

NEW EMPIRE, SUNDERLAND.

OPENING CEREMONY.

(From our own Correspondent.)

By special invitation on Saturday afternoon a large number of the principal inhabitants of the town, which included representatives of the corporation and other public bodies, had the privilege of a private view of this magnificent theatre—a full description of which appeared in our last issue. It is among the largest and finest halls in the North, and in the opinion of many present from different parts of the country, some of whom were experts in theatre construction, it will bear favourable comparison with many of the best in London and the provinces. After the house had been thoroughly inspected, Mr. Frank Allen, assisting director and chief of the staff of the great Moss, Stoll, Thornton and Allen combination, who had an enthusiastic reception on his re-appearance in his native town, addressed the gathering. He said:—

By Mr. Thornton's request I beg to thank you for the honour you have done him by your presence here to-day, and to express a hope that this new Empire Palace which he has had pluck enough to erect comes quite up to your expectations. Speaking for myself, I am filled with admiration of the beauties of the decorations, the perfect acoustic properties, the clear and unobstructed lines of sight, and the cleverly arranged entrances and exits so necessary for the safety of the public; in fact, taking the theatre as a whole, I can with confidence say that it will bear fair comparison with the most pretentious in the country, and I am sure reflects the greatest credit upon the architects, our own townsmen, the Brothers Milburn, who have designed and carried out the work in a manner worthy of their reputation, giving, I assure them, the greatest satisfaction to the managing director, Mr. Richard Thornton, and those who are associated with him. It is twenty-one years since he, Mr. Thornton, commenced his first venture as a music hall proprietor in South Shields with your humble servant as his general manager, and I well

remember how careful he was during our first interview to impress upon me his great desire that the entertainment which was about to be presented to his patrons should be clean and wholesome. Nothing must be allowed, either in word or gesture, on the stage that could possibly offend the most fastidious. The entertainment must be of such a character that any man can with safety bring his wife and family to witness, said Mr. Thornton. These were the principles laid down by him at the beginning of his career, and these are his principles to-day. From the ashes of an old workshop in Union Alley, South Shields, nearly twenty-two years ago arose, phoenix-like, the pretty little theatre known as Thornton's Varieties, and which unquestionably has proved itself the jumping-off board to all his future successful undertakings in the business, resulting in his name being prominently associated with the greatest entertainment enterprise the world has ever seen, with a capital of over two millions of money. A few years after the commencement of his South Shields venture Mr. Thornton, who by this time had added the Royal, Sunderland; the Alhambra, West Hartlepool; and the Empire, Newcastle—the latter being only partly completed when he joined partnership with that gentleman, Mr. H. E. Moss, now Sir Edward Moss, appointing me their first general manager with a seat on the board, a position I have had the honour of holding for nearly twenty years. Then additions were made with startling rapidity, and a few years later, just to put the finishing touches upon this wonderful combination, Mr. Oswald Stoll joined forces with them, adding his beautiful variety theatres to the already long list. And now here we have the veteran Mr. Thornton coming up smiling with a final effort to try and eclipse the lot by adding this palatial structure, making a grand total of thirty-nine, comprising some of the finest appointed theatres in the world—a record that will take a lot of beating by those who try to follow us. In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, allow me to express a hope that the new Sunderland Empire Palace, which I am sure is a credit to the architects, a credit to Mr. Thornton, and a credit to the town, will be worthy of the best traditions of our numerous and successful undertakings, and that the people of Sunderland will not be slow in showing their appreciation of what the worthy promoter has done for them, by giving him their most generous and hearty support. I thank you once more for the honour you have done us by your attendance here to-day.

Mr. J. R. Milburn, in a crisp and merry little speech, paid a warm and thoroughly well deserved tribute to the contractors and sub-contractors, who had done their work so well, and given general satisfaction. It is pleasing to add here that the designers and general contractors all belong to the town and district. Afterwards the company adjourned to the circle saloon, where refreshments were served, and after a very pleasant afternoon the gathering dispersed. Among those present were Miss Vesta Tilley and her husband, Mr. Walter De Freeo, Messrs. Richard Thornton, Frank Allen, Sidney Stone, S. Gething, W. R. Gillanders, Frank Elliott, Henry Eason, the resident manager, John Fallow, Harry L. Carlo, Alfred Browne, representatives of the local Press, THE STAGE, and others. The hall was opened to the public on Monday, when at both shows the house was filled to its utmost capacity. The opening ceremony was very simple, there being no speaking, and consisted only of the singing of the National Anthem by Miss Lilian Lea, which, we understand, is the sixth time this artist has officiated for the same firm in a similar way. It is also a coincidence that this is the second time since December 24 last that Miss Lea has been a member of the opening company of two new theatres in Sunderland. After a fine performance of the overture to *William Tell* the variety portion of the programme was then proceeded with. Vesta Tilley, who, of course, "topped the bill," delighted the huge audience immensely, and was recalled repeatedly. The Soustoffs (cyclopic dancers), Will Van Allen (musical tramp), Thorpe and Coe in sketch, *My Burglar*, and also Lilian Lea, in her pretty pastoral scene, *Primrose Farm*, were heartily received. Included also were W. Fulbrook and company—Maudie Francois, Charles Kay, and a bioscopic picture representing Miss Tilley laying the foundation-stone of the theatre on September 29 last. An important and notable feature of the entertainment is the fine orchestra, consisting of twenty musicians, who are under the able baton of Mr. Charles P. Loller, recently musical director at the Empire, South Shields.