



SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRE?

Archaeology at
4-6 New Inn Broadway
Hackney



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October 2008

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Front cover: William Shakespeare

*Back cover: A theatre building shown on
The View of London from the North, drawn
between 1577 and 1598*

INTRODUCTION

This booklet provides an introduction to the archaeology and history of 4–6 New Inn Broadway. In 2007, the Tower Theatre Company commissioned the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS, now MOL Archaeology) to carry out a desk-based study of 4–6 New Inn Broadway, in Hackney, as part of their proposals for building a new theatre on the site. This initial research was followed by an archaeological trial trench evaluation of the site in 2008, which established the extent and preservation of the surviving archaeology.

The site was known to be in an important historic area. Holywell Priory, a significant medieval nunnery, was located here and an Elizabethan playhouse, known as 'The Theatre', was known to have stood in the proximity. The recent archaeological evaluation has revealed the foundations of a polygonal structure. As historic documents report that The Theatre had a polygonal plan, the remains are potentially of national importance, as they could belong to one of London's earliest playhouses, in use by 1577. Shakespeare is known to have performed at The Theatre, which, despite being a very successful attraction, was demolished only twenty or so years later, in just four days. The remains have been preserved below ground while further study is carried out by MOL Archaeology.

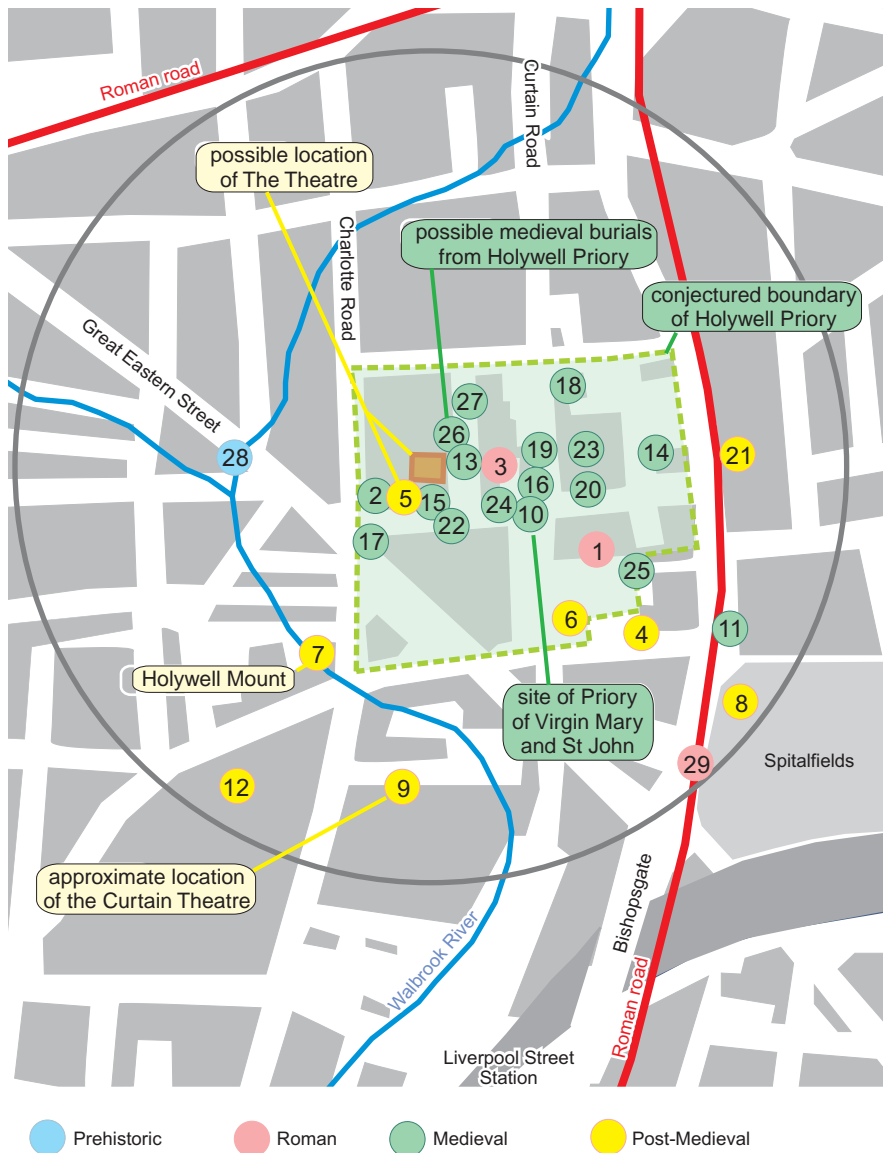


Fig 1 Archaeological sites and finds in the area

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

SITE LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

In order to fully understand how a site has developed, it is important to determine its location, topography and geology, as these provide necessary background and context. For example, the underlying geology has an effect on land use and the kinds of resources that were available to people in the past; while a site's location within a parish may have determined its pattern of occupation and utilisation in the medieval and later periods.

The site falls within the historic parish of St Leonard, Shoreditch, and lay within the county of Middlesex prior to being absorbed into the administration of the Greater London Borough of Hackney. As we will see in the medieval section below, this location had a role in the development of the site.

The site's underlying geology is Hackney gravels. The gravel terraces formed as the River Thames, which was wider in prehistoric times, cut into the valley floor bedrock and gradually deposited alluvial deposits. Generally the terraces are distinguished on the basis of their altitude, with the higher terraces representing the older course of the River Thames, and the lower ones becoming increasingly younger, as they get closer to the river's current flow. Fossils and prehistoric (Palaeolithic) artefacts, such as flint handaxes and flakes, are found in the river terraces, depending on their age. The Hackney gravels are an intermediate terrace and were formerly known as the 'Middle' terrace. The gravels are overlain by 'brickearth', a sandy silt deposit which formed in the late Devensian stage (17,000–10,000 Before Present or BP), and which corresponds to the later prehistoric ground surface. Brickearth in this area was commonly quarried and used to make bricks in the past.

Past investigations in the area have shown that both gravel and brickearth were eroded by a number of small streams flowing south to join the Thames, c 1.8km to the south. One of the larger of these was the River Walbrook (one of London's 'lost' rivers, now culverted over), the north-western branch of which probably originated near what is now the south end of New North Road, c 800m north-west of the site, while the eastern branch probably originated near the bottom end of Hackney Road, c 270m north-east of the site. Previous archaeological investigations at 86–90 Curtain Road, 3–15 New Inn Yard (**Site 2**), immediately to the east of the site, identified a deposit of fine sandy silt, which was clearly a water lain deposit. Soft brown clay, possibly indicating a marshy terrain, was also observed, suggesting that a small stream also crossed the site.

OVERVIEW OF PAST ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

Relevant old documents and maps, as well as archaeological sites and finds in the surrounding area, were examined in order to determine the likelihood of finding significant archaeological remains at the site. Two key objectives were to find out more about important buildings which seem to have stood there: the medieval nunnery of Holywell Priory and London's first public theatre.

The map on page 4 (Fig 1) shows the location of known archaeological sites and finds around the site (these are listed at the back of this booklet). Recommendations for further reading have been included for those interested in finding out more.

In 1999, MoLAS carried out a geophysical survey within properties along New Inn Broadway, which identified a geophysical anomaly interpreted as possibly corresponding to The Theatre. A geophysical survey is a non-invasive and non-destructive archaeological technique used to create maps of buried archaeological features, which have

recognisable electrical or magnetic properties. Survey results can then be used to target areas of excavation, as was indeed the case. Subsequently, structural remains were recorded by MoLAS during archaeological investigations immediately west and south of the site (86–90 Curtain Road, 3–15 New Inn Yard and 3–3a New Inn Broadway). In particular, the wall footings uncovered under the basement of 86–90 Curtain Road (**Site 2** on Fig 1), adjacent to the site on the south side, were believed to be part of The Theatre.

Unlike Holywell Priory, the layout of which is known from early maps, allowing archaeologists to be more confident in identifying the remains, there is no map showing the location of The Theatre. Legal documents make reference to The Theatre, but they are unclear as to its exact location, often referring to its position in relation to other buildings, which have also since disappeared. Not surprisingly, locating The Theatre constitutes a considerable challenge (Fig 2).

In addition, the site also had a largely unknown history before the building of the priory or The Theatre, and as archaeologists it is our duty to record remains of all periods if they are to be affected. Our account of the site therefore begins with the prehistoric period.



Fig 2 Archaeologists working on the site

CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY

Prehistoric period (c 700,000 BC–AD 43)

The earliest evidence for occupation in Britain dates to about 700,000 years ago, a time when Britain was connected via a land bridge to continental Europe. The earlier prehistoric period, divided into the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic, saw alternating warm and cold phases (glacial and interglacial periods) and intermittent, perhaps seasonal, occupation. During the Upper Palaeolithic (c 40,000–10,000 BC), after the last glacial maximum (i.e. when sea levels were at their lowest), and in particular after around 13,000 BC, further climate warming took place and the environment changed from being a treeless steppe-tundra to one of birch and pine woodland. It is probably at this time that this part of England saw continuous occupation. Subsequent erosion has removed many of the land-surfaces on which Palaeolithic people lived and hunted and consequently most Palaeolithic finds are typically residual (i.e. located outside the context in which they were originally deposited), and often discovered during gravel extraction. Rich Palaeolithic sites have been found in Hackney, associated with the Hackney Gravels, but none are known from the study area.

The Mesolithic hunter-gather communities of the postglacial period (c 10,000–4,000 BC) inhabited a still largely wooded environment. River valleys, such as the area around the River Walbrook, would have been good for hunting and fishing, and also provided a means of transport and communication. As Mesolithic communities were not sedentary but tended to be mobile, evidence of human activity during this period is ephemeral, being largely characterised by finds of flint tools and waste, representing temporary camps, rather than permanent structural remains. A Mesolithic chipped flint axe (Site 28) was found in the Great Eastern Road area, c 100m west of the site.

The Neolithic (c 4000–2000 BC), Bronze Age (c 2,000–600 BC) and Iron Age (c 600 BC–AD 43) are traditionally seen as a time of technological change, the establishment of farming and settled communities. Forest clearance (Fig 3) occurred for the cultivation of crops and the construction of communal monuments, and there was increasing population and pressure on available resources throughout each period. It has been suggested that Old Street, lying to



Fig 3 Neolithic land clearance

the north of the site, runs along the line of an Iron Age trackway, although this is unconfirmed. There are no known remains dated to this period in the area.

Roman period (AD 43–410)

Within approximately a decade of their arrival in AD 43, the Romans had established their provincial capital, known as Londinium, on the north bank of the Thames where the City of London now stands, c 1km to the south of the site (Fig 4). A network of roads stretched out in several directions from the capital to the other Roman towns.

Archaeological evidence along these roads suggests farming, quarrying, and cemeteries, as Roman law required the dead to be buried outside the city perimeter.

The Site lies c 160m to the west of the main Roman road north of the City, known as Ermine Street. The course of this road is closely followed by modern Bishopsgate, Shoreditch High Street and Kingsland Road (**Site 29**). Burials have been recorded along Ermine Street at Bishopsgate to the south (outside the study area), but as yet none have been recorded in Shoreditch, the stretch of road that runs close to the site.

The character of the area immediately around the site in the Roman period is not well known, but in all likelihood there would have been fields or woods outside the City, near to the source of the River Walbrook. This was recently confirmed by work at 2–4 Holywell Lane (**Site 4**), c 150m south-west of the site, where Roman agricultural features were observed by MoLAS in 2006–7. In 1989, MoLAS excavated fifteen trenches at 183–185 Shoreditch High Street (**Site 1**), c 100m south-east of the site. No Roman structures or features were encountered, but pottery and building material (pieces of tegula or tile) were recorded in two trenches, suggesting that a small farm lay nearby. At 14–20 New Inn Broadway (**Site 3**), c 25m east of the site, accumulated soil containing possible Roman material was recorded above the natural gravels, again indicating Roman agricultural activity.



Fig 4 Roman Londinium, showing the rural nature of the land beyond the city wall

Early medieval period (AD 410–1066)

Following the withdrawal of the Roman army from England in the early 5th century AD, much of the country fell into an extended period of socio-economic decline. By 650, a large new town called Lundenwic was established on the bank of the Thames around the Strand, between the old Roman city and what would become Westminster. The City of London was in effect refounded by King Alfred in 886, and grew into the medieval capital.

Bishopsgate and Hackney lay outside the Roman and medieval city, on its north-east side. There is little evidence in the archaeological record for occupation before the Norman Conquest (1066) with no finds securely dated to this period reported from either the site or study area. However, a MoLAS evaluation at 183–185 Shoreditch High Street (Site 1), c 100m south-east of the site, within the precinct of the Augustinian priory of St John the Baptist, produced evidence of an agricultural soil established before the foundation of the nunnery (by 1133–50). This may indicate some occupation and agricultural activity in the area during this period. It is possible that settlement at this time centred around the junction of Kingsland Road and Old Street, c 280m north of the site, where the later medieval settlement is known to have developed.

Later medieval period (AD 1066–1485)

Shoreditch is not listed as a separate place in the Domesday Survey of 1086, which was commissioned by William the Conqueror following the Norman Conquest to assess the extent of his new lands. The earliest reference to *Soerdich* is from about 1148 and seems to refer to a drainage ditch leading down to the Thames. An alternative derivation is taken from the family of the *Soerdiches*, Lords of the Manor in the time of Edward III (1327–1377). The nucleus of Shoreditch village was probably around the junction of Kingsland Road and Old Street, north of the site, where St Leonard's Church is thought to have stood from at least the 13th century (the present building is from 1740).

Medieval Shoreditch was dominated by the Priory of St John the Baptist at Halywell or Holywell, which was founded in the 12th century. The buildings of the Priory lay between Shoreditch High Street on the east and the fields of Finsbury to the west with the southern gate in Holywell Lane, which led from Shoreditch to the fields. A conjectural reconstruction plan of the Priory (Fig 5) shows the site within the western part of this Priory. To the west of the Priory lay Finsbury Field, separated by the road that led to 'Hollywel', the precursor of Curtain Road.

The Priory was founded for the Augustinian Canonesses by Robert Fitz Generan (or Gelran), prebend (or canon) between 1133 and 1150. It originally consisted of 3 acres of 'moor' (marsh) and included Haliwell spring. Monastic precincts are generally laid out according to a prescribed pattern, consisting of the church as the spiritual centre of the community, with an attached cloister, an enclosed square composed of the *frater*

(refectory), the *dorter* and *redorter* (dormitory and latrine), and often the chapter-house. The cemetery is usually located towards the east end of the church, often extending around it. Beyond this central unit, were the more 'secular' buildings, such as kitchens, workshops, stables, the infirmary, and store houses. Surrounding these were the gardens, guest houses, barns, orchards and fishponds. Often, a wall with a gatehouse would surround the whole precinct.

In 1989, a MoLAS trial excavation at 183–185 Shoreditch High Street (Site 1), largely confirmed Besant's 1906 conjectural reconstruction plan of the Priory (shown in Fig 5), including the location of the south aisle and chapels of the church. Despite the robbing of many of the walls, two or three phases of rebuilding were identified. At least one 15th-century floor surface was found, as were burials within the church and to the south of it.

On the conjectural reconstruction of the Priory (Fig 5), the site is located between the Convent Orchard to the north and the Great Barn to the south. It stands in an area covered by a brew house, part of a bake house to the north (part of a range of three outbuildings), and part of a pond to the south, with open ground in between and to the

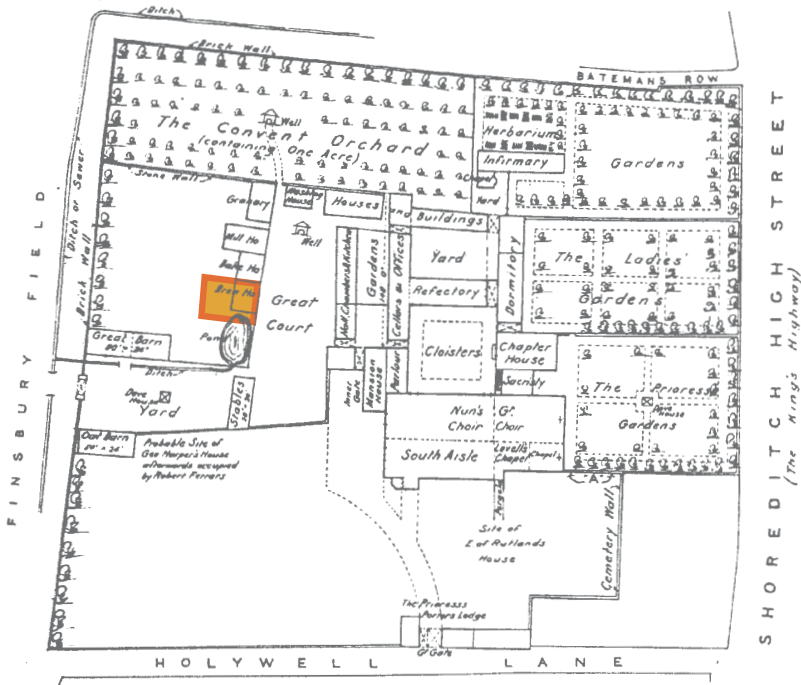


Fig 5 Conjectural reconstruction plan of Holywell Priory (Besant 1906)

west of the site. The area includes a number of buildings and other features. The pond is connected to the 'Ditch of Sewer' beyond the precinct by an east-west ditch. A small bridge crosses the ditch and leads to a building labelled the 'Great Barn' located south-west of the site.

At 14–20 New Inn Broadway (**Site 3**), c 25m east of the site, medieval deposits contained pottery dated to the mid-14th to 16th century. A patch of mortar above this layer could represent structural or demolition activity, possibly associated with Holywell Priory.

Early post-medieval period (AD 1485–1570)

During the Tudor period (1485–1603), national economic factors led to the population of London quadrupling in size, but the medieval layout of the City did not change significantly. Whilst the City remained the commercial centre and Westminster the political centre of London, suburbs began to develop in the areas between them and beyond the City walls. In particular, the wealthy moved into the area of the Strand and the Inns of Court, whilst the poor streamed into existing disadvantaged suburbs around Clerkenwell, Shoreditch, Aldgate and Southwark.

The villages of Hoxton and Shoreditch started to expand in the 16th century, and this process of expansion continued steadily throughout the later centuries. Shoreditch largely lay within the Liberty of Holywell, in the parish of St Leonards, Shoreditch – derived from the Priory lands and thus outside the increasingly puritanical strictures of the City. As such it became notorious for its numerous taverns.

Several benefactors of the Priory are noted in documentary sources. According to London's first major historian, John Stow, in 1524, Sir Thomas Lovell, Knight of the Garter, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and constable of the Tower, 're-edified' the Priory, and "buildd much there in the raignes of Henry VII and Henry VIII. He endowed this house with fayre lands and was there buried in a large chappel by him buildd for that purpose".

The Earls of Rutland were to become owners of part of the Priory before the Dissolution of 1539 and increased their hold afterwards. A mansion connected by a gallery to the chapel of Thomas Lovell was built by the Earl on land south of the church, leased from the nuns, before the dissolution, and he appears in an audit collecting a salary as chief steward in 1534. At the Dissolution, the Priory was the ninth richest of the English nunneries. Demolition layers of what might be Rutland's Mansion were found during a MoLAS evaluation at 183–185 Shoreditch High Street (**Site 1**).

After the Dissolution the plot was divided into three main portions. The nuns held part of the plot for a while, until it was granted to Henry Webb, usher to Queen Catherine Parr, whilst the Earls of Rutland held another 'third'. The last portion belonged to a Robert Ferrars. Webb's portion lay to the west of the church and included barns,

brewhouses, granaries and stables, so that it seems likely that the site stood within this property. This identification appears to be confirmed by the successive ownership of the property: in 1576 Giles Allen leased it to James Burbage, who erected a playhouse there.

The 'Agas' map of c 1562 (Fig 6) shows the precinct wall of the Priory with the south gate and some buildings located in the south-east corner of the precinct. The site lies mainly in open ground within the precinct wall, but may have been at least partly occupied by the Earls of Rutland's residence.

The early theatres and the growth of a London suburb (1570–present)

By the 1570s, the two earliest playhouses of Elizabethan England had been built, and the area quickly became a home to many actors and dramatists – including Shakespeare and Marlowe. One of these, the first purpose-built London theatre was erected in Shoreditch in 1576. The playhouse, called simply 'The Theatre', was located on Curtain Road at the junction with New Inn Yard, on a plot of land within the former Priory precinct (Fig 7). Much of the evidence comes from legal cases, but there are indications that The Theatre may have stood partly within the site (see below).

The Theatre was constructed by James Burbage, a carpenter turned actor. In 1575, the Lord Mayor had issued an edict banning the performance of plays within the circuit of the City. Burbage, however, erected the wooden structure on a site just beyond the Lord Mayor's jurisdiction. Queen Elizabeth had permitted her favourite, the Earl of Leicester, to collect a body of actors and to enrol them under a patent from the crown. James

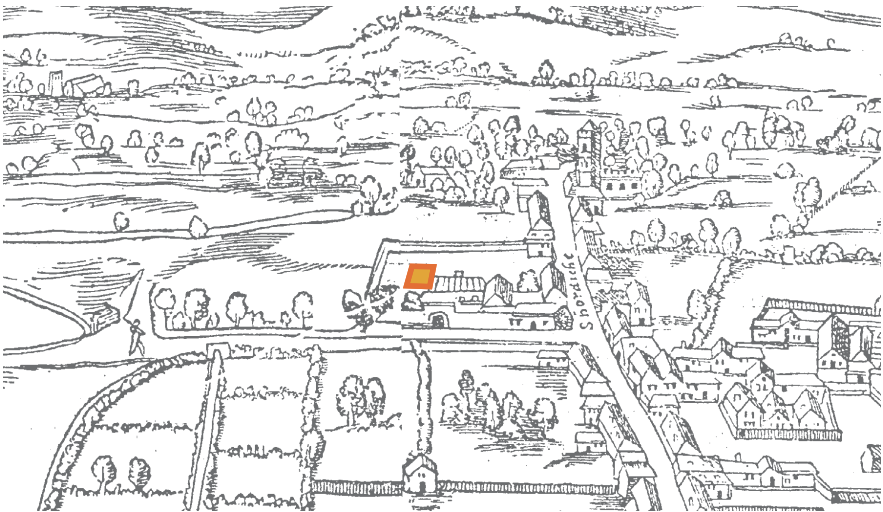


Fig 6 'Agas' map of c 1562

Burbage was at the head of this body.

In 1576, Burbage obtained a parcel of land in lease from a Giles Allen. The land contained other houses and gardens, which included a mill-house, a pond and the Great Barn. The lease was for 21 years until 1597, with a clause that allowed Burbage to renew the lease for another 21 years if he had spent the sum of £200 by the end of the first ten years, resulting in a 31-year lease.

Under the terms of his lease, Burbage could demolish any of the houses as should 'within the sayd ten years be erected on the sayd voyde growndes for a theater or playing place'. He was, however, to repair the brick wall (or build as new the same) next to the fields to the west. The barn was in dilapidated state and needed to be supported against the new Theatre. In return, Allen was to have access to the theatre to see plays free of charge. Another clause provided that Burbage could tear The Theatre down at any point during the lease.

The new playhouse was a magnet attracting great crowds, and it was soon known over London as 'The Theatre'. In his first edition of the Survey of London in 1598, John Stow stated that there are 'two houses for the show of Activities, Comedies, tragedies and histories for recreation... The one of them is named the Curtayn in Holy Well, the other the Theatre. They are bak-syde of Holywell towards the filde'. The Curtain, thought to lie

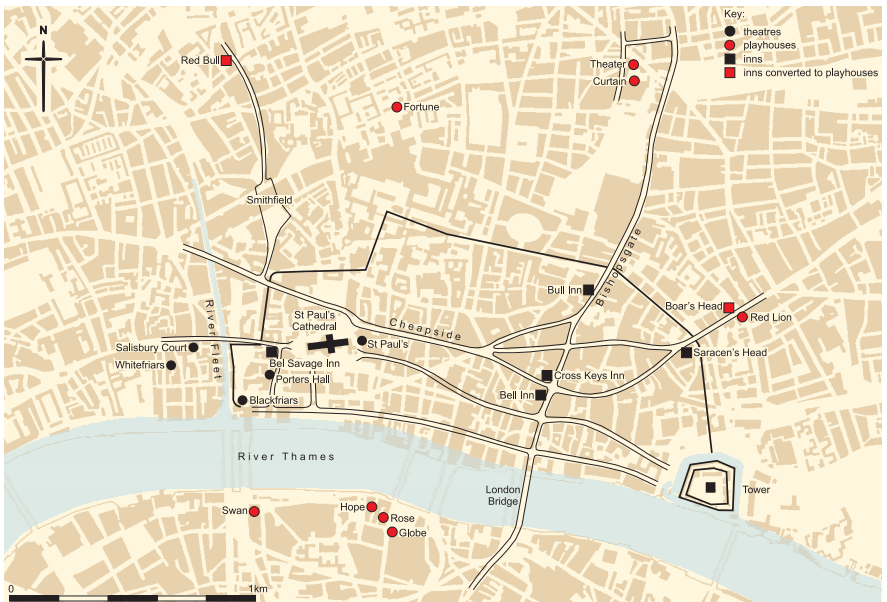


Fig 7 Location map of playhouses and theatres in the 16th/17th centuries

some 180m south of the site (**Site 9**), was built in 1577. The Theatre and The Curtain are referred to as 'the nursery of the English stage', and Ben Jonson obtained his first engagement at The Theatre.

Encouraged by his success at Shoreditch, in 1576 Burbage opened the Blackfriars Theatre, which soon became London's leading play house, connected with the name of William Shakespeare (Fig 8), who became a personal friend of James Burbage.

Several other playhouses were built in quick succession, the 'Red Bull' and the 'Fortune', in the north of London; and on the south of the river, in Southwark, the 'Rose', the 'Hope', the 'Swan', and the 'Globe', near the 'Bear Garden' (Fig 9). Shakespeare found many of these theatres already in existence when he came to London from Stratford in 1585 or



Fig 8 Shakespeare



Fig 9 London viewed from Southwark in c 1650, with the Rose, Globe and Hope theatres flying flags

the following year, and the very presence of so many playhouses probably attracted him to London in the first place (Fig 10).

It was through Burbage's efforts and thanks to the Earl of Leicester that actors were formally established as members of a recognised profession. James Burbage died about the year 1594 and is buried, along with several other 'poor players' in St Leonard's churchyard. St Leonard's Church is known as the actors' church of London, and in the days of Elizabeth and James many actors lived in this parish.

The Theatre was certainly in use by 1577 and is known to have hosted plays by many of the famous dramatists of the day, as well as other public activities such as fencing shows. By 1597, the playhouse was in the hands of James Burbage's sons Cuthbert and Richard – the latter a well-known actor. The landlord, Allen, refused to renew the lease, arguing that James Burbage had not spent the agreed £200 pounds on the old buildings.

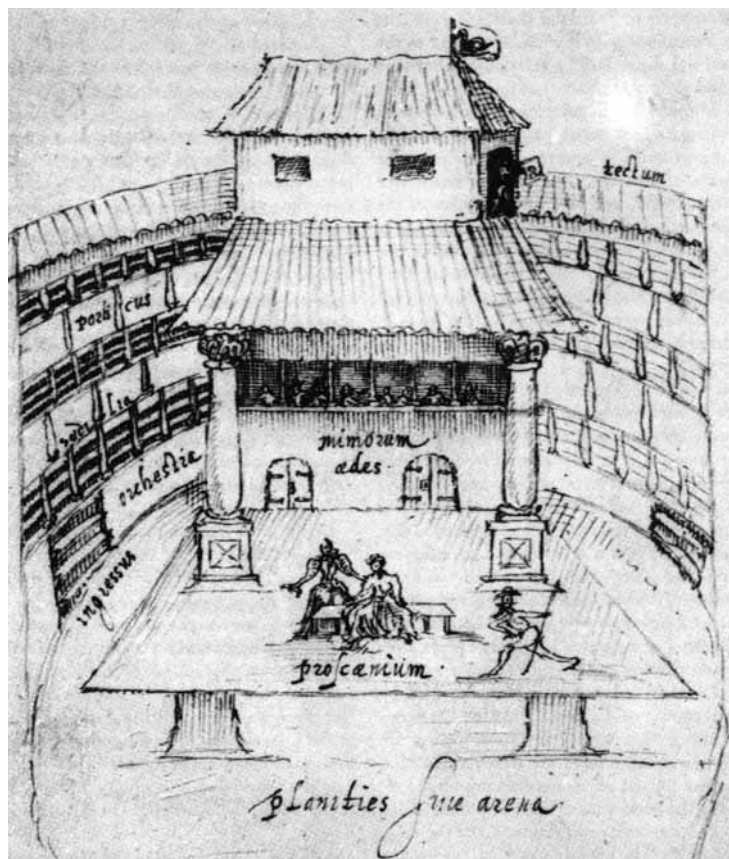


Fig 10 Sketch of the interior of the Swan Theatre made about 1596

It proved impossible to reach an agreement between the parties, and therefore in 1598, Cuthbert Burbage, with the help of Peter Street, a carpenter, and twelve workmen, began dismantling The Theatre. The demolition took two to four days to complete and the timber was removed to the other side of the Thames and used by Street to build the Globe theatre.

The Theatre was a 'playhouse', a particular form of purpose-built outdoor wooden amphitheatre with an open yard. The type is often referred to as a 'public theatre', reflecting the lower entry cost in comparison to indoor 'private' theatres. In spite of the abundant legal documentation about The Theatre, no detailed description survives. However, it is known that it was built mainly of timber with some ironwork, it had a tiring-house (which at the Globe contained dressing rooms, the prop room, the musicians' gallery, and connecting passageways) and galleries, one at least was divided into upper rooms where the audience could sit or stand.

At some date between 1577 and 1598, a drawing of London called 'The View of London from the North' (also known as the Utrecht panorama because until recently only one copy, at Utrecht in the Netherlands, was known) was produced. This shows many details of the Tudor City of London from a hillside now in Islington; and over on the left, in Shoreditch, is a polygonal three-storeyed structure (Fig 11). Theatre historians have argued whether this is The Theatre, or its nearby companion The Curtain, without resolving the issue; but it is an attractive possibility that this really is a drawing of London's first specially-built theatre.

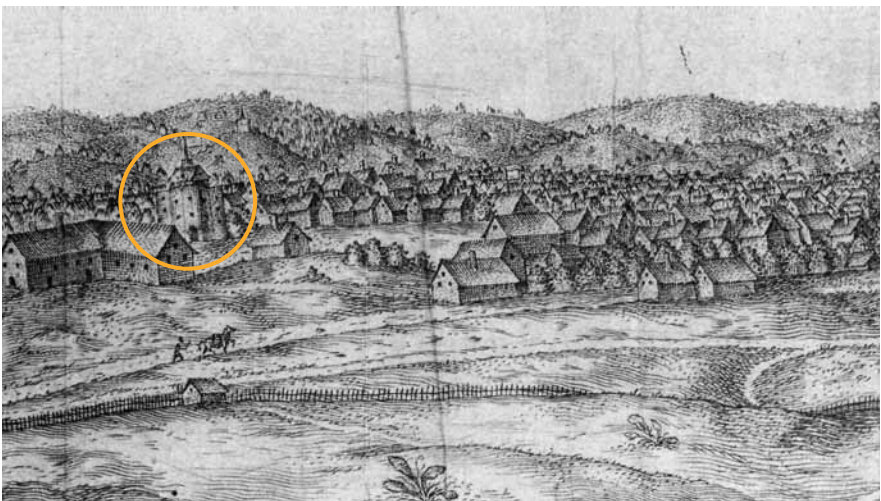


Fig 11 A theatre building shown on *The View of London from the North*, drawn between 1577 and 1598

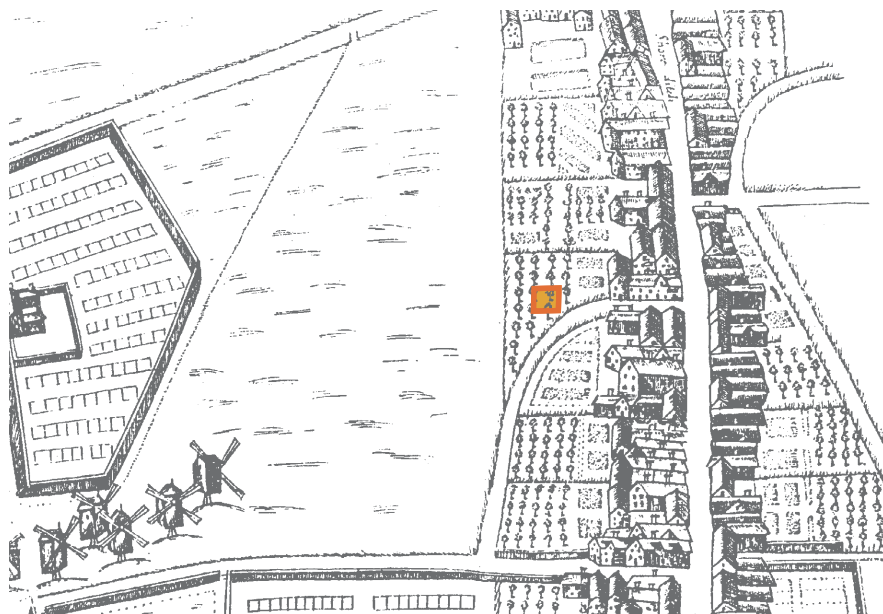


Fig 12 Faithorne and Newcourt's map of 1658

Faithorne and Newcourt's map of 1658 shows the site located within orchards and possibly covering the northernmost part of a north-south running road (Fig 12). There are no buildings within the site, and no evidence of the site of The Theatre. Documentary sources indicate that the Barn was converted into tenements in the late 16th century and it is possible that it survived, with any necessary alterations, into the 18th century. However, the barn is not marked on this map, presumably as the map is pictorial and not a detailed survey, and it is therefore quite possible that the barn was simply omitted. The map shows that urban development continued in a ribbon pattern along Shoreditch High Street. Such development soon spread farther west engulfing the old Holywell priory complex. Hoxton and Shoreditch escaped the destruction of the Great Fire in 1666 and urban development continued. New Inn Yard was in existence at least from the late 17th century and a western gateway into the former Priory grounds was postulated at the junction of what is now Curtain Road and New Inn Yard, c 30m south-west of the site.

Chassereau's map of 1745 (Fig 13) and Rocque's map of 1746 (Fig 14) both show the site occupied by buildings along New Inn Broadway to the east side, which is shown as a larger courtyard named Holywell Court. The site possibly fell partly within this courtyard. A small passageway leads eastwards from Curtain Ditch Side (the remains of the ditch outside the priory precinct) to the open courtyard (the old Great Court area) that would

later become New Inn Broadway. Rocque's map also shows Holywell Mount (Site 7) c 130m south-west of the site. The mount may represent either remains of the Civil War defences or a plague body dump. During the Civil War (1642–46), the Common Council undertook a comprehensive scheme for protecting the City, Liberties and outlying parishes against the Royalist forces. This included the construction of a 17 km-long line of defences, comprising a system of forts and large ditches though no definitive archaeological record of them has ever been made. At Shoreditch there appears to have been a fort on both sides of the main north road from the City (Kingsland Road) well to the north of the site, the main defensive ditch extending roughly alongside modern Old Street. Known as Hollywell Mount by 1760, it was used as a burial ground with chapels by 1777. It was levelled for building in 1787 when it is known to have been a dangerous place, with numerous reports of robbery and rape having taken place here in the mid 18th century.

Horwood's map of 1799 (Fig 15) shows the site occupying tenement blocks and their back yards. By 1820, the population of Shoreditch had expanded to 53,000 and further housing development proceeded apace. This is seen on the Ordnance Survey (OS) 1st edition map of 1870 (Fig 16), which shows the site occupied by two buildings along its north side, three buildings along the south and east sides, and an open courtyard in the



Fig 15 Horwood's map of 1799



Fig 16 Ordnance Survey 1st edition 5 feet to 1 mile map of 1873 (not to scale)



Fig 17 Ordnance Survey 2nd edition 25" map of 1893 (not to scale)



Fig 18 Ordnance Survey 5 feet to 1 mile map of 1913 (revised in 1938) (not to scale)

middle, accounting for $c\frac{1}{3}$ of the total area of the site, accessed via a covered entrance from New Inn Broadway.

The 2nd edition 25" OS map of 1893 (Fig 17) shows that the buildings in the south-east corner of the site have been demolished. The site is now occupied by two buildings, one along New Inn Broadway, the other along the northern edge of the site around a central courtyard. The 3rd edition OS map of 1913 (Fig 18) shows the site as a void occupied by a timber yard, reflecting the prominent furniture industry in the East End. The current layout, with a single storey light warehouse, first appears in the OS map dated 1948. During the Second World War, bomb damage, although severe in some areas, does not seem to have affected the site and its surroundings.

LOCATING THE THEATRE

The exact location of The Theatre in relation to the site is uncertain and largely based on documentary records preserved through legal sources, and more recently on the results of archaeological investigations, which are not fully in agreement. In 1999, a geophysical survey was undertaken by MoLAS at 86–98 Curtain Road, 3–15 New Inn Road, 3a–6 New Inn Broadway (thus including the site) and the two car parks east of 96–98 Curtain Road and north of 6 New Inn Broadway. The aim was to determine the location and survival of features associated with the Priory and, particularly, The Theatre. The basement areas on the Curtain Street frontage revealed little resolution and no features were detected. The larger, westernmost car park area, seemed to be homogenous to a depth of 2–3m and this suggested an infilled basement. The area of 3a–6 New Inn Broadway, including the site, and the smaller, easternmost car park revealed possible traces of buildings at a depth of between 1.4 to 2m. In two of the survey grids, largely within the premises of 7–9 New Inn Yard, anomalies overlay these possible traces and showed three areas of



Fig 19 Possible location of The Theatre according to archaeological evaluation (MoLAS 2008)

high amplitude reflections possibly indicating a masonry structure. Their location suggested a possible circular feature with a diameter of c 22m. The anomalies were tentatively identified as The Theatre. If this identification were correct, The Theatre would extend slightly into the south-west corner of the site (Fig 19).

In 2003, an archaeological evaluation was undertaken by MoLAS partly in order to test this hypothesis. The evaluation, led by Julian Bowsher, took place at 86–90 Curtain Road (Site 2), where it located the possible Theatre foundation and shoring for the Great Barn, c 15m south-west of the site. This identification would locate The Theatre further to the north than the geophysical survey, and thus potentially extending further into the south-west corner of the site. According to Bowsher, the east-west wall footing observed during the evaluation may have been part of the Priory's Great Barn. Most of the agricultural/industrial buildings of the Priory were situated in the western part of the grounds and later property deeds established the site of the Great Barn almost precisely in this location. The identification of this wall is of great importance to the location of the Theatre, which was on the north side of the Great Barn. The relationship between the two buildings lies in the fact that by 1576 the Barn was in poor condition and needed to be supported against the new Theatre. Much of the evidence for these details comes, again, from the various legal cases concerning the site, which stressed beyond doubt that the Barn was distinctly shored up against The Theatre.

The 2008 archaeological evaluation at 4–6 New Inn Broadway has confirmed that the potential for survival of ancient ground surfaces from at least the 16th century through to the 19th century at the site is good. Excavation did not continue below the medieval and post-medieval deposits into the Roman and prehistoric layers; therefore, the earlier phases of the site remain unknown. Significant archaeological remains, consisting of foundations of a polygonal structure, were recorded in the south-western area of the site c 1.5m below ground level (Fig 20). It seems unlikely that these are associated with Holywell Priory, as generally medieval priories did not have buildings on a polygonal plan. The strongest candidate is instead The Theatre, as we know it had a polygonal structure. If this identification is correct, the remains would be of national importance, as they would belong to one of London's earliest playhouses, and Shakespeare's first. The remains have therefore been preserved *in situ* while further study is carried out. The preliminary results of the investigation are very encouraging, as not only the remains lie very close to the known location of The Theatre but the structural characteristics of the building (shape and building technique) appear to be of the right type. The planned new theatre for the site, potentially located at the very place where Shakespeare first performed and where some of Shakespeare's plays must first have been performed, is a fortuitous but exciting continuity to the history of the site.

Modern development can be destructive, but it also gives us an opportunity to find



Fig 20 Photograph of Trench 1 during the 2008 MoLAS archaeological evaluation at the site

out things about the past. In this case, the Tower Theatre Company and MOL Archaeology have worked together to find out more about the whole history of the site, but especially its two main features: Holywell Priory and The Theatre, London's first specially-built public theatre. As always with fragile remains of national importance, it is better to leave them in the ground rather than dig them up. But by careful investigation, more can be found out about how much has survived and what condition the remains are in. Sympathetic modern designs also make it possible to preserve important remains below ground. We are at the beginning of our study of this important historic site, which already has shown to have considerable significance within the history of London.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN THE AREA

The table below represents a gazetteer of known archaeological sites and finds within a 250m-radius study area around the Site. Sites and finds listed in this gazetteer are referred to in the text and can be located on Fig 1.

Site No.	Description
1	MoLAS evaluation at 183–185 Shoreditch High Street (site code HLP89) in 1989 within the precinct of the Augustinian priory of St John the Baptist produced evidence of Roman activity in the lowest levels, and agricultural soil established before the foundation of the nunnery (documented 1133–62).
2	MoLAS watching brief at 86–90 Curtain Road (site code CNU02). A chalk foundation was revealed above the natural gravels; this, almost certainly, was the base of the perimeter wall of Holywell Priory. Another foundation was probably associated with the Great Barn, an integral part of the priory, whilst other foundations may have been associated with the Elizabethan playhouse known as The Theatre.
3	Pre-Construct Archaeology evaluation, 14–20 New Inn Broadway, 17–25 New Inn Yard (site code NIY03). Above the natural gravels, make-up layers containing possible Roman material were recorded. They were overlaid by a medieval deposit containing pottery dated to the mid-14th–16th century. A patch of mortar above this layer could represent structural or demolition activity, possibly associated with the 12th-century Holywell Priory, within whose precincts the site lay.
4	MoLAS evaluation at 2–4 Holywell Lane (site code HWL06). A well had cut through layers of post-medieval dumping which included German stoneware vessels manufactured from 1480–1550 and fragments of ‘Bellarmine’ jugs of late 16th/early 17th century date. The finds from these dumps may have come from an upper class establishment nearby, probably on the site of the former Priory of St John the Baptist at Holywell.
5	86–98 Curtain Road, 3–15 New Inn Road, 3a–6 New Inn Broadway and the two car parks east of 96–98 Curtain Road and north of 6 New Inn Broadway. A geophysical survey was undertaken by MoLAS largely in order to determine the location and survival of features associated with the Priory and, particularly, The Theatre. In two of the survey grids largely within the premises of 7–9 New Inn Yard, anomalies suggested a possible circular feature with a diameter of c 22m – tentatively identified by McCann, author of the report, as The Theatre.
6	Holywell Lane. Works of William Follingham at Holywell, one of few print works outside the City in the post-medieval period.
7	Curtain Road. Site of Holywell Mount, possibly remains of Civil War defences, possibly a plague body dump. It was known as Holywell Mount by 1760, and used as burial ground with chapels by 1777. Levelled for building in 1787 when it is known to have been a dangerous place.
8	Shoreditch High Street. Site of the Bell Inn (1514). Described in 1653 as a ‘messenger’, i.e. either a tenement or brew house.

- 9** Curtain Road. Site of The Curtain, one of London's earliest playhouses. The builder is unknown but Henry Lanham owned it in 1582. It was disused by 1625 and destroyed in the Great Fire. The exact location of The Curtain is not known although maps and documents appear to provide a general vicinity for the playhouse. Apparently located within the Liberty of Holywell, nothing is known about the structure of The Curtain, although one source suggests that the playhouse was either identical with or adjacent to a house called The Curtain.
- 10** Shoreditch High Street. Priory of Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist for Augustinian Nuns of St John the Baptist at Haliwell for Augustinian Canonesses. Site granted by Robert Fitz German of 'Moor' with Spring. Dissolved c 1539 and seems to have been speedily demolished due to pressure of buildings in area. Remains called 'King Johns Palace'.
- 11** Bethnal Green Road. Medieval road that linked Bethnal Green with main road to the north.
- 12** Holywell Row. Post-medieval burial ground.
- 13** New Inn Broadway. Holywell Priory Great Court ringed by wash house, kitchen, brew house, bake house, mill house, granary, stables etc.
- 14** Shoreditch High Street. Holywell Priory. Infirmary garden with herbarium, ladies garden, prioress's garden. Conjectured from reconstruction plan.
- 15** New Inn Street. Conjectured location of Holywell Priory dormitory.
- 16** New Inn Yard. Conjectured location of Holywell Priory cloister.
- 17** New Inn Yard. Conjectured location of Holywell Priory barn.
- 18** Batemans Row. Conjectured location of Holywell Priory infirmary.
- 19** Batemans Row. Conjectured location of Holywell Priory refectory.
- 20** New Inn Yard. Conjectured location of Holywell Priory Chapter House.
- 21** Shoreditch High Street. Small brew house owned by Ralph Harwood, who is said to have invented porter.
- 22** New Inn Yard. Post-medieval gunpost.
- 23** New Inn Yard. Conjectured location of Holywell Priory church spire.
- 24** New Inn Yard. Conjectured location of Holywell Priory prioress's lodgings.
- 25** 185–187 Shoreditch High Street. Antiquarian observation of 50ft of stone wall at back of timber yard. Also 3 coffins and 2 female skeletons, possibly of medieval date.
- 26** New Inn Broadway. Human bones were uncovered by sewer works 3m from ground level and identified by the police. They were assumed to be from medieval burials associated with Holywell Priory.
- 27** Holywell Priory Precinct. Human remains were uncovered during the excavation of a vertical shaft, approximately 3.5m deep and 2.5m square at the junction of New Inn Street and New Inn Broadway by a utilities company in 2003.
- 28** Great Eastern Street. Findspot of a chipped flint tranchet axe.
- 29** Roman Road. Ermine Street, the main Roman road north of the City. The course of this road is closely followed by modern Bishopsgate, Shoreditch High Street and Kingsland Road.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MOL Archaeology thanks the Tower Theatre Company for commissioning this booklet and the on-going archaeological work for 4–6 New Inn Broadway. MOL Archaeology also wishes to acknowledge the following individuals, whose work has greatly refined current understanding of the archaeology of the area, and particularly of Holywell Priory and The Theatre: Julian Bowsher, Jo Lyon, Pat Miller, Heather Knight, and Ken Pitt. John Schofield and Sophie Jackson offered precious advice on the text. The reconstruction drawing on page 7 is by Derek Lucas; the painting on page 8 is by Peter Froste. The back cover image of a detail from the Burden copy of *View of London from the North* was photographed by Andy Chopping for the London Topographical Society in 2001. The original illustrations were prepared by Kenneth Lymer and adapted by Sandra Rowntree; photographs by Andy Chopping. Much of the information regarding The Theatre is derived from Bowsher and Miller's forthcoming monograph on Tudor playhouses.

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The Tower Theatre Company has, since its foundation in 1932, mounted almost 1,400 productions before combined audiences of over half a million patrons. Run almost entirely by voluntary effort, we have given literally thousands of participants of all ages and backgrounds the opportunity to be involved in every aspect of putting on high quality drama of all types. Remarkably, we are entirely self-supporting and receive no grants whatsoever for our day-to-day operation, presenting between 15 and 18 productions each year. Our forthcoming fund-raising campaign will be aimed purely at securing the remaining capital cost of building this project. We are very excited that our plans for this site will not only create a valuable community facility for the area, but also bring public theatre in London back to its historic roots. The discovery that we shall be building a 21st-century playhouse where Shakespeare and Burbage played, and where some of Shakespeare's plays must have been seen for the first time before paying theatre-goers, is a huge inspiration. For further information about the Tower Theatre Company and our plans for the future, please visit www.towertheatre.org.uk

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