Historic England

Cinemas

Introductions to Heritage Assets



Summary

Our 'Introductions to Heritage Assets' (IHA) series sets out our current understanding of different types of historic buildings, landscapes, sites, monuments and marine heritage. Typically, IHAs cover subjects either where there is a lot of existing literature but where something short and concise is missing, or more commonly where little has been written. The IHAs are illustrated and aim to be understandable and accessible, whilst also being well-researched and authoritative. Many IHAs give us an understanding of types of heritage which are not yet well understood, perhaps because they are commonplace or fairly recent. New titles are added regularly, as our understanding evolves or new research comes to light.

Cinemas are an important part of the nation's cultural infrastructure, as well as our built heritage. They are often prominent buildings in our towns and cities, their elegant facades instantly recognisable within the streetscape. They are places intrinsically connected to growing up, where memories are made, friendships and relationships blossom and where we fall in love with the magic of film. Many people have fond and vivid memories of the cinemas that served their communities, and desire to see them appreciated and conserved.

This IHA aims to give a comprehensive introduction to cinemas as a building type including their development and decline, as well as a section on how some have been successfully put to alternative uses. Also included is a glossary of terms, and a bibliography to signpost the reader to further information. For those looking to further understand the considerations for listing cinemas, the building type is also described in Historic England's Listing Selection Guide for Culture & Entertainment Buildings.

Words underlined in the text are explained in the glossary.

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This edition published by Historic England September 2026.

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Please refer to this document as:
Historic England 2026 *Cinemas: Introductions to Heritage Assets*. (Historic England, Swindon).

The Cinema Theatre Association (CTA) is the national body that campaigns for historic cinemas. The CTA is a voluntary membership association which:

- Publishes books, an annual scholarly journal, and a quarterly magazine
- Sells many other publications on cinema history
- Organises lectures and day and weekend visits for its members
- Maintains a major Archive of cinema history
- Campaigns and undertakes casework

For all enquiries consult the **CTA website** or e-mail **info@cta-org.uk**.

Front cover: The Art Deco auditorium of the Regent, Hanley, near Stoke-on-Trent, opened in 1929. Photographed 2026. Listed, Grade II*, 1195837 [James O. Davies © Historic England Archive DP573664]

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Introduction

All through the 20th century, cinema was one of the most prominent forms of public entertainment in Britain. Initially films were shown in a variety of premises, however from the 1909 Cinematograph Act (see ‘Early Years’, below) specially designed buildings were erected in ever greater numbers to cater for public demand. From the fairly modest structures of the 1900s, cinemas grew in size and ambition until in the 1930s three or four major circuits (companies operating cinemas across multiple sites) built huge auditoria of considerable architectural quality. Cinemas are still being built, but only a few designed since the Second World War show the same quality and ambition.

Cinema attendance declined from the 1960s onwards due to the impact of television, and as such the number of cinemas also declined, with many fine buildings now lost. Concern at this loss led English Heritage (now Historic England) to commission a ‘Thematic Survey’ undertaken by Richard Gray (author of this guide) and the late Elain Harwood, during 1998-9. Thirty cinemas were newly listed, eight others were upgraded, and the organisation published a booklet called ‘Picture Palaces’.

There is considerable overlap with theatre design, and some buildings have alternated between the two uses during their life. The Introductions to Heritage Assets: Interwar Theatres is particularly relevant. As commercial buildings, cinemas are subject to the pressures of the open market, and many have found new uses as bingo halls, music venues, religious assembly buildings, or banqueting suites. Cinema attendance remains healthy today, as customers appreciate watching films on a big screen as a collective experience. Recent interest in 1930s design, especially ‘Art Deco’ and ‘Streamlined’ styles, has prompted a renewed concern to preserve the best examples.

Development of the building type

The Invention of Film

The moving image flickered into life from Victorian slide shows and through scientific experiments with high-speed photography. The technology eventually became perfected to the point where it could be demonstrated to a paying audience. The Lumière family, photographic plate-manufacturers from Lyon in the south of France, are generally credited with achieving the earliest commercial exploitation. Their presentations were at first given to learned organisations concerned with photography and science, but then publicly, in a cafe in Paris at the end of December 1895. A press screening in London followed, held at the Regent Street Polytechnic in the succeeding February, and in other countries too. The

films lasted less than a minute, most famously ‘A Train Arriving at a Country Station’ - said to have caused alarm among audiences at the sight of an approaching steam locomotive. Inventors elsewhere worked towards the same goal, but ultimately they suffered defeat by the Lumières’ business acumen in successfully offering the moving image in a theatrical environment.

The Lumières were keen to retain sole rights to their ‘Cinematographe’ but an English rival, Robert Paul, had also perfected a projector, naming his the 'Theatrographe', using films obtained from Thomas Edison in the USA. But Paul was prepared to sell his machines and soon, with other camera or projector manufacturers, the medium became exploited by travelling entertainers who had previously given slide presentations - magic lantern shows - and had realised its potential. Thereafter film appeared in local public halls, and even rooms over pubs, with audiences attracted by printed handbills and word of mouth. So lucrative were these demonstrations that they increased in frequency and found permanent homes. Sites were located, often crudely converted shops, with wooden benches facing a rough sheet serving as a screen. Variety theatres installed film equipment with the screen let down from the stage flies (rigging) between the acts, and travelling fairgrounds also adopted the medium. Film moved away from its original high-minded scientific origins to become a form of mass public entertainment.

Early Years

Before feature-length productions, film programmes comprised a mix of single reels providing a changing roster of comedies, dramas, travelogues and news, with shows lasting from an hour to ninety minutes. Prior to the First World War, film was aimed less at educational, scientific or cultural value, but at entertainment, with audiences attracted not by particular subjects but to spending time in a cinema, appreciating its novelty value.

Projectors would be operated by electricity obtained from a gas or oil-fired generator, its noise and smell placed well away from the audience. The highly inflammable nitrate-based celluloid film could quickly ignite in the intense heat generated by the light source, and, if it became trapped in the mechanism, a fire could break out. Inadequate exits made escape dangerous and there were instances of mass panic, particularly at children's shows. A need therefore arose for government legislation to control the operation of cinemas, and to this end a legal enforcement. The Cinematograph Act of 1909 came into operation on 1 January 1910. From this time projection equipment was required to be housed within a fire-proof enclosure with only external access and with escape routes clearly indicated.

Being unable or unwilling to comply with the new requirements saw the closure of many early sites, but the Act became a defining catalyst for the construction of the first generation of purpose-built cinemas. They were predominantly simple single-storey structures, although many boasted elaborate fronts to attract attention on the street, their design grounded in that of the fairground and incorporating a usually centrally positioned

ticket booth flanked by access and exit doors. These exuberant facades were embellished with ornamental plasterwork and often crowned by a flamboyant eye-catching finial or dome. Internally, the eclectic decorative features of the live theatre were adopted but in modified form, comprising columns, pilasters, cornices and elaborate, barrel vaulted ceilings, providing cinemas with the air of respectability their operators were by then craving. With electricity still a novelty the word 'electric' would often be included in the name, as at the Electric Palace in Harwich, Essex (fig. 1).



Figure 1 - The eye-catching façade of the Electric Palace, Harwich, opened in 1911. Photographed 2022. Listed, Grade II*, **1204934** [Stella Fitzgerald © Historic England Archive DP312454]

The years immediately preceding the First World War saw cinemas becoming architecturally more ambitious, with high facades and two-level auditoriums. Dating from 1912, The Ionic at Golders Green, north London (demolished in the 1970s) was of this type, having an elegant entrance portico and, in the auditorium, a curving balcony and private boxes in emulation of the live theatre. Likewise, the Picture House (later renamed the Futurist, demolished in 2016) in Liverpool, opening in the same year, with a fine classical frontage and elaborate internal plasterwork. At a mid-point during World War One cinema construction ceased, caused by a combination of a building materials shortage and a lack of workforce, many of them having fallen victim in the trenches of northern France.

Around 1914 feature-length films emerged, each being a dramatic piece with a length closer to that of a stage play. Exhibitors found that longer, better quality productions provided an opportunity to charge higher ticket prices, resulting in greater profits. So successful were they that in the USA huge picture houses began to appear, with the largest, the Capitol on Broadway in New York of 1919, capable of seating an audience of over 5,000.

Architectural Influences from the USA

‘We sell tickets to theatres (cinemas), not movies’, so pronounced Marcus Loew, an early film exhibitor in New York who eventually controlled a nationwide circuit. For the public the experience was wholly new, with the picture house becoming the agent of seduction in the consumption of film and providing an immersive fantasy where everyday life could be set aside.

Found in every American city, these temples of entertainment were envisioned in a multitude of architectural forms designed to attract the maximum audiences. The Majestics, Tivolis, Rivolis and Orientals (common names for cinemas on both sides of the Atlantic) offered escape in the form of captivating storylines and glamorous movie stars like Clara Bow, Rudolph Valentino and Ramon Navarro. Lavish foyers led to cavernous auditoriums of faultless sight lines achieved through the use of ingenious planning and construction. Cantilevered balconies avoided intrusive structural supports - otherwise obscuring the screen - with heating and cooling systems contributing to a uniformity of comfort.

Architects for this massive infrastructure were required to work at great speed, as time was of the essence when no audience was occupying the seats. There were many specialists in the field but two in particular greatly influenced the look of British cinemas:

- Thomas Lamb of New York - an adherent of the decorative neoclassical style, inspired by Robert Adam - as exemplified by the previously mentioned Capitol in New York, and;
- John Eberson, the inventor of the atmospheric auditorium, which resembled a giant stage set of asymmetrically arranged architectural assemblies, usually Spanish influenced, viewed against a landscape backdrop and a clear plaster ceiling 'sky'.

The Atmospherics were a consummate technical illusion as, for 'daytime' (before the programme began) the auditorium would have projected clouds passing in succession overhead, while for 'night', with the film in progress, miniature light bulbs simulated stars.

The cinema palace construction boom in the USA continued unabated through the 1920s, but the Wall Street financial crash in its final year brought it to an abrupt ending.

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Cinema Construction in the 1920s and into the early 1930s

The most productive period for British cinema construction came during the twenty years book-ended by the end of the First World War in 1918 and the start of the Second World War in 1939. Of seminal importance for its effect on the design of new cinemas was the now demolished Brighton Regent of 1921 which repeated the splayed plan for its auditorium, which its architect Robert Atkinson had seen in the USA, especially that of the Capitol in New York.

By 1926 there were some 3,000 cinemas operating in Britain. Of greater complexity than their Edwardian predecessors, the most recent examples of new buildings were referred to as 'super cinemas', as a differentiation. Multi-tiered auditoriums were often shoe-horned into restricted city-centre sites, as the abundant financial rewards justified the enormous expenditure involved. Meanwhile in every suburb and town an equally ambitious but less costly picture house was constructed. A number of projects were conceived as a complete entertainment complex, to include not only a restaurant but also a ballroom in response to a current craze for formalised dancing. Due to its popularity, many existing venues for live entertainments converted permanently to film, as illustrated by Bertie Crewe's London Opera House in Kingsway of 1911 which became the Stoll Picture Theatre six years later, and the Leicester Square Theatre by Andrew Mather of 1930, with a suave classical facade and an auditorium inspired by the Atmospheric interiors of the USA, which provided both forms of entertainment at its opening but reopened solely for cinema use in 1933. Both are now gone.



Figure 2 - The Neo-Georgian façade of the Regent, Ipswich, opened in 1929. Photographed 2026. Listed, Grade II, **1385027** [Sarah J. Lever © Historic England Archive DP600529]

Most construction took place later in the 1920s, a large part of it by Provincial Cinematograph Theatres (PCT). The only national circuit at the time, its new owner, Gaumont, disposed much of its assets to Fox in America as a means of raising the outlay involved in acquisition. Many of PCT's cinemas were designed by their in-house architect William Trent, including the Regent in Ipswich of 1929 (fig. 2), with its Neo-Georgian façade. This has a broad, low auditorium but significantly larger than pre-First World War examples and incorporates internal detail derived from German sources. Also dating from the late 1920s, the Regent in Hanley, Stoke on Trent (fig. 3), of high quality construction in Art Deco style.



Figure 3 - The Art Deco auditorium of the Regent, Hanley, near Stoke-on-Trent, opened in 1929. Photographed 2026. Listed, Grade II*, **1195837** [James O. Davies © Historic England Archive DP573666]

The PCT Regent cinemas helped establish a mature British cinema style, but independent operators were also energetic, as demonstrated by the monolithic but architecturally refined Kensington Kinema (later Odeon) in west London of 1926 by Julian Leathart; only the facade remains in reconstructed form. Other examples included Robert Cromie's Davis in Croydon, south London, of 1928 (long gone) in a format described at the time as 'Free-French' but now reading as pure Art Deco. Another example from the same year, the sumptuously Italianate interior of the Empire, Leicester Square by Thomas Lamb of New York in collaboration with a British counterpart, Francis Chancellor, was built as the MGM film studio's London showcase. The interior has been lost but the entrance facade remains intact (fig. 4). As a direct architectural descendant of the Empire, George Coles, a prolific designer in the field produced the lavish but now lost Trocadero at Elephant and Castle in south London, in 1930.



Figure 4 - The London flagship of MGM films: the Empire, Leicester Square, London, opened in 1928. Photographed 1928. Unlisted [Alfred George Plater, Bedford Lemere and Company © Historic England Archive BL29574]

Another Hollywood studio, Paramount, had as its British headquarters cinema the Plaza in Lower Regent Street, London, of 1926 (Grade II, **1274609**). Designed by Frank Verity and Samuel Beverley, it had a dignified classical facade (surviving) and a superb Italian Renaissance interior (lost). While having American 'Beaux-Arts' origins, it was handled with a sophisticated European sensibility. A year later Paramount went into partnership to create a companion project - the surviving but currently disused Carlton nearby in Haymarket, with an Adam-influenced foyer and elegantly classical auditorium (fig. 5). Paramount was the only Hollywood studio to establish an extensive British circuit, beginning with two huge projects in Manchester and Newcastle upon Tyne, opening early in the 1930s following decade. Again designed by Verity and Beverley, Manchester's auditorium was originally richly classical and Newcastle's fully French Art Deco, with Manchester's later remodelled in this new and fashionable style; both are now lost.



Figure 5 - The elegant Adam-style foyer of the Carlton, Haymarket, London, opened in 1927. Photographed 2001. The 1990s lighting and colour scheme have since been removed. Listed, Grade II, **1456493** [Derek Kendall © Historic England Archive AA025456]

For much official and commercial architecture of the 1920s, classical design, basically of Baroque inspiration, was still in control but increasingly simplified. Entertainment buildings followed the same pattern, and some theatre and cinema work became decoratively indistinguishable. But for cinemas, escapist ‘fancy dress’ crossed the Atlantic in the late 1920s to manifest itself as ‘Chinese’, ‘Egyptian’ or in some other costume - whatever would attract public attention, as spectacularly demonstrated by the facades of the Palace, Southall, west London of 1929 (fig. 6), the Carlton, Islington, north London of a year later (fig. 7) and the Granada (now Soho theatre), Walthamstow (**1065590**). All three are listed at Grade II*.

With this incursion came the first British Atmospheric interiors, as could formerly be seen at the Marble Arch Regal in central London of 1928, designed by Clifford Aish and Charles Muggeridge, with fake autumnal foliage cascading from the ceiling. The Splendid in Downham, south east London of 1930, the work of William King and (probably) F.L. Phillie, featured an auditorium based on a lakeside scene in northern Italy. Neither remain. Two mature Atmospheric examples survive in London: the Astoria, Brixton (fig. 8) of 1929 and Finsbury Park Astoria of 1930 (Grade II*, **1297977**) now a music venue and an evangelical church respectively.



Figure 6 - The Chinese-inspired exterior of The Palace cinema, Southall, London, opened in 1929. Photographed 2026. Listed, Grade II*, **1079380** [Chris Redgrave © Historic England Archive DP622066]



Figure 7 - The Carlton, Islington, London in neo-Egyptian style, opened in 1930. Photographed 2015. Listed, Grade II*, **1292870** [James O. Davies © Historic England Archive DP148248]

With the intention of evoking a nostalgia for a romantic past, the medieval and Tudor styles were also explored, sometimes to complement a historic setting as for the Gaumont Palace, Salisbury (Grade II, **1243555**) but also in new suburban areas, as at Henry Farmer's Robin Hood cinema of 1927 in Hall Green, Birmingham, now lost. Advancing into the 1930s, two Gothic interiors were imagined by the Russian émigré stage designer Theodore Komisarjevsky: the Granada in Tooting (fig. 9), 1931, now a bingo hall, and its sister, the Woolwich Granada of 1937, now The Christ Faith Tabernacle Cathedral (see fig. 21). Listed at Grade I and Grade II* respectively.



Figure 8 - The elaborate ‘atmospheric’ interior of the Astoria, Brixton, London, opened in 1929. Photographed mid-20th century. Listed, Grade II*, **1064934** [© Historic England Archive]

By 1930, the more progressive architects were looking to recent German and Swedish achievements, finding a way towards freer design forms and moving away from (or at least reducing) classical references. Symmetry survived, as did figurative sculptural decoration, albeit stylised. An important exemplar was Julian Leathart's Sheen cinema in west London of 1930 (now lost). It had a symmetrical facade, with classical allusions confined to sculptural reliefs flanking the central vertical emphasis. Here too were the beginnings of streamlining, evident in the horizontal banding of the plinth and cornice, the latter descending as part of the central motif, with the auditorium following in the same vein.



Figure 9 - Flagship of the Granada circuit, the rich Gothic style interior of the Granada, Tooting, London, opened in 1931. Photographed 2012. Listed, Grade I, **1357668** [Derek Kendall © Historic England Archive DP134340]

Also dating from 1930, but more radical than Sheen, was Ernest Wamsley Lewis' New Victoria in central London, now the Apollo Victoria Theatre (fig. 10), with its Expressionist auditorium and streamlined facades, the latter based on those of Erich Mendelsohn's German department stores dating from the previous decade. The Dreamland cinema in Margate of 1935 with a slim, vertical external tower (known as a fin tower) and an auditorium influenced by the stripped classical of the 'Swedish Grace' style prevalent in that country during the 1920s (Grade II*, **1260315**).



Figure 10 - The Expressionist auditorium of the New Victoria, now the Apollo Victoria Theatre, London, opened in 1930. Photographed 2026. Listed, Grade II*, **1066085** [Chris Redgrave © Historic England Archive DP622075]

Sound

A seismic event in the history of the medium, the effective exploitation of film sound had to wait until the development of efficient amplifiers and loudspeakers. On becoming available in the late 1920s, the fledgling Hollywood studio Warner Brothers introduced the Vitaphone system. This comprised conventional turntables mounted on the back of the projectors playing shellac discs, the positioning of the stylus requiring precise synchronisation to the action on the screen, being particularly crucial when characters spoke or sang.

The first feature-length sound film, Don Juan, released in 1926, came only with an orchestral recording, although preceded by an introductory message in synchronised sound from Will Hays, chairman of the Hollywood film trade body (subsequently a name associated with notorious censorship). A year later Warners released The Jazz Singer, with fully integrated dialogue and sung pieces. In the same year the Fox studio launched the technical miracle of photo-electric optical sound, with the soundtrack printed down one side of the film. The cumbersome turntable and disc system then became redundant.



Figure 11 - The new Odeon style shown at Scarborough, North Yorkshire, opened in 1936. Photographed 1936. Listed, Grade II, **1243674** [John Maltby © Historic England Archive BB87/03389]

At first sound was regarded by many in the industry as a passing fad but, although at first far from perfect, it made film more realistic and the public had no doubts; momentum gathered and cinemas everywhere were soon 'wired for sound'. Musical subjects became most successful and the first in the genre, Broadway Melody from MGM in 1929, was much vaunted as 'all-singing, all-dancing'.

It has been estimated that by the end of 1930 one third of the world's cinemas had been equipped for sound, including 47% of those in Britain[1], but impoverished early halls found the apparatus too expensive to install, were unable to compete and soon closed. An

implication of the new technology was the inevitable dismissal of the musicians, who had previously accompanied silent pictures.

Sound-track audibility in cinemas became a major consideration, the acoustic problem of reverberation, particularly in auditoriums with fewer conventional architectural embellishments, being solved by sound absorbent membranes and plaster mouldings to interrupt the bare surfaces. Speakers for the sound system were normally located in a compartment built into the rear wall of the stage, with the soundtrack escaping through invisible perforations in the screen.

New Cinemas for Britain after 1930

Sound exponentially increased the popularity of film, leading to a huge expansion in British cinema construction, even during the economic depression of the early 1930s. This development coincided with a move away from traditional architectural forms to embrace Modernism in various iterations, and this was also reflected in sleek and sophisticated Hollywood sets. Additionally, the 1930s had an obsession with the visual representation of speed, which became expressed in architecture, as seen in streamlined blocks of flats, for example, and which supplanted the jagged and angular version of Art Deco derived from the 1925 Paris Arts Decoratifs exhibition.

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With a fusion of image and sound, cinema represented the epitome of modernity and, for some operators, this was best expressed by a new and radical architecture for their cinemas. The most successful expression of this aesthetic was for the Odeon circuit: its first cinema opened in 1930 - at Perry Barr in Birmingham (surviving as a banqueting venue, unlisted). Odeon’s building programme continued through the decade, and, apart from a few exceptions, the design ethos took its influences from architectural advances in Europe, particularly in Germany.

The Odeons achieved external prominence through eye-catching street appeal, given emphasis by distinctive vertical features clad in faïence or imaginatively treated brickwork. This ground-breaking new look was first revealed in 1934 at the Worthing Odeon on the south coast (now lost) with its impressive landmark tower, and in Chingford, north London, a year later (also lost) apparently designed by Andrew Mather and similarly announced by a vertical accent, made more forceful by the use of stylised relief statuary.

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Figure 12 - Prominent flagship of the Odeon circuit: the Odeon, Leicester Square, London, opened in 1937. Photographed 1937. Unlisted [John Maltby © Historic England Archive BB87/03700]

Most influential on the appearance of the Odeons were the ‘Universum’ and ‘Titania Palast’ cinemas in Berlin (interiors now lost). These were the genesis of designs by John Clavering, an assistant working in Harry Weedon's practice in Birmingham. Two of his Odeons were at Colwyn Bay in North Wales (now lost) and Scarborough, north Yorkshire, whose exterior survives (fig. 11), both dating from 1936. Clavering left the practice in the same year, with the architectural baton passed to another assistant in the firm, Robert Bullivant, an example being his Chester Odeon, also of 1936 (Grade II, **1376369**) of which the exterior survives. In 1937 the Weedon and Mather practices collaborated for the company's most important and lavish cinema: the Odeon in Leicester Square (fig. 12), with its soaring tower dominating the facade and dramatically streamlined auditorium (lost but partly restored). A number of architects were engaged on Odeon's huge building programme, most of them continuing a reliance on a streamlined Modernism. They included the highly experienced George Coles, best exemplified by his sensational futuristic auditorium for the former Odeon, now Everyman, at Muswell Hill in north London (fig. 13).



Figure 13 - Streamlined Modernism in the interior of the Odeon, Muswell Hill, London, opened in 1936. Photographed 1936. Listed, Grade II*, **1079178** [John Maltby © Historic England Archive BB87/03202]

Other national circuits had been established: the aforementioned Associated British Cinemas (ABC, founded in 1928) and Gaumont (founded in 1927). To augment the Hollywood product and to ensure a continuous supply of films, both circuits also controlled film studios. Gaumont's cinemas mainly came from their chief designer William Trent, internally incorporating German Expressionist motifs, while those for ABC had stylish Art Deco interiors designed by the company's prolific architect, William Glen. A fine example of the latter's work survives as the former Savoy, Northampton of 1936 (fig.14), now a place of worship. Endowed with funds raised from merchant banks and investment by Hollywood studios, these national circuits almost entirely replaced the older generation of picture houses.



Figure 14 - An Art Deco interior at the Savoy, Northampton, opened in 1936. Photographed 2026. Listed, Grade II, **1249275** [Sarah J. Lever © Historic England Archive DP600551]

Independent operators also produced fine examples in this period, including the following examples, which all date from the early 1930s:

- The Regal in Kingston, south west London (Grade II, **1253350**), by Robert Cromie. Built in a Germanic, early Art Deco style for Sidney Bacon, a local exhibitor;

- Black's Regal in Sunderland (fig. 15) by Gray and Evans (until recently a bingo hall), its street presence announced by a tower featuring Art Deco plasterwork and having a similarly designed auditorium;
- The Plaza in Stockport (Grade II*, **1257697**) by William Thornley, combining for the (now gloriously restored interior) Art Deco with classical motifs overlaid by designs derived from Egypt and central America. It was designed for the Ambassador cinema circuit.



Figure 15 - Art Deco design in an independent circuit: Blacks Regal at Sunderland, Tyne and Wear, opened in 1932. Photographed between 1932-1942. Unlisted [© Historic England Archive NWC01/01/2317]

For the Gaumont State at Kilburn in north London of 1937 (Grade II*, **1078889**) George Coles provided a diminutive skyscraper for the frontage but reverted to what this particular exhibitor wanted for the interiors: an opulent classicism. It also had the largest audience capacity of any cinema, with just over 4,000 seats (falling below Britain's biggest ever cinema capacity - that of Green's Playhouse in Glasgow of 1927, seating 4,368). The auditorium of the Regal in Bridlington of 1938 on the Yorkshire coast (now given over to bingo), saw bold decorative panels designed by Eugene Mollo and Michael Egan (fig. 16) and, of the same year, is the State at Grays in Essex (fig. 17) by Francis Chancellor, which included an imposing tower and stylish Art Deco internal features.



Figure 16 - Bold decorative panels by designers Mollo & Egan at the Regal, Bridlington, East Riding of Yorkshire, opened in 1938. Photographed 1938. Unlisted. [John Maltby / RIBA Collections]

A sub-genre of the building type, the newsreel cinema, produced a distinguished example in the News Theatre, now the Tyneside Cinema, in Newcastle upon Tyne of 1937 (fig. 18). The work of a local architect, George Bell, it had an interior of exuberant plasterwork.

The cinema experience

The largest and most important cinemas offered a hybrid entertainment known as cine-variety. As the term implies, it combined film with performance, when the screen would be taken up into the stage loft to make way for live acts. At their conclusion, besides the main feature film, the programme could include short subjects, a newsreel and an interlude on a cinema organ, an instrument originally conceived as an augmentation for the orchestras accompanying silent pictures but subsequently becoming popular for solo performance. For the exhibitor, cine-variety supplemented the expensive film product (especially those from Hollywood) and enhanced the perceived value for the admission charge. Undoubtedly spectacular, these often elaborate presentations eventually proved superfluous and mostly died out during the Second World War.

Film could (and can still be) experienced alone or with others, perhaps meeting beforehand in a cinema cafe. A loyalty could be developed for a particular venue, expressed as 'my' or 'our' cinema, so familiar and regularly was it visited. Such was their popularity that long queues formed for admission; but how dispiriting it must have been standing in the cold and rain of winter, with the possibility of only being seated after the main feature had begun, and having to pick up the storyline half-way through, only to see the beginning when it 'came round' again. But in an era of fewer expectations this disappointment was treated as a lesser concern, a common phrase being 'this is where we came in'.



Figure 17 – Art Deco interior at the State Cinema, Grays, Essex. Photographed between 1950-1970. Listed, Grade II*, **1111543** [John D. Sharp © Historic England Archive]

During the later 1920s and into the 1930s there were on average eight hundred feature films released annually by Hollywood studios. By the end of the 1930s British cinemas were accommodating audiences of, on occasions, 23 million per week. From the 1920s, Hollywood and British studios increasingly addressed a female consumer who unequivocally became the dominant mass audience, subconsciously receiving instruction on their appearance and every aspect of their lives. Film attendance became part of women's lives outside of the home, and the habit later gave rise to a reminiscence: ‘You

acted out what you saw (during) the rest of the week'.[2] An afternoon 'at the pictures' might be followed by a visit to the comforting and indulgent cinema tearoom such as the one at the aforementioned Stockport Plaza (fig. 19).



Figure 18 - The Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle upon Tyne, opened in 1937. Photographed 2008. Listed, Grade II, **1385094** [James O. Davies Historic England Archive DP059765]

Another War and After

World War Two commenced in September 1939, with government directives requiring the cessation of work on inessential construction, including cinemas. However, cinema admissions remained buoyant throughout the war years, despite the dangers of aerial attack. British picture-going peaked at 1.64 billion admissions just after the war in 1946; the equivalent of 33 cinema visits per person, per year. The population at the time stood just under 49 million, of which 73% attended cinemas, with nearly half visiting once a week or more.

Building restrictions continued into the post-war years, only ending in 1955, but projects commenced before the war could be completed and those destroyed could be rebuilt. Britain's most notable post-war cinema was a worthy replacement for south London's

Trocadero (demolished in part for a road-widening scheme): the Odeon of 1966 designed by the Hungarian émigré architect Ernő Goldfinger. Completely free-standing, the reinforced concrete frame both supported and spanned the entire auditorium. It has since been demolished. Opening the same year but still extant and in use as a cinema, the Curzon, Mayfair (Grade II, **1272023**) features sliding fibre glass screens in the foyer and fibre glass murals on the cinema walls, both by the sculptor William Mitchell.

The First Losses

Launched in Britain by the BBC in 1936, television at first entered only a handful of homes. Three years later transmissions ceased at the outbreak of the war. Recommencing in 1946, the medium was given a huge boost in 1953 by the coverage for Queen Elizabeth II's Coronation, when many people acquired their first receiver, and it also established television in the national conscience. There was only one channel, to serve London, but after more transmitters were erected TV reached almost everywhere. The 1954 Television Act broke the monopoly held by the BBC, and the next year a commercially sponsored, more populist second channel (ITV) emerged. Thereafter television became the decisive nail-in-the-coffin for mass cinema attendance.

Cinemas were beginning to empty: queues would be shorter and it became less likely that filmgoers would be turned away from the last screening. There would be a greater choice of seats and no longer the risk of being ushered to a seat at the end of a row, with its slanting view of the screen. During the later years of the 1950s admissions fell dramatically, leading to an average of only one visit per person every two weeks and the more poorly located and economically weak cinemas began to close. Lone operations suffered from the prevailing bar system, whereby film distributors gave preference to the dominant major circuits, only then passing the product down to the independents. New releases could take weeks to reach such venues, and this crumbs-off-the-table policy brought about many closures.

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In the four years following the opening of the second television channel in 1955 over a fifth of the sites listed in Malcolm Webb's Greater London's Suburban Cinemas ceased

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operation (99 out of 440). Unusually for cinemas belonging to a major national circuit, some Odeons came to an end, having had a life of barely twenty years. The giants of the halcyon days became too large to fill, a case in point being the Davis in Croydon, south London. Independently owned, it offered concerts, opera and ballet in addition to film, but the bar-system starved it of the best product and in 1959 it succumbed to redevelopment.

But cinema closures had as much to do with sociological change as a loss of interest in film. A generation having survived the war married, had families and were purchasing homes on a mortgage. Life became more home centric and, with childcare hard to come by it became easier to spend evenings watching television than visiting a local picture house. Audiences began to fragment, with the young continuing to attend cinemas, both as a recreation and as a way of breaking free from parental supervision in an environment often dominated by TV.



Figure 19 - The elegant cinema tearoom at Stockport Plaza, opened in 1932. Photographed 2026. Listed, Grade II*, **1257697** [Alun Bull © Historic England Archive DP598435]

During the mid-1950s the first supermarkets appeared in Britain. They required a large uninterrupted floor area and, rather than building from new, a cheap and quick solution to providing premises would be to acquire and convert redundant cinemas, with the suburbs presenting potential opportunities for this. The comprehensive redevelopment schemes of

the 1960s also became a potent factor towards loss, as happened to south London's Trocadero coupled here with a complex road widening scheme for the Elephant and Castle (see previous section). Surviving cinemas became less profitable and as a result became increasingly dilapidated due to a lack of investment - as could be witnessed by a visit to the Beaufort in Birmingham (now lost) with its delightfully eccentric interior of fake Tudor beams, where the lighting would be reduced yearly as a way of disguising the poor maintenance caused by reducing revenues. Similarly, in wet weather audiences at a picture house in the Somerset coastal resort of Minehead might experience rainfall internally.

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Alternatives

As many of the larger cinemas had substantial stages built for cine-variety the boom postwar in popular music ensured that, from the late-1950s and through the 1960s and 1970s, they once again saw service, but for rock concerts. These provided a profitable alternative to film and a number of venues transferred permanently to the new use.

Another possibility became available in 1960 through the legalising of public gaming and, almost overnight, bingo became immensely popular. It had previously been reserved for seaside resorts and church fundraising events, but with falling admissions many cinema proprietors seized the opportunity to turn over to this business. An older female population especially enjoyed it at a time when pubs were predominantly still a male preserve. It made a novel change from film and was perceived as a safe activity to attend alone. Ironically, these were the same generation who only a few years before had been spellbound by the magic and glamour of film.

Some venues divided their time between film and bingo, providing the latter in the afternoons or during the quieter days earlier in the week, while others dropped film altogether. At first players occupied the existing cinema seating but this was later replaced by tables and benches arranged on terraces laid over the original raked floors. The new configuration created a sociable atmosphere, consequently encouraging loyalty and therefore leading to increased attendances.

Automatic ten-pin bowling, introduced from the USA, provided another reuse. The national circuits converted a number of sites for bowling, starting with one in London in 1960, followed by others elsewhere.[3] While initially successful, public interest soon waned and Odeon's ambitious programme for 60 bowling venues had to be scaled back to 24, with the ABC circuit achieving ten. By 1970 all Odeon's bowling operations had closed.

Subdivision

Starting from a postwar total of over 4,800 cinemas, by the end of 1960 this number had decreased to 3,050, and five years later to 1,971, due in part to the recent introduction of colour television. The majority of the remaining larger cinemas became subdivided - referred to as 'twinning' or 'tripling' - where two or three units would be created from one venue. Presented as a way of providing a choice of films under one roof, in reality the concept attempted to meet the new conditions of reduced audiences, but sites often became a tortuous warren of small screening rooms with poor sight lines and diminutive screens, and many fine interiors were destroyed in the process.

The Multiplex

In 1984, British cinema admissions sank to an all-time annual low of 54 million, representing just over one visit per person per year. As well as the continued popularity of television, the widespread availability of home video from the early 1980s also had an impact on cinema attendance, allowing viewers the freedom to choose when and where they wanted to watch films, bought or rented, with piracy exacerbating the situation.

Salvation arrived in 1985 with the opening of the first multiplex cinema in Britain, The Point in Milton Keynes (fig. 20). Purpose-built, multiplexes featured at least two screens (but often many more) served by a single projection room. A cinema had initially been proposed for the new town of Milton Keynes in the early 1980s, but no British operator could be persuaded to build it, leading to the American AMC company stepping up to the challenge. It was designed by the Building Design Partnership, in collaboration with the interior specialist Neil Tibbatts.

The multiplex breakthrough was assisted by increased car ownership, when much of the population began driving to leisure pursuits and ease of parking at an out-of-town site became preferable to seeing a film at a cinema in a congested town centre.

Much to the industry's surprise, the multiplex concept proved an instant success and soon spawned other multiplex operations, leading to a dramatic effect on film attendances. The

multiplex breakthrough was assisted by increased car ownership, when much of the population began driving to leisure pursuits and ease of parking at an out-of-town site became preferable to seeing a film at a cinema in a congested town centre. Subsequent multiplexes were generally architecturally less imaginative, although exceptions include the Harbour Lights cinema in Southampton, 1995, and the now-closed Picturehouse at Stratford, east London of 1997 (both unlisted). Both cinemas were designed by John Burrell, the latter with ingenious and cryptic internal architectural allusions (fig. 21).

The arrival of the multiplex accelerated the decline of traditional cinemas and many degenerated into poor condition, especially compared to the sparkling new multiplex structures. As a result, the national chains began rationalising their stock of traditional holdings, particularly in locations where duplication occurred. Redevelopment potential often became the deciding factor on which sites would survive, and the circuits often came to mutual agreements on closures. So, down came many of the great picture palaces. Those that survived often suffered remodelling or subdivision to create smaller units, as happened to nearly all the central London cinemas.



Figure 20 - Eye-catching pyramid at Britain's first 'multiplex': The Point, Milton Keynes, opened in 1985. Photographed 2010. Unlisted [James O. Davies © Historic England Archive DP147590]

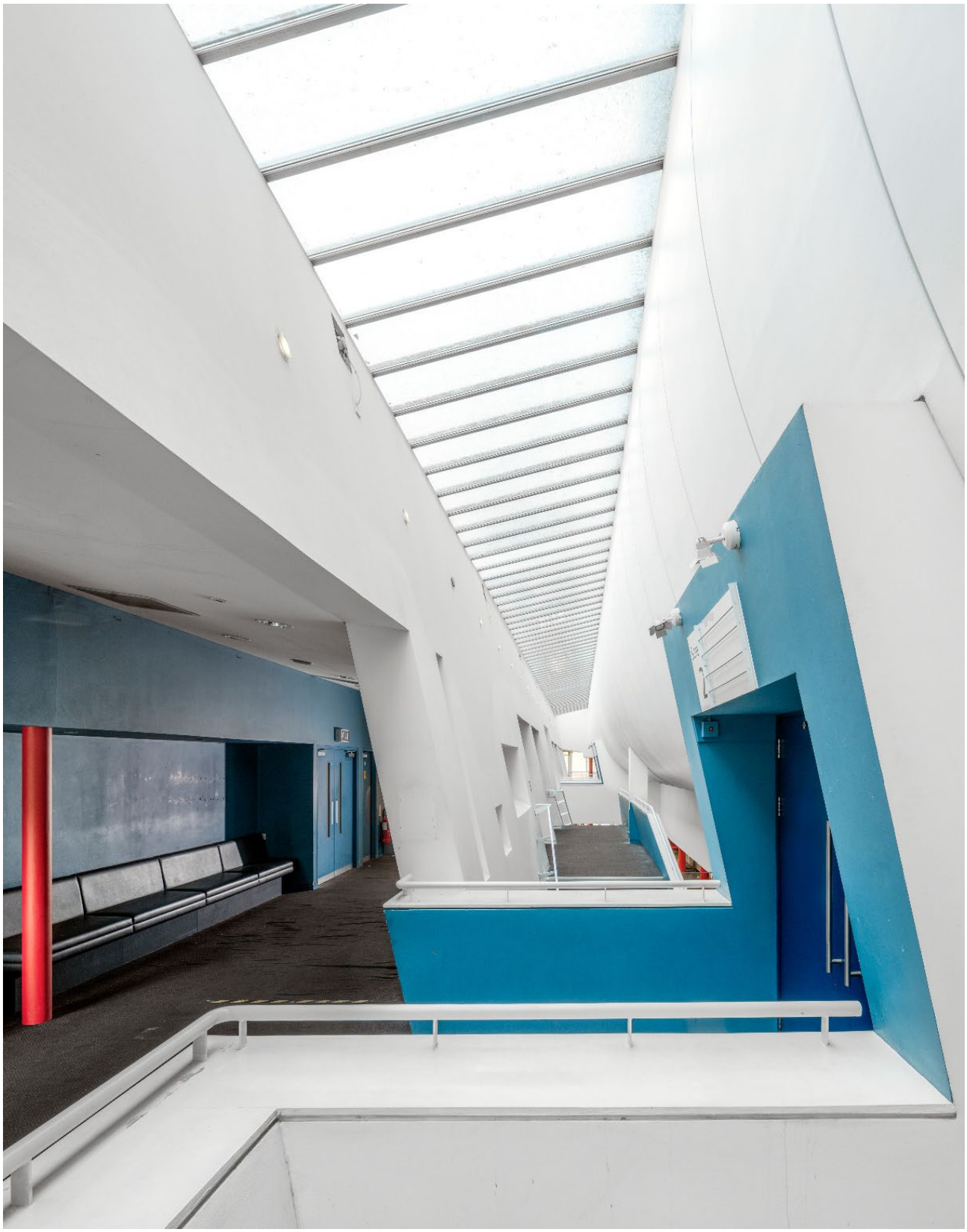


Figure 21 - The bold contemporary interior at Picturehouse, Stratford, London, opened in 1997. Photographed 2026. Unlisted [Chris Redgrave © Historic England Archive DP622065]

Change and the future

Cinemas as a building type remain vulnerable to change, because they often occupy prime city or town centre sites of high land value, and there can be considerable pressure for redevelopment. In addition, the popularity and comparative cost of home streaming services have made film viewing more accessible than ever. Despite this, film remains an ever-popular leisure activity. Annual UK cinema admissions have risen from the base of 54 million in 1984 to 123.5 million in 2025, still lower than the pre-pandemic figure of 176.1 million in 2019.

The continued appeal is due not only to the multiplex but also to the construction of smaller-scale venues specialising in independent or international films, or offering a more luxurious, experiential offering. Additionally, a small number of the original buildings have returned to film, sometimes following a period as bingo halls; examples include the rebirth achieved by the Everyman chain of the former Rialto in Crystal Palace, London and the former Regal in Salisbury (both unlisted). Bingo, a peculiarly British phenomenon, has passed its peak of popularity, but it sustained many a former picture house, as at the Tooting Granada in London (see fig. 9) since its closure for film in 1973.

The first cinemas to be listed were the aforementioned Tooting Granada, the New Victoria (see fig. 10) and the Electric Palace, Harwich, Essex (see fig. 1), all listed in 1972. Historic cinemas continue to be assessed for listing, and there are now more than 250 former or current cinema buildings on the National Heritage List for England (the NHLE). Recent additions include the former Futurist Cinema in Birmingham of 1919 (Grade II, **1492266**) and the former Morecambe Odeon of 1937 (Grade II, **1492083**). Other cinema buildings may be celebrated for their community importance by inclusion on local heritage lists.

Alternative uses for cinema buildings

The rise of empty cinemas from the 1960s coincided with the growth of new worshipping communities, looking for affordable buildings to reuse as places of worship. For many Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Pentecostal Christians, former cinemas were ideal: large auditoriums offered worship spaces with smaller ancillary rooms providing community facilities. Many cinemas had car parks or were located close to public transport links.

The reuse of former cinemas as places of worship is now an established practice with at least 100 currently in use across England, as churches, mosques, gurdwaras, temples and a Zoroastrian Centre. In some cases, communities choose to reuse cinemas over other building types, or even in preference to purpose-built places of worship. This is particularly true of Pentecostal churches, where capacious auditoriums with stages, fixed seating, good acoustics and sound insulation are uniquely suited to performative worship.

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The Christ Faith Tabernacle Cathedral (fig. 22) in Woolwich, London is an exemplar of the reuse of a cinema as a Pentecostal church. Designed by Cecil Masey in 1937, the building was purchased by a Nigerian Pentecostal congregation in 2011, who have since reinstated the rake and fixed seating as well as the original organ. The community have undertaken a painstaking restoration, returning the cinema to its former glory.

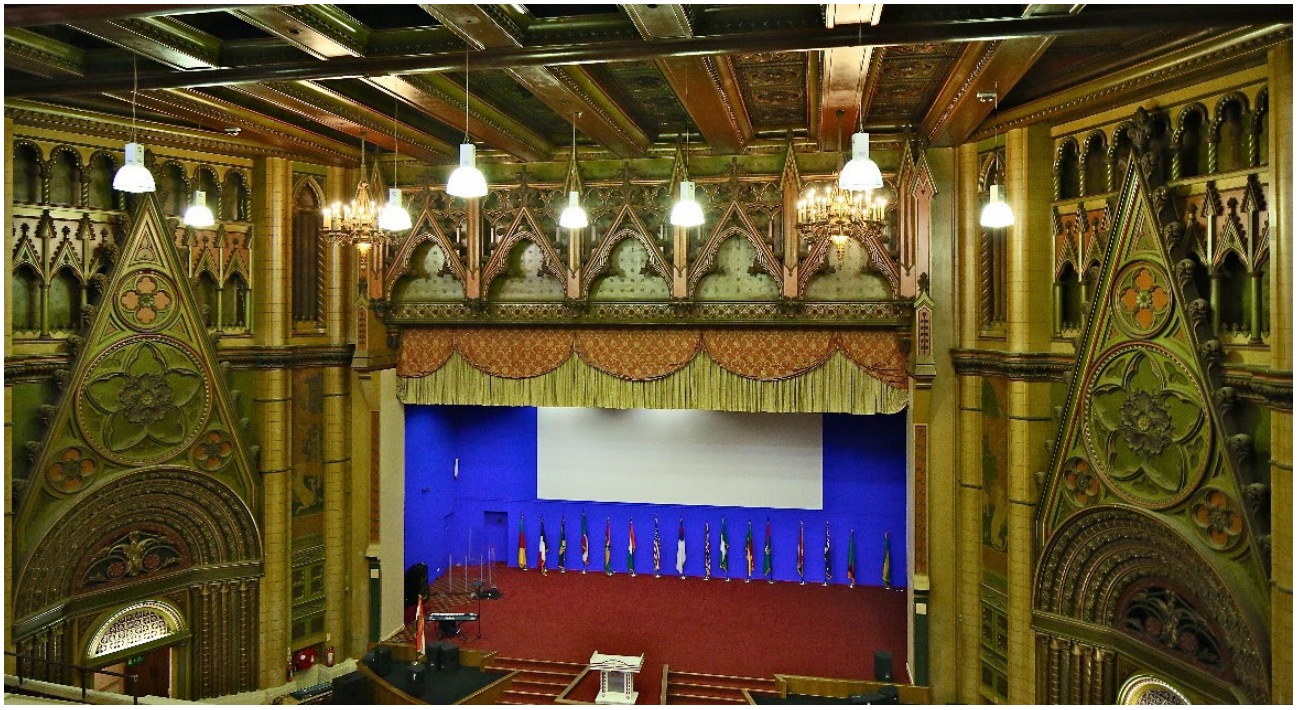


Figure 22 - Granada Cinema, Woolwich, London (opened in 1937), now The Christ Faith Tabernacle Cathedral. Listed Grade II*, **1212651** [© John East]

While former cinemas meet the needs of Pentecostal worship, many others have been adapted as mosques. The Aziziye Mosque in Hackney, London (fig. 23) occupies the former Apollo Picture House of 1913, built to the designs of Stanley Burdwood. After purchasing the former cinema in 1994, the community decorated the exterior with coloured mosaics, creating a striking hybrid of English Edwardian and Turkish Islamic architecture. Though this is far from a faithful restoration of the former cinema, the result is a striking landmark included on the London Borough of Hackney's local heritage list.

Elsewhere in London, the Zoroastrian community converted the former Grosvenor, Rayners Lane, Harrow (fig. 24) as a worship and community space. The building had been on the Heritage at Risk Register until the community undertook a complete restoration. The auditorium has been minimally altered with some decorative additions around the proscenium arch. The most distinctive change has been the adaptation of the former projection room as a fire temple, housing the Zoroastrian sacred flame. Though places of worship appear an unlikely reuse for former cinemas, faith communities have been successful in saving many important buildings, often restoring them to a high standard at their own expense.



Figure 23 - Former Astra Cinema/ Apollo Picture House, Hackney, London (opened in 1913), now the Aziziye Mosque and Community Centre. Unlisted [© John East]



Figure 24 - Former Grosvenor Cinema, Rayners Lane, Harrow, London (opened in 1935), now the Zoroastrian Centre. Listed, Grade II*, **1079729** [© John East]

Another good alternative use for a cinema building (for similar reasons as their reuse as places of worship) is that of live performance. Apart from commercial operation, a local government initiative for the restoration of a heritage cinema can be driven by an urban regeneration objective or to satisfy an arts amenity requirement, or it could be driven by the passion and enthusiasm of local communities. A few traditional cinemas have found a new existence in this way, either commercially operated or through local council support and managed by a not-for-profit Building Preservation Trust. The communities they serve are now justly proud of these symbols of prestige, for both their cultural importance and intrinsic architectural interest.

Banqueting suites or pubs offer another relatively sensitive conversion option, both requiring terracing above the auditorium rake to achieve the necessary flat floor.
An example of the evolutionary nature of many cinema buildings is The Playhouse in Colchester, Essex, which began life as a theatre before conversion to cinema use, and which is now a J D Wetherspoon's pub (fig. 25). Even indoor climbing centres can preserve the cinema interior in essence. Less successful are nightclub conversions, due to the heavy intervention involved.



Figure 25 - The Playhouse, Colchester (opened in 1929) now in use as a Wetherspoons pub. Photographed 2026. Unlisted [Sarah J. Lever © Historic England Archive DP600540]

Further Reading

Several major books give an overview of British cinemas as a building type:

Atwell, David, The Cathedrals of the Movies, Architectural Press, 1980

Eyles, Allen, London's West End Cinemas, English Heritage, 2014

Gray, Richard, Cinemas in Britain, Lund Humphries and the Cinema Theatre Association, new edition 2011

Gray, Richard, The Cinema Palace: Lost and Found, Historic England, 2026

Picture Palaces, published by English Heritage, 1999

Sharp, Dennis, The Picture Palace, Hugh Evelyn Ltd, 1969

The Cinema Theatre Association has also published books by the historian Allen Eyles which describe the development of the main cinema circuits. Published by the CTA, distributed through British Film Institute Publishing:

ABC, The First Name in Entertainment, 1993

Gaumont British Cinemas, 1996

The Granada Theatres, 1998

Odeon Cinemas 1: Oscar Deutsch Entertains Our Nation, 2002

Odeon Cinemas 2: From J. Arthur Rank to the Multiplex, 2005

Many other books have been published on individual cinemas or particular cities or regions. These are available from the CTA Publications Manager: sales@cta-uk.org.

The **Cinema Treasures website** has information about lost, repurposed and extant cinemas in the UK and beyond, including photographs.

Glossary

Atmospheric auditorium: A cinema auditorium designed as a giant stage set, often with a Spanish theme.

Bar system: A restrictive system whereby distributors would only release films to the major cinema circuits.

Cinematographe: The first system for projecting moving pictures launched by the Lumiere brothers in 1895.

Expressionist: An architectural style originating in Germany using non-Classical, sometimes organic, forms to convey emotion.

Independent cinema, independent operators: A single cinema or small group run as a stand-alone business, as opposed to the major circuits.

Multiplex: A purpose-designed cinema complex with several screens, often in an out-of-town location.

Newsreel cinema: A cinema dedicated to showing short factual documentaries about news and current events.

Photo-electric optical sound: A more sophisticated sound system developed by the Fox studio, with the sound-track printed down one side of the film.

Raked floor: The sloping floor of the auditorium designed to give every seat a view of the screen.

Splayed plan: Fan shaped, tapering outwards from the screen.

Theatrographe: A rival early projection system patented and sold by Robert Paul.

Tripling: The subdivision of an existing cinema to create three smaller screens.

Twinning: The subdivision of an existing cinema to create two smaller screens.

Vitaphone: An early system for recording sound for films introduced by Warner Brothers in the late 1920s.

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[1] Brian Coe, The History of Movie Photography (Westfield, New Jersey, 1981)
[2] Lisa Stead, Off to the Pictures: Cinemagoing, Women's Writing and Movie Culture in Interwar Britain (Edinburgh, 2016)
[3] Alan Eyles, Odeon Cinemas: From J. Arthur Rank to the Multiplex (New York, 2008)

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Publication date: September 2026

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