrated 'tribe' of theatrical performers who, often closely involved with the authorities in areas where they operated, constituted an informal nationwide network through which a shared culture was disseminated and established across the length and breadth of the country. It is also apparent that the theatrical legislation which, to a large extent, dictated the character and course of Sarah's career, had a similar impact in other areas. As a consequence of these findings I now strongly believe that the challenges which Sarah's activities pose to existing theories on provincial theatre can, with ample justification, be extended to include the provincial theatre in the country as a whole at that time. From this premise it is a logical step to conclude that this has serious implications for current perceptions of the role of eighteenth-century provincial theatre in its national context and demonstrates the necessity of a complete re-assessment of its place in the history of this country at that time.

Challenging the 'Status Quo'

Before setting out the evidence that substantiates this hypothesis, I will first describe some of the ways in which the eighteenth-century provincial theatre is currently represented in the literature on the period. On the whole, it is a case of widespread indifference and neglect. Even when the issue is addressed accounts are often vague, inadequate or misleading with the consequence that its role and status is habitually marginalized or misunderstood. In mind of what I have discovered about Sarah's theatrical activities I will consider and investigate the reasons for the discrepancies between my own conclusions and those contained in other accounts of the provincial theatre at that time.

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were with Thomas Collins and his Salisbury Comedians and then at Henry Thornton's Chelmsford Theatre in 1797.

In most general histories of eighteenth century Britain provincial theatre is not mentioned at all, either as a physical, or social, presence.[3] Ian R. Christie, for example, in his account of the years 1760-1815, a period of wars and revolutions at home and abroad, writes of how '...men looked about them for reassurance and security' at that time. He also examines the reasons why 'buffeted by all these strains and forces of change...stemming from political or economic confrontation, the British nation remained on an even keel'.[4] But nowhere in his otherwise enlightening account of this period does he consider the role and influence of the provincial theatre during this turbulent period. Neither does the role of theatre figure in Harold Perkin's classic interpretation of the 'industrial revolution' even though he states that this was as much a '... social revolution with social causes and a social process [with] profound social effects' as anything else.[5] Linda Colley, too, in her thought-provoking book on how a new British nation was invented in the wake of the 1707 Act of Union[6], barely touches on the contribution made by the theatre, let alone the provincial theatre, in constructing and confirming in the psyche of the inhabitants of this country, the idea of what it was to be British. She at least acknowledges this omission[7] but in terms of her subject matter, it is a major one that, I believe, well illustrates my contention that theatre in general and provincial theatre in particular is a topic that deserves more attention.

One of the explanations for the general neglect is that the provincial theatre is a notoriously difficult area to research and relatively few in-depth studies have been undertaken especially with regard to this particular period. The major problem has been that although there are numerous references to and glimpses of troupes of players operating in towns, villages and rural areas all over the country in the eighteenth century, evidence of their existence is inevitably fragmented and hard to come by. This is not only because of the transient nature of their work but also because from 1737-1788 the illegality of most companies meant there was little documentation about their activities, and sources, such as they are, are inevitably scattered and often obscure. The situation

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[3] An exception is Paul Langford's *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989) although, crucially, where provincial theatre is concerned, the period covered by his book does not extend to 1788.
[4] Ian R. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain 1760-1815* (London, Melbourne, Auckland, 1992), p.2.
[5] Harold Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society* (London & New York, 1969), p.ix.
[6] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London, 1992).
[7] Ibid., p.8.

improves somewhat in the 1770s as a handful of provincial playbills survive from this period and increasing numbers of newspaper advertisements help to shed more light on the situation. In this respect R.M. Wiles' study of advertisements in the provincial press of the 1770s is helpful.[8] Although little more than a 'snapshot' it does at least demonstrate that numerous theatrical companies were performing 'hundreds of plays' in myriad venues across the country during this decade. While the Act of 1788 legalized the activities of many troupes of travelling players, detailed information remains sketchy and sporadic which, again, does little to alleviate the problems of establishing a satisfactory history for the provincial theatre of this period.

Compounding these difficulties is the fact that the legislative framework that constrained, defined and underlay the very special characteristics of provincial theatre in the eighteenth century is widely ignored even in articles or books specifically concerned with theatre history.[9] Without addressing the impact and implications of this legislation it is very difficult to place the provincial theatre in the context of the wider history of the period and it is little wonder that the evidence that does exist has lent itself to generalization, speculation and misinterpretation. For example, in his work on building for cultural purposes in provincial England, C.W. Chalklin makes no mention of the parliamentary legislation relating to the provincial theatre.[10] This omission leads him to associate its development solely with economic factors and the continued growth in size and prosperity of the larger towns. Although he notes that 'theatre building in the regional centres was particularly marked in the later 1780s and early 1790s' the 'basic reason' for this was that these were 'years of commercial expansion'.[11] Chalklin's failure to make any reference to the legislation that framed the development of the provincial theatre in the eighteenth century means that the premise upon which he bases his conclusions is, at best, flawed. More than this, in failing to take account of the effect of the Acts of 1737 and 1788, his explanation encourages and perpetuates the myth of provincial theatre as a passive entity with no dynamic or history of its own.

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[8] R.M. Wiles, 'Provincial Culture in Early Georgian England', in P.S. Fritz and D. Williams (eds.), *The Triumph of Culture: Eighteenth Century Perspectives* (Toronto, 1972).

[9] See 'Introduction' above, p.1.

[10] C.W. Chalklin, 'Capital Expenditure on Building for Cultural Purposes in Provincial England, 1730-1830', *Business History*, Vol. 22, 1980, pp. 51-70.

[11] Ibid., pp.53-54 & 57-58.

There are similar problems with J.H. Plumb's influential and enduring model of the role of provincial theatre in the eighteenth century which originated in a celebrated lecture he gave in 1974.[12] On that occasion he addressed the idea of how, by 1760, the leisure 'industry' in this country had already 'taken off'. One of the illustrations he used to support his hypothesis was that of the provincial theatre. This lecture followed up an article he had written two years earlier in which he had claimed that by the mid eighteenth century, 'Except for the remoter parts of England, gone forever were the days when a band of strolling comedians took over a farmer's barn for bawdy traditional farces, grotesque melodrama and conjuring tricks... .'[13] Now he explained how the prosperous gentry and the new leisured middle class 'hungered' for cultural pastimes such as theatre which their own private houses were not large enough to accommodate. Plumb identified the Assembly Room as 'marking the transitional stage between private and fully public entertainment' and spoke of how 'culture seeped through to the masses and so became more commercially viable'.[14] He also stated that while in the later seventeenth century there had been '...no provincial theatres of any kind', by the mid eighteenth century, '...every town of any pretension had a well built theatre and a regular company'.[15]

Plumb's theories bear little relation to the evidence I have of Sarah Baker and her theatres.[16] Neither, as I will also demonstrate, do they generally apply to the situation and activities of other theatrical companies in towns and villages across the country. Here again, I believe that the underlying problem with Plumb's account of the provincial theatre of that period is due to the unsatisfactory nature of the criteria upon which he bases his ideas. Most importantly, he fails to take any account of the legislative framework within which it was forced to operate from 1737 until 1788. In fact he totally misrepresents the true situation by stating that the Licensing Act of 1737 actually granted Justices of the Peace the right to license strolling players.[17] The Theatrical

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[12] Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure*.
[13] Plumb, 'The Public, Literature and the Arts...', p. 44.
[14] Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure*, p.17-18.
[15] Ibid., p.13.
[16] See above, especially Chapter 2, 'Behind the Scenes...'; Chapter 3, 'Sarah Baker and her Theatres' & Chapter 6, 'Sarah Baker: Culture and Class'.
[17] Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure*, p.13, footnote 40.

Representations Act of 1788 is not mentioned at all. This omission, I believe, resulted in the creation of a very distorted, but none the less influential, account of the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century upon which all sorts of other erroneous assumptions and conclusions have since been based.

The true relevance and role of the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century is also often overlooked or misrepresented because it is so frequently classified together with cricket, horse racing, gaming, and even boxing, under the generic heading of 'leisure'. In view of the fragmented and relatively inaccessible evidence available this is understandable but, once again, the concept of provincial theatre as a unique art form with a history and influence of its own is undermined. It is small wonder that marginalization of this kind perpetuates the myth that provincial theatre was on a par with other 'fringe activities' and, likewise, had no particular consequence or significance in terms of either local or national development. Borsay is typical in that although he argues that '....the development of fashionable urban architecture and leisure opened a widening cultural gap between polite and popular society' during this period[18] he, none the less, makes little reference to theatre *per se* in the text of his book. When he does mention it, it is in tandem with other leisure activities such as horse racing and cricket, all of which he equates with 'high' or 'polite' culture and classifies as 'fashionable pastimes'. As such, he maintains, they were all equally vulnerable to the same drive towards commercialization which rendered them increasingly accessible to a 'vulgar' public. To add weight to his argument that art and leisure played a crucial role in separating the social ranks Borsay links the Theatrical Licensing Act of 1737 with other 'draconian' laws relating to gaming (1739) and horse-racing (1740) and suggests that this constitutes evidence of the efforts being made to reinforce the exclusivity of these activities. [19]

Whatever the situation with regard to other leisure activities Borsay's theories, as I have already demonstrated, are less than satisfactory where the specific example of Sarah Baker's company is concerned.[20] In her case circumstances dictated that, until 1789,

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[18] Borsay, *English Urban Renaissance*, p.300.
[19] Ibid., p.304.
[20] See above, Chapter 6, 'Sarah Baker: Culture and Class', pp. 185-202.

she and her company had no choice but to perform wherever and in whatever makeshift premises were available to them either playing in a portable wooden theatre at fairs or in other temporary 'theatres' of one kind or another. Even after this date, as she began to establish her 'theatrical empire', in the towns where she had yet to open her own purpose-built theatre, she still had to play in whatever venue was made available to her. Thus, the culture of the elegant new urban theatres that she erected between 1789 and 1802 in Canterbury, Rochester, Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells not only originated in the fairground but was also synonymous with that of the less salubrious surroundings in which the company was still, on occasion, obliged to perform right up until the end of the eighteenth century. With regard to the identity of Sarah's patrons in her 'great grand' theatres, I have also shown that she welcomed a broad cross section of the public here and this, again, flies in the face of Borsay's generalized claim that 'leisure' had a divisive role to play in the development of a class society at this time.[21] These objections to Borsay's theories rest on evidence that I have gathered with regard to Sarah's enterprise. They are equally valid, I believe, when applied to the activities of other itinerant groups of strolling players who operated in similarly inauspicious circumstances in Kent, as well as elsewhere in the country, during this period.

The 'London' factor

Lack of information about what was happening with regard to individual theatre companies in the provinces and neglect of eighteenth-century acts of parliament relating specifically to provincial theatre has meant that it is often presumed that what was happening on the much better documented London theatrical scene was echoed in the provinces. This assumption, it seems, must be at the root of Peter Burke's unconvincing account of the emergence of an 'entertainment industry' during the eighteenth century and his claim that companies of strolling players, such as Sarah's, simply ceased to exist as the century progressed.[22] Burke argues that in this country '...as elsewhere in the eighteenth century economy, large scale enterprises drove out small ones...' He adds that 'one might have expected the English to be the pioneers of this early industrial

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[21] Ibid; also above, Chapter 1, 'Setting the Scene...', p.30 & Chapter 3, 'Sarah Baker and her Theatres', pp.72-74.
[22] P. Burke, *Popular Culture*, pp.244-286.

revolution in entertainment'.[23] This basic misconception stems, it appears, from the fact that Burke, in seeking to establish the claim that 'eighteenth- century England witnessed a 'commercialization of leisure'' takes one example, that of Philip Astley's circus founded at Westminster Bridge in 1770,[24] and uses it to generalize about 'popular culture' in the country as a whole.

He is not unusual in his assumption that what was happening in London automatically reflected the situation elsewhere in the country. John Brewer also fails to acknowledge the differences in his account of the formation of 'culture' in the public sphere in eighteenth-century England.[25] This is because in his contemplation upon 'English' culture, where he addresses the role of 'theatre' in some detail, he takes as his model the London theatres of Covent Garden, Drury Lane, Goodman's Fields, Lincoln's Inn Fields and the Haymarket.[26] In applying his theories about these theatres to the theatre in general Brewer whose own perspective, it seems, is summed up in this instance by his statement that '...culture travelled only one way, out of London rather than in from the provinces',[27] fails to take any account of the very different status and characteristics of the theatre outside the capital.

Using the London theatre as an example, Brewer argues that culture became a commodity in the eighteenth century and describes theatrical impresarios as among those who '....became the new capitalists of cultural enterprise at this time'.[28] Because the new breed of cultural entrepreneur was 'agnostic when it came to the question of culture as a means of moral improvement' a culture was created '...that was driven by luxury, social emulation, human appetite and desire'. This new 'blatantly commercial' culture was feared, says Brewer, for the way it 'undermined social distinctions' and, also, condemned for abandoning the 'instructive and morally elevated cultural forms for crude entertainment'.[29]

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[23] Ibid., p.249.
[24] Ibid., pp.248-249.
[25] Brewer, ' "The most polite age..." ', pp. 341-361.
[26] Ibid., pp. 346-347.
[27] Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.494.
[28] Brewer, ' "The most polite age..." ', p.346.
[29] Ibid., p. 349.

It is difficult to reconcile what I have learned of Sarah Baker and of her theatrical enterprise in Kent with this description. For example, the 'extraordinary variety of entertainments' and 'apparent absence of discrimination between cultural forms' that Brewer associates with the 'cultural commercialization' taking place in the London theatres of the eighteenth century[30] had been a characteristic of Sarah and her family's theatrical entertainments probably long before her first advertisement appeared in the *Kentish Gazette* in November, 1772. So had her appeal to a heterogeneous public which Brewer associates only with the 'commercialized culture' of the London theatres. In Sarah's case this must have had something to do with the cost of full-price seats in her theatres which varied little between 1772 and 1816 and were, consistently, about half that of full-price tickets for the major London theatres. For example, in 1790 full-price seats for the opening night performance of *Inkle and Yarico* at Sarah's first legitimate theatre in Canterbury were, 'Boxes 3s.- Pit 2s. and Gallery 1s.', while, for a performance of the same play at the Haymarket Theatre in 1791, the equivalent prices were Boxes 6s.- Pit 3s.6d.- Gallery 2s.[31]

Furthermore Brewer's statement that 'from the entrepreneurs' perspective the public was defined as those who possess and consume'[32] is also far too simplistic a definition when applied to the theatres of provincial entrepreneurs. For one thing, it totally ignores the constraints imposed by their dependence on the good will of the local magistracy both before, and after, the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788. [33] As Kathleen Wilson has pointed out, 'the precarious existence of theatre, both as a closely supervised political medium dependent upon magisterial tolerance' as well as '...a commercialized cultural arena requiring the sympathy and support of its audience...' necessitated a particularly sensitive approach on the part of local entrepreneurs.[34]

A further difference was that, by the end of the century, the larger London theatres were compelled to produce ever more spectacular shows in ever larger and more luxurious theatres in the battle for commercial survival. This development proved disastrous in

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[30] Ibid., p.348.
[31] *Kentish Gazette*, 12-18 January, 1790; Cutting No. 6199.40, Theatre Collection, Hertford Museum.
[32] Brewer, "The Most Polite Age...", p.348.
[33] See above, Chapter 2, 'Behind the Scenes...' & Chapter 6, 'Sarah Baker: Culture and Class.'

more ways than one. For example, such vast sums were laid out to build these emporiums and fill them with extravaganza that economic viability was an impossibility A further problem was that, although the patent theatres were the supposed guardians of the 'legitimate drama', it was extremely difficult to perform this sort of material in these theatres because they were so big that the actors could hardly be seen by most of the audience and had problems in making themselves heard. Consequently, by the end of the century, the 'legitimate drama' had become increasingly unpopular in the capital, cultural standards were slipping and audiences falling away.[35]

William Dowton, Sarah's son-in-law, was one of those, in 1832, who gave evidence to the parliamentary select committee appointed to inquire into 'the state of the Laws affecting the interests and exhibition of the Drama'.[36] The inquiry was prompted by increasing concerns about the deteriorating standards of the London theatre which had been in decline since the turn of the century. As Dowton commented: '....the persons who used to attend the theatres 20 or 30 years ago do not come now'. He was certain that a major cause of the problem was that the huge patent theatres were totally unsuited to the performance of the 'legitimate drama' and, furthermore, were '... managed by persons who are perfectly strangers to dramatic affairs'. He referred to the way in which actors had to 'bawl' in order to be heard by even a minority of the audience. He also told how, many years before while still a young man, audiences were already complaining to him that '...they could neither see nor hear' what was happening on stage in these enormous emporiums.

In order to '..observe those beautiful touches ...[the] lights and shadows' of a fine performance, '...give me a theatre of a moderate size where you can be natural', demanded Dowton. It was in just such a theatre that he had made his own reputation as a young man, he reminded the Committee. He also pointed out that some small theatres,

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[34] Kathleen Wilson, 'The good, the bad and the impotent': Imperialism and the politics of identity in Georgian England', in Bermingham & Brewer (eds.), *The Consumption of Culture*, p.244.
[35] The playwright Hannah Cowley was highly critical of the declining standards of the London theatre in the prologue to her last play 'The Town Before You' (1794), see Mary de la Mahotiere, *Hannah Cowley: Tiverton's Playwright and Pioneer Feminist 1743-1809* (Tiverton, 1997), p.78.
[36] *British Parliamentary Papers, Stage and Theatre, Vol. I, Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature with the Minutes of Evidence, 1831-1832* (Shannon, 1968), pp.89-92.

despite the risks involved, had continued to ' ....perform the 'legitimate drama' in defiance of the law'.[37]

As a member of Sarah's company since the early 1790s and manager of her old circuit since 1815, he was well-placed to know this. While the cultural standards of the London theatres had begun to decline in the 1790s, Sarah's small provincial theatres had remained the ideal venue for the performance of the 'legitimate drama' as well as other pieces. In keeping abreast of the times, however, she also occasionally used special effects in her shows. For example a playbill for her Rochester Theatre for Thursday 23 June 1803 shows that a 'leap through a hoop of real daggers' as well as 'a view of the infernal regions and a superb shower of fire' were part of the attractions that night.[38] Realistic stage fights must also have taken place as in 1794, Mr Campden, a long serving actor and scene painter with Sarah's company, was killed on the stage of her Rochester theatre by an actor who had omitted to mask his foil.[39]

On the whole, though, unlike the London theatres, Sarah had no need to 'play to the gallery' or seek out a new public by resorting to spectacle alone to attract patrons to her small theatres. If anything, as the century progressed, her entertainments became rather more select than they had been in the past and the 'legitimate drama' remained a regular feature of her mixed entertainments. Other than her own hard work and organizational ability, the main reason Sarah's small theatres remained commercially viable and continued to offer their traditional eclectic mix of entertainments was because they were not subject to the same commercial pressures experienced by the London theatres. This, I suggest, was largely due to the protection that she, like other established provincial theatre companies, was afforded by the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788. As long as Sarah's company held the licence for the areas in which she put on her entertainments, under the terms of this act no other company was allowed to play in the same place at the same time. Sarah's company, therefore, like so many other established provincial companies, had no direct competition. This meant that in terms of her company's survival as a business, it was Sarah's relationship with the local magistracy

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[37] Ibid., pp. 89-92.
[38] Playbill for Sarah Baker's Rochester Theatre for 23 June 1803, Hertford Museum.

that mattered most. On their part, the local elites with whom she was involved must have been content with the mixed bills she continued to present in her theatres. It was hardly surprising that 'legitimate drama' was included for, illegal or not, as Dowton pointed out many years later, this ' ...would always be attractive' when presented by good actors in small theatres. Maybe even more apposite where provincial elites were concerned was Dowton's view that the performance of legitimate drama would also '...improve the public taste'.[40]

The relevance of this survey of current theories concerning provincial theatre in relation to what I have discovered about Sarah Baker's career has been to demonstrate how, through scrappy evidence and neglect of the legislative framework that circumscribed the character of provincial theatre in the eighteenth century, so many misconceptions have arisen. It has also been my purpose to show it is wrong to assume that the provincial theatre was a mere shadow of the London scene. Because of the very different pressures and influences to which it was exposed, the provincial theatre was, to a large extent, shielded from the forces of change which transformed the London stage and, as I have found in the case of Sarah's enterprise, had a life and dynamic of its own.

In the next section of this chapter I will examine the evidence that both substantiates my argument concerning the extent and character of theatrical activity in the provinces of the eighteenth century, that demonstrates the similarities and connections with Sarah Baker's enterprise and further supports my belief that a complete re-assessment of the role of provincial theatre in a national context is long overdue. In so doing I will look at how fierce competition between companies and the enterprise of individual players in their search for work had cultural connotations for the country as a whole. I will also assess the impact of parliamentary legislation on the provincial theatre and consider the nature and implications of the relationship between groups of players and the magistrates, mayors and Corporations in the localities where they operated both before and after the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788. In addition to this, I will describe the cultural and social ramifications involved in the fact that whole troupes, as well as

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[39] N. Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker (1736/37-1816) "Governess-General of the Kentish Drama" ', in M. St. Clare Byrne (ed.), *Studies in English Theatre History* (London, 1952), p.77.

individual players, performed in venues which, depending on what was available, ranged from fairground booths to proper purpose-built theatres. Finally, I will consider the significance of the provincial theatre's role in delivering a more or less homogenous programme of entertainments to a nationwide audience.

The geographical diversity and character of theatrical activity c.1700-1788

Fierce competition between rival companies, the necessity to seek out new audiences for their shows and desperate poverty often compelled whole troupes as well as individual players to travel long distances in order to make even a basic living. These are some of the reasons why by the early eighteenth century '...the country was pretty well covered' by companies of strolling players.[41] This fact is apparent not only from the evidence gleaned from increasing numbers of provincial newspapers but also from biographical accounts of strollers such as Charles Macklin (c.1699-1797) and the autobiographical writing of Charlotte Charke (1713-1760) who seem to have had no difficulty in finding a company to join wherever in the country they happened to be.[42] Macklin had come over from Ireland when he was seventeen or eighteen years old and joined a strolling company in the Bristol area around 1717. For the next sixteen years he found work with various troupes in the west of England, making occasional forays into Wales and the Midlands and is also occasionally to be glimpsed elsewhere such as Sadler's Wells, Southwark Fair and at Hockley-in-the-hole near Clare in Suffolk.[43] Having made his name in London, Macklin regularly revisited his old haunts in the summer and in 1744 and 1746 'strolled the Kentish countryside' with his wife and young daughter.[44] Charlotte Charke, too, during a nine year period from 1746-1755 spent much of her time as a stroller with various provincial companies. Among the places that she visited during these years and refers to in her *Narrative* were Sunning Hill, Cirencester, Bristol, Chippenham, Bath,

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[40]Dowton's evidence, *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on the laws affecting dramatic literature etc.*, p.92.

[41] Sybil Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces, 1660-1765* (Cambridge, 1939), p.4.

[42] W.W. Appleton, *Charles Macklin: An Actor's Life* (Cambridge, Mass. & London, 1961), p. 2, refers to three early biographers, Francis Congreve, James Kirkman and William Cooke; Charlotte Charke, *A Narrative of the life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* (First published 1755: London, 1929). Other accounts are contained in: Anthony Aston, 'A Sketch of the life of Mr. Anthony Aston...', in Watson Nicholson, *Anthony Aston, Stroller and Adventurer* (South Haven, 1920); Peter Pangloss, *Memoirs of Sylvester Daggerwood* (1806); S.W. Ryley, *The Itinerant* Vol. I (1818); E.C. Everard, *Memoirs of an Unfortunate Son of Thespis* (1808)

[43] Appleton, *Charles Macklin*, pp.1-3,9,10,18 & 19.

[44] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, pp.239-240.

Columpton, Corsham, Minchin-Hampton, Ross in Herefordshire, Monmouth, Chepstow and Abergavenny.[45]

Rosenfeld's broad-ranging survey of the activities of provincial strolling players in the years from 1660-1765 supplies much of the information that, I believe, indicates that even at that time, and probably long before this, the distances covered by and the interaction of these troupes must have ensured a degree of uniformity in respect of the nation's entertainments.[46] Like Sarah's company, others, too, would play in a variety of venues and, as a rule, also sought to take advantage of the crowds attracted to race meetings, to the assizes or to fairs. Consequently, it must have been a rare occasion when one or more troupes of players were not present at such events but, as in Sarah's case, they, too, had to compete vigorously both with each other and for local permission to perform.

One of the most successful managers of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was John Power who, in 1687, took over the management of the Newmarket company and acquired a licence to play in Norwich. His activities give some idea of the range and scope of a provincial company in those early days. In Norwich, as elsewhere, there was considerable rivalry among those seeking the right to perform in the city but Power was there every year between 1691 and 1696. Then, after a gap of a few years, he reappeared in the city with a new company and, with the exception of 1706, played there every year from 1702-1707. Power and his company also visited Bath in these years and in 1704 erected a theatrical booth in Bristol, returning again to this city in 1705 and 1706.[47] It also seems that he toured Wiltshire and there is some evidence that he also took his company to Worcester.[48] In addition to this, they performed at Windsor in 1706 and his company is also reputed to have made a regular appearance at Stourbridge during the fair.[49]

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[45] Charke, *Narrative*, pp. 149,153,159,160,161,169,178 & 188.
[46] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*.
[47] Ibid., pp.41-45.
[48] K. Barker, 'The revival of theatre outside London with special reference to the West Country (c.1700-1788)', *Theatre Notebook*, Vol. 46, No. 3, (1992), p.119.
[49] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, pp.45-46.

Further evidence of widespread theatrical activity is also apparent in the movements of other managers in the early eighteenth century. Thomas Aiger, for example, an actor/manager in Norwich in 1707 took his company to York in 1711 and in 1715 signed an agreement with the authorities there that permitted his company to play in the city during the Lent Assizes and the Lammas Assizes which also included the city's race week. In 1721 Aiger's company was taken over by Thomas Keregan who had also played in Norwich and for the next four years he continued to visit this city with his new company. Keregan also made sure that his troupe's visits to Newcastle, Leicester and Nottingham in 1721, coincided with the periods when large numbers of additional potential patrons were also in town, attracted by the local races . In 1726, he and his company were in Canterbury at Easter but after this he concentrated his campaign in the north.[50]

Something of the intensity of theatrical activity in the first half of the eighteenth century can be gauged from the scale and character of the circuit covered by the Norwich Company of Comedians between 1720 and 1758. Among the towns and villages in which they played were Aylsham, Beccles, Bury St. Edmunds, Bungay, Cambridge (Stourbridge), Colchester, Dereham, Fakenham, Framlingham, Harleston, Hingham, Holt, Ipswich, King's Lynn, North Walsham, Saxmundham, Sudbury, Swaffham, Thetford, Woodbridge, Walsingham and Yarmouth .[51] Although Norwich had been famous as a centre of theatrical activity from the 1660s it was not until 1758 that the authorities in the city sanctioned the building of a purpose-built theatre there, the status and legality of which was confirmed in 1768 by the granting of a Royal Patent.[52] The company played in this theatre, until 1788 the only legal playhouse in the area, but, like other less well-known troupes operating in the vicinity they, too, also continued to perform, as they had done since the 1720s, in barns, booths, warehouses, fairs and other assorted venues in towns and villages throughout East Anglia.

Other troupes in the area included Fisher and Scragg's, also known as the Norfolk and Suffolk Company of Comedians, which played at Beccles, Bungay, East Dereham, Eye,

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[50] Ibid., pp. 46, 107-112.
[51] Ibid., pp. 61-66, 82.

Lowestoft, Newmarket, Sudbury, Swaffham, Thetford, Woodbridge etc.[53], also the Huntingdon Company and that of a Mr. Bainbridge, recorded to have been at Holt in 1734 and again in 1738.[54] Smith's Company played at Hingham in July 1749 and Herbert's Company put on Nicholas Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* (1703) at King's Lynn in 1728 and were back there again in 1743, 1745, 1746 and 1748. This company were also known in Yarmouth, Leeds and Newcastle Upon Tyne but for the most part, it seems, they remained in the Lincolnshire area. As Rosenfeld points out, in the case of so many smaller companies at the time, lack of a local newspaper in any of their normal circuit towns or villages means that very little is known of their activities.[55]

In the west country, Bath's strolling company of comedians 'spread wide its nets' both geographically and in terms of its venues. In the five counties of Somerset, Devon, Gloucester, Wiltshire and Worcester their performances took place in small villages such as Wooton-under Edge, Stroud and Hampton as well as in the larger towns.[56] They played, in fact, where they could, so, in the summer of 1733, while in Wells for the Assizes, they performed in a barn but later in the year they were performing before a private audience in one of the greatest country houses in the country. Mrs. Delany described this occasion in a letter to her sister written during her stay at Longleat in December 1733. Here she describes how the Company put up their scenes in the great parlour and 'acted two plays very well'. [57]

Ireland, too, was an important centre of theatrical activity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and also formed part of the network that existed at that time. This was very much a two-way process and whole companies as well as individual players often made the trip, in both directions, across the Irish Sea. In 1766, for example, Joseph Austin and Michael Heatton brought a company of actors over to play in various

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[52] Mark A. Howell, 'The "Regular Theatre" at Jacob's Well, Bristol 1729-65', in Richard Foulkes (ed.), *Scenes from Provincial Stages* (London, 1994), p.39.
[53] I. Mackintosh, *Pit, Boxes & Gallery: The Story of the Theatre Royal, Bury St. Edmunds* (London, 1979), p.23.
[54] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, pp. 57, 63, 95.
[55] Ibid., pp. 3,15,21,63,95,113.
[56] Ibid., p.177.
[57] *Autobiography and Correspondence of Mrs. Delany* Vol. 1 (1861), p.424, quoted by Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, p.177.

towns on their circuit which included Lancaster. [58] One of the best known of the many managers, actors and actresses who began their careers on the Irish stage was Dora Jordan. Although she became the mistress of the future William IV and bore him ten children she managed to continue a successful career as an actress both in London and in the provinces. On at least one occasion, late in her career, she appeared at Sarah's Canterbury theatre.[59] That companies and individuals also made the trip in the other direction is confirmed by John Bernard who, in his memoirs, relates how in the early 1780s, after a period with the Exeter Company playing, among other places, at Weymouth, Plymouth Dock and Exeter, he travelled to Ireland where he performed in Cork, in Dublin and elsewhere.[60]

In Kent, there is also evidence to demonstrate an impressive theatrical presence, and considerable inter-company rivalry, in the county long before either Sarah Baker or her mother commenced their campaign. In the 1720s and 1730s and probably even before this, Ashford, Deal, Dover, Sandwich, New Romney, Rye, Tenterden, Margate, Maidstone and Rochester were all visited on a regular basis by various theatrical companies, some of whom were based in Canterbury.[61] One of the most notable of these was Dymer's. They are first heard of playing in Canterbury in 1728 and from then on reappear at fairly regular intervals at various venues across the county for the next six years. It is also recorded that this company played in Ipswich in November 1735 and, according to *The Theatric Tourist*, Dymer managed a company which, until 1764, played in an inn in Chichester.[62]

Charles Mate in the first of his letters to James Winston also gives a few details about the managers and state of theatrical activity in the county in the 1760s before Sarah's company arrived on the scene. For example, from 1762-1768, around the time that Sarah was with her company in the Bristol area, Mate tells us that a William Smith '...who was Brought up Wool Comber in Essex' was manager of a theatrical circuit

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[58] A.J. Betjemann, *The Grand Theatre, Lancaster: Two Centuries of Entertainment* (Lancaster, 1982), p.2.
[59] C. Tomalin, *Mrs. Jordan's Profession* (Harmondsworth, 1994); *Kentish Gazette*, 27 August, 1802.
[60] John Bernard, *Retrospections of the Stage, edited by his son W. Baile Bernard, Vol. I* (London, 1830), p.228.
[61] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, pp.216-223.
[62] Ibid., pp.218-238.

comprising Margate, Canterbury, Dover, Deal, Maidstone, Faversham and Rochester. In 1768 Smith was forced by Thomas Burton '... to quit the Est part of this County...'. Burton, who had some connection with the Ship Inn at Faversham, had served as Smith's candle snuffer when his company performed in the town but now took on the management of some of Smith's old towns leaving him with only Maidstone, Dartford, Gravesend and, probably, Rochester in his circuit. Mate also supplies Winston with some information about the 'theatres' in these towns. In Canterbury, he told him, this was over the Butter market, in Margate and Faversham, barns served the purpose, in Dover an 'old Store House on Snargate Street' was used, in Deal an old Malt House sufficed, in Maidstone a temporary booth was built in the Star Inn yard and in Rochester a large bread house at the Star in Estgate, on occasion, also doubled as a theatre.[63]

Provincial reaction to the theatrical legislation of 1737 and 1788

Because of the problems in establishing the facts of theatrical activity in the eighteenth century, the evidence that I have presented to demonstrate its prevalence in the country as a whole for this early period can be regarded as little more than the tip of the iceberg in terms of the full picture. Having said this, the information that is available makes it clear that even during the period 1737-1788 there was a considerable amount of 'theatre' going on. From the perspective of the better, as well as the worst companies, both equally at risk of prosecution or imprisonment, and of the local politicians whose legal right to authorize theatrical performance in their towns and villages had been removed by the Licensing Act in 1737, the situation must have been far from satisfactory.

Rosenfeld's somewhat casual reference, in an otherwise invaluable work, to the fact that '...everywhere during the decade 1755-65 new and imposing theatres were being built' is, I believe, somewhat wide of the mark and, more seriously, has been at the root of many subsequent, inaccurate and misleading accounts of the history of the provincial theatre of that period.[64] Far more realistic, I suggest, is Mark Howell's more recent finding that between the years 1737 and 1788 '...unlicensed purpose-built provincial

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[63] Charles Mate to James Winston, 14 Jan. 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[64] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, pp.1-2. See also 'Introduction', above, pp. 2-3.

theatres were rare' unless there was particularly strong local protection or pressure from influential patrons to deter the local authority from enforcing the law.[65]

As evidence for her claim Rosenfeld cited six theatres that were granted Royal Patents between the years 1768 and 1777.[66] In fact it was in 1767, nearly thirty years after the Licensing Act became law, that the first of only eleven of the myriad 'theatres' operating outside London in those years petitioned parliament for a royal patent and the legal right to perform during this period. This was Edinburgh whose initial attempt to achieve a royal patent in 1739 had been a failure. Between then and 1788 only ten other theatres were also granted royal patents. These were at Bath (1768), Norwich (1768), York and Hull (jointly licensed by act of parliament, 1769), Liverpool (1771), Manchester (1775), Chester (1777), Bristol (1778), Margate (1786) and Newcastle (1787). Of these, Liverpool, in 1770, and Bristol, in 1773, had both failed to achieve a patent at their first attempts.[67]

In view of the signs that theatrical activity continued to thrive in the country in the years after 1737 it would appear that, with the passage of time, the Licensing Act had proved less and less effective. This would help explain why not one English company petitioned parliament for a royal patent until 1768. On the other hand, the fact that Edinburgh's breakthrough in 1767 immediately prompted others to apply for patents for theatres in their own towns and cities also indicates that the Licensing Act was more effective than might have been supposed. Not all the applicants were successful. Plymouth, for example was never granted a royal patent for either its town or dock theatres although three separate petitions were presented to parliament in 1770 and 1771.[68] In Birmingham five separate attempts were made between 1776 and 1779 to gain a royal patent for one or other of the theatres in the town, all of which were unsuccessful

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[65] Mark Howell, 'The Theatre at Richmond, Yorkshire: New Evidence and Conjectures', in *Theatre Notebook*, Vol.46, No.1, 1992, p.31.
[66] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, p.2, footnote 1.
[67] John Raithby (ed.), *An index to the Statutes at Large of England and Great Britain: From Magna Carta to the forty ninth year of George III inclusive* (London, 1814); Julian Hoppit (ed.), *Failed Legislation 1660-1800. Extracted from the Commons and Lords Journals with an introduction by Julian Hoppit and Joanna Innes* (London 1997), Nos. 77.015, 111.003, 114.022.
[68] Hoppit, *Failed Legislation*, Nos. 111.001, 111.007, 112.013.

and it was not until 1807 that a royal patent was finally granted to a Birmingham theatre.[69]

The situation in Birmingham provides some insight into the reasons why, in the late 1760s and 1770s, more than thirty years after the Act became law, any provincial theatre proprietor should have still considered it worth the trouble and expense to apply for a parliamentary patent. As John Money's account makes clear, the concerted attempts between 1776 and 1779 to obtain parliamentary licences for one or other of the theatres in the town, were a symptom of the chaos and discord that had arisen because of the regulatory vacuum created by the act. [70] They were also the manifestation of a desire on the part of one or other of the theatres in the town to legalize and take control of their own affairs, free of interference from the local Bench, and gain the upper hand in the battle for commercial survival. It was not surprising that they should want to do this for, despite long-standing theatrical traditions in Birmingham, the situation was fraught with insecurity and controversy. The petitions for patents accentuated the problems. In the first place they served as a focus for the fierce opposition of local religious groups to the evils of theatre in general. They also exacerbated the intense rivalry between the two main theatres and, because of the personal involvement of members of the local establishment in theatrical affairs, emphasized the lack of consensus surrounding the whole issue. These circumstances made it highly unlikely that either theatre would obtain a patent at that time and it was many years before the situation clarified and a patent was finally granted to a theatre in the town. In the meantime, theatrical activity continued its somewhat precarious existence there. As with other unlicensed playhouses elsewhere in the country, even the refurbished and fashionable New Street Theatre with its elegant new neoclassical façade erected in 1780, remained wary of the Licensing Act and had to continue performing plays as free 'interludes' between two halves of a concert in order to avoid the probability of prosecution under the act.[71]

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[69] Ibid., Nos. 117.027, 118.030, 119.001, 120.001,120.010; *Journals of the House of Commons*, Vol. 62 (1806-1807), pp.571 & 601.
[70] J. Money, *Experience and Identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1800* (Manchester, 1977), pp. 87-97.
[71] Ibid., pp.89-91.

Ironically, because a patent gave a local manager total control over his or her theatre, it was only in cases where a strong relationship existed between a theatre and the local establishment that patents were ever granted. Where the situation was unclear, as in Birmingham where two powerful factions were involved, or had temporally broken down, as it had for Sarah at Rochester in 1798, a petition for a patent was unlikely to succeed. These examples demonstrate just how important it was for a provincial theatre company to establish a good understanding with the local magistracy or similar authority in areas where they wished to operate both before and after the Act of 1788.

The nature of such a relationship often manifested in a particularly overt manner. For example, Money connects the New Street Theatre's '...blatant use of the stage to convey proper political attitudes...' supportive of the government's policy towards the rebellious American colonies at a time when local opinion was sharply divided on the issue, with its manager's attempt to secure local acceptability and support for his petition for a parliamentary licence in 1777.[72] This strategy on the part of the theatre continued through the 1780s and 1790s in ways that very much reflected what was happening in Sarah's and other theatres at about the same time. Therefore, a performance of 'British Loyalty: or a Squeeze to St. Paul's' celebrating the King's return to good health in 1789, which had been presented by Sarah's company in the theatre in Deal late the same year was also performed at the New Street Theatre a few months later.[73]

Further evidence that, in order to secure its position, a provincial theatre company was often expected to support and reflect the attitudes and interests of the local hierarchy upon whose good will its survival depended is provided by the following illustrations. Although Money found considerable antipathy in some quarters towards theatrical activity in Birmingham, many of the wealthier inhabitants looked upon it as 'one of the principal channels through which improved standards of artistic execution could be instilled in the town's tradesmen.'[74] The desire on the part of employers to educate their workers in 'a proper canon of taste' was, of course, related to the financial advantage that improvements in the quality and design of goods would bring their interests as

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[72] Ibid., pp.91-92.

[73] *Kentish Gazette*, 10-13 November 1789; *Birmingham Gazette*, 6 September, 1790, cited by Money, *Experience and Identity*, p.92.

entrepreneurs. This, as Money explains, was an important motivation for their encouragement and involvement with theatrical activities in the town.[75]

The symbiotic relationship of the provincial theatre with the local establishment is also demonstrated by the following example from Newcastle upon Tyne. Here, in December 1794, the aid of the Mosley Street Theatre was invoked to encourage local enthusiasm for a scheme to build a 'grand aqueduct over the Tyne, intended for the new canal from Newcastle to Carlisle'. The company's contribution involved the provision of stage scenery that depicted 'a superb view' of the yet to be built aqueduct 'with a representation of the vessels passing, which, when completed, will be the only aqueduct in this part of the Kingdom'.[76] This scheme achieved overwhelming public support which, whether due to the theatre's involvement or not, must have encouraged the idea that this was a good method of influencing local opinion.

In Bath, it must be assumed that, by 1768, when it became the first English provincial theatre to be granted a royal patent, there must have been considerable local consensus concerning the benefits of establishing a permanent theatre in the city. This had not always been the case. In the immediate aftermath of the Licensing Act of 1737 the old theatre had been bought up and demolished by the Trustees of the Mineral Water Hospital and the Bath Company of Comedians, who had acted there for many years, were obliged to put on their entertainments in the somewhat cramped surroundings of a room under the ballroom at the Assembly Rooms. They played here, as well as at other assorted premises in the city, on and off for many years. A second 'theatre' was also opened during this period but, in 1754, both were shut down under the auspices of the 1737 Act. It was not long, however, before a new 'Concert Room' was advertised where, as a means of getting round the problems, plays were performed free of charge between two sections of a concert.[77] In view of Bath's reputation as a fashionable resort with need of a reputable theatre, it is not surprising that in the wake of Edinburgh's successful petition, they were the next to seek, and achieve, a patent for a regular theatre in the city.

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[74] Money, *Experience and Identity*, p.88.
[75] Ibid., p.87.
[76] H. Oswald, *The Theatres Royal in Newcastle Upon Tyne* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1936), pp.50-51.

In Bristol, the old Jacob's Well Theatre continued to operate intermittently after 1737 and was probably never prosecuted but, as Kathleen Barker has pointed out, the possibility of prosecution remained an ever-present danger and well into the 1770s members of other established companies in the city often suffered heavy fines or imprisonment.[78] The difficulties faced by players in the city were also noted by Charlotte Charke, who worked there for a while in 1752. She commented on the severity of the Magistrates there '...who have not suffered any playes to be acted in the City for many Years' but, none the less, 'slily adventured' to organize her own benefit 'in the very Heart of it, at the Black Raven in High-Street'.[79] The act was widely evaded and abused by many different companies who, on occasion, suffered the consequences. It was not until 1772, however, that James Dodd, manager of the New Theatre in King Street, attempted to out-manoeuvre his rivals by petitioning for a patent.. His application was unsuccessful and, continuing with his season, he was fined £200 by local magistrates. The following year, his leading players were imprisoned, again by local magistrates, and his season curtailed. Dodd must have worked hard to endear himself and his company to the local authorities because by 1778 he had won over enough local support to ensure that his second petition for a royal patent was a success.[80]

In view of the difficulties and circumspection with which even the larger and more confident companies, who sought and sometimes gained theatrical patents, regarded the act, it is hardly surprising that the mass of smaller companies remained exceedingly wary of its powers. In Exeter, for example, the theatre had been closed down and converted for use as a Methodist meeting house in 1737. When it re-opened in the 1740s the law was evaded by selling packets of tooth powder or worm tablets in lieu of tickets.[81] Theatrical activities in general also remained extremely problematical for local authorities in the provinces with the result that, for the most part they, too, acted with some caution where these matters were concerned.

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[77] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, p.p.178-197.
[78] Kathleen Barker, *Bristol at Play* (Bradford on Avon, 1976), p.7.
[79] Charke, *Narrative*, p.191.
[80] Barker, *Bristol at Play*, pp. 12-13.
[81] Barker, 'Revival of Theatre outside London', p.120.

Because of the uncertainty of the whole situation relatively few local authorities seem to have been particularly supportive of entrepreneurial plans to erect proper purpose-built theatres in their towns at this period. For example, of the six theatres listed by Chalklin as constructed in the 1760s, Hull (1768) achieved legitimacy the same year through the grant of a patent. At Bristol (1766), twelve difficult years had passed before the authorities eventually gave Dodd the support that enabled him to secure a royal patent for his New Theatre in 1778. This left only four towns, Southampton (1766) Scarborough (1767) Colchester (1764) and Stamford (1768) where the local mayor and magistrates were prepared to see the law flouted in such a public manner.[82]

The situation that existed in Bury St. Edmunds was, maybe, more typical. This was one of the Norwich Company of Comedians circuit towns and here, as elsewhere, their perilous existence depended, above all, on the continuing good will of the local elite. This fact is embodied in the extant silver tokens that gave free admission to the Mayor.[83] Bury was known as a 'good' theatrical town where since at least as early as 1734 performances had taken place in a makeshift theatre in the old Market Cross. But in 1773 when the Market Cross was reconstructed to the design of Robert Adam, the theatre, as in Canterbury at that time, remained out of sight on an upper floor of the building. In Canterbury the mayor had given his financial backing to Sarah's grand new theatre with its splendid Orange Street entrance shortly after the passage of the Theatrical Representations Act in 1788. In Bury, however, the 'productive' little theatre on the first floor had to suffice until 1818 when William Wilkins at last constructed a new theatre '...of ample dimensions and elegance corresponding to the other public buildings of the place'.[84]

Winchester, too, had a 'theatre' hidden away on an upper floor. This was in a hall above the meat market and slaughter house and had been used as a theatre since the 1660s. It was not until 1785, pre-empting the Act by three years, that the city authorities finally had the confidence to authorize the building of a splendid new theatre complete with a proscenium flanked by two ionic pillars each 14 feet high and with an arch surmounted

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[82] Chalklin, 'Building for Cultural Purposes', p.54.
[83] Mackintosh, *Pit, Boxes & Gallery*, p.15.

by a bust of William Shakespeare. This was in Jewry Street, opposite the old county gaol.[85] These are only a few examples of the many ways in which players and local advocates of 'the drama' managed to circumnavigate the difficulties and keep the drama alive at this time. As Rosenfeld suggests, it was only through persistence and perseverance during many years of suppression that companies of strolling players eventually won back their legal right to exist.[86]

There is no doubt that the Act of 1788 transformed Sarah's fortunes and changed the course of her life. This was because for the first time in her professional career she was relieved of the perpetual fear of imminent prosecution or imprisonment and, with the lawful support of the local authority behind her, could at last look forward to a more secure future. Her new found confidence meant that she now felt it possible to invest in more appropriate and permanent premises for her company's entertainments and over the next decade or so she opened new theatres in all the towns where, for so long, she had performed in less salubrious surroundings.[87] From the substantial rise in the number of other proper purpose-built theatres erected elsewhere in the provinces at this time it can be safely assumed that many other reasonably well-established companies, with the backing of their local authorities, reacted to the Act of 1788 in the same way. Evidence that these years witnessed '...the biggest boom in theatre building ever known'[88] in the provinces is substantiated by the information contained in James Winston's notebooks of 1800-1804. Here he gives the names and, in most cases, some description of approximately 290 provincial theatres that were in existence at that time.[89] This, as Ian Mackintosh comments, constitutes '...formidable evidence of the extent of theatrical activity in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century'.[90] The fact that many of these theatres were associated with just sixteen specific circuits and managers, including Sarah

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[84]William Wilkins to Bury St. Edmunds Corporation, proposals for a new theatre, quoted by Mackintosh, *Pit, Boxes & Gallery*, p.16.

[85] Ranger, *The Georgian Playhouses of Hampshire 1730-1830* (Winchester, 1996), p.19.

[86] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, p.9.

[87] See above, Chapter 3, 'Sarah Baker and her Theatres', pp. 70-99.

[88]I. Mackintosh, *The Georgian Playhouse, Actors, Artists, Audiences and Architecture 1730-1830* (Arts Council of Great Britain exhibition catalogue, Hayward Gallery, London, 21 August - 12 October, 1975), Nos. 356-379.

[89] A.L. Nelson, *James Winston's 'Theatric Tourist', A Critical Edition with a Biography and a Census of Winston Material Vol. I*, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (The George Washington University, 1968), p.clxxxvi. See also below, Appendix 2, 'Map of towns and villages with theatres c.1804 compiled from information in James Winston's 'Theatric Tourist' notebooks'.

and her Kentish circuit,[91] also demonstrates that the Act particularly favoured and facilitated the activities of the more ambitious entrepreneurs and encouraged their activities on a wider scale. Having said this, it still has to be remembered that the penurious existence of many players meant that it remained common for theatrical performances to take place in all manner of less congenial 'theatres' as had been the case throughout the century.

The significance of venues

In view of this evidence, Plumb's opinion that by the 1760s '...every town of any pretension had a well built theatre [and] a regular company' and that a fully commercialized theatre industry had already emerged in the provinces, seems somewhat implausible.[92] On the other hand, however, there is little doubt that theatrical entertainments of all kinds continued to flourish throughout the fifty years of restriction and constraint. Much of the confusion in this area lies, I believe, in the fact that the concept of 'theatre as entertainment' has frequently been confused with that of 'theatre' in terms of bricks and mortar. Despite the existence of some proper purpose-built theatres, the majority of theatrical performances in the eighteenth century continued to be presented in assorted makeshift facilities of varying degrees of suitability in towns, villages and fairgrounds across the country. Whatever the venue, however, be it a barn, a fit-up, a booth, a room in an inn or a malt-house it was inevitably described as 'theatre'.

Of particular significance where venues were concerned was that, throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, the troupes and individual players who performed in the barns, booths and other such fit-ups of one kind or another would also play, as often as possible, in more conventional 'theatres'. Thus even after the theatre building boom in the wake of the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788 individual strollers, as well as whole companies of strolling players, were as much in evidence on the stages of 'respectable' urban playhouses as they were in less distinguished

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[90] Mackintosh, *The Georgian Playhouse* (exhibition catalogue), Nos. 356-379.
[91] Nelson, *James Winston's 'Theatric Tourist'*, pp.clxxxvi-clxxxvii.
[92] Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure*, p.13; 'The Public, Literature and the Arts', p.44.

'theatres'.[93] That this was the case is of fundamental importance to the history of the provincial theatre as this meant that, as well as a widespread geographical homogeneity, there was also considerable correlation between what was presented in an elegant purpose-built town theatre and, for example, a country barn or a fairground booth.

In failing to make the link between the many strolling companies who played in fairgrounds, country barns and the like, and those who appeared in more conventional 'theatres', it is easy to arrive at the mistaken assumption that the 'culture' of the purpose built provincial playhouses '...seeped through to the masses' from the drawing rooms of the wealthy. [94] In reality, the reverse was true. This was because it was the fairground or strolling companies such as Sarah's who, throughout the eighteenth century, had often occupied a town's 'theatre', be it a barn, a room, a fit up, a booth, or later, a proper purpose- built playhouse. These companies, of course, brought their 'culture' with them. Thus the entertainments of the purpose-built, eighteenth-century playhouse encompassed a variety of factors and influences, many deriving from the traditional fair ground shows with their origins in the previous century or even earlier. In addition to this, although the numbers of proper purpose-built theatres proliferated in the years 1788-1810, many of these companies and individual players were still frequently obliged to put on their shows in somewhat less than ideal surroundings. Thus, the 'culture' of the purpose-built provincial playhouse remained closely linked to that of the fair grounds, inn yards, barns, booths and other makeshift venues where, in order to make a living, many of these individuals and companies had no alternative but to continue to appear.

The long-standing relationship between more conventional theatres and the fairground is of particular importance in terms of the evolution of a shared culture in this country and this involvement continued long into the following century. For despite the abolition of many fairs in the early years of the century, others, '...particularly those on the outskirts of London survived and grew'. This included Greenwich which escaped attempts to

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[93] Mackintosh, *The Georgian Playhouse* (exhibition catalogue), Nos. 311-316.
[94] Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure*, p.18.

abolish it in the 1820s.[95] From the 1850s inner London was bereft of fairs but until then, the enormously popular Bartholomew Fair, although the target of repeated attempts by the City authorities to control or abolish it altogether, was one of those that managed to keep going.[96] In 1790-4 there had been twenty-three stall holders with licences to play the drama at this fair and even as late as 1830-4 nineteen stall holders with dramatic licences were still to be found there.[97] Probably the most famous example of a travelling theatre company that survived well into the nineteenth century was Richardson's. From 1798 until 1826, the year when he finally sold up, Richardson was on the road from Easter, the time of the Greenwich Fair, until he set up his theatre at the Bartholomew Fair in September. In all Richardson visited sixty different fairs in any one season as far afield as Winchester, Oxford and Newmarket.[98]

Richardson's statement in the 1820s that 'Some of the firmest props of the stage, both in ancient and modern times have laid the foundation of their greatness at Bartholomew and other fairs'[99] provides useful evidence of the continuing connections between the fairground and even the best-known London theatres as he could include members of his own travelling company in this category. Ann Carey, for example, was 'one of the chief ladies, if not the chief...', who was permanently attached to his company at the end of the eighteenth century.[100] The Carey children also took part in his productions and one of them, Edmund (Kean), later made his name as one of the most famous tragedians of his day on the London stage. After leaving Richardson, Kean, still a young man, found other work in the provinces and was at one time a member of Sarah's company in Kent. He played at her Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone theatres in the winter of 1806-7 and at Rochester in the early spring. In 1817 he returned to Sarah's Canterbury theatre and the following year to Rochester, this time as an established and well-known actor on the

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[95] H. Cunningham, 'The Metropolitan Fairs: A case study in the social control of leisure', in A. P. Donajgrodzki, *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London and Totowa, 1977), pp.163-167.
[96] Ibid., pp.170-172.
[97] Mark Judd, 'The oddest combination of town and country: popular culture and the London fairs, 1800-60', in J. Walton and J. Walvin, *Leisure in Britain 1780-1939* (Manchester, 1983), p.18.
[98] Mackintosh, *The Georgian Playhouse* (exhibition catalogue), Nos. 317-322.
[99] Pierce Egan, *The Life of an Actor* (Founded on First Edition, 1825: London, 1904), p.194.
[100] Henry Morley, *Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair* (London, 1880), p.372.

London stage.[101] In dedicating *The Life of an Actor* to Kean in 1825 Pierce Egan summed up Kean's career as follows: '...the Booth, the Assembly Room, the Barn, the Circus, the Provincial Playhouse, have all been overtopped by the exertion of your genius and splendid talents'.[102]

Kean was far from the only famous actor who had made his reputation in this way and Egan's dedication can therefore be regarded as an elegant demonstration of the close relationship that had long existed between all the various branches of the theatrical fraternity whatever the nature of the 'theatres' in which they performed. A further example, from earlier in the century is that of David Garrick who, in 1741, using the pseudonym of Lyddall, made his stage debut with a company at Ipswich.[103] In contrast to this John Bannister, who had long been famous not only in London but also on the stages of major theatres throughout the country, was still 'fitting up' his own theatre in an inn yard at Oundle as late as 24 August 1825.[104]

The significance of 'strollers'

These details emphasize the fact that the primary key to understanding the character and impact of theatrical activity and its relevance to the life of the nation at large in the eighteenth century, lies not so much with the venues *per se* but in the lives and activities of the strolling companies and the individual players themselves. Although Plumb claims that companies of strolling players had disappeared altogether by the mid-eighteenth century[105] it is apparent they remained active long after this period and continued to appear in the same sort of makeshift 'theatres', as well as in more auspicious buildings, as previous companies had done since time immemorial. In this way, the unique and complex contribution of provincial theatre to the life of this country was maintained well into the nineteenth century.

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[101] Morris, *Taking the Town: A compleat and authentic account of Thespian Activity in the County of Kent 1737-1843* (Unpublished manuscript, Theatre Museum, London), p. 107; Rochester Theatre Playbills, 18 March, 16 April, 20 April 1807, Hertford Museum.
[102] Egan, *The Life of an Actor*, title page.
[103] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, p.100.
[104] Oundle Playbill, 24 August, 1825, 'S. T. Arnold's Collection Illustrating the Theatre, Vol. III', Provincial Theatres L-Y, Harvard Theatre Collection.
[105] Plumb, 'The Public, Literature and the Arts...', p.44.

The impact that could be made by the travels of just one individual is implicit in Dibdin's account of his activities in 1789-1790. Here he describes how, in 1789, he walked from Margate to Eastbourne to catch up with Charles Mate's 'Dover company' which was performing at a 'theatre' ' ....formed in a very large barn and adjoining stables, the property of a carrier who fitted it up at some expense and exacted a moderate rent for it'.[106] The following year, having finished an engagement with Sarah in Kent, he moved on to London and was then engaged to play at Harrogate.

Dibdin's account tells us not only of the extent of his travels but also confirms the role of small companies and individuals, such as himself, in the dissemination of a common culture across the country. This is particularly striking in the case of his trip up north. On this occasion, Dibdin, both a writer and actor as well as a scene painter, worked at Harrogate, Beverley, Manchester, Liverpool and Chester. From there he went on to join some old friends, the Jones's, who had '...commenced managers on their own account in Scotland'.[107] His travels took him to Edinburgh and Aberdeen and thence, on foot to Banff. As the people of Banff '...longed for some London sights' Dibdin '....immediately set about painting the late procession of George III to St. Paul's'.[108] The small company presented a mixed repertoire, that included 'the *Something New*' Dibdin had recently '...put together at Eastbourne', before continuing their journey, via Elgin, to Inverness. Here after a week of hard work he and the rest of the company had finished constructing the unfinished theatre and were ready to open using the scenery from Banff. During the six weeks they stayed in the town, Dibdin described how he '...continued increasing the stock of decorations and left it with eight additional new scenes'.[109] His description of this trip gives a valuable insight into how individual players such as himself, as members of small, and, maybe, not very successful troupes, could make an important contribution to the dissemination of a common culture from one end of the country to the other.

Thomas Younger, in a letter to James Winston dated 5 December 1803, also provides much detailed information about the variety and extent of his own activities as an

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[106] T.J. Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. I. (London, 1827), p.73.
[107] Ibid., p.114.
[108] Ibid., p.143.

itinerant player and the sort of 'theatres' in which he played before his spell with Sarah's Kentish company. He was writing from Maidstone and informs Winston, who was gathering information for inclusion in *The Theatric Tourist*, that among the places he had played with various different companies before engaging with Sarah's company were Honiton, Asbhurton and Wincanton (where he played in barns); at Totness which had 'a place built for the purpose opposite the Dartmouth Inn'; at Frome where they had played in a Warehouse, known formerly by the name of the Slaughter House which, as Younger wryly added, '....more than probably deserves that appelation to this day'; at Shepton Mallet where he had played in a room at the George Inn ; at Dorchester in a carpenter's shop and at Wells and Lymington. Only the last two were described respectively as 'very neat' or 'very pretty' little theatres.[110]

Sarah, too, was well accustomed to the strolling life and in the 1760s had ventured as far as Gosport in search of work. In July 1766 she and her company had also appeared at the Old Assembly Room in Bristol during the time of the fair.[111] She was still taking her company to the Bartholomew Fair in 1782[112] and in the same year is known to have performed with them in a stable at Rochester.[113] During the 1780s she gradually gained control of her Kentish circuit but even this involved a considerable amount of travel. This pattern remained very much the norm for any theatrical troupe at this time although, as in Sarah's case, once established in a specific circuit there was usually less need to travel as far afield as there had been in the past.

Rosenfeld informs us that there were three main categories of strolling companies in the eighteenth century. These she describes as the established 'companies of comedians' with headquarters at the chief town in the district and regular country circuits, the innumerable small troupes covering lesser places but who sometimes also appeared in the larger towns, and the temporary bands of players from the disbanded London theatres who sought a living in the provinces during the summer months.[114] As far as the players

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[109] Ibid., pp.148-152.
[110] Younger to Winston, 5 December, 1803, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham.
[111] Younger to Winston, 6 January 1804, 'Theatric Tourist' Collection, Birmingham; Felix Farley's *Bristol Journal*, 19 July, 1766.
[112] William Hone, *The Every-Day Book*, Vol. I. (London, 1825) p. 1245.
[113] Egan, *Life of an Actor*, p.197.
[114] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, p.5.

themselves were concerned this apparent hierarchy seems to have been of little consequence as even the most 'respectable' of them did not appear to worry about the distinctions and, when unemployed, found work wherever they could. This interaction was so commonplace that it must have contributed in no little way to the degree of uniformity between performances whatever, or wherever, the venue.

That this had long been the case is confirmed by the example cited by Henry Morley in his account of Bartholomew Fair published in 1880. Here he recounts how, in 1699, Edward Ward wrote in the *London Spy* about the considerable number of players who temporarily deserted the Drury Lane Theatre, tempted by the fifteen or twenty shillings a day they could earn playing in booths at the Bartholomew Fair.[115] Rosenfeld also noted this characteristic in respect of the relationship between the well-known Norwich company and some of the smaller companies playing in the area in the 1740s remarking that: '....it is of interest to note the interchange of actors between these lesser strollers and the Norwich Company'.[116]

The company with which the inexperienced John Bernard travelled in Ireland in the early 1780s also included some well-known performers. Among them, were the actresses Miss Younge (afterwards Mrs. Pope) who, at over forty, was already a well-known actress at Drury Lane, Covent Garden and elsewhere; Miss Barsanti, then about thirty years old, the celebrated Dr. Charles Burney's former 'favourite pupil' and, later, wife of the scurrilous Irish manager Richard Daly and, the young singer and actress, Anna Maria Phillips, afterwards, Mrs. Crouch. By the time she arrived in Ireland she was about nineteen years old having been apprenticed soon after her seventeenth birthday to Thomas Linley, music master and joint patentee at Drury Lane.[117]

Whatever their ambitions or previous triumphs, players were usually in no position to be choosy about where, or with whom, they worked as the majority of them were shockingly poor. For example, en route for Limerick, Bernard describes how he came across an actor named Walker performing in a dilapidated barn theatre at Mallow. Not

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[115] Morley, *Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair*, p.264.
[116] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, p.63.

so long before, this actor had been '...a great favourite in Dublin'[118] but had fallen out of favour and now, to earn even a pittance, had no option but this. That Bernard and his company found themselves in a similar situation when the 'season failed' at the Capel Street theatre, Dublin in 1782 and were forced to disperse, also underlines the fact that bare necessity often dictated these decisions. On this occasion, the choice for Bernard and his wife was between destitution or work, wherever they could find it and consequently, they moved on to Belfast. Other members of the former company either stayed on in Dublin or left for Liverpool and Norwich. As Bernard stoically reflected 'Such is the life of an actor! Who, after all, comes the nearest to an evidence of the perpetual motion'.[119]

The activities of the more successful players, or those who wrote memoirs, are relatively easy to trace and do give some idea of the 'perpetual motion' and interaction that characterized the lives of the theatrical fraternity at large. But they constitute a tiny minority and it is the hundreds of other players, their names long forgotten, whose combined efforts must have contributed most to the establishment of a coherent theatrical network, the influence of which was not necessarily confined to Britain alone.

One such couple were a Mr. and Mrs. Wignell whose first known appearance was as members of Herbert's Company in King's Lynn in 1743. From that date they travelled extensively in this country and through their son, Thomas, were also connected with the management of the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia. In 1748-50 the Wignell's were playing with the York Company of Comedians and after a short spell with another company in the Norwich area in the spring of 1751, returned to York in December of the same year.

By April 1754, they were in Kent, acting in *Venice Preserv'd* as members of Perry's Kentish Company in the Town Hall at Ashford. Three years later, in June 1757, Wignell who by that time had performed as an under actor at Covent Garden, was in Maidstone

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[117] Bernard, *Retrospections*, Vol. I., p.228; Highfill et al, *Biographical Dictionary of Actors*, Vol. 12 (1987), pp.64-73; Vol. I (1973), pp.359-362 and Vol. 4 (1975), pp. 80-81.
[118] Bernard, *Retrospections*, p.245.
[119] Ibid., pp.300-301.

where he erected a wooden booth in the yard of the Star Inn. [120] Here, he and his wife and their own '...little motley troop from London', appeared three times a week over a period of several weeks and '...certainly deserved more attention and encouragement than was bestowed'. [121] This was according to the eighteen year old Tate Wilkinson, a member of their troupe, who would later become famous as manager of the York circuit. In his *Memoirs* he also described how, in Maidstone, his benefit night brought him only 1s 6d. and two pieces of candle.[122] Also with the Wignells in Kent that year were Thomas Hull, who by 1760 was manager of the King Street Theatre in Birmingham[123] and a Miss Hallam, probably the Wignells' eleven year old niece Isabella, who would later become a well-known actress in her own right. It was the Wignells' Hallam cousins that, some years later, persuaded young Thomas Wignell (1753-1803) to join them in America where he first made his name as an actor and then became manager of the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia.[124] Tom Dibdin also had contact with the Wignell family and in his *Reminiscences* mentions how he sold the manuscript, music and sketches of the scenes of 'a petite piece on the subject of Botany Bay' to '...an agent of Mr Wignell, proprietor of the Philadelphia theatre' in about 1791.[125]

Compounding the professional activities of provincial players were the personal relationships that also contributed in no small way to the ties and interaction between disparate theatrical groups in different parts of the country. It has been widely noted that: 'From the Restoration period onwards there was a tendency for players to marry and remarry within the profession...'. [126] Carol J. Carlisle has also described the theatrical family, '...stretching over several generations and spreading out, sometimes over a large geographical area', as '...one of the most striking phenomena of the nineteenth-century British stage'.[127] I have already commented on the number of

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[120] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, pp.63, 79, 80, 82, 85, 139-142, 251, 254-5; Hartnoll, *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, pp. 366-367 & 891.
[121] Tate Wilkinson, *Memoirs,* Vol. I (1790), p.123.
[122] Ibid., p.123.
[123] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, p.254; Money, *Experience and Identity*, p.87.
[124] Hartnoll, *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, pp.366-367 & 891.
[125] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. I., p.114.
[126] Loftis et al, *Revels History of Drama in English 1660-1750*, p.138
[127] Carol J. Carlisle, 'The Faucit Saville Brothers; or, Theatre and Family', in Richard Foulkes (ed.) *Scenes from Provincial Stages* (London, 1994), p.114.

eighteenth-century theatrical dynasties with Kentish origins[128] but in addition to this have also found many examples where inter-marriage facilitated and strengthened the links between Kent and other parts of the country.[129] Having already considered the economic advantage that could accrue from belonging to a strong theatrical family unit[130] it seems that a 'good' marriage within the profession was also important. This was because it opened up new opportunities, not only for the individuals involved, but also for other family members, friends and associates. The marriage of Sarah's own daughter to William Dowton is a case in point as is that of Tom Dibdin to Nancy Hilliar, whose 'in-laws' managed the Richmond theatre in Yorkshire.[131] Coincidentally, therefore, marriage within the profession had also long served to strengthen and develop the theatrical network which, I believe, constituted an important channel of communication in the provinces of the eighteenth century.

Entertainments and audiences

The point of my investigation into the movements and interaction of companies and individual players has been to demonstrate that a complex and highly integrated theatrical network was operating, albeit at an informal level, throughout the provinces in the eighteenth century. From extant playbills and contemporary newspaper advertisements it is also evident that, between them, the individuals and companies of which this network was composed delivered a more or less homogenous programme of entertainments across the length and breadth of the country during this period. Rosenfeld has found that provincial strollers of the eighteenth century, '...though they liked to produce the latest London plays, were slow to adopt the methods and organization of the London companies...'. From this she concluded that, in many respects, they differed '...but little from the companies of Shakespeare's day' and that in their activities the customs and traditions of an older age were preserved long after they had disappeared in London.[132] In this context it is relevant to note that many of the

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[128] See above, Chapter 5, 'Women in a world of men?', pp.152-184.
[129] For example: Roger Kemble, a member of William Smith's Canterbury company with Sarah Ward, daughter of the Birmingham theatre manager in 1752; Marie Thérèse De Camp to Charles Kemble in 1806; Harriet Diddear to John Faucit Saville in 1805; Charles Mate's daughter to Sam Russell, manager at Margate and Richmond and close friend of William Dowton and T.J. Dibdin.
[130] See above, Chapter 5, 'Women in a world of men?', pp. 152-184.
[131] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol. 1, p.107; S. Rosenfeld, *The Georgian Theatre of Richmond Yorkshire* (London and York, 1984), pp. 2 &12.
[132] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, p.9.

plays performed by Dymer's company during their Kentish campaign in the 1720s and 1730s were still regularly included in Sarah's itinerary at the end of the century, and a quick perusal of her repertoire demonstrates a remarkable continuity with the past.[133] Among the pieces presented both by her own and Dymer's companies were: *The Provok'd Husband, The Beggar's Opera, The Busy Body, King Lear, The Recruiting Officer, The Beaux Stratagem, Hamlet, Jane Shore, A Bold Stroke for a Wife, The Miser, The London Merchant, Othello, The Jew of Venice (Merchant of Venice), The Fair Penitent* and *The Devil to Pay.*[134]

In addition to this, Sarah included many contemporary pieces in her shows, sometimes boasting of the efforts to which she went to obtain the latest hits of the London stage. She also regularly dealt with topical issues and concerns of the day. Spectacle of one kind or another, be it tight-rope walking, dancing or special effects, had also always featured in her entertainments. Her practice of incorporating all these elements in her shows was, seemingly, repeated again and again elsewhere in the country. In the circumstances it seems improbable that the geographically diverse but culturally homogenous network of provincial players in the eighteenth century played anything less than a significant role in the cultural and social evolution of the nation as a whole at that time.

As with every other aspect of theatrical research for this period, the evidence to substantiate this statement is somewhat elliptical due to the erratic nature of the data upon which it is based. For example, some of the years for which I have ample information about Sarah's entertainments coincide with a dearth as far as other companies are concerned, and vice versa. None the less, in the course of my investigation I have come across enough material to give the impression that there was an overwhelming similarity between the entertainments in Sarah's theatres and those presented elsewhere in the country.

Here again, it was often through the efforts of individual players and companies that this material was disseminated around the country. Sometimes players wrote their own

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[133] See Appendix 1, 'Sarah Baker's Repertoire'.

pieces. Susannah Centilivre whose plays remained popular throughout the century and were often presented in Sarah's theatres is one such example. An actress with John Power's company at the beginning of the century, through her travels with his company Susannah's plays were seen in Bath, Norwich, Bristol and Windsor.[135] At the end of the century Tom Dibdin was among the many who continued to write and perform in their own works.

Of major importance, too, was the fact that printed works were increasingly widely available as the century progressed. From as early as 1725 Shakespeare's plays were being published in booklet form although it was not until the mid 1730s that competition between rival publishers reduced prices to as little as one penny a play.[136] Shortly before this, in 1733, the publication of John Bell's comprehensive selection of plays which were widely advertised in the local press must also have been of enormous benefit to theatre companies of all descriptions. The 1791-1802 edition comprised 36 volumes.[137] Similar publications were also available. In December 1788, for example, a notice in the *Kentish Chronicle* advertised the first of forty weekly installments of *The New Theatrical Magazine, or, Complete Dramatic Library*. These cost 6d and each contained a tragedy, a comedy and a farce.[138]

Despite this, Sarah sometimes complained in her advertisements of the great lengths and difficulties she experienced in acquiring scripts and often seems to have obtained plays in manuscript rather than as legitimately purchased texts. In September 1784, for example, she announced that she had '...lately received a Quantity of Manuscript pieces from her Theatrical Correspondent'. In May 1790 and again in August 1803 she also refers to the trouble and expence she has gone to in obtaining transcripts or manuscripts of plays.[139] Although Dibdin wrote much of his own material he also tells us how, in 1789, *The Tragedy of Werter*, the play that he wanted to put on for his Eastbourne benefit, '...was

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[134] Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, pp.218-238; Sarah Baker's advertisements and playbills.
[135] Ibid., p.45, footnote 5.
[136] Allardyce Nicoll, *The Garrick Stage: Theatres and Audience in the Eighteenth century* (Manchester, 1980), p.18.
[137] Hartnoll, *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, p.73; S.S. Kenny, 'The Publication of Plays', in R.D.Hume (ed.), *The London Theatre World, 1660-1800* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1980), p.328.
[138] *Kentish Chronicle*, 9-16 December, 1788.
[139] Morris, *Taking the Town*, p.35; *Kentish Gazette*, 25-28 May, 1790 and 19 August 1803.

not printed and we had no manuscript'. He managed to borrow a script from the prompter at the Brighton theatre where the play was being performed and '...by close work the whole day and sitting up a great part of the night' made a complete copy of it and returned with it to Eastbourne the following day.[140] Scripts were often distributed in this way, it seems, as Dibdin also tells us that one of Sarah's stage manager's jobs was to copy the parts.[141] While manuscripts were sometimes jealously guarded by those who wrote them, it was often to little avail. Charles Macklin, for example went to great lengths to try and stop the pirating of his scripts but without any noticeable success. Consequently, he was '...almost perpetually at war with country managers who were performing *Love à la Mode* and *The Man of the World* without his authorization'.[142]

More often than not, it was in the heads of individual actors and actresses that the content of many plays was conveyed around the country. This was because of the system that operated at that time whereby players were typecast and specialized in specific 'lines of business' from which they rarely deviated. An individual player often carried thirty to forty different parts in his or her head. So long as they had the various 'specialists' in place a small company was enabled to perform an enormous number of pieces over a seven or eight week period in order to tempt a finite number of patrons back to the theatre again and again.[143] This system explains why the casting of the period sometimes appears a little eccentric as actors and actresses continued in their 'line of business' as long as they could and often long past the moment when they should have resorted to roles more suited to their age. Elizabeth Younge, for example, still specialized in young roles, including that of Juliet, when she was well into her forties, for which she was attacked in the press with the words 'Believe me, Younge, 'tis Time at Forty four, Your Song and Dance, and Gambols to give o'er...'.[144]

The similarity in seat prices advertised in playbills for various theatres around the country also indicates that the eclectic social mix I have identified in Sarah's theatres was to be found elsewhere. Sarah's first advertisement in the *Kentish Gazette* of 18-21 November

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[140] Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, Vol.1, p.85.
[141] Ibid., p.98.
[142] Appleton, *Charles Macklin*, p.16.
[143] M. Field, *The Lamplit Stage: The Fisher Circuit 1792-1844* (Norwich, 1985), p.19.
[144] *Public Advertiser*, May, 1780, quoted by Highfill et al. Vol. 12, (1987), p.69.

1772, for example, advertised 'Stage Boxes 2s. 6d.- Front Boxes 2s.- Pit 1s.- Gall. 6d'. In 1790, seat prices for the first performance at her new, legitimate theatre in the city with the exception of a 6d. rise in the price of a box seat, were exactly the same. [145] Even at the height of her success in 1802, seat prices for the opening night at her new theatre on the Pantiles in Tunbridge Wells were far from excessive with Boxes advertised at 4s. and Pit and Gallery at 2s. and 1s. respectively.[146] These sort of prices were very much the norm throughout the provinces during this period with the consequence that, in general, provincial audiences were as socially mixed as in Sarah's establishments. Evidence of this comes from Lancaster where in 1782, the *Cumberland Pacquet* noted that 'even the honest Tars in the gallery were all attention' at a performance of *Hamlet* that had taken place at the theatre on the previous evening.[147] As A.G. Betjemann notes in his work on this theatre the fact it first opened during race week meant that the wealthy and fashionable would also have been in the town which, as he comments, '...emphasizes the wide social mix of the Georgian audience'.[148] Further evidence of this is exhibited in a note at the head of a playbill dated 26 Feb 1813 for the Exeter theatre. This takes the form of an apology for bad behaviour as follows: 'We the undersigned having ....been guilty of ANNOYING the Audience in the Pit, by throwing from the Gallery, Apples, Orange Peel etc. do acknowledge the lenity of the Manager in stopping a prosecution against us, beg his pardon for the OFFENCE, and promise never to be guilty of the like again. Signed G. Burrow, William Avent'. Gallery prices at the Exeter theatre at this time remained at 1s.[149]

Conclusion

In the works of Plumb, Burke and Borsay[150] the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century is presented as an elite and fashionable leisure activity that, together with other fashionable provincial pastimes, comprised part of a commercialized leisure industry that had already taken off by the 1760s. One effect of this development, it is

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[145] *Kentish Gazette*, 12-18 January, 1790.
[146] Tunbridge Wells playbill for 8 July ,1802, Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum.
[147] *Cumberland Pacquet*, 20 August, 1782, quoted by Betjemann, *The Grand Theatre Lancaster*, p.6.
[148] Betjemann, *The Grand Theatre, Lancaster*, p.6.
[149] Exeter Theatre playbills for 26 February 1813 and 16 December, 1812, 'Provincial English' playbills, Harvard Theatre Collection.
[150] Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure*; Plumb, 'The Public, Literature and the Arts...'; Burke, *Popular Culture*; Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance*.

suggested, was that by the 1770s large commercial companies had already driven strolling players and their entertainments from the scene. According to this model there was no connection between the popular entertainments of the fit-ups, barns or booth-theatres, and the 'high culture' that was offered for the amusement of 'high class' audiences in the growing numbers of elegant purpose-built theatres springing up in the new towns. These elite provincial entertainments, so the theory goes, originated in wealthy drawing rooms and many years passed before any of this began to filter through to the masses. In this scenario, the provincial theatre played a divisive social role and for most of the eighteenth century served to widen the gap between 'high class culture' and the hoi-polloi. Together with this interpretation goes the assumption that the provincial theatre was little more than an inconsequential appendage of the London stage with no importance or contribution to make of its own.

None of these ideas and accounts of the history of the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century are confirmed by the facts of Sarah Baker's career. Neither does what I have discovered about the activities of other provincial companies add any weight to these theories. In taking my comprehensive investigation of Sarah's career as a reference point for comparison with what was happening elsewhere in the country and anchoring my study firmly to the theatrical legislation that both constrained and defined the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century I have reached very different conclusions about the status and character of the provincial theatre at that time.

What my work has shown is that the Licensing Act of 1737, contrary to the intentions of its instigators, actually stimulated provincial theatrical activity at this time which, in turn, generated the intense competition between companies that characterized this period. This, in conjunction with the extreme poverty of many players, motivated whole companies, as well as individual strollers, to travel long distances in order to work thus encouraging the development of a comprehensive network of theatrical activity from one end of the country to the other. Because players were prepared to perform wherever they could, the entertainments of fairground booths, fit-ups, barns, malt-houses and other such 'theatres' were, by and large, the same as those presented in more conventional theatres. This interaction continued well into the nineteenth century. My investigation of provincial playbills and advertisements has also demonstrated a

continuity with the past as well as a marked similarity between theatrical performances taking place at more or less the same time in different parts of the country. This I believe was largely due to the 'perpetual motion' and interaction of individual players.

My research has also made clear that the period of consolidation and stability which manifested in the construction of escalating numbers of purpose-built provincial theatres towards the end of the eighteenth century had a direct link with the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788. This was because this legislation inaugurated a new era of legality and security for many provincial theatre companies, especially those who had already established a good relationship with local dignitaries in areas of their operation. These companies now also benefited from the commercial protection afforded by the Act which encouraged the entrepreneurial activities of the more successful provincial managers. Thus, in the 1790s, when standards at the struggling London theatres were in decline, the provincial theatre with its long-standing cultural traditions had already entered its 'golden age'.

There is considerable significance to these findings. Firstly, the extent, diversity and extraordinary interaction between all manifestations of theatrical activity during this period meant that throughout the country diverse and scattered audiences were exposed, by and large, to very much the same entertainments at more or less the same time as every one else. In general, therefore, anyone who patronized 'theatrical entertainments' was subject to similar cultural influences and confronted with the same, often political, issues and concerns of the day, whoever they were, wherever they lived and whatever the nature of the venue. Because provincial 'theatre' cut through both cultural and social divides it is clear that, far from epitomizing the polarization that some historians associate with this period, the theatre of the provinces did much to encourage a 'shared culture' that anyone of whatever social rank could understand and enjoy.

The second point to be made concerns the increasingly close relationship of the more ambitious provincial troupes with the local establishment upon whose good will their livelihood, in large part, depended. That the provincial stage had long been regarded as a powerful influence is clearly acknowledged by the decision to ban it altogether in 1737. By 1788, however, it appears that, at both national and local level, the establishment had

come to recognize the potential of the provincial stage as a useful means of promoting their own ideas and interests. This applied not only to local affairs but also to wider concerns especially at times of national crisis. The concept of the provincial stage as a crude means of influencing opinion in the country at large is therefore another aspect of its history that has until now been widely overlooked.

Finally, in marked contrast to the inaccurate and misleading impression that theatrical activity in the eighteenth century provinces was merely a pale reflection of the London scene, my investigations have made it clear that the provincial theatre of Georgian Britain had a life and dynamism all of its own. My research has also demonstrated that because of the complex factors involved in its own survival and evolution, the theatre of the provinces had a unique capacity to influence and facilitate change in its own right. For all these reasons, therefore, I am convinced that this is a subject that has been neglected, misrepresented and marginalized for far too long and that a complete reappraisal of its role and contribution to the history of this country as a whole is long overdue.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study has been to investigate the relevance and place of the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century within the context of the broader history of that period. The fundamental point of reference for this project has been the comprehensive picture I have built up of the life and career of the Kentish theatrical manager and entrepreneur, Sarah Baker. By considering this evidence in relation to the events, attitudes and concerns of the wider world in which she lived I have been able to discover a great deal about the political and social significance of the provincial theatre of Sarah's era.

The additional implication of this study is that because my research has involved an exploration of the ways in which external factors affected Sarah's career I have engaged with and, in some cases, shed new light on work done by historians in a number of other areas. In this respect the discovery that the problems of the London theatres in 1787-88 coalesced with concerns about the nation's moral decline to produce beneficial, but unforeseen, consequences for the theatre of the provinces has uncovered new evidence regarding the methods and achievements of William Wilberforce's Proclamation Society. Thus, I have been able to add to the work done by Joanna Innes on the subject.[1] Likewise, my examination of Sarah's experience of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and description of the way in which she assisted with the government's efforts to generate enthusiasm for its policies, constitutes a response, and addition, to Gillian Russell's work on theatre and war.[2] Kathleen Wilson's suggestion that there was a strong connection between the magistracy and the theatre has also been amplified by my examination of Sarah Baker's career.[3] The history of gender is another area where I have been able to make a contribution. This has been achieved, initially, by investigating the question of whether or not it was as exceptional as it seems for a woman to take on

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[1] Joanna Innes, 'Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth-Century England', in E. Hellmuth, *The Transformation of Political Culture* (Oxford, 1990). See above Chapter 2, 'Behind the Scenes: The Theatrical Representations Act of 1788', pp. 39-69.

[2] G. Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics and Society 1793-1815* (Oxford, 1995). See above Chapter 4, 'Theatre and War...', pp.114-151.

[3] K. Wilson, ' 'The good, the bad and the impotent': Imperialism and the politics of identity in Georgian England', in Ann Bermingham & John Brewer (eds.), *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text* (London, 1995). See above, especially Chapters 1,3,4 & 7.

the sort of managerial/entrepreneurial role that Sarah did in the latter half of the eighteenth century and, then, by considering my evidence in the context of work on the period by, for example, Olwen Hufton, Amanda Vickery and Bridget Hill.[4] Urbanisation is another theme that can be identified as one of the many external factors that helped determine the course and progress of Sarah's career and here, too, the data I have amassed means that I have been able to offer new insights and perspectives to the on-going debates that focus on the nature and development of life in the burgeoning eighteenth-century town.[5]

But it is the insight that I have gained into the dynamics and place of the eighteenth-century provincial theatre itself that has proved the most valuable outcome of my in-depth study of Sarah's career. Having said this there is no doubt that, at one level, the evidence I have accumulated with reference to Sarah's activities constitutes a compelling account of personal endeavour, courage and achievement in its own right. As a young widow with three small children to bring up the demands on Sarah's energy and resourcefulness were formidable especially in the long years before the Theatrical Representations Act inaugurated a new era of relative security and comfort in 1788. Until that time, in fierce competition with the managers of other itinerant companies and with the prospect of prosecution under the Licensing Act a permanent threat Sarah had neither home nor proper purpose built theatre of her own. Perpetual travel, with unmade roads frequently the only option, was the hallmark of such a life. In addition to this there were venues to be arranged, scripts to be acquired, new plays and acts to be learned and rehearsed, scenery and machinery to be devised and built for all shapes and sizes of 'theatres', costumes to be made and cared for, actors to be hired and fired and the finances to be taken care of. To have contended successfully with operational and logistical demands such as these until she was over fifty years of age is proof enough of Sarah's special personal qualities. So, too, is the fact that when, at this late stage, the

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[4] Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, Vol. 1, 1500-1800* (London, 1995); Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', *Historical Journal*, Vol.36, No. 2 (1993), pp. 383-414; B. Hill, 'Women's History: A study in change, continuity or standing still', in P. Sharpe (ed.), *Women's Work: The English Experience 1650-1914* (London, 1998). See above, Chapter 5, 'Women in a world of men?', pp. 152-184.

[5] See above Chapter 6, 'Sarah Baker: Culture and class', pp. 185-202 & Chapter 7, 'Re-writing provincial theatre history', pp. 203-245.

opportunity to place her business on a more secure and permanent footing at last presented itself, she had the energy, resolve and courage to invest her savings in building her own four substantial theatres, the last of which was not completed until 1802 by which time she was at least sixty-five years old.

The public sphere at the end of the eighteenth century would seem to have belonged on the whole to men. In seeking to understand more about Sarah's achievements and put her success into some sort of perspective part of my research has focused on attitudes towards women and work in the late eighteenth century and how it was that Sarah was able to survive and thrive in, what appears to have been, a predominantly male preserve. Although unusual, I discovered that it was not unknown for women to compete successfully with men in male dominated areas of work at this time. Sarah, however, as a woman of the theatre, enjoyed particular freedoms and opportunities that were unavailable to the vast majority of women at this period. But because of society's ambivalent attitude towards the stage there were dangers in her situation. Unlike some other theatrical women Sarah managed to avoid the potential pitfalls of her profession and was fortunate in that she was a member of a supportive theatrical family. As well as the personal advantages involved, Sarah's family, including her mother, sister, children, in-laws, cousins, nephews and grandchildren also worked for her and, as such, constituted a powerful economic resource. In chronological terms Sarah was not unique as there were many other female managers of troupes and theatres both before and after her time. Thus her example appears to support the 'continuity theory' of women's work that suggests that between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries women's opportunities and experience of work remained broadly unchanged.

In large measure the evidence that illuminates Sarah's personal qualities also demonstrates that the course of her professional life was dictated by events and concerns far removed from the day to day existence over which she had any personal control. The fact that the prejudices, preoccupations, progress and struggles of the wider world are reflected so vividly in the character and course of her career, as well as manifesting in the subject matter of the entertainments presented on her stages, demonstrates just how closely involved she and her company were, both implicitly and explicitly, in the rapid changes taking place in society at large at that time.

Fundamental to the direction that Sarah's lifelong career was to take were the moral concerns that had dogged the theatrical profession since the latter years of the previous century. The troubled history of the London theatres, too, was deeply implicated in the difficulties that faced the strolling players of the provinces in the years from 1737 as well as being involved some fifty years later in the complex parliamentary manœuvres that resulted in the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788. The target of moral reformers, the stage had also long been regarded as a suitable focus for action when the political *status quo* was threatened and in 1737 strolling provincial companies became a victim of the political vulnerability of Robert Walpole. The Licensing Act, passed that year in an attempt to stifle theatrical activity on a nationwide scale, was to define the nature of provincial theatre for the next half century Despite the draconian intentions of this act, Sarah's professional survival was safeguarded by the antiquated methods by which the country was still governed at this time. The reason she was able to pursue her theatrical activities throughout the many years that they remained illegal was because the executive independence of the mayors and magistrates in the towns and villages where she played had developed to such an extent that they were virtually autonomous and could interpret the law more or less as they wished.

Until the 1770s the way Sarah's business operated reflected the overwhelmingly rural existence of lives that revolved around the seasons. In order to make a living she and her troupe had to seek out an audience and travelled long distances to find and perform for the large crowds who gathered at a country fair or race meeting. As more and more people began to move to the towns new opportunities opened up and Sarah slowly established a regular circuit concentrating, in the main, on the larger towns of Kent. From the mid 1780s she was doing well enough to give up the fairground altogether. Although beginning to flourish, the omnipresent Licensing Act ensured that her life as the manager of a theatrical troupe remained precarious and insecure with the threat of prosecution ever present. Until 1788 and the advent of the Theatrical Representations Act, the uncertainty of her situation meant that it would have been unwise to risk large sums of money in erecting permanent purpose built theatres of her own and the authorities in her main Kentish towns were also reluctant, it seems, to give their permission for her to do this before that date. Although by the mid 1780s she was the

owner of two portable wooden theatres, a barn in Folkestone and a room attached to the Hare and Hounds at Ore, in her main towns she continued to perform in whatever makeshift facilities became available to her, mostly in temporary 'theatres' rigged up for the occasion in barns, warehouses, malthouses, rooms and the like.

Town improvements in Canterbury in 1787-88 threatened disaster for Sarah and her burgeoning career when the old Buttermarket where her company's performances had taken place in an upstairs room, on and off since 1772, was demolished in the name of progress. This incident coincided with the resurgence of concerns about the nation's moral turpitude and with the foundation of William Wilberforce's Proclamation Society whose *raison d'etre* was to stop the moral rot through encouraging greater responsibility and uniformity of action on the part of the provincial magistracy. At the same time hostilities resumed between the various factions involved in the London theatre wars.

Fortunately for Sarah and her company, an unexpected consequence of the moral concerns and theatrical squabbles with which the London establishment were preoccupied in 1788 was the Theatrical Representations Act. This legislation restored the rights of the provincial magistracy to grant theatrical licences and thus made it possible for her (and many other provincial players) to operate legally for the first time in her life. In general, this legislation favoured a company such as Sarah's which had already established a good relationship with the local authorities. In contrast to the situation of the London theatres, it also offered commercial protection to those who 'won' licences because, under the terms of the act, no two companies were permitted to play in the same place at the same time. Thus, once established in a specific town, an accepted provincial company such as Sarah's had no direct competition and, therefore, was not exposed to the same sort of commercial pressures that the London theatre experienced. This situation accentuated the importance of the relationship between the local magistracy or officials of a town with any theatrical company who sought to establish themselves in the area under their control. Probably the most important event of Sarah's professional life, the Theatrical Representations Act opened the door to a new era of security and respectability for her and her company and shortly after its

enactment, with the backing of the Canterbury authorities, she erected her first permanent purpose-built theatre in the city.

Coming at the moment when town improvements were already underway the timing of this act was also fortuitous for the local authorities themselves. Not only was the construction of a fine theatre an appropriate and permanent demonstration of their reinstated powers where theatrical activities were concerned but it also provided the recently revamped city with a splendid new cultural focus. In the following twelve years Sarah erected three more substantial purpose-built theatres in Rochester, Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells.

While the effect of the Theatrical Representations Act cannot be overstated in terms of Sarah's eventual prosperity it was not the only external factor involved in her change of fortune in the 1790s. The French wars, which broke out in 1792 and continued until 1815, the year before Sarah's death, also played an important part in her success. The playhouse had long been popular with the military and naval fraternity and for this reason Sarah had always focused her theatrical campaign on towns with a military or naval presence. With the advent of war in 1792, she was thus well placed to take advantage of the increased numbers of military and naval personnel who poured into the county at this time. In addition to this, part of the attraction of Sarah's shows had always been that, as well as providing straightforward entertainment, her productions also dealt with current affairs, a subject which was of considerable interest to the general public. In this context, the drama of war lent itself particularly satisfactorily to theatrical re-enactment and Sarah, who was always quick to exploit an opportunity, made the most of the commercial possibilities that this presented.

As well as demonstrating how the ups and downs of Sarah's professional life were largely dictated by events and concerns over which she had little control my research has also revealed that Sarah's provincial company, itself, made a considerable contribution to the development and character of the volatile, evolving urban communities in which she operated and, eventually, erected her own purpose-built theatres. In making this discovery my study has thrown up a lot of challenges to the existing literature on the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century. This, I believe, is largely because little, if

any, account has previously been taken either of the importance of the link between the magistracy and the provincial theatre, or, of the profound effect of the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788. Without considering the implications and consequences of these two vital factors it is not surprising that erroneous conclusions have often been drawn about the origins and nature of theatre in the provinces. Nor, in these circumstances, is it to be wondered at that the eighteenth-century theatre of the provinces is frequently, and inaccurately, dismissed as a pale reflection of the London stage with no dynamic or impact of its own.

One of the most enduring theories about the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century is that it epitomized and encouraged the social and cultural polarization that is frequently attributed to this period. By considering the evidence provided by Sarah's career within the legislative framework that both constrained and defined the character of provincial theatre in those years, I have been able to demonstrate that the generalized stereotype of the provincial theatre as being socially and culturally divisive was far from the truth where her company and activities were concerned.

In the first place, there was nothing culturally elite about Sarah's entertainments which were an eclectic mixture of old and new and demonstrated a remarkable continuity with the past. Plays that had been performed by previous companies in Kent in the 1720s and 1730s were still regularly included in Sarah's repertoire at the end of the century. Traditional fairground entertainments such as tight-rope walking and hornpipes, as well as the plays of Shakespeare and other classics also figured in her shows. In addition to this, she regularly dealt with the topical issues and concerns of the day and often boasted of the efforts to which she went to obtain the latest hits of the London stage for performance by her company.

Although in the wake of the Theatrical Representations Act Sarah began to build her own 'great grand' theatres, it was not until 1802 that the last of the four was opened. This meant that even in the 1790s she was still obliged, in some instances, to continue performing with her company in the less conventional 'theatres' that she had utilized during the long years that her activities had remained illegal. It is also the case that well into the 1780s she and her company were still performing at the Bartholomew Fair.

Thus, the performers and entertainments of her proper purpose-built urban playhouses, not only originated in but, also, remained closely linked to the fairgrounds, inn yards, barns, booths and other makeshift venues where she and her company had operated for so long.

There is also substantial evidence to demonstrate that, even as 'Governess-General' of her 'great grand' theatres, Sarah continued to welcome all and sundry, whatever their social rank or background, to her shows. Consequently, her auditoriums were in essence an interface where a broad cross-section of society came together to enjoy an eclectic range of entertainments that reflected their mixed tastes and expectations while, at the same time, experiencing a social event in common. Sarah's theatres had an involvement, therefore, in creating a 'shared culture' for her patrons whatever their background. This was of particular significance in respect of the aspiring and established 'middling sort' making their way in the uncertain social *milieu* and rapidly changing environment of the Kentish towns where she operated. In creating a public forum of this kind Sarah made a significant contribution to the evolving society in which she lived and worked which is very much at odds with the conventional image of the provincial theatre as the fashionable and exclusive preserve of the socially and culturally elite.

This was not the only way in which Sarah and her company played a significant role in the developing world with which they were involved as my research has also revealed that by the late 1780s Sarah's theatres were being utilized by the local elite as a means of promoting their own political ideas and interests. The theatre had long served as an important source of information about current political issues, scandals and 'hard' news and in this respect Sarah's company was no exception. Apart from newspapers, which only a minority were able to read, the general public often had little 'solid' information about the affairs of the world outside their own personal existence. One of the attractions of the provincial stage, therefore, was that in attempting to interpret, comment upon or re-enact exciting current events, in effect, it performed a 'newsreel' function. At times of particular excitement or crisis the theatre did especially well as people were even more eager than usual for 'news' and also for the opportunity to 'taste' the excitement of war or a major battle for themselves. Because Sarah's interests were so closely tied to the goodwill of the local authorities within whose jurisdictions

she operated she had to be particularly careful how she presented these issues so that she did not offend their political sensibilities. Thus, for example, the unfolding drama of the French Revolution had to be increasingly carefully negotiated by her company as the initially warm reaction to this event began to cool.

That the provincial stage had long been recognized as a powerful medium through which to deliver a political message is clearly acknowledged by the decision to ban it altogether in 1737. By the early 1790s, however, it is clear that Sarah's relationship with the establishment in the towns where she had her theatres had developed to the point where they had come to recognize the potential of the stage, not, primarily, as a threat or danger as had been the case in the past, but, rather, as a positive benefit. As Sarah's career progressed the evidence for her increasingly close involvement with the local hierarchy in the towns where she had her theatres is reflected, for example, in the use that was made of her stage by local politicians at election time. It is also apparent that Sarah's theatres were a vital component of the campaign to generate enthusiasm for the government's policy of war with France between 1792 and 1815. As well as the overtly patriotic material that became a staple of her repertoire in these years, and especially at times of particular crisis, her theatres also provided a public forum for the morale-boosting activities of the Volunteers, right at the heart of the local urban community.

These insights into Sarah's career have opened up new perspectives on the place and role of the provincial theatre of the eighteenth century. This is because they demonstrate that her experiences were integral to the changes taking place in this country at that time and also that, in themselves, her theatres, constituted a catalyst for change. It is also clear that because of the complex factors involved in the survival and eventual prosperity of her company, her theatrical enterprise had a dynamic and character all of its own and, therefore, should not be dismissed as a mere 'leisure activity' or as a feeble imitation or mere offshoot of the London scene.

A further dimension to these findings is that in the course of my research I have come across a considerable amount of information about provincial theatre companies elsewhere in the country and been struck, not only by the extent and diversity of their activities but also by the parallels, similarities and direct connections with Sarah's

company in Kent. From this I have deduced that the influences and events which affected the course of Sarah's career were also involved in the development of the provincial theatre elsewhere in the country in that period.

The overall impression that has emerged from this study of provincial theatre in the country as a whole is of an eclectic but none the less integrated tribe of theatrical performers who, often closely involved with the authorities in areas where they operated, constituted an informal nationwide network through which a more or less homogenous culture was disseminated and established across the length and breadth of the country. It is also apparent that the theatrical legislation which, to a large extent, dictated the character and course of Sarah's career had a similar impact in other areas. As a consequence of these findings I now strongly believe that the challenges which Sarah's activities pose to existing theories regarding the provincial theatre can, with ample justification, be extended to include the provincial theatre in the country as a whole at this time. From this premise it is a logical step to conclude that this has serious implications for current perceptions of the role of provincial theatre in its national context and demonstrates the necessity of a complete re-assessment of its place in the history of the country at that time.

APPENDIX 1

Sarah Baker's Repertoire

Due to the uneven nature of the data upon which it is based this is a somewhat elliptical record of Sarah Baker's repertoire. Nonetheless this table does give some impression of the scale, scope and development of her entertainments over the years. The information comes mostly from her own advertisements in the *Kentish Gazette* (from 1772) and the *Maidstone Journal* (from 1786) and from playbills in the following collections: Sprange Collection, Tunbridge Wells Museum; Theatre Collection, Harvard University Library; Playbills Collection, Hertford Museum. The only record I have found for the years before 1772 is for 1766 and this comes from Felix Farley's *Bristol Journal*. The years which are well represented are: 1772-1775, 1778, 1779, 1781,1785-1790, 1794-1798 and 1800-1807. From 1808 the information is more limited coming from a few random playbills and only a handful of advertisements in the *Kentish Gazette*.[1] The fall-off in the number of advertisements could have been due to Sarah's advancing years and the fact that by this time, according to Catherine Feist, she '...was very lame, and seldom, if ever, walked beyond ten paces from the theatre'.[2] On the other hand it is possible she was using alternative methods to advertise her shows. Whatever the truth of the matter there is still enough evidence to demonstrate that 'the show went on' and that until June 1815, only nine months before her death, she continued to manage the business herself.

A '*' to the left of a column indicates that the piece was played in the first half of the decade and to the right that it was performed in the latter half. In the 1800-1816 column the first '*' indicates pieces performed from 1800-1807 inclusive while the second '*' covers the last nine years of Sarah's life.

The first entry, 'Usual diversions' etc. is very generalized but is meant to indicate that elements of the entertainments of the earlier years were retained right through into the nineteenth century. For example, a performance in 1803 at the Rochester Theatre

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[1] The years I have concentrated on here are 1808, 1809, 1811, 1812, 1814, 1815 & Jan - Feb 1816.
[2] Catherine Feist, 'Genuine Gossip by an old actress: The eccentric Mrs. Baker', *Era*, 5 June, 1853.

featured a 'leap through a hoop of real daggers' while at the Maidstone theatre in 1812, Miss Hooper danced the hornpipe, blindfold, over twelve eggs. The classification of each piece, which could vary, is based on descriptions given by Sarah herself in her advertisements and playbills.

KEY: B=Burlesque; BD=Ballet Dance; BO= Ballad Opera/Song; C=Comedy; CO=Comic Opera/Operatic Farce; DE= Dramatic Entertainment; DR=Dramatic Romance; F=Farce; HP=Historical Play/Sketch; I=Interlude; M=Melodrama; MD=Musical Drama; ME= Musical Entertainment/Songs etc; MF= Musical Farce; MI= Musical Interlude; O=Opera; P= Pantomime; R=Romance; T=Tragedy.

	1766	1770s	1780s	1790s	1800-07/ 1808-16
'Usual diversions' including stiff-rope/tight-rope dancing, musical glasses, tumbling, band of music, singing, dancing (hornpipes, wooden shoes etc.) fireworks & 'spectacle' etc.	*	* *	* *	* *	* *
Harlequin's Whim; Or Merry Medley. (P)	*	*			
The Honest Yorkshireman., H. Carey, 1735. (F/BO)		* *			
Thomas and Sally, I Bickerstaffe, 1760		* *	*	*	
The Harlot's Progress. (P)		*			
Three Old Women Weather-Wise. (I)		* *	*	*	
The Chaplet, Mendez, 1749. (ME)		* *		*	
Midas, K. O'Hara, 1762. (B)		* *	*	* *	* *
Harlequin Restored. (P)		* *			
Cymon (DR)		*	*		
The Parting Lovers; or The Press Gang. (F/BO)		*			
The Old Man Taught Wisdom; Or, the Virgin Unmask'd, H. Fielding, 1735. (F/BO)		* *	*		*
Birth of Harlequin. (P)		*			
Orpheus on his Journey to Hell for his Wife. (MI)		*			
The Farmer Deceiv'd or the Death and Restoration of Harlequin. (P)		* *	*		
The Devil to Pay or Wives Metamorphosed, Charles Coffey and J. Mottley, 1731. (Based on *Devil of a Wife*, Thomas Jevon, 1652-88). (O)		* *		*	*
The Captive. (CO)		* *			
The Beggars Opera, J. Gay, 1728.		* *	*		*
The Portrait, G. Colman, 1770.		* *	*		

	1766	1770s	1780s	1790s	1800-07/ 1808-16
The Jealous Sultan Deceiv'd; Or Harlequin turn'd Turk . (P)		*			
The Spanish Lady. (BO)		* *			
Harlequin Skeleton.		* *	*		
The Distrest Sailor. (MI)		*		*	
The Trip to Scotland, I. Bickerstaffe, 1765. (F)		* *			
Harlequin Statue.		* *		*	
Daphne and Amintor. (CO)		*			
Cupid's Revenge, F. Gentleman, 1772.		* *			
Harlequin Captive in Spain.		*			
Linco's Travels. (MI)		*			
The Padlock, I. Bickerstaffe, 1768. (CO)		* *	* *	* *	*
Mrs Midnight's Concert Or the Old Woman's Oratorio. (ME)		*			
Damon and Phillida, C. Cibber, 1729. (BO)		* *			
The Country Courtship.		*			
The Wedding Ring, C. Dibdin, 1773. (O)		* *	* *		
The Pantheonites. (DE)		* *			
The Triumphs of Shakspear; Or the invasion of Harlequin, 'a comic, tragic, operatic, pantomimic entertainment'.		*			
The Cross Purposes, O'Brien, 1772. (F)		*			
The Deserter; Or, A Trip to Portsmouth. (DE)		*	*		*
The Waterman or the First of August, C.Dibdin, 1774. (ME)		*	* *	*	*
Miss in Her Teens, D. Garrick, 1747. (F)		*			*
The Note of Hand; Or, A Trip to Newmarket, R. Cumberland, 1774. (DE)		*			
The Mayor of Garrat, S. Foote, 1763. (C)		*		* *	* *
The Cooper; Or, Love in a Tub. (Based on *The Comical Revenge; Or, Love in a Tub*, Sir George Etherege, 1664). (MF)		*		*	
The Irish Widow, D. Garrick, 1772. (F)		*		* *	*
The Romance of an Hour. (F)		*			
She Stoops to Conquer; Or, The Mistakes of a Night, O. Goldsmith, 1773. (C)		*	*	*	*
The Rival Candidates. (B)		*	*		
The Orphan; or, The Unhappy Marriage, T. Otway, 1680. (T)		*			

	1766	1770s	1780s	1790s	1800=07/ 1808-16
The Busy Body, Susannah Centilivre, 1709. (C)		*	* *	* *	
The Contract. (F)		*			
The Earl of Essex. (T)		*			*
The Wonder, A Woman Keeps a Secret, Susannah Centilivre, 1714. (C)		*	* *	*	*
All the World's a Stage, Jackman, 1777. (F)		*	* *	* *	*
The School for Scandal, R. B. Sheridan, 1777. (C)		*	* *	*	*
The Maid of the Mill, I. Bickerstaffe, 1765. (C O)		*	* *	*	
The Quaker; Or, May-Day Dower, C. Dibdin, 1777. (C O)		*	* *	* *	* *
Romeo and Juliet. (T) 1694		*	* *	*	*
The Duenna, R.B. Sheridan, 1777. (C O)		*	* *		*
The Recruiting Officer, G. Farquhar, 1706. (C)		*	*	*	*
May Day, or The Little Gipsey, D. Garrick, 1775. (CO)		*	*		
Othello. (T) 1604		*	*		*
King Richard III. (T) 1693		*	* *	* *	* *
George Barnwell or The London Merchant, G. Lillo, 1731. (T)		*	* *	* *	*
The Beaux' Stratagem, Farquhar, 1707. (C)		*	* *	*	*
Hamlet. (T) 1602		*	* *	* *	
The Fair Penitent, N. Rowe, 1703. (T)		*	*	* *	
The Maid of the Oaks; Or, Fete Champetre, General John Burgoyne, 1774. (C O)		*		*	
A Bold Stoke for a Wife, Susannah Centilivre, 1718. (F)		*	*	* *	
Bon Ton; or High Life above Stairs, D. Garrick, 1775. (F)		*	*	*	
Love in a Village, I. Bickerstaffe, 1762. (C O)		*			*
Oroonoko; Or, the Royal Slave, Thomas Southerne, 1696. (T)			*		
Cato, Joseph Addison, 1704. (T)			* *	*	
The Fashionable Lover, R. Cumberland, 1772. (C)			* *	* *	
A Bold Stroke for a Husband, Hannah Cowley, 1783. (C)			* *	*	*
Henry II; or, the fall of Rosamund			*		
The Oddities; or, the Canterbury Races, Elizabeth Burgess, 1781. (C)			*		
Arden of Faversham. (T)			*		*
Harlequin's vagaries; or the Power of Magic. (P)			*		

	1766	1770s	1780s	1790s	1800-07/ 1808-16
The Jubilee.			*		
The Mogul Tale; or, the Cobler's Flight in an Air Balloon. (F)			* *		*
The Poor Soldier, O'Keefe, 1783. (CO)			* *	* *	* *
King Lear. (T)			* *	*	
More Ways than One. (C)			* *		
The Gamester, E. Moore, 1753. (T)			* *	* *	
Peeping Tom , O'Keefe, 1784. (F)			* *	*	*
Rosina., Mrs. Brooke, 1782. (C O)			* *	* *	*
The Romp; Or, A Cure for the Spleen, Lloyd, 1778. (F)			*	* *	* *
Jane Shore, N. Rowe, 1714. (T)			* *	* *	*
The Grecian Daughter, A. Murphy, 1772. (T)			* *		
The Deaf Lover, Pilon, 1780. (F)			* *	* *	
The Generous Tar; Or, Naval Gratitude (O'Keefe).			* *		
Which is the Man? Hannah Cowley, 1782. (C)			* *	* *	
St. Patrick's Day or The Scheming Lieutenant, R.B. Sheridan, 1775. (F)			* *		
The Suspicious Husband., B. Hoadly, 1747. (C)			* *	* *	
The Natural Son, R. Cumberland, 1784. (C)			* *	* *	
The Touchstone; or, Harlequin Traveller. 'An operatical, farcical, pantomimical, Naval Military Extravaganza'.			*		*
Alexander the Great, Nathaniel Lee, 1677. (T)			* *	*	
Barnaby Brittle. (F)			* *	*	*
The Rivals; Or, A Trip to Bath, R.B. Sheridan, 1775. (C)			* *	* *	* *
The West Indian, Richard Cumberland, 1771. (C)			* *	* *	* *
Tamerlane the Great, N. Rowe, 1701. (T)			* *		
Who's the Dupe, Hannah Cowley, 1779. (F)			* *	*	* *
The Chapter of Accidents, Sophia Lee, 1780. (C)			* *	* *	
The Belle's Stratagem, Hannah Cowley, 1780. (C)			* *	* *	*
King Henry the Fourth. (T) 1597			* *	*	*
The Ghost; Or, The Dead Alive. (F)			* *	* *	*
The Son in Law. (F)			* *	*	
I'll Tell You What. (C)			* *	*	
The Flitch of Bacon. (C O)			* *	* *	*
The Young Quaker, I. Bickerstaffe, 1783. (C)			*	*	*

	1766	1770s	1780s	1790s	1800-07/ 1808-16
Harlequin Invasion, or The Taylor without a Head, D. Garrick. (P)			*	* *	
Robin Hood; Or, The Humours of Sherwood Forest (C O)			*	* *	*
The Agreeable Surprize, O'Keefe, 1781. (C)			* *	* *	*
Douglas, John Home, 1756. (T)			*	*	
The Foundling. (C)			*		
The Midnight Hour; Or, the Battle of Wits, Elizabeth Inchbald, 1787. (F)			*	* *	* *
The Merchant of Venice. (C) 1596			*	* *	* *
He would be a Soldier, Pilon, 1786. (CO)			*	* *	
Richard Coeur de Lion, General John Burgoyne, 1786. (MD)			*	*	
The Chances, Fletcher/ Villiers/ Garrick, 1754. (C)			*	* *	
The School for Greybeards, or The Mourning Bride, Hannah Cowley, 1786. (C)			*		
Robinson Crusoe, or Harlequin Friday, R.B. Sheridan, 1781. (P)			*		
Such Things Are, Elizabeth Inchbald, 1787. (C)			*	* *	
The Country Girl, D. Garrick, 1760. (C)			*	* *	*
All in the Wrong (C)			*		
The Lyar, S. Foote, 1762. (C)			*	*	
The Stone-Eater (I)			*		
The Doctor and Apothecary (CO)			*		
Love for Love			*		
The First Floor (F)			*		
The Heiress, General John Burgoyne, 1786. (C)			*	*	
Inkle and Yarico, G. Colman, 1787. (CO)			*	* *	* *
Venice Preserved; Or, a plot discovered, T. Otway, 1682. (T)			*		*
Macbeth. (T) 1606			*	*	
The Cheats of Scapin. T. Otway (F)			*		
Love in a Camp, or Patrick in Prussia. (F)			*	*	
Don Juan, William Reeve, 1787, (Based on *The Libertine*, Thomas Shadwell, 1675. (T)			*	*	*
The Clandestine Marriage, G. Colman & Garrick, 1766. (C)			*	*	*
As You Like it. (C) 1599			*	* *	*
The Beggar on Horseback, O'Keefe, 1785. (CO)			*	*	
Seeing is Believing. (DR)			*	*	*
The Critic; or A Tragedy Rehearsed, R.B. Sheridan, 1777. (C)			*	*	

	1766	1770s	1780s	1790s	1800-07 1808-16
Sorrows of /The Tragedy of Werter, Frederick Reynolds, 1785. (T)			*	*	
Animal Magnetism, Elizabeth Inchbald, 1788. (C)			*	*	*
Highland Reel., O'Keefe, 1788. (C)			*	* *	*
The Married Man. (C)			*		
Twelfth Night (C) 1699			*	*	
The Spanish Barber (F)			*	* *	
The Triumph of Liberty or The Destruction of the Bastille, John Dent, 1789. (DE)			*	*	
The Election. (ME)			*	*	
British Loyalty, or A Squeeze for St. Paul's.			*	*	
The Farmer. (C O)			*	*	* *
Transformation. (I)			*	*	
As it Should Be. (DE)			*	*	
The Benevolent Planters.			*	*	
Coriolanus; Or, The Roman Matron. (T) 1607			*	*	
The Double Disguise. (F)			*	*	
The Carmelite. (T).			*		
Catherine & Petruchio, Shakespeare / Garrick, 1756. (C)			*	*	* *
Ways and Means or a trip to Dover, G. Colman. (C)				* *	*
The Pannel. (C)				*	
The Farm House. (C)				* *	*
The Dramatist, or Stop Him Who Can!, Frederick Reynolds, 1789. (C)				* *	
The Man of the World, C. Macklin, 1764. (C)				*	* *
The Miser, Henry Fielding, 1733. (C)				*	*
The Follies of a Day or The Marriage of Figaro (C)				*	
The Tempest, or The Enchanted Island. (C)				* *	
The Toy, or the Humours of Hampton Court. (C)				*	
The Deserter of Naples, or Royal Clemency, 1788. (P)				*	
The Child of Nature, Elizabeth Inchbald, 1788. (DR)				* *	
The Village Lawyer, M'Cready, 1787. (F)				* *	* *
A Countryman's Description of London Amusements. (ME)				* *	
The Regent, Or Virtue Triumphant, Bertie Greatheed, 1788. (T)				*	
Robinson Crusoe, and his Man Friday. (P)				*	*
The Recruiting Serjeant, I. Bickerstaffe, 1770. (MI)				* *	*

	1766	1770s	1780s	1790s	1800-07 1808-16
The Provok'd Husband, Or, A Journey to London, C. Cibber with Vanbrugh, 1728. (C)				* *	
She Wou'd and She Wou'd Not, Colley Cibber, 1739. (C)				*	
The Adventurers. (F)				*	
No Song No Supper, Prince Hoare, 1790. (CO)				* *	* *
Try Again. (F)				*	
The Mock Doctor, H. Fielding (from Moliere), 1732. (F)				*	
Rival Loyalists, Or, Shelah's Choice, T.Dibdin, 1791. (MI)				* *	
Two Strings to your Bow, Jephson.				*	*
Patrick O'Neal; Or, an Irishman's Description of a Man of War (ME)				* *	
The Prisoner at Large, Kendal.				*	*
The Accident; Or, The Chickens Reckoned before they are Hatched. (MI)				* *	
Bucks Have at You All. (ME)				*	*
How to Grow Rich, Frederick Reynolds, 1792. (C)				*	
The Spoilt Child, I Bickerstaffe, 1790. (F)				* *	*
The Jew, R. Cumberland, 1794. (C)				* *	*
My Grandmother, Prince Hoare, 1793. (CO)				* *	* *
The Mountaineers; Or, Love and Madness. G.Colman the younger, 1793. (DR)				* *	* *
The Sailors Wedding. (MI)				*	
Sprigs of Laurel. (C O)				* *	
Hob in the Well, Doggett / T. Cibber 1696 / 1711. (ME)				*	* *
The Little Farthing Rush Light. (ME)				* *	
The Deserted Daughter, T. Holcroft, 1795. (C)				* *	
Four and Twenty Fiddlers all on a Row. (ME)				* *	
The Children in the Wood, Morton, 1793. (T)				* *	* *
Everyone has his Fault, Elizabeth. Inchbald, 1793. (C)				* *	* *
Irishman in London: Or, The Happy .1frican, William M'Cready, 1792. (F)				* *	*
The Purse; Or, The Benevolent Tar J.C .Cross, 1794. (ME)				* *	* *
The Rage, Frederick Reynolds, 1794. (C)				* *	
The Wedding Day, Elizabeth Inchbald, 1794. (F)				* *	*

	1766	1770s	1780s	1790s	1800-07 1808-16
Netley Abbey, Pearce, 1794. (ME)				* *	*
The Prize: Or, 2,5,3,8, Prince Hoare, 1793. (CO)				* *	*
Road to Ruin., T. Holcroft, 1792. (C)				* *	*
Jacob Gawky's Rambles from London to Bath. (ME)				* *	
Modern Antiques; Or, The Merry Mourners, O'Keefe, 1791. (F)				* *	*
The Wheel of Fortune, R. Cumberland, 1795. (C)				* *	*
The British Volunteers. (ME)				*	
The Lying Valet, D. Garrick, 1741.(C)				* *	*
The Apparition, J.C. Cross, 1794. (ME)				* *	
Crotchet Lodge, Harlstone, 1795. (F)				* *	
Hartford Bridge; Or, The Skirts of the Camp. (F)				* *	
The Town Before You, Hannah Cowley, 1794. (C)				* *	
The Auctioneer, 'local, musical, rhetorical, whimsical extravaganza'.				* *	
Auld Robin Gray, Arnold, 1794. (CO)				* *	
British Fortitude & Hibernian Friendship Or, An Escape from France. (MI)				* *	*
The Chapter of Kings. (ME)				* *	
First Love, R. Cumberland, 1795. (C)				* *	
The Man of Ten Thousand, T. Holcroft, 1796. (C)				*	
The Picture Shop; Or, Modern Caricatures. (ME)				*	
Notoriety. (C)				*	
Lock and Key, Prince Hoare, 1796. (CO)				*	* *
The Adopted Child. (F)				*	* *
The Story of the Pork Steak; Or, The Enraged Music Vender. (ME)				*	
The Smugglers: Or, The Coast of Cornwall, Birch, 1796. (F)				*	
The Way to Get Married, Morton, 1796. (C)				*	
Love and Money, Or, the Fair Caledonian. (F)				*	
Monsr. Tonson.				*	
The Love of Fame, Mr. Melvin (member of company). (D)				*	
Hunt the Slipper Or, The Macaroni Shoemaker. (MF)				*	
The Poor Sailor; Or, Little Bob and Little Ben, J. Bernard, 1794. (CO)				*	*
The Deuce is in Him, G. Colman, 1763. (F)				*	* *
The Rival Lovers. (BD)				*	

	1766	1770s	1780s	1790s	1800-07 1808-16
William Tell: Or, The Swiss Archers, James Sheridan Knowles. (HP)				*	
Surrender of Calais. (HP)				*	
Mysteries of the Castle, M.P. Andrews, 1795. (R)				*	
The Tunbridge Wells Volunteer, Mr. Mara (member of company) (ME)				*	
Three Weeks After Marriage, Murphy, 1776. (C)				*	
The Will, F. Reynolds, 1797. (C)				*	*
Zorinski; Or, Cassimer, King of Poland/ King and Country Preserved.				*	*
A Cure for the Heart-Ache, Morton, 1797. (C)				*	* *
Harlequin Dr. Faustus. (P)				*	
Poor Cottagers; Or, Honesty is the best Policy. (P)				*	
Scotch Ghost; Or, Little Fanny's Love. (BD)				*	
Love Letter, T. Dibdin. (MI)				*	
Wives as the Were, And Maids as they Are, Elizabeth Inchbald, 1797. (F)				*	*
The Shipwreck.				*	
The Times; Or a Fig for Invasion. (C)				*	
Gaffer's Mistake; Or, The Case is Altered, T. Dibdin. (I)				*	
The Sultan; Or A Peep into the Seraglio, I. Bickerstaffe, 1775. (CO)				*	*
Valentine and Orson; Or The Wild Man of Orleans, O'Keefe, 1795. (MD)				*	
The Raree Shew; Or A Touch At The Times, 'a new comic, whimsical extravaganza', T. Dibdin, 1797.				*	
Rule a Wife and Have a Wife, Fletcher / Love, 1776. (C)				*	
The Citizen, Murphy, 1761. (F)				*	
Boys of Britain; or, A Fig for the French and Dutch, T. Dibdin. (ME)				*	
Royal Visit to the Nore, T. Dibdin. (ME)				*	
The Tunbridge-Wells /Canterbury Maidstone Landlords; Or, A Song about Signs, T. Dibdin. (ME)				*	
Country Recruit; Or, Dolly in the Dumps.				*	
Something New; Or, The World as it Wags, T. Dibdin.				*	
Wild Oats; Or, The Strolling Gentlemen, O'Keefe, 1791. (C)				*	
War and Peace, 'grand spectacle', T. Dibdin.				*	

	1766	1770s	1780s	1790s	1800-07 1808-16
Lover's Trial, Or, Loyal Villagers, T. Dibdin,				*	
The Merry Hop Pickers; Or, Kentish Frolics. (ME)				*	
Castle Spectre, M.G. Lewis, 1797. (DR)				*	*
The Jew and Doctor: Or, Marriage and Divorce, T. Dibdin. 1798 . (F)				*	*
Virgin of the Sun (Altered from the German of Kotzebue)				*	
The Horse & Widow, Kotzebue/ T. Dibdin'.				*	*
The Aukward Recruit. (ME)					*
The Heir at Law, G. Colman the younger, 1797. (C)					* *
Silvester Daggerwood, G. Colman the younger, 1795. (DE)					* *
The Stranger, B. Thompson, 1798. (D)					* *
Lover's Vows, Elizabeth Inchbald, 1798. (D)					*
Secrets Worth Knowing, Morton, 1797. (C)					*
Fortune's Frolic, J.T. Allinghan, 1798.					* *
Speed the Plough, Thomas Morton, (C)					* *
The Lads of the Ocean. (ME)					*
Pizarro; Or, The Death of Rolla, R.B. Sheridan, 1799. (T)					*
Lover's Quarrels; Or, Like Master, Like Man					* *
High Life below Stairs, Rev. James Townley, 1759. (F)					*
The Son of Law. (F)					*
The School for Prejudice, T. Dibdin. (C)					*
Il Bondocani; Or, The Caliph Robber, T. Dibdin, (ME)					*
St. David's Day, T. Dibdin. (MF)					*
The Death of Admiral Benbow. (ME)					
Paul and Virginia, Cobb. (ME)					*
Of Age Tomorrow `Adapted from Kotzebue by T. Dibdin, 1800. (CO)					*
Deaf and Dumb; Or, The Orphan Protected, T. Holcroft. (HP)					*
The Blind Girl/The Blind Boy. (ME)					* *
The Wags of Windsor, G. Colman the younger, 1801. (MF)					* *
The Poor Gentleman, G. Colman the younger, 1801. (C)					* *
Laugh When You Can, F. Reynolds, 1798. (C)					* *

	1766	1770s	1780s	1790s	1800-07 1808-16
The Naval Pillar, T. Dibdin. (MI)					*
Hot-spiced Gingerbread. (ME)					*
Life, F. Reynolds. (C)					*
The Old Maid. (F)					*
Blue Devils, G. Colman the younger, 1798. (F)					* *
The Honest Thieves: Or, The Faithful Irishman, T. Knight, 1797.					* *
The East Indian, M.G. Lewis. (C)					*
The Cryer, or Peace is Come Girls. (I)					*
The Birth Day, 'Altered from ...Kotzebue', T. Dibdin'. (C)					*
'Tis all a Farce, J.T. Allingham. (F)					*
John Bull; Or, An Englishman's Fireside, G. Colman the younger, 1803. (C)					* *
Heigh Ho! For a Husband, Waldron. (C)					*
A Loyal Effusion. (I)					*
Hearts of Oak. (C)					*
The Magic of British Liberty; Or, the Great Consul's Metamorphosis, 'grand national pantomime'.					*
The Will for the Deed, T. Dibdin. (C)					
The Point of Honour, Kemble. (DE)					*
The Marriage Promise. (C)					*
Rival Soldiers; Or the Expedition to the Baltic.					*
The Magic Rock; Or, Harlequin Victor. (P)					*
Lethe; Or, Aesop in the Shades, D. Garrick, 1740.					*
Mrs. Wiggins, J.T. Allingham. (F)					*
The Hunter of the Alps, Dimmond. (ME)					*
Cinderella; Or, The Little Glass Slipper, 'allegorical spectacle'.					* *
Coxheath Camp. (MF)					*
The Haunted Cave: Or, The Robbers Destruction. (P)					*
Chevy Chase; or Douglas and Percy (P)					*
Blue Beard: Or, Female Curiosity, G. Colman the younger, 1798. (DR)					*
The Soldier's Daughter, Cherry, 1804. (C)					* *
The Sailor's Daughter, R, Cumberland (C)					* *
The Honeymoon, John Tobin, 1805. (C)					* *
Raising the Wind, Kenney, 1803. (F)					*
The Cabinet. (O)					*

	1766	1770s	1780s	1790s	1800-07 1808-16
Raymond and Agnes; Or, The Bleeding Nun. (P)					*
The Way to Keep Him. (C)					* *
The Tale of Mystery. (ME)					* *
Like Father, like Son. (C)					*
School for Friends, Miss Chambers, 1805. (C)					*
The Delinquent. (C)					*
The Blind Bargain: Or, Hear It Out, F. Reynolds, 1804. (C)					*
Spanish Dollars: Or, The Priest of the Parish.					*
The Prodigal: Or, Fatal Extravagance.					*
A Hint to Husbands, R. Cumberland.					*
The Weathercock, T. Forrest / J.T. Allingham, 1775 / 1805. (T)					* *
The Defence of Canterbury against the French Invasion. (ME)					*
Who Wants a Guinea, G. Colman (C)					*
Another Century; Or, Old England for Ever (BS)					*
The Drum Head.					*
Zara. (T)					*
Tom Thumb the Great, H. Fielding/O'Hara, 1730/1780. (B)					*
Tancred and Sigismunda, Thompson. (T)					*
Time's a Tell-Tale; Or, British Protection. (C)					*
The English Fleet; Or, 1,3,4,2. (CO)					*
Harlequin and Mother Goose, T.J. Dibdin. (P)					*
The Wonders of 1814, T. Dibdin.					*
Illusion; or, The Trances of Nourjahad.					*
Plot and Counterplot. (F)					*
The Bee Hive. (MF)					*
The School of Reform; Or, How to Rule a Husband. (C)					*
The Miller and His Men.					*
A Day After the Wedding; Or a Wife's First Lesson, Maria Theresa De Camp, 1808. (C)					*
The Wood Daemon: Or, The Clock has Struck!					*
Where to Find a Friend. (C)					*
Aladdin; Or the Wonderful Lamp. (P)					*
A Chip of the Old Block. (I)					*
Harlequin Rasselas; Or the Happy Valley. (P)					*

APPENDIX 2

Map of provincial towns and villages with theatres c.1804 compiled from information in James Winston's 'Theatric Tourist' notebooks[1]

James Winston envisaged *The Theatric Tourist* as a 'part work' on the provincial theatre '...replete with useful and necessary information to theatrical professors, whereby they may learn how to chose and regulate their country engagements...'. His intention was to issue a total of thirty numbers over a period of three and a half years each containing engravings and accounts of three theatres. The enterprise was a failure and only eight issues were ever published. In 1805 these were bound together into a single volume which was published as *The Theatric Tourist*.[2]

From about 1802 Winston had begun to compile information for this project in a series of notebooks and the names of approximately 285 theatre towns and villages were included in this preliminary work. Although this seems a considerable number it is likely the figure falls far short of the actual total of towns and villages with theatres at this time. For example, throughout this period the *Kentish Gazette* advertised performances at theatres in 'Town Malling' and in 'Milton' neither of which are included in Winston's inventory.

With few exceptions I have included all the theatres mentioned by Winston, most of which were in England, in the three maps overleaf. I have, however, excluded those which would now be in London or the Greater London area, namely: Deptford, Edgware, Edmonton, Fulham, Hampton Wick, Kentish Town, Parson's Green, Peckham, Ranelagh Gardens (Chelsea), Richmond, Sadler's Wells (Clerkenwell), Twickenham, Uxbridge, Vauxhall Gardens (Lambeth) and Woolwich. I have also

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[1] James Winston, 'Theatric Tourist' Notebooks 1-4, Ref. TS 1335.211, Harvard Theatre Collection. For more about Winston's notebooks see C. Beecher Hogan, 'The manuscript of Winston's *Theatric Tourist'*, *Theatre Notebook*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (April, 1947), pp. 86-90 ; A.L. Nelson, *James Winston's 'Theatric Tourist', a Critical Edition with a Biography and a Census of Winston Material*, (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, George Washingtron University, 1968), pp. 186-195.

[2] The towns included in this work were: Andover, Bath, Birmingham, Brighton, Chichester, Edmonton, Exeter, Grantham, Lewes, Liverpool, Maidstone, Manchester, Margate, Newbury, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Norwich, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Reading, Richmond (Surrey), Southampton, Tunbridge Wells, Winchester and Windsor.

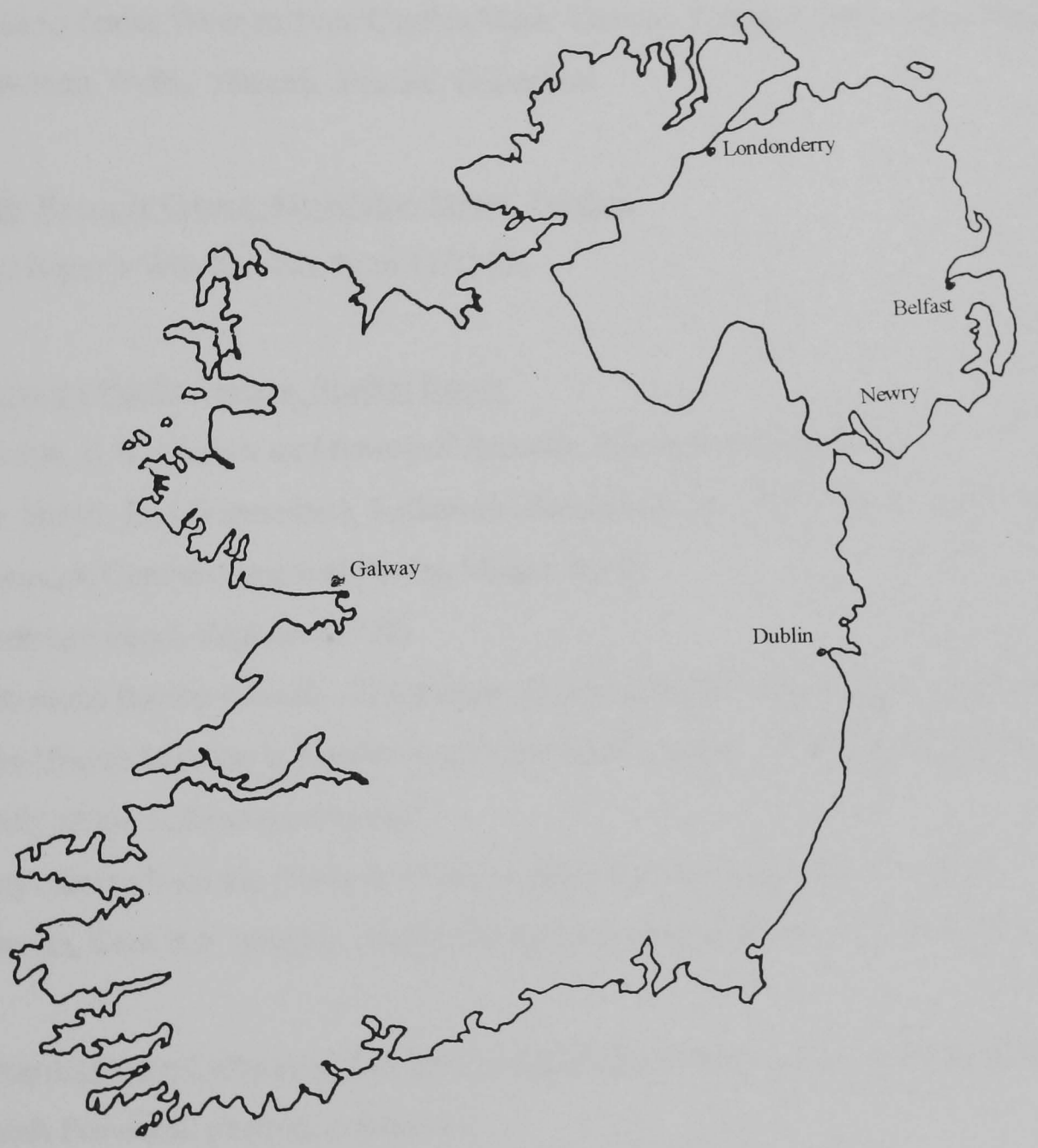
excluded six private theatres as follows: Brandenburg House, Hammersmith (Margravine of Anspach); Crewe Hall, Cheshire (Marquess of Crewe); Dalby Hall, Leicestershire (Edward Hartopp); Gordon Castle, Moray (Duke of Gordon); Strawberry Hill, Middlesex; Wynnstay, Ruabon, Denbigh (Sir W. Wynne). Winston also included two American theatres in his notebooks, at Philadelphia and Baltimore. This was not as surprising as it might seem as it was quite common for a single player, or group of players, to cross the Atlantic in search of work. There is also reference to a theatre in an anonymous town in Guernsey and one entry, 'Market Place', which is impossible to identify. I have assumed 'Sodbury' to be Sudbury, Suffolk; 'Haylestone' to be Harleston, Norfolk, and 'Burrows' to be Burrow, Lancashire.

ENGLAND AND WALES

SCOTLAND


Aberdeen
Perth
Dundee
Inverary
Stirling
Glasgow
Greenock
Edinburgh
Dumfries

IRELAND



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