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# **BRECON'S HIDDEN THEATRE HISTORY, 1699–1870**

**BEYOND SARAH SIDDONS**

Jayne Gold



# Brecon's Hidden Theatre History, 1699–1870

*Brecon's Hidden Theatre History, 1699–1870* uncovers how the Welsh market town of Brecon became a key centre for theatrical innovation and women's cultural leadership over nearly two centuries.

Sarah Siddons' 1755 birth in Brecon is revealed as part of a rich theatrical tradition that predated her by at least 50 years. Drawing on the archival collection of renowned local historian Sister Bonaventure Kelleher and newly discovered materials, this study recovers forgotten patterns of provincial theatrical practice. It introduces a pioneering "archival resident" methodology, blending microhistory with community-based research to reveal the vital roles women played as theatre managers, patrons, and innovators. The book challenges London-centric narratives of British theatre history, offering compelling evidence of female agency in public cultural life. By demonstrating how provincial communities like Brecon shaped distinctive theatrical traditions, it provides a replicable model for recovering overlooked local histories through rigorous archival scholarship and community engagement.

This book is essential for theatre historians, scholars of women's history, Welsh historians, and anyone interested in cultural history. It will appeal to those studying courses in theatre studies, gender studies, or local history, as well as general readers eager to explore how overlooked communities and voices have shaped the broader cultural landscape.

**Jayne Gold** is a theatre educator, researcher, and creative producer whose work spans applied practice, community engagement, heritage, and performance pedagogy; she is a Professor on the PGCert Performance Teaching course at Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

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# Brecon's Hidden Theatre History, 1699–1870

Beyond Sarah Siddons

Jayne Gold

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**In memory of Sister Bonaventure Kelleher of Brecon  
(1923–2019).**



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# Preface

This book is inspired by the archive of materials collated by the late Sister Bonaventure Kelleher (1923–2019) of Brecon. Sister Bonaventure was a dedicated Ursuline nun and a teacher of English at St David’s Convent School in Brecon for forty years until its closure in 1993. Throughout her life she was a keen member of the *Brecknock Society and Museum Friends*, a registered charity to promote the study and understanding of the archaeology, history, geology, natural history, arts, and literature within the historic county of Brecknock. She became a member of the charity’s executive council in 1992 and served as President between 1998 and 2009. She was very well known around Brecon, and local people remember her as their teacher, a local campaigner, or from one of her regular history lectures and talks. By all accounts, she was vivacious and good-humoured and held an unwavering passion and determination, right up until her death at the age of 96, to tell the story of Brecon’s English-speaking theatre history. Before her death, Sister Bonaventure, passed on her archive to the *Brecknock Society and Museum Friends* with a wish that the work that she had started would one day be shared with the people of Brecon and beyond.



*Figure 0.1* Sister Bonaventure being awarded Town of Brecon Shield, Photograph from Brecknock Society and Museum Friends

The Sister Bonaventure Kelleher archive is a substantial archive of meticulous, painstaking research on English-speaking theatre in Brecon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries collated over several decades before the age of digitisation. Thousands of newspaper columns and details of numerous playbills are either typed directly onto yellow paper or recorded in extensive, handwritten notes. There are photocopies of playbills and artefacts, and reams of letters and research correspondence. Over five decades, Sister Bonaventure had visited archives, libraries, and museums across the United Kingdom to build this collection. Amongst the papers are new discoveries with the potential to challenge our established knowledge of eighteenth and nineteenth-century provincial theatre.

Sister Bonaventure was keen to write up her research through the auspices of a university. Her research records reveal that she originally applied to University College of Swansea to study for a Master of Philosophy research degree titled 'English Theatre in Brecon 1755–1892' in the early 1970s and was offered a place to study full-time. She could not accept the place full-time due to teaching commitments and could not do it part-time due to the rule in place at the time that stipulated applicants must have spent at least one year as a full-time residential student in Wales to qualify for part-time post-graduate study. Whilst Sister Bonaventure had lived in Wales for most of her life at the convent in Brecon, her undergraduate degree in English Literature had been completed in London. Instead, she then applied to the University of London and was accepted in 1975 enrolling on a Master of Philosophy research degree in the English department researching theatre in Brecon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She conducted extensive research finding evidence of performances and the people who brought them to Brecon but never reached the final writing-up stage. Every so often she would have to write a report of her progress to send to her supervisors. These reports document her research process, which was protracted over decades as it became side-tracked by the myriad of other worthwhile causes and campaigns Sister Bonaventure was involved in alongside her role as a full-time teacher at the St David's Convent school in Brecon. The University of London had a policy that if you had not completed your degree after five years then registration on the course would lapse. At the university's discretion one could apply for a further five years, but only once. They were lenient with Sister Bonaventure and allowed her to continue for twenty-five years. However, finally, in 2000, she received a letter informing her that her registration in the course had ceased.

Undeterred, later in 2004, Sister Bonaventure now aged 81, started a Master of Philosophy degree at University of Plymouth. She was now fully retired from teaching and wanted to tell the important story of Brecon's theatrical history:

Apart from the connection with the birth of Sarah Siddons which 'happened' here in 1755, the memory of any real theatrical tradition had faded locally...I feel that my research could establish a full record of

material...[and] could make a distinct contribution to the knowledge of the subject.

(University of Plymouth application form 2004,  
Sister Bonaventure Kelleher).

Sister Bonaventure's supervisor at University of Plymouth subsequently moved to Oxford Brookes University, and Sister Bonaventure followed her there. Every month, she would travel on public transport from Brecon to Oxford for her supervisions. There is no train station in Brecon so the eight-hour round trip would have involved two buses and three trains in each leg. Her research degree developed into research into the life of John Ward, an actor and strolling player manager (and Sarah Siddons' grandfather). After several years, Sister Bonaventure completed her Master of Philosophy and progressed on to a PhD programme on the same subject, which she was never able to finish.

Sister Bonaventure commenced her research journey in the 1970s. Prior to this the only published scholarly authority on Brecon's theatre history was the Welsh academic Cecil Price (1915–1991) whose 1948 book *The English Theatre in Wales* documents the strolling players who toured Wales in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Price was Professor of English at University College of Swansea between 1961 and 1980 and had previously been a Lecturer at University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. Had Sister Bonaventure's application to study at Swansea been accepted in 1975 Price could well have been her supervisor and the story of her research journey may have been very different. Either way, through her work as a local historian, the several decades she spent studying this area, and the multiple connections and opportunities these afforded, Sister Bonaventure uncovered findings that Price's research had missed or misrepresented.

Sister Bonaventure's efforts sit within the work of other notable historians and archivists in the field of provincial theatre history. For instance, Kathleen Barker (1925–1991) who was an archivist based in Bristol. Like Sister Bonaventure she undertook extensive, independent research and postgraduate study on theatres outside of London during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her huge number of research documents, contained within eighty large arch-files, focus on Bristol, and also Nottingham, Sheffield, Newcastle, and Brighton. Sister Bonaventure and Kathleen Barker were born only two years apart. Barker's methodology of scanning newspaper records for references to theatre, typing them up, and collating and filing them, was very similar to Sister Bonaventure's. Kathleen Barker was awarded her PhD in 1982 and went on to contribute widely to publications on provincial theatre for the *Society of Theatre Research*. She bequeathed her extensive archive of research to the University of Bristol Theatre Collection where it remains an invaluable asset for theatre historians. Whilst Sister Bonaventure was not able to achieve similar goals in her lifetime, it is hoped that this book can go some way into ensuring that Sister Bonaventure's work, which could be so

easily overlooked, is recorded, remembered, and perhaps used more widely within the theatre history record.

Sister Bonaventure's archive provided the foundation for discoveries that matter far beyond local history. Building on her meticulous documentation, this book reveals how theatrical culture spread through provincial networks, how women pioneered new forms of theatrical entrepreneurship, and how supposedly 'remote' Welsh market towns were vibrant cultural hubs connected to metropolitan theatre scenes. These findings challenge our understanding of how British theatre developed and thrived outside London's patent houses, uncovering forgotten patterns of cultural exchange and theatrical innovation. It has been a delight, and an honour, to be able to take Sister Bonaventure's work forward in her memory.

# Acknowledgements

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To KIN, Kids in Nature outdoor nursery in Monmouthshire – you were an unexpected sanctuary of scholarly productivity. For two years, your beautiful forest setting provided my weekly research retreat. Bundled in thermals and fingerless gloves, I wrote significant portions of this book while my son played happily under the care of your exceptional staff. During the isolating Covid restrictions, this space offered not just childcare, but a lifeline of creativity and connection.

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# Introduction

The birth of the famous eighteenth-century actress Sarah Siddons in Brecon in July 1755 has long been viewed in the town as a chance, one-off event. In February 1935, the renowned playwright George Bernard Shaw visited Brecon. He visited Sarah Siddons' birthplace, the *Shoulder of Mutton Inn* and said of the actress, "She was a most marvellous woman, and Brecon should congratulate itself on the good luck that fell to the town by the *accident* of her birth" (*Western Mail*, 11th February 1935, author's emphasis). Sarah Siddons was one of the most prolific actresses of the eighteenth century and a key player in the emergence of a celebrity culture. Her career, beginning in the touring circuit with her parents and grandparents, later extended to London, where she had phenomenal success. Siddons earned a reputation as the queen of tragedy on the English stage. Chelsea Phillips writes of her iconic identity, "visible onstage in her performance of queenly roles, rendered in paintings and drawings, and made available for purchase in the form of paintings and drawings" (2022: 118). Siddons' fame was far-reaching, influencing culture and fashion across the country. Sarah Siddons' birth in Brecon being an "accident" is a view which had been upheld and unchallenged. It is the actress herself who was celebrated and remembered in the town with the renaming of the Shoulder of Mutton Inn to the Sarah Siddons pub and through the 2019 acquisition of her portrait on a plate painted by Thomas Baxter at Brecon's Museum, y Gaer. Yet Brecon's rich theatre history began many years before the 1755 birth of the famous actress. Sarah Siddons' birth in Brecon was no accident. She was born in the town, into a successful acting family, *because* it was an established part of the theatre touring circuit. Brecon was a culturally rich and well-established place to perform to an array of local and visiting theatre supporters and funders. A tradition which long precedes the perceived beginnings of theatrical history in the town marked by Siddons' birth.

It was a local historian, Sister Bonaventure Kelleher, who first uncovered this long, and rich, history of theatrical activity in Brecon. The Sister Bonaventure Kelleher Archive (referenced as SBK Archive throughout), is an uncatalogued archive passed on to local history organisation the

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Brecknock Society and Museum Friends in 2019, containing around 20 boxes and files of research relating to Brecon's theatrical history between 1699 and 1870. The archive has provided the primary source materials for this book. This study uses the original archive, and the author's own research, to uncover the story of Brecon's theatrical past situating its place within wider provincial theatre circuits. It considers factors including the town's rural location, its landed gentry residents whose estates ring the settlement, its longstanding military presence, and its role as a business and administrative centre. In presenting a study of the town's theatrical past, alternative narratives are uncovered to challenge dominant histories and reveal a fuller sense of historical theatrical practice. This study considers patterns of familial connection within touring troupes, their repeated visits to Brecon, and the importance of support from its residents. In widening the field of evidence to focus on the town's inhabitants who acted as patrons for its theatre, this study explores particularities of patterns of practice which have enabled and developed women-led patronage in Brecon and asks how this might contribute to a wider understanding of modes of patronage. The exploration of women theatre managers, who operated in Brecon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, considers overlooked practices and how these might add to, but also challenge, established histories of female theatre management in this period.

By honouring the depth of local history work which underpins this study, this project has involved the compassionate and considered recovery of Sister Bonaventure Kelleher's research through working alongside Brecknock Society and Museum Friends supporters and members of the Brecon community. In embracing public history practice, the uncovering of Brecon's theatrical past has been a "collective and collaborative effort" (Kean et al. 2000: 14).

Early scholarship of public history had defined the field as "the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia" establishing a dichotomy between the 'academic' and 'public' historian (Kelley 1978: 16). More recently there has been a drive to break down this division and offer new methods for viewing and interpreting history. Phyllis K. Leffler and Joseph Brent's *Public and Academic History, A Philosophy and Paradigm* sought to "bridge the existing breach between the worlds of public and academic history by providing the philosophical underpinning for a novel teaching methodology" (1990: 8). It was a drive which emerged from the 1984 Institute on Teaching Public History conference at Arizona State University and worked to transform the teaching of Public History in US universities (Leffler and Brent 1990: v), forming part of a wider acknowledgment that "the discipline of history is enriched by the integration of its public and academic content" (Leffler and Brent 1990: 8). The development of the first Master's degree in Public History in the UK at Oxford University's Ruskin College was influenced by Marxist historian Raphael Samuel and his