

Closure and fire failed to destroy tra Fine theatre which staged two rebirths

THE Tyne Theatre and Opera House found a place in Tyneside history within months of opening in 1867 when a new song was composed for its first panto — *The Lambton Worm*.

It had been founded by a group of theatre enthusiasts and businessmen, including noted editor and politician Joseph Cowen, and soon established a reputation as a place for quality popular entertainment.

One of its specialities was the spectacular special effects loved by Victorian theatregoers. The complicated machinery which allowed for various parts of the stage to be raised and lowered is still in place and makes the Tyne one of the most historically important theatres in the country.

A century ago, it was in regular use. In 1886, *Run of Luck* featured real racehorses and hounds. Three years later a show depicting the sinking of the Spanish Armada required nine railway wagons to carry 30 tons of scenery.

Of course, such theatrical alarms and excursions did not always go according to plan. In 1887 a stage-carver was killed when a cannonball — from a machine used to simulate thunder — fell on him.

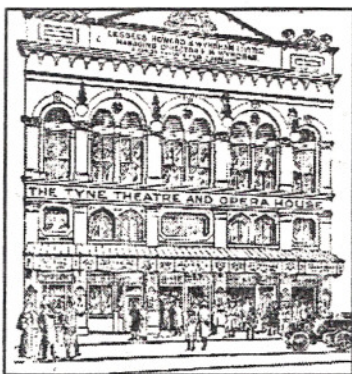
It gave the Tyne one of the main requirements of a theatre. It is claimed that the ghost of the poor workman still haunts the scene of his death.

Although the emphasis was on popular entertainment, more high-brow endeavours also found a place at the Tyne. The 1890s saw the regional premieres of a number of operas including *Carmen*, *I Pagliacci* and *Falstaff*.

Many of the greatest stars of the day such as Sarah Bernhardt trod its boards. The annual panto attracted music hall greats like George Robey, Harry Lauder and, of course, the great Vesta Tilley whose name is commemorated by the pub adjoining the theatre.

A hundred and twenty five years ago this week one of the region's most attractive theatres opened for business in Newcastle.

CHRISTOPHER GOULDING tells its story.



■ **Victorian heyday:** The old Tyne Theatre and Opera House before it became a cinema.

But by 1916, with so many men away at the war and money tight at home, audiences went into decline. The management decided to try and revive the Tyne's flagging fortunes by concentrating more on the emerging entertainment of cinema.

Short, single-reel films had featured as novelties in variety bills before, but for its first full-length feature, the Tyne obtained a print of one of the most noted films of its time (and still a favourite with film buffs), D. W. Griffith's epic *Birth of a Nation*.

This venture proved so successful that within three years the live theatrical side of things ended with *The Maid of the East*. The building then became part of the Stoll cinema chain, a name it carried for over half a century.

By the Seventies, the Stoll occupied a special place in the Newcastle cin-

ema scene. It specialised in soft-porn "skin-flicks" with such entrancingly naughty titles as *Naked as Nature Intended* and *They Wore Only the Wind*.

But by 1974, the dirty mac brigade had moved on and the Stoll closed. For three years the building which had once resounded to laughter and applause remained dark and semi-derelict.

Salvation appeared in 1977 when a bunch of theatre enthusiasts who would have got on very well with the Tyne's founders moved in under businessman Jack Dixon to buy the old building and reclaim it for live theatre.

The old stage machinery was lovingly restored. In the process of restoration the haste with which the Tyne had abandoned live theatre for the movies was found. Behind the screen was the dust-covered set of *The Maid of the East*.

After lengthy and expensive work, the Tyne reopened to present a fare of regular musicals produced by a resident amateur company interspersed by visits from opera stars like Plácido Domingo.

Disaster struck on Boxing Day, 1985, when a fire raged through the auditorium and stage. A further £1.5m was spent on, in effect, restoring the restoration.

In November, 1986, the Tyne Theatre and Opera House was firmly reopened by Welsh baritone Sir Geraint Evans who sadly died this week. The Tyne has become one of the most important venues in the region and will become the focal point for the proposed theatre village.