



Photo: R. F. Wills

THE AUDITORIUM FROM THE STAGE

THE THEATRE ROYAL, BRISTOL

By J. RALPH EDWARDS

The Theatre Royal, Bristol, was reopened on 11th May 1943 as the first State Theatre in England, and the occasion seems appropriate for recording some notes on the building and its history.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Bristol was, of course, often visited by companies of travelling players. For many years a theatrical booth was set up at the Horse Fair. There were two appearances of 'My Lord President's Players' at the Guildhall in 1610 and it seems that, before 1666, some building had been erected especially for theatrical purposes for, in that year, the Churchwardens of All Saints were complained of 'for not mending the place where the play is in Christmas Street, being very much decayed'. About that date also, a Theatre was erected on the South side of the Avon near Bristol Bridge, but, says Latimer, 'the dramas then popular in London scandalized sober-minded Bristolians' and before 1688 that Theatre was converted into a dissenting chapel. Later Play-houses were erected at St. Augustine's Back (1706) and Jacobs Wells (1729). The latter—though little more than a hut, and inconveniently situated between Brandon Hill and 'the Hot Wells'—was still prospering in 1764. By that time, however, most of the wealthy Bristolians had taken up residence in or near Queen Square, the building of which was begun in 1700 and completed 1717. Thus the inconvenience of the Jacobs Wells Theatre became accentuated.

A scheme was therefore promoted for erecting a theatre which would be centrally situated and worthy of the city. Each of the fifty original Proprietors contributed £50 and further sums were subscribed by supporters of the drama. The promoters acquired a site in King Street, consisting of two seventeenth century houses with adjacent land. The approach to the auditorium was through these houses, their upper floors being retained as dwelling accommodation (see plan, fig. 1). The site adjoins the Hall of the Coopers' Company, built in 1744 from the design of William Halfpenny. The Architect of the Theatre was James Paty of Bristol, in conjunction with Saunders the stage carpenter of Drury Lane. The builder was Gilbert Davis and the cost of the new building was about £5,000. The Foundation Stone was laid on 30th November 1764 and the following two extracts from *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* are of interest :

24th November 1764

The Workmen are now employ'd in order to lay the Foundation of the New Theatre, in King-street; which would have been done before this Time had not a Mistake been made in the Calculation whereby the House would have been built 8 Feet larger in the Clear, than the Theatre Royal in Drury-Lane. A Model of that House has been sent for and the Proprietors seem determined that the Work shall be carried on with great Spirit. The Purchases are made, necessary for the Entrances from King-street and the Rackay; and another Way will be made into Baldwin-street.

1st December 1764

Yesterday afternoon was laid the Foundation Stone of the new intended Theatre in King-street, which will be opened the Beginning of next Summer with a Play, for the Benefit of the Bristol Infirmary.

The theatre was opened on 30th May 1766 and, as it was not then licensed, the proceedings were evasively announced as 'A Concert of Musick and Specimen of Rhetorick'. The play was Steele's 'The Conscious Lovers', followed by a farce entitled 'The Miller of Mansfield'. Considerable opposition arose amongst religious bodies and it was not until 1778 that the Royal Licence was granted, legalizing its use for stage plays.

Each of the original Proprietors received a silver token by which he and his assigns were "entitled to a sight of Every Performance . . ."

It is interesting to examine the Old Theatre at Bath, in comparison with the Bristol House, for the former was owned by John Palmer who also became lessee at Bristol in 1779. The Bath Theatre was planned by Hipplesey and Watts in 1747, completed by John Powell and opened in 1750. Its curtain descended for the last time on 13th July 1805. Its rectangular auditorium was 60 ft. long and 40 ft. wide in the clear and, in all essentials, it was a typical theatre of its period.

The auditorium at Bristol is especially noteworthy in that it is the first example in this country of the 'horseshoe' plan with rising tiers of seats in the 'Circles' (fig. 1). It thus marks the development from the rectangular plan which previously persisted. The main outer structure of the building is still rectangular on plan, the dimensions being 99 ft. long by 48 ft. 6 in. in the clear. Within this main rectangle the stage occupies a space of 48 ft. 6 in. by 29 ft., the remainder consisting of the auditorium and vestibule (foyer). The external walls,

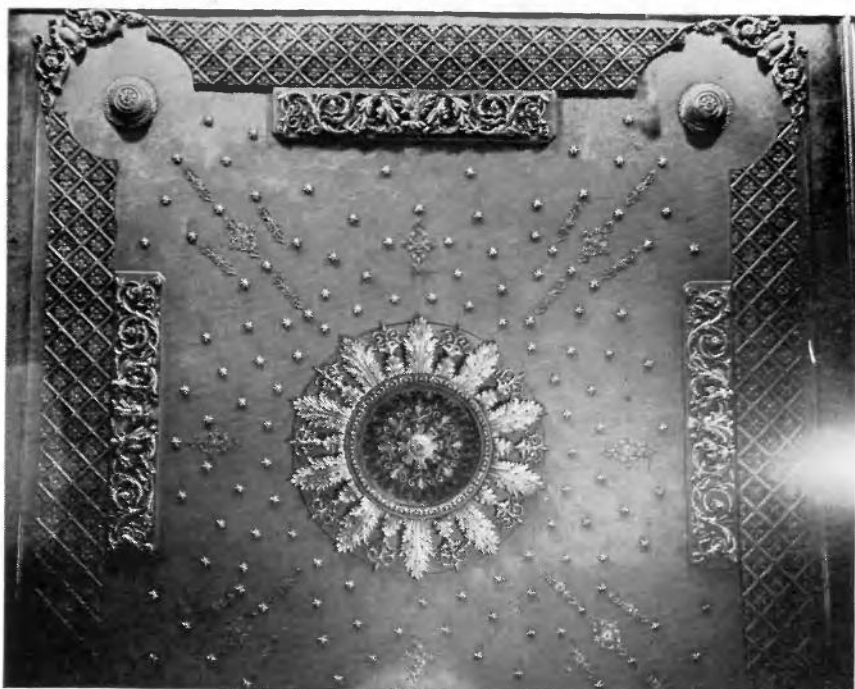


Photo : R. F. Wills

A. DETAILS OF THE MAIN CEILING

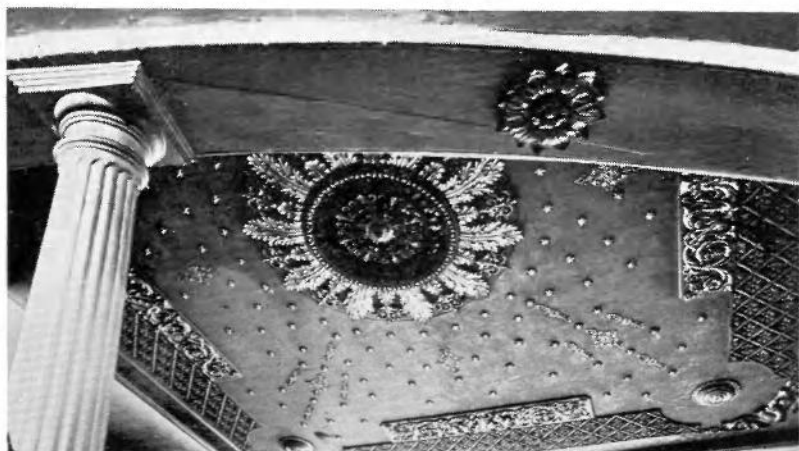


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B. MAIN CEILING FROM THE DRESS CIRCLE

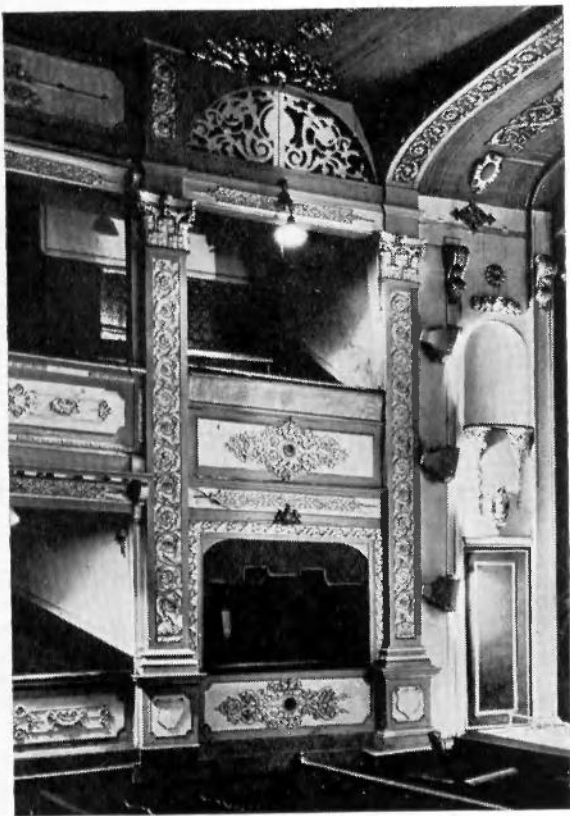


Photo: Victor Turl. By permission of the National Buildings Record
A. THE ROYAL BOX AND PROSCENIUM DOOR



Photo: R. F. Wills

B. DETAIL OF ROOF CONSTRUCTION

of local Pennant stone, are 3 ft. thick. In accordance with the fashion of the times, the two 'circles' were divided into separate boxes and these were named after famous playwrights and actors. This curved interior plan—enhanced by the reeded Doric columns (of yellow pine) which support the upper tiers (pl. II B), and by the beauty of the enrichments in plaster and carved wood—has resulted in a remarkable feeling of graciousness in the complete design. The 'lines of sight' are also extremely good from all parts of the house (pl. I).

It can be safely assumed that the original ceiling was flat or nearly so, with gilded ornament and, in all probability, a great chandelier was suspended from its centre, illuminating both stage and auditorium. The existing plaster ceiling dates from 1800, when the main walls and roof were raised and the gallery was erected as a topmost tier above the 'Undress circle' (pl. II). This sloping ceiling, with its painted ground of mellow green, decked with stars, and adorned with richly gilded acanthus and diaper work, is indeed the crowning glory of the theatre, and, coupled with the timber construction throughout, it has produced a perfect acoustic condition in which every whisper on the stage can be heard in any part of the auditorium.

Of the other ornament, little is original except the Corinthian pilasters of the boxes. The detail of these pilasters and their acanthus enrichments is admirable in design and craftsmanship—all in carved wood (pl. III A). The Royal Arms (of Victoria) are displayed above the proscenium and over the Royal Box. The panelled balustrades of the Circles have been covered with canvas to which carved wooden ornaments have been applied. As the original decorations of the theatre were by Michael Edkins who was a celebrated painter of Bristol porcelain, it is possible that these panels may have been adorned with paintings by him.

In *Memoirs of the Bristol Stage* (Richard Jenkins, 1826) it is recorded :

'The House was painted by Mr. Michael Edkins, father of the present artist of that name, who executed the same under Mr. Simmonds, City Painter. The front panels of the boxes were painted in green and gold . . . The internal part was formed semi-circular and the whole decorated with carving, painting and gilding, executed with much taste. . . '

Next to the stage boxes should be noted the exceptionally interesting example of proscenium doors and, at their base, the evidence of the original 'apron stage'.

The construction of the roof itself is worthy of notice (pl. III B). The main principals are of oak and are an unusual development

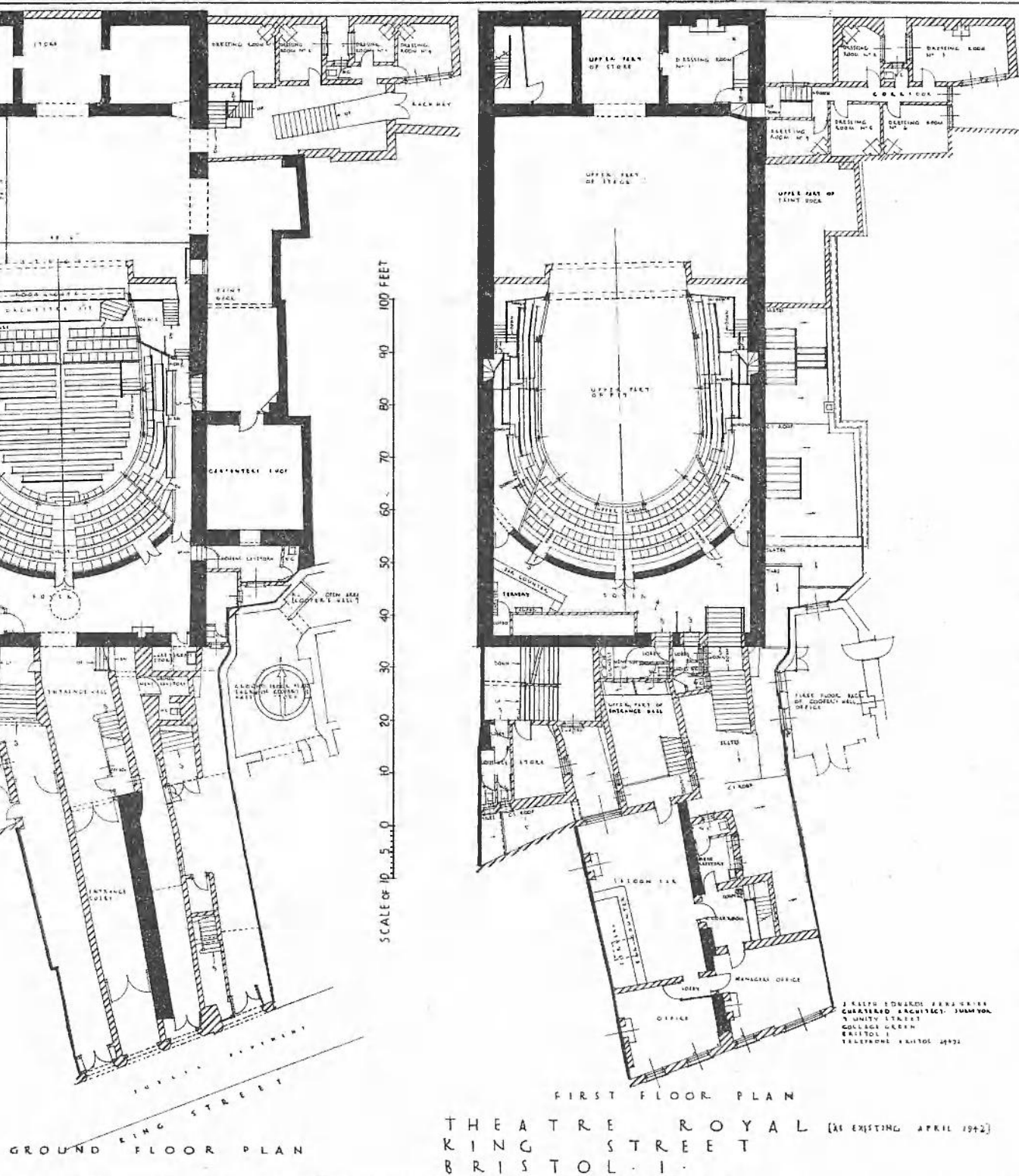
of the king-post truss. They are set at intervals of about 10 ft. and their tie-beams, which span the clear width of 48 ft. 6 in., are 16 in. deep and 12 in. thick. Suspended from these roof timbers is the 'thunder run'—an inclined wooden trough, down which cannon balls may still be rolled with realistic effect.

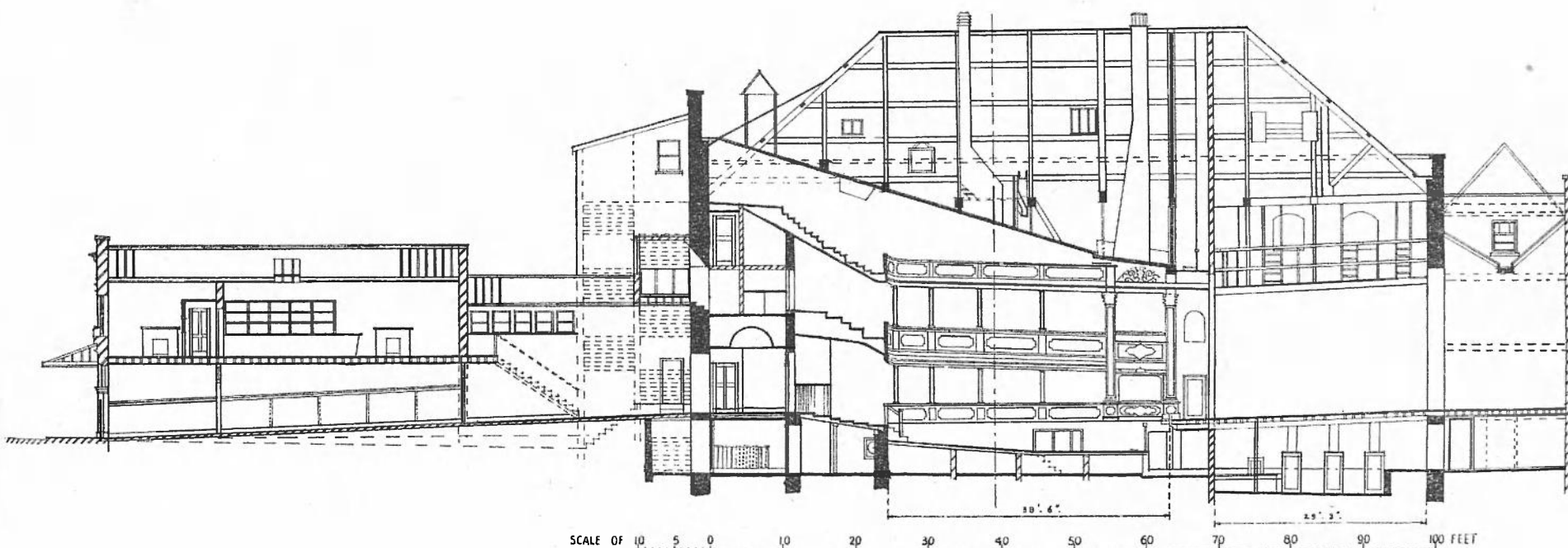
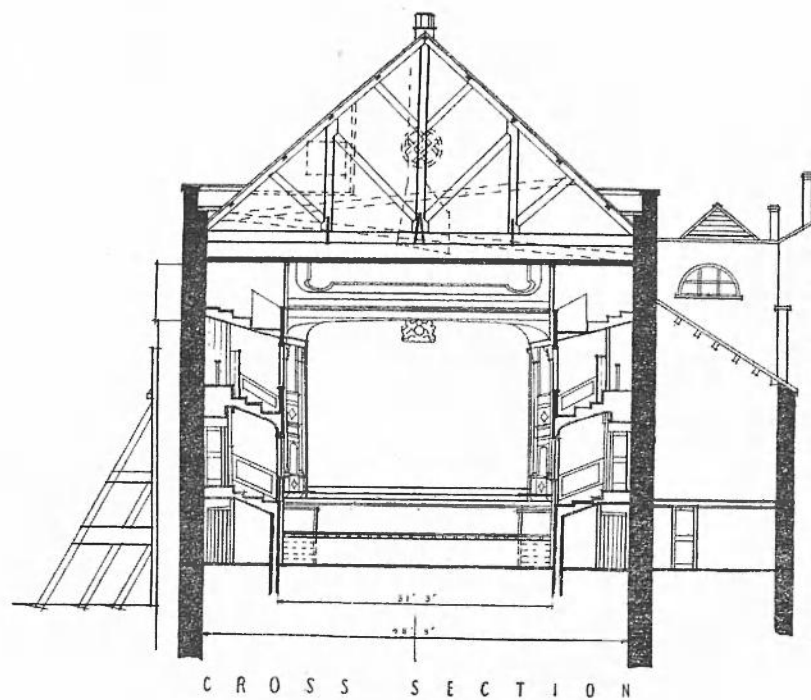
The stage and its equipment require separate study. The proscenium opening is 25 ft. wide and its effective height is approximately 18 ft. The 'grid' and even the 'fly galleries' are suspended from the timber roof. The original dressing rooms and early wardrobe room adjoin the stage and in addition to the 'thunder run', mention must be made of the 'cat walks' (i.e. 'bridges') above the stage and the wooden stage machinery (a considerable part of which is original, including an example of 'grooves' for fixing scenery).

Much has been written of the opening performance in 1766, of all the famous players—Mrs. Siddons, the Kembles, the Keans and Macready amongst them—who have appeared upon that stage, and of the many vicissitudes through which the theatre has passed in the hundred and seventy-seven years of its history.

A few short months ago it narrowly escaped destruction, which was only averted by the prompt action of the Council for the Preservation of Ancient Bristol with the support of other public-spirited citizens who have now formed a body of local Trustees. A considerable part of the purchase money still remains to be raised in order to secure its future. Through the initiative of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, directed by Lord Keynes, the theatre has now been repaired and made fit for a new lease of active life, whilst attention has been given to the neglected beauty of its interior. Under that beneficent influence may it now remain—in the words of Herbert Farjeon :

'Unscath'd from floor to star-encrusted ceiling.'





LONGITUDINAL SECTION
THEATRE ROYAL BRISTOL.

FIG. 2

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