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Queen reveals a time capsule of treasures

■ For 25 years, items recovered from an archeological dig at the old Queen's Theatre have been stored in boxes.
■ Now, to coincide with Heritage Week from April 16 to 24, they will be handed over to the SA Museum for display.
LIZ WALSH reports.

IT had been such a wonderful night. She had put on her special jewellery and best clothes and off she went to the heart of the city to see a play in the newly built Queen's Theatre.

She laughed, she clapped, she chatted with friends. It was only when she got home that she realised she had lost one of her precious gold earrings.

Perhaps they had been given to her by her parents for a milestone birthday. Perhaps they had been given to her by an admirer or her husband.

Perhaps they were an heirloom and had come aboard the ship with her that left England or Ireland bound for South Australia only years earlier.

We'll never know. The story behind these beautiful earrings was buried when, over time, the under-stage and dressing room area below the Queen's Theatre was covered with soil as the theatre failed and the beautiful building was transformed into various uses over the ensuing decades: courthouses, a horse bazaar, the city mission, a warehouse, and a carpark.

It is most likely this earring was lost some time in the mid to late 1800s. It did not see the light of day again, until the Adelaide City Council commissioned an archaeological dig of the site in the late 1980s. It is possible the earring had been lost for 100 years or more.

The Queen's Theatre, in Playhouse Lane off Currie St, was built for £3000 in 1840 by English brothers Emanuel and Vaiben Solomon, who had arrived at Port Jackson, Sydney,

in 1818 – aged only 18 and 17 – after being sentenced to seven years' transportation to NSW for stealing clothes.

After their emancipation, they became successful businessmen and stated their theatre could be used by "all classes of colonists unsubjected to rudeness and interruptions".

It opened in 1841 and remains the oldest purpose-built theatre on mainland Australia.

Hamish Angas, a Queen's Theatre expert and government heritage adviser, says the archaeological dig – conducted by Austral Archaeology in 1988 and 1989 – revealed significant remains of the theatre including:

FOUNDATIONS of all the main walls of the 1840 Queen's Theatre, including the under-stage basement, dressing rooms, tavern and offices.

ALTERATIONS made to the theatre in 1843

to turn the building into the law courts.

CHANGES made in refurbishing the building in 1850 to become the Royal Victoria



Theatre, including the extension of the dressing rooms and the modification of the orchestra pit.

TURNING the building into a horse bazaar in 1877, including soil fill and post holes.

The dig also revealed thousands of historic artefacts, including costumes, props, shoes, buttons, sequins, make-up cases, clay pipes, bottles, candlesticks, toothbrushes – and the single gold earring.

“Not only to discover the artefacts but to discover the underground structure of this 19th-century building was a revelation,” Mr Angas said.

“It was amazing. These artefacts talk about the early days of SA, when the colony was only three or four years old.”

But for the past 25 years, these treasures have been in 45 boxes in the government storage facility at Netley. Buried again. However, the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources, of which Mr Angas’s heritage branch is a part, is hoping that that will soon change.

“The decision has been to transfer them to an organisation that can make better use of them instead of them sitting in our store,” he said.

“We offered them to the SA Museum, which has an archaeological collection, and they said they’d take them.”

This month, in conjunction with Heritage Week, the items will be officially handed over to the museum’s curatorial staff.

“We, as a government, want them to be as easily accessible as possible and sitting at our Netley Store, as they have, for the last 25 years, is not the most ideal place for them to be easily

accessible,” Mr Angas said.

“Putting them into a curatorial organisation like the SA Museum is a far more appropriate

organisation to have custodianship of them.

“These items belong to the state and we feel that the SA Museum is a better place for them. We’re hoping that the museum will do displays with them from time to time.

“Looking over these items, it takes you back to a lifestyle of a totally different era. It’s like time travel, almost.

“When the underground was exposed, it remained like that for about five years with a dream of putting a glass floor in but we didn’t have the money to do that.

“So what happened was all the masonry – walls of stone and brick – started to decay because they had never been exposed to the air, so we had bricks turning to dust and all sorts of things.

“So we had to make the very hard decision of filling it all in again. But we did it in a very special way. We lined all the underground remains with geotextile fabric and then put clean sand in and then some of the old soil back in so that if at any time in the future someone wanted to re-excavate it, it would be a relatively simple process.”

Today, the Queen’s Theatre is a popular venue for hire and, once again, South Australians are getting dressed in their best to spend a night there chatting with their friends and laughing, just as it was 175 years ago.

Some of them, may even lose some jewellery.

“The best item from the archaeological dig is the single gold earring,” Mr Angas said.

“It could be romantic and have a lovely story attached to it but we don’t know anything about it other than it was found when they did the dig.” But that it survived, being buried be-

neath layers of dirt while the venue was horse bazaar, then stables, a store and warehouse, a carpark and ended up being a derelict shed full of pigeons and people sleeping rough, is story enough.

History surely does live and breathe.



MYSTERY: The earring, which could be about 150 years old, and, below, soda bottles.

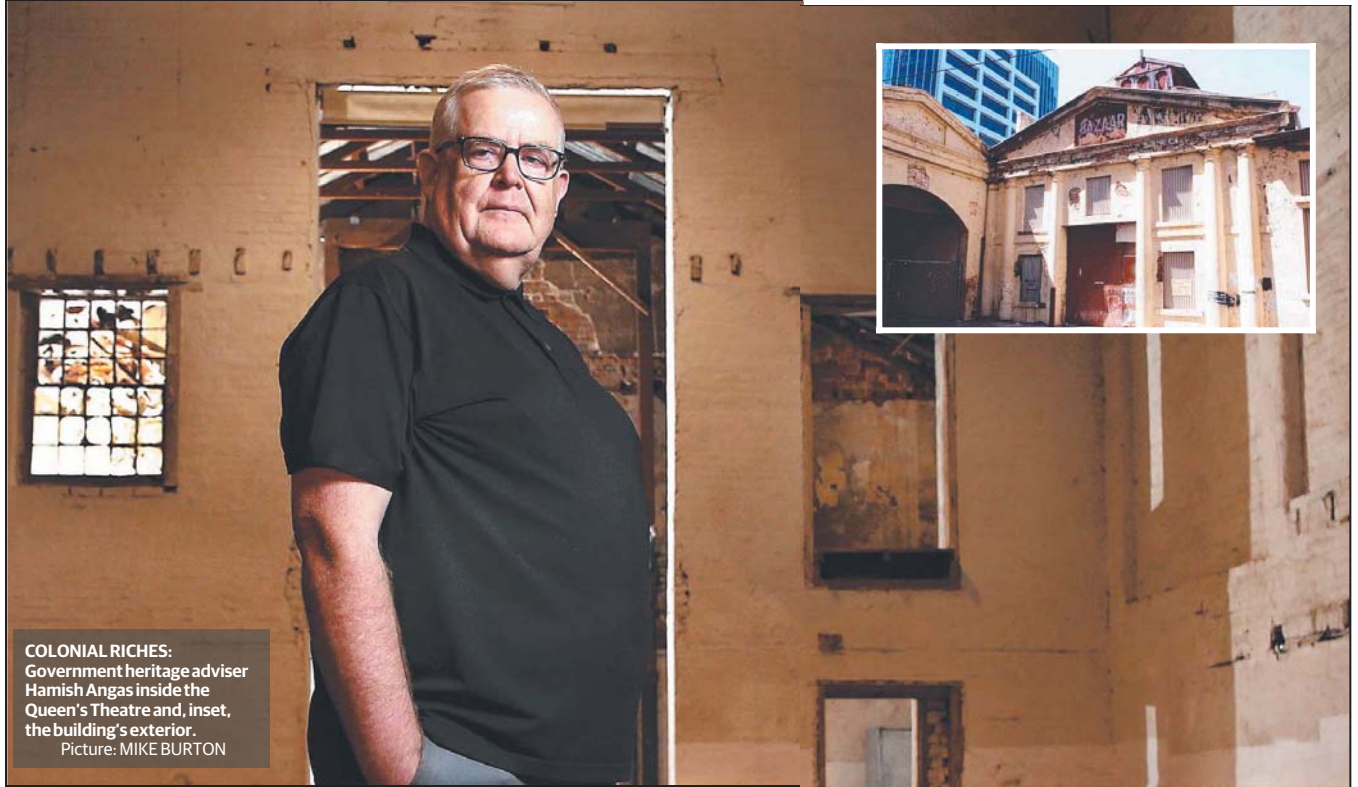


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COLONIAL RICHES:
Government heritage adviser
Hamish Angas inside the
Queen's Theatre and, inset,
the building's exterior.
Picture: MIKE BURTON



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UNEARTHED

1. Clay pipes. 2. A needle case. 3. A copper sequin and mother of pearl button. 4. An oriental design plate. 5. Part of a bone-handle knife. 6. Part of a metal ornament. 7. Ginger beer stoneware bottles.





UNDERFOOT: Archeologist Justin McCarthy in 1989 with a shoe sole found during the dig.



DIFFERENT USE: Horses for sale when the Queen's Theatre was an auction house in 1931.