

A PASS FOR THE 'BIRMINGHAM THEATRE', 1774

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THE pass published here (Fig. 1) was donated to Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery by Mr A.L. Carr of Birmingham and catalogued into the Museum's collections as accession number 2003.356. It can briefly be described as:

Obv. WE SHALL NOT LOOK UPON HIS LIKE AGAIN·

Draped bust of Shakespeare right; below the bust, I·W·F·

Rev. FREE TICKET / FOR / BIRMINGHAM / THEATRE / 1774·

Engraved in space above this, *M^r. / Faulconbridge.*

Struck in copper, diameter 32 mm, 16.51 g, 0°.

The type was described by Davis and Waters, who interpreted IWF as the signature of the Birmingham engraver John Westwood, and indeed the obverse of this pass is closely based on Westwood's obverse die for the medal for Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee celebrations at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1769.¹ Specimens of this pass are rare: it was apparently unrepresented in the museum's collections and this was the first example that the author had seen in twenty-five years as a curator in Birmingham (but see p. 320).

Theatres in Birmingham before 1774

This is not the place to go into the history of the theatre in eighteenth-century Birmingham in any detail – indeed there is still a great deal of work to be done on this subject – but it is clear that theatrical performances of some kind go back to at least the early years of the century.² Hutton records the construction of a theatre in Moor Street in about 1740. This may have been the first purpose-built theatre – Hutton's wording suggests this, although some later commentators maintain that it was converted from another use.³ In 1751 there was a sea-change in the Birmingham theatre, when 'a company arrived, who announced themselves "His Majesty's Servants, from the theatres royal, in London ..."'.⁴ The company was so well-received that a larger theatre was built in King Street in the following year, and the famous actor Richard Yates served as manager for that and several subsequent seasons.⁵ The King Street Theatre was so

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¹ Davis and Waters 1922, 1, nos 7–8. The die engraver is John Westwood senior; his career is conveniently summarised in Dykes 1999, 179–86. Dykes also reproduces (as p. 181, Fig. 7) illustrations of Garrick's medal. An advertisement appeared in *Artis's Birmingham Gazette* (hereafter *AG*) for 23 August 1769 advising customers that the medal would be published on 30 August and that 'Ladies and Gentlemen may have them either in Cases for the Pocket, or with Pendants for the Bosom' (Dent 1880, 144). Dr Dykes has kindly compared photographs of the pass to the specimen of the Garrick medal in his possession and confirms that they are certainly struck from different, not re-cut, dies. He has also pointed out that this pass must have been one of Westwood's last die-sinking commissions.

² Dent 1880, 56 suggests that they may have taken place even earlier, but offers no evidence to support this. William Hutton, Birmingham's first historian, talks of theatrical performances being offered before 1730 in 'a shed of boards in the fields', then in a 'performers' booth', and finally in 'something of a stable in Castle-street' (Hutton 1781, 125). Since the entrance charge for the Castle Street theatre was 3d a head, it is doubtful if the entertainment provided was of a particularly elevated kind.

³ Hutton 1781, 125. Cunningham 1950, 11, and Price 1988, 1, both maintain that the Moor Street theatre was a conversion.

⁴ Hutton 1781, 125. The contemporary custom was for theatrical companies to move out into the provinces when the London theatres closed for the summer – usually from late May/early June to mid-September (Cunningham 1950, 11). Birmingham, with a population of 22,688 in 1751, and rapidly growing, must have been an attractive prospect (population figure from Samuel Bradford's plan of 1751; see Dent 1880, 145–6).

⁵ Hutton 1781, 126; Cunningham 1950, 14; Price 1988, 1. The King Street Theatre opened with a Shakespeare Night and a Concert of Vocal and Instrumental Musicians. Admission charges were 3s. for a Box seat, 2s. for the Pit and 1s. for the Gallery, and these became the norm for Birmingham theatres for the rest of the century. For more about Yates, see n. 10 below.



Fig. 1. The 'Birmingham Theatre' pass, 1774, produced for use at the New Street Theatre, Birmingham (reproduced by permission of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery).

successful that the one in Moor Street was forced to close in 1764 and the building became a Methodist chapel.⁶

The King Street Theatre was unchallenged for a decade, but in 1773 there was clearly talk in the air of founding a new theatre. *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* of 31 May of that year carried a notice headed 'A Caution', which warned that 'many respectable Manufacturers in this very populous and Important Town' considered 'the Exhibition of Plays ... as extremely prejudicial to the Manufactures carried on here; having a Tendency to promote Negligence, create Expense, and corrupt the Morals of the Industrious'. It also threatened that the said Manufacturers would lay before the magistrates any offences committed against the Acts of Parliament designed to prevent theatrical performances. This notice soon drew a sharp response in favour of plays from another correspondent.⁷

The first recorded step towards the foundation of the new theatre was taken at a meeting at the Swan Inn, on Tuesday, 10 August 1773, of 'the Subscribers for building a New Playhouse in the Town of Birmingham'. (The use of share subscriptions to fund the construction of a new theatre was well-established by this time: The Queen's Theatre, Haymarket was founded in 1705 through the issue of thirty shares at £100 each, while more recently the theatre in Bath had been funded through twenty shares at £50 each.)⁸ At the meeting it was agreed that an approach be made to William Inge about the possibility of leasing from him some land along New Street (known as Greenwood's Cherry Orchard) and a committee of seven men was named 'to carry this Scheme into Execution'.⁹ At a series of subsequent meetings the lease on the land was agreed and agreements were prepared between the Subscribers as a body and two of their number as individuals. Thomas Saul, a builder, undertook to construct the theatre, which was to be ready by June of the following year, at an estimated cost of £1500, while Richard Yates, the actor-manager, who we have already encountered at the King Street Theatre, was to lease the theatre.¹⁰ On 8 March 1774 it was 'Order'd that Mr Saul be desired to be as expeditious as possible in the finishing of the Playhouse according to a Model he this day produced ...', and by 1 June it was

⁶ Price 1988, I. Under the 1737 Licensing Act it was illegal for any individual to perform an 'Interlude, Tragedy, Comedy, Opera, Play, farce or other entertainment of the Stage ... for hire, gain or reward' unless the performance was approved under letters patent from the crown or had been licensed by the Lord Chamberlain (Moody 2000, 16). To get around this, unlicensed theatres offered musical concerts, for which they charged, but which also included plays performed for free by the players 'for their own amusement'. Such concerts could be licensed by local magistrates under the Disorderly Houses Act of 1732. (Crompton Rhodes 1924, 7–8; Cunningham 1950, 13–14; Moody 2000, 17. According to Moody, this legal fiction was devised by Henry Giffard, who reopened the Godman's Fields theatre in London in 1740 on this basis.) There were only two 'patent houses', theatres licensed by the crown – the Theatres Royal at Drury Lane and Covent Garden, in London (Lynch 1953, 2–3).

⁷ Langford 1870, 274–5.

⁸ Lowndes 1922, 17–8.

⁹ *List of Proprietors for Building a Playhouse in New Street, Birmingham with Minutes of their Meetings*, BCL Lee Crowder coll. 387, 2r. [hereafter *Minute Book*]. The Swan Inn, in High Street, was one of Birmingham's main coaching inns at the time (Dent 1880, 108). Greenwood's Cherry Orchard can be found on Westley's 1731 plan of Birmingham, which is conveniently reproduced in Dent 1880, facing p. 66.

¹⁰ *Minute Book*, 3r.–3v.; Cunningham 1950, 20. Saul held one of the thirty shares in the theatre, while Yates had two. Yates had not been associated with the King Street Theatre since at least 1762 (Cunningham 1950, 15). For Yates's career on the London stage, see *DNB* XXI, 1216–19, although the entry manages to make no mention of his long connection with Birmingham. There is also an obituary in *AG* of 25 April 1796, recording his death on 21 April at the age of 84, and describing him as the 'Manager of the Summer Company of Performers' in Birmingham from 1750 until 1792. According to *DNB* he died 'it is said, in a fit of rage at being unable to obtain eels for his dinner'.

possible for the Subscribers to meet at the 'Birmingham New Theatre' for the first time.¹¹ Less than three weeks later, on 20 June 1774, the new theatre opened to the public for the first time.

The 'Birmingham Theatre': King Street or New Street?

It will be apparent that by 1774, the date on our pass, Birmingham boasted two theatres, the old one in King Street and its new rival in New Street. In contemporary parlance both were usually referred to by their locations, while both were also known for some time after they opened as 'the new theatre'.¹² Neither was normally referred to as the 'Birmingham Theatre', so to which did this pass belong? Fortunately this question is fairly straightforward to answer.

Hutton notes that 'In 1774, the theatre in King-street was enlarged, beautified, and made more convenient; so that it had few equals' (probably, one suspects, in the face of the challenge from its new competitor).¹³ A study of *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* for 1773–5 shows that the last advertisement for the 1773 season at the King Street Theatre appeared in the issue dated 6 September.¹⁴ The theatre was used for entertainments for a few days over the Christmas season,¹⁵ but it then vanishes from the pages of the *Gazette* until its reopening is announced on 29 May 1775.¹⁶ Throughout 1774 the only theatre to be advertised in the *Gazette* is the New Street Theatre, and the pass must therefore be attributed to that institution.

Thomas Faulconbridge, a forgotten 'worthy'

Now that we have identified to which theatre the pass belonged, can we say anything about the Mr Faulconbridge, to whom it is named? An initial search of the trade directories revealed that he was probably to be identified with Thomas Faulconbridge, merchant, who appears in the directories between 1770 and 1781, although they do not reveal the precise nature of his business.¹⁷

A search of the various indices held by the Birmingham City Library revealed only two other references to Thomas Faulconbridge. The first dates to 1768, when he was the assignee under a Commission of Bankruptcy of a lease of six properties in Coleshill Street,¹⁸ and the second is his obituary in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* in 1783, which simply notes:

DIED. On Thursday last, at his house at summer-hill, Mr Faulconbridge, Merchant in this Town, after a lingering illness.¹⁹

We have no information about his career prior to 1768, and so know nothing about where and when he was born and how old he was when he died in 1783. Was he a Birmingham man by birth, or had he, as seems likely, migrated to the town as so many of his contemporaries had done?²⁰ However, as the research into the New Street Theatre progressed, it became clear that Faulconbridge was a much more significant figure, both for that theatre and for Birmingham in general, than these skimpy notices might suggest.

¹¹ *Minute Book*, 4r. and 5r.

¹² Price 1988, 2 has misunderstood these references and says that the New Street Theatre was originally called 'The New Theatre', but this is not the case.

¹³ Hutton 1781, 126.

¹⁴ Those attending were promised 'A comedy (not acted these three years) called THE BUSY BODY ... To which will be added a Pantomime Entertainment, interspersed with Songs and Dances (for the third Time) called THE WIZARDS OF THE ROCKS; or HARLEQUIN FROM THE MOON ... The whole to conclude with a grand Dance by the Country Lads and Lasses.'

¹⁵ AG 20 December 1773; there was a play by Henry Fielding, 'The Comedy of the Miser', with a musical entertainment called 'The Chaplet', on 27 December, and a Ball 'for the young Ladies and Gentleman under the Tuition of Mr Burton' on 28–29th.

¹⁶ Langford 1870, 276. The King Street Theatre's new season began on 5 June with a tragedy, 'The Distrest Mother', and a ballad opera, 'The Devil to Pay' or 'Wives Metamorphosed'. Both theatres were in action the following week, with 'The Merchant of Venice' and 'The Virgin Unmask'd' at King Street, while New Street offered the tragedy 'Braganza' and a musical entertainment called 'Thomas and Sally'.

¹⁷ Faulconbridge, Freese and Co., of 18 New Hall Street, in 1770 (*Sketchley's Guide*), 1774 (*New Birmingham Directory*), and 1775 and 1775–6 (*Swinney's Directory*); Thomas Faulconbridge, of 2 New Hall Street, in 1777 (*The Birmingham Directory*); and Faulconbridge and Co., of Great Charles Street, in 1780 and 1781 (*The Birmingham, Wolverhampton ... Directory*).

¹⁸ BCL 2113.

¹⁹ AG 5 May 1783. He would have died on 1 May.

²⁰ Some of the more famous in-comers included James Watt senior, the engineer; William Hutton, the historian; and Joseph Priestly, the scientist.

Faulconbridge was among the group of Subscribers who met at that initial meeting at the Swan Inn on 10 August 1773, and was one of the seven men nominated then to form a committee to carry the scheme forward.²¹ He was assiduous in his duties, attending all the meetings until the theatre opened and acting as chairman on at least one occasion. His enthusiasm for the project is also revealed by the earliest surviving list of shareholders, since he is one of just four of them to hold two shares in the theatre, one of the others being the theatre's actor-manager lessee, Richard Yates.²²

Even before the theatre opened the Subscribers decided, at a meeting held on 1 June 1774, to build new houses on the vacant land to each side of it, at a maximum charge of £20 against each share. Once again Faulconbridge was named to the committee established to oversee this project.²³ However, although the decision to build these houses was taken in 1774, it seems that construction did not actually start until 1780 (see below, p. 319). (Given his important role in the foundation and running of the New Street Theatre, it is something of a puzzle why Faulconbridge's name appears on a copper version of the pass, when we know that specimens were also struck in silver, which would surely be a more appropriate medium for a Subscriber's pass.²⁴ Is it possible that this might be a free ticket given out by Faulconbridge, rather than his own pass? Sadly we know nothing about how these passes were used in Birmingham and at present can do no more than note the problem.)

As well as taking a leading part in establishing the new theatre, Faulconbridge was also one of those behind the drive to clean up and modernise the town. There is a very good chance that he was the T.F. who wrote a long letter to *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* early in 1769 arguing in favour of a local Improvement Bill which was then before Parliament.²⁵ Certainly, when the legislation was passed later that year, Faulconbridge was named as one of the fifty-strong Board of Commissioners established to carry out its provisions. Among his colleagues on the Commission were Dr John Ash, the founder of the Birmingham General Hospital, Dr William Small of the Lunar Society, Samuel Garbett, a businessman who would be commissioned in 1782 to investigate 'the state and charge of the management of the [Royal] mint',²⁶ John Baskerville the printer, and Samuel Lloyd the banker.²⁷ The Commissioners were responsible, among other things, for keeping the streets safe and clean, and for providing street lighting.²⁸ Gill records that Faulconbridge acted as chairman at meetings of the Commissioners more frequently than anyone else, but that for some time 'around 1780' his attendance fell off, although he did later reappear.²⁹ Hutton provides one possible explanation for Faulconbridge's temporarily reduced involvement with the Commission, since he records that he served as High Bailiff for the town in 1779.³⁰

²¹ *Minute Book*, 2r. His colleagues on the committee were Richard Goolden, Joseph Green, Dr William Small, Samuel Steward, John Taylor junior, and Thomas Wight.

²² Each share represented an investment of £50, a considerable sum in the 1770s. The list of shareholders appears on 1r. of the *Minute Book*. From internal evidence the initial list of names there is probably to be dated to before 1 June 1774, but it also notes changes that cannot be earlier than 1 February 1777 (based on evidence in the documents relating to share transfers preserved in BCL Lee Crowder Coll. 421). In addition to Faulconbridge and Yates, the initial shareholders included Matthew Boulton, his partner John Fothergill, and Samuel Aris, the owner of the *Gazette*. From the documents in Lee Crowder 421 and other sources it is possible to say that the other shareholders also included several gentlemen and esquires, a clergyman, a lawyer, two other merchants, a silk mercer, a confectioner, a grocer, and a builder.

²³ Faulconbridge's colleagues this time were Edward Palmer, Daniel Ruston, Samuel Steward and Thomas Wight. The meeting on 1 June 1774 is the first that Matthew Boulton is noted as attending in person.

²⁴ Davis and Waters 1922, no. 8 is recorded as silver. See also p. 320 below.

²⁵ The letter is reproduced in full in Dent 1880, 158.

²⁶ Dyer and Gaspar 1992, 441-4.

²⁷ Dent 1880, 161, gives a full list of the Commissioners.

²⁸ This last power gave the Act its popular name, the Lamp Act, and the Commissioners were regularly referred to as the Commissioners of the Lamp Act for many years to come. To serve on the Board of Commissioners one had to own property worth £1,000 and pay at least £15 a year in rates.

²⁹ Gill 1952, 157-63.

³⁰ Hutton 1781, 93. Birmingham never obtained the status of a chartered borough during the mediæval period and legally remained a manorial village into the nineteenth century. The High Bailiff was the most important of the manorial officials. According to Hutton, his duties were 'to inspect the market, and see that justice takes place between buyer and seller; to rectify the weights and dry measures used in the manor' (Hutton 1781, 88). We may also note here that Faulconbridge was one of the subscribers to the first edition of Hutton's *History of Birmingham* (Hutton 1781, list following p. xii). He is probably also to be identified with the 'Mr Falkenbridge' who was renting property in Park Street from King Edward's School in 1771-2 (Chatwin 1951, 151).

The New Street Theatre: the early years

What sort of evening would Faulconbridge have enjoyed when the New Street Theatre opened for its inaugural performance on 20 June 1774? The show rated an enthusiastic review in the following week's *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, which it is worth quoting in full:

Birmingham, June 27

On Monday last the new Theatre in this Town was opened with the Comedy of 'As you like it' and the Entertainment of 'Miss in her Teens'; a Prologue (said to be written by Mr Foote) was spoke by Mr Yates, which was suitable to the Occasion, and very well received by the Audience.³¹ The drawing up of the Curtain about the Middle of the Prologue, discovering a most magnificent Scene of a Palace, had a very fine Effect, and was received with a prodigious Burst of Applause. The different Parts in the plays performed this week have been well-filled, and the Performers in general met with universal Approbation. Particular Encomiums are due to Mr Columba, from the King's Theatre,³² who painted the Scenes, which are allowed to be as well executed as any in London. The Audience each Night has been brilliant and numerous, and the Theatre is built upon a most excellent Plan both for Company, and the Performers, and it does Mr Saul, the builder, much Credit. It is supposed to be as good, if not the best House in England out of London. – One Circumstance we are sorry to remark – that several of the Gentlemen that appeared in the Boxes were dressed in a very improper Manner for so conspicuous a Place, and it is recommended to them in future to pay more Respect to the Ladies, by dressing themselves in a Manner suitable to the Company, and as Gentlemen should, who appear in the Boxes.³³

The new theatre proved a success, but we know little about its activities in its first two years beyond the advertisements that appeared in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* for the 1774 and 1775 summer seasons, since nothing is recorded in the Proprietors' *Minute Book* between 1 July 1774 and 13 June 1776.

The *Minute Book* resumes with the record of a meeting 'held at Mr Green's to prepare the incorporation deed to lay before the Proprietors for their approbation ...'.³⁴ The Proprietors clearly did approve because on the following 1 February (1777) 'the first Meeting ... pursuant to the direction of the deed of Incorporation' was held, 'Mr Faulconbridge in the chair'. The Proprietors proceeded to appoint a Committee 'to manage the Affairs relative to the said Theatre, or Playhouse ... in manner directed by the deed of Incorporation'. The members of this Management Committee were Faulconbridge (once more), Matthew Boulton, Rev. John Gaunt, Thomas Price and Thomas Wight, but within the month the Rev. Gaunt had sold his share and was replaced on the Committee by Richard Goolden.³⁵

The year 1777 was to prove eventful for the Proprietors. In February they were discussing plans to add a Coffee House to the theatre buildings. Matthew Boulton, who was once again in attendance, suggested that Samuel Wyatt of London should be asked to draw plans and elevations for the new building and the Committee agreed and asked him to deal with it, although they stipulated that the new work should cost no more than £750 'Exclusive of the Expence of the Portico' which was planned to beautify the front of the complex.³⁶ Wyatt's drawings were considered at two meetings in May, and, after renewed discussion as to whether the new building should be 'a publick Coffee Room' (a proposal carried by fifteen votes to three), it was eventually decided to go ahead using Wyatt's elevation, but basing the work on a plan by Eglinton as altered and approved by Mr Green.³⁷ The new building work was finally undertaken in 1780 and it is this façade which is shown in the engraving reproduced here as Fig. 2 and which also appeared on the medal illustrating the 'Birmingham Theatre' (i.e. the New Street Theatre) in Kempson's 1795 Birmingham buildings series.³⁸

³¹ For the text of this Prologue, see Langford 1870, 276–7.

³² The King's Theatre, Haymarket, London, opened in 1705 as the Queen's Theatre, a licensed theatre, but the acoustics were poor for speech and it came to be normally used as an opera house – The King's Opera House (Avery 1960, xxvi–xxvii; 1961, xix–xx). It is still in existence today as Her Majesty's Theatre, Haymarket.

³³ AG 27 June 1774.

³⁴ *Minute Book*, 5v.

³⁵ *Minute Book*, 6v.–7r. and 7v. Faulconbridge was to serve on the management committee until January 1783.

³⁶ *Minute Book*, 7v.–8r.

³⁷ *Minute Book*, 8v.–9r. and 9v. Wyatt was paid twelve guineas for his work (*Minute Book*, 11r.).

³⁸ Dalton and Hamer 1915, 283 nos 215–16. The portico survived until the theatre was rebuilt in 1902–4, but a medallion from the façade bearing a portrait of Shakespeare is still preserved in the Birmingham City Library (Cunningham 1950, 22). See Hutton 1781, 127 for a contemporary comment on the portico.

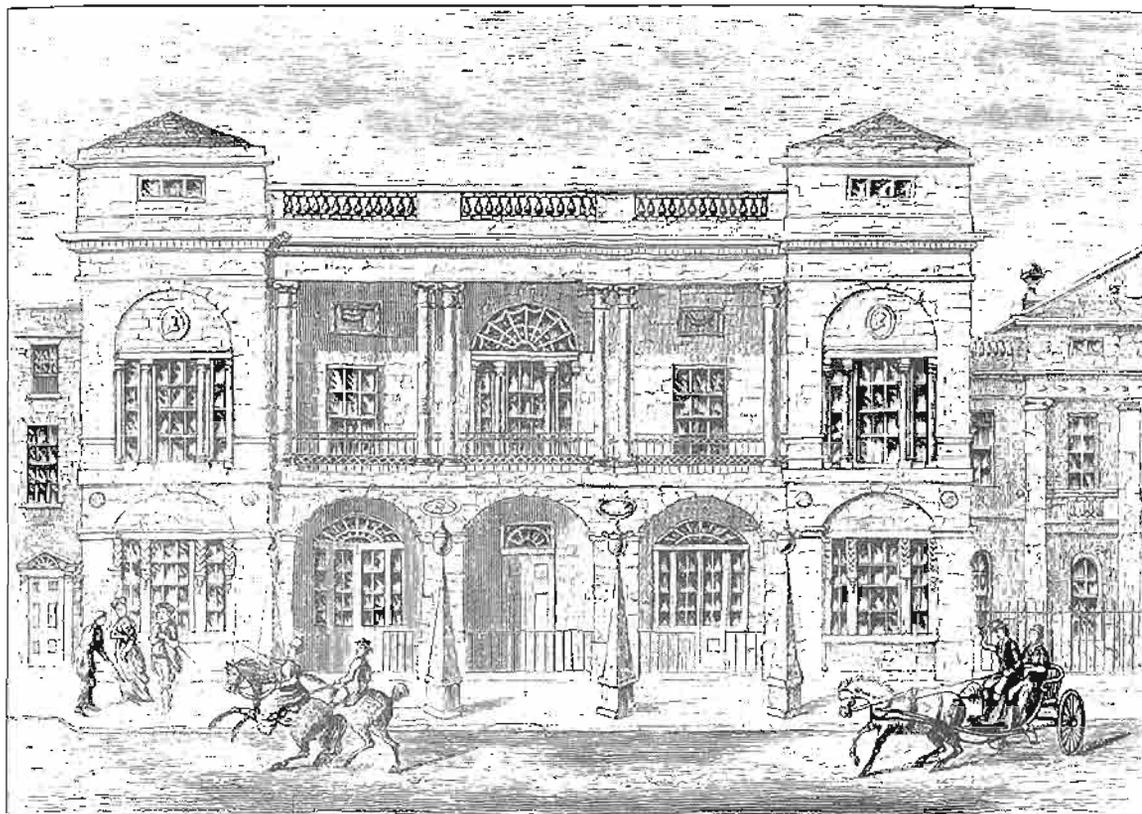


Fig. 2. The façade of the New Street Theatre, Birmingham, after the addition of the new portico in 1780 (reproduced from Dent 1880, 123).

Returning to 1777, both the King Street and New Street theatres were suddenly closed by the magistrates within a couple of weeks of the new season starting in June, and they were both to remain closed until the summer of 1779.³⁹ The precise reason for the closures requires further investigation, but it is probably related in some way to the increasingly strident rivalry between Richard Yates at New Street and Messrs Younger and Mattocks at King Street.⁴⁰ Cunningham also records a suggestion that both managements may have been paying their workmen with theatre tickets and that this had been causing great suffering and distress.⁴¹

The other major event of 1777 may perhaps help to explain why feelings were running so high between the two theatres. In February *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* reported that Richard Yates had presented 'a Petition to the House of Commons for leave to bring in a Bill to license the Theatre in New-Street, in this Town; another Petition was also presented at the same Time, signed by several Gentlemen and respectable Tradesmen, in support of Mr Yates's Petition'. The same edition also carried a notice, quite probably penned by Yates, which was obviously an attempt to head off potential local opposition by suggesting the conditions under which the theatre would operate if it was successful in becoming a 'patent theatre'. These laid down that the theatre would stage no 'Diversions, such as Rope-Dancing, Tumbling, Puppet-shows, &c.', and that the season would be limited to four months each year. The writer presumed that a 'Royal Theatre' would be acceptable under these conditions since 'it is certain nine Parts in ten of the Town are convinced that two

³⁹ Both theatres advertised in *AG* for 16 June 1777, neither were mentioned on 23 June, while the 30 June edition carried a notice for the New Street Theatre which began with the words 'The usual Amusements of the Theatre being stop'd' and went on to advertise a musical concert. They reopened in June 1779, New Street on the 16th and King Street on the 21st (*AG* 14 and 21 June 1779).

⁴⁰ Witness the vitriolic exchange of open letters between them in *AG* 23 and 30 June 1777.

⁴¹ Cunningham 1950, 15 and 21–2. There is no mention of the closure in the *Minute Book*.

Play-houses are greatly injurious'. (This must have gone down well at the King Street Theatre.)⁴² The Bill was given its first reading on 26 March, which it passed by forty-eight votes to twenty-eight, but it was then defeated by sixty-nine to eighteen at the second reading on 29 April 1777.⁴³

There is no record of any of this in the *Minute Book*, but the notes of the meeting on 5 January 1778 record that

A Petition having been presented to Parliament for leave to bring in a Bill to Licence King Street Theatre Therefore resolved that the Committee do cause the advertisement produced and read at this Meeting by Mr Faulconbridge to be inserted in the Birmingham Newspapers for calling a Town Meeting to take into consideration the propriety of that Measure And that a Petition be also presented to Parliament for leave to bring in a Bill to Licence New Street Theatre in order that the proprietors or Lessees of each Theatre may be upon an equal footing – And that the Committee do adopt any other Measure respecting this matter which may appear to them most advantageous to the Proprietors And That the Committee be and they are hereby authorized to make any call or calls of money – to defray the Expences attending to this Business.⁴⁴

The planned meeting was held at the Old Crown on 13 January 1778 and, perhaps unsurprisingly, passed a resolution which supported the New Street Theatre obtaining an Act licensing it for a four month season each year. Another petition was then circulated and this was presented to the House of Commons on 28 January 1779. The Commons referred it to a committee, but it seems that no further action was taken.⁴⁵

At a meeting of the Proprietors held on 12 March 1779 Faulconbridge reported that he had received an offer from several (unnamed) persons that, if the Proprietors tried once more to get a licence, then they would raise the money to defray the expenses involved (although the Proprietors were to repay them if the attempt ended in success).⁴⁶ The Proprietors initially accepted the proposal, but at another meeting held a month later (on 16 April) it was decided that 'the Intended Application to Parliament for an Act to licence New Street Theatre be deferred for the Present', and there the matter seems to have rested.⁴⁷ Faulconbridge clearly took a leading role in these attempts to gain a licence, eventually claiming £105 for expenses he had incurred along the way (see below, p. 319),⁴⁸ but it was to be almost another twenty years before the New Street Theatre finally got its licence in 1807 and became the Theatre Royal, Birmingham.⁴⁹

Faulconbridge also clearly took a major part in attempts to resolve the problems between the New Street and King Street Theatres. He reported to the meeting of the New Street proprietors on 4 January 1779 that he and Mr Gem, representing the King Street proprietors, had drawn up eleven 'propositions ... respecting an Accomodation of the Theatrical disagreements' between the two groups. In essence these proposed that the two sets of proprietors should be merged into a single body, the King Street proprietors paying £45 on each of their twenty shares to raise them to the same value as the thirty New Street shares (worth £75 each). The extra money was to be put towards the cost of the new building work at New Street. Only New Street would continue to operate as a theatre, with King Street being let 'for the advantage of the united proprietors for some other purpose'. The draft agreement also called for both Yates and Younger and Mattocks to surrender their leases on New Street and King Street respectively and then to share New Street for the next six seasons.⁵⁰ At first it looked hopeful that a deal was in sight, but the negotiations dragged on for the next three months and eventually foundered over the inability of the lessees to agree over the terms of the settlement, in particular how they should divide up the first six

⁴² Langford 1870, 278–9, quoting from AG 17 February 1777. In AG 10 March 1777 the New Street Theatre Proprietors published the text of their Bill, also in an attempt to head off any objections (Langford 1870, 279–80). Bath had become the first provincial city to obtain a licensed theatre by Act of Parliament in 1768. It had been followed by York and Hull (1769), Liverpool (1771) and Manchester (1775), so the idea was very much in the air at this time (Lowndes 1982, 22).

⁴³ Langford 1870, 281–3.

⁴⁴ *Minute Book*, 11v.–12v.

⁴⁵ Langford 1870, 284.

⁴⁶ *Minute Book*, 18r.

⁴⁷ *Minute Book*, 19r.

⁴⁸ Cunningham 1950, 22.

⁴⁹ Crompton Rhodes 1924, 8 and 10; Price 1988, 2.

⁵⁰ *Minute Book*, 12v.–15r.

seasons at New Street. The last reference to the proposed merger is at a meeting on 16 April 1779 and the subject then disappears for good from the minutes.⁵¹ Throughout this period Faulconbridge was in the chair at every meeting of the Proprietors, continued the negotiations with the King Street representative, and wrote and received a stream of letters on the Proprietors' behalf.

As we have already seen, both the New Street Theatre and the King Street Theatre reopened in the summer of 1779 after their enforced closure, but King Street found it hard to compete, did not open for the 1780 season and remained closed thereafter. In 1786 the building became a chapel for Lady Huntingdon's Connexion, a Calvinist Methodist grouping, largely funded by Selina, Countess of Huntingdon.⁵² The New Street Theatre, now without a rival, continued to thrive. In 1780 the Proprietors finally got to grips with the long-planned houses and other new building work that had been agreed in 1774 and 1777 respectively, but which had apparently been delayed by the difficulty of getting the agreed monies out of certain of the Proprietors. On 3 January 1780 the Committee was authorised to press ahead with the work.⁵³ Once again it seems that Faulconbridge played an important role. At the next meeting, on 6 March, he reports back with comparative prices that he has obtained for using stucco or stonework for the new façade. He also explains that he has been in touch with Samuel Wyatt, the architect, for drawings 'for the regulation of the Workmen in the Execution of the Building'.⁵⁴

However, after a decade of steady progress, disaster struck on 17 August 1792. After a number of unsuccessful arson attempts over the previous months, someone broke into the theatre, deliberately set several fires and succeeded in burning it down. Despite the offer of a 200 guineas reward by the Proprietors, no one was ever charged for the offence.⁵⁵

The death of Faulconbridge

Faulconbridge did not live to see this tragedy, but died in 1783. As we have seen from his obituary, his final illness clearly lasted for some time,⁵⁶ and this may be why his attendance at meetings of the New Street Theatre committee, hitherto impressively regular, begins to become patchy from September 1782 onwards. He is last specifically named as attending on 11 February 1783 (although no names are recorded in the *Minute Book* for the meetings on 4 and 25 March and 15 April). Perhaps more significantly, at the main annual meeting of the Proprietors held on 6 January 1783, Faulconbridge is one of the three members of the outgoing committee who 'declined serving for the year ensuing' – the first time that he had not served on the committee since its establishment back in February 1777.⁵⁷

Perhaps his illness was prompting him to put his affairs in order, or maybe he simply found himself in need of ready cash, but the minutes of the meeting of 6 January 1783 also record the receipt of a letter and an 'account' (what we would today call a bill or invoice) from him:

To the Proprietors of the Theatre, Gentlemen. After the many services I have been employed in for you, both in Birmingham and London, and which must be needless for me to point out the particulars to you, being so well known not only to yourselves, but to all the Town, I did not expect I should be required to make out a charge for such Services, but that your gratitude, would have pointed out to you what would be proper on the occasion, that not being the Case, I have sent you my charge which I have made very moderate, that no one may have reason to complain – for had I charged in proportion to my time and trouble, five times the Sum would not make me amends, nor would five times the Sum I have charged be in so great proportion for my time, as you have already paid for business of a similar nature to another proprietor. – I am Gent^l. Your very Hble. Serv^t. – T. Faulconbridge. – New Hall Street 22nd. October 1782 – The Proprietors of the Theatre D^{rs}. To Tho^s. Faulconbridge. – To Soliciting a Bill in Parliament with great variety of other business respecting the Theatre and Buildings &c. £105.

⁵¹ *Minute Book*, 15v.-19r.

⁵² Cunningham 1950, 15; *VCH Warwickshire VII*, 219. The site of the theatre now lies underneath New Street Station (Crompton Rhodes 1924, 6). For Lady Huntingdon, see *DNB IX*, 133–5.

⁵³ *Minute Book*, 21r.–21v.

⁵⁴ *Minute Book*, 22r. The houses were not actually ready for letting until January 1782 (*Minute Book*, 27r.–27v.).

⁵⁵ Dent 1880, 264. An account of the fire appeared in *AG* for 20 August 1792. It records the 'Many ineffectual attempts ... made for months past to set fire to our Theatre.' After the fire the theatre was rebuilt to a design by George Saunders.

⁵⁶ The obituary describes it as 'lingering'. See p. 314 above.

⁵⁷ *Minute Book*, 1r.–35r. *passim*.

It is clear from this letter that that Faulconbridge had expected that his expenses would be covered without the need for such formality, and that he was hurt and offended that he was being, as he saw it, so shabbily treated after working so hard on behalf of the Theatre and his fellow Proprietors.⁵⁸ A decision over his claim was postponed to another meeting planned for 21 January, but this was inquorate, as were the Proprietors' next seven attempts to meet.⁵⁹ By the time a quorate meeting was finally held in the late summer of 1783, Faulconbridge was dead. It is sad to report that there is no trace in the minutes that his expenses bill was ever paid.

On 11 February 1783, Faulconbridge sold one of his two shares in the theatre for £100 to Thomas Everton, a saddletree maker in Birmingham.⁶⁰ About ten weeks later (on 1 May) he died. His will (dated 5 April 1783) makes no specific mention of his remaining share in the theatre, but he retained this posthumous connection with the New Street Theatre for some years after his death. On 16 December 1791 his executors even bought back his second share from Thomas Everton's executor for £103 16s. 8d., but early in the following year (on 23 February 1792) they sold both his shares, for £190 each,⁶¹ finally severing his last links with the theatre that he had done so much to establish.⁶²

POSTSCRIPT

While this note was in press, a second specimen of this pass, struck in silver, has come to light in the Birmingham Museum collection. Erroneously put aside among miscellaneous uncatalogued material in the early 1980s, this second specimen (accession number 1885 N 1541.151) is part of a collection of over 200 pieces presented to the museum in 1881 by Mr H. Buckley. This example is engraved *Jos.h Green's* on the reverse, in slightly larger lettering than that on Thomas Faulconbridge's pass.

Like Faulconbridge, Joseph Green was a successful Birmingham merchant, who also served as High Bailiff (in 1778, the year immediately prior to Faulconbridge).⁶³ He first appears in the trade directories in 1770, when he is listed as a wine merchant at 25 New Street.⁶⁴ Described simply as a merchant, he continues to be listed until 1798,⁶⁵ although his address begins to appear as 'Portugal House' from 1787.⁶⁶

Green was also one of the original subscribers to the New Street Theatre project, holding one share.⁶⁷ Again like Faulconbridge he served on the committee established on 10 August 1773 to see through the scheme to build the Theatre on Mr Inge's land in New Street.⁶⁸ Thereafter he was (unlike Faulconbridge) an irregular attender at meetings of the subscribers, although the meeting of 13 June 1776, held to prepare the deeds for incorporation of the Proprietors, is noted as being 'held at Mr. Green's'.⁶⁹

The house where this meeting took place was right next door to the Theatre; indeed, part of it is visible at the right hand edge of Fig. 2 above. It was known as the finest private house of its day in Birmingham.⁷⁰ Described as virtually a country house with a pleasant garden, although in a busy marketing town, it later became the Inland Revenue Office and was demolished in 1874.⁷¹

⁵⁸ *Minute Book*, 34r.-35r.

⁵⁹ *Minute Book*, 35r.-37r.

⁶⁰ BCL Lee Crowder Coll. 421.

⁶¹ BCL Lee Crowder Coll. 421. The purchasers were Samuel Palmer and Thomas Price.

⁶² The Theatre Royal survived the fire of 1792 and another in 1820, but in 1956 it was finally closed and demolished.

⁶³ Hutton 1781, 93.

⁶⁴ *Sketchley's Guide*, 41.

⁶⁵ *The New Birmingham Directory ... 1798*, 24.

⁶⁶ The new style first appears in *The Birmingham Directory ... 1787*, 32.

⁶⁷ *Minute Book*, 1r.

⁶⁸ *Minute Book*, 2r.

⁶⁹ *Minute Book*, 5v.

⁷⁰ Cunningham 1950, 21.

⁷¹ Dent 1880, 192. Dent reproduces a vignette of the house taken from Hanson's Plan of Birmingham of 1778, where it is described as 'Mr. Green's House'. The trade directories suggest that it must have become known as Portugal House in the mid 1780s. Drake (1825, 38) records that it was called Portugal House 'by its original proprietor [i.e. Green], who had gained a fortune in the Portugal wine trade'.

It is clear that problems quite soon arose between Green and the Theatre over the boundary between the two properties. At the Annual Meeting of the Proprietors held on 5 January 1778 (at which Green was present), Thomas Faulconbridge was authorised to get the party walls between Green's property and the Theatre measured and to ascertain sums of money 'to be received and paid on account of such party walls'.⁷² The problem clearly rumbled on because a later meeting (chaired by Faulconbridge on 17 May 1780) agreed that a letter should be sent to Green about the dispute over the property boundary.⁷³ Whether for this reason, or simply because he wanted to realise his investment, Green sold his share in the Theatre on 15 January 1779 to Joseph Batterson, a Birmingham confectioner.⁷⁴

Green outlived Faulconbridge by more than twenty years, his obituary appearing in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* in 1810: 'DIED. On Sunday se'nnight [sevensnight], aged 74, at Dalbury, in the county of Derby, Joseph Green, Esq. formerly of Portugal House, in this town.'⁷⁵ This would put him in his early sixties when he disappears from the trade directories and about thirty-eight when he used this pass. Both he and his house were remembered in Birmingham long after his death. In 1870, in response to an enquiry in *Local Notes and Queries* (in the local, Birmingham press) about the 'Mr. Green's House' that appeared on Hanson's Plan of Birmingham, two contributors noted that the house had been called Portugal House and that it had belonged to 'a gentleman ... who was known by the soubriquet of "Beau Green"', 'a man of good social position', who 'flourished towards the end of the last century and was a prominent man on occasions of public celebration ...'.⁷⁶

Finally, this pass allows us to speculate a little more about why named examples are known in both silver and copper. On this silver specimen Green's name is engraved with a possessive apostrophe 's', whilst on the copper example Faulconbridge's name is given in the nominative. Although this could simply reflect the length of Faulconbridge's name, it may strengthen the suggestion tentatively advanced above that the Proprietors themselves used silver medals (marked as belonging to them personally), but also had copper specimens (bearing their names) which they could pass out to others. Only the recording of further specimens may allow us to solve this problem.

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⁷² *Minute Book*, 11v.–12v.

⁷³ *Minute Book*, 23r.–23v.

⁷⁴ The sale is recorded in BCL Lec Crowder Coll. 421.

⁷⁵ *AG* 5 February 1810. Green died on Sunday 28 January. Dalbury is near Etwell, a few miles to the south-west of Derby

⁷⁶ BCL 99081 (*Local Notes and Queries. 1865–1871*), 84, no. 557-8, of 7 December 1870. The original enquiry is 83, no. 551, of 9 November.

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