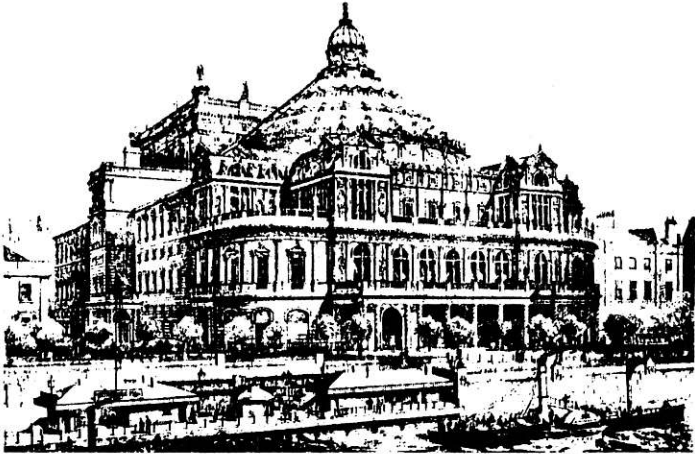


Past, Present and Proposed No.3 The Scotland Yard Opera House

Dip Clayton



*(1875), showing Westminster Pier
in the foreground*

Before I tell you about the proposed Opera House it would be helpful to give a potted biography of the man behind the idea. James Henry Mapleson, known as the "Colonel", was born in London in May 1830. He became a student at the Royal Academy of Music where he studied violin and piano. During the 1848-49 seasons he played in the orchestra at Her Majesty's Theatre in the Maymarket, then the home of the Royal Italian Opera. In 1839 he took a company which included Henriette Sontag, Luigi Lablache and the pianist Thalberg on tour through the English provinces. 1851 saw him in Milan where he studied singing with Professor Mazzucato at the Conservatorio. Nearly three years later, early in 1854 under the name of Enrico Mariani he sang (according to his memoirs) in Lodi where his first role was that of Carlo in *Linda di Chamounix*. He next sang at Verona where the role was Manrico in *Trovatore*. However reasearch has failed to find any evidence of an artist of that name at either Lodi or Verona. What he does not mention is that he gave one disastrous performance as Alphonse in Auber's *Masaniello* at Drury Lane on the 23rd July 1854. The review in the Evening Post was devastating. Following this, in 1856, he started a music agency and in 1858 managed the opera season at Drury Lane. Finally in 1861 he began a new career as an impresario at the Lyceum, the opening night was

Trovatore with Antonio Giuglini as Manrico, Marietta Alboni as Azucena, and with the Leonora of Thérèse Tietjens. Later in that season he gave the first performance in England of *Un ballo in maschera*. For the next twenty-eight years he managed at different times Her Majesty's and Drury Lane theatres, and joined Frederick Gye as joint manager for two seasons at Covent Garden. From 1879 to 1883 he presented opera at the Academy of Music in New York. Under his régime London saw the first performances of *Vêpres Siciliennes*, *Ballo*, *Faust*, Cherubini's *Medée*, *La forza del destino*, *Hamlet*, *Mireille*, *Carmen*, *Mefistofele* and *Il talismano* (by Balfe), the last four also receiving their first performances in New York under his auspices. Also, by letting Her Majesty's to a German company he was responsible for London seeing Wagner's *Ring* for the first time. Singers who appeared in London for the first time under his management included Christine Nilsson, Lillian Nordica, Jean de Reszke and the American soprano Minnie Hauk. His battles with the Metropolitan Opera in New York and with financially disastrous tours of the American mid-west finally broke him. He died in 1901 a poor man.

But, you may ask, what has this to do with the proposed opera house of the title above? For some time Mapleson had toyed with the idea of managing his own theatre and with this in mind he had drawn together a consortium of backers with the intention of building, as listed in the prospectus, a "Grand New Opera House". On the night of the 6th of December 1867 Her Majesty's Theatre was destroyed by fire. The previous year Mapleson had started to make plans for his opera house, and work started on preparing the site in September of the same year. Because of the site that was available, this came to be known as the Scotland Yard Opera House.

On a site now bordered by Whitehall, Westminster Bridge Road and the Embankment had once been a plot of land known as "Scotlande". A pamphlet printed in 1548 names it as "of the title that the Kynges Majestie of England hath to the Sovereigntie of Scotlande". During the course of years title to this land had changed a number of times and had been lost. It was granted by Henry VIII in 1519 to Cardinal Wolsey under the description of "A parcel of land formerly belonge to the Kings of Scotland".

In 1860 the Victoria Embankment was begun and from Chelsea to Blackfriars the bank of the river Thames was reclaimed. When the stretch of road from Westminster Bridge to the east was opened it left a large empty space which lay derelict for some years. This patch of mud and weeds could not be tolerated in the heart of the capital and for a while was laid out as a pleasure garden of shrubs. This was the site chosen by Mapleson for his new opera house.

By 1875 the site had been cleared and work on the foundations had begun. However, after reaching a depth of 50 feet (17.5m) and being now below the level of the river, water poured in. Over fifteen pumps were used to contain the flow and eventually the London clay was reached and the foundations were completed. Now came the first blow to the enterprise. Originally the cost of excavating the site was to have been £5000 but the architect F.H. Fowler persuaded Mapleson that it would be more economical to pay by measurement. This now meant that the cost of the foundations was in excess of £33000.

On September 7th the first brick was laid by Mlle Tietjens. Later, on December 16th of this same year the cornerstone was laid by H.R.H. Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, second son of Queen Victoria. Mapleson intended it to be nothing less than the

leading opera house in the world. It was to have its own Underground entrance linked to what is now Westminster Station on the District and Circle Lines (I believe this passage link is still in existence) A subterranean passage would lead to the Houses of Parliament by which Members might return to the House on hearing the division bell. For the artists there were to be recreation rooms including billiard tables, two Turkish Baths, a surgery with two eminent doctors appointed to deal with sore throats and other indispositions. Also, tied up at the pier, on the river was a small steamer to act as a tug to a large houseboat on which the company could sail down river for recreation or rehearsals.

A description of the building taken from the London Illustrated News of the 11th September 1875 gives the following information: *"...this new house will be the largest in Europe. It is intended that it will stay open throughout the year and in addition to Italian opera, English works sung by English singers, shall be produced. The building will cover a little more than two acres, the shape of the auditorium to be an elongated horseshoe. The frontage on the Embankment 160ft in length consists of a centre and two wings standing on three stories of columns. The auditorium will contain 500 stalls, a passage of three feet being left between each row. These seats are approached from a vestibule 110ft long, and numbered odd and even on the right and left sides of the house respectively. The approach to the Grand Tier will be by circular staircases in each of the wings. The boxes and rest of the house will each have their own separate entrances. To all the private boxes there will be outer rooms. The whole surmounted by a dome rising to a height of 146ft. Both without and within, our new opera house promises to be a handsome building"*.

Alas, it was not to be. By the time the outer walls had been completed and the internal structure had risen to the Grand Tier over £103000 had been spent. Another £10000 was required for the roof. This was not forthcoming and Mapleson had to abandon his dream. In a letter to the Times, Mapleson complained: *"for backing or laying against a horse, for starting a new sporting club, or a new music-hall, the money could have been found in a few hours"*. The building was sold as it stood for £29000, it remained standing for a number of years, derelict and boarded-up, until questions were raised in Parliament about the eyesore which could be seen from the windows. The unfinished building was resold for only £500, the new owners then having to pay £3000 for demolition in 1888.

Two years later New Scotland Yard was erected on the site, as the headquarters of the police force.

But let us leave the last word to "Colonel" Mapleson himself:

"The site of what, with a little public spirit, usefully applied, would have been the finest theatre in the world, is now to serve as a new police station"...adding, bitterly..."with such solid foundations, the cells, if not comfortable, will at least be dry".

