

# NOOKS and CORNERS

**BRIGHTON, aka London-on-Sea, is full of wonderful things, not least the exotic Royal Pavilion. But it has long had a local authority that has failed to protect what makes the place special.**

Many interesting buildings have been allowed to go; and perhaps the rot started when the Regent Cinema, a remarkable building with wonderful interiors, came down in 1974. It had been closed by the Rank Organisation, which had decided to concentrate on the old Brighton Hippodrome. And now the Hippodrome itself, a theatrical building of extraordinary interest with a huge circular interior, is itself under threat.

The Brighton Hippodrome (pictured), tucked away near the Lanes and the seafront, began life in 1897 as an ice rink. Three years later it was partially rebuilt as a circus and a theatre by Frank Matcham, the *doyen* of theatre architects, who gave it a richly decorated interior with balconies and a wonderful wide dome.

For many decades after it reopened in 1902 the Hippodrome was the principal theatrical venue in Brighton. Sarah Bernhardt, Buster Keaton and Laurel & Hardy performed there, not to mention the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. In 1965 the theatre closed and, after a spell as a TV and film studio, it was bought in 1967 by the Rank Organisation and turned into a Mecca bingo hall. Bingo ceased in 2007, since when the building has not been used.

Now the Hippodrome has been acquired by Alaska Development Consultants, who claim (without evidence) that it is in danger of collapse. They hope to make it into a "new entertainment hub". With architects Russ Drage they propose a "restoration" which entails dividing up the interior as an eight-screen cinema, leaving the space under the dome as a restaurant. This scheme was strongly opposed by the Theatres Trust, which pointed out that the Hippodrome is the only surviving circus theatre in the country, that its interior, by Matcham, is significant both nationally and internationally, and that no other grade II\*-listed theatre has been allowed to be divided in this way. The developers claim everything proposed will be reversible; but as the theatre historian John Earl observes: "So it is, if you believe an omelette can be returned to its component eggs."

There is no reason the Hippodrome cannot be a theatre again. What Brighton lacks is a lyric theatre. Yes, it has the Brighton Centre, and the Theatre Royal, now run by the Ambassador Theatre Group, which is interested in operating the Hippodrome if it were restored. There is also the Dome, the Oriental-style former stables to the Royal Pavilion, but it has no fly-tower and so cannot receive major musicals – which a restored Hippodrome could. But Brighton and Hove council seems determined the Hippodrome will never be a theatre again.



One officer stated that because it has been empty for some time it can have no future. This, the Frank Matcham Society points out, shows great ignorance of theatre history: the London Coliseum (also by "Matchless Matcham") was for many years a cinema before becoming home to English National Opera.

At a planning meeting last month, Alaska's destructive scheme was approved, even though there is another eight-screen multiplex close by, along with hundreds of restaurants and bars. Much was made of the lack of opposition from English Heritage; but the planning committee was not told that, in its letter, EH did not rule out the possibility

"that a theatre use, in a repaired building, could be a viable business in Brighton" and "would be pleased to consider an alternative... proposal". As the council knows, the strongly supported Our Brighton Hippodrome campaign plans to submit just such a proposal.

The Theatres Trust has asked for this case to be called in. Given that the Hippodrome is listed II\* and could be very important, if restored, to Brighton's economy, the secretary of state must surely take notice. To his credit, Eric Pickles did the right thing over Smithfield Market. He is now the only hope to stop this extraordinary building being mutilated and abused.

**CHANCELLOR George Osborne recently announced that £5m is to be given to the Glasgow School of Art towards building a new Graduate & Research Centre. This is in addition to the £5m promised to recreate C.R. Mackintosh's Library in the West Wing gutted by fire in May.**

*Obviously such largesse has nothing to do with the forthcoming referendum on Scottish independence. But it seems strange further to reward the GSA when it was the indolence and incompetence of its managers which was responsible for the fire, combined with the fact that it was the completion of the school's new (dreadful) £50m (not-the-Jimmy) Reid Building opposite which distracted them from completing the fire protection system in the original Mackintosh building (for which they were given £250,000 in 2012 – see Eyes 1368 & 1369).*

*Alongside Toshie, Glasgow has had other brilliant architects of international stature, above all Alexander "Greek" Thomson, whose commercial masterpiece, Egyptian Halls, continues to decay, partly because help is lacking from Glasgow city council and Historic Scotland. That public money should now go to the GSA and not to revive a building by Thomson of supreme cultural and intellectual value is wrong and stupid.*

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