

History of the Regent Street Cinema

In 1848 a new theatre was added on to the south side of the Royal Polytechnic Institution building. The theatre was purpose built for the 'optical exhibitions' for which the RPI had become famous. It seated 1500 in two tiers, and shows often ran twice a day. Its success formed a major part of the RPI's income.

The theatre was 12m wide, 36.5m long and 15m high. Designed by architect James Thompson, the design incorporated an elliptical-coved ceiling created with huge arched iron girders sitting on massive piers and arches. These iron girders remain in place today. Access to the theatre was through the RPI's Great Hall. There is a good description in *The Builder* (April 1848) of the theatre which featured a skylight in the roof which was covered during performances by two moveable shutters; it also had a 'manipulating' room for the projection equipment, and a canvas covered disc which could act as a screen. Shows included scientific demonstrations, lantern slides as a backdrop to live music and drama, and also full theatrical productions. The first performance including the illusion known as *Pepper's Ghost* was a production of Charles Dickens' ghost story 'The Haunted Man'. It was first performed at the Polytechnic on Christmas Eve 1862, and there were many subsequent plays incorporating this unfailingly popular illusion.

When Quintin Hogg took over the building in 1882 he used the theatre - usually called the great hall - both for entertainment and as teaching space. The floor was raised to create a music rehearsal room underneath but it was otherwise largely unchanged until 1891. New fire regulations obliged Hogg to purchase the buildings at 307 Regent Street in front of the theatre and create an entrance to the theatre directly from Regent Street for the first time. As part of the works, the floor was also raised again and the ceiling lowered, so the height was now a more modest 9m, to allow for extra classrooms above and below, and a new gallery of seating circles the space. The work was completed in November 1893.

It was in this space that Felicien Trewey demonstrated the Lumière brothers' Cinématographe machine to the press on 20 February 1896, with its first presentation to a paying UK audience on 21 February 1896. (The show, comprising ten short films, was first shown to the public in Paris at the Grand Café, Boulevard des Capucines, on 28th December 1895).

The theatre was used for a variety of purposes after the 1896 Lumiere show; there is evidence that the Polytechnic bought its own film-making equipment and "animated photographs" are mentioned several times, as interval entertainment during evening concerts and prize givings. From 1899, Alfred West's *Our Navy* and *Our Army* films ran continuously for 14 years, arguably making this one of the first examples of a permanent cinema.

When 307-311 Regent Street was rebuilt between 1910 and 1912, the cinema was one of the major spaces (like the swimming pool and the gymnasium) left in place. It did however receive new seats and a re-decoration. Its next comprehensive refurbishment occurred between 1923 and 1927, much of which remains in place today. At this time the gallery was removed and replaced with a single curved balcony. The floor was levelled and a new projection room was added at the back of the room, while the decorative scheme became Art Deco.

The cinema now seated 610 and became known for its travel and nature films. Unusually these were shown at set times, instead of on a loop, and souvenir programmes were available to purchase. In 1936, the Compton organ was installed. Rather than the accompaniment of silent features, the organ was instead formed part of the entertainment, playing before the film and during the intermission.

After World War Two the cinema was re-named the Cameo-Poly, part of the Cameo cinema chain, showing foreign language and avant-garde films. In January 1951 it showed the first X-certificate film 'La Vie Commence Demain' and later developed a reputation for showing films 'on the art-sex boundary'. During the 1960s the Cameo-Poly hosted many premieres, before being sold to the Classic Cinemas chain in 1967. 6 years later, the cinema was sub-let to Larry Parnes for conversion to a theatre. For 10 years it hosted musicals including *Let My People Come*, which had transferred from Greenwich Village in New York and featured a naked cast.

In 1976 the Polytechnic decided that it once again required the Cinema as teaching space, and began a legal process to end its tenancy. The Cinema closed to the public in April 1980. For over 30 years it was used as a lecture theatre and for University functions. In 2005-7 the organ was also refurbished thanks to the support of Alumni and friends, notably the then Mayor of Westminster.

In 2015 the Regent Street Cinema re-opened to the public, renovated by by Tim Ronalds Architects to reflect its 1930s heyday. The project was supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Quentin Hogg Trust, the Garfield Weston Foundations and many other sponsors. It has been transformed into a state-of-the-art space for the cinematic arts; a place where students, schools, filmmakers and the public can come together, learn about film and be inspired by the heritage of the cinema.

Much of the information in this leaflet is taken from architectural research by Ro Spankie, which will be published in full in *The Magic Screen: a history of Regent Street Cinema*, June 2015.

Relevant sources available in the University of Westminster Archives

Documents relating to tenancy of the Theatre

Tenancy agreements and leases of the Marlborough hall (1920s-1940s), and correspondence with the tenant (1950s-1960s). There is also mention of the tenancy arrangements at various points in the Court of Governor's minutes.

Entertainment listings and accounts of performances

The Archive holds an incomplete series of programmes and press cuttings relating to shows held in the theatre at the Royal Polytechnic Institution. The Polytechnic Magazine and its predecessor Home Tidings (digitized copies of these are available free of charge online) contain numerous mentions of performances held at the theatre and later of film screenings and events. From the 1940s there are also frequently advertisements in the Polytechnic's student publications. The Archive also holds souvenir programmes for a number of films shown in the 1920s and 1930s, for the première of *Le Secret de Mayerling* and the 1996 Lumiere festival.

Photographs

The Archive holds a few historic photographs of the cinema interior, taken sometime before World War One. There are also various photographs showing the exterior of the building with the cinema entrance visible from the time of the Lumiere screening onwards. We also have amateur colour photographs taken during the 1995 refurbishment

Compton Organ

Specification, estimate and agreement for building a new organ, including a scale drawing. The Court of Governors minutes in 1936 also refer to the installation of the organ.