

THEATRE ROYAL (Charters Towers)

(ca. 1871-1970) Constructed of iron, timbre and weatherboard, Charters Towers' Theatre Royal reportedly held upwards of 2,000 people, and played host to a wide variety of entertainments during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including boxing tournaments, vaudeville/minstrelsy, legitimate drama, opera and film. Virgil Coyle (later of Birch, Carroll and Coyle) was associated with the Royal during the late-1900s/early-1910s.



ca. 1950s.

The box in the front of the building was added when set up for cinema screening.
Source: John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

Following the chance discovery of gold in 1871, Charters Towers quickly turned into a bustling city (in its heyday it was the second largest city in Queensland), and as a result numerous hotels were built to cater for the miners. One of these, situated at the corner of Church and Hodgkinson streets, was later converted into the Theatre Royal. It was likely built by William Gough who also built the adjoining Excelsior Hotel. Constructed of iron, timbre and weatherboard, the Royal may not have been the most solidly constructed building at that time, but it nevertheless remained standing through until 1970. The main entrance to the theatre was via the Hodgkinson Street frontage but there were two or three wide doorways opening onto Church Street as well. The dressing rooms etc., were located at the northern end of the building, under the stage area (Power, email 11/02/2014).

As the largest place of entertainment in Charters Towers for many years (it reportedly held upwards of 2,000 people), the Royal played host to all sorts of entertainments during the late 19th and 20th centuries, including boxing tournaments, vaudeville/minstrelsy, legitimate drama, opera and film.

One of the most regular variety companies to appear there during the first two decades of the 20th century was Harry Clay's Waxworks and Comedy Co. Clay staged a season there every year between 1901 and 1919, initially up to a fortnight at a time, and also produced two seasons of drama there in 1908 and 1909. Among the many minstrels and vaudeville companies known to have played the Royal during the late 1800s and early 1900s were the Cogill Bros (1895); McAdoo's Georgia Minstrels (1900); Percy St John's Royal Burlesque Co (1901); the Sensation Vaudeville Co (1905), featuring

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THEATRE ROYAL.
SOLE PROPRIETOR AND LESSEE,
ARTHUR ST. VINCENT.
TO-MORROW,
Thursday, Nov. 8th.
UNDER THE DISTINGUISHED
PATRONAGE OF HIS WORSHIP
THE MAYOR.
**Grand Opening Concert and
Entertainment**
BY
MADAME AND MR. ST. VINCENT,
CONSISTING OF—
Music,
Magic,
AND
Ventriloquism.
Embracing all the best Songs and Duets in their
Repertoires.
Front Seats, 5s.; Back, 2s.
Doors open at 7.30, commence at 8.
N.B.—Children, half-price.

Lennon, Hyman and Lennon; Walter Bell's Waxworks Co (1900), featuring Harry Clay; Lazern and Salmon Vaudeville Co (1902); Ted Holland's Entertainers (1902-05); Will Wallace's Waxworks and Vaudeville Co (1905); Pollards' Merry Midgets (1908); the Frank Sidney Co (1912); Deave's Mannikins (1914); and The Royal Togos (1918). Although the opening of the Tivoli Theatre picture gardens in Mosman Street (opposite the Crown Hotel) on 9 July 1915 did not initially cause the Theatre Royal any direct competition, it did begin to struggle from around 1916 following the Tivoli management's decision to introduce vaudeville and other theatrical entertainments in addition to its film screenings.

During the 1920s the Theatre Royal was used by such companies as Coleman's Vaudeville Company (1921), Tutty's Vaudeville Company (1922), the Royal Musical Carlson (1923), the Littlejohns Revue Company (1924), and the Merrymakers' Costume Comedy Co (1926), featuring Vaude and Verne. Harry Clay also returned to Charters Towers and the Royal with a vaudeville and revue company in 1922, while his company sent a company on tour through north Queensland in 1927. Headed by Nellie Kollé it took appeared the Royal.¹

T H E A T R E R O Y A L.
 FOR A SHORT SEASON ONLY.
 MAY 16 || TUESDAY NEXT || MAY 16
 MAY 16 || TUESDAY NEXT || MAY 16
CLAY'S CLAY'S
Waxworks and Comedy Company
 NEW ARTISTS,
 NEW ILLUSTRATED SONGS,
 NEW PICTURES,
 EVERYTHING NEW
 THE STRONGEST COMBINATION
 at
 LOWEST PRICES.
 1/- ADMISSION. 1/-
 Children under 10 Half-price.
LOU COURTNEY,
 Representative.

Although variety theatre struggled somewhat during the 1930s and 1940s, due in part to the arrival of "talkies" and the combined effects of the depression and later the war, it never completely disappeared, remaining a popular alternative to films, "legitimate" theatre and other popular culture amusements. During this period the Royal attracted seasons by a number of well-known touring companies, including Stanley McKay's Gaieties (the company played Charters Towers often during the 1930s and 1940s), and Barton's Follies (1940).

The Royal also operated on occasions as a picture theatre, with some of the early operators established to date being Richards' Bioscope and Variety Co (1904), Harry Webber (1908) and Olympia Pictures (1910-12), an exhibition firm run by Birch, Carroll, Graham and Hill.² Following the amalgamation of Birch and Carroll with Virgil T. Coyle in Charters Towers in October 1912, the Theatre Royal returned to being a live theatre under their management.³

T H E A T R E -:- R O Y A L.
 Lessees—Birch, Carroll, Graham, Hill.
 Resident Manager — P. E. Warren.
 TO-DAY AT 2.30.
**A PICTORIAL FESTIVE MATINEE
 PICNIC,**
 which comprises all the Gems, same
 as evening.
 Children, 3d. to all parts.
**AN AFTERNOON'S PLEASURE AND
 EDUCATION FOR YOUNG AND OLD.**
**"TIS ABSOLUTELY NO USE TO
 ARGUE."**
**OLYMPIA
 PICTURES**
 have long since received the stamp of
 public approbation, and this is con-
 tinually testified to, for at every per-
 formance there is unbounded enthu-
 siasm shown, besides the greatest proof
 of satisfaction is in the attendance of
 the
THOUSANDS
 of patrons who have nothing but
 praise for
OLYMPIA PICTURES.

Northern Miner 16 May (1905), 1.

Northern Miner 22 Oct. (1910), 1.

During its lifetime the Royal also played host to many big local and international theatrical stars. Notable were Charles Arnold (1895), Charles Holloway (1895, 1897), Olivia Kempf (1895), Maggie Moore (1898), Lilian Meyer (1907), Scottish tragedian Walter Bentley (1909), Dame Nellie Melba (1909), Edwin Geach (1910), Carmen and Lawrance (1914), Daisy Jerome (1915) and The Great Levante (1941). According to the *North Queensland Register* the 1909 Melba season established a record audience for the theatre (19 July 1909, n. pag.).

When the Towers Players was established in 1962 to provide cultural and artistic activities for the community of Charters Towers and the local district, the group initially used the Royal for its productions, beginning with *Trial by Jury*. The society eventually moved out of the theatre after the members managed to purchase the old Anglican church (built in 1883), and which subsequently became the St Paul's Playhouse.

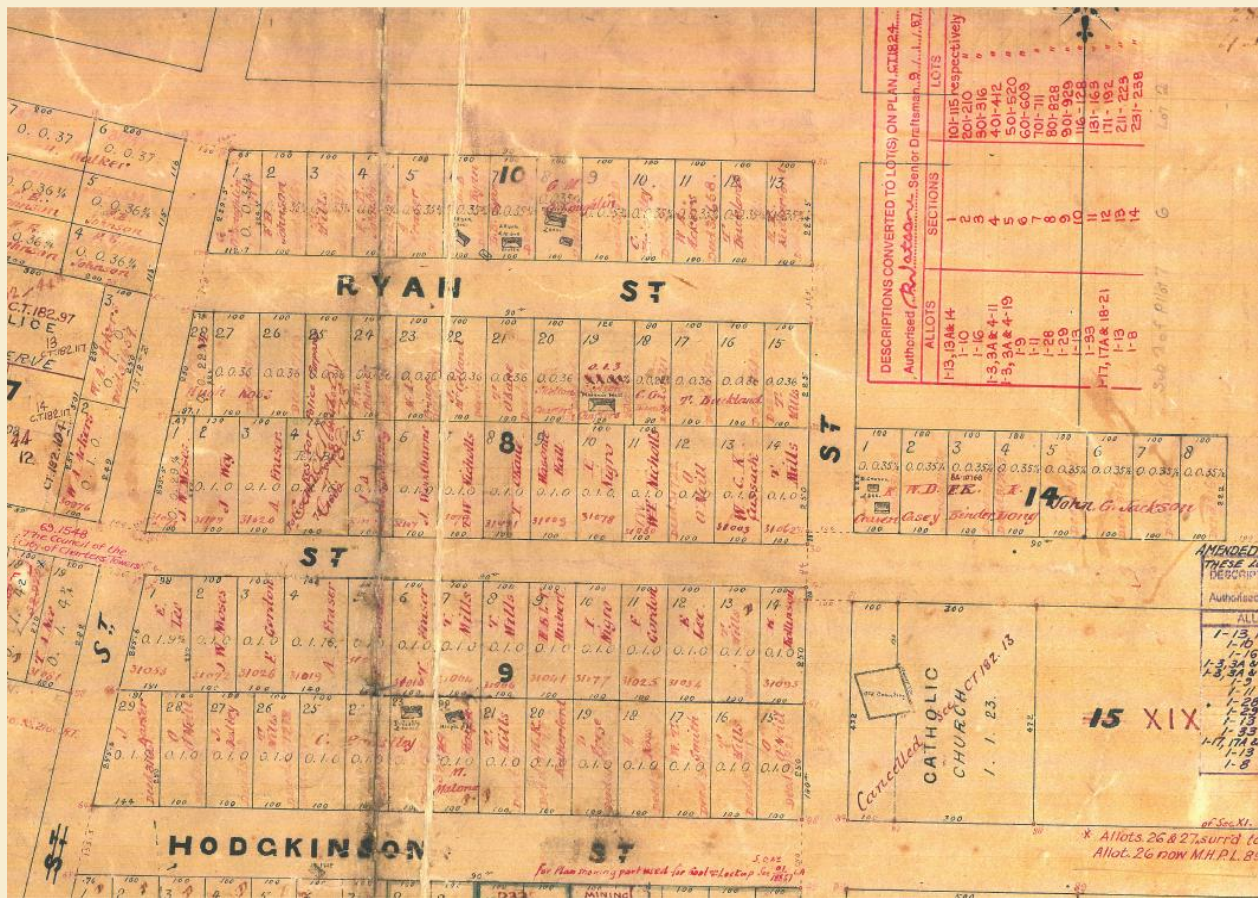
¹ Clay had died in 1925

² See "Historical Notes and Corrections" section below for details relating to Olympia Pictures.

³ Although the Royal was returned to being a live theatre under lessees Birch, Carroll and Coyle they often included the screening of films and news gazettes as part of the entertainment package for variety shows.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. The Theatre Royal's exact location is recorded by the Charters Towers Regional Council as originally being allotment 14 of section 9 – now described as Lot 914 on plan CT 1824.



Source: Courtesy of the Charters Towers Regional Council.

2. **Birch, Carroll and Coyle:** George Birch and Edward Carroll, in association with Graham and Hill, began operating their Olympia Pictures at the Olympia Skating Rink from October 1909 (and from April 1910 out of the School of Arts). On 19 October 1912 the they relocated their film operations to the Stadium in association with Virgil T. Coyle, thereby beginning the partnership that would later become Birch, Carroll and Coyle. The three entrepreneurs also re-opened the Royal that same night as a theatre. The entertainment was given by the Norwoods, an American hypnotist act.

SENSATIONAL ANNOUNCEMENT

**A GRAND VARIETY VAUDEVILLE
AND COMMUNITY CONCERT**

is presented
To-night (Saturday)
AT THE THEATRE ROYAL, CHARTERS TOWERS.

In aid of the funds of the 26th Battalion (Sellheim Camp)
Christmas Comforts Fund

U.S.A. Imported Artists include—

VIC PAULASTO, Sensational Tivoli Star.
LAL FOX, Famous Radio Star of 2FC and 3BL.
EDGAR VERNON and his Charlie McArthur Doll.
FRANCES PAGE, Charming Hollywood Dancer.
THE ORIGINAL INVISIBLE MAN ON STAGE PERFORMS

ALMA STANLEY, North Queensland's Radio Queen of Song by courtesy of 4AY.
JACK VAUGHAN, Virtuoso of the Mouth Organ, and
THE FAMOUS HILL BILLY STAGE BAND AND REVIEW.

COMMUNITY SINGING OF SONGS OLD AND NEW.

Specially Selected Items on Stage by Boys
from the Sellheim Camp (a Surprise Treat)

POPULAR PRICES. NO RESERVATIONS.

Produced and Presented by J. S. POLLARD, Manager Roxy Theatre,
Townsville.

Northern Miner
20 Dec. (1941), 2.

SEE ALSO

- [Harry Clay's New South Wales/Queensland Tours](#)
- [Birch and Carroll](#)
- [E. J. Carroll](#)



Inside the Theatre Royal, 1893

Source: eSpace, The University of Queensland
(contributed by Sidney Richardson)

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