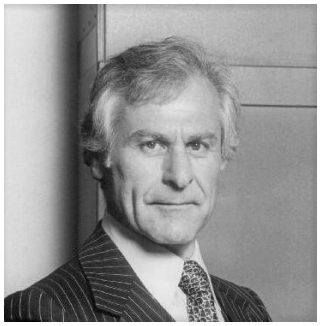
Shakespeare's Globe



In 1599 the Globe playhouse was opened south of the River Thames in the London borough of Southwark to perform the plays of William Shakespeare. It was laid out in the contemporary style with a circular auditorium open to the sky surrounded by tiers of benches. In 1613 this wooden theatre burned down and was replaced by a very similar one that was closed by the Puritan government in 1642 and demolished. Shakespeare's reputation ebbed and flowed over succeeding centuries but by the early twentieth century he was widely revered as the greatest playwright in the English language, notably by people in the United States. Sam Wanamaker was born in Chicago in 1919, the son of Ukranian immigrants. He became an actor and his experience of acting in a replica of the Globe, built as part of the Great Lakes Worlds Fair in Ohio in 1937, sparked a quest to find the original Globe. When he finally got to the Bankside site in 1949 all he found was a brass plaque on a brewery wall, but it inspired a dream to recreate the Globe theatre. Black-listed in the Joseph McCarthy witch hunt he decided to settle in London, and built a career as an actor, director and producer. But his dream persisted.

1969 Sam sees that buildings covering the site of the Globe are being demolished. He creates proposals for a theatre and educational centre and enlists enthusiastic but non-committal support from leading actors, architects, academics and other members of the 'great and the good'. He gets wide publicity for his vision.

1970 The Shakespeare Globe Trust is formed to promote interest in the life and work of the Bard. Sam enlists the help of historical experts, but his determination to build a complex of arts buildings, rather than just recreate the Globe, leads to many arguments and a changing cast of advisers over the years. In 1971, at the World Shakespeare Congress in Vancouver, 500 academics endorse the project. A small existing building near the site is bought and Southwark Council approves its use as an arts and learning centre.

1972 Sam mortgages his house to buy more land around the site. Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, says he will be a prominent supporter if the project demonstrates public credibility. Summer events in architect-designed temporary structures on the site attract sponsorship and audiences but lose over £10,000. Southwark Council approves conversion of a warehouse into a permanent Shakespearian museum.

1973 Leading architect Sir Hugh Casson supports the scheme and advises Sam not to worry too much about historical accuracy (the archaeologists and historians would never all agree) or the compromises needed to meet modern fire and safety requirements. This will be the first thatch-roofed building in London since the Great Fire in 1666. Other commentators predict the project will be some kind of Elizabethan Disneyland, and there is real prejudice because Sam is American. He has to use his own money to cover some of the losses on the summer season of plays and activities which are run to sustain interest in the project and build support.

1974 The community organisation called North Southwark Community Development Group (NSCDG) announces its complete opposition to the project because they want homes and jobs in the area for local working people.

1975 The summer season of events on the site turns into a fiasco when the Globe team mis-read contracts with the supplier of a temporary theatre and are left with extra debts. The economic recession means funding becomes increasingly hard to find. By 1977 financial support from the Greater London Council dries up. The museum has to close and there is no summer season.

1979 Southwark Council announces that it feels the best use of the land will be an office development that includes the Globe theatre as part of the whole commercial complex. A deal is reached between the council and a developer that gives the Globe trust the right to build a theatre and educational buildings on part of the site about 230 metres away from exactly where the original Globe stood.

1981 At the third World Shakespeare Congress in Stratford-upon-Avon (home of the Royal Shakespeare Company), Sam's rough treatment of some academics and selfish concerns about a new venue so close to Stratford lead to a reversal of the support he had received in Vancouver. Nevertheless Professors Andrew Gurr and John Orrell (both eminent theatre historians) become closely involved. Sam invites his long-time adviser Theo Crosby to be the Historical Architectural Consultant and he produces the first master plan.

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1982 Theo and Sam have many debates about the design of the theatre. Over the years more and more historical evidence comes to light and by 1989 a design is arrived at which is broadly acceptable. In May 1982 the NSCDG effectively takes over Southwark Council and finds ways to slow down the pace of developing the site. One of Sam's daughters is a Southwark councillor, who votes with the NSCDG councillors against the project. And she still lives at home with Sam and her mother! American fund-raising is going well though. Billionaire Armand Hammer agrees to lead the effort, and a lavish party in Beverly Hills attracts sponsors from Hollywood and business. Prince Philip agrees to be the Trust's patron.

1983 Sir David Orr, chairman of Unilever, becomes chairman of the trustees. He is a masterful negotiator and also effective in focusing Sam's enthusiasm. In July the site is formally dedicated as the new home of the Globe, at an event attended by 28 of the rich American patrons. Everything at last looks positive, except that the NSCDG stages a noisy demonstration. However the developers and the Council are threatening to sue each other, and that could lead to the Trust losing all rights to build on the site. So the Trust sues both of them for reneging on the original deal! The case will take over two years to reach the High Court and everything is stalled until it is concluded. When he comes to London Hammer realises the financial administration of the Trust is inadequate and he feels money is being wasted. He withdraws his support – a major blow.

1986 In the High Court, the case is settled, confirming that the Trust can build on the site with a 125 year lease at a nominal rent of 5% of operating profits. The case costs Southwark council £9 million, which could have built a lot of houses in other parts of the borough. Over the past couple of years it has become plain that the overwhelming majority of Southwark residents want the Globe, in spite of the NSCDG campaign.

1987 The NSCDG lose control of Southwark Council. Planning permission to build the whole scheme is finally granted. A £16 million fund-raising appeal is launched, but poor planning and marketing means the opening events attract fewer than 1,000 people, rather than the 20,000 who had been expected.

1988 Building the new Globe finally begins but progress is slow and fundraising difficult in the face of another economic recession.

1989 The discovery of archaeological remains of the 16th century Rose theatre nearby leads many in the arts world to argue that public money should support preserving the remains of a real Elizabeth era playhouse not on a recreation of one. This challenge is eventually overcome, but has a positive side effect in confirming what many features of the new Globe should be, for example being a twenty sided polygon in plan.

1991 Insufficient funds are coming in to sustain full-scale building work. Everyone is depressed that so much effort has achieved so little real progress. Theo devises Self Build, a scheme whereby a small band of craftsmen are retained and they only work when money comes in. In this way, work proceeds section by section, and the steady progress starts to encourage more and more donations.

1992 Two of the twenty sections of the Globe are unveiled. The following year Sam dies, fated not to see the fruit of his thirty years of work. Theo dies a year later. Sam had the dream and the stubborn tenacity (if not the organisational skills) and Theo had the vision of what the Globe theatre could look like and how it could be realised. Fortunately, the project is now unstoppable.

1995 The building is approaching completion. The emphasis is shifting from the problems of planning and politics to setting up the theatre company and staging the first plays. Royal Mail even issues a Globe stamp. In 1996 the National Lottery gives a grant of over £12 million, which helps to pull in lots more money and guarantee completion. The whole project will ultimately cost over £20 million up to 2000.

1997 On 12 June Her Majesty the Queen officially opens Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.

Today The Globe is a major tourist attraction and serious centre of learning about Shakespeare. It has a reputation for putting on among the best performances of the Bard's work anywhere. Standing in the pit as a 'groundling' and being almost as much a part of the action as the actors proves hugely popular with audiences.

The Trust continues to develop the Bankside site. In 2014 an indoor Jacobean theatre opened to stage the plays Shakespeare wrote for smaller playhouses. It is named the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse.

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