



County: **Greater London Authority**District: **Camden (London Borough)**Parish: **Non Civil Parish**National Grid Reference: **TQ3000781007**

# Ambassadors Theatre

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## Official list entry

Heritage Category: **Listed Building**Grade: **II**List Entry Number: **1379185**Date first listed: **16-Mar-1973**Date of most recent amendment: **09-Jun-2017**Statutory Address 1: **Ambassadors Theatre, West Street, London, WC2H 9ND**

This List entry helps identify the building designated at this address for its special architectural or historic interest.

Unless the List entry states otherwise, it includes both the structure itself and any object or structure fixed to it (whether inside or outside) as well as any object or structure within the curtilage of the building.

For these purposes, to be included within the curtilage of the building, the object or structure must have formed part of the land since before 1st July 1948.

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## Location

Statutory Address: **Ambassadors Theatre, West Street, London, WC2H 9ND**

The building or site itself may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

## Summary

Theatre, opened in January 1913, designed by W G R Sprague in Classical style with Louis XVI style interiors. The builder was Kingerlee and Sons. The Stalls were re-seated in 1924 and the Circle in 1929 by Sprague and Barton.

## Reasons for Designation

Ambassadors Theatre is listed at Grade II for the following principal reasons: \* Architectural interest: as an 1913 theatre designed by W G R Sprague, one of the most important late C19 and early C20 theatre architects; \* Completeness of design: both the Classical style exterior and the interior in Louis XVI style were designed by Sprague and include foyer, circle bar, auditorium and some original backstage features; \* Degree of survival: both exterior and interior are little altered; \* Historical interest: the theatre saw the West End debut of many famous artists including Ivor Novello, Hermione Gingold, Paul Robeson, Margaret Lockwood and Vivien Leigh and it was the original home of 'The Mousetrap', the world's longest running show; \* Group value: adjoins St Martin's Theatre of 1916, also by Sprague (Grade II) and 24 West Street (Grade II).

## History

The Ambassadors Theatre was designed by the theatre architect W G R Sprague (1865-1933) and opened on 5 June 1913. Sprague (1865-1933) was one of the three leading theatre architects of the period 1890-1914 and designed more than thirty theatres during his career, including eight in London's West End

A new theatre had been proposed for this site in 1898-9 but had been twice rejected because of the narrowness of the surrounding streets, particularly Tower Court. In 1912 Sprague applied on behalf of Herbert Jay to build 'a comparatively small theatre' for 506 seated patrons and 40 standing, mainly for amateur productions. He argued that although the streets were narrower than normally allowed for access to a theatre there would be access to the site on three sides if the narrow Tower Court, only 13 feet wide, was included. Permission was granted on condition that Tower Court was widened to 20 feet, which made a restricted site even smaller. The height of the theatre was restricted by Ancient Lights acquired by neighbouring properties.

Sprague's plans, which included the interior decorative scheme, date from April 1912. An additional floor of dressing rooms was added during construction and the theatre opened on 5 June 1913. The auditorium was described in contemporary accounts as in Louis XVI style with ambassadorial crests and a colour scheme of Parma violet, ivory and gold.

A sprinkler system was added in January 1914. The stalls seats were replaced in 1924 and the circle seats in 1929 by Sprague and Barton. Apart from re-decoration the auditorium remains virtually intact. The theatre can currently seat 408.

From the start it was used for professional performances, specialising in small ensemble pieces and also revues, which were pioneered here by Charles B Cochran in 1914, and ran through the Second World War. Performers who made their West End debut in plays here included Ivor Novello and Hermione Gingold (both 1921), Paul Robeson (1925), Margaret Lockwood (1934) and Vivien Leigh (1935). In 1952 'The Mousetrap' opened here and remained until 1974 when it transferred to St Martin's Theatre next door. The building was also in occasional cinema use.

## Details

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MATERIALS: the frontage to West Street and the corner to Tower Court is stuccoed, the remainder of brick in English bond. There is a metal and glazed canopy to West Street and the corner with Tower Court. The roof is concealed by a parapet.

PLAN: a splayed almost triangular site with a circular foyer at the corner of West Street and Tower Court, a circular bar above and stairs leading off. The auditorium comprises stalls and circle, the proscenium arch is 24 feet 6 inches wide with a box each side, and the stage depth is 20 feet 6 inches. The stairs, offices and lavatories adjoin Tower Court. There are three storeys of dressing rooms behind the stage along Tower Street.

EXTERIOR: the West Street elevation is of three storeys and five bays with a balustraded parapet with ball finials and a deep moulded cornice. The central three bays are separated by pilasters and have deeply recessed flat-arched casement windows. The slightly advanced end bays have channelled pilasters under segmental pediments, circular openings on the second floor and flat-arched casements to the first floor. The ground floor has a continuous metal and glazed canopy, deep moulded cornice and alternate mahogany double doors and casement windows. The curved corner between West Street and Tower Court has mahogany half-glazed doors and triple casement windows above flanked by pilasters. The stuccoed southern bay of the Tower Court elevation is identical to the southern bay on West Street.

The remainder of the Tower Court elevation is in brick and plainer, the southern end of three storeys and a semi-basement with three elliptical-headed windows, the central part of two storeys with two elliptical-headed windows and a tall opening for loading scenery, and the northern part of three storeys with two elliptical-headed casement windows and a narrow stage door.

The Tower Street elevation has a taller three storey southern bay with an elliptical-headed casement on each floor and a lower three storey and semi-basement section of four bays with elliptical-headed windows and an elliptical-headed fire door.

INTERIOR: the interior plaster decoration is in Louis XVI style. Public areas have mahogany doors. The circular foyer has pilasters below a decorative plastered ceiling. The circle bar above is similar. The auditorium has a circular high relief decorated plaster ceiling with central chandelier, a panelled border with roundels and a deep cove penetrated by arches springing from fluted Ionic pilasters. The richly framed and festooned roundels have coloured armorial decorations in the arch tympana. The Circle has a horseshoe-curved balcony front with panelled and festooned plasterwork decoration, and there is a narrower section raised up at the back with a smaller similar balcony. Its ceiling has large fielded panels. The Stalls side walls have oval decorations with festoons, containing looking glasses, but, according to an old photograph in the Metropolitan Archives, originally held paintings. The flat basket-arched proscenium arch is crowned by three armorial decorations, flanked by fluted Ionic pilasters and tall single splayed round-headed boxes with urn decoration above and closed balustrading below.

Original stage machinery includes two fly floors and the traditional system of hemp flying, although the ropes, flying bars and pulley blocks have been replaced. There is a timber gridiron for suspending scenery with a now rarely surviving but disused single drum and shaft mechanism.

## Legacy

The contents of this record have been generated from a legacy data system.  
Legacy System number: **478552**

Legacy System: **LBS**

## Sources

### Books and journals

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Earl, John, Sell, Michael, The Theatres Trust Guide to British Theatres 1750 - 1950, (2000), 98  
Kilburn, Mike, London Theatres, (2002)  
Stuart Gray, A, Edwardian Architecture A Biographical Dictionary, (1988), 335-336

## Legal

This building is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as amended for its special architectural or historic interest.



## Map

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