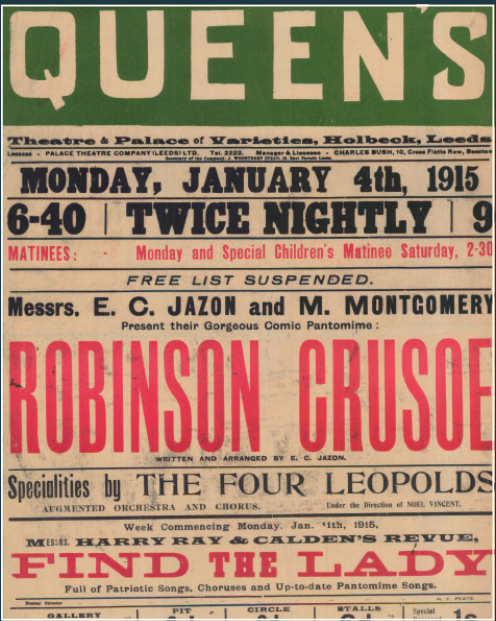


Welcome

“All the world’s a stage” wrote Shakespeare and he could not be more right when you begin to explore Leeds’ theatrical past. From pantomimes to opera, Leeds has seen it all.

Since the late 1700s many theatres have come and gone, with frequent name changes in between. Theatrical trends that swept Britain were exemplified in Leeds, with the growth of music halls opening up performances to wider audiences during the late 19th and early 20th century.



Queen's Theatre Advertisement.

All Leeds theatres, and the artists who performed on their stages, have influenced the city and affected its history. The theatres of the past were resilient, like the city itself, battling financial problems and the competition posed by cinema and television. Iconic names have performed here including Charlie Chaplin, Frankie Vaughan, Anna Pavlova and Ian McKellen.



Empire Palace sign in the Victoria Quarter.

This trail allows you to explore the diverse history of Leeds’ theatres and view the sites where drama played out on and off stage, and to discover how Leeds became the thriving theatrical city we know and love today.

On this side of the leaflet you will find a brief background of Leeds’ theatrical past and a timeline of key events. On the other side of the map ten theatres and their histories are featured.

This trail has been produced in partnership with Leeds City Council as part of a series of maps which invite you to explore this vibrant and historic city and should take approximately 2 hours to complete.

Brief History of Leeds Theatres

Can you remember the first theatre you ever went to and the experience of your first production? Thousands before you have shared similar experiences in Leeds in its many different venues.

Yet Leeds was not always the thriving theatrical city we know today. If anything it was a late bloomer in gaining such a prestigious reputation for drama. Before Tate Wilkinson built the Hunslet Lane Theatre in 1771, Leeds had depended on travelling performers and singing rooms in pubs for entertainment. The Hunslet Lane Theatre was a part of the York performance circuit, with Wilkinson’s company using the Leeds theatre only in the summer months. Although it managed to stay open for a century, it was not entirely successful and Leeds was known as “the Botany Bay of actors” due to the city’s opposition to the theatre. Some of the fiercest hostility came from the Methodist community, with one Methodist commenting “you go to plays! And what do you see there?... you see the devil’s children grinning at you”.

Opposition to theatre began to dwindle and in the 1800s many theatres and music halls opened across the city. Class was a key factor in determining the clientele of theatres, with music halls catering largely for the working classes. The middle classes disapproved of these popular halls which were seen as crude and unrefined, especially Leeds’ Royal Casino which was one of Britain’s original music halls.

Leeds theatres have a long history of supporting war efforts. In 1815 the Hunslet Lane Theatre raised money for bereaved families following the Battle of Waterloo, and in 1916 The Grand Theatre and Opera House and Coliseum held fundraising concerts.

The growing popularity of cinema in the 20th century had a massive impact on theatre in Leeds. Many theatres, such as the Coliseum and Queen’s Theatre, closed and were converted into cinemas. The development of television had a similar effect. However, during the 1970s the creation of Leeds Playhouse indicated a new growth in the performing arts in Leeds. University theatres, like Studio Theatre and stage@leeds, have throughout recent decades also played an important role in creating the vibrant and colourful Leeds theatre scene we see today.

Timeline

1762
The Swan Inn opened and gained the nickname ‘The Mucky Duck’, with a singing room added in 1766 – this is now the City Varieties Music Hall.

1817
Famous actor Mr Cummins died on stage at the Hunslet Lane Theatre during a production of *Jane Shore*. Curiously this was just after performing the lines “accords to thee, and begs of Heav’n to show thee; May such befall me at my latest hour and make my portion blest or curs’d for ever”.

1849
The Princess Theatre opened. This was later renamed the Princess Concert Hall and then the Princess Palace.

1857
◀ W.F. Wallett, a famous clown, performed at the Princess Theatre.

1865
Charles Thornton opened Thornton’s New Music Hall and Fashionable Lounge, in place of the singing room at the Swan Inn. He was inspired by the success of Joseph Hobson’s establishments.

1876
The Royal Amphitheatre also burnt down in a fire. It was rebuilt and opened later that year as The Theatre Royal.

1897
The Eight Lancashire Lads, a group the legendary Charlie Chaplin was a member of, performed at City Varieties.

1899
The Tivoli closed due to competition from the Empire Palace Theatre which forced them into insolvency.

1907
Music Hall artists went on strike due to harsh contracts.

1924
The Queen’s Theatre was turned into a cinema, revealing how cinemas were affecting the sustainability and success of Leeds theatres.

◀ The celebrated Gracie Fields came to The Empire Palace Theatre performing in a production *Mr Tower of London*.

1949
◀ The Civic Playhouse was renamed as the Civic Theatre and reopened. Many small touring companies who visited the Civic, including the eminent Cambridge Footlights group who are known for starting the careers of Graham Chapman and John Cleese, of *Monty Python* fame, and also Simon Bird, of *Inbetweeners* fame.

1964
The 6-year campaign for a repertory theatre in Leeds began. The Leeds Theatre Committee was created, led by President Roger Stevens, Vice-Chancellor at the University of Leeds. Other famous supporters included actor Peter O’Toole and artist Henry Moore.

1970
The campaign for a repertory theatre was successful. However Leeds Playhouse’s first performance, of *Simon Says*, was nothing short of a disaster. The Lord Mayor commented “if they don’t put on something good, then we could see the Playhouse go down”. Luckily the official opening night was more successful.

1990
The West Yorkshire Playhouse opened at Quarry Hill, replacing the Leeds Playhouse with a new name and venue.

2005
The Civic Theatre closed with The Carriageworks opening as a replacement.

2010
Slung Low began renting a premises which became the Holbeck Underground Ballroom (HUB).

2014
Famed Leeds theatre company Red Ladder started the inventive #GisATenner campaign on Twitter to help secure funds for their theatrical projects.

1771
One of the first theatres in Leeds commonly known as the ‘Hunslet Lane Theatre’ opened under the management of Tate Wilkinson who ran the York Theatre Circuit. ▶

1848
Pablo Fanque, known for being the first black circus owner in Britain, visited Leeds with his circus. Sadly his wooden stage collapsed during a performance and his wife Susannah died. She was buried in Woodhouse Lane Cemetery.

1856
Well-known Leeds theatre proprietor Joseph Hobson reopened the Royal Casino as the Royal Alhambra. He was to also become the owner of the Princess Theatre next door.

1858
Queen Victoria and Prince Albert opened Leeds Town Hall.

1875
The New Theatre Royal and Opera House, which had replaced the Hunslet Lane Theatre, burnt down. Although the cause of the fire was not documented it was perhaps due to lighting, as candles and gas lighting were still used at this time and could be dangerous.

1878
The Grand Theatre and Opera House opened with a performance of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*.

1898
Aladdin was The Grand Theatre and Opera House’s Christmas Pantomime, heavily advertised in the Yorkshire Harlequin.

1904
The popular Houdini, who is honoured on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, performed his impressive magic tricks at City Varieties.

1912
Renowned prima ballerina Anna Pavlova and Monsieur Novikoff performed at the Grand Theatre and Opera House, which was advertised on a playbill as “the event of the year”. ▶

1940
Committee for Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) was created to help arts institutions stay open during the Second World War.

1945
The Arts Council was created from CEMA although it was later to be separated into: Arts Council of England, Scottish Arts Council, Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Arts Council of Wales.

1953
The 30-year-long running BBC programme *The Good Old Days* starring the City Varieties Music Hall began in July. The Varieties and the BBC invested in an expensive renovation to ensure the show was a success.

1968
The Agitprop Street Players was formed, later renamed Red Ladder Theatre Company, which became a staple feature of Leeds theatre scene.

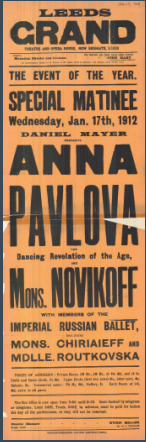
1970
The creation of the Leeds Playhouse’s Theatre in Education Company followed the example of the Coventry Belgrade five years previously.

1978
The Grand Theatre and Opera House becomes Opera North’s home. The company is incredibly successful winning a number of awards including the Theatre Awards UK ‘Outstanding Achievement in Opera’ award.

2000
Alan Lane and Matthew Scott created theatre company Slung Low.

2008
The Coliseum building became the O2 Academy. ▶

2011
Beginning of a resurgence in experimental Fringe theatre in West Yorkshire, as shown by the Transform Festival at the West Yorkshire Playhouse which has become an annual event.



Find out more...

To find out more about the history of Leeds theatres you can go on tours at Leeds Grand Theatre and Opera House and City Varieties Music Hall. For more information please visit: www.leedsgrandtheatre.com/online/LGTTours www.cityvarieties.co.uk/Online/CVTours



References:

R.E. Preedy, Leeds Theatres Remembered (Leeds: R.E. Preedy, 1981)

Discovery Leeds: The Theatres www.leadis.net/discovery

West Yorkshire Playhouse (Leeds Playhouse) Archive in Special Collections at the University of Leeds library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/7313/



Credits

This heritage trail has been researched and written by Dominique Triggs, who is an undergraduate at the University of Leeds, as part of the Undergraduate Research and Leadership Scholarship. She was supervised by Laura King, Jamie Stark and Tess Hornsby Smith.

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Other Maps and Trails in the series:

Leeds History of Medicine Trail
Your M&S Leeds Heritage Trail
Leeds Industrial Heritage Trail
Leeds Potts Clocks Heritage Trail
Leeds First World War Heritage Trail
Leeds LGBT Map
Leeds Waterfront
Leeds City Centre Map

These can be found as PDF’s online at: visitleeds.co.uk/essentials/pdf-downloads.aspx

Leeds Industrial Heritage Trail is also an app on www.yourtrailapp.co.uk/leeds

Walk it

Leeds Theatres Through Time Heritage Trail



Leeds is very compact and walkable, easily accessible by bus, train or car. Leeds Bradford Airport is just half an hour from the city centre by bus. There are numerous car parks and ample blue badge car parking spaces in the city centre.

Leeds Visitor Centre

VisitLeeds is a friendly visitor information centre and art gallery shop located at the Leeds Art Gallery on The Headrow, open 7 days a week.

0113 378 6977
www.visitleeds.co.uk

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Leeds Travel Information

With up-to-the-minute information about car parking spaces, public transport and walking routes, travelling into and around Leeds has never been easier.

0113 245 7676
www.leedstravel.info

Walkit.com

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www.walkit.com/leeds





1 Site of the Coliseum 1885-1905

It was the future Edward VII and his wife Alexandra of Denmark who opened the Coliseum in 1885. The Coliseum presented circus acts with the most famous of these being Gilbert's Circus, which drew rave reviews from *The Yorkshire Harlequin* in 1898. The acts included the Three Rosebuds who were aerial gymnasts, Professor Hull who had trained his horses in "waltzing" and Captain Leslie who had trained his dogs in "leaping" among other tricks. Like many of Leeds' other theatre venues the Coliseum was set for big changes and became the first cinema in Leeds after being bought by Sydney Carter in 1905.



2 Site of the Civic Theatre 1929-2005

The Civic Theatre began as the Civic Playhouse, opening in 1929. Prior to that the building had been used by a number of organisations including the Mechanics Institute, the School of Art, College of Music and School of Design. Like Slung Low they had a 'pay as you feel' philosophy, relying on donations, as tickets to their productions were free. In 1949 the theatre was renamed the Civic Theatre and 56 years later it closed in 2005 being succeeded by the Carriageworks Theatre. It is now Leeds City Museum which has a 5000 year old Mummy amongst its displays.



3 The Carriageworks 2005-Present

The Carriageworks was created to replace the Civic Theatre, with the theatre's building located in the Electric Press complex. It is advertised as a family-friendly theatre and, through the Carriageworks Young Theatre Makers groups, helps young people to improve their skills and gain experience of performance. They also house Leeds Civic Arts Guild which is a group that includes Leeds Amateur Operatic Society and Leeds Children's Theatre. Outside the theatre, a screen features performances, with productions such as *Don Giovanni* from the Royal Opera House being screened.



6 Site of the Empire Palace Theatre 1898-1961

The Empire was a part of a theatre chain run by Moss and Stoll, and the Empire sign can still be seen in the brickwork at Harvey Nichols. The playbills at the Empire varied and like the Coliseum they also offered circus acts, but this could be dangerous as a trainer in the later 1930s was attacked by leopards. The Empire had many renowned entertainers like Frankie Vaughan and Gracie Fields perform. Like most other theatres in Leeds the Empire put on pantomimes such as *Babes in the Wood* which in 1960 was their last pantomime before the Empire closed in 1961.



7 City Varieties 1865-Present

The Varieties has experienced both successful and challenging times during its 150 year history, and has come a long way from its origins as a singing room at the Swan Inn. Many world famous acts have performed there including Charlie Chaplin, Harry Houdini and Lily Langtry who was the mistress of Edward VII. It is believed Edward used to secretly watch Lily perform, and donated the royal coat of arms that hangs proudly above the stage. During the 1950s the Varieties depended on strip shows to stay open, but the BBC's *The Good Old Days* TV show which ran from 1953-1983 is what really saved the Varieties.



8 The Grand Theatre and Opera House 1878-Present

The Grand was built to replace the New Theatre Royal and Opera House and the Royal Amphitheatre that both burnt down within a year of each other, and also to combat music hall culture which was seen as vulgar. Interestingly its original shareholders included a surgeon and a brewer. The Grand is a receiving house and showcases West End touring shows as well as housing Northern Ballet and the UK's largest opera company outside London: Opera North. Famous Victorian actor Henry Irving performed at the Grand in 1907 in *The Bells* which was a play that had made him a household name 6 years previously.

Did you know?

Many theatres in Leeds are reported to be haunted including The Grand Theatre and Opera House who is haunted by the friendly 'Lavender Lady' who visits Box D in the dress circle. At the Coliseum another ghost resides, said to be a circus master from the 19th century who committed suicide.

Did you know?

The original architect of the Civic Theatre building was Cuthbert Brodrick, who is a well-known name in Leeds as he was also the creator behind other Leeds monuments including Leeds Town Hall and the Corn Exchange.

Did you know?

The theatre's unique name comes from the building's origins as the West Riding Carriage Manufactory in Stansfield Chambers, which is a Grade II listed building.

Did you know?

The staff of the Empire were no strangers to stress, as when they opened for their first night in 1898 the plasterers were still at work as the crowds waited outside.

Did you know?

The Varieties was originally called 'Thornton's New Music Hall and Fashionable Lounge' and was founded by Charles Thornton who created Thornton's Arcade off Briggate Street.

Did you know?

The Grand was known as "the Drury Lane of the North" and the idea to build this theatre began surprisingly with Prince Albert. Albert came to Leeds with Queen Victoria to officially open the Town Hall in 1858, and allegedly commented that "Leeds seemed in need of a good theatre, and that nothing was more calculated to promote the culture and raise the tone of the people".

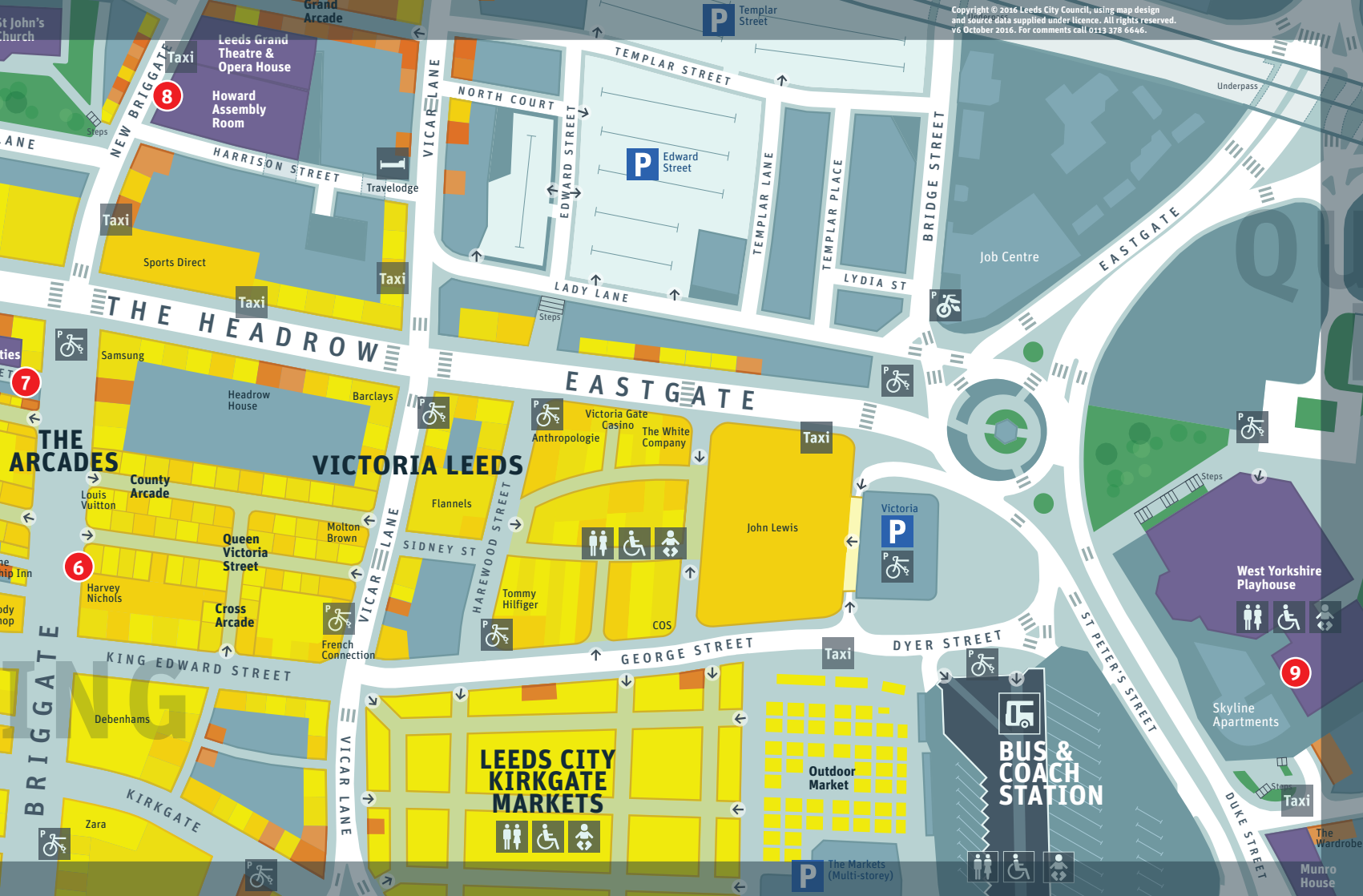


4 Site of the Hippodrome 1849-1933

The Hippodrome has had a number of name changes. It was originally called the Princess's Theatre, where the famous clown W. F. Wallatt performed in 1857 who was known as Queen Victoria's jester. The theatre was sold to Joseph Hobson, the theatre proprietor who owned the Royal Amphitheatre next door, and he renamed it the Princess Concert Hall. In 1898 it was changed to the Tivoli, which like City Varieties went out of business due to the success of the Empire Palace. It then became the Hippodrome, which closed in 1933 as a fatality of the increasingly popular cinemas.

5 Site of the Theatre Royal 1848-1957

The Theatre Royal began in 1848 as the Royal Casino, a controversial music hall opposed by the middle classes. Nearly a decade later it was expanded and renamed The Royal Alhambra by its well-known proprietor Joseph Hobson. It changed from a music hall to theatre in the mid-1800s being renamed (again) as the New Amphitheatre. Yet in 1876 there was a fire devastating the theatre. Hobson rebuilt his theatre and it opened as the Theatre Royal (whose name was to stick until it was sold in 1957). The Theatre Royal became famous for its pantomimes, such as *Aladdin*.



9 West Yorkshire Playhouse 1990-Present

During the 1960s, a passionate campaign for a repertory theatre began, resulting in the establishment of the Leeds Playhouse. The Playhouse began life on the University of Leeds premises in 1970 before finding a permanent home on Quarry Hill in 1990. Many prestigious entertainers have performed there such as Ian McKellan, who featured in *The Seagull*, *Present Laughter* and *The Tempest* under artistic director Jude Kelly. They have had major successes including Carnival Messiah in 1999 and 2002 which was reviewed as "a heart-stopping surge of sound, sensation and colour". Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* was another hit in 2009 with the innovative casting of comedian Lenny Henry in the lead role.



10 Slung Low Holbeck Underground Ballroom 2010-Present

Slung Low is a theatre company run by artistic director Alan Lane. In 2010 they obtained the abandoned HUB, which had previously been a club, as a rehearsal space and theatre. They are a subsidised theatre supported by Arts Council England and Leeds City Council, whose financial backing helps them to rent the HUB. The company's philosophy centres on community and collaboration. Their first community project at the HUB was *Original Bearings* which involved putting up 100 signs around Holbeck with different stories, some fact some fiction. More recently in 2015 they collaborated with Sheffield People's Theatre on Camelot: *The Shining City*.



Did you know?

Once when the theatre was known as the Princess's Theatre, a variety act took place outside involving a bizarre spectacle with a clown, called John Garret, being pulled around Leeds by geese as he sat in a tub.

Did you know?

The Leeds Rational Recreation Society, created in 1852, aimed to combat music hall culture exhibited at Hobson's Royal Casino, which they felt was low-brow. They approved of the Albion Street Music Hall which they helped sponsor, with the aim of refining entertainment the working classes indulged in.

Did you know?

Like many of the British royal family, including Edward VII and Queen Elizabeth II, Prince Charles has also been a supporter of Leeds theatres and was present at the premiere of the Leeds Playhouse in 1970.

Did you know?

Slung Low performed *The White Whale* by James Philips, which is a modern re-telling of the classic Moby Dick, on Leeds Canal. A boat on the water was their stage with the audience surrounding the canal listening to the actors via headphones.