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[Inside Out - South West: June 9, 2003](#)

### EXETER THEATRE FIRE

**150 years ago saw one of Britain's worst theatre disasters. Even though the jury reported a verdict of accidental death, was the architect to blame?**

On the evening of the September 5 1887, an audience of more than 800 was present for the opening night of *'Romany Rye'* at the Theatre Royal in Exeter. But during the fourth Act a fire started on stage.

Smoke and darkness quickly filled the theatre and it developed into one of the worst fire disasters of 19th century Britain.

Up in the flies, the area above the stage where sets are rigged and operated, naked gas jets used to illuminate the stage, set drapes alight.

#### Fire established quickly

The theatre was on fire very quickly. The death toll was said to be around 150, mainly from the upper gallery from where there was only one exit, with a ticket office blocking the route halfway down. It was a dreadful night, despite the many desperately heroic acts of bravery.

The Theatre Royal of Exeter had opened less than a year before the disaster. It was designed by one of the most respected theatre architect of the time, Charles John Phipps

The theatre was destroyed, but since that date, stringent safety regulations have been in force in British theatres.

The Home Office in the introduction to its "Manual of Safety Requirements in Theatres and Other Places of Public Entertainment" (1934) explained that its recommendations were based on experience of disasters at home and abroad. Nine fires were highlighted including the 1887 fire at the Theatre Royal, Exeter.

#### Parliamentary Inquiry



The Theatre Royal in Exeter is destroyed by fire.



The Theatre Royal opened less than a year before the disastrous fire

#### See also ...

On the rest of the web  
[True account of the terrible fire, 1887](#)  
[The History of Fire Safety Legislation](#)  
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An inquiry headed by Captain Eyre Shaw was launched. At the end of the inquiry, the unusual large jury of 21, returned an unanimous verdict of accidental death. Captain Shaw handed his report to the House of Parliament on the 29 September 1887.

It is reported that Charles Phipps statement during the inquiry was 'vigorous and bold'. He was sarcastic, particularly to those who did not appear to understand the subject as well as himself. Could he be responsible for the death of 150 people?



An Inquiry headed by Captain Eyre Shaw was launched

During the Inquest it emerged that when Charles Phipps designed the theatre he agreed to comply to the latest safety regulations even though they were not mandatory at the time.

### Experts investigated

The evidence was shown to a fire safety expert. Expert opinion says that looking at the evidence, the design was probably to blame. Charles Phipps, the architect, deceived his client and there is evidence of considerable changes in the plans during the theatre's construction.

Charles Phipps is still recognised as a great architect, a Victorian theatre specialist, an authority in his field. He was involved in the construction or alteration of over 20 theatres including the Theatre Royal on London's Haymarket

The positive side of this tragedy was that fire regulations became stricter after the event and safety devices such as the fire curtain were introduced in all British theatres.

### Readers' Comments

We are not adding any new comments to this page but you can still read some of the comments previously submitted by readers.

### Dimitri Houtart - Director of Inside Out

In response to comments below

It's true that Fire curtains already existed at the time of the Exeter fire but they were not a legal requirement, even in London where the fire safety regulation for the Metropolitan Board of Works were stricter.

Exeter theatre fire was not the only event that pushed to stricter regulations. Several disasters, at home and abroad, happened around the same time which pressed towards the new regulations.

During our research we came across many stories of bravery including Bombardier Scattergood, William Hunt, Robert Andrew and others. There were many other elements to the story which we found out, which we did not have time to include in our programme, as we decided to concentrate on the theatre design angle.

A lot of those individual stories are amazing acts of bravery and some of the heroes were indeed commended for them; did we have a 30 minute format, we surely would have included those stories.

### Jill Wright

back again - to the right of the memorial in Exeter Higher Cemetary is another one next door, in memory of bravery of Bombardier F.

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Scattergood, who also died trying to save other lives during the fire, it was erected by his comrades.

I was wondering why you didn't include a picture of it as it was only 3feet away?

I know the Jack Tar who helped (a Plymouth sailor on leave and visiting his father in Exeter at the timewho raced up ladders etc and helped many, Frank Scattergood actually lost his life and would have thought him worthy of mention too. Just a thought!

#### **Jill Wright**

My great grandmothers little sister also died - council was blamed for adapting architects plans and not building all the exits according to newspaper and docs.

#### **John Amosford**

A very interesting article on the Exeter Theatre Fire, however, I have never found a clear link between Exeter and Fire Safety Curtains. Did the programme researcher find such evidence, or is this the old anecdote still continuing. Fire Safety Curtains were already in existence in other theatres (including Plymouth), which made Phipps refusal to bother with them even worse!

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