

CLAY'S BRIDGE THEATRE COMPANY LTD

aka **Clay's Theatres Ltd / Clay's Vaudeville Company**

Founded in 1912 by Harry Clay (1865-1925), Harold Morgan and A. R. Abbott, Clay's Bridge Theatre Company built and operated the Bridge Theatre in Newtown (Sydney). It later controlled Clay's Sydney city/suburban circuit, and his south-west N.S.W. and Hunter Valley circuits. The company ended its association with live theatre in the late 1920s and moved into theatre and property leasing. Renamed Clay's Theatres Ltd in the 1930s, the company was controlled by H.T. Morgan and Sons (solicitors) until the sale of its flagship property in 1969.

Although Harry Clay only began operating under an officially registered business name in 1912 (as Clay's Bridge Theatre Company Ltd), his entrepreneurial career actually dates back to 1901. That year he took his first touring party on the road through New South Wales, Queensland and possibly Victoria and Tasmania. It is unclear if Clay was required to underwrite this first tour himself, and if so who provided the financial guarantee. However, given that he had established his managerial reputation in Newtown as early as the mid-to-late 1890s, it is possible that his later partners in Clay's Bridge Theatre Ltd - Newtown solicitor and Alderman, Harold T. Morgan (also a past and future Mayor) and businessman Archibald R. Abbott – may have also been investors in both the Queensland tours and his early Sydney circuit.



Australian Variety 23 May (1917). 1.



Newtown Diamond Jubilee Souvenir (1922), 2.

Following two further annual tours of Northern New South Wales and Queensland, Clay initiated a regular suburban circuit around Sydney in late 1903. As his name is not linked with any other organisations over the late spring to late summer periods of 1901 and 1902, it is possible that he was staging one-off or irregular variety shows in Sydney, and if so

Newtown's St George's Hall was likely to have been one venue. Although a number of secondary sources have claimed that Clay was the first manager to bring vaudeville to the suburbs of Sydney,¹ primary source research into Australia's late 19th century variety industry now demonstrates that this was not the case. Indeed, Sydney (as with Melbourne) audiences living outside the inner city precincts were clearly being entertained by variety troupes from at least the 1880s onwards. Among the venues known to have been used for such purposes that decade were the Darlinghurst Hall,² St Georges Hall (Newtown),³ Sir Joseph Banks Pavilion and Pleasure Grounds (Botany)⁴ and the Bondi and Coogee aquariums. What made Clay's venture different was that his was possibly the first circuit to operate in the suburbs of Sydney on a more or less permanent basis.

Between 1903 and 1905, Clay's operations basically involved the six month-long tour of Queensland after which he returned to Sydney to re-open his Sydney circuit. Interestingly, while his career has historically been associated with Sydney, it was the Queensland venture that had the greatest initial impact on his career as a vaudeville entrepreneur, and effectively positioned him as one of Australia's three leading vaudeville entrepreneurs (the others being Harry Rickards and the Tivoli organisation, and the Fuller brothers). Up until 1912 his company operated as more or less a sole trader type of business. These tours and his Sydney operations were subsequently known by various (non-legal) names including Harry Clay's Enterprises, Clay's Waxworks and Comedy Company or Clay's Waxworks and Vaudeville Company. Although both ventures were undoubtedly risky, his costs were surprisingly low (especially in Sydney) because the vast majority of acts were responsible for supplying their own properties and sets etc. For his touring companies Clay was required to pay for transportation (always first class) and possibly all or partial accommodation costs. Somewhat surprisingly he rarely ever engaged his artists under contract until 1916, preferring instead to do his deals with a handshake. It was often said that Clay's word was as good if not better than a written

¹ Leann Richards writes for example, "Clay was unique in that he took the theatre to the burgeoning suburban areas of Sydney" (History of Australian Theatre).

² Martyn Hagan was presenting his shows at the Darlinghurst Hall in the late 1880s (see his entry in the AVTA). John F. Sheridan even played a season there in December 1891/January 1892. In Brisbane Percy St John was one of a number of entrepreneurs who presented variety in suburbs such as Woolloongabba in the 1890s, while a number of Melbourne's suburban town halls and schools of arts were also being used for variety entertainment from the 1880s onwards.

³ Horace Bent played St George's Hall, Newtown under the management of Kron and Co in 1888. Harry Clay is also known to have been the manager of the hall in the mid to late-1890s, and in this position oversaw the production of numerous events, including variety entertainment.

⁴ Harry Clay's first professional appearance in Sydney occurred in 1885 at the Botany pleasure grounds. Produced under the management of Frank Smith, these shows were staged every Sunday for several years.

legal document, and indeed throughout his entire career he was only ever taken to court by one artist, and in that instance he was given the verdict.⁵

No records relating to the level of income these tours generated have yet been located, but there are a number of clues which indicate that Queensland (as well as Northern N.S.W.) was extremely lucrative for Clay. His seasons of 10 to 14 nights in Charters Towers from 1904 through until the mid-1910s, for example, attracted audiences of 2,000 or more each night, with adult patrons paying a shilling and children sixpence. Other indications that Clay profited well from these tours were the £300 Trust Fund he set up (with cash) for daughter Essie only days after returning from his 1905 tour; and his purchase of a house in the fashionable end of Glebe Point Road for £1,500, paid in cash only days after returning from his eighth Queensland tour ("Harry Clay" 13).

Clay's Sydney suburban circuit, while perhaps not initially reaping as much money as the Queensland tours, was nevertheless strategically important in helping Clay build what was to eventually become a small vaudeville empire. Requiring only limited capital outlay, and without the leasing commitments that were standard for city-based entrepreneurs, Clay was free to adapt his circuit to suit his needs – just as he did with his Queensland tours. During this period his only inner city show was a Saturday night programme at the Royal Standard - located down the far southern end of Castlereagh Street in the city - and hence he was only committed to a one night lease. To a large extent, then his primary costs in running the suburban shows were, aside from renting each venue, wages and perhaps travel reimbursements. Most of his advertising was undertaken locally through posters, daybills and dodgers (the latter being delivered to local residences by children for the cost of free admission to a show). The decision to build his own theatre, however, was a business strategy that not only required a large capital investment but also increased the risk factor.

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.

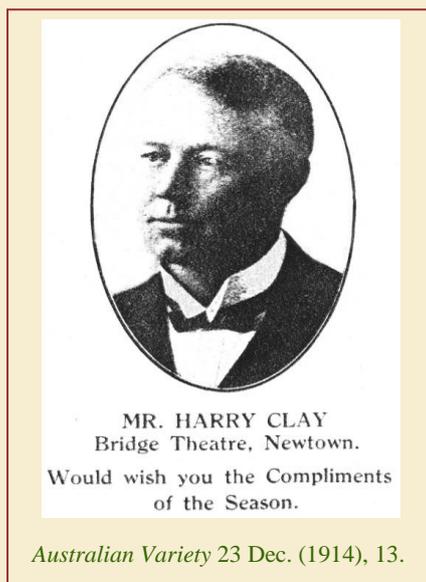
1/- ADMISSION. 1/-
 Children under 10 Half-price.

LOU COURTNEY,
 Representative.

Charters Towers
Northern Miner 16 May (1905), 1.

1912 - 1917

In 1912, having decided to set up his new theatrical enterprise in the heartland of Newtown, Clay and his three partners Morgan, and Abbott established the Bridge Theatre Company Pty Ltd (its registered office was 2 Denison Street, Newtown). In October that year they made an application to the Newtown Council for permission to erect a theatre on a block of land situated on the railway bridge that had for many years been the site of a blacksmith's shop and briefly the Newtown Hippodrome.⁶ The following month the application, which the council initially referred to the Works' Committee, was granted permission to proceed subject to the Government Architects approval (468). Work on the theatre began in late February or early March 1913.



Clay opened his account at the Bridge Theatre on 19 July 1913. Surprisingly, too, he also commenced operations at two other theatres on the same night - the National Theatre, Balmain, and the Coliseum Theatre, North Sydney. The day after the opening of the Bridge Theatre the Sydney Sun published a small article on Clay and his suburban operations:

Mr. Harry Clay opened his new Bridge Theatre at Newtown last night to a capacity house. This new theatre is one of a circuit of suburban houses, including the Coliseum, North Sydney and the national Theatre, Balmain, under Mr. Clay's direction. Mr Clay has been showing without a break for the past 20 years, and such well-known artists as Daisy Harcourt, Lalla Brooke, the Leslie Brothers practically made their start with him. Essie Clay, now with the George Marlowe Co in Melbourne is a daughter. His wife was also a well-known performer - so his is really a theatrical family... Mr Clay has two vaudeville companies at present playing in Sydney, also a dramatic company and a vaudeville company on tour in Queensland. The Coliseum, North Sydney, plays three nights' vaudeville and three nights' drama, as does the National, Balmain. The Bridge Theatre is devoted to vaudeville. Mr Clay hopes to eventually control seven suburban theatres (20 July 1913, 15).

⁵ Music director/conductor Frances Rose Phillips alleged in 1923 that Clay owed her £106.4. in wages. See "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company, 1865-1930" (revised edition), page 92 for further details.

⁶ The Hippodrome was leased briefly by Edward "Bohemian" Cole around 1908/09 and by 1912 was being operated by James Brennan, possibly as a boxing stadium (see "Bridge Theatre" entry for further details).

Australian Variety reports in November that "Harry Clay's Newtown home [was still] playing to capacity business nightly" (5 Nov. 1913, 6), a level of success that led to him terminating the remainder of his suburban circuit (apart from a No 2 company at the Coronation Theatre, Leichhardt, every Saturday night). This decision had been made he claimed so that he could "devote his whole attention to the Bridge Theatre" (AV: 3 Dec. 1913, 6).

BRIDGE (CLAY'S) THEATRE.
 NEWTOWN BRIDGE.
Opening Night,
SATURDAY NEXT.
 AND EVERY EVENING.
 ALL—VAUDEVILLE—ALL
 COMBINATION.
 New Artists and New Acts Every Saturday.
 OUR MOTTO IS MODESTY.
 We say little and do much.
 ADMISSION: 6d, 1/-, and 1/4.
 Seats can be booked at Mick Simmons,
 Ltd., 311 King-street, Newtown.



THE ONLY CLAY THAT DRAWS NO CONNECTION WITH ANY OTHER CLAYS

BALMAIN NATIONAL THEATRE.
 Lessee, HARRY CLAY.
Commencing Saturday Next, and Every Evening.

EVERY SATURDAY, MONDAY, and TUESDAY. CHARLES STANFORD'S DRAMATIC COMPANY. First Production, THE EVIL STRANGER. PRICES AS USUAL.	EVERY WEDNESDAY, THURSDAY, and FRIDAY. HARRY—(CLAY'S)—HARRY VAUDEVILLE COMPANY. New Artists Always Appearing. PRICES AS USUAL.
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COLISEUM THEATRE, NORTH SYDNEY.
 Lessee, HARRY CLAY.
Commencing Saturday Next, and Every Evening.

EVERY SATURDAY, MONDAY, and TUESDAY. HARRY—(CLAY'S)—HARRY VAUDEVILLE COMBINATION. PRICES AS USUAL.	EVERY WEDNESDAY, THURSDAY, and FRIDAY. CHARLES STANFORD'S DRAMATIC COMPANY. First Production, THE EVIL STRANGER. PRICES AS USUAL.
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Sun (Syd) 13 July (1913), 3.

In 1916, having ridden out a tough but brief period the previous year, when local audiences were distracted by several newly-opened picture theatres, Clay re-opened his suburban circuit. He also established Harry Clay's Theatrical Enterprises and Booking Offices. It is not known, however, if this venture was his own independent business or if it operated as part of the Bridge Theatre Company Pty Ltd. Perhaps the most important aspect of the Bridge Theatre Company's expansion during 1916 was the decision to extend the Sydney circuit into several NSW regions, whereby he would run four distinct companies along what was to be one complete circuit comprising a one week tour of the suburbs, a week-long season at the Bridge Theatre and a two-weeks tour of the South-Western line. The towns initially played along the South-western circuit were: Goulburn, Murrumburrah, Wagga Wagga, Young, Cowra, Grenfell, Bathurst, Albury, Portland, Lithgow, Katoomba, Yass and Cootamundra ("Harry Clay" - MA thesis, Chapter Four and Appendix D). This expansion resulted not only in increased opportunities for performers (more than 100 individuals being employed in any given week), but also meant that the Bridge

Clay's Bridge Theatre
 Newtown Bridge.
EVERY EVENING.

No. 2 Company :
Coronation Theatre, Leichhardt
 Every Saturday Night.

Always an Opening for Good Artists.

Australian Variety 31 Dec. (1913), n. pag.

Theatre Company expanded its employee base to include dozens of managers, office staff and associated theatre workers, including costume makers,⁷ scenic artists, stage hands, musicians, electricians, operators etc. Another significant move by the company in September 1916 was to open at the Coliseum Theatre at North Sydney. Located at 269 Miller Street (corner of Ridge Street), the theatre would for many years be referred to as either Clay's Theatre or Clay's Coliseum.

⁷ It should be pointed out that artists were responsible for the costumes used in their own acts. The company would generally supply garments for revues, farces and special events, however.

HARRY CLAY'S VAUDEVILLE
 Each and Every Evening at Eight.
 Kerr's GAIETY THEATRE, Oxford Street, Hyde Park,
 Matinees, Saturdays and All Holidays, at 2.30.

THE BRIDGE THEATRE, NEWTOWN.
 (Right on the Bridge.) No Matinees.

THE PRINCESS THEATRE, George Street, Railway Square.
 Matinees, Saturdays and All Holidays, at 2.30.

Every Saturday—Gigantic All-Star Vaudeville.
AT THE CHEAPEST PRICES OF ADMISSION POSSIBLE.
 PARIS GARDENS, MANLY.
 CLAY'S SUBURBAN ROUTES.
 Entirely New Company Appearing Weekly:—
 SATURDAY—North Sydney Coliseum and Paris Gardens, Manly.
 MONDAY—North Sydney Coliseum; Queen's Theatre, Hurstville.
 TUESDAY—Rockdale Town Hall; Oxford Theatre, Paddington.
 WEDNESDAY—Paris Gardens, Manly; Mosman Town Hall.
 THURSDAY—Bondi Junction Coronation; Democratic Theatre, South
 Kensington.
 FRIDAY—Ashfield Town Hall; Rowland's Theatre, Wollongong.
 CLAY'S VAUDEVILLE BOOKING AGENCY,
 4 Young's Chambers, 256 Pitt Street, Sydney.
**ALWAYS AN OPENING FOR GOOD VAUDEVILLE
 AND REVUE PEOPLE.**
 ALL CLASSES OF PERFORMERS SUPPLIED FOR GARDEN
 FETES, AT HOMES, SMOKE CONCERTS, Etc.
 See J. H. WHITE ("Whitie.")

(Above) *Everyone's* 16 Mar. (1921), 16.

Paris **CLAY'S** Gardens
 Manly Manly

Minstrel, Vaudeville and Revue Company
 Wednesday Next, 10th December

Driver Walker and Una Forde
 In the Military Sketch "A Nurse's Devotion," Introducing
 Anzac, the Regimental Dog



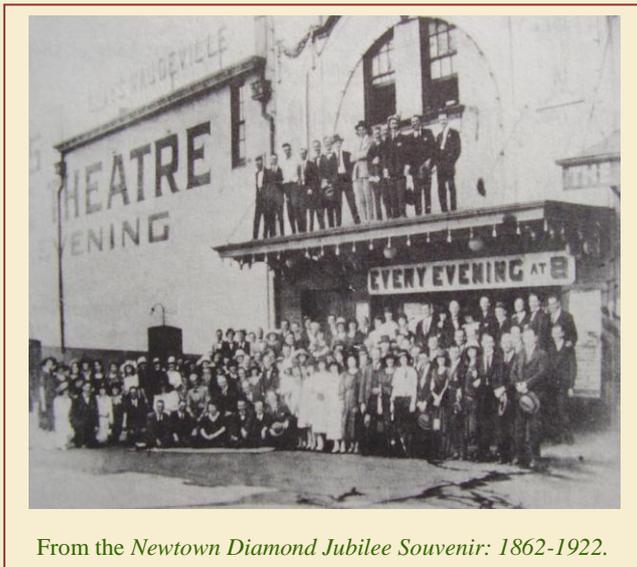
Ted Stanley
 Jim Romaine
 Madge Loyala
 Elvie Stagpoole
 Alf Edwards

Ross' **Bonnie Boys**
 Jim Caldwell
 Una Ford
 Harmony Four
 Phillips Sisters

First Appearance
Frank Moran
 The Elongated Comedian
 and Mirth Bearer

A Great Show at Popular Prices

(Right) Courtesy of Barbara Peek



From the *Newtown Diamond Jubilee Souvenir: 1862-1922*.

An indication of the gradual down-turn in the company's fortunes - it could never be described as a collapse - can be seen in A.R. Abbot's letter to the Commissioner of Stamps, presented as part of Clay's Deceased Estate File. Abbot indicated that the company's shares were considered to be (in 1925) only 20/- instead of the 28/- indicated on the last Balance Sheet, and cited the company's losses for the past three years as being the reason for this. Those losses were as follows:

Year ending Nov. 30th 1922	£2360.17. 08
Year ending Nov. 30th 1923	£1834. 4. 01
Year ending Nov. 30th 1924	£2381. 4. 03

Abbot further stated that "when the directors decided to issue another 1,500 fully paid shares at 20/-, six of the seventeen shareholders did not make an application, although financial members of the community" (letter dated 9 June 1925). It

would seem then, that from 1922 onwards the company began to feel the brunt of changes that would by the end of the decade see vaudeville lose its position as the dominant entertainment offering in Australia. Further indication of vaudeville's change in fortune would become noticeable in early 1923, too, when the *Theatre* magazine pointed out that in Sydney only Harry G. Musgrave (Tivoli) and Harry Clay were presenting vaudeville between them - with the Fullers and George Marlow offering other theatrical attractions for the time being (Jan. 1923, 20).

1925 - ca. 1970s

Following Harry Clay's death in 1925, management of the company once again fell to Maurice Chenoweth. When he and the other directors decided not to renew its lease on the Princess Theatre in 1926 the company temporarily relocated to the nearby Haymarket Hippodrome, but for Saturday nights only. This association is believed to have ended in either late 1926 or early 1927. While references to the suburban circuit in magazines like *Just It* appear to indicate that further contraction led to just a handful of venues in 1926 and 1927 this is difficult to ascertain as Clay's advertising in that magazine stops around this period and hence mention of the company also decreases markedly. The suburbs known to have been part of the circuit during those years are: Newtown (Bridge Theatre), CBD (Gaiety Theatre), Leichhart (Strand Theatre), Ashfield Town Hall and North Sydney (Coliseum) in 1926; and the Bridge, Gaiety and Coliseum theatres in 1927 (along with an unidentified venue in Balmain). It is known, too, that the Gaiety

was still controlled by Clay's Bridge Theatre Company up until mid-to-late 1929. The company's association with entertainment at the Bridge Theatre ended around December 1929 or early January 1930, however. The North Sydney Coliseum license was also not renewed during 1929.

Although the Bridge Theatre (renamed The Hub in the early 1930s) was leased by various individuals and companies over the next couple of decades it remained under the ownership of Clay's company until around the late 1960s/early 1970s (at some stage in the 1930s it was renamed Clay's Theatres Ltd). Although an exact date for the sale of the theatre is unknown, the new owner was a company called Moorgate Pty Ltd. According to information held in Essie Clay's 1948 Deceased Estate File, it seems that her father's company had been trading relatively well over the past twenty years. The 1948 assessment of the company's books showed that it had made over the 1947-48 period an "average profit after payment of taxes = £432.13. 9." This was a very much lower result than the two year period 1946-47, due to a very poor Net Profit return in 1945. 1947, for instance, showed a £1,439.13. 5 Net Profit. The company's shares in 1947 were valued at 11/-, and considered by the company's accountants as representing fair value (Letter dated 29 Nov. 1948 - File No A135194, NSW State Government Archives). Clay's Theatres Ltd operations at this time, still controlled by H.T. Morgan and Sons, are believed to have been in the area of theatre and property leasing.

Details regarding the ending of Clay's company still remain a mystery. With a key file currently missing from the State Government Archives, and there being no other record of a company registration number, an attempt to find these answers has been to no avail. It is interesting to note, however, that the Dead Companies Index (held at the State Government Archives), shows no mention of the company being declared inoperable prior to the closure of the index in the mid-1960s. A search undertaken by the Australian Securities Commission, too, has failed to locate any information regarding the Bridge Theatre Company, and hence this matter must remain unresolved for the time being.

SEE ALSO

- [A. R. Abbott](#)
- [Harold T. Morgan](#)
- [Bridge Theatre](#) (Newtown)

FURTHER REFERENCE

Djubal, Clay. "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company, 1865-1930: An Historical and Critical Survey." MA Thesis, The University of Queensland, 1998.
"Clay Theatres, The." SS: 20 July (1920), 15.



The Princess Theatre (Syd)
Courtesy of Jon Fabian



The Bridge Theatre/The Hub
Courtesy of Newtown Research and Explorations website

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Expanded and updated from Clay Djubal, "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company" MA Thesis (1998) U of Qld.

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