

**7 Mary Pepi Countess de Rossetti, d 7 December 1915**  
**Rino Pepi d 17 Nov 1927**

Rino Pepi became a theatre entrepreneur in the north of England, and owned the Tivoli Theatre in Forshaw St.



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It was one of the theatres commissioned by the famous entrepreneur, Signor Pepi:– He started building a chain of theatres. After Barrow came Blackpool (acquired by ABC as the Hippodrome and rebuilt in 1963 as the ABC – ‘Europe’s most luxurious theatre’ and from where many lavish live shows were televised) and then Carlisle. Then, early in 1907, in partnership with the Birmingham theatre specialist George Ward, he began work on an “Opera House and Empire” on some recently-cleared land in Parkgate, Darlington. Within seven months, the theatre was complete and, named the New Hippodrome and Palace Theatre of Varieties, it opened on September 2.

Even as Pepi received the opening night acclaim, building was beginning on another of his hippodromes, this one in Middlesbrough, on top of an old Quaker burial ground. After Middlesbrough came Bishop Auckland Hippodrome in 1909 followed by Shildon in 1910. But even as it was growing, Pepi’s empire was crumbling at its peripheries. He sold off Middlesbrough after just eight months, losing £10,000 in the process. Shildon lasted a year, its disposal coinciding with the Bishop Auckland Hippodrome being declared bankrupt in 1911. By the outbreak of the First World War, our principal character owned just two theatres: Darlington and Barrow. To make matters worse, on December 7, 1915, his wife Mary, Countess de Rossetti, died at their modest mid-terrace home in Barrow. She was only 46.

Signor Rino Pepi was one of the leading quick-change artistes of the late 19th century and at the age of 30 bought the Star Theatre of Varieties in Barrow – later the Tivoli in Forshaw Street. He came to Barrow as a performer on a tour of the provinces but found out the theatre was for sale and embarked on the building of what would become a theatrical empire. He had strong links with the development of the theatre in the North East and his story is told in *Of Fish and Actors: 100 Years of Darlington Civic Theatre* by Chris Lloyd. (2007) Signor Pepi was born in 1872 as the son of a merchant in Florence, Italy. By his early 20s he was a star across Europe. Queen Victoria liked him so much she gave him a diamond scarf pin. Along the way, he fell in love with Mary, Countess de Rossetti, a widow who was half-Italian and half-Irish. She taught him English and 1898 he came to London and for three months he topped the bill at the Pavilion in Piccadilly Circus – now the Trocadero shopping centre – with a 15-minute sketch called *Love Always Victorious*. He played all seven characters in this show, male and female. Signor Pepi took his show to Austria, Belgium and Holland, before starting the British tour which brought him to Barrow in September 1902.

This article is an abridged version of a chapter in Chris Lloyd's book, *Of Fish and Actors: 100 Years of Darlington Civic Theatre* **Copyright not sought yet**