

CASEWORK REPORT: November 2009

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GRANADA, Hoe Street, Walthamstow, London; Cecil Masey and Theodore Komisarjevsky, 1930, Grade II*

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God has submitted plans to Waltham Forest Council's planning department to change this long time derelict cinema into a place of worship. The Council is in the process of selling off the adjacent brownfield site for redevelopment as a multiplex, among other uses, and is not convinced that this cinema could, viably, reopen for film shows with new competition so close. This is another case, very similar to what happened in Kingston several years ago, where the actions of the local authority actively endangered a historic cinema. There seems to be no joined up thinking regarding a responsibility toward heritage and new developments. At the Tuschinski cinema in Amsterdam the new multiplex integrated the historic cinema into its business – successfully - and thereby guaranteed the survival of this building. Most likely this was not just due to a heritage conscious developer with a charitable spirit, but because there are national guidelines in place to see to it that new development does not jeopardize important public treasures. We do feel as well that there is a responsibility to keep such very special cinemas in public use – but it appears that the mechanisms in place here often are working out of sync, with the consequence that important buildings get lost in the spaces in-between.

In the meantime we have requested to be allowed on site so as to be able to evaluate the current application professionally. Looking at drawings without understanding the condition of the actual space is just not enough. Three appointments in consecutive weeks have been set up and then cancelled. The building has been condemned by the Council since 2003 because of the possible risk of asbestos contamination. And while the owners are now undertaking steps to have this lifted, the Council has informed us that the owners should have addressed these issues years ago. This has been extremely disappointing because we had organized caseworkers from the Twentieth Century Society, SAVE Britain's Heritage and The Theatres Trust, as well as the Cinema Organ Society, to attend. While the Council has promised to hold the application until we have been allowed on site, we are concerned that the other bodies will lose interest in the cause of this important cinema.

PICTUREDROME, 51 Canada Grove, Bognor Regis, West Sussex; Arthur Smith as Assembly Rooms in 1886, films from 1897, 1919 conversion to full cinema use by the architect and owner Peter D Stonham and then renamed Picturedrome, Grade II

Almost as soon as the listing of this early cinema conversion went through, a planning application was registered with Arun District Council to convert this building into three residential units. This would have totally defaced the interior and any appreciation of the historic auditorium space. The Theatres Trust objected strongly and so did we. We also alerted English Heritage directly who instantly supported our reservations. The plans have now been turned down!

RIALTO (later Granada), 25 Church Road, Upper Norwood (Crystal Palace), London; AC Matthews, 1927, unlisted

We have commented on an application to change this historic cinema, which was last operating as a bingo hall, for church use. Opened as the Rialto on 6 October 1927 the film house originally had a seating capacity of 1,393 in stalls and balcony. The cinema showed silent pictures until 1930 when sound films were introduced. It had been designed and built by its proprietor AC Matthews who was an Australian. The frenzy to provide the public with more cinemas during the boom years is hard to imagine today, but it made speculative enterprises like this one not unusual. The Granada circuit took over in 1949 and the cinema was renamed. By 1968 it was turned into a bingo hall by Granada and later became a Gala bingo club. Earlier this year the Gala closed its doors for good and sold the venue to a church.

The auditorium is in restrained classical style with an arched ceiling. Many noteworthy original features survive such as the plasterwork decoration, mirrors, grillwork and chandeliers in the auditorium, as well as the decorative wrought iron balustrades in the stairwell. There is much architectural significance to the interior of this historic cinema.

In this instance we have objected to turning the cinema into a place of worship and have urged the council to seriously investigate its return to film use. There hasn't been a cinema locally for 41 years. The immediate district has changed in that time from being run down to having a proliferation of restaurants and bars replacing traditional shops. This is a bustling area that could easily sustain a cinema such as the Ritzy in Brixton, the Screen on the Green in Islington or the Electric in Portobello Road.

Returning this building to film and entertainment use would not only connect with all the new night life but also fill a 'cinema gap' in south-east London. The closest cinemas now are the Ritzy in Brixton and the Odeon in Streatham to the west, but to the east there is nothing until the Odeon in Beckenham. North, there is a cinema in Peckham, but the closest cinema in the south is all the way down in Croydon. In the middle of this area is Dulwich consisting of well-off established people, who may well attend a reopened Rialto, but locally there is now no cinema provision.

We are convinced that this historic cinema could once again be a viable business for film shows!

LISTING

Tameside Hippodrome, Oldham Road, Ashton-under-Lyne, Manchester; JJ Alley, 1904, converted to cinema in 1933 by Drury & Gomersall, Grade II

We are pleased to announce that this building has now been listed.

Built as a theatre in 1904 by the architect JJ Alley, the building was converted for film shows in 1933. The architects employed for these changes were Drury & Gomersall who comprehensively redesigned the auditorium and foyer with a crisp classically inspired Art Deco style. One of the two balconies was removed and so were the boxes, but the stage facilities were retained. An organ was installed at this point, that is regrettably no longer there. By 1935 the façade had also been redesigned and updated by the same architectural firm.

We hope this will set an important precedent regarding listing applications for further still unprotected cinemas.

ABBEYDALE, Abbeydale Road, Sheffield South Yorkshire; Dixon and Steinlet, 1920, Grade II

There is a strong local campaign by the Hallamshire Historic Buildings Society to increase the status of this Grade II listed cinema to Grade II*. We had been asked for our support and have carefully assessed the case. What is so special about this building is the unusual iron safety curtain. The decoration on the safety curtain at the Abbeydale Picture House dates from the 1950s and shows posters advertising local wares and services. It would have been let down during the intermission and would have been viewed by cinemagoers while they were drinking their tea. It is unique.

Decorated safety curtains, while once common, are now of great rarity in cinemas. The one at the Odeon in Leicester Square still survives and the decoration here is by Edward Bainbridge Copnall but is a painted work of art, rather than an advertisement as at the Abbeydale.

We consider the decoration on the safety curtain of the Abbeydale of great rarity nationwide and have recommended that it should be acknowledged in the list description even if the campaign to upgrade the cinema is not successful.

The casework team would also very much appreciate any more information on surviving original iron safety curtains that members may be aware of.

**RITZ (Jehovahs Witness Hall), Bowes Road, Southgate, London;
William King, 1933,unlisted**

Haringey Council is to put forward this cinema for listing. We have supported their cause by providing them with a history of the building.

**METROPOLE, 160 Victoria Street, Westminster, London;
George Coles, 1929, unlisted**

We have just heard from the Twentieth Century Society that the building next to this historic cinema, TH Sutton pawnbrokers, has been listed at Grade II. This could be excellent news in terms of drawing attention to the devastating redevelopment plans for the entire area north of Victoria station. The plans would mean that the beautiful and highly ornate surviving foyer of the Metropole would be demolished and we hope that the listing of the pawnbrokers will put a halt to this.

CINEMAS AT SERIOUS RISK

**NEW VICTORIA (aka Odeon), Prince's Way, Bradford, Yorkshire;
William Illingworth, 1930, unlisted**

Planning permission is now in place to tear down the historic cinema and replace it with a new structure. BORG (Bradford Odeon Rescue Group), the vociferous local campaign has been fighting a valiant battle to stop this from happening. We have written to the Secretary of State requesting that the case be called in and determined at a public inquiry. SAVE Britain's Heritage have now done the same. We consider that several important policies, that are in place to protect buildings that are listed or in a Conservation Area, have not been complied with. The applications are not only contrary to Bradford's Unitary Development Plan, but also the Planning Policy Guidance 15 on buildings of clear architectural merit within a Conservation Area. We are also very concerned that, should the demolition really be allowed under these conditions, a very dangerous precedent would be set.

Cinemas are highly complex in terms of their design development, which has evolved as a typical twentieth century building type. The moving image is undeniably one of the great developments of modernity and the world as we experience it today would certainly not be possible without it. Historic cinema buildings are the physical manifestation of this groundbreaking development and early examples are now very rare. They are important as examples of our nation's architectural and social heritage. Historic cinemas often have complicated, very tightly developed plans and sections. Often they have been adapted and fitted out with suspended ceiling or other reversible changes that have been part of new fit-outs. A thorough assessment of what survives is then a matter of knowing where to look.

On the occasion of the first listing application for the New Victoria we believe that the English Heritage inspector was not given full access to all areas of the interior to form a complete picture of what was left of the ornate plasterwork that was covered over and concealed by later lightweight and removable surfaces. We have seen photographic evidence of this and had on numerous occasions offered our support by attending on site to help point out the relevant locations. But sadly our offer was not taken up and listing was turned down.

The New Victoria opened in 1930 and was the largest and most ambitious cinema to be built in the north of England, and indeed one of the largest, with splendid decorative opulence, outside London. Cinemas of such a grand scale existed in other major centres of the north, such as Manchester, Newcastle, Liverpool and Leeds but none were in the same league as the New Victoria. Its only rivals nationally, during the golden age of cinema construction of the inter-war period, were those in London and its surrounding area such as:

Trocadero, Elephant and Castle (demolished)
Davis, Croydon (demolished)
Gaumont State, Kilburn (listed Grade II*)
Granada, Woolwich (Grade II*)
Granada, Tooting (Grade I)

Comparable examples outside the London area were:

Regent, Brighton (demolished)
Regent, Plymouth (demolished)
Green's Playhouse, Glasgow (demolished)
Green's Playhouse, Dundee (Category A, although only façade survives following the destruction of the interior by fire)
Playhouse, Edinburgh (Category A)

Most of the comparable cinemas were demolished many years ago before there was an educated appreciation of the architectural and historic merit of this building type. The survivors are now listed – and at very high grades of protection.

But regardless of the originally very fine and luxurious interior and its possible survival, this cinema is unquestionably of great significance externally. It makes a significant contribution to the townscape of central Bradford. The architect, William Illingworth, consciously designed the façade in terms of complementing the adjacent tower of the Alhambra theatre. And this has been acknowledged in the Conservation Area Assessment dating from 2005.

We hope that the combined efforts of the local campaigners, SAVE and the CTA will be enough to finally put a halt to the detrimental plans for demolition.

COLISEUM Cinema, 18-20 Albion Street, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire; Architect unknown, 1913 as theatre, 1931 as cinema, locally listed

A new application to demolish this cinema has been submitted.

Odeon West End / LEICESTER SQUARE THEATRE, 39-41 Leicester Square, Westminster, London;

Andrew Mather, 1930, unlisted but in Conservation Area

Adam Unger has still not been allowed on site to make a photographic record of the interior.

Demolition is now imminent.

SHORT CAMPAIGNING UPDATES

STATE, George Street, Grays, Essex;

FGM Chancellor, 1938, Grade II*

In June we received notification from Thurrock Borough Council that funding is now in place for a feasibility study for this empty and unused cinema. Since then we have heard nothing and we are

growing increasingly concerned about the building's condition. The owners have refused any communication with us for years in which a positive way forward could be worked out.

**GAUMONT STATE, Kilburn High Road, London;
George Coles, 1937, II***

The first phase of the ambitious proposals to restore this cinema from its recent use as a bingo hall into a place of worship and reinstate much of its original fabric has been approved. We had raised no objections to the preliminary steps that need to be put in place before the building can be used for its new purpose.

**NEW VICTORIA (aka Apollo Victoria), 17 Wilton Road, Westminster, London;
Ernest Wamsley Lewis, 1930, Grade II***

We were notified that a Klee Clamp system had been installed at roof level for health and safety reasons regarding any work at this height. Unfortunately the balustrade that this clamp system is attached to is visible from the street, which we consider unacceptable for a Grade II* listed building. These systems can be installed on the roofs of historic buildings unobtrusively. It is disappointing that in this instance this was not done; especially so because so much care and attention has been dedicated to bringing the building and its façade back to its former glory. We have written to Westminster Council recommending that this situation be put right. The railings either need to be positioned back from the parapet or adjusted in height, or both.

**OXFORD / Odeon, Magdalen Street, Oxford;
Frank Matcham & Co and JC Leeds, 1924, Grade II**

Several months ago we had recommended that the proposed new screen should be retractable like that at the Electric in Portobello Road. The proscenium arch at the Oxford is still in its original dimensions and is completely unspoiled. This is now exceedingly rare in a working mainstream cinema. There is listed building consent in place to allow for a new screen to be installed that would obscure this wonderful surviving feature because it would be placed in front of it. While this new screen does not damage the historic interior in any way it would be a shame not to be able to appreciate the original proscenium. We will be in contact with Odeon to offer advice.

**Whiteladies Picture House, Whiteladies Road, Bristol;
Architect unknown, 1921, Grade II**

Proposals have been submitted for conversion of this cinema to either a place of worship or a supermarket. We have sent in our objections.

**REGENT, Victoria Parade, Deal, Kent;
Built as a seaside pavilion in 1928, changed for cinema use in 1933, unlisted**

There is a move to convert this cinema into a performing arts facility. Great news!