

History of the Hailsham Pavilion

Hailsham Pavilion Cinema was erected as a purpose built 'picture palace' in 1921 on land previously owned by a Dr. Nicholson and Dr. Gould.

Prior to this, films had been shown at 'The Corn Exchange' behind the Crown Inn (now renamed the Corn Exchange) in the High Street. Some residents at the time regarded the Pavilion as a 'new fangled upstart of a cinema'. The Pavilion was officially opened on Monday 28th November 1921 by A.K. Burtsenhaw JP. The Hailsham Town Band had earlier played around the town and at the cinema entrance where a large number had assembled. As a special attraction, for the opening performance "The Kid" starring Charlie Chaplin had been booked, and the first house was crowded.



Prior to re-decoration after the war, the interior paintwork was primrose and pink and decorative wall panels were picked out in gold leaf. Some interior panelling was oak and the front doors were french polished. Curtains in front of the screen were red velvet and were originally operated by hand.

Owners of the Cinema were a Mr Shipman and Mr King, the former often playing the piano in the 'orchestra pit' at weekends. Sarah Castle was also one of the first to play the piano here for the silent movies. During the latter years it was managed by a Mr. Gilbert, and many of the then employees (ushерettes and projectionists) are still known to live in Hailsham.

At the height of its popularity, the Cinema opened every day (a Sunday licence was obtained during the war years when Canadian troops were stationed in the area). Films were shown twice a day (opening hours were 4.30pm to 10.30pm) for three days with a change of programme on Mondays and Thursdays - a separate film was shown on Sundays.

After it was closed in 1965, it stood empty until an application for change of use to a Bingo Club was approved in 1967. Five year permits were renewed in 1972, 1977 and 1982.

In 1973 a conservation grant for renovation of the facade (under the 1962 Act) recommended re-painting of the general elevation in magnolia, with recesses in mocha and embellishments in pale lilac. Prior to this the facade had always been painted in one colour - cream.

Officially listed as a Grade II building of historic and architectural interest and in the Conservation Area of Hailsham, it has been described as having "a classical facade, and

is possibly one of the most elaborate small provincial cinemas ever built. Two storeys. Three windows. Stuccoed. Each window, flanked by Ionic pilasters with rusticated quoins on the outside. Modillion cornice, parapet and curved pediment over the centre window bay. Ground floor windows flanked by pilasters with cornice over. Doorway with engaged columns. Round windows in moulded architrave surrounds on first floor, the centre one flanked by plaster figures of children - the girl carrying a basket of flowers, the boy a basket of bread and fish".

It has a 2400 square feet inclined auditorium originally having a seating capacity for a total of 397, with the seats placed nearly to the wall backing on to the Box Office. No Kiosk, Stairs, or Ladies' toilet existed at that time.

The building ceased to be used for Bingo in 1985, remaining empty until in 1987 it was sold by auction for a sum in excess of £65,000 reputedly for a combined retail and residential development. Thereafter it again stood empty and unused.

In photographs taken prior to its closure, some damage by dampness on the ceiling at this point was already evident. It is known that some damage to the roof and ceiling was sustained when a bomb fell on the Post Office during the second World War. It is understood that just following the closure of the Bingo Club, contractors were seen to be working on the roof, which was stripped, re-felted and battened - and then abandoned.

By 1991, having been totally neglected for four years, much work was needed, mainly to prevent the ingress of rain through the roof which had caused severe damage to the ornate plaster ceiling resulting in its collapse in some parts. This is a false barrelled ceiling fixed to the underside of steel roof trusses. The original pitched roof on the north side was of square red asbestos tiles laid diamond pattern. On the south side, the whole covering of tiles was missing; roofing felt and battens appeared to be mostly intact from the outside although from the inside, holes were visible at various places resulting in the boarding having rotted. At the western end, a large area from ridge to eaves appeared to have been pulled back leaving a great open hole allowing entry of rain and vandals. Some of the damage to the plaster ceiling had been caused deliberately by vandals entering this way.



Some of the original seating was still in place in 1991, but badly damaged by damp and mould growth, the remaining seating having been removed and piled up in the corner. They were replaced with tables and seat for use by the bingo patrons. Mould growth and dampness had also caused much damage to the carpeting throughout.

Despite dampness and vandal damage to much of the fittings, the general structure of the building appeared to be sound and in some strange way retained an atmosphere reminiscent of the old Victorian theatres and picture palaces.

The entrance foyer included a central ticket office area (facing the front doors) with steps on either side leading to the auditorium. A narrow winding staircase still leads to storerooms and the projection room (above the ticket office) on the first floor. Some fire damage had occurred in the projection room, otherwise the whole first floor was inhabited by pigeons which had easy access through open and broken windows in the facade.

The stage area of the auditorium was small, being little more than a raised dais or platform. Behind this was a decorative, but false, proscenium on the solid rear wall of the auditorium. At the rear of the main building was a raised storeroom/boiler room of fairly large dimensions but too small to accommodate sufficient backstage facilities.

However, the value of the site in 1991, apart from the unique facade, lay in its [a] location in the town centre but close to car parks and public houses (The George Hotel is directly opposite), [b] the solid structure (solid concrete floors on the ground and first floor levels, steel roof trusses), [c] the sloping auditorium, [d] the decorative moulded plaster work, [e] the theatre entrance, layout and facilities, and [f] its adequate but intimate bijou accommodation and atmosphere.

It was felt then that all these characteristics would have been difficult to re-create at reasonable cost in a new building or converted building not already possessing such adornments with the atmosphere being totally irreplaceable. Hence the saving of the building was imperative before it was lost for all time.

The biggest disadvantage was, of course, the cost of acquiring the building itself before another development company or entrepreneur could get their hands on it.

In 1993, the refurbishment and restoration became the dream of former Hailsham Town Mayor, June Bourne. She was getting to the end of her term of office and had £1400 left in her expenses which she wanted to use for the community's benefit. After consulting with the other Councillors, it was decided to open a building society account to start raising funds for the restoration of the Pavilion. A Supporters' association was formed, Hailsham Old Pavilion Society (HOPS), with members paying £5 a year subscription.



As the owners of the Pavilion were then in receivership, Wealden District Council issued a compulsory purchase order and arranged for necessary 'boarding up' work to be carried out to make the building weather proof and safe.

By the end of 1999, HOPS had over 800 members and had raised almost £100,000 from the local community to help towards the cost of the restoration. A grant of £275,500 was received from the Heritage Lottery Fund, and together with Partnership Funding of £50,000 from Wealden District Council, £12,500 from East Sussex County Council, £7,500 from Hailsham Town Council, £1,500 from Environment Hailsham and £1,000 from Hailsham Rotary Club, plus an unexpected contribution of £27,000 when the Trustees of the Hailsham Town Bus wound-up the organisation, completed the main funding to allow this £0.5 million scheme to go ahead.

As the lottery grant was awarded on a heritage remit, the restoration had to stay true to the original design in keeping with the grade II listed status, this gave the architect, builders and specialist craftsmen many technical and other problems to overcome.

Having rescued the cinema, the next challenge was to keep it open. As was the case in its original days, the cinema is not large enough to afford first run films and will usually be a few weeks behind the new multiplex units in nearby Eastbourne, Uckfield and Brighton.

What it does have, however, is 203 seats (plus facilities for wheelchairs) and is able to offer a uniquely friendly atmosphere with costs (particularly ticket prices) being kept low with many people working here as volunteers. A 31-year lease on a "peppercorn rent" was arranged by Wealden District Council for HOPS to make the facilities available as an amenity for Hailsham and the surrounding district.

The Pavilion was officially opened on Tuesday 1st February 2000 by June Bourne, Chairman of HOPS and Vice Chairman of Hailsham Pavilion Limited, a company formed to act as the commercial arm of the enterprise.

The assembled gathering at the opening ceremony was treated to a slide show of still pictures taken during the restoration, and two short demonstration films. During her address, June Bourne declared "that her dream had come true". "Standing here today" she said "brings back a lot of happy memories from the days when I used to visit the cinema and it is really exciting to think that the present day residents of Hailsham and the surrounding area will be able to come to their own cinema once again and enjoy the big screen entertainment".

Interior view of the Hailsham Old Pavilion showing rows of red seats and a stage area.