

News from Ladbroke

The Newsletter of the Ladbroke Association

SUMMER 2001

BACK AFTER THE BREAK - Notting Hill's Electric Cinema



1. The renovated interior of the Electric Cinema in Portobello Road

Almost 90 years to the day after it first opened its doors, Notting Hill's much-loved Edwardian auditorium, the Electric Cinema, now restored to its former glory, has once again welcomed cinema goers. Many locals, together with movie buffs and those who care about Britain's cinematic and architectural heritage, will breathe a sigh of relief that the Electric, a fine example of an early cinema building, still exists. They should also be delighted with the refurbishment of its Edwardian decor and the entertainment facilities it now offers.

That the Electric did not meet its demise long ago, like so many of its contemporaries, is due to the

determined refusal of successive RBK&C Planning Committees to grant change of use of the building, and to English Heritage's campaign launched in late 1990 to save London's best cinema buildings from demolition or inappropriate alteration. These policies, coupled with the vision and financial backing (nearly £6 million) of its new owner, Peter Simon, entrepreneur and founder of the Monsoon and Accessorize retail chains, have saved the Electric and seen it restored to a better condition than when it was built. So what has been achieved and why is it important?

For years the Electric has been beset by problems both structural

and financial, as well as by lack of volition to maintain its original function. In the last three decades the survival of the Electric as a cinema has been frequently in jeopardy, although in 1972 it was granted a preservation order and it is now a Grade II* listed building.

The oldest purpose-built cinema in the country, the Electric was begun in 1910. Built on the site of a timber and builder's yard and incorporating bits of earlier buildings, it was powered by electricity, which had only just been installed in Portobello Road. It was designed by George Seymour Valentin, a young architect who worked in 'Flicker Alley' off Shaftesbury Avenue, then home to the developing British film industry. In those days cinemas were lighting up all over Britain in a wide variety of buildings. The more stringent safety standards in a new Cinematograph Act, which entailed the reconstruction of many early cinemas, meant the Electric's own construction was rushed through. Its first film, *Henry VIII*, was screened on 23 February 1911. Despite the rush, the Electric set the standard in decor, facilities and safety provisions for other cinemas.

English Heritage has called the Electric 'the quintessential and most ravishingly pretty cinema of its period'. The building sported various innovations. The front was faced in brick with *trompe l'oeil* designs in terracotta, though they

proved too expensive to finish. A slate roof with roof-top dome, plus a stunning barrel-vaulted ceiling with ornate fire-proof plaster-work moulding, were supported by a cantilevered iron frame. Decorative friezes and painted ribbands surrounded the roof and wall panels, while instead of the normal proscenium arch, the screen had an unusual picture frame around it surmounted by a globe and golden arch. The safety and comfort of the audience were important too. The auditorium, which could house 600, included large, comfortable seats, fire escapes and a separate projection room (early nitrate stock film reels were highly inflammable). A wooden red and gold box office and beautiful mosaic floor that picked out the original name, *The Electric Cinema Theatre*, completed the front of house. The Electric soon attracted a wide audience.



2. *The foyer and box-office kiosk*

Yet, the Electric's design had inherent flaws. There was little space for foyer, box office, offices, storage and toilets. Opened 18 years before the introduction of 'talkies' in 1929, the Electric had no facilities for sound, and was more suited to live performances: 'a music hall with a screen', commented one cinema specialist. Even its financial problems began early. In 1919 it was renamed The Imperial by Mr Harry Hyamson, the first of a number of proprietors to encounter cash flow problems in running it. But crucially it was Hyamson who wrote into the

Electric's lease that it must always be a cinema. This far-sighted act prevented its subsequent redevelopment.

The Electric/Imperial's golden age was the 1930s and 1940s when it attracted weekly audiences of up to 4000. In 1938 a leading cinema architect, George Coles, was commissioned to design a new stream-lined frontage with a projecting 'fin' on the façade. The London County Council granted planning permission in May 1941 but the scheme never went ahead.

The Electric's decline began in the 1950s when its owners were unable to maintain the building. By the 1960s it was a dilapidated example of an early purpose-built 'flea pit' known locally as the Bug Hole. The roof leaked, seats collapsed unpredictably, the plumbing and drainage were elderly and liable to flooding, heating was minimal, the carpets were filthy and the audience was aging, if loyal. But the atmosphere was relaxed and friendly.

In 1968 the Electric Cinema Club was formed with the aim of showing alternative films and of combating the cinema distributors' imposition of bland box-office hits at the cinema chains they controlled. In December 1970 the Club took over the premises and gave the Electric a new lease of life as a leading 'alternative' London cinema. The building was decrepit, but the tradition, character and atmosphere were maintained. £50,000 was spent on seating, heating, sound and projection equipment, and roof repairs, and the preservation order was granted. But yet again financing major structural repairs proved a problem.

From 1911 to 1983 the Electric had never closed for more than a few days, except between June and September 1945 following a fire in the projection room. But in 1983

closure seemed imminent. The staff formed a cooperative to bid for the building, but an offer from Mainline Pictures (owners of the Screen chain of cinemas), was accepted, and on 31 October 1983 the Electric closed for renovations. The interior was restored, and the original plasterwork was picked out. An Indian poster artist, Narinder Singh Plahay, was commissioned to recreate in paint Valentin's original tile design. Plush seating, air conditioning and Dolby stereo sound were all installed. But no structural repairs were undertaken.

Re-named the Electric Screen, the cinema reopened on 8 March 1984 and concentrated on first-run single features. But these did not attract the audiences required. Mainline decided to sell: in April 1987 the building was bought amid rumours that it was to be turned into an antiques market. At the same time the Campaign to Save the Electric Cinema was born with the aim of persuading the new owners to sell so it could be reopened as a working cinema. A petition opposing change of use obtained 10,000 signatures, including those of Audrey Hepburn and Anthony Hopkins. Despite the lobbying, on 6 May 1987 the doors closed again. Empty and shuttered the Electric again faced an uncertain future.

A succession of other new owners proved unable to resurrect the Electric. In 1989 restaurateur Martin Davis acquired it, restored the interior with the advice of English Heritage, revised the film programme and introduced live music performances. But in 1992 the building passed into the hands of receivers. An Afro-Caribbean company ran it for a time, but went bankrupt. By the mid-1990s the Electric was on the point of collapse. Receivers held the freehold which was sold in September 1996 and again in April 1998, as RBK&C's strict planning

requirements thwarted applications for change of use. In the 1990s local residents got used to the dismal sight of the Electric hoarded-up, neglected and covered in fly posters. The local council, nevertheless, made one last effort to preserve it as a cinema.

Good fortune had it that by early 2000 Peter Simon had bought both the building and the supermarket next door. His aim was to 'reconnect' the Electric: to switch on the power again by forming a multi-purpose cinema, art, entertainment and leisure venue. English Heritage had just launched its initiative to save the country's historic cinemas. Together with the Twentieth Century Society and the local authority, a quite spectacular and ambitious restoration and development plan for the two buildings was put forward, thrashed out and eventually approved, in a private, public and voluntary partnership.

Architects Gebler Tooth, whose commissions have included the Travel Bookshop in Blenheim Crescent, were chosen for the project. GT have reinstated and refurbished the Electric as an historic cinema which fits modern-day requirements, while also modifying it for conferences and live performances. GT had to decide whether to reinstate original Edwardian features or make the cinema acceptable to the 21st century, given that both the building and the interior decoration were listed. Structural changes have included installing another level at the front of the building, putting timber decking on top of the original concrete floor and reinstating two original windows formerly covered by hanging light boxes.

Outside, Gebler Tooth have restored the terracotta, replaced the rendering and cleaned the brickwork. Internally they have

restored the mouldings and the globe in the auditorium, and the mosaic floor with the Electric's original name in the foyer and vestibule, which are largely unchanged from 1911. With assistance from the Cinema Theatre Association and RBK&C's archives, the architects researched the cinema's appearance 90 years ago. Hence the colour-scheme of ivory with white mouldings and gilding reflects the French-inspired tastes of Edwardian England.

Phoenix-like the Electric has been reborn, architecturally and functionally, as a multi-purpose venue with bar and restaurant. According to Sasha Gebler, it is a marriage of the historic and the modern 'without compromise to either'. Although the Electric will continue to face competition from its local rivals, the Coronet (opened as a theatre in November 1898) and the Gate, a vital part of Notting Hill's heritage has finally been saved for posterity. Thankfully, as actor Michael Palin comments, there are still 'people good enough to help landmark buildings like this to survive.'

Jan Brownfoot

With thanks for information and assistance to:

RBK&C Local Studies Library - for numerous articles

RBK&C Planning Department

Peter Simon's PR Department

Gebler Tooth Architects

THE GARDEN WALK

2 May 2001

Henrietta Phipps led a motley group of 70 on our traditional garden squares excursion.

We began in Hanover Garden (Lansdowne Walk was first called Hanover Terrace), celebrated as a wildlife garden, where the beautiful woodland wild flowers were at their peak. The late Dame Sylvia Crowe, the noted landscape architect and advisor to the Forestry

Commission, lived here and a handsome bench commemorates her 90th birthday. This is one of the earliest gardens on the Estate, the tall terrace of houses along Ladbrooke Grove was built in 1842-3, it retains its original path layout with a central route winding around clumps of trees.

This was followed by Montpelier Garden where extensive replanting has been embarked upon recently. The Chairman, Niall McMahon, and the gardener/designer, Simon Wall, were on hand to accompany us and answer questions, showing us the new wildflower meadows at each end. Splendid iron gates were installed to mark the 1977 Jubilee, for which they also renamed their Square after Montpelier Road, the original name of Lansdowne Rise, and in recognition of 'the Cheltenham connection'. A holm oak was added to the other well-cared for trees, all tagged, which include some large ash, horse chestnuts, a well placed weeping willow, and a liquidambar.

Each square was originally planted with a dominant forest tree species: ash, in Montpelier Garden, and originally elm, in Lansdowne/Elgin Garden, all bar one magnificent specimen lost to the dreaded Dutch beetle.

We completed our perambulation in Lansdowne Crescent, one of the smaller gardens, on the crest of the hill, with a curving boundary formed by the semi-detached villas of Lansdowne Crescent of 1844 and another formed by the straight block along Ladbrooke Grove (1841-2) which has no private gardens but instead a raised terrace. At either end were large private gardens, both now replaced by blocks of flats, the southern one designed by Maxwell Fry, the only listed modern building in the Ladbrooke Estate so far. Next door, the vicarage to St John's Church (1845) is in ragstone.

LONDON HISTORIC PARKS AND GARDENS TRUST SEMINAR

London's Garden Suburbs: Community Landscape and the Urban Ideal

In his introduction, Philip Davies, Director of English Heritage London Region, touched on many points of concern to the Ladbroke Association: the loss of architectural detail, the importance of regarding trees as part of the landscape, difficulties with planners and with the enforcement of building regulations, and the importance of the overall plan rather than an individual's wishes in a conservation area. He commented on the poor state of upkeep of pavements and the insensitive way they are repaired, with varied and unsuitable materials; he also remarked on the plethora of signs and the introduction of various types of traffic calming schemes which, with forethought and a little planning, could be handled better.

Chris Sumner of English Heritage spoke interestingly on how affluence seems to foster an obsession with an individual's right to determine his or her environment and a lack of understanding of, or sympathy for, the integrity of a conservation area.

Ivor Cunningham, an architect and landscape architect, talked of Span with which he was associated for many years. Span promoted a series of housing developments built around communal gardens. No house had a private garden, but the green areas were beautifully planted; mature trees were preserved, often close to the new buildings, while many varieties of trees were planted with an eye to the future. These are already reaching maturity. Notable are the developments at Fieldend, Teddington, Parkley and Mallard Place on the Thames. One site has been chosen

for listing by English Heritage. Estates are managed by residents' associations to which all residents automatically belong. They control the conservation and maintenance of the landscapes which are communal freeholds. In consequence, developers and individuals are not permitted to alter plantings or paths at will.

It was curious to note that, while Regent's Park, Hampstead Garden Suburb and Bedford Park were featured at this seminar, no mention was made of the Ladbroke Estate. This is particularly strange given the similarities in planning and ideals behind Regent's Park and the Ladbroke Estate. John Nash's early plans for Regent's Park, dating from 1809 and 1812, have much in common with the initial plan for Ladbroke of 1823. Both feature squares, crescents, strategically positioned parish churches and villas surrounded by gardens in the style of John Claudius Loudon. Perhaps Ladbroke is the unacknowledged missing link between Regent's Park and Hampstead Garden Suburb, which dates from 1902.

LADBROKE ASSOCIATION ANNUAL LECTURE

The annual lecture this year was given on 13 February 2001 by the Ladbroke Association's President, Sir Angus Stirling, and held in the fully restored 20th Century Theatre in Westbourne Grove which, like the Electric Cinema, is another of Notting Hill's Grade II listed buildings.

The subject of Sir Angus's talk was not the Association's own 'patch', but a part of London with an older and more water-borne history, the World Heritage site of maritime Greenwich. Although his lecture was titled *'From Tudor Palace to Renaissance 2000'*, Sir Angus

transported us through more than 2000 years of Greenwich's 'illustrious story'. In a talk comprehensively illustrated with slides, we could trace the development of Greenwich from pro-Roman times through King Henry V's manor of Grenovic and the Tudors' Palace of Placentia, to the creation in 1996 of the Greenwich Foundation for the Old Royal Naval College.

Greenwich came of age and confirmed its place in British history under the Tudors. The vast Palace of Placentia, built on the river front by Henry VII, was the childhood home of Henry VIII and his daughter, Elizabeth I, who were both born there. It was demolished by Charles II, and the Royal Observatory designed by Wren and the Royal Naval Hospital were subsequently constructed on the site, near to the Queen's House that had been completed by Inigo Jones in 1635 for Queen Henrietta Maria. The Hospital was in use until Victorian times but closed in 1869, to open four years later as the Royal Naval College. The site by then had a wealth of architectural treasures in the design and construction of its various buildings.

For 130 years the College aimed to provide naval officers with an efficient, advanced education. But in the 1990s, Greenwich lost out in the Government centralisation of Defence service staff colleges: in 1995 it was advertised for sale. A campaign to find a more appropriate solution for one of England's most historic architectural sites was immediately launched. The outcome is the charitable Greenwich Foundation (chaired by Sir Angus) which is responsible for conserving the site and its buildings, finding and managing new uses for them, raising income, and enabling public access.

To date the main buildings have

been restored and repaired for use by the chosen tenants, the University of Greenwich and Trinity College of Music, thereby providing continuity for Greenwich as a place of learning. Numerous slides illustrated what has been achieved already to preserve the history and maritime traditions of the site for future generations, as well as enabling functional usage today. Designation as a World Heritage Site 'is now producing a genuine renaissance.' The work continues.

The 'renaissance' is also dependent on close cooperation and working in unity with the Foundation's partners and neighbours at Greenwich. Sir Angus concluded his fascinating talk with a comment that applies equally to the Ladbroke Estate: '...our historical inheritance is our contemporary world: it is the environment in which we live'.

Jan Brownfoot

PLANNING

Sign of the Times

In recent years the number of restaurants and coffee shops in or near the Ladbroke Conservation Area has grown enormously. In connection with these places there are often Planning Applications for chairs and tables on the adjacent pavement. Provided there is adequate room on the pavement, we favour this practice, which adds life and colour to the area. Moreover, these chairs and tables tend to be in use all the year round. Surely this is an indication of a warmer climate and due to 'global warming'?

1 Kensington Park Gardens

This prominent corner house has been restored recently, including the handsome bottle balustrade at the back edge of the pavement. Although at the time of writing the work is not complete, we would like to congratulate the owner and the architects on a job well done.

Context

The way a building relates to its context is always of great importance. This is especially so in our area, where so many buildings are in terraces. Many Planning Applications are concerned with minor or sometimes major alterations, usually to the backs of houses. It is really impossible to judge the quality of these proposals unless the drawings give full information on the buildings on either side of the building in question. It must be said that many architects' drawings are inadequate in this respect, and we frequently urge the Planning Department to call for more drawings so that the proposal can be judged in relation to its context.

79 Ladbroke Grove

This is a very important corner site on a quite steep slope. Presumably the original building on this site was destroyed in the last war. The present building dates from the 1950s and is totally undistinguished and inadequate for the site. There have been a number of proposals to give the building a facelift or totally rebuild it. One relatively recent scheme to rebuild was given Planning Consent, but was never built. There is a current proposal from a so-called 'minimalist' architect which is causing a lot of concern. There are people for and against it, and general doubt over the suitability of the materials to be used, and how they would weather. This will be one of the very few new buildings in the Conservation Area and it focuses the differences of opinion on design which exist. There are those who feel that only replica or pastiche design in the style of Allason and Allom is appropriate to the whole area. Others consider that there are circumstances where replica design is essential, but also cases where a modern idiom may be suitable, provided that scale and proportion are appropriate, as well as the materials and colour.

We understand that modified proposals are being prepared for this site, and we have urged that they be fully illustrated, including a model of the proposed building in its context, so that the fullest possible information is available to assist understanding and appraisal. It is time we had a more worthy building on this prominent site.

Robert Meadows



3. The existing flats at
79 Ladbroke Grove

Footnote: The Council's Executive Director of Planning and Conservation has undertaken to bring this important application to the Planning Services Committee for decision rather than dealing with it under delegated authority.

NEWSFLASH

Arundel & Elgin Gardens

The ongoing saga of the disputed strip of communal garden in Arundel Gardens, which has rumbled on painfully since 1997 without the Land Registry coming to any resolution (subject of an article in our Spring 1998 Newsletter), has finally been referred to judicial determination at the Land Registry's London Headquarters on Tuesday 18th September 2001.

AUTUMN LECTURE 14th NOVEMBER 2001

Thomas Pakenham, author of *Meetings with Remarkable Trees* and former Chairman of the Ladbroke Association, is lecturing on trees in the Ladbroke Estate on Wednesday 14th November 2001 at 7:30 p.m. in St. Peter's Church Hall, at 59a Portobello Road, W11

