Historic England

Theatres Trust

Interwar Theatres

Introductions to Heritage Assets

Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which lack such a summary. This can either be where the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood. Many of these are what might be thought of as 'new heritage', that is they date from after the Second World War.

This IHA provides an introduction to theatres in the interwar period, from 1915 to 1945. Architecturally, historic theatres of this period are extremely diverse. Some make a strong impression in the street as a statement of their cultural and often civic aspirations or to attract patrons inside, and some are more backstreet, being hidden by other buildings. It is often their interiors that are the determining factors for their statutory listing. Considerable architectural effect was often deployed, and those that remain are evocative reminders of past patterns of culture and entertainment, yet this period is the least researched and often little understood. This guide illustrates examples of the period by theatre building type.

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Pavillion Theatre,
Worthing, West Sussex

Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. They believe that current and future generations should have access to good quality theatre buildings where they can be inspired by, and enjoy, live performance. They champion the future of live performance by protecting and supporting excellent theatre buildings which meet the needs of their communities. They do this by providing advice on the design, planning, development, and sustainability of theatres, campaigning on behalf of theatres old and new and offering financial assistance through grants.

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1 Introduction

Although the interwar period (1918-1939) is characterised by changes in theatre building practice and style, it has been given little contextual consideration. The 1930s revival in theatre construction centred on London's West End, with notable 'provincial ripples'. In the 1920s audiences were seduced by the excitement of the new cinematic age; this had an influence on theatre design and use. Outside commercial theatre came a rise in amateur dramatics, with productions in the open air, halls and vacant theatres. Amateur dramatics hugely energised social life after the Second World War. The 'Little Theatre' movement and its concomitance to theatre buildings is the legacy of this era. The expansion in theatre building drew to a dramatic halt in 1945 until the 1960s.
This document focuses on the period 1915-1945, capturing the style, construction and fashion of theatre in each decade.

2 Development of the building type

1915 – 1925

The late Victorian and Edwardian periods saw a theatre-building boom, driven by an expanding population's thirst for entertainment. By the beginning of the First World War the British Isles was well supplied with theatres.

Theatre in the UK was and remains a largely commercial activity, driven by the need to maximise profits for operators.

The most popular type of theatrical entertainment during this period was that of the variety stage. This was a mixed bill of different acts: singing, dancing, acrobatics and drama among others. It evolved during the 19th century in music halls and by the turn of the century purpose-built variety theatres were being constructed across the country. These buildings had limited stages and technical facilities, except in London where variety was very different, needing a flytower and orchestra pit to accommodate musical revue, such as those produced by Charles B Cochran. One of the largest and most lavish examples is the London Palladium, the auditorium of which was designed by Frank Matcham in 1910 and became known as the home of variety.

However, between these extremes sits the generic category known as 'ciné-variety'. Films had become a regular part of variety programming and purpose built venues had vestigial stages for live acts between films. Such acts tended to be third-rate, but the growing popularity of these ciné varieties contributed to the rapid rise of cinemas and the slow decline of variety houses. Owners and managers often opened these buildings whilst 'hedging their bets'. They were fit for purpose as either cinemas or variety theatres, in case one or the other fell out of fashion. Many of these buildings were designed on tight budgets and on even tighter sites.

Building evolution

The First World War put the brakes on theatre construction. Building restrictions were imposed in 1916 to preserve supplies and there was a shortage of craftsmen. Construction of new theatres was slow to resume after the war, partly because of the number of theatres already in existence, but also because costs increased, affecting theatres' profitability. The Entertainment Tax, imposed in 1916, adding 25–50% onto ticket prices was much-resented by theatre and cinema managers. It was not repealed until 1960.

A fire at Exeter Theatre Royal in 1887 necessitated precautions such as the safety curtain. London City Council's prohibition of three-tier auditoria brought about significant changes in design. This change was further accelerated by the seemingly unquenchable public desire for entertainment in a pre-television era. In this climate it was inevitable that entrepreneurs would increase their profits by building auditoria capable of seating well in excess of 2,000 people.

The ability to build larger and wider auditoria was enhanced by advances in structural engineering. Frank Matcham and Robert Alexander Briggs introduced the theatre building industry to their patent cantilever as early as 1902. A cantilever balcony uses a rigid steel girder anchored only on one side and eliminates the need for supporting columns that would otherwise obscure the view to the stage. This advancement had been observed by Matcham during his visits to the USA with Oswald Stoll prior to the construction of the London Coliseum in 1903. For theatre building within the British Isles this was a game changer that allowed architects to remove supporting pillars from auditoria, increase width and thereby increase seating capacities.

Matcham's untimely death in 1920 was at a time when he was working on several projects including the reconstruction of the Empire Theatre, Leicester Square. This left the theatre construction business open to a new generation of architects. Structural developments were taken to a new level in this country by among others William and T R Milburn of Sunderland. Moss Empires, having used Matcham for many years, transferred its allegiance to the Milburns and in doing so heralded a whole new wave of theatre construction based upon their refined techniques and structural capabilities.

There was also increased competition from cinema after the war, leading to declining theatre audiences and further erosion of profits. Early cinemas and bioscopes were simple shed-like structures, usually single storey with very limited front of house facilities. It is incredible to think that within less than 20 years this building genre was transformed into a complex operation, with venues often seating over 2,000 patrons. This rapid transition can be attributed to a number of key elements. The post-1918 world was one of great ambition signalling a change in social attitudes coupled with advances in technology associated with war.

During this period cinema was gradually asserting itself as a separate art form with distinctive architectural requirements and language. Because cinemas were the dominant new building type, they in turn began to influence the design of new theatres. A cinema auditorium has different requirements from a theatre; it needs to provide adequate sightlines to a projected image on a fixed flat screen. This tends to push the audience into an 'end on' position facing the screen. By contrast, in a live performance, the audience needs to be able to see a three-dimensional performer as they move around the whole stage, and in consequence the sightline needs to be more flexible than in a cinema. Nevertheless, design of this period became increasingly cinematic in their auditorium arrangements and architecture.

Theatres were still being constructed in the West End in this period, but elsewhere in Britain, new, purpose-designed theatres were increasingly rare. Those that were built reflected the theatrical uncertainty of the time. They were often dual-purpose ciné-variety buildings, or primarily cinemas with stages for intermittent live performance.

There was, however, an increasing focus on the social, cultural and educational benefits of theatre. The construction of theatres in schools reflects the view that access to the arts was a social benefit. Institutions such as hospitals and asylums often included multi-purpose entertainment halls to provide entertainment for patients.

The Repertory Theatre movement, or 'rep', was gathering pace at this time. A resident company performed one play in the evening whilst rehearsing the next during the day. It evolved in the regions and was sponsored by wealthy theatrical benefactors seeking to introduce audiences to a wide variety of theatre at an affordable price. These sponsors also sought to support local writers and help train young regional actors. Some rep companies took over existing theatres with assistance from their sponsors. The earliest purpose-built and most significant survival is Birmingham's Old Rep of 1913 which also contains a rare lighting bridge.

Several innovative theatre directors during the 1920s were experimenting with novel ways of staging plays. Two stages survive from this period and are of particular interest in demonstrating an experimental approach to theatre-making typical of the time. Director Terence Gray took over the Festival Theatre in Cambridge. Here he explored experimental 'open stage' techniques propounded by Modernist theatre practitioner, Edward Gordon Craig. The director Walter Nugent Monck CBE attempted to recreate this and constructed an Elizabethan stage at the Maddermarket Theatre in Norwich from a former chapel.

At the other end of the theatrical spectrum there was significant growth of the amateur theatre movement in Britain which developed rapidly after Geoffrey Whitworth formed the British Drama League in 1919. The league was established for 'the encouragement of the Art of the Theatre, both for its own sake and as a means of intelligent recreation among all classes'.

Variety theatre

Most traditional proscenium theatres during this period followed variations on conventional forms. The largest and most elaborate illustration is the Bristol Hippodrome of 1912, built for Oswald Stoll and designed by theatre architect Frank Matcham. It opened with a variety bill headed by Eugene Stratton in a melodrama called 'The Sands O' Dee', a 100,000 gallon water spectacular with diving horses. Whist the 2,000-seat auditorium and the stage represents the very best of its type, by comparison the vestibule illustrates the typical long and thin entrance, occupying the more expensive high street plot.

Derby Hippodrome, 1914, is a good example of a regional variety house. It was designed by local architects Marshall and Tweedy on a corner site with an external elevation of red brick with terracotta dressings. The 2,000-seat auditorium was of traditional horseshoe form, on three levels, with a large stage and flytower. The stalls were below street level with two curved balconies above ground and a pair of boxes flanking the proscenium at dress circle level. This approach was introduced to reduce the average distance of travel from ‘seat to street’ whereby the stalls were below ground level and the upper gallery tier was dispensed with completely. In common with pre-war theatres, the auditorium was decorated with rich fibrous plasterwork in the Baroque style. Unfortunately, the Derby Hippodrome was seriously damaged in 2008.

The Grand Theatre in Cockermouth, 1915, by contrast, is an archetypal small-scale provincial variety theatre from this period. It was a simple rectangular building with a channel-rusticated stucco façade and the name ‘Grand Theatre’ in Art Nouveau lettering over a central lunette window. It originally had three feature domes set back from the front façade. The 750-seat theatre had a single circle decorated with Art Nouveau plasterwork and stage facilities, but no flytower.

Ciné-variety

The Regent, Great Yarmouth, is one the best examples of a ciné-variety house. Designed in 1914 by Norfolk cinema architect, Francis Burdett Ward, it seated 1,680 people. It emulated conventional theatre architecture and included a restaurant and café. It was designed for both cinema and theatre use but a projection box was not installed until later. It boasted a free Classical façade with a central Diocletian window flanked by two giant Ionic columns carried on console brackets and oeil-de-boeuf windows surmounted with plasterwork swags. The auditorium was decorated in a Louis XVI style with a profusion of fine elaborate plasterwork including swags and putti. It had seating in stalls and balcony levels, and featured four boxes with boldly projecting bow fronts to the side slips. The small stage house is typical, having a grid and flies but only four dressing rooms to accommodate live performances.

Another example from this period is the 1,500-seat Garston Empire Theatre, Liverpool, 1915. This is a rare survivor of a ciné-variety house during a transitional period of theatre architecture. It was built with a projection room and was dual-purpose, with a stage, dressing rooms and flytower for live performance. The Garston Empire had a single sinuous circle, one pair of stage boxes by the proscenium and simple Edwardian plasterwork. Like many ciné-variety houses of the period, it was only used for live theatre for three years before becoming a full-time cinema.

Cinemas with stage facilities

The popularity of film still necessitated the building of stages for intermittent live performance. Architecturally they present an important transition genre. One of the most striking is the Empire Theatre, Liverpool, 1925, designed by theatre architects William and T R Milburn. The Empire had a steel frame and was clad with Portland stone on its main elevation in a free Neo-Classical style with coupled Ionic columns above a tall ashlar base. The 1,925-seat design looked towards North America for inspiration, with a very wide auditorium and single, deep balcony.

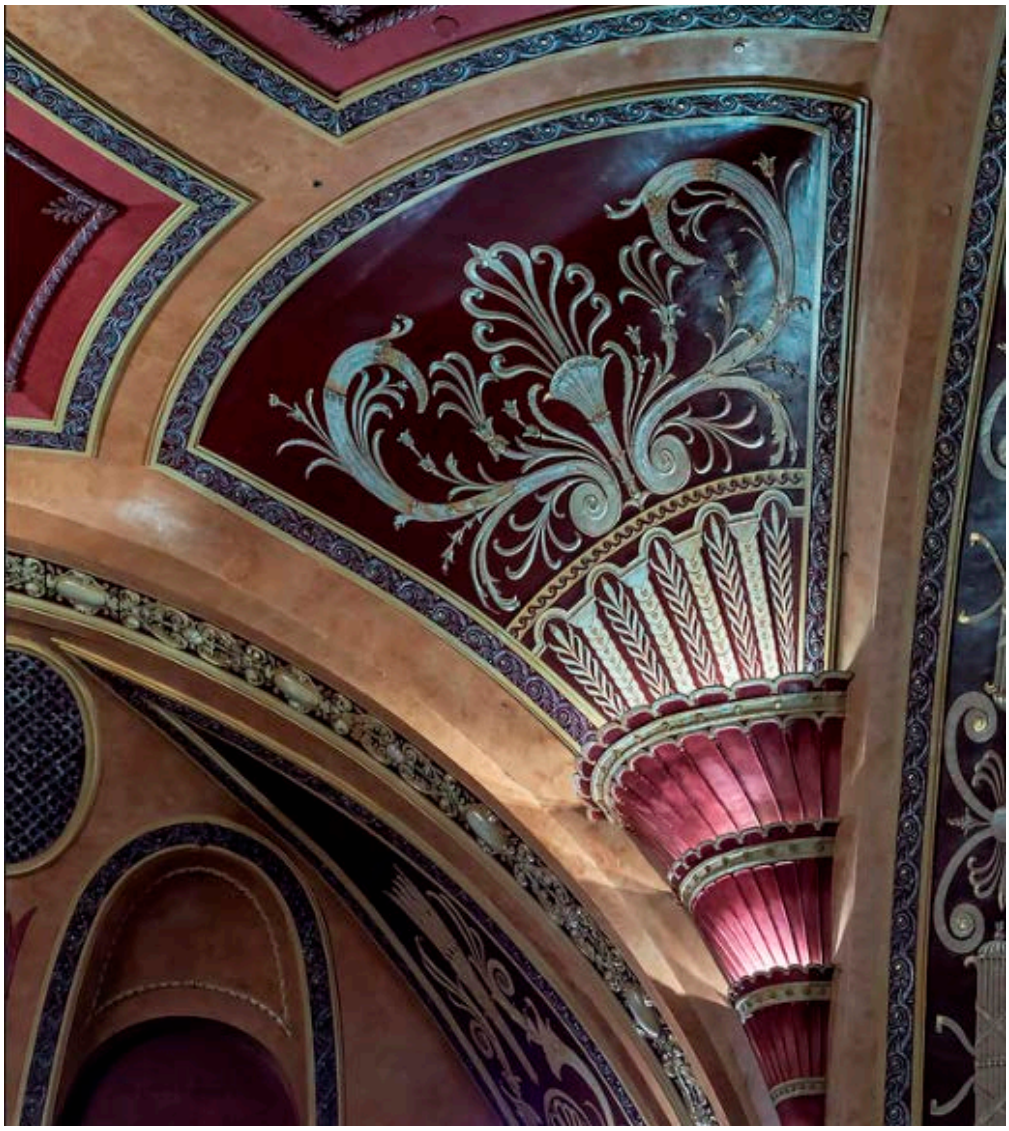

Figure 1: A detail of the integrated uplighter illuminating the elaborate plasterwork of the pendentive in the Empire, Liverpool. Listed Grade II.

In many ways it foresaw the great ‘super-cinemas’ of the 1930s in both design and decoration. The splayed walls on either side of the proscenium are articulated with repetitive arches inset with the graded, sweeping seating balconies. The Neo-Classical plasterwork cleverly incorporates glass uplighters.

The Abbeydale Picture House, Sheffield, 1920, was designed by North Shields based cinema architects Dixon & Stienlet, with a ballroom and billiard hall, hosting a mixture of ciné-variety. It had an attractive façade of white faience with a prominent domed corner tower. Internally, a single, sinuous balcony bows out into boxes on either side of the proscenium. The 1,500-seat auditorium retains much of its original plasterwork detail.

The Palace Theatre, Newark, 1920, also opened as a cinema with facilities for stage performances. It is remarkable because it was built for local entrepreneur, Emily Blagg, who had a successful property company. This was her third cinema but she designed it with a stage and orchestra pit in case the local appetite for film became less popular. It was constructed in the Neo-Byzantine style with exotic domed pinnacles and opened with a version of 'King Solomon’s Mines'. Its auditorium was reminiscent in shape of early music halls, a curiously archaic form in this period, with balconies on three sides of a rectangular auditorium with flat, delicate, plaster mouldings.

Figure 2: Exotic domed pinnacles to the entrance of Newark Palace Theatre designed in 1920 for local entrepreneur, Emily Blagg. Listed Grade II.

Figure 3: An elaborate barrel-vaulted venue for dinner dances at St Monica's, a multi-purpose hall with full stage facilities to entertain its residents. Listed Grade II.

Institutional theatres

The Theatre at St Monica's retirement home in Bristol, 1925, by local architect Sir George Oatley, provides a good example of an institutional theatre of the period. It was constructed for the almshouses named after Monica Wills, wife of Henry Herbert Wills (a businessman and philanthropist from Bristol, and a member of the Wills tobacco family), along with a chapel. It was designed as a multi-purpose 900-seat entertainment hall to allow for a variety of uses including dances and parties, but was provided with a generous raked stage equipped with a small grid. The theatre had a panelled wooden dado, plain walls and a barrel-vaulted ceiling with decorative plasterwork ending in large, ornate corbels. The hall was generously lit with long windows and had a small end balcony.

The Theatre at St Francis's College, Letchworth, 1924, was much more austere in its lack of ornament. It formed a complex with the gymnasium and was designed by institutional and church architect, Percy Richard Morley Horder. The assembly hall design was tweaked to include a flytower and to create a 600-seat theatre. It had a simple rendered exterior with arched doorways and a plain rectangular raked auditorium on a single tier, with a single box at first-floor level. A high, barrel-vaulted ceiling was lit by round-headed mullioned windows and it had a square plain proscenium arch.

Experimental theatre

The Maddermarket Theatre in Norwich, 1921, is claimed to be the first attempt in this country to recreate an Elizabethan stage, typically a large platform protruding into the middle of the yard so that the spectators nearly surrounded it. The Maddermarket Theatre was designed for director Walter Nugent Monck CBE, who believed traditional proscenium theatres were unsuited to the performance of pre-Restoration drama. A 310-seat auditorium in the Elizabethan style (complete with half-timbering and panelled doors) was created utilising the shell of a former Georgian chapel.

In 1926, director Terence Gray removed the proscenium arch at the Georgian (1814) Festival Theatre in Cambridge and remodelled the stage complete with revolve, fixed curved cyclorama and Schwabe lighting. It was the most modern experimental stage in Europe. Plans were drawn up by Sir Edward Maufe, RA, FRIBA. The theatre became a hub of experimental avant-garde theatre making. It is now a Buddhist centre, a remarkable combination of a rare surviving Georgian auditorium with a 1920s experimental stage complete with timber revolve.

Traditional proscenium theatres

Few traditional theatres were constructed during this period outside of London. The Palace Theatre, Redditch, 1913, is a rarity. It was designed by theatre architect Bertie Crewe and built by local builder G C Huins and Co. It had a stuccoed façade which ran alongside the auditorium and a stage in a Neo-Classical style with Ionic pilasters a feature. The 690-seat auditorium was designed in similar style with a balcony on a shallow curve, linked to one large box on either side, framed by Ionic pilasters with pediment over. It was primarily used as a ciné-variety house.

St. Martin's Theatre, Covent Garden, London, 1916, was designed as a companion building to the Ambassadors Theatre, 1913, by the same architect, W G R Sprague. It was built for Lord Willoughby de Broke and is significant as one of the first theatre interiors to drop the lavish display of modelled plasterwork instead exhibiting what was described as 'domestic English Georgian' style. In this, it looks ahead towards the plainer stripped-back interior of the 1920s. The auditorium was lined with dark polished hardwood with classical motifs including giant fluted Doric columns flanking the stage boxes. It was completed with a large glazed dome. Unusually for a theatre of this late date, the substage was provided with an exceptionally significant and complete set of wooden stage machinery following stage techniques of the late 19th century.

The first theatre to be built in London after the First World War was the Fortune Theatre, Covent Garden, which opened in 1924. It was built for playwright and impresario, Laurence Cowen, and was designed by architect Ernest Schaufelberg. The Fortune was one of the first buildings in London to experiment with concrete, its façade principally made of

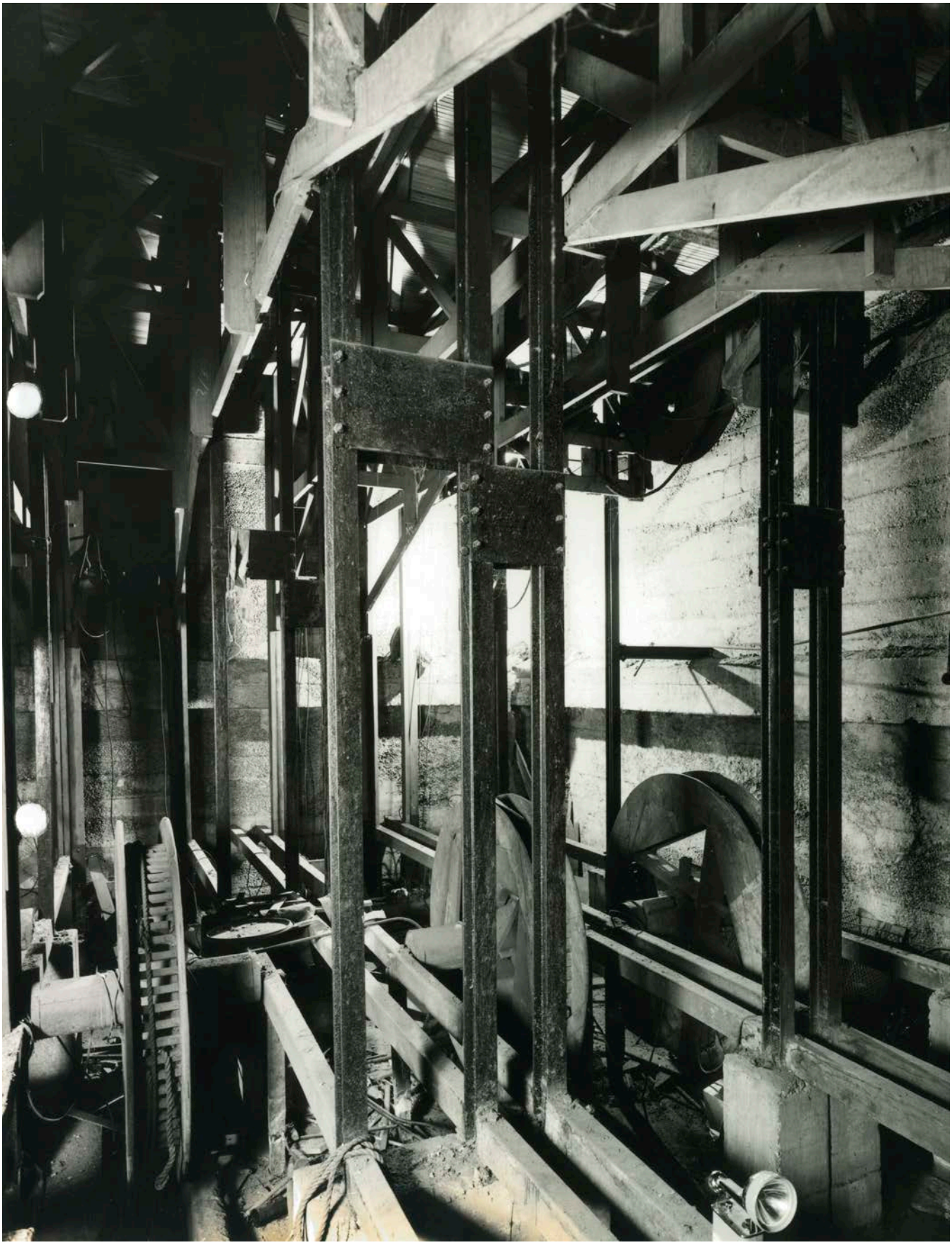

Figure 4: St. Martin's Theatre is famed for the longest running show, ‘The Mousetrap’. It has significant and complete wooden substage machinery including three working bridges as well as two grave and two star traps. Listed Grade II.

bush hammered concrete by Bovis Ltd. The theatre's figurine above the entrance, Terpsichore, was sculpted by M H Crichton of the Bromsgrove Guild artisans. Significantly it represents a radical departure from the dominant pre-war Edwardian Baroque. Its striking auditorium adopts a Germanic style not generally adopted until the 1930s. Two balconies with straight fronts include sleek, textured plaster chevrons.

It is interesting to compare the auditorium of London's Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, on the opposite side of the road from the Fortune. This auditorium was reconstructed in 1922 to designs by Emblin Walker, Frederick Jones and Robert Cromie, for the theatre impresario, Sir Alfred Butt. Stylistically, it harks back to pre-war Edwardian interiors with rich gilded plasterwork and soft furnishing. Its 2,600-seat auditorium in the Empire style, with three tiers of curving balconies, three bays of boxes and matching safety curtain provide an elaborate ensemble.

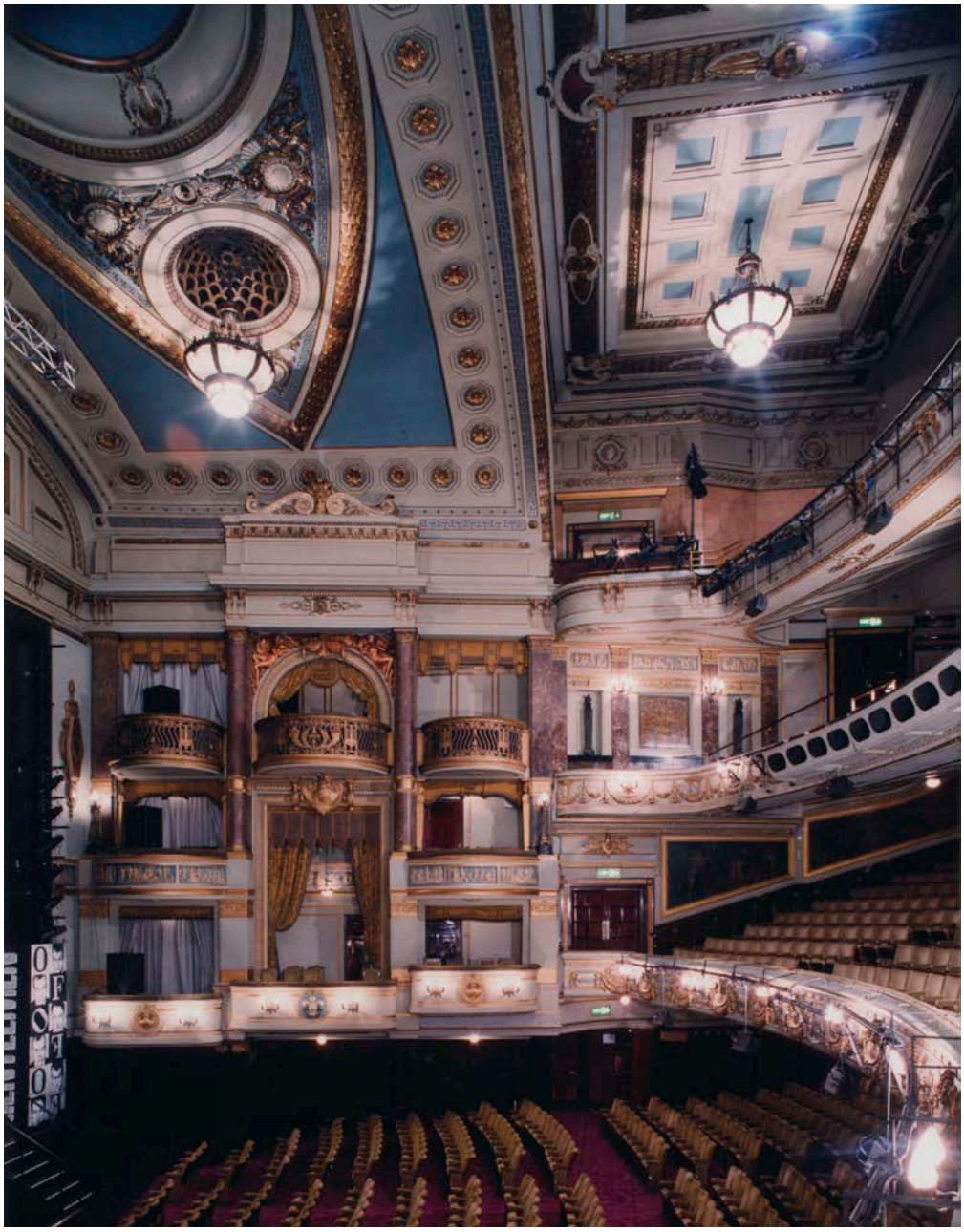

Figure 5: The reconstructed auditorium of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane was inspired by the Empire period - the owners wanted to retain everything that was noble and traditional about the precincts of the old theatre. Listed Grade I.

1926 – 1935

The theatres of the 1920s and 1930s are optimistic architectural statements. They were built in hope after the First World War.

Theatre architecture of this period illustrates the international design movement, Art Deco, first exhibited at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, in Paris, 1925. The lavish opulence of Art Deco with its bright colour, and adventurous, accessible design was introduced into theatres long before it became common in cinemas. Large theatres were decorated with reflective silvered plasterwork, beaded curtains, polished chrome fixtures and lacquered panelling.

Smaller theatres adopted a restrained, streamlined Moderne, with its sense of movement and light, introducing concealed lighting and abstract murals. Some theatres were refurbished with their foyers and bars updated in this latest style.

‘The movies’ had their heyday between the wars. The big American film-making companies wanted to have outlets to control and showcase their films. These theatres were constructed with a stage for live shows in support of feature films. The largest purpose-built flagships were located in the West End. Theatres were principally used for trade shows for distributors and many were soon forced to play films. Several live theatres were built but most took the precaution of incorporating a projection box to provide for alternative use. Existing theatres were adapted or remodeled for film. The Tameside Hippodrome, for example, had an internal fit-out in the Art Deco style. The Adelphi on the Strand had its whole façade modified in Odeon-like faience tiles to advertise film.

Live theatre began to be challenged by film and lost its mass audience. The decline in audiences was accelerated by the introduction of a tax on theatre tickets, which did not compare favourably with the new cinemas. An average seat in the theatre was nine shillings, while a ticket for 'the flicks' was anything from two to six shillings. Commercial theatre construction declined and theatres that survive this period are rare.

However, there remained many people for whom theatre had meaning. Plays became more sophisticated. The playwright and critic, George Bernard Shaw, made people think in a different way and the audience expected to be stimulated by what they saw and heard. The director, Harley Granville-Barker, returned to a serious consideration of the context and original staging of Shakespearean plays.

Nevertheless, as a result, theatres were still being built in London and major cities around the country. West End theatres were for the most part impoverished and remained conservative both in content and staging. Musicals such as 'No No Nanette', 1925; 'Mr Cinders', 1929 and 'Ever Green', 1930 were popular. It was only at Drury Lane where large-budget musicals by Ivor Novello and Noël Coward used huge sets, extravagant costumes and

large casts to create spectacular productions. Some regional theatres were rebuilt following fire damage. Seaside resorts were at their peak as people were still going on holiday for health and leisure purposes. Piers were a thrill-seekers and family attraction and many were rebuilt with theatres.

In the 1920s, the Moss Empires theatre group considered the prospects good enough to embark upon major expansion. Huge 2,000-seater Empire venues were built. These included Edinburgh, Liverpool, Glasgow, Southampton and the Dominion in London. William and T R Milburn used principles learnt from a visit to the USA in 1925.

Coastal theatres

A classic seaside theatre is the Worthing Pavilion, Sussex. The council purchased the pier in 1920 and started work on a shoreward pavilion. Designed by commercial architects, Adshead and Ramsey, the 1,000-seat theatre opened in 1926 and became a permanent home to the Municipal Orchestra. Its exotic domed roof following the Brighton Pavilion. The auditorium was lozenge shaped (for dancing) constructed of steel girders with a semi-circular proscenium decorated in Neo-Adam motifs. It is representative of its genre, a flat-floored, multi-purpose hall for seasonal entertainment with no flytower and limited stage and dressing rooms.

At the other end of the scale, the Bournemouth Pavilion opened in 1929. It was designed by G Wyville Home and Shirley Knight, winners of a competition design. It consisted of a 2,000-seat concert hall with a stage, later converted with a stage house in 1934. The auditorium was square on plan with a domed ceiling and decorated in a restrained Grecian manner. Bournemouth was a major seaside resort. The local council desired a large venue to attract stars of stage and screen. It occupied an acre of the town's pleasure gardens and seafront land and included a ballroom and restaurant. It was opened by the Duke of Gloucester who said in his speech that ‘Bournemouth was the acting physician to the industrial towns, bringing health to the sick, vigour to the convalescents, and being a playground to those in full health.’

Figure 6: The wide auditorium viewed from the cantilevered balcony of the Bournemouth Pavilion, a competition design by G Wyville Home and Shirley Knight to lure stars of stage and screen to the resort. Listed Grade II.

Figure 7: A painted frieze at Southport's Garrick Theatre featuring an abstract dancer motif in the curved contours, previously lit by trough lighting. Listed Grade II.

Between the two scales, the Garrick Theatre, Southport, Merseyside, 1929, by local architect George Tonge best illustrates the Art Deco style. The auditorium, originally seating 1,500 people, consisted of stalls, circle and eight stage boxes. The theatre was commissioned by local businessman George Rose and his partners as a fashionable home for live touring entertainment rivalling other seaside towns. It opened with a mystery drama ‘Firebird’, direct from the London Playhouse.

Figure 8: The huge American influenced auditorium of the Southampton Mayflower, with its swanky stepped boxes in the Neo-Grecian style with inset round-headed pediments above with fish scale decorations and plumed edge. Listed Grade II.

The largest theatre ever to be built on the coast in this period was the 2,300-seat Southampton Mayflower. It was built in 1928 for Moss Empires by architects William & T R Milburn and had ‘open days’ and a tea garden on the roof. The main façade was built of red brick and Portland stone with flanking half-octagonal turrets. The foyer was lined in marble and the auditorium was in the Neo-Grecian style with Art Deco influences. Two balconies feature. The upper one was set back and a curved proscenium arch, rising high, penetrating the deep sounding board part of the ceiling. The ceiling itself is divided into square and rectangular panels, with a dome in its centre. Mahogany panels and doors were produced by out of work shipyard carpenters. It retains 22 glazed 'standing boxes' which are a rare survival.

The De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea is regarded as one of the icons of the Modernist movement. It was championed by the 9th Earl De La Warr, who became Bexhill's first Socialist mayor. It was part-funded by a loan from the Ministry of Health. Designed by the architects Erich Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff, it was constructed in 1935. The Pavilion was the result of an open competition run by the RIBA at the request of the borough council in 1932. The selected design utilised the latest techniques and building materials. A welded, steel framed structure, a German idea and one of the first in the UK, was employed supporting plate glass walls. It was described by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner as ‘Mendelsohn’s magnum opus during the short time that he lived in England’ and ‘as exhilarating today as it was when it was new and a revolution for the English seaside’. The 1,000-seat theatre was designed as a multi-purpose hall and part of a complex which included a restaurant, library and reading room.

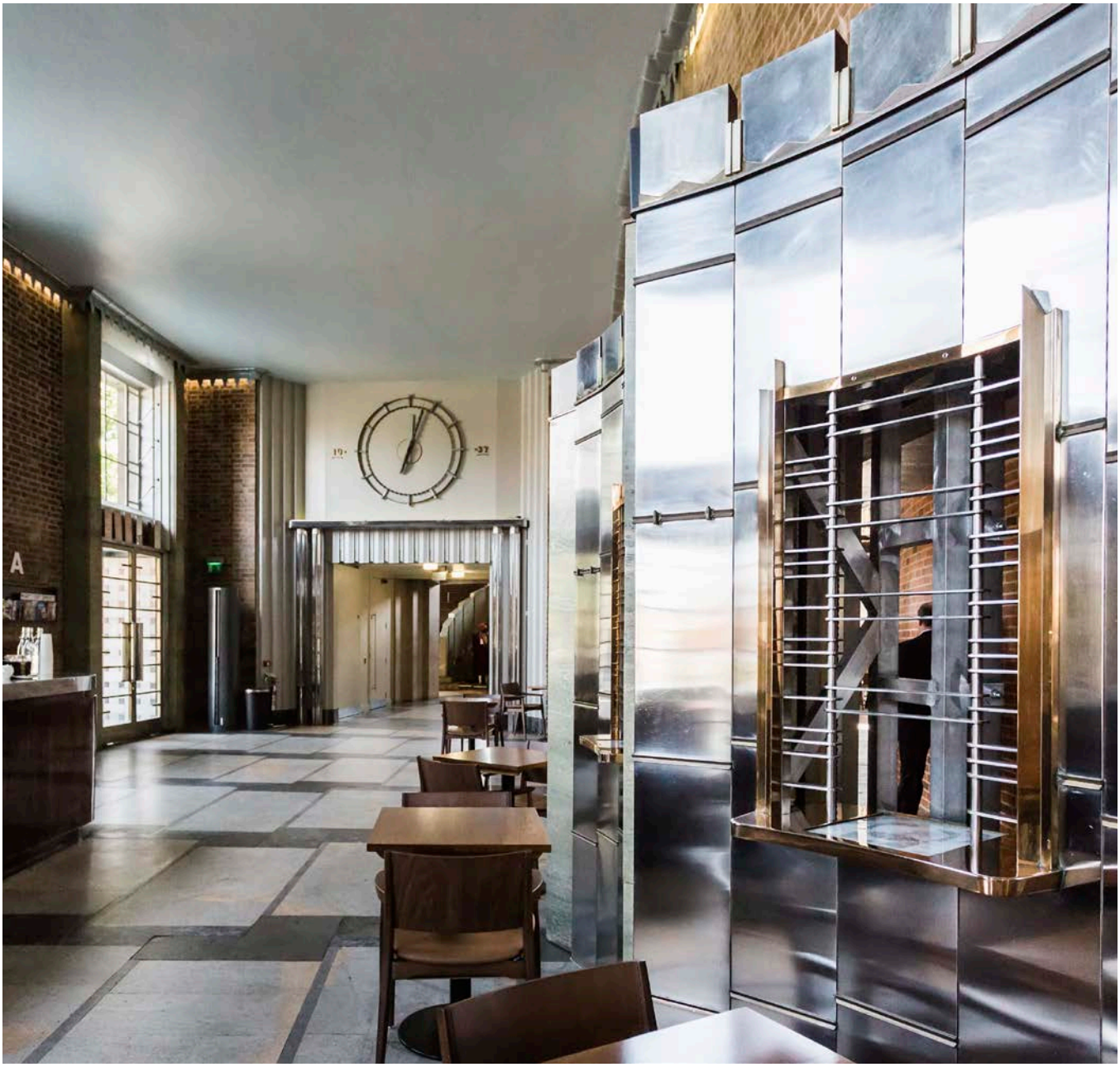

Figure 9: The shiny polished chromium plated door surrounds in the curving foyer of the Stratford Memorial Theatre contrast with the exposed brickwork and green marble veneers. A feature of the room, an oversized brass metal clock face flanked by the date '1932'. Listed Grade II*.

Theatres built by charitable associations

When a fire in 1926 destroyed most of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, the Shakespeare Memorial Association held a competition which was won by Elizabeth Scott of Scott, Chesterton and Shepherd. It was the first theatre commission to be won by a woman. The theatre opened in 1932. The scheme, thought daringly modern by the British establishment, was admired for its scale and simplicity of handling. Few parts of the 1879 building survived, but were incorporated by Scott rather than demolished. Her work was sensitive for its time. The brick façade reflected contemporary Dutch design. The 900-seat, fan-shaped veneered auditorium took reference from cinema design but was criticised over time for awkward sightlines and bad acoustics. It was totally remodelled by Bennetts Associates (2007-2010). The foyer and circular staircase with fountain by Gertrude Hermes is arguably one of the finest Art Deco examples in Britain.

The 450-seat Joseph Rowntree Theatre, York, was designed by architect and Garden City designer, Barry Parker, in 1935. It was principally designed for Rowntree's (later Nestlé) factory workers. The aim to build a 'centre of those recreational and educational activities which make for a full and happy life'. It had simple architectural features, combined with concealed lighting and a fully equipped stage house with curved cyclorama and could accommodate a sixteen-piece orchestra.

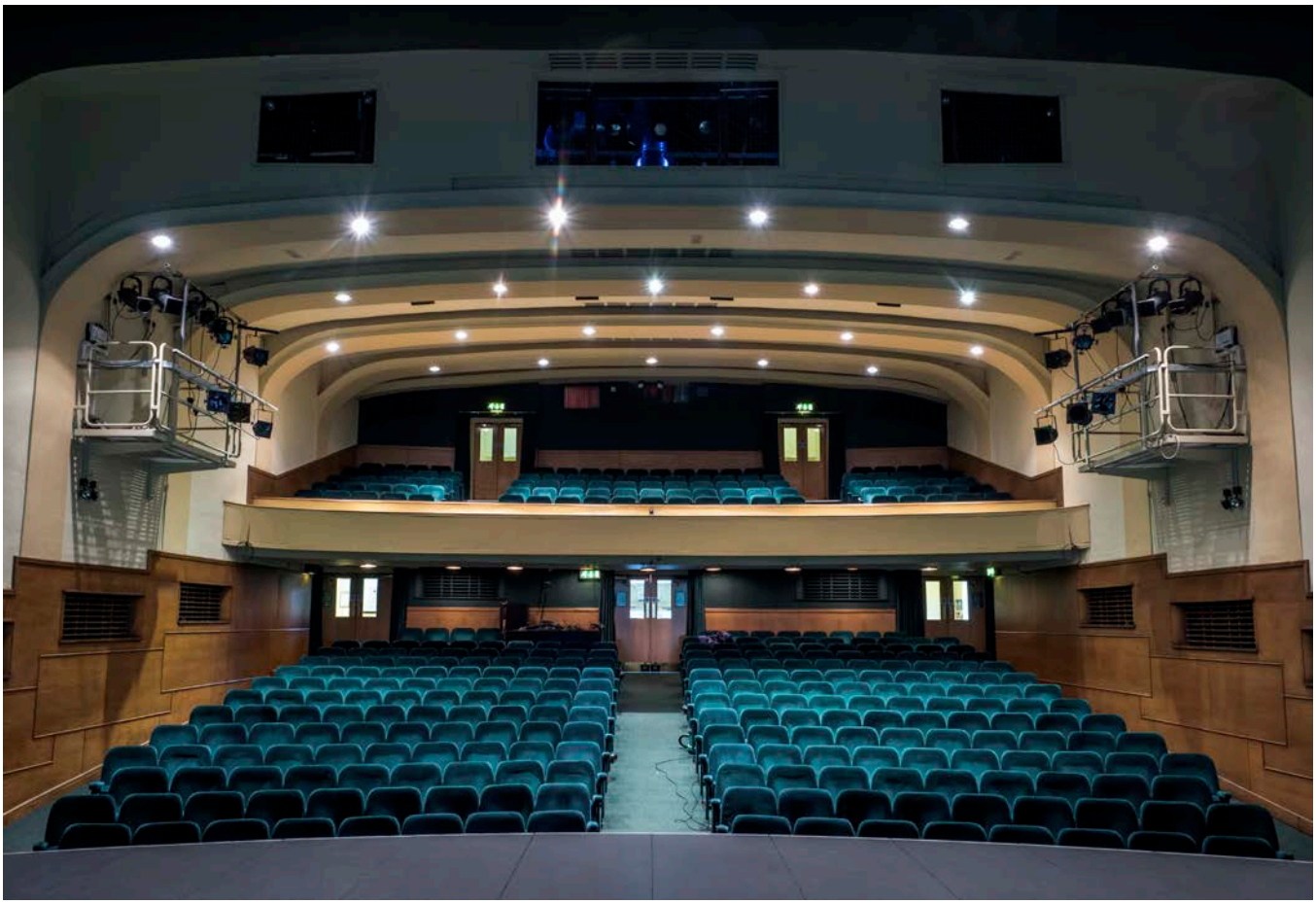

Figure 10: The restrained interior of the Joseph Rowntree Theatre, with its narrow balcony with plain curvilinear front. The ceiling with deep plaster ribs originally containing concealed lighting. Polished timber panelling to dado height incorporates louvered ventilators. Listed Grade II.

Commercial theatres

William & T R Milburn were architects for the 2,000-seat New Theatre, Oxford, 1934. They co-operated on the interior with T P Bennett and Son for its owner, Stanley Dorrill, who wanted a new, modern and luxurious theatre to replace the Victorian one destroyed by fire. The new theatre had a Bath stone corner entrance and a single balconied feature window. The auditorium was in the Art Deco style. Its high, arched ribbed proscenium with a pelmet set within deep banded ante-proscenium included two balconies. Gilded murals depict Antique scenes in the stalls and concealed dimmable lighting was a feature so that the mood of the audience could be swayed to the style of show. New scenic techniques included a large revolving stage, a scarce survivor of theperiod. The numerous bars and toilets within the theatre were described in the opening programme as a 'lure'.

The Globe Theatre in Stockton-on-Tees was designed as a ciné-variety house in the Art Deco style by the Newcastle-based firm Percy L Browne & Son who specialised in the 'architecture of entertainment'. It was developed by Stockton born brothers Charles and Alfred Lewis and was the first cinema in the area to introduce 'talkies' and provided a building fit for both the purpose of theatre and cinema. Built in 1935, the long-term future of cinema was still perhaps not absolutely assured, ciné-variety offered 'the best of both worlds' - both stage and screen.

Open air theatres

Renewed British interest in Shakespeare brought about a trend for outdoor theatres. The Bard's plays were originally performed in the open-roofed Globe Theatre in London. One of the most dramatic examples is the Minack Theatre, Porthcurno, Cornwall. Its creator, Rowena Cade, bought a rocky headland to build a house but became so involved in local theatre that she planned a 600-seat theatre in her garden. With the help of her gardeners she shaped the theatre seating and stage from the rock. In the summer of 1932 'The Tempest' was performed against the backdrop of Porthcurno's dramatic seascape. Cade made some of the costumes herself. Only batteries and car headlights lit the play. The audience had to buy their tickets from a table in the garden and then scramble down a narrow path to the theatre.

In Scarborough, the local council constructed the vast 6,000-seat Open Air Theatre in Northstead Manor Pleasure Gardens in 1932. Audiences flocking to see the opera 'Merrie England' were accommodated on the banks of a small valley, taking advantage of ground contours which created a natural amphitheatre. Then, as now, the stage was set on an island in the middle of a lake with fixed seating for the audience opposite.

West End revival

At this time the West End was having a revival in theatre building and provided a series of Modernist buildings that make up much of London's Theatreland. The Savoy Theatre of 1929 is arguably the most outstanding. The 1,138-seat auditorium is an example of geometrical Art Deco invention. It was totally reconstructed by theatre architect Frank A Tugwell with interior decoration by Basil Ionides. There were two balconies with tongue-fluted faces, the upper one set back, with slips. From the slips forward to the proscenium the side walls were canted and carry a deep sounding board, all divided into panels in an illusionistic perspective pattern. The 82 side wall panels were decorated aluminium leaf with Chinese motifs, mainly derived from a great lacquer screen of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Whilst the 1929 building appeared to be a brand new theatre, it still retained much of Charles John Phipps' earlier theatre structure including the stage house.

Figure 11: The auditorium of the Savoy is one of the truly outstanding examples of geometrical Deco invention. It is a mass of gold and silver, plate glass and brilliant colouring, and the roof gives the impression of a summer sky. Listed Grade II*.

Figure 12: The Whitehall Theatre's proscenium arch illuminated by concealed lighting, with a glass beaded safety curtain designed to look like the boarder and fringe of a shawl. The ceiling represented a silver cloud suspended in mid-air. Listed Grade II.

The Trafalgar Studios, the former 660-seat Whitehall Theatre of 1930, was designed by theatre architect Edward Albert Stone. It is exceptional for its French Art Deco interior by decorators Marc-Henri Levy and Gaston Laverdet - famous for decorating the Paramount Theatre in Paris (1927). Black lacquer, tinted silver, reflective panels and polished chrome were used to give maximum feeling of luxury. It also had concealed lighting and a glass beaded curtain, said to 'resemble the border and fringe of a ladies shawl'. A rare survival is the original multi-coloured textured plasterwork.

It is interesting to compare the Cambridge Theatre which opened in 1930 with the Ronald Jean's Revue, 'Charlot's Masquerade'. The theatre was designed by Wimperis, Simpson and Guthrie and the interior partly by Serge Chermayeff. The modestly designed exterior was faced mostly with

Portland stone. The Moderne style 1,250-seat auditorium was designed with a series of transverse ribs, which advanced in increasing proximity one to another up to the springing of the dress circle. Each contained concealed lighting. The effect was intensified by the scheme of limited decoration, carried out in bands of lacquered metal-leaf. The two boxes had a semi-circular arched opening, the tympanum of which was filled in with an embossed design furnished in matt-silver.

By contrast to both, the Phoenix (1930) is unusual in several ways. It was built for Sidney Lewis Bernstein (Baron Bernstein) a British businessman who was founding chairman of Granada Theatres Ltd. The theatre was designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, Bertie Crewe, and Cecil Masey, with a 1,020-seat auditorium designed by Theodore Komisarjevsky. Komisarjevsky was a theatrical impresario and interior designer and created some of the most lavishly decorated interiors for the Granada circuit. Its interior was in free Renaissance style using plaster modelling, rich colours, gilding and mirrors. It retains its original highly decorative safety curtain. Komisarjevsky would go on to design the interior of the vast 4,000-seat Tooting Granada cinema (1931).

The 3,000-seat Streatham Hill Theatre, 1928-29, is significant because it was the last theatre designed by theatre architect, W G R Sprague. The commercial intention was to preview productions prior to their West End runs. It is consequently one of the largest metropolitan theatres and was one of the best-equipped in London outside of the West End.

Figure 13: Glamorous mirrored ceiling of the foyer at the Phoenix Theatre. Listed Grade II.

1936 – 1945

During the six years Britain was at war, 1939–45, life was inevitably challenging. Food and clothing were rationed and in short supply. The introduction of the blackout in 1939 and the Blitz in London led to massive disruption of the entertainment industry. Many theatres closed and some were requisitioned as shelters. People were reluctant to visit theatres because of bombing. There was a shift towards touring. Mobile companies entertained audiences at makeshift 'non-theatrical' locations: evacuation centres, factory canteens, army camps, hostels and tube shelters.

A few commercial and private theatres were constructed during the early part of this period, usually rebuilt as the result of fire, profit or popularity. However, the Second World War brought building new theatres to an end, with materials directed to the war effort and controlled by licencing from 1940. The war had doubled the rent of properties and caused the closure of West End theatres, further compounded by the evacuation of London. The Entertainment Tax and fewer theatres meant increased competition for those that remained.

In 1939, theatre producer Basil Dean set up the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) to provide entertainment for troops and civilian workers. At the same time government intervention was made necessary because of the widespread unemployment of artists and musicians during the war. In addition, worries about morale on the home front led to the creation of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) in 1940. CEMA had two purposes: to encourage amateur arts, and to ensure that professional artists were given work. By 1945, 46 arts organisations were funded by CEMA. Many buildings were adapted for theatre use but examples are now scarce. After the war CEMA was renamed the Arts Council of Great Britain (now Arts Council England) with an interest in purpose-built buildings for the arts.

There was an upsurge of non-commercial drama and a renewed enthusiasm for amateur productions. A number of repertory companies needed new accommodation. Amateur and professional theatre groups were encouraged to provide 'Holidays at Home'. Groups formed amateur dramatic clubs and guilds performed in community halls, church halls or in makeshift theatres in camps. It culminated in the formation of The Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain in 1946 to represent the views of amateur theatres across the UK. These groups constructed their own theatres or converted existing buildings into performance spaces.

The idea of the civic theatre was first brought to the notice of the government in 1942 by the British Drama League. Its work included pursuing the creation of the National Theatre. A clause was inserted in the Local Government Act of 1948 enabling local authorities to provide entertainment and spending on the arts. Many local authorities had plans for creating a 'civic theatre' to provide a social service, to be part of communal life and to serve the needs of local people. They were a means of providing a town with a multi-purpose facility often intended primarily for dancing, but

with a stage, showcasing a borough's status. Such buildings were symbols of civic pride. Competitions were held for the best design using modern materials. They were commonly funded by local benefactors.

Little Theatres and clubs

The Palace Court Theatre, Bournemouth, 1931, opened as the 565-seat venue for the amateur drama club, The Little Theatre Limited. It was funded by a bank loan and share issue. It was custom-designed by the architectural firm Seal & Hardy, and based on the Whitehall Theatre, London. The club put on its own plays but the venue also hosted touring shows. By 1960 the rising costs meant the theatre had to close; but from the 1980s it was used as a place of worship until its acquisition for restoration and reuse by Arts University Bournemouth in 2021.

The Southport Dramatic Club had been operating from existing venues since 1913. It did not have a permanent home until its Little Theatre was built at the rear of the Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society offices. The 398-seat theatre is approached through a passageway beneath the east side. It was funded and equipped by 41 founder members, opening in 1937 with a production of 'Dear Brutus' by J M Barry. It was designed in the Moderne style with concealed lighting and was constructed with a flytower, paintframe and workshops.

Figure 14: The Moderne auditorium of Southport Little Theatre with decorated walls curving towards the plain proscenium is flanked with tripartite columns. The ceiling has three deep plaster troughs that originally contained concealed lighting.

The former Oxford Cinema of 1913 was converted into the Playhouse Theatre for the Erith Theatre Guild, Bexley, in 1949. The guild was formed in 1943 and mounted productions in hospitals, service stations, gun sites and barracks. The conversion into a 170-seat theatre was accomplished by local builders in their spare time over two years. The small cinema stage and screen was customised to provide wing space and access to the dressing rooms and scene dock, located outside in old army huts. An area was also excavated to provide an orchestra pit.

Civic theatres

The Cambridge Arts Theatre was constructed in 1936 by the economist and founder member of the Arts Council, John Maynard Keynes. The architect, George Kennedy, constructed a 670-seat theatre behind and incorporating a 19th century façade. An Art Deco timber panelled auditorium was provided with a circle and boxes flanking the proscenium. The theatre was paid for by a share scheme supervised by its founder Keynes, at a cost of £15,000. The design managed to incorporate a flytower in a sensitive location.

By the mid 1930s Wolverhampton Council desired a first-rate music venue for the city. It had been considering a new venue since the 1920s and a 'Civic Hall Committee' was established. A competition design was won by E D Lyons and L Israel, AA, RIBA of Ilford in Essex. There were 122 entries which were examined by eminant architect Charles Cowles-Voysey but the high cost meant that the Civic Hall was not constructed until 1938. There were two main assembly halls, the 2,200-seat Civic Hall and the smaller 670-seat Wulfrun Hall both in the Art Deco style.

On a smaller scale, the Tunbridge Wells Assembly Hall Theatre opened in 1939. The 900-seat theatre was designed by architect Percy Thomas in the Art Deco style as part of the Civic Centre complex. Mayor Alderman Westbrook told guests at the opening that 'today's proceedings mark a definite step forward and a progressive theatre policy.'

The Playhouse in Cheltenham was started by the local council as a small theatre for amateurs. In 1945, the council converted the former Georgian Montpellier Baths into a theatre. The floor of the auditorium was built over the swimming pool, originally as a flat floor venue seating 300.

Arts centres

The Albany Theatre was originally built as a lecture hall for Coventry Technical College, which opened in 1935. CEMA adapted the auditorium into a 650-seat theatre by providing a flytower. It was used through the war years to entertain the public with concerts. It became a professional venue and was home to the Midland Theatre Company - the first funded Rep – which went on to become the repertory company at the Belgrade Theatre.

In 1945, Gwen Pollard, a local patron of the arts, realised that there was an opportunity for an arts centre in Bridgwater. Bridgwater Arts Centre opened in 1946, and was the first arts centre in Britain to open with Arts Council support. It was created within a former school of music, converting a large Georgian town house and its school hall (in the back garden) into a 175-seat black box theatre.

Commercial theatres

The Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, was built on the site of the previous Court Theatre which had been destroyed by fire. It was built for Robert Arthur in 1938 and designed in the Art Deco style by the Liverpool architect James Bushell Hutchins. On a corner site, the elevations were designed of red brick with dressings of Aberdeen granite. The 1,600-seat auditorium comprised stalls, grand circle and balcony and was richly decorated. The proscenium was gilded with delicate plaster ornament; coffered sounding board over a splayed ante-proscenium, containing a box at first floor level each side with its front extended to the circle by a curved bay.

The Blackpool Opera House, in the Winter Gardens Complex, was built in 1939 to the designs of the architect Charles MacKeith in a Modernist Art Deco style. It replaced an 1889 opera house by Frank Matcham. The new 3,000-seat theatre was equipped with what was then the largest stage in the country. The enormous theatre was constructed for summer spectaculars, entertaining Blackpool's holiday makers in grand style, and was fitted with a Cinemascope.

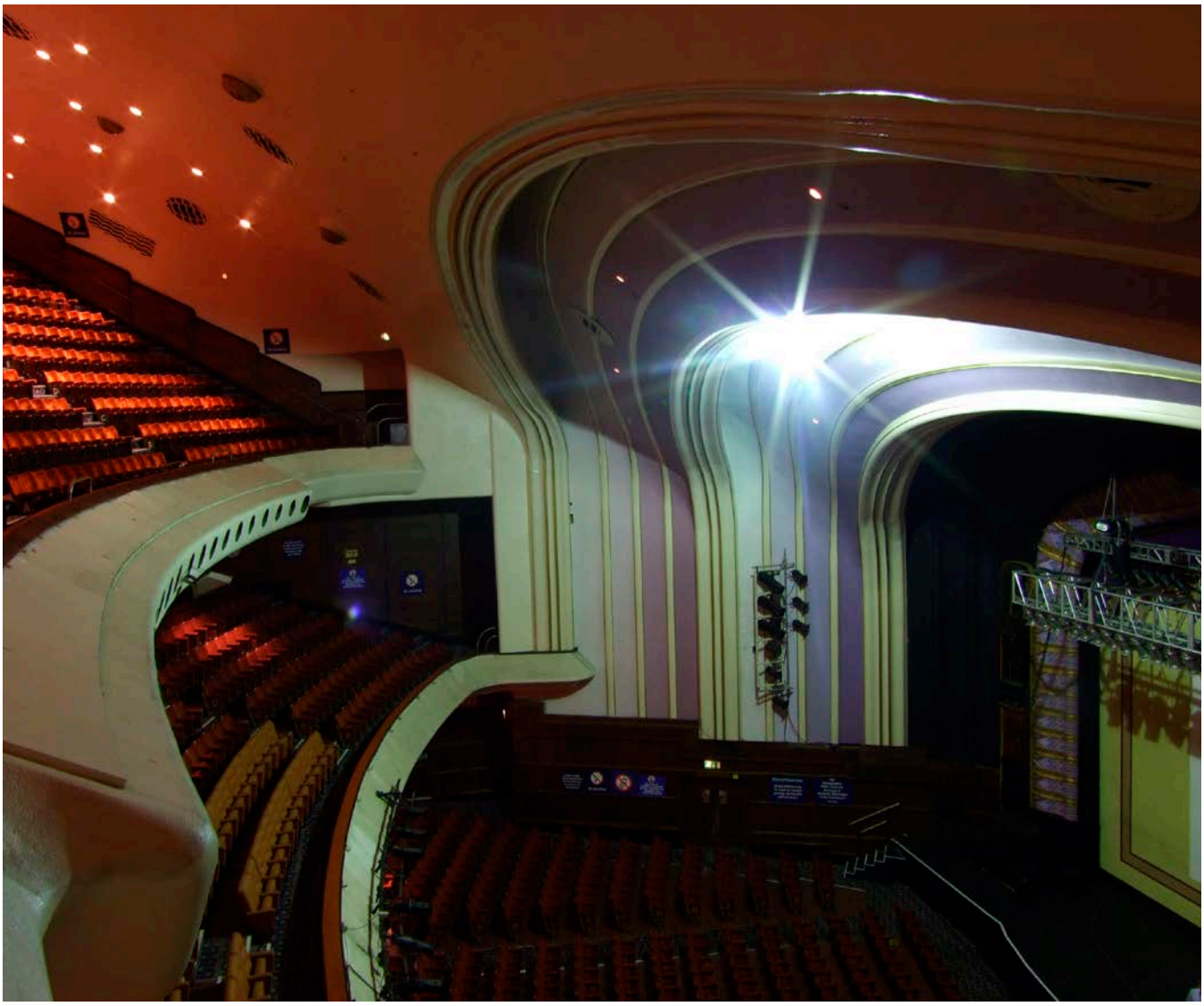

Figure 15: The sinuous curves of Blackpool Opera House, concealed Holophane lighting, with polished panelling providing vast opulence, complementing its enormous stage delivering entertainment on an industrial scale. Listed Grade II*.

Initially a project of showmen, the Hyams brothers, the Gaumont State Theatre in Kilburn was the largest and most impressive ever built in England and the third largest in the UK, seating 4,004 people. It was constructed with a huge stage, a suite of dressing rooms and a separate paintframe workshop. It was opened by Gaumont Super Cinemas in 1937 with an 'All Star Variety Show', with stars appearing including Gracie Fields. The orchestra pit was on a lift and its 4 Manual Wurlitzer organ console was on a revolving lift. The organ had 16 ranks and a grand piano attached. The exterior design is reputedly inspired by the Empire State Building in New York, originally housing the theatre's broadcasting studio. In the foyer, the chandelier was modelled after one in the Banqueting Hall at Buckingham Palace. The auditorium was in the Art Deco style with one wide balcony and it had a restaurant with its own separate entrance.

Repertory theatres

The Oxford Playhouse is an important illustration of a repertory theatre. It survived during the war years as it attracted actors and directors who were unable to perform in London's closed theatres. An appeal to raise funds to build the theatre began in 1934, led by enthusiast Eric Dance when he joined the directors of the Oxford Repertory Company. A new theatre was wanted as the company had been using a former museum. The design of the façade was by Sir Edward Maufe and the theatre by F G M Chancellor of Frank Matcham & Co. When Maufe designed the Oxford Playhouse in 1938 he felt the need to conform to the Georgian discipline of the adjoining terraces that it is almost undistinguishable as a theatre. The single-balconied, 700-seat auditorium was also quite understated with simple streamlined plaster ribs.

At the other end of the scale, the Hull New Theatre was built for the Hull Repertory Company which had previously been using the Little Theatre next door since 1924. In 1939, the company's director Peppino Santangelo, who had turned the organisation's fortunes around, set about the reconstruction of the former Georgian Assembly Rooms into a new 1,330-seat theatre which involved it being reconstructed internally in the Art Deco style. It was converted into a theatre by W B Wheatley and cinema architect Robert Cromie. It had one balcony, boxes flanking the stage, and featured giant stylized Ionic pilasters modelled on the portico.

Military theatres

A rare example of a theatre constructed to entertain troops can be seen at Hurst Castle, Lymington. Originally built by Henry VIII in 1544 as one of a chain of coastal forts. In the Second World War, Hurst was manned with gun batteries. A 200-seat garrison theatre was formed for troops stationed at Hurst by knocking two casements together.

Figure 16: The makeshift wooden proscenium with the insignia of the Royal Artillery and painted back wall of the Hurst Castle Garrison Theatre. Scheduled Monument.

Another rare example is the Theatre Hut at Harperley, Prisoner of War Camp, County Durham. It was a purpose-built 60-seat theatre, constructed by its former inmates in 1939. The theatre had a stage, orchestra pit and tiered flooring. It was decorated using painted hessian sacking with accompanying adapted wall lighting. The proscenium was decorated with theatrical masks and scroll work fabricated from papier-mâché. Productions were written and performed by the inmates.

A roofed bandstand was replaced by the present Babbacombe Downs Concert Hall which was built by the council in order to extend the season for popular musical concerts. Opened in 1939 with 600-seats, it is good example of a theatre constructed at a time when there were limited materials. It demonstrates the makeshift character of such venues used by the military to give lectures, concerts and ENSA shows.

In Welwyn Garden City, a 17th century aisled barn was converted to a 150-seat theatre in 1932. After use during the war for Army Cadets, it was refurbished in 1946. By 1948 the land had become part of the new Welwyn Garden City, under control of the local authority, who eventually leased it to the local Little Theatre group.

Figure 17: Concrete silo and feather-edged weatherboarding to the 17th century timber-framed Welwyn Barn Theatre, a converted cowshed. Listed Grade II.

Private theatres

Stanford Hall Theatre is the best surviving private theatre of the interwar period. In 1928, Stanford Hall (built in 1774) in Stanford on Soar, was purchased by Sir Julien Cahn a British businessman, philanthropist and cricket enthusiast. In 1937 he commissioned cinema architect Cecil Aubrey Masey to build a private cinema/theatre adjoining his private house. It was designed in an Art Deco style with decorations by interior decorator J E Redding and murals by artist Beatrice McDermott.

Figure 18: Auditorium side wall and ceiling of Stanford Hall Theatre are divided into staggered sections by a series of lighting coves, with murals on each leaf and full height central Art Deco uplighter. Listed Grade II*.

3 Change and future

Theatres can be particularly vulnerable to change, alteration and demolition because they can occupy sites of high land value located in prime town centres with large footprints. By 1945 large towns might have had two or three theatres, while cities could have up to a dozen. There can be pressure of development for more profitable uses. A former theatre that is in non-theatrical use will face many more pressures for alteration to its original theatrical character and purpose than those that remain in their designed use.

Often the immediate threat to a vacant theatre is a proposed change of use rather than demolition. Some planning applications are made for change of use only, with no reference to works, but physical changes nearly always follow use changes. Care is needed to ensure that these do not render an eventual return to theatre use insupportably expensive or impossible.

Developments on adjoining sites similarly need care or they can also sterilise a theatre completely if essential access routes are blocked. An adjoining development which has no such physical impact, but which introduces a noisy neighbouring use, or a noise sensitive use such as residential, can be equally damaging. It should be noted that a noise which may be perfectly tolerable in most urban contexts can be quite unacceptable in a theatre, where pains have been taken to silence even the faintest sounds, for instance, from the ventilation system.

Greater flexibility for conversion of town centre uses also creates risks for theatres, particularly where it introduces new housing on neighbouring or adjoining sites. Residential use causes issues around sources of noise and disturbance, whether from performances or from late night get-ins/get-outs and servicing. It can result in restrictions being placed on theatres and venues, such as earlier closing times and a reduction in permitted sound levels, that could impact the venue's operation and viability.

There are many examples of theatres on the National Heritage List for England. Additional candidates for inclusion may be identified where their special interest has not been recognised. Of those already on the list their special interest may be such that they should be considered at a higher grade.

Examples of local interest will often warrant consideration as local heritage assets, and should be brought to the attention of the local authority. Expert investigation of some of these has produced (or will produce, if they are properly safeguarded) clear evidence of their original character. Communities may also consider acquiring a redundant theatre as an Asset of Community Value.

4 Further reading

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