

Interior of the refurbished Phoenix Cinema

When the restored ‘birthplace of British cinema’ in London’s Regent Street opens its doors once more in May, it will join a growing number of Heritage Lottery Fund supported projects that are recapturing the golden days of the silver screen in the UK.

Venerable picture houses throughout the country have been given a new lease of life to the great delight of cinema goers of all ages. Projects now span the generations from those who recall the joy of sitting in the one-and-nines or thrilling to the experience of Saturday morning pictures to today’s cineastes who value the ambience of the preserved buildings.

The Regent Street Cinema, now owned by the University of Westminster, has undergone a three-year renovation to restore the auditorium where the first ever performance of moving pictures in this country took place. That filmshow, created by the French inventors of motion pictures, the Lumiere Brothers, was displayed to a paying audience in 1896.

In 1980 the auditorium was turned into a student lecture hall by the university and has been closed to the general public ever since. The cinema will now become an arts venue for quality world cinema past and present with the technology enabling it to show all moving image formats from 16mm and 35mm to Super 8 and the latest 4K digital film.

Other venerable picture palaces that have benefited from HLF investment include the Duke of York’s Picturehouse in Brighton which can claim to be the oldest cinema in the UK that has remained in continuous use and in its original form since 1910. A project targeting the local community and schools to tell its fascinating history was undertaken in time for

the cinema’s centenary celebrations.

Then there’s the Phoenix in East Finchley which was able to live up to its name and be reborn thanks to an HLF grant that ensured a complete makeover so it could continue to serve as London’s oldest cinema in continuous use since it opened as the Picturedrome, also in 1910.

Meanwhile the project Norfolk at the Pictures, based in Norwich, received widespread support from the community given the chance discover how a love of cinemagoing that began with extempore moving picture shows at travelling fairs in Norwich and Great Yarmouth then developed with the building of dedicated cinemas throughout the county from the early 1900s onward.

The Tyneside Cinema Heritage Project energised the Gateshead community in order to save their 1937-vintage cinema which was facing closure. Original features including stained glass windows and mosaic flooring were revealed, its original auditorium restored and a modern extension constructed.

A traditional fixture of many picture houses, both before and after the arrival of ‘the talkies’, was the mighty cinema organ and the Astoria Project in South Yorkshire has restored to full working order a 1934 Art Deco style Compton Cinema Organ. The impressive instrument started life in the Astoria Cinema in Purley, South London, and featured in BBC broadcasts during the 1930s and 1940s. It has now been installed in the UK's first dedicated Theatre Organ Heritage & Restoration Centre in Barnsley.



Interior of Royal Polytechnic Cinémathèque Française

University of Westminster’s Regent Street Cinema restoration to go ahead thanks to £1.5million grant