

The Garston Empire - Architectural Significance Statement

The *Empire* as Historic England note in its guide to interwar theatres, is a 'rare survivor' of a ciné-variety house during a transitional period of theatre architecture (Historic England 2022: 6). The Theatres Trust concur on the *Empire's* architectural significance noting that it is a unique example of a genre 'deserving of more research, national recognition and heritage designation' (Theatres Trust 2022). Cine-Variety Houses were designed for both theatre and cinema use. The *Empire* was built in 1915 with a projection room and was dual-purpose, with a full-sized stage, an orchestra pit, eight dressing rooms and fly tower for live performance. It has a single sinuous circle, one pair of stage boxes by the proscenium and simple Edwardian plasterwork. The stalls accommodated eight hundred seats, the circle three hundred seats, two stage boxes, plus a projector room. With only three working years as a theatre, this cine-variety theatre has survived with its original features and much decoration intact thanks to over forty years with cinema use, and thirty years of bingo use. The *Theatres Trust Guide to British Theatres 1750-1950* (2000: 90; attached in documents) recognises the *Empire* as one of the earliest and most architecturally complete examples of its type, and it survives, relatively unaltered, as a rare and local example of a hybrid (Earl and Sell 2000)

The *Empire*, designed in 1914 by Joseph Pearce and built in 1915, belongs to a class of transitional theatres that were built across a very short period, coming after the Edwardian theatre boom and before the cinema building boom that followed the 1909 Cinema Act. These buildings possess unique qualities as their architects were conscious of the possibilities of continued variety theatre and silent films. This type of entertainment building is therefore a reflection of major changes that affected the social habits of society and comes at a watershed moment in the history of entertainment.

The *Empire* is one of the most important of the remaining theatres and music halls with cinematograph facilities to be left. It is unique because it is so early in date, illustrating the crossover period when buildings were being constructed for both live theatre and cinema. Most of the later listed examples date from the 1920s and 1930s and are constructed mostly for cinema but incorporating live performance.

The interior of the *Empire* has survived in original form except where the seats have been removed in the stalls and where the centre of the pit enclosure has been removed for access to what is now a bar below stage.

There was a previous attempt to get the building listed in 2005. However, since this date there has been growing recognition of the place of the cine-variety in the history of British theatres (see Historic England 2022). The *Empire* was also assessed as a cinema in 2005 rather than as a theatre and music hall with cinematographic capabilities.

Architectural Significance Unredacted

The *Empire* (aka *The Garston Empire*), as Historic England note in its guide to interwar theatres, is a 'rare survivor' of a ciné-variety house during a transitional period of theatre architecture (Historic England 2022: 6). The Theatres Trust concur on the *Empire's* architectural significance noting that it is a unique example of a genre 'deserving of more research, national recognition and heritage designation' (Theatres Trust 2022). Cine-Variety Houses were designed for both theatre and cinema use. The *Empire* was built in 1915 with a projection room and was dual-purpose, with a full-sized stage, an orchestra pit, eight dressing rooms and fly tower for live performance. It had a single sinuous circle, one pair of stage boxes by the proscenium and simple Edwardian plasterwork. The stalls accommodated eight hundred seats, the circle three hundred seats, two stage boxes, plus a projector room. With only three working years as a theatre, this cine-variety theatre has survived with its original features and much decoration intact thanks to over forty years with cinema use, and thirty years of bingo use. The *Theatres Trust Guide to British Theatres 1750-1950* (2000: 90; attached in documents) recognises the *Empire* as one of the earliest and most architecturally complete examples of its type, and it survives, relatively unaltered, as a rare and local example of a hybrid (Earl and Sell 2000)

The *Empire*, designed in 1914 by Joseph Pearce (based on a design by Cecil Massey) and built in 1915, belongs to a class of transitional theatres that were built across a very short period, coming after the Edwardian theatre boom and before the cinema building boom that followed the 1909 Cinema Act. These buildings possess unique qualities as their architects were conscious of the possibilities of continued variety theatre and silent films. This type of entertainment building is therefore a reflection of major changes that affected the social habits of society and comes at a watershed moment in the history of entertainment. The *Empire* was built with full theatrical facilities including an orchestra pit and its first licence (1 June 1915) was for a theatre, music hall and cinematograph. The first official notice of the opening was in the trade press *Kinematograph Weekly* of 10th June 1915 (extract in documents). The policy of variety and pictures remained until 1916 when it was announced that from 3rd April only stage plays were to be presented. There was a return to variety and revues until the *Empire* eventually went over to a fulltime cinema in 1918. It continued as a cinema until 1962 when the building was converted into a bingo club. The bingo club operated until 2009 when the building fell vacant.

The theatre was designed to serve a predominantly local working-class community. Such provincial variety theatres provided a vehicle for the spread of popular culture and are often referred to as fleapits, characterised by small foyers and relatively plain auditoria. The *Empire's* plain features and simple Edwardian detailing makes it distinctive. They are increasingly rare with estimates that fewer than twenty survive nationally.

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There are only a handful of surviving comparators of this date, but these include the *Chelmsford Regent* (Grade II), the *Regent* in Great Yarmouth 1914 (Grade II); the *Hippodrome* in Derby 1914 (Grade II), in Colne, the *Pendle Hippodrome*, 1914 (unlisted); and Winchester's *Theatre Royal* 1913 (Grade II), all built as theatres rather than as a designated cine-variety house. Other theatre buildings of this period are in other use or irreversibly altered to such an extent that they have no special interest. The *Redditch Place* is the only other hybrid variety theatre of this earlier date; however, the architect there, Bertie Crewe, was a theatre designer and intended it to look like a theatre. This makes the survival of the *Garston Empire* important as a hybrid theatre, particularly as it is not by a well-known theatre architect and as an example of what was being created in local districts. The *Garston Empire* is also unique in the survival of many of its original features and its continuation in a relatively unaltered and architecturally complete state.

Built on a corner site on the junction of James Street and Church Road of ordinary brick, the arches over the windows are emphasised with red brick, except the James Street side which is entirely of red brick. Three storeys of irregular plan, recessed above the ground floor (now rendered); flat-roofed with a frieze of red brick, except the James Street side where it is stone-dressed. The single-storey main entrance projects to the back line of the footway. Through a now plain foyer, the auditorium is approached down a short flight of steps into a waiting area with three entrances to the rear stalls, now adapted for sales. At the left, a marble staircase leads to the balcony, which retains theatre seating. The curved balcony front terminates in a box at either side of the high arched proscenium (now obscured by a false lowered ceiling). The boxes are arched and have curved fronts and are dressed with curtains and chandeliers. Throughout the auditorium much decoration survives including panels, drops and swags. The front of the orchestra pit has been removed at the centre to allow access to what is now the bar, below stage. The cinema seats in the stall have also been removed to accommodate a cabaret set-up during its years as a bingo hall.

There was a previous attempt to get the building listed in 2005. However, since this date there has been growing recognition of the place of the cine-variety in the history of British theatres (see *Historic England 2022*). The inspector's assessment also contained a number of questionable assumptions. Firstly the *Empire* was assessed as a cinema rather than as a theatre and music hall with cinematographic capabilities (The inspectors report referred to *Historic England's* cinema guidance and the Cinema Theatre Association was consulted rather than the Theatres Trust). The *Empire* was denigrated for its plainness and lack of ornamentation, which are part of the theatre's architectural distinctiveness as a local theatre with a working class audience and are well-articulated. There are also a number of inaccuracies in the report, arising from the lack of a site inspection, that leads to a failure to recognise how unaltered the building is from its original purpose and the preservation of key features of the theatre

The theatre has been vacant since 2009 and though it has been in good condition this is under severe risk. The building has been in steady decline since its sale in November 2020 with little efforts to keep the site secure.

References

EARL, JOHN and SELL, MICHAEL (ed.) (2000) *The Theatres Trust Guide to British Theatres, 1750-1950* A&C Black, London

HISTORIC ENGLAND (2022) *Interwar Theatres: Introductions to Heritage Assets* Historic England, London

Threat Statement

The Garston Empire was in a state of reasonable repair when it closed as a bingo hall in 2009. The hall stayed with the same owner and though vacant was kept relatively secure and well-maintained.

However, in November 2020 the theatre was sold to a developer, Dam Group UK Property Ltd. The Dam Group sold the site in November 2021 to Garston (BGO) Project Ltd for £250, 000. The group is owned by Robert McMaster, a specialist in building affordable housing, with the intention of demolishing the Empire and building an apartment block. Since November 2020 the management of the site has noticeably declined. There have been attempts to get into the building through existed entrances and these doors have not been resecured. Windows have become open to the elements allowing pigeons into the building. Plants have been allowed to embed themselves in the brickwork of the exterior. A building previously in a reasonably state of repair is degraded at a rapid pace.

Garston Project Ltd has now gone bankrupt and the bankruptcy is being managed by insolvency specialists Bridgestones (25/127 Union St, Oldham OL1 1TE). A representative for the company Robert Cooksey, said the building would be an asset in the bankruptcy. The Landwood Group (Lancaster Buildings, 77 Deansgate, Manchester) have listed the property as a development opportunity (see listing in attached documents). This has placed the Empire in real danger and facing demolition in the short-term or at best continuing degradation of the fabric of the building until demolition at a later date.