

# HMV's dog trials an Artificial Eye in a new cinema venture

HMV and Curzon Artificial Eye (CAE), operator of the five site, nine screen London Curzon "arthouse" cinema chain, jointly opened the first "hmvcurzon" cinema in Wimbledon, South London late last year. The opening of their trial joint venture made the national headlines in the UK.

Mark Trompeteler reports on the opening and a subsequent visit to find out about all the excitement.

How often does a new, quite small, local cinema open when a substantial percentage of the national population feel they might be able to recognise one of the co-owner's beloved dog, and news coverage includes an item in the national Radio 4 Today programme's primetime 8 to 9 am slot on the day of opening? Other national media coverage included a subsequent dedicated feature on Radio 4's "You and Yours" two days later. There certainly seemed to be quite a degree of media excitement last October when the first ever trial "hmvcurzon" cinema opened in Wimbledon High Street.

## The Vision

The joint concept aims to bring quality cinema to the heart of local communities via selected HMV stores and is being piloted at Wimble-

don. This is a particularly bold and innovative commitment to the resurgence of cinema when you consider that the "hmvcurzon" is opening right by a rival Odeon multiplex cinema some two to three hundred yards away in the same high street environment. More "hmvcurzon" locations may follow, depending upon the experience of the Wimbledon trial and further site analysis.

The "hmvcurzon" will, as well as showing the latest releases, also screen a diverse range of independent films, foreign language features and special screenings and events, such as film director / cast Q.&A.s and live concerts, opera and theatre, that have all come to characterise the quality, content and values of Curzon cinemas. This is an interesting concept because

many people would normally have to travel some distance to be able to see foreign and independent cinema and special screenings. The "hmvcurzon" vision is to bring a more eclectic mix of programming direct into your local high street. The hmvcurzon's broadband and WiFi connectivity also enables games tournaments and events to be staged, while occasional music gigs / concerts are also expected to become part of its output. The concept is a little reminiscent of one or two other cinema groups' ambition of catering to a slightly more discerning cinemagoer who might like a distinct alternative to the standard multiplex experience with also a slightly more discerning refreshment experience, intimate atmosphere and some film / media culture add-ons.





### Cinema & Store & Cafe

The venue occupies a 7,500sq.ft. area housed within the building's second floor, and delivers its screenings and events via three, colour-themed screen auditoriums - red (below right) 103 seats, blue (below left) 91 seats and green 71 seats - 265 seats in total and state-of-the-art technology. The use of digital projectors has made projection boxes redundant in this cinema, optimising the seating capacity in each auditorium, and also enabling a flexible and diverse programming schedule. This, in turn, means that the "hmvcurzon" is well placed to respond to both local demand and opportunities as they arise, to offer a wide variety of films and events across the week. Another feature that is being promoted by the cinema,

is a self-service ticketing system that aims to reduce queuing on the day. Customers are being encouraged to book / purchase online at [www.hmvcurzon.com](http://www.hmvcurzon.com), and to print their tickets whilst still at home or at their place of work. The tickets are then scanned on the door in order for customers to gain admission to any of the three screen auditoriums. The ticket pricing policy is an "active" one where the price varies during the week with cheaper tickets being available at off peak times, and prices becoming a little more expensive at peak times.

The cinema has its own dedicated lift and stairwell access, which it shares with the adjacent HMV when the store is trading – thus giving customers the opportunity to browse an extensive selection of films and visual content on DVD and Blu-ray, including titles on Curzon's own Artificial Eye range, as well as CDs and soundtracks, Games and other entertainment products such as film posters, books and t-shirts. Separate street access to the cinema is used according to whether the HMV store is open or closed. When the HMV store is closed a very large shutter secures the traditional HMV store but cinema patrons still have access via the dedicated stairs.

The first public space patrons enter on entering the cinema is a spacious café bar area which can seat 103. The refreshment offer is considerably more sophisticated than the average offer at a multiplex and to my mind it is a good enough place to indulge in a coffee and a Danish pastry, or more, if I was in the high street, irrespective of whether or not I was going in to see a film. The cinema features striking designs and interiors, which draw inspiration from classic film imagery, and I found the standard of architectural / interior design finish of a very high standard. As well as buying tickets online, they can also be purchased in the HMV store area and the café bar area as you enter the cinema.

### The Masters' Voices

At the press launch I was fortunate in being able to briefly ask questions directly to Simon Fox and Philip Knatchbull, the respective Chief Executives of HMV and Curzon (pictured page 50 - Simon on the left - with Nipper the ubiquitous HMV dog).

I started by asking - *"where did the idea of them getting together to create this trial joint cinema venture come from?"*

*Philip Knatchbull ( CEO Curzon ) replied: "I think what happened was, three years ago, when I joined the company, I had a deliberate strategy to try and bring the Curzon name, which I thought was an undervalued brand name, to a much wider audience. A little tiny cinema operation down in Hawkhurst in Kent, called the Kino, had the kind of wall panels you see here, it had a digital projector and it had an enormous appetite for the local community to come and use it and its single screen. I knew about it because as a distributor we were booking films into there and we saw the returns. So suddenly I found that we have the technology to do what we wanted to do but we had to find the right partner to put our cinemas into retail space. So coming together with HMV was a natural fit because Simon was doing what I was doing, in that he was trying to move HMV and reposition it for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – so that is how we came together."*

I also asked them – *"where in the cinema market place do you see "hmvcurzon" cinemas sitting – alongside Everyman ? Alongside Picturehouse ? "*

*Philip ( Curzon ) again replied: "Absolutely not – the Curzon brand will be undiluted by this. It will sit alongside Everyman and Cityscreen cinemas but by joining and putting our name alongside HMV it allows us to move into the mainstream, but not as a multiplex operator, but as a clear alternative to multiplexes – bringing a wide breadth of programming into*





an intimate and socializing space for local communities in the high street."

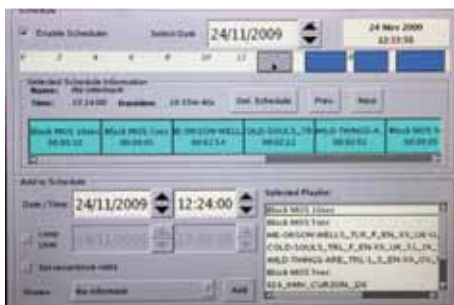
I asked them about their interesting choice of location to trial their joint idea and venture in cinema – with an Odeon multiplex only a few hundred yards down the high street. (The photo below shows just how close the neighbouring cinemas are.)

*"With such established competition so very close by why have you chosen Wimbledon to open your first cinema? Is there anything significant about the social economic demographics of your choice of location?"*

Simon Fox (CEO HMV) told me: "I don't think you should see too much significance in the choice of Wimbledon – we obviously had to start somewhere and Wimbledon met our criteria on a number of levels. Firstly, it happened to be an HMV store where we were not trading on the second floor – where the cinema space is now situated. The concept is to use space in HMV stores in which we are not currently trading, and ideally to find space which hasn't previously been used for trading. It is also a highly competitive market place – we are 100 metres away from a large twelve screen Odeon and we thought it was important to do a trial in a competitive market because trialing something in a place where perhaps there was no competition would not be a fair trial. In addition to that the demographics to Wimbledon are favourable for a cinema, and so for those three reasons we feel comfortable that Wimbledon is a good first location for this new venture."

Philip and Simon did not want to discuss the cost of the conversion of the space to a cinema but Philip did comment: "The costs are a lot less than they would have been a few years ago – the great thing about digital technology is that

*The technical side of the cinema can be run from a laptop - theoretically, from anywhere in the world. You can, for example, call up the theatre management system playlist shown below, and can make changes as necessary.*



the price of conversion comes down – there are no projection boxes and the cinemas are serviced via a server room. We have a theatre management system that you can run from a laptop from anywhere in the world – even in theory from a beach in Hawaii!" Simon Fox (HMV) interjected: "I hope we won't be doing that!" Similarly, they did not want to discuss anything about the financial arrangements between the two companies in this trial joint venture other than it was truly a joint venture in terms of the set up costs and pay back arrangements.

I asked Philip (Curzon): *"How do you see the programming of the cinema interface with the local Wimbledon community? What mechanisms will there be to make appealing to the local community a meaningful concept?"*

Philip replied: "I think cinemas were originally all about property – they were all about location, location, location. Today cinemas are all about programming, programming, programming. As long as we cater to what is being demanded of us – we will be fine."

*"But how will you know that?"* I asked.

"By testing it - I think we have a track record in this business – I think we are the most successful independent cinema chain in the country and we hope to bring that expertise to bear in Wimbledon."

Finally I asked Simon Fox (HMV): *"You both say this is a trial venture. What criteria will you use and when, to judge whether or not the trial has been successful or not? Is the idea that if the trial is successful you then intend to roll out further 'hmvcuzon' cinemas in other carefully chosen locations around the country?"*

Simon replied: "I think the idea is perhaps to be a little more ambitious than that. If the trial is successful we will be looking to more aggressively roll out around the country. The definition of success will ultimately be the level of audience." Philip interjected, "It is called 'bums on seats'." Simon retorted back: "I tried not to use that phrase," and went on to confirm that is what it will be all about.

At the press launch, and during a subsequent visit back to the cinema with Jim Slater, I was able to get a good understanding of the technology behind this extremely impressive, brand new, small, high street multiplex. For showing me around and talking through the technology with me, I am very indebted to; Phu To, Projectionist / Technician Curzon Cinemas; Mick Stephen, Chief Technician, Curzon Cinemas; and Rob Kenny Operations Director, Curzon Cinemas. I am particularly indebted to Jordan Bedding, Assistant Manager / Technical Manager "hmvcuzon" Wimbledon, and Peter Hall of Future Projections, whose company undertook the technical installation at Wimbledon, and who both spared significant time to talk the installation through with both Jim and I.

### Building Considerations

Peter Hall told us that his company, Future Pro-



L-R: Phu To, Projectionist/Technician, Curzon Cinemas, Jordan Bedding, Assistant Manager /Technician HMV Curzon Wimbledon, Mick Stephen, Chief Technician Curzon Cinemas.

jections, often tackles cinema technical installations at slightly different or unusual locations. At the stage that his company gets involved he usually negotiates the temporary freezing of all architects drawings while he prepares a package of 30 – 40 drawings that clearly define and specify the complete technical design and installation. The company then project manages and installs the whole technical side of things.

He clearly defined that in this installation, confined space was a major issue. Also that with only some 265 seats, every inch and every penny of the installation was very significant. Another major installation issue was the requirement that the cinema could essentially run itself, which he informed us it can absolutely, and it obviously had to be entirely digital.

The floor where the cinema is situated, was originally a completely derelict storage area and the initial scheme was smaller than the one that has now been completed. JD Sports next door to HMV had an adjacent derelict and unused storage space and HMV approached them. They were happy to subsidise their own rent and rates by profiting from their own unused retail space and signing it over to this scheme. So the green screen is above the HMV store, whilst the red and blue screens are above JD Sports.

The floor rake in each of the cinemas varies and is not particularly steep and directly related to this, and one of the other major considerations affecting the technical installation is the limited head room offered by the site. The space and head room dictated that there could be no projection rooms. Ceiling mounted projectors also had to be discounted because with the low ceiling height a significant part of the seating and sight lines in at least two rows of each cinema would be compromised, this would be an unacceptable loss of seats in already quite small seating capacities as well as something that was considered to be a potential big eyesore in a small auditorium.

Peter said it was important that the entire complex be cabled with the best HDSI cable available and to match cable terminations all in attempts to eliminate or minimize any potential time lags around the site.



The projectors are mounted vertically in narrow compartments at the rear of the auditoria, with the beam angled through a 45 degree optical quality mirror. Access to the projectors for service purposes is gained via an easily opened hatch (above)

### All done with mirrors...

The solution to the no projection room and no ceiling mounting problem was to create and build projection compartments / enclosures into the rear wall of each of the auditoria. Each of these is equipped with vertically mounted Barco 1200 projector linked to a dedicated GDC 2TB server in a server room.

Peter Hall and Future Projections seem to be very keen on the idea of finding a product they are happy with, and then really getting to know it very well indeed. They also like the idea of fostering a really good relationship with a supplier as well as the kit. They have an established good working relationship with Barco and their projectors, and enjoy an excellent support relationship with them. Both Peter and Curzon have a similar regard and relationship with GDC servers, and it for these reasons that this core kit was chosen.

The design of each projector compartment built into the rear wall of the screening rooms meant mounting and using the projectors in an upright / vertical position with the projection beam going into a 45 degree angled mirror in a semi periscope arrangement which then projects onto the screen. Barco confirmed that these projectors would perform perfectly well in this orientation. The image is vertically inverted in two of the projectors and laterally reversed and inverted in a third – this depends which way round the projector is facing in its vertical position in its compartment. The angled mirrors are also key features of this arrangement, they are very expensive and have an optically pure front surface coating.

The compartment and projector are aligned so that the projector can be serviced and lamps changed. Access to each compartment is via a safely secured access hatch which is a small part of the auditorium's rear wall in two of the auditoria. In the third auditorium the compartment is part of a storeroom / office behind the auditorium and access to the projector in its compartment is via this office / store.

Each projection enclosure has dedicated air extraction for the projector which exceeds the Barco recommendation of 230 cfm – these have 400cfm – so all the heat from the projector is taken away. In addition each enclosure itself is cooled – so they are treated very much like computer rooms. The lamps in the projectors are kept very cool. The lamps have an alarm temperature of 85 degrees and in the first month's operation Peter said that the lamps on average tend to reach 35 degrees. The size of the auditoria means that all three projectors are running with 2K lamps.

The performance of all three projectors and their individual components is monitored from the technician's portable ACER laptop computer in the server room, or elsewhere, using Barco's associated software. This total elimination of the projection boxes, and the ability to monitor projection equipment remotely, yields the ability to provide maximum seating in these



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sometimes relatively small screening rooms. In addition all three projectors have the potential for 3D.

#### The Server room

Each auditorium and projector is linked to a dedicated equipment rack in the central server room, and sound equipment associated with the same screening room is in the same dedicated rack (pictured above). A fourth equipment rack is dedicated to an 8TB overall theatre management system as well as three satellite receivers – one for each screen.

In each rack that projector is serviced by a GDC server which has 2TB of hard disk space. The ingestion of a movie for that projector is done in its rack in the server room. These individual dedicated 2TB servers feature ingestion racks with a SATA connection which is very much faster than a USB connection. Here the ingestion of a complete movie can take place in about 20 minutes. In addition the centralised TMS system in the fourth rack has an additional 8TB of storage capability available to the three projectors. However, this uses a USB connection for the ingestion of movies which is very much slower in real time. It is hoped that increasingly the individual 2TB servers will be used in more integral ways that will interface more with the central 8TB server. The addition of appropriate long distance data lines could mean that either the entire cinema could be run from a PC in the manager's office or from a potential future network Curzon control centre at a remote location.

Munro Acoustics, who have not been involved much with cinemas to date, but have a background in equipment for audio recording studios, supplied all the speakers amplifiers and equalisation for the site. In the auditoria a nice interior design feature (below) is the colouring



of the speakers to blend in with the walls and hence be a lot less noticeable than in many auditoria. Surround sound is facilitated by USL Model JSD-80 processor amps in each screen's equipment rack (above/top).

Each screen has video and audio patching facilities built into its rack thus ensuring at least a couple of microphones can be easily used in each screen. The equipment rack and cabling design also means that BetaSP, Digibeta, Blu Ray and Standard DVD can be played out to any screen. One satellite dish on the roof and outputs from three Fortec satellite receivers (one shown above / bottom) in the fourth equipment rack, enable "live cinema" and satellite alternative content to be relayed to any screen.

#### Technical Management

Jordan Bedding, Assistant Manager / Technical Manager, told me that he always programs the three cinemas one day in advance – never further than that – just in case film times need to be changed. Ingestion of a programme's component parts can, as stated previously, be done at the projector's individual server or at the overall theatre management system's equipment rack. Similarly, scripting a screen's playlist can either be done of at each individual server or the central TMS 8TB server.

The morning we went to meet up with Peter Hall and Jordan at Wimbledon, Jordan was unfortunately delayed on the underground for a short period of time. However, in his absence all three screens opened their shows by themselves; lights dimmed down at the exact appropriate time, advertisement reels and trailers were screened, tabs went backwards and forwards as aspect ratios changed themselves, and the feature films started just as the technical manager walked in to meet us. The all digital fully automated three screen multiplex was a wonder to behold! It is interesting to note that like one or two other chief projectionists / technical managers I have met recently Jordan is also the assistant or deputy manager of the cinema.

#### Fingers crossed for the future

Jordan Bedding has a degree in fine art and was drawn to working in projection as a result of experience with projection technology in modern art installation work. He has built up a solid background in working in film projection and more recently in digital projection and has worked for the Curzon group at a number of Curzon sites. He has occasionally undertaken additional work at the Cine Lumiere, projecting a lot of foreign language films.

Karolina Kus, the General Manager, has a degree in film studies from Poland and was previously at the Curzon in Mayfair. She commented at the press opening: "This is a very exciting opportunity for the team, not least because we're trying something that, in my view, is quite new and ground-breaking. Everyone has a passion for film – whether it's action and sci-fi blockbusters, cutting-edge animation, world cinema or left-field independent movies, and I'll be doing my very best to cater to every and any type of local demand and to ensure that we place the "hmvcurzon" at the very heart of the film-going community in Wimbledon and in the neighbouring areas."

#### Final Thoughts

The "hmvcurzon" at Wimbledon is an extremely interesting and very impressive high street mini multiplex. It has an exciting vision behind it from two major players in the UK entertainment industry and it is no wonder there was a lot of media interest at its opening. A visit to this new cinema and its technical installation provides yet another opportunity to glimpse the exciting future of cinema. The opening of a single mini multi screen cinema, with only 265 seats, in just one high street, is hardly going to have anyone at Odeon, Empire or Vue seriously worrying about the competition of this one new cinema. However, if the trial is a success, and we see an aggressive roll out of more similar such cinemas in high streets across Britain, the situation could then become far more interesting.



A chain of "hmvcurzons" alongside quite a few other small chains such as Picturehouse, Everyman, etc., collectively could all become an increasingly significant part of our industry.

*It was a pleasure to meet a beautifully behaved and dapper Nipper, the HMV dog, (not the original), at the opening of the cinema. Like many, I hope this trial venture will be a success. It will be good news for our industry if Nipper's wagging tail might soon be glimpsed at the various openings in high streets across Britain. Fingers crossed and good luck to Jordan and Karolina and their team at Wimbledon in this exciting new venture.*

Mark Trompeteler

Related Websites:

[www.kinodigital.co.uk](http://www.kinodigital.co.uk) / [www.hmvcurzon.com](http://www.hmvcurzon.com)  
[www.artificial-eye.com](http://www.artificial-eye.com) / [www.hmv.com](http://www.hmv.com)  
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