

# THE BIRTHPLACE OF UK CINEMA, REBORN



*Mark Trompeteler returns to an historic site in London's Regent Street, the subject of an article in our December 2013 edition — and a £6.1million cinema heritage project*

**B**ritain's first commercial cinema was at 309 Regent Street in London. The Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, together with their father, Antoine, had decided that the Hall at 309 Regent Street was a suitable venue to premiere their Cinematographe projected film exhibition system to the British public in 1896.

The Lumières had decided to put the exhibition of their Cinematographe and first film screenings in London under the management of their friend, Felicien Trewey. The choice of the Regent Street venue had a lot to do with its reputation as a leading national venue for presentation of new inventions, scientific devices, theatrical and illusionist demonstrations, which it had regularly presented to the public for years. This, together with its reputation for technical education and its central London location, made it ideal.

## THE FIRST COMMERCIAL FILM SCREENINGS

The first film screenings were very short in length, with verbal introductions and explanations in between the various films. During these introductions, Matt Raymond, the projectionist, could change over the very short film reels. Projecting at 15fps these 50ft early Lumière films barely lasted 30 seconds on the screen. The first commercial public showing of projected moving pictures in the UK took

place on 21 February, 1896. Fifty four people bought either a sixpenny or shilling ticket to see the show, compared with the 32 for the first-ever show in Paris. The auditorium for these early screenings soon changed from The Great Hall to the smaller Marlborough Hall, probably for audience size, illumination and electricity supply reasons.

This historic site has a previous, illustrious, history of being used both as a cinema and a theatre, but has been in the ownership of the University of Westminster for many years and the auditorium had not been used as a public commercial cinema for 36 years.

## A COMPLETE REBUILD

I visited the site a few years ago, prior to the £6.1million rebuild in an Art Deco style by architect Tim Ronalds. I had my personal concerns when I learned that the plans for the rebuild included the elimination of the original balcony, an essential feature in such a historic site.

The plans focused on completely changing the auditorium to give it a single rake of seats, making it a more viable commercial cinema for today. It enabled the creation of a bar and cafe area under the original balcony and incorporation of display space and toilets — as well as the creation of good viewing sightlines for the



## THE VITAL STATS

309 REGENT STREET, LONDON

SCREENS: 1 (SEATS 200, 187 IN USE)

OPENED: 1896 (RE-OPENED MAY 2015)

FILM PROJECTORS: KINOTON FP30D 35MM/16MM

DIGITAL PROJECTOR: BARCO 4K DP4K23B

SOUND: DOLBY CP500 PROCESSOR, CROWN AMPS

CINEMA DIRECTOR: SHIRA MCCLOUD

WEBSITE: [WWW.REGENTSTREETCINEMA.COM](http://WWW.REGENTSTREETCINEMA.COM)

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cinemagoes from almost all of the seats.

When I recently visited the cinema for a day of student film screenings I was extremely impressed with the outcome of the rebuild. The three-year project has honoured the important historic nature of the site, whilst still satisfying the need to make it a viable commercial cinema. The huge advantage gained by removing the rear stalls area and replacing it with an improved foyer that naturally leads into a bar area, with toilets, is immediately

of such an historic place had been dealt with so well in the re-development.

In the newly built auditorium the line and structure of the original balcony is clearly referenced and included in the rebuild. The whole auditorium has a very luxurious gold look to it. One disadvantage of retaining some of the original architectural details is that the sightlines of a very few seats at the rear are affected. The auditorium has 200 seats, but they don't sell the 13 seats with

and MPS LANsat is used for receiving Event Cinema showings. The sound system uses a Dolby CP500 processor with Crown DSi 1000 and 2000 amps.

### AN ENERGETIC PROGRAMME

The rebuilt cinema opened in May 2015, and its programming policy, overseen by cinema director, Shira McCloud, is interesting, exciting, energetic, and 'cutting edge'. They show a mix of current mainstream cinema releases, "arthouse" films, classic films from the past and the often overlooked programming item of some really interesting "double bills".

The deputy director of the cinema is Michael Schaub and the technical/projection manager, David Winstanley, is assisted by two other projectionists. If you are in Central London and want to make a pilgrimage to the birthplace of British cinema, taking in a screening at the Regent Street Cinema is thoroughly recommended. You will also be visiting a really fascinating modern cinema in its own right. If, through the fantasy miracle of time travel, Messrs. Lumière, their manager Trewey and their projectionist Raymond could undertake such a visit, I think they would be more than impressed at how their legacy has been revitalised and still endures. **CT**

## "IF MESSRS LUMIERE AND THEIR MANAGER TREWEY COULD TAKE A VISIT TODAY, I THINK THEY WOULD BE MORE THAN IMPRESSED"

evident. Everything looks as though that was how it was always meant to be.

The effect of seeing such a modern approach to seating, the single steep rake of seats, combined with a luxurious restoration of the Art Deco details of the 1920s décor and decoration is both startling and stunning. The result of an almost seamless blending of both the historic and the modern is an impressive achievement. My earlier concern about eliminating the former balcony and the former two-level nature of the auditorium

restricted views caused by the historic architecture that makes the site so special.

### 16MM FILM, TOO

When I visited the site before the rebuild, the projection box was an empty room fallen into disrepair. Future Projections has now installed a lot of equipment. The box has two Kinoton FP30D 35mm film projectors, one being a dual 35/16mm fitted with a 16mm head on one side, with a separate lamp house. A Barco 4K DP4K23B digital projector is employed,