

DRURY LANE THEATRE.

IMPORTANT IMPROVEMENTS.

The Christmas pantomime at Drury Lane is to be introduced on Boxing-day in what will, to a large extent, be a new theatre. Since the beginning of September last, an army of men have had possession of the building, working night and day to carry out a vast scheme of improvement designed by Mr. Philip E. Pilditch, the Consulting Architect to the Marquess of Salisbury and the Duke of Bedford.

In the annals of Drury-lane Theatre no small part of the best records of the British drama are enshrined. The ground is sacred to David Garrick, to Charles Kemble, and to Mrs. Siddons; with it are associated the names of Mrs. Jordan, of William Farren, of Pope, Bannister, and King; and it was here that Sheridan first appeared in his *School for Scandal*, and that Edmund Kean's *Shylock*, by one stroke of genius, revived the declining fortunes of a modern house. For nearly two centuries and a-half the neighbourhood of "The Lane" has had its interest largely bound up with those of the playhouse. The first Theatre Royal in Drury-lane was opened in April, 1663, under Royal patent, the play presented by "His Majesty's Servants" being *The Humorous Lieutenant*, by Beaumont and Fletcher. Thomas Killigrew was chiefly responsible for the undertaking, but it took the form of a joint-stock speculation, in which the actors had a share of interest. The building was only a small one, and it did not cost more than £1500. Nine years later the structure was destroyed by fire, and Sir Christopher Wren was employed to design another, which cost £4000. After passing through many financial vicissitudes, the second house was closed in 1791, and three years afterwards a third, and much larger, theatre was erected, capable of accommodating 3600 persons. In 1809 fire again left nothing but a heap of ruins on the site; but in the following Session of Parliament an Act was passed enabling the proprietors of the old house to form a Joint-Stock Company for the purpose of re-building. The Prince Regent encouraged the movement, and, with the assistance of an influential Committee, a sum of £400,000 was raised for the purpose. All pecuniary embarrassments were thus, for a time at least, removed, and no man did more to bring about such a result than Mr. Samuel Whitbread, the principal proprietor.

The handsome theatre known to recent generations was then designed by Mr. Benjamin Wyatt, and opened to the public in 1810. It constituted an im-

portant addition to the great playhouses of the world, and renewed its title to recognition as the "National Theatre." The architect evidently gave careful consideration to all the elements necessary in the construction of a model home of the drama, but the conditions governing some of these details have since undergone such a radical change in the direction of greater regard for public safety that a scheme of reconstruction has once more been demanded. Although its licence still comes from the Crown, through the Lord Chamberlain's Department, the London County Council claim the right to exercise jurisdiction over the theatre, and the alterations now being carried out are the result of an arbitration award given by Mr. John Slater, who was appointed by Lord Windsor, the First Commissioner of Works. Roughly speaking, only the shell of Wyatt's house is retained, and even in this portion of the fabric certain new features will appear. Three years ago the first and second tiers were entirely reconstructed in steel and concrete. The two upper floors, containing the balcony and gallery, are now undergoing treatment in the same way, the fronts being ornamented with fibrous plaster.

Two new staircases have been provided at either side of the building. These are laid one above the other, so that four independent streams of people will be able to leave the gallery at the same moment, each staircase being completely shut off from the other by stone and brickwork. This arrangement will, of course, add immensely to the security of those who may be seated in the upper portions of the auditorium, and it is one which will, no doubt, be repeated in other new places of entertainment. Additional gangways have been formed in the first and second tiers, harmonising with those in the floors above, and all the old exits have received careful attention. Important street widenings are in progress in Drury-lane, Catherine-street, and Russell-street—the three thoroughfares into which the audiences emerge—and the means of approach to the theatre will, therefore, be vastly improved. Beyond the avenues mentioned, the building possesses, on the South side, the further advantage of a private roadway, formerly known as Vinegar-yard.

No interference whatever is needed with the heavy timbered roof that Mr. Wyatt contrived, because no better material could possibly be suggested; but the ceiling, upon the elaborate decoration of which £1000 was spent, has given place to one composed of fibrous plaster, a material finding general acceptance in modern principles of construction, owing to the fact that it offers no encouragement to the spread of flames. The new ceiling is being richly adorned with paintings representing the months of the year, while the inner design pictures, with pleasing effect, the

four seasons, the panels of the artists being set in floral festoons. An immense electrolier will hang from the centre of the roof, and the ceiling itself is dotted with hundreds of electric lamps which agreeably follow the lines of an effective scheme of decoration.

The old proscenium characteristics have been removed and replaced by others formed of fibrous plaster. In the centre will appear the Royal coat of arms modelled in gilt, the ceiling rising immediately above. At the sides are marble pilasters, and the entablatures rest upon steel and fibrous plaster columns. The upper drapery, which was such a prominent feature, has disappeared altogether, and the public will instead look in future upon a massive plaster pediment, decorated in classic style, still more in harmony with the surroundings. Every scrap of soft woodwork has been cut away from the stage, and a new decking laid of teak, which, as is well known, possesses peculiar fire-resisting qualities. This floor is supported by steel girders, some of which are two feet deep. All the old wooden traps have been condemned, and replaced by safer metal devices connected with intersecting galleries made of steel. This new work gives the basement area of the stage the appearance of an engine-room in a large ocean-going steamer, and the effect is heightened by the powerful appliances already existing for raising and lowering the central portions of the stage. Under the plan of reconstruction deemed necessary, it was ordered that the old wooden "flies" should be taken down and steel galleries erected in their stead. A similar clearance has been made of the numerous hempen ropes employed in the manipulation of scenery, and nothing but steel wire is now employed, the introduction of counter-weights greatly reducing the amount of manual labour needed in setting the various scenes of a play. A fireproof curtain, with overhead sprinklers, had previously been installed, and when all the new features are taken into account it will be recognised that nothing has apparently been left undone that could add in any degree to the safety of audiences and performers alike. It may be added that there will be a dozen different exits from the stage to the open air, and the dressing-room on the ground floor will henceforth be used as a refreshment buffet by stall-holders. Offices for the management are being erected above Vinegar-yard, the old staff-rooms having been given up to the space required for the new staircases. The improvements described will involve a total expenditure of from £25,000 to £30,000. Pending reconstruction, the musical rehearsals for the Pantomime of *The White Cat* are being conducted in a local Volunteer Drill-hall, and the Grand Saloon of the theatre will shortly be used by the principals for the same purpose.