

## Chapter 18

### The Pantheon

The Pantheon, which was designed by James Wyatt and opened in 1772, stood on the south side of Oxford Street upon the western part of the site now occupied by the Marks & Spencer at Nos 169–173, which bears the same name. The masquerades and concerts which took place there were at first extremely successful, but in the 1780s the popularity of the Pantheon declined, and after the destruction of the King's Theatre in the Haymarket by fire in 1789, it was converted into an opera house. After only one complete season the Pantheon was burnt to the ground in 1792, but by 1795 it had been rebuilt as a place of assembly by Crispus Claggett. In 1811–12 N. W. Cundy converted the building into a theatre, but restrictions imposed by the Lord Chamberlain ruined this venture and the career of the Pantheon as a place of public entertainment came to an end in 1814. In 1833–4 the Pantheon was rebuilt as a bazaar, Sydney Smirke being the architect. In 1867 the building was acquired by Messrs W. & A. Gilbey, the wine merchants, and was used by them as offices and showrooms until 1937; it was demolished shortly afterwards to make way for the present building.

#### **The Pantheon, 1769–90**

##### *Philip Turst and the origins of the Pantheon project*

In 1732 Benjamin and John Pollen sold the freehold of the future site of the

Pantheon to Elizabeth Turst, spinster. The plot had a frontage of some 54ft to Oxford Street and contained two houses, behind which there was a large piece of ground enclosed by the gardens of houses in Great Marlborough Street, Poland Street and Oxford Street. By 1769 this ground had passed to Elizabeth Turst's nephew and heir, Philip Elias Turst, described as of Percy Street, St Pancras, esquire.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from his connection, as founder and owner, with the Pantheon, hardly anything is known of Turst. During the Seven Years' War he had bought for £100 a share in the *Blenheim*, a privateer commissioned to cruise against the French, but had (in his own opinion) been cheated of his share of the prize money by the promoter of the venture.<sup>2</sup> Turst was the Crown lessee of two houses on the south side of Pall Mall, and in 1768 he granted a lease of them to James Christie, the auctioneer.<sup>3</sup> He died intestate on 15 July 1785.<sup>4</sup>

In 1771 and in 1773 one of the shareholders of the Pantheon filed a bill of complaint in the Court of Chancery against Turst, complaining of dishonest treatment, and in 1773 and again in 1782 Turst in his turn filed complaints against several other shareholders. The outcome of these suits is not known, and the assertions made by the various parties are frequently contradictory, but the main course of events was as follows.

In the early 1760s 'several Noblemen and persons of Fashion' had intimated 'that a place of public entertainment was wanted for the Winter Season similar to that of Ranelagh for the Summer'. This information came to Turst's knowledge, perhaps through his wife's friend, Margaretta Maria Ellice, of Great Russell Street, spinster. Miss Ellice was said to be 'a person of fortune'; she evidently had the entrée to fashionable society, and had 'had a principal share in the Planning and Conducting the Entertainments of the Nobility at Mrs. Corneley's in Soho Square, in which she had met with the highest approbation'.<sup>5</sup>

It was perhaps at Miss Ellice's suggestion that Turst opened negotiations with the operatic soprano Mrs Teresa Cornelys, who in the late

1760s was at the height of her prosperity. Mrs Cornelys was thought 'to be the most proper person to undertake a scheme' of this kind, and she 'as eagerly treated with him for the purpose'. Turst 'delivered a proposal and plan in writing to Mrs. Cornelys for a place of entertainment', and 'various treaties and proposals were had and made', but ultimately they all 'broke off'.<sup>6</sup>

According to her version, Miss Ellice then 'took divers Opportunities in conversations she had with some of the Nobility and other Persons of Rank and Fortune to learn from them whether the Erection or Structure of a Dome, Building or Pantheon for Winter's Evening Entertainments would be agreeable and likely to meet with the Approbation of the Nobility in General'. She received a favourable response, which she passed on to Turst and his wife, and 'hinted to him the great Advantage that might probably accrue to them from such a Place of Entertainment'. Turst was 'much pleased', and repeatedly importuned her 'to become a joint sharer or partner with him', to which she agreed.<sup>7</sup>

Turst's first scheme, according to Miss Ellice, estimated the cost of the proposed building at £15,000, which was to be raised by the sale of fifty shares for £300 each to original subscribers, and for as much more as possible for later purchasers. Turst knew that Miss Ellice 'was possessed of and intitled to a considerable fortune', and by promising that 'she should have the chief conduct and management of the said intended Pantheon' he persuaded her to agree to buy thirty of the fifty shares. By articles of agreement dated 22 May 1769 she agreed to pay Turst £10,000 at specified dates, and to receive thirty shares in exchange. Building work began on 5 June 1769, and during the next few months Turst received £6,800 from Miss Ellice.<sup>8</sup>

At this point Miss Ellice's version becomes less credible, since her two petitions of 1771 and 1773 do not tally. In her first account she says that by November 1770 she had become so ill that she did not expect to survive; but not wishing to prejudice Turst's interest by allowing the articles of agreement to fall into other hands after her death, she sent for Turst and gave him her

copy of the agreement on condition that he should return it if she recovered; to which proposal he 'very readily concurred ... and accordingly received the said Deed'. (This solicitude for Turst's interest becomes more credible if it is assumed that Miss Ellice had hopes of marrying him. Mrs Turst died in July 1768, and her husband later admitted that in and before 1769 he had enjoyed 'a great Intimacy and friendship' with Miss Ellice, and that he 'used until lately to visit her very frequently'.) Subsequently he prevailed upon her to yield up temporarily nineteen of her shares, there being a number of forgeries in circulation, and then he refused to return either the agreement or the shares.<sup>9</sup>

Her later version is not much more persuasive; there she says that in November 1770, when she was 'much weakened and fatigued with an Assiduous and constant Attendance upon a Sick Friend', Turst 'by artful insinuations and Misrepresentations' persuaded her to part with both the agreement and with nineteen shares.

Turst's answer was more convincing. The building of 'a winter Ranelagh in London' had first occurred to him 'shortly before or in the beginning of' 1769, but certainly after the death of his wife in July 1768. In May 1769 he invited Miss Ellice 'to be concerned therein'. She had agreed to advance £10,000 or £12,000 in exchange for thirty out of the fifty shares, and he was to superintend the erection and management of the Pantheon. But in the autumn of 1770, when a heavy outlay on building work had been incurred and many people thought the venture would fail, Miss Ellice expressed 'a great uneasiness' and entreated Turst ('sometimes with Tears') to release her from the agreement of 22 May 1769. To this he agreed, 'principally out of friendship'; they both destroyed their copies of the agreement, and shortly afterwards she returned nineteen of her shares to Turst. Miss Ellice had, he admitted, been tired through nursing her friend Mrs. Sadler (from whom she expected to receive 'a very considerable fortune', but whose estate proved in the event to be 'but small'); she had certainly not been seriously ill, however,

or in expectation of death, and had vacated the agreement because she feared the loss of her money through the failure of the project. Some time later the price of shares began to rise, and she then regretted her precipitate cancellation of the agreement.<sup>10</sup>

Which of these two versions is true cannot be determined, but other documents show broadly how and when the money was raised for the building of the Pantheon. Early in 1769 Turst 'caused Plans of the intended Buildings to be made', and he then estimated the cost of building at £25,000. He decided to raise this sum by the sale of fifty £500 shares. Each share was to take the form of a 61-year lease commencing at Michaelmas 1770 (when the building would be ready for use), subject to a ground rent of £8; in the event of the failure of the scheme he thus provided himself with a certain annual income of £400 (50 × 8) from the rents.<sup>11</sup>

In June 1769, when building work began, Turst 'caused to be printed fifty Receipts', and by the end of the month he had sold thirty shares; he subsequently stated that he eventually sold all the remainder except one, which he kept for himself.<sup>12</sup> The original purchasers of thirty of the fifty shares have been traced. They included Sir Thomas Robinson, baronet, who also held shares at Ranelagh, and had directed the entertainments there;<sup>13</sup> John Donnellan, murderer (see below), who paid £600 for his share; John Cleland, novelist and journalist;<sup>14</sup> William James, conceivably the landscape painter;<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Jane Denis, who also owned shares in one of the assembly rooms at Bath; her brother, Vice-Admiral Sir Peter Denis;<sup>16</sup> and Sir Jacob Wolff, baronet.<sup>17</sup>

Turst was soon at loggerheads with several of the shareholders, for the total cost of the building exceeded £25,000. Turst claimed that the shareholders should each pay one-fiftieth of the extra amount, but they maintained that they had no such liability. These disputes provide indirect information about the design and erection of the building. First and foremost they show that the choice of architect was made by Turst alone. John Sampey

and his wife, who subsequently bought two shares, stated that 'several plans of the said intended Building were prepared, and Estimates made and procured of the expence', and that in 1768 or very early in 1769 both the estimates and the terms of sale of shares had been settled.<sup>18</sup> Building work began on 5 June 1769 and by the end of July or beginning of August the old houses had been demolished and the new building 'raised about the Basement Story'. But Turst had not sold any shares before June. At the time when the designs were in course of preparation he therefore had had no shareholders to consult over the choice of architect.

Even Miss Ellice, with whom he had contracted on 22 May to sell thirty shares, was not consulted, one of her later complaints being that she had been prevented from having 'any Communication or Personal Intercourse with the Person employed as Principal Architect in the said Work (who was Mr James Wyatt of Newport Street)'. Turst confirmed this, and added that he never so much as informed her of the plan or materials to be used other than in a general way. He was the builders' sole paymaster, 'the Direction of the aforesaid Buildings being left' to him.<sup>19</sup>

It was not until August 1771, when the building 'ought to have been finished', that the shareholders took any part in the management of the works. They had been led to believe that the building would be ready by Michaelmas 1770, and they considered that 'for private reasons' Turst had 'delayed to complete the same'. They therefore proposed that 'possession should be delivered to them or to a Committee to be chosen from among themselves to manage the place and Entertainments'. To this Turst 'very unwillingly consented', and on 1 August 1771 a committee of eleven shareholders, of whom Turst was one, took over the superintendence of the nearly finished building.<sup>20</sup>

Turst's petitions and answers to the Court of Chancery were not concerned with the design of the building, but in one of them he states that after he had decided to erect a place of entertainment he spent a little time in

'thinking and consulting with his friends and a Surveyor on several plans for such a Building'.<sup>21</sup> The 'surveyor' may conceivably have been James Stuart, who from 1764 to 1768 occupied one of the two houses in Oxford Street which belonged to Turst and which were demolished in 1769 to form the entrance to the Pantheon.<sup>22</sup> The 'friends' are unfortunately unknown, but as one of them may well have introduced James Wyatt to Turst, their possible identity is worth consideration.

### *The role of the Wyatts*

There are three accounts of how James Wyatt came to design the Pantheon; all of them were written more than forty years after the event, all contain inaccuracies and none mentions Turst. The *Monthly Magazine* states that Wyatt owed his success to his elder brother, John Wyatt, a surgeon living in Great Newport Street and 'a zealous promoter of the scheme of the Pantheon'.<sup>23</sup> In his *Architettura Campestre* T. F. Hunt says that while in Italy James Wyatt had formed a lifelong friendship with Richard Dalton, librarian and antiquarian to the King, and that through Dalton's influence he 'was allowed to compete with the most eminent architects of that day'. The second part of that statement is misleading, but Wyatt's biographer John Martin Robinson has confirmed that he met Dalton in Venice as a youth of sixteen, when Dalton was packing up Consul Smith's library there on the King's behalf prior to its dispatch to England.<sup>24</sup> The extremely inaccurate account in the *Gentleman's Magazine* may perhaps confirm this theory, for it states that the choice of Wyatt was due to an unnamed 'Gentleman of leading influence' at the Pantheon whom Wyatt had met in Italy.<sup>25</sup>

These three accounts are not necessarily contradictory, and it is indeed likely that, when Turst first envisaged the Pantheon project, he was already acquainted with the Wyatt family and, perhaps, with Richard Dalton. At this time three Wyatt brothers, John, the surgeon, Samuel, the builder, and James,

the architect, were all living in (Great) Newport Street;<sup>26</sup> all three were to play an important part in the history of the Pantheon, John as shareholder and (from August 1771) member of the shareholders' managing committee,<sup>27</sup> Samuel as 'the Builder who executed Mr James Wyatt the Architect's Plan',<sup>28</sup> and James as holder of two shares as well as architect. A fourth brother, William, acted as treasurer in 1771 and 1772.<sup>29</sup>

The origin of the Turst-Wyatt connexion is not known, but by June 1769, when Turst began to sell shares, it was evidently a close one, for Samuel Wyatt was the witness to the issue by Turst of 24 out of the 25 receipts which have been traced. Robinson surmises that the original connexion was indeed Samuel Wyatt, who was working as a builder in the Midlands for James Stuart in the mid 1760s when the latter was an Oxford Street tenant of Turst's. He had also been clerk of works at Robert Adam's Kedleston Hall, where a small Pantheon-type dome was built over the toplit saloon. On that reading, Turst's concept of an Oxford Street centre for entertainments married with an architectural idea already developing in the minds of the ambitious Wyatts.<sup>30</sup>

The only known connection between Turst and Richard Dalton is indirect. In 1768 the former granted a lease of his two houses in Pall Mall to James Christie, the auctioneer, to whom also Dalton in 1771 assigned a lease of other premises in the same street; Christie may, however, have been in occupation of Dalton's premises some time earlier.<sup>31</sup> That Dalton continued to take an interest in the Pantheon is strengthened by the fact that James Wyatt was able in 1770 to exhibit three drawings of the project at the Royal Academy, to which the former acted as official antiquary.

The building of the Pantheon took over two and a half years (June 1769 to January 1772). The principal contractor was Samuel Wyatt, who, in the twenty-four receipts which he witnessed for Turst, variously described himself as builder, architect, or gentleman.<sup>32</sup> His address was usually given as Newport Street, but later as Berwick Street, where he set up a yard not far from the Pantheon in 1774. The significance of the job for Samuel as well as



James Wyatt is reinforced by the appearance of a volume of accounts marked 'Pantheon' in the background of a portrait of the former by Lemuel Abbott.<sup>33</sup>

Among the principal craftsmen involved, 'Mr. Rose ... did the Stucco work in and about the said Building'. This was Joseph Rose the younger, who had worked at Kedleston and was to go on to embellish many later Wyatt projects; he was also a shareholder. There are two drawings of stucco ornament for the Pantheon in a sketchbook of Rose's now at Harewood House (one of which was for a ceiling that is said to have survived the fire of 1792).<sup>34</sup> Joseph Nollekens was paid £160 for four statues of Britannia, Liberty, the King and the Queen; this was his first work in England following his return from Rome in 1770. John Snetzler built the organ for £300, and James Wyatt received £575 'for paintings and statues and fixing the same', besides his commission of five per cent as architect.<sup>35</sup> In Robinson's view, Wyatt probably delegated this last job to Michael Novosielski, whom he had met in Rome and invited to England to work on his buildings.

Other artists and craftsmen who worked at the Pantheon included William Parker, £1,550 'for Lustres, Lanthorns, Glass Vases'; John Sotheby, £646 'for gilt chandeliers'; Gabriel Valois, £555 'for carving and gilding chairs, sofas, tripods, candelabras, pedestals, music stands'; Henry Barford, £438 'for Upholstery'; Caleb Jeacock, £177 for the same; John Cobb, £146 'for looking Glasses and Frames'; Thomas Knight, £115 'for looking glasses'; Thomas Allam, £70 for upholstery; Messrs Smith and Cocks, £66 'for Brass Sconces'; Edward Crace, £63 'for painting and gilding glass frames, table frames, seats and chairs'; James Eyre, £61 'for carpets'; Edward Watson, £49 'for Girandoles and gilt ornaments for Ditto';<sup>36</sup> and Samuel Begra, £10 for sham pipes for the organ.<sup>37</sup> Other known craftsmen included Domenico Bartoli and J. A. Richter (scagliola columns)<sup>38</sup> and Biagio Rebecca (painted decoration). A considerable number of these craftsmen had also worked at Kedleston.

In general, all the furnishings and fittings were designed by Wyatt, in line with the growing neo-classical practice which brought such items within

the architect's sphere. Evidence for this includes three drawings for ceilings in a Wyatt album in the possession of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and sketches and designs in the so-called Noailles Album of Wyatt drawings, privately owned in Paris.<sup>39</sup>

*The architecture of the Pantheon*

The site of the Pantheon fronted 56ft 4in to Oxford Street, and extended south for this width to a depth of some 83ft. At this point the width increased eastwards for another 44ft 4in and the site continued south for some 121ft, with a total width of 96ft 3in feet. The large south quadrangle was given over to the great assembly room, or rotunda, and a sequence of vestibules, card-rooms, etc., filled the smaller quadrangle fronting Oxford Street. There, the main doorway, sheltered by a portico, and the two side doorways opened to a vestibule, beyond which were three ranges of rooms, wide between narrow, extending southwards. The vestibule, 50ft wide and 15ft deep, was divided by screen-colonnades into three compartments, the middle one having an apse with a door opening to the first card-room. This was circular, some 25ft in diameter, with three doorways and a fireplace on the cardinal axes, and four apses on the diagonals. On the east and west sides of this card-room were corridors or galleries, each 42ft by 10ft, the east one leading to an apse-sided ante-room, forming the axially placed main entrance to the great assembly room. The west corridor led south to the grand staircase, rising in a D-shaped compartment, and thence into the north-west angle of the great room. Between the two corridors was a smaller card-room, a square with east and west apses, lit by a Venetian window from an oblong area, 10ft wide, between the two card-rooms.

There is general agreement that the scheme of the great room, or rotunda, was derived from Santa Sophia at Constantinople. Wyatt could have known that via Fischer von Erlach's *Outline of Historical Architecture* which

had been translated into English in 1730; furthermore Richard Dalton had visited Constantinople. The likeness is particularly true of the plan, which was, nevertheless, most skilfully contrived for its purpose and for architectural effect. The great central space was contained in a square of 60ft, with triangular piers splaying off the corners. On the east and west sides were superimposed colonnades of seven bays, screening the aisles and galleries; these were probably borrowed from the rotunda at Ranelagh. The north and south sides opened to short arms, 40ft wide, terminating in shallow segmental apses deriving from the niches in St Peter's, where Wyatt had made measured drawings while in Rome. The triangular piers were linked by segmental arches, framing the spreading pendentives of the central dome. The north and south arms had segmental-arched ceilings and saucer semi-domes to the apses, and the ceilings of the aisles and galleries were flat.

However Byzantine the plan, the forms and decorations of the Pantheon were as truly Roman as eighteenth-century taste could achieve. Two superimposed orders were employed throughout the great room, Ionic below Corinthian, the latter being raised on a pedestal with balustrades between the columns. The entablatures of both orders were continued all round the room. The columns forming the screens to the aisles and galleries, and the pilasters flanking the piers, had plain shafts of scagliola imitating 'giallo antico' marble. The walls behind the colonnades were simply treated, with statues placed in niches, alternately semi-circular and straight-headed, and this treatment was repeated in the upper stage of the large north and south apses. The piers supporting the dome had apses containing stoves in the lower stage, and statues framed in tabernacles above. The soffits of the great segmental arches were coffered in squares alternating with oblongs, the tympana over the east and west screens were decorated with figure subjects in large panels, and each of the pendentives to the dome was adorned with a large oval medallion amid scrolling arabesques. The dome was copied, almost exactly, from that of the Roman Pantheon (which Wyatt had also measured),

albeit in plaster on a wooden framing, with five graduated rings of twenty-eight quadrangular coffers, each with four sinkings and a central flower, and a wide band of fan or velarium ornament surrounding the glazed oculus. Below the great room was the tea and supper room, of the same form but divided into five aisles by the piers supporting the floor of the great room.<sup>40</sup>

As originally designed by James Wyatt, the Oxford Street front of the Pantheon was a charming composition of two storeys, with a central feature of three bays, wide between narrow, slightly recessed between attic-crowned pavilions. A Doric portico of three bays, with plain-shafted columns and a simple entablature with a low-pitched pediment, projected from the ground storey. This last had a rusticated face, with a round-arched doorway between two rectangular windows behind the portico, and a round-arched doorway in each pavilion. The upper storey was underlined by a pedestal, with a blind balustrade below the window in each pavilion. These windows were each dressed with an architrave and a triangular pediment resting on scroll-consoles, and set against a face of smooth ashlar. The three bays of the central feature were divided by plain-shafted columns and antae of an engaged Ionic order. In the wide middle bay was a Venetian window, also Ionic, the frieze and cornice of its entablature-impot being continued across each narrow side bay, above a niche with a statue and below an oblong panel modelled with an urn between griffins. There was a full entablature across the central feature, surmounted by an open balustrade, but the pavilions had only the frieze and cornice, and, above the blocking-course, a low attic stage with an oblong window and a pyramid roof.<sup>41</sup>

### *Costs of the project*

In August 1769 Turst took an opportunity to purchase a leasehold house on the west side of Poland Street and backing on to the site of the Pantheon, thereby obtaining greatly improved access. According to Turst, James Wyatt's

plans had been 'drawn without reference to such Opening', and the extra cost of providing this secondary entrance was £2,995. By agreement with the shareholders Turst later reduced this sum to £2,500. In July 1772, when the Pantheon had been in use for a few months, he bought the adjoining house to the north.<sup>42</sup>

Squabbling between Turst and the shareholders began in 1771, or perhaps earlier. The latter maintained that progress in building was unnecessarily slow, while Turst found that the cost of the works was exceeding his expectations and claimed that the extra expense ought to be met by a further subscription from the shareholders. The original estimate of cost appears to have been £12,000, plus £3,000 for furnishing,<sup>43</sup> but before building began this was revised to the round figure of £25,000. Turst stated that the cost of the building was £27,407 2s 11½d plus £2,500 for the purchase and rebuilding of the house in Poland Street, and £7,907 1s 2¾d for furnishings. He claimed that the shareholders ought to pay proportionately at the rate of £208 per share for the extra cost of the house and the furnishing,<sup>44</sup> but they replied that Turst had promised that they would have no further liability beyond the original £500 cost of their shares. Turst brought a test case in Chancery against one of the shareholders, who was ultimately compelled to pay £141 3s 6d for the extra expenditure incurred. Twelve other shareholders then voluntarily made similar payments, but a number of their less sporting associates refused to do so, and Turst was still busy litigating in Chancery when he died in 1785; his sister gallantly continued the action, but with what result is not known.<sup>45</sup>

Contemporary reports of the cost of the building were greatly exaggerated, and have frequently been repeated. Writing to Sir Horace Mann in May 1770 Horace Walpole asked 'What do you think of a winter Ranelagh erecting in Oxford Road, at the expense of sixty thousand pounds?' This figure was later quoted in *The Dictionary of Architecture*, although Walpole had within a year reduced his estimate by £10,000.<sup>46</sup> But in 1797 James Wyatt told Joseph Farington that the cost was £25,500.<sup>47</sup> The sums mentioned in the

proceedings in the Court of Chancery show that the true cost was probably midway between Wyatt's recollection and Walpole's second guess. Turst produced to the Court 'a Book containing the Account of the Bills of the expence of erecting and furnishing the Pantheon'<sup>48</sup> and none of his opponents appears to have contested his statement that, as already mentioned, the cost of the building was £27,407 2s 11½d, plus £2,500 for expenses incurred in connexion with the entrance from Poland Street. The Court finally determined that the cost of furniture, including such items as paintings, statues, the organ, and Wyatt's five per cent commission for designing the furnishings, was £7,058 16s 6d. This gives a grand total expenditure of £36,965 19s 5½d – a figure which corresponds closely with Turst's own statement that the cost was £37,000.<sup>49</sup>

But this large increase in costs did not prevent the shareholders from making 'a considerable profit' when the building was opened.<sup>50</sup> Up to fifty pounds was paid for tickets for the first night,<sup>51</sup> and during the first year after its completion £3,000 was taken in admission charges to inspect the building. For a while the shares commanded high prices, £700 being commonly paid, as, for instance, by Dr Charles Burney, who in 1777 unwisely bought a share for this figure from John Wyatt.<sup>52</sup> James Wyatt relates that 'a year or two' after the opening he sold his two shares for £900 each, 'so successful was the scheme at first'.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless the shareholders complained that 'they might have made a greater profit' if the building had been completed more quickly, and probably with some justification they felt 'inclined to believe ... that his [Turst's] intentions were not very fair towards the real and bona fide purchasers of shares'.<sup>54</sup>

### *Opening and initial reception*

The Pantheon 'which for some time past had raised the expectations, and engrossed the conversation of the polite world', was finally opened on

Monday, 27 January 1772. 'There were present upwards of seventeen hundred of the first people of this Kingdom; among whom were all the Foreign Ambassadors, the Lord Chancellor, Lord North, Lord Mansfield', Lord and Lady Clive and eight dukes and duchesses. 'A foreign Nobleman observed, that it brought to his mind the enchanted Palaces described in the French Romances, which are said to have been raised by the potent wand of some Fairy; and, that, indeed, so much were his senses captivated, he could scarcely persuade himself but that he trod on fairy ground'.<sup>55</sup>

Nor was this merely foreign flattery, for blasé, middle-aged Horace Walpole was equally enthusiastic and more precise. In April 1771 he and the French ambassador had visited the uncompleted building, and Walpole had reluctantly admitted that 'It amazed me myself. Imagine Balbec in all its glory! The pillars are of artificial *giallo antico*. The ceilings, even of the passages, are of the most beautiful stuccoes in the best taste of grotesque. The ceilings of the ball-rooms and the panels [are] painted like Raphael's *loggias* in the Vatican. A dome like the Pantheon, glazed ... Monsieur de Guisnes said to me, "Ce n'est qu'à Londres qu'on peut faire tout cela".<sup>56</sup> In May 1772 Walpole was still sufficiently enraptured to exclaim, absurdly, 'Mr. Wyatt, the architect, has so much taste, that I think he must be descended from Sir Thomas [Wyatt, whose works Walpole was then editing]. Even Henry VIII had so much taste, that were he alive he would visit the Pantheon'.<sup>57</sup> Fifteen months later he was comparing Wyatt's work favourably with that of Robert Adam, 'and the Pantheon is still the most beautiful edifice in England'. His friend William Mason concurred – it was 'the most astonishing and perfect piece of architecture that can possibly be conceived'<sup>58</sup> – and even Gibbon, who can never be suspected of enthusiasm, observed that 'the Pantheon in point of Ennui and Magnificence is the wonder of the XVIII Century and the British Empire'.<sup>59</sup> Dr Burney, writing long after the destruction of the original building by fire<sup>60</sup> (an event which inflicted on him a heavy financial loss), when the first wave of enthusiasm had long been dissipated, stated simply

and unreservedly that the Pantheon 'was built by Mr James Wyatt, and regarded both by natives and foreigners, as the most elegant structure in Europe, if not on the globe ... No person of taste in architecture or music, who remembers the Pantheon, its exhibitions, its numerous, splendid, and elegant assemblies, can hear it mentioned without a sigh!'<sup>61</sup>

Fanny Burney was not quite so enthusiastic, and she was not alone in comparing the Pantheon unfavourably with Ranelagh. She makes her heroine Evelina relate how 'About eight o'clock we went to the Pantheon. I was extremely struck with the beauty of the building, which greatly surpassed whatever I could have expected or imagined. Yet, it has more the appearance of a chapel, than of a place of diversion; and, though I was quite charmed with the magnificence of the room, I felt that I could not be as gay and thoughtless there as at Ranelagh, for there is something in it which rather inspires awe and solemnity, than mirth and pleasure'.<sup>62</sup> Mrs Harris recorded that 'As a fine room I think it grand beyond conception, yet I'm not certain Ranelagh struck me not equally on the first sight, and as a diversion 'tis a place I think infinitely inferior, as there being so many rooms, no communication with the galleries, the staircase inconvenient, all rather contribute to lose the company than show them to advantage'.<sup>63</sup>

The visit which Boswell and Dr Johnson made to the Pantheon on 31 March 1772, when the subscribers were holding their fifth 'Meeting' or assembly, was later described by Boswell:

The first view of it did not strike us so much as Ranelagh, of which he said, the '*coup d'oeil* was the finest thing he had ever seen'. The truth is, Ranelagh is of a more beautiful form; more of it, or rather indeed the whole *rotunda*, appears at once, and it is better lighted. However, as Johnson observed, we saw the Pantheon in time of mourning, when there was a dull uniformity; whereas we had seen Ranelagh when the view was enlivened with a gay profusion of colours ...

I said there was not half a guinea's worth of pleasure in seeing this place.

JOHNSON. 'But, Sir, there is half a guinea's worth of inferiority to other people in not having seen it.' BOSWELL. 'I doubt, Sir, whether there are many happy people



here.' JOHNSON. 'Yes, Sir, there are many happy people here. There are many people here who are watching hundreds, and who think hundreds are watching them'.<sup>64</sup>

### *Early management and fortunes*

For a few years the Pantheon prospered. Dr Burney records that 'During the first winter there were assemblies only, without dancing or music, three times a-week'.<sup>65</sup> At first the shareholders (who since August 1771 had taken over the management from Turst) stipulated that admission could only be on 'the Recommendation of a Peeress',<sup>66</sup> but this policy soon proved impractical, perhaps because Captain John Donnellan had unwisely been chosen as master of the ceremonies. He 'found himself greatly embarrassed to execute his office on account of the rigour with which ladies of easy virtue were exempted from admission', and, within a month of the opening, a 'Plan for a New Subscription' was being advertised. Later in this first season there was a ridotto and a masquerade, and in July the proprietors announced that they would shortly 'take into Consideration a Plan for enlarging the Building'.<sup>67</sup>

Captain John Donnellan's career is perhaps worth recording. He was the illegitimate son of an Irish officer; at an early age he obtained a commission in the army and 'went over to Asia, where he behaved very well in a military capacity'. After obtaining possession of a diamond ring by dubious means he returned to England at about the time of the erection of the Pantheon and in November 1769 bought a share from Turst; subsequently he became possessed of another.<sup>68</sup> In 1770 he was concerning himself in the finances of the Pantheon,<sup>69</sup> and shortly before the opening night the proprietors appointed him master of the ceremonies; though of rather 'low stature, he was genteel, had a prepossessing countenance, and possessed all those external graces which lord Chesterfield so strenuously recommends'. He remained for some time at the Pantheon, but when its fortunes declined he eloped with a

young heiress; unfortunately their carriage broke down, his intended bride was rescued, and 'the proprietors of the Pantheon judged it prudent to dismiss him'. Shortly afterwards he became acquainted at Bath with Miss Boughton, the sister of Sir Theodosius Boughton, baronet, of Lawford Hall, Warwickshire. Miss Boughton 'had had the misfortune to have made one false step in her life, which ... is apt to lessen the value of a young lady in the estimation of the world'. Donnellan was therefore emboldened to make a successful 'offer of his hand'. After their marriage in 1777 they went to stay at Lawford Hall, and there, in due course, Donnellan poisoned his brother-in-law, and after trial at Warwick Assizes was hanged on 2 April 1781.<sup>70</sup>

The fashionable season at the Pantheon began in December or January and ended in April or May. Subscribers paid six guineas for admission to the twelve assemblies, which began at about seven o'clock. There were usually two masquerades in each season, and the building was elaborately decorated for these occasions.<sup>71</sup> At the end of the American War of Independence in 1783, for instance, a newspaper announced that 'Mr Wyatt is executing an elegant structure, to be placed in the center of the Great Room ... to be dedicated to Peace, and will be chiefly composed of warlike implements, now rendered useless by the happy return of peace'.<sup>72</sup> The doors were usually opened for masquerades at nine or ten o'clock, and supper was served at midnight or later, usually in the basement under the great room. This lower room was described as 'large, low, and under ground, and serves merely as a foil to the apartments above'.<sup>73</sup> Sometimes these masked balls were sponsored by one of the fashionable clubs – Boodle's in 1774, Goostree's in 1775, and White's in 1789.<sup>74</sup>

Twelve subscription concerts also formed part of the seasonal round, and at the conclusion of each concert there was dancing.<sup>75</sup> Fanny Burney's *Evelina* relates that 'There was an exceeding good concert, but too much talking to hear it well. Indeed I am quite astonished to find how little music is attended to in silence; for though everybody seems to admire, hardly

anybody listens'.<sup>76</sup>

Nevertheless these concerts were at first very successful, and Dr Burney, writing in 1789, relates how, some four years after the opening of the Pantheon, the proprietors 'ventured to engage' the singer Lucrezia Agujari at the enormous salary of £100 a night, for singing two songs only! And yet, however exorbitant the demand, or imprudent the compliance with it may seem, the managers ... have since involved the proprietors in disgrace and ruin, by going a more œconomical way to work. Indeed, in subsequent undertakings, they have more frequently had money to pay than receive; for, notwithstanding so much was disbursed to the Agujari, much was likewise cleared, and the dividend was more considerable than it has ever been since that memorable aera.<sup>77</sup>

The turning point in the fortunes of the Pantheon seems to have been about 1780. In that year the price of admission to the assemblies was reduced, and in 1781 support for the masquerades was also declining.<sup>78</sup> As early as 1777 the great room had been used out of season for the demonstration of 'Experiments on the Use of Conductors in preventing Buildings from being struck by Lightning', and in 1781 there was an exhibition of the stained glass which James Pearson had made for a window at Salisbury Cathedral.<sup>79</sup> In 1784 the centenary of the birth of Handel was celebrated by five concerts, four in Westminster Abbey, and one (on 27 May) at the Pantheon. Important alterations and embellishments were made by James Wyatt for the occasion, which was attended by over 1,600 people.<sup>80</sup>

In 1784 and 1785 Lunardi exhibited his balloon at the Pantheon, but in the latter season the envelope was punctured 'by a part of the sky-light of the dome breaking', and 'Mr Lunardi had the mortification to disappoint a very numerous assembly of fashionable people'. In 1786 another aeronaut, Mr Uncles, exhibited his balloon, which was 'in the shape of a Fish, with a car suspended from it, triumphal in form and magnificent beyond description in appearance, in the front of which are convenient accommodations for four live Eagles, which Mr. Uncles has so trained, as in their flight for the purpose

of guiding the machine, or return to the car, to be perfectly subservient to his pleasure'. This remarkable equipage was exhibited at the Pantheon for some time, 'the birds harnessed as at the ascension', but the promised 'grand experiment' in dirigible flight had repeatedly to be postponed owing to unsuitable weather.<sup>81</sup> At last, on 18 July 1786, it took place at Ranelagh in the presence of ten thousand people. 'Mr. Uncles mounted his seat with eagles harnessed, and made an effort to ascend – he rose about eight feet and then dropped'.<sup>82</sup>

In 1788 the shareholders seem to have decided to revert to a more discriminating policy at the Pantheon, and the price of admission to the assemblies was restored to half a guinea, 'which will exclude the *Bourgeois*'.<sup>83</sup> In April James Wyatt was making alterations and embellishing the interior for the approaching festival of music in 'support of decayed musicians and their families'.<sup>84</sup> During the second half of 1789 extensive alterations were carried out, and when the season of 1790 opened in January with a concert, one newspaper commented that the new plan 'provided equally for select and miscellaneous company'. Another described 'the judicious alterations made in the great Concert Room. The construction of the new orchestra and the organ, the disposition of boxes, with the contrivance of a temporary ceiling, to prevent any echo from the dome, and at the same time to keep the company warm, render it the most magnificent, as well as the most commodious room for music in the world'.<sup>85</sup> The season proved busy and successful. It was probably at this time that the Abbé George Joseph Vogler (1749–1814) reconstructed the organ; 'he had pedals put to the organ ... and a general swell contrived for the whole instrument; and in a series of morning performances on that organ, shewed his dexterity in the use of the pedals'.<sup>86</sup>

## The King's Theatre, Pantheon

After the destruction of the King's Theatre, Haymarket, by fire on 17 June 1789, two rival schemes for a new opera house were put forward. The rebuilding of the theatre on its old site in the Haymarket was supported by the Prince of Wales, the Lord Chancellor, Sheridan, and the proprietor, William Taylor; while the building of a grand new opera house on the north side of Leicester Square (to a design probably by George Maddox) was the aim of R. B. O'Reilly, supported by the King, the Lord Chamberlain (the 1<sup>st</sup> Marquess of Salisbury) and the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Bedford. O'Reilly was a law student who had become the legal adviser of Giovanni Gallini, the mortgagee of the King's Theatre, Haymarket; through his 'constant passion' for the study of architecture he had become deeply involved financially in the scheme for the new opera house in Leicester Square, and at the critical moment Gallini had abandoned him. He was saved from ruin by his ally the Lord Chamberlain, who promised the patent for the proposed new theatre in Leicester Square to him and not to Gallini. But this promise was thwarted by the Lord Chancellor, and O'Reilly therefore had to look elsewhere for a theatre. The Pantheon was the natural choice.<sup>87</sup>

A very full account of the building's conversion into an opera house in 1790 and its subsequent history down to the fatal fire of 1792 and beyond is given in the second volume of *Italian Opera in Late Eighteenth Century London*, hereafter *Italian Opera* (2001).<sup>88</sup> The following section offers a résumé of that short-lived episode.

The shareholders of the Pantheon are said to have been 'all put into high spirits' when O'Reilly and his trustees proposed to lease the building and convert it into an opera house.<sup>89</sup> A newspaper commented that 'Of late years, merely for the sake of rent, it has been lett to any person who had a shew of any kind'. The shareholders were therefore glad to grant a twelve-year lease

at a rental of 3,000 guineas per annum and on 30 June 1790 the Lord Chamberlain granted O'Reilly a four-year licence for the performance of Italian opera at the Pantheon.<sup>90</sup>

The rent of 3,000 guineas represented a dividend of only 12½ per cent on each of the fifty £500 shares, but it was a crippling liability for the new opera house. Nevertheless O'Reilly and his principal trustee, William Sheldon, a barrister, are said to have spent £34,000 on the conversion of the building, encouraged, no doubt, by a loan of £12,000 from their supporters, the Duke of Bedford and the Lord Chamberlain.<sup>91</sup> The gardens of the houses behind the Pantheon were prospectively acquired for an enlargement of the stage, and a royal entrance from Great Marlborough Street was planned. This ambitious extension was thwarted by Mr Thompson, the tenant of one of the houses in Great Marlborough Street, who worked at Drury Lane Theatre and who, evidently at Sheridan's instigation, refused to sell his interest, for which very large sums were offered. Not to be outdone, the Duke of Bedford ('a very warm friend to the Pantheon House') then threatened to refuse to grant Sheridan a lease of premises required for the impending rebuilding of Drury Lane Theatre. The ratebooks show that Thompson's resistance was successful, for he still occupied his house in 1795.<sup>92</sup>

James Wyatt was the architect for the conversion, but as his final account was for £5,700 he evidently performed more than the normal duties of an architect.<sup>93</sup> Richard Wall was the bricklayer and Edward Wyatt, whose premises abutted to the east, was paid £685 'for carving, gilding and ornamenting the inside of the Pantheon'.<sup>94</sup> Henry Tresham painted the ceiling and the curtain, the latter representing 'The Apotheosis of Metastasio'.<sup>95</sup> The frontispiece over the proscenium arch was designed by William Hodges, RA, who was described in a prospectus as 'Inventor and Painter of the Decorations'. The assistant painters were N. Fileter Stephanoff, Cornelius Dixon, Thomas Frederick Luppino, junior, and Luigi de la Rovere, most of whom were also employed as scene painters.<sup>96</sup>

Meanwhile the rebuilding of the King's Theatre in the Haymarket had been rapidly advancing, and by the end of 1790 both theatres were nearing completion. In January 1791 several unsuccessful attempts were made to reconcile the two rival establishments, but the advantage was with the Pantheon, which now held the Lord Chamberlain's licence for opera and to which George III had granted the title of King's Theatre. On 17 February 1791 the new opera house was opened with a performance of Sacchini's *Armida*.<sup>97</sup>

The comment passed on the theatre during its brief career of little more than one season seems to have generally been favourable. *The Times* said that though small in scale 'we may reckon it among one of the prettiest [theatres] in Europe', while Dr Burney considered that 'though many of its internal beauties were hidden and annihilated, it still was a perfect model of a complete theatre in its new form'.<sup>98</sup> After a life-time of theatre-going the Earl of Mount Edgecumbe wrote that 'Mr. Wyatt by this conversion produced one of the prettiest, and by far the most genteel and comfortable theatres I ever saw, of a moderate size and excellent shape, and admirably adapted both for seeing and hearing ... On the whole I never enjoyed the opera so well as at this theatre'.<sup>99</sup>

There are two extant representations of the theatre in action. The more reliable one is a crude drawing in the British Museum. It is taken from the stage and shows a lyre-shaped auditorium with five tiers of boxes and a gallery, ceiled with a dome resting on pendentives. The box-fronts are panelled and there is an elaborately dressed royal box in the middle of the second tier. The decorations of the dome begin with a band of interlacing garlands, the main surface being divided into sectors each ornamented with a chain of lozenge-shaped panels, and a smaller band of interlacing garlands surrounds the painted panel in the crown. More charming but, according to the authors of *Italian Opera*, 'virtually worthless' as an architectural record, is a Rowlandson engraving purporting to show dancers in the ballet *Amphion et Thalie* (February 1791), again looking towards the audience. Here six tiers of

boxes are erroneously shown.<sup>100</sup>

Since the conversion of the Pantheon's great room into an opera house was made in haste, Wyatt made no important changes to its main structural features, notably the piers supporting the central dome. These continued in place, seem to have survived the fire of 1792 and are traceable in the plan made in 1831 of Cundy's later theatre.<sup>101</sup> Instead, Wyatt inserted an independent timber structure within this central space. Doubtless for acoustical reasons, the dome was covered in by a flat ceiling interrupted by a large central ventilator, sixteen feet in diameter. Plans which came to light in 1988 and are now in the library of Pennsylvania State University confirm that the arrangements were somewhat makeshift. Since the promoters had been unable to complete their purchase of extra land to the south of the Pantheon, there was no room for a deep modern 'vista stage'. So the stage was very restricted in depth – barely more than thirty feet. The auditorium too was small but planned for a select audience, somewhat on the lines Giuseppe Piermarini's La Scala, Milan (1778). The authors of *Italian Opera* estimate the capacity at around 1,400. In the local context, the auditorium was important as 'the first London theatre to feature tiers of boxes arranged in what is now thought of as the classic horseshoe'.<sup>102</sup> The columns supporting the fronts of the tiers and dividing the boxes were reinforced with iron, and the whole building was 'cased with iron fire plates after Mr Hartley's invention; a very necessary precaution for so large a building, where such a quantity of lights must be used', reported *The Times*.<sup>103</sup> It appears the Hartley fireplates were used mainly under the pit floor. After the fire, however, David Hartley claimed that because he had not been consulted over their use, they had been entirely misapplied.<sup>104</sup>

#### *The fire of 1792 and its aftermath*

The season ended on 19 July 1791, and *The Times* recorded that 'this beautiful



Theatre is now left without a rival'.<sup>105</sup> But the career of the King's Theatre, Pantheon, was already nearly over, for the second season was only a few weeks old when the building was almost completely destroyed by fire on 14 January 1792. In his memoirs of 1828 Henry Angelo offered a long and graphic account of this great fire, which he claimed was seen as far away as Salisbury Plain, where James Wyatt and his clerk were travelling at the time. Unfortunately Angelo's narrative is riddled with inaccuracies and implausibilities. In truth, the fire started at the back in a scene painters' building, and spread rapidly northwards from there, causing the auditorium to burn and the dome to collapse. The ruin was total, and almost all the interiors, apparatus, fittings, costumes and papers were destroyed, but no one died. The main elements of the structure survived, including the front portico. Not long after the fire, the Pantheon ruins were recorded by J. M. W. Turner in two well-known watercolours, one showing the Oxford Street front, the other the roofless auditorium.<sup>106</sup>

Within a few days, rumours that the building had been deliberately fired were so strong that they attracted the attention of Henry Dundas, the Secretary of State. The protagonists of the resurgent King's Theatre, Haymarket – particularly the creditors and the proprietor, William Taylor – had every reason to wish for the destruction of the King's Theatre, Pantheon, whose successful existence virtually precluded the renewal of the opera licence to Taylor. 'Idea crowds upon idea', commented *The Times*, 'that the fire was not accidental – that a scheme was in agitation by the demolition of one House to erect the standard of Italy [i.e. Italian opera] at the other'. On the other hand, the Pantheon management itself was in grave financial difficulties at the time of the fire. O'Reilly had absconded to Paris in the summer of 1791 to elude his creditors, and his backers, chiefly the Duke of Bedford and the Marquess of Salisbury, were confronted with 'terrifying debts'.<sup>107</sup> The fire was 'enormously convenient for the Pantheon's secret backers', pronounce the

authors of *Italian Opera*; they however also point out that a large consignment of lighting oil had just been delivered by Joseph Hayling, and that may well have contributed to an accidental conflagration.<sup>108</sup> The truth of the matter has never been elucidated. But no one was charged, nor was any insurance claim on the damage ever paid.

The Pantheon never fully recovered from the effects of this disaster. James Wyatt and several of the artists and craftsmen who had adapted the building to its new use in 1790 had not been paid.<sup>109</sup> Following O'Reilly's defection no one had been left clearly in charge. The twelve-year lease which had been gladly granted in 1790 was evidently vacated, for there is no further mention of it after the fire, and in July 1792 the shareholders advertised the site to be let on building lease.<sup>110</sup> After transferring what was left of their company to the Little Theatre, Haymarket, for one season, Salisbury and Bedford made their peace with the management of the King's Theatre, Haymarket, in 1792, when a 'General Opera Trust Deed' was signed.<sup>111</sup>

### **The Rebuilding by Crispus Claggett**

In the latter part of 1792 Crispus Claggett, described as of Berners Street, esquire, agreed with the shareholders to take a lease and by February 1793 the ruins of the old building were being cleared away. In March 1794 the shareholders, whose own 61-year interests granted by Turst were due to expire at Michaelmas 1831, leased the site to Claggett for the whole of the remainder of their term.<sup>112</sup>

Crispus Claggett (born 1740) was a builder who in the 1770s erected two substantial houses in Piccadilly.<sup>113</sup> In 1789 he ventured into entertainment as the proprietor of the Apollo Gardens in St George's Fields, Lambeth, on which he claimed to have spent over £6,000. These he seems to have sold or

sublet when he bought the Pantheon, after which the gardens became disreputable and were in due course suppressed.<sup>114</sup> At the Pantheon he appears to have acted as his own architect. The walls of the new building (which incorporated part of the old) were four feet thick, and supported 'a prodigious roof of timber' which was prepared 'in a field, on the east side of Walcot-place, Lambeth', not far from the Apollo Gardens.<sup>115</sup> Claggett intended to provide masquerades and concerts, and the principal room therefore consisted of 'an Area or Pit ... and a double tier of elegant and spacious Boxes, in the centre of which is a most splendid one for the Royal Family'. The Pantheon reopened with a masquerade on 9 April 1795.<sup>116</sup>

An aquatint in *The Microcosm of London* shows a riotous masquerade in Claggett's great room. The body of this room appears to have been an oblong with an apse at one end, decorated with giant Corinthian pilasters in the corners, supporting a bracketed entablature below a deep cove, this and the flat ceiling being painted with figures among clouds. On each side, however, was a Gothic arcade of three wide bays, opening to a gallery below a groin-vaulted ceiling. The orchestra recess at one end of the room was flanked with boxes, and it appears that there were two tiers of boxes round the apsed end.

Claggett met with little success, and in 1796 *The Times* commented that 'The Genius of Dulness seemed to have spread her mantle over the occasional Visitants at this Temple ... and the more lamentable is this circumstance, as the beauty of the building and decorations, together with the excellent accommodation, ought to have exhilarated the Company ... The Pantheon is so well adapted for Concerts and other public Entertainments, it is a sort of reflection on the national taste that it is not more frequently resorted to'.<sup>117</sup>

In 1796 or 1797 Claggett disappeared and was never heard of again. In the Mander and Mitchenson collection of Pantheon material there is a curious manuscript note signed by James Winston, author of *The Theatric Tourist*. The note states that Horatio Claggett, a relative of Crispus Claggett, had in 1833 or 1834 informed Winston that 'about 1796 [Crispus] Claggett was suddenly

missed, and has never since been heard of – Graham who was at the Pantheon in Claggett's time, and has been there ever since, says he dream'd of some papers being concealed under the stage, and found them there, going for the purpose to look for them, and [Horatio] Claggett said further that in the recent alteration [of 1833–4] a skeleton was found, which he believed was the skeleton of his relation [Crispus] Claggett'.<sup>118</sup> In any event, when in April 1798 Claggett's payment of rent was over a year in arrears, the shareholders complained to the Bow Street justices that Claggett had 'deserted the said premises and left the same uncultivated and unoccupied' and that therefore no sufficient distress could be had. The justices found this complaint to be true and they accordingly restored possession of the Pantheon to the shareholders.<sup>119</sup>

From 1798 to 1810 the shareholders seem to have reverted to the original custom of managing the Pantheon themselves.<sup>120</sup> Concerts, lectures, exhibitions and masquerades provided the main fare.<sup>121</sup> But the popularity of masquerades was waning,<sup>122</sup> and in 1810 the shareholders decided to lease the building again, at the much reduced rent of £1,000 per annum, which represented a dividend of only four per cent on each £500 share.

### **N. W. Cundy's theatre at the Pantheon**

The new tenants were the directors and secretary of the 'National Institution for improving the Manufactures of the United Kingdom, and the Arts connected therewith'. In September 1810 a prospectus announcing this grandiose project was issued from the Pantheon, but within a year the institution was in debt, and in July 1811 Charles Bonnor (Bonner), one of the directors, disposed very advantageously of the lease to Colonel Henry Francis Greville.<sup>123</sup>

Colonel Greville was the proprietor of the Argyll Rooms in Argyll Street, where he held an annual licence from the Lord Chamberlain for music and dancing, burlettas (one-act comic operas or musical farces in which there were not more than four performers) and occasionally for dramatic entertainments by children under seventeen years of age.<sup>124</sup> By 1811 the Argyll Rooms were too small for his needs, and early in that year he obtained the Lord Chamberlain's permission to transfer his licence to the Pantheon. In July he held a public meeting at the Argyll Rooms 'to take into consideration the best plan to establish a theatre at the Pantheon'; 'a great number of Noblemen and Gentlemen attended,' eight of whom formed a committee of management to provide Greville with the necessary backing. The latter then acquired from Bonnor the National Institution's lease, and at about the same time (July or August 1811) the committee of management approved Nicholas Wilcox Cundy's plans and estimates for adapting the Pantheon to theatrical uses.<sup>125</sup>

Nicholas Wilcox Cundy described himself as of New Norfolk Street, gentleman, and 'educated as an architect'. A younger brother of Thomas Cundy the architect, he was the author of a variety of unsuccessful projects. He had already undergone one bankruptcy before taking on the Pantheon; later he was the projector of a proposed ship canal from Portsmouth to London, and of one of the four competing schemes for the London and Brighton railway.<sup>126</sup>

When the cost of executing Cundy's designs was ascertained, Greville 'found that he could not furnish the necessary means to complete the aforesaid theatre' and in August 1811 he therefore contracted with Cundy and Joas Pereira de Souza Caldas, a Portuguese wine merchant who had been director of the Lisbon opera, to sell his interest in both the lease and in the Lord Chamberlain's licence. Cundy was to be responsible for the construction of the theatre and Caldas for its management, while Greville was 'to furnish the Licence from year to year'.<sup>127</sup>

On the strength of this agreement, and in expectation of the regular

renewal of the annual licence from the Lord Chamberlain, Cundy and his supporters then expended about £50,000 on building and fitting up the new theatre. By the acquisition of garden ground on the south, the stage was to be made as large as that at Drury Lane. The design of the theatre was, according to Cundy, modelled on that of 'the great theatre at Milan'; there were 175 boxes, the pit was 60 feet square, and the building was 'most admirably constructed for sight and sound'. Years later this 'colossal theatre' was described as 'too large for any rational purpose of dramatic representation' and 'a huge sepulchre in the midst of life and gaiety'. It was opened for the performance of burlettas on 27 February 1812.<sup>128</sup>

The plan made in 1831 of Cundy's ill-fated theatre shows that it incorporated the remains of Wyatt's structure.<sup>129</sup> The front remained little changed, the entrance vestibule had much the same plan, and the rooms behind it were formed within the old walls. Even the four triangular piers of Wyatt's dome can be traced in this plan, which shows an opera-house auditorium with segmental-ended and straight-sided tiers of boxes, and a splayed proscenium with boxes flanking the stage apron. As the working stage was only some 27 feet deep, it seems clear that the southern extension proposed at various times was never carried out. There are two views of the interior in Robert Wilkinson's *Theatrum Illustrata*. One view is of the auditorium with its five tiers of boxes, the topmost broken in the middle by the deep gallery. On the panelled box-fronts were fixed brackets for the hanging lustres. The main ceiling was probably flat, but painted with a sky dome within a ring of coffers. The other view shows the stage, with giant Corinthian pilasters flanking the elliptical arched proscenium, which had four boxes in each splayed reveal. A melancholy picture of the auditorium and stage, in an advanced state of dilapidation, seems to offer a more convincing impression of the proscenium than that given by Wilkinson, and shows that the back wall of the stage was constructed with a great arched opening, intended to lead to the proposed back stage extension.

The difficulties which within two years were to kill the Pantheon as a place of entertainment began to appear even before the new theatre had opened. In December 1811 and the two following months there was a squabble between the Vice Chamberlain, Lord John Thynne, on the one hand, and Greville, Cundy and Caldas on the other over an irregularity in the issue of the licence. This had hardly been settled and the theatre opened when the building was found to be unsafe, and on 19 March the Lord Chamberlain ordered it to be closed.<sup>130</sup> In the same month Caldas was declared bankrupt.<sup>131</sup> John Nash was employed to supervise the repair of the roof, where there were three broken beams,<sup>132</sup> but in April James Wyatt, who had been employed by the Lord Chamberlain to survey the building, still did not consider it secure. Nevertheless the season appears to have been resumed for a few nights, for early in May William Taylor, the manager of the King's Theatre, Haymarket, indicted the performers for infringement of the Lord Chamberlain's licence; the case was dismissed by the Bow Street magistrates.<sup>133</sup> In June Cundy was declared bankrupt.<sup>134</sup>

All these troubles might have been surmounted if the Lord Chamberlain had been willing to renew the annual licence, which expired on 30 July 1812, on less restrictive terms. But he refused to modify the existing licence, which permitted only music and dancing, burlettas, and dramatic entertainments by children under seventeen years of age. He insisted that comic opera and ballet would not be permitted, that music and dancing only covered balls and assemblies, and that the entertainments were to be supported by subscription and not by money taken at the door; he would not renew the licence to anyone except Greville, who refused to accept it on these terms.<sup>135</sup>

For over a year the Pantheon remained shut. On 17 November 1812 there was another fire, which began at the north end of the building, on the first floor. Within an hour or two 'the flames were happily got under', the only damage being to the passages and lobbies which led from the Oxford Street

entrance to the body of the theatre.<sup>136</sup>

Between June 1812 and July 1813 numerous requests for a licence were addressed to the Lord Chamberlain. In one of his petitions Cundy stated that he was 'involved in a multiplicity of difficulties in consequence of the Theatre being shut up and utter ruin must follow him and his Family'; he was already on bail for debt, and he did in fact spend most of the next four years in gaol.<sup>137</sup> In the spring of 1813 the aristocratic supporters of the Pantheon venture, headed by the Marquess of Blandford, tried unsuccessfully to obtain a licence. They still supported Cundy, with whom they had come to an arrangement; many of them had subscribed money in expectation of the renewal of the annual licence, and were aggrieved at the Lord Chamberlain's refusal to comply with established custom. Their requests were, however, unsuccessful, as were those of Colonel Greville in February 1813 for a renewal on the terms which he had rejected in the previous summer.<sup>138</sup>

At last, in desperation, Cundy opened the Pantheon as an 'English Opera-house' on 22 July 1813 without a licence from the Lord Chamberlain.<sup>139</sup> He claimed that he was entitled to do so under the licence for music and dancing which he held from the Justices of the Peace. On 24 July the Lord Chamberlain ordered the theatre to be closed, but Cundy ignored this and continued to perform 'regular drama'. He maintained that this type of entertainment could 'by certain magical operation, occasioned by the touch of a single chord in a piano-forte, cease to be Dramatic, and might all at once come under the description of "Music and Dancing"', for which he had a licence from the justices. This ingenious idea was not supported by the Marlborough Street magistrates when on 4 August they heard an information which had been laid against Cundy, who was fined £50. Undeterred, he appealed to Quarter Sessions, and meanwhile continued the performances. Informations were then laid against the performers under the Vagrancy Acts, and a few weeks later Cundy's appeal was dismissed.<sup>140</sup> This disastrous season came to an end, but on 27 December 1813 Cundy tried again with



'ballets, pantomimes, etc. upon a very inferior scale', which continued for three weeks.<sup>141</sup>

The Pantheon was never again used as a place of entertainment, either social or theatrical. In April 1814 the Duke of Norfolk presented a Bill in the House of Lords 'for the better establishing a Theatre at the Pantheon, and to authorize the Proprietor to perform the regular Drama', but it was rejected at the second reading. In October of the same year the fittings of the building were sold by auction under a distress for arrears of rent. 'Every thing that could be moved, and that was left from other distresses previously put in' was sold; even the nails were drawn, and the floor of the pit taken up. Shortly afterwards the justices refused to renew their licence for music and dancing, on the grounds that Cundy had failed to satisfy them that he was still in possession of the building.<sup>142</sup>

But he continued to agitate, and in 1816 the law officers of the Crown, who had been consulted, expressed their opinion that there was no vested property in an annual licence, and that the Lord Chamberlain had the right not to renew.<sup>143</sup> In 1818 Sir Francis Burdett, in moving unsuccessfully in the House of Commons for the appointment of a committee to enquire into a petition presented by Cundy, stated that there had been 'a most cruel, harsh, unjust and improper exercise of the power of the Lord Chamberlain'.<sup>144</sup> In 1823 George Graham, the aeronaut, temporarily used the stage for the construction and occasional inflation of his balloon.<sup>145</sup> Next year, Cundy petitioned for the last time for the renewal of his licence, claiming he had seven years of his lease unexpired. He was once again unsuccessful, as he was opposed by one of the shareholders, who continued to have an interest in the building.<sup>146</sup> This did not expire until Michaelmas 1831 (61 years from Michaelmas 1770), and so for another seven years the dismal shell stood useless and empty. In July 1831 the Lord Chamberlain refused to grant a licence to J. M. Hanchett, who had 'served in His Majesty's Royal Navy for thirty Years'.<sup>147</sup>

## The Pantheon Bazaar and after

The freeholders of the Pantheon were now the devisees of Philip Elias Turst's sister Salome Turst.<sup>148</sup> In 1831 and the two following years the Pantheon was on several occasions put up for sale by auction, the last attempt being in April 1833, when the auctioneer admitted that the building was 'in a state of great decay; that it would be necessary to rebuild the roof, and he would advise that several feet of the walls be taken down, so as to limit the great extent of the premises'.<sup>149</sup> After the failure of these attempts the freeholders seem to have decided to lease the building, and shortly afterwards 'a few gentlemen' decided to erect a bazaar there at their joint expense.<sup>150</sup> Bazaars had been rising in fashion along this part of Oxford Street since the opening of the Soho Bazaar in 1816, followed in 1828 by the Royal Bazaar opposite the Pantheon.

The area of the site was enlarged by the acquisition of extra land on the east and south sides, and a new entrance passage from Great Marlborough Street was formed. Ultimately the freeholders granted a 60-year lease of the original site, while the additional pieces were leased for varying terms, mostly shorter. The lessees were the builders Samuel and George Baker, of Montague Place, Russell Square, and Edward and James Day, both of Rochester, gentlemen.<sup>151</sup> The Bakers, based in Rochester and London, were established contractors on a large scale, having built the Brompton Artillery Barracks at Chatham and the Millbank Penitentiary, where they began a long association with the Smirke family of architects.<sup>152</sup> George Baker seems to have been the leading figure in the enterprise; the Days left the partnership in 1839.<sup>153</sup>

The architect of the Pantheon Bazaar was Sydney Smirke,<sup>154</sup> who erected a great hall of basilican plan, with a barrel-vaulted nave of five wide bays, flanked by flat-ceilinged aisles and galleries, the latter linked across each end bay of the nave. Lighting was chiefly from generous curved openings in the sides of the barrel vault. Views of this interior suggest that

Smirke may have taken some inspiration from Wren's St Bride's, Fleet Street. The semi-circular arches to the main roof were constructed in timber, and all bore on end grain in order to minimize shrinking and warping, considering the width of the vault. The piers supporting the arches of the arcade concealed cast-iron stanchions. The central roof was covered in copper, but the aisles were slated.<sup>155</sup> Surfaces were elaborately decorated with papier mâché ornaments provided by Charles Bielefeld, while the well-known modeller Felix Austin supplied orientalizing vases in artificial stone to Smirke's designs.<sup>156</sup>

Building work began in the winter of 1833–4, but in February, when over two hundred men were employed, progress came to 'a complete standstill, owing to the spirit of combination among the workmen, most of whom are members of some of the unions which are almost everywhere forming among the working classes'; the cause of this contumaciousness was the men's refusal to accept a reduction of their daily wage from three shillings to two shillings and ten pence. The bazaar was opened on 27 May 1834. Admission to the bazaar was free, but the proprietors took a commission charge of ten per cent on all sales.<sup>157</sup>

The fabric of the building was not entirely new. The whole of the roof and part of the walls of the old theatre were taken down,<sup>158</sup> but the entrance fronts to both Oxford Street and Poland Street were retained, as were also the rooms immediately behind the former. On the main frontage, Sydney Smirke altered the ground storey by replacing Wyatt's portico by one of his own, with fluted Doric columns of cast iron supporting a triglyphed entablature of stone, and a balcony of cast iron. Claggett having extended the attic across the central feature, Smirke made further alterations, dividing the attic by panelled pilasters into three bays, with an oblong window in the middle and a round window on either side.

The *Morning Chronicle* also remarked on 'well executed groups in marble' on either side of the entrance hall. Inside the new back entrance from

Great Marlborough Street there was a conservatory and aviary, erected by the greenhouse specialists Daniel & Edward Bailey. Most of the wall surfaces were enriched with conventional plaster ornamentation. One of the chief attractions of the bazaar at the time of the opening was an exhibition of pictures, including many old-master paintings; as at the Royal Bazaar opposite, they seem to have occupied a separate room at the back. In the vaults beneath there was ample storage space, hired out for wine and other commodities.<sup>159</sup>

A vivid description of the Pantheon Bazaar is given by George Augustus Sala in his *Twice Around the Clock* of 1858. By then the whole place had become run down. The Oxford Street vestibule, Sala remarks, was where ‘the ornamented flower pots, and the garden chairs of complicated construction, and the busts with smoky cheeks and noses, and marvellously clubbed heads of hair, have their *locus standi*’. Then there was the ‘queer picture-gallery, where works by twentieth-rate masters have been quietly accumulating smoke and dust for some score years, and where the only conspicuous work is poor shiftless Haydon’s nightmare picture of “Lazarus”’. As for the great room itself, Sala evokes a ‘labyrinth of avenues between triple-laden stalls, all crowded with ladies and children, whose voluminous *jupons* – the very babes and sucklings wear crinolines now – render locomotion inconvenient, not to say perilous.’ To all this he prefers the conservatory at the back,

a winter garden built long ere Crystal Palace or Jardins d’Hiver were dreamt of, and which to me is as pleasant a lounge as any that exists in London ... The place is but a niche, a narrow passage, with a glass roof and a circle at the end, where the fountain is, like the bulb of a thermometer; but to me it is very delightful.<sup>160</sup>

In 1867 the Pantheon Bazaar closed and the building was acquired by W. & A. Gilbey, the wine and spirit merchants, who were already established at 357 Oxford Street a few doors to the west.<sup>161</sup> They floored over the great hall

at gallery level and furnished it to look like a banking hall. This became Gilbeys' main office, while the vaults below continued to be used as storage space for part of their enormous stock. From 1880 the address became 173 Oxford Street. Gilbeys remained in occupation there until 1937, when they sold the property to Marks & Spencer Ltd. The old building was demolished shortly afterwards and replaced by the so-called Pantheon branch of Marks & Spencer. In 1937 the Georgian Group attempted unsuccessfully to preserve the Oxford Street façade for re-erection elsewhere, and Marks & Spencer offered to contribute to the cost. This offer was taken up by Edward James, who commissioned Christopher Nicholson to design a country house behind the Pantheon façade for erection on his estate at Chilgrove in Sussex. Plans were drawn up, but the project did not materialize, and the stones have since been lost.<sup>162</sup>