

Celebrating a century of British cinema



The Phoenix, East Finchley, London.

The Phoenix Cinema built in 1910 was amongst the first wave of purpose built cinemas. Last year in its one hundredth year it underwent a fabulous one million pound refurbishment which restored its 1930s splendour. Mark Trompeteler reports on a Phoenix that has never had to rise up from the ashes - from its Picturedrome beginnings to the present day.

Early Cinema

Most of us probably know that the first commercial projection of films in Britain began in the early months of 1896 and that the beginnings of cinema did not start in what we now know as cinemas. The early film performances of the first decade of the twentieth century were shown in the major halls in big cities, local halls around the country, fairground tents and also as part of variety programmes in theatres and music halls. The very first fixed site cinemas were conversions of buildings previously used for other purposes. As in all historical things the claims for the very first purpose designed and built cinema ever built in the world are numerous and varied. Some American sources claim the first permanent structure designed for the screening of movies was Tally's Electric Theater, completed in 1902 in Los Angeles. Tally's Theater was a storefront and operation within a much larger building, but apparently purpose-built as a movie theatre, a building within a building - so does that count? European sources cite the Cinema Omnia Pathe which opened in Paris on December 1, 1906. The 20ft by 13ft screen they installed was larger than anywhere at the time. In the UK, Blackburn claims it had the world's first purpose built cinema. This was the Alexandra, on Dock Street, which was also reputedly built in 1906. However, evidence shows that it was not completed until 1909.

The First British Cinemas

What is certain, however, is that between 1909 and 1914 a first wave of purpose designed cinemas were built across the UK. These at various times over the next couple of years celebrate their centenaries.

Amongst them are:

The Electric Cinema in Birmingham opened on 27th December 1909 and claims to be the oldest working cinema in the UK. However there is not a great deal left of the original building due to a rebuild in 1937.

The Electric Cinema, Portobello Road, London, a Grade II listed building, opened on 24th February 1910 and is now London's oldest, and one of its finest purpose-built cinemas although the original exterior has been altered to a large extent.

The Duke of York's Picturehouse in Brighton opened in September 1910.

The Electric Theatre in Worthing opened in 1911 as part of the Kursaal / Dome complex - a unique example of an Edwardian Leisure Complex.

The Ultimate Picture Palace in Oxford, opened on 25th February 1911 but despite having closures and periods of dereliction operates today as a small independent cinema.

The Electric Pavilion in Brixton, London, now known as The Ritzy, opened on 11 March 1911. It still retains the architecture and atmosphere of an Edwardian cinema.

The Harwich Electric Palace first opened on Wednesday 29th November 1911.

The Cottage Road Cinema in Leeds, previously known as Headingley Picture House, and what is now known as **The Curzon Community Cinema Somerset** both opened in 1912.

The Hyde Park Picture House in Leeds opened in 1914 as a result of a major conversion of a hotel building dating from 1908.

The Picturedrome, East Finchley

Amongst these early cinemas was also The Picturedrome in East Finchley. A company called Premier Electric Theatres was formed in November 1909 with plans to build twelve cinemas across London but unfortunately the company went into liquidation in January 1912 with its East Finchley cinema not yet having opened. However, the site was acquired by three businessmen who had set up the East Sheen Picturedrome and The Picturedrome East Finchley finally opened in May 1912. The Picturedrome's original site orientation was one with the screen being at the High Road end of the building. It had 428 seats arranged in rows of 16 and a gangway on either side with the public gaining admission into the auditorium by entering either side of the screen. There was a small restaurant on the first floor above the foyer.



The Coliseum

During 1923 and 1928 the operation and management of the cinema went through a number of changes and in early 1924 one of these involved a name change to The Coliseum. In 1926 new seating and lighting were installed and a new entrance in the side road to provide access to the more expensive rear seats was added. In 1928 Arthur Ferriss,



The Picturedrome ... with early poster

a former music hall performer, acquired the cinema as part of his Home Counties Theatre Company. The records of the cinema note that the introduction of sound films led to residents in the side road complaining to the council about the noise. The cinema introduced self closing doors which kept the doors closed during performances and better muffled the offending noise.

The Rex

The thirties saw the rise of the thousand seat glamorous super cinemas and the Gaumont, Odeon and ABC chains against which this small cinema had to compete. In 1938 new owners Albert and Ronald Green acquired the cinema and extensive improvements and alterations were made to the cinema as well as changing its name to The Rex. The orientation of the cinema was completely changed with the screen being moved to the opposite end of the cinema and the rake of the seats being completely reversed. Seating capacity was increased to 528 and more modern heating and ventilation systems were added. The original barrel vaulted ceiling was retained



The Rex ... with detail of the art deco panels

and an auditorium colour scheme of red, bronze and gold was completed. Decorative art deco panels by Mollo and Egan were added on the walls of the auditorium and in addition the exterior of the building was considerably altered. The old original decorative plasterwork and turrets were removed and a whole new sleek thirties modernist look was constructed complete with glazed black tiling, a new full width canopy and new neon signage.

Integral to this major reconstruction work was the construction of a new projection box with the installation of new projectors, amplifiers and two new RCA speakers behind the screen which went on to give 60 years service. The modernized Rex re-opened on 12th September 1938 with a very favourable reception in the local press. It then began a long and successful tradition of operating as an independent cinema organising its own programming unlike its nearby chain competitors whose schedules were allied to their associated distribution and production companies. It was, and is its independence, that has seen this cinema's survival and now resurgence during the various ups and downs over the years in the cinema exhibition industry.

After World War II there were some more changes in ownership with The Rex installing CinemaScope projection later than local rivals. There was a 95 foot throw from lens to screen. In 1960 Peter Bayley joined The Rex as second projectionist and was promoted to chief projectionist four years later. Peter went on to work at the cinema as its chief for



Peter Bayley is pictured (right) with CEO Paul Homer

fifty years until he retired in December 2010, being awarded an MBE in 2002. Regular CT readers will be aware of the honorary membership of the BKSTS that was awarded to Peter at the 2010 projectionists' Christmas party. Details of both his career, and the projection equipment used at the cinema over the years, were given in both the citation and a "Meet The Chief" feature on Peter previously published in Cinema Technology.

Today, following on from Peter's retirement the Technical & Projection Manager is Richard Compton assisted by projectionist technicians Will Martin, Jamie Palmer and Paul Stanley. Also as a sign of the times it is interesting to note that the most used piece of equipment is a NEC NC 800C digital projector working with a Doremi DCP 2000 digital cinema server. Sound is being delivered by a Dolby CP65 processor with SST amps.

A Brush with a Chain

The Granada Cinema and Television Group acquired The Rex in October 1973 and its ownership of the cinema was short but not sweet. The group introduced a programming policy of only screening the big commercial releases and the sudden change of programming caused both local anger and a fall in attendances and then yet another change in ownership.

The Phoenix

In October 1975 Contemporary Films led by Charles and Kitty Cooper bought the cinema and rechristened it The Phoenix introducing the logo that is still used today. They planned to use the cinema to showcase the European and world cinema "art house" films they represented in the UK. They continued the strong independent programming policy that had previously been established but obviously programming now had a strong world cinema flavour. The Coopers maintained the "art house" philosophy against increasingly difficult times and competition but eventually

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retired and put the cinema up for sale in the early eighties. A property company made an application to purchase and demolish the cinema, and build an office block on the site. Despite the local planning application being granted – the plan was blocked by the Greater London Council but following a public enquiry the demolition of the cinema was then re-approved. There is obviously a real tenacity in the local East Finchley population in its love for this cinema because following the re-approval of the demolition a vigorous local campaign was initiated. Charles Cooper, given the tremendous local support, developed plans for the cinema and its transfer of ownership to a Trust. In 1985, assisted by a £325,000 grant from the GLC, the ownership of the cinema transferred to The Phoenix Cinema Trust.

The Trust

The Phoenix Cinema Trust began operating as a charitable trust with the cinema's independence, direction and operation being overseen by a committee of trustees – local volunteers.



One of the trust's missions is to oversee the work of a Chief Executive for the trust and cinema. The CEO has responsibility for the day to day operation of the cinema as well as all the associated work and growing initiatives. Ruth Mulandi held the post until 2003 and the current CEO is Paul Homer assisted by Cinema Manager Cassie Birtwistle. Today the Board of Trustees has bi monthly meetings chaired by Stephen Barr and three committees meet monthly to, in turn, discuss and oversee staffing and building issues, heritage and education activities, and marketing and fundraising issues. The Phoenix is very fortunate in having a number of significant media and film celebrity patrons that support its work and lend their names to its mission. They are Judi Dench, Mark Kermode, Mike Leigh, Maureen Lipman, Ken Loach, Michael Palin, Bill Paterson and Victoria Wood.

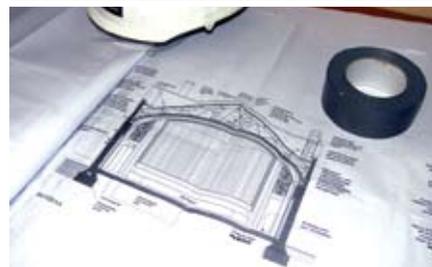
In the January 1999 edition of Cinema Technology there was a short article on the trust's vision for a rekindled, restored and flourishing Phoenix. The trust, patrons and staff of The Phoenix have to be congratulated on making that vision happen and delivering this magnificent piece of cinema history back to London in the way that they have done.

The Restoration

In 2009 the Trust began its £1.1 million pound Centenary Restoration Project. This not only consisted of essential restoration work to the fabric of the building and the auditorium but also the creation of a café, which the cinema originally had, and a significant two year programme of heritage activities running from 2010 to 2012 to celebrate and involve people in the history of The Phoenix as well as British cinema history. A significant part of the money came from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The balance has been made up from contributions from charitable trusts and foundations, individual donors – one gave £25,000, and public fundraising events.

The restoration work was undertaken between March and September 2010 and only involved the cinema closing totally for some eight weeks. Regarding the restoration of the auditorium Paul Homer told me: "It is really about bringing out all that is best in there and that has been neglected for a number of years." The auditorium had suffered a little from damp in recent times and the restoration was about curing that, installing an up-to-date lighting system, redecorating what was an unpleasant brown colour scheme back to the more vibrant colours of the thir-

*From top down:
Restored artist's impression; renovation plan
and renovations in progress*





The pre-renovation brown barrel vault ceiling and, after renovation

ties colour scheme and making the most of the art deco features. Exterior refurbishment has been far more radical and equally effective.

The CEO View

I chatted to Paul Homer about the cinema's longevity and its relationship to what appears to be a very loving and very supportive local audience and he shared his views with me.

"The cinema has survived because it has been able to adapt, whether that has been from a tactical point of view or whether that has happened by chance, but nevertheless the key feature has been survival. In the thirties this cinema offered an alternative to the huge super cinemas, in the sixties because it wasn't part of a chain it struggled to get first run films so it began showing foreign language films and that worked."

"I don't know much about the local demographics but I think that over the past twenty years I think that the kind of local people who live around here are the kind of people who like to attend a cultural small neighbourhood cinema so it has been quite fortuitous because we are all aware of how many cinemas just don't exist anymore. Over the past five years we have really tried to strengthen our customer base, our core customers probably all live within a three mile radius of the cinema, with many living only within a mile or one and a half miles of the

cinema. We really concentrated on key local neighbourhoods and our approach has been really successful – we have had over 70,000 people through our doors each year in the past two years, which we think is good for a small cinema. Now we have got that base we are beginning to branch out. We are aware our audience is slightly older and we are now encouraging younger people to come in and we hope the café bar will be part of that. We are also trying to encourage a more ethnically diverse audience and since 2000 we have become accessible for wheelchair customers and we try to shout about that too."

"What makes us special is the atmosphere – the atmosphere of the building, the films we show, the experience you get when you are dealt with by our staff, and the impression that this is a cinema that cares deeply about the films that we show. This is the kind of place where people can come and enjoy films in a kind of really classic atmosphere".

A Very Special Place

After its recent restoration, at an industry relaunch day, Mark Kermode the respected TV film presenter, writer on cinema and film critic (pictured below) spoke a few eloquent and enthusiastic one hundredth birthday celebration words on both the uniqueness and very special atmosphere and importance of The Phoenix. Mark Kermode knows The Phoenix well as it was his local cinema as he grew up and he stated it is where he learned about film. Many people seem to acknowledge the very special nature of The Phoenix.

The combination of almost one hundred years of showing a luxurious wealth of every type of film imaginable – from the classic and contemporary products of Hollywood and commercial European cinema, though to all the masterpieces and experiments of independent and world cinema give it a history that is far richer than the history of many purely commercial chain cinemas. The Phoenix also combines the now increasingly rare atmosphere of an auditorium that authentically dates back to the thirties and the barn like look with the distinctive large span barrel vaulted ceiling that identifies it as a cinema from the very beginnings of dedicated cinema building - in the Edwardian era.



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The spirit of independence that the cinema represents and its survival during all the ups and downs of cinema exhibition over the last century add yet another layer to its special nature. The Phoenix before its restoration was a special place – even more so now after its centenary refurbishment. What is even more glorious is that with its programming policy, its membership schemes, the frequent special screenings, talks and celebrity question and answer sessions, the return of its café, its affordable pricing and educational and outreach initiatives, it is firmly establishing itself one hundred years on as a thriving twenty first century cinema destination.

Mark Trompeteler
mtromp@blueyonder.co.uk

Many thanks to Paul Homer and Peter Bayley for their assistance in the compilation of this article.

The Phoenix website is:
www.phoenixcinema.co.uk.

An excellent book "The Phoenix Cinema: A Century of Film in East Finchley" is available from The Phoenix.

Email: heritage@phoenixcinema.co.uk or call +44 (0) 208 444 8679 for more information.

A beautiful short film celebrating The Phoenix can be seen at www.onparproductions.co.uk/thePhoenix.htm