

John Philip Kemble

John Philip Kemble was born on 1st February 1757 in Hillock Street, Prescot. He was baptised at Prescot Parish Church on 16th February 1757.

He belonged to a famous acting dynasty headed by his father Roger Kemble, a celebrated comedian.



Portrait of John Philip Kemble

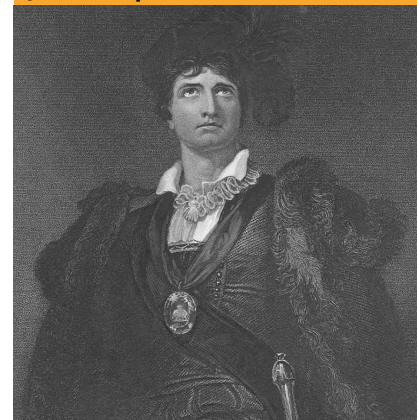
John's elder sister Sarah Siddons was an accomplished actress and achieved fame with him on the stage of The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. The brother and sister duo first appeared there together in 1783, as Beverley and Mrs Beverley in *The Gamester*. His other siblings Charles, Stephen, Ann and Elizabeth also enjoyed success on the stage. John's niece Frances Ann (Fanny) Kemble was a respected actress and author.

John Kemble's father wanted him to become a priest and was sent to study in France, but being born into a theatrical family, it was unsurprising that John took to the stage. In December 1787 he married actress Priscilla Hopkins Brereton, the widow of another actor.

Kemble's life was as dramatic and eventful as any play he performed in. In 1781, in defence of an actress friend, he attacked a group of officers with his sword. Ten years later, he fought a duel with a man named James Aicken. In a show of great chivalry, he faced the fire of Aicken's pistol, and retaliated by shooting into the air rather than at his rival.

<http://www.knowsley.gov.uk/things-to-see-and-do/galleries-and-museum.aspx>

John Philip Kemble as Hamlet



Kemble was noted for his tragic roles, specialising in Shakespearean dramas, and was particularly celebrated for his portrayal of Hamlet – the first character he played on the London stage in 1783. The great poet Lord Byron claimed he was “the most supernatural of actors.”

Kemble & Siddons, *Macbeth* 1786, by Thomas Beach



Sarah Siddons by Gilbert Stuart



John Philip Kemble

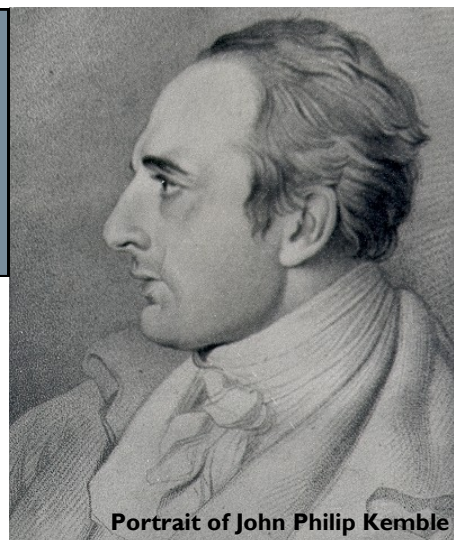
Kemble was appointed manager of Drury Lane Theatre in 1788, and revolutionised dramatic productions, introducing live animals and aquatic effects to the stage.

He later managed and owned shares in the Covent Garden Theatre in 1803. It burned down in 1808, and was subsequently rebuilt and reopened in 1809, almost resulting in his financial ruin. Following the renovation, ticket prices rose, leading to 'The Old Price Riots' which lasted for 67 nights. In addition to money donated by the Duke of Northumberland, Kemble sold his personal library in order to reduce the theatre's ticket prices.

Kemble's work won him national acclaim as Britain's leading tragic actor in roles such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Cato* and *Coriolanus*. After years of successful reviews, he began to be overshadowed by the Romantic actor Edward Kean. Following his final performance as *Coriolanus* on 23rd June 1817, Kemble moved to the Continent, he died on 26th February 1823 in Lausanne, Switzerland, aged 66.

Hillock Street was renamed Kemble Street in his honour. His birthplace, 93 Kemble Street, was demolished in 1969.

Numerous portraits of John Kemble and his family exist, reflecting his status as one of the most popular and wealthy 18th century celebrities.



Portrait of John Philip Kemble



Kemble's birthplace - 93 Kemble Street

Invite to Kemble's retirement dinner



Examples of portraits of the Kemble family

Portrait of John Philip Kemble as Hamlet, Sir Thomas Lawrence. Tate Gallery, London.

Actor J. P. Kemble as Cato. Walker Art Gallery.

Portrait of John Philip Kemble, G. Stuart, c.1800. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Fanny Kemble, Sir Thomas Lawrence.

Charles Kemble as Romeo, P. Thomson, c. 1819. R. Mander & J. Mitchenson Theatre Collection.

Portrait of Mrs Sarah Siddons, G. Stuart. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Sarah Siddons, John Downman. National Portrait Gallery, London.