



Picture palace

It is 75 years since the Holloway Odeon opened. Mark Smulian goes behind the historical scenes

The Odeon cinema is an unmistakable landmark at the junction of Holloway Road and Tufnell Park Road, yet it is lucky to have survived at all and even more so to still function as a cinema.

When it opened in 1938, the event was considered important enough for a BBC radio outside broadcast of the variety programme that began proceedings.

The building, then called the Gaumont, was the work of



American theatre architect C Howard Crane, who also designed the Earls Court Exhibition Centre.

But it was designed for a world about to end, which means it now houses behind, above and below its screens a curious hidden labyrinth, which the *Journal* was able to explore with manager Mark Redding.

The cinema opened with a single screen and enough seats for 3,006 people to watch it. In an era when it was common to visit the cinema weekly, it needed that capacity.

In keeping with popular tastes, it was designed to be capable of staging full live variety theatre performances as well as films.

Mr Redding has a copy of a programme from its opening on

5 September 1938. Patrons would have seen the film *The Hurricane*, starring Dorothy Lamour, once they had passed through a French renaissance style foyer, thought to have been painted gold, into the equally palatial auditorium.

The programme notes the presence of a Wurlitzer organ “designed for this magnificent cine variety theatre”, capable of imitating 32 instruments and effects including the little-known chrusaglott.

It promised: “A new era in modern entertainment combining the best of stage and screen. Each and every week the first release film together with interesting short subjects will be seen in conjunction with a full hour of variety by world-famous artistes.”

The variety bill on the first night featured popular singing star Jessie Matthews (later famous for the radio soap opera *Mrs Dale’s Diary*), comic actor Will Hay, Louis Levi and his broadcasting orchestra, Scottish singer Will Fyffe and comedians Leslie Sarony and Leslie Holmes.

A director in the circle could control both film and stage performance by whispering, so as not to disturb the audience, “into a small control panel fitted with a micro telephone of the very latest type”.

It opened at 1.30pm (5.30pm on Sundays) and admission charges ranged from 6d to 2/6, depending on seats and times.

The Odeon’s Holloway Road side now accommodates small shops at ground level. Above, a flat roof houses only a disused gobo



– a machine that looks a little like a dalek – that once projected an Odeon logo on the side wall.

Beneath the shops is a small working boiler house that still has (non-functional) 1930s bakelite gauges and other equipment.

In 1938, the flat roof terrace was the cinema’s restaurant, where one could indulge in a three-course lunch or supper for 1/6 and snacks from 1/- with, slightly surprisingly for the time, vegetarian dishes available.

Barely a year later the Second World War began and, though the cinema stayed open, it took a direct hit from a V1 rocket on 8 November 1944 and was further damaged by a V2 in January 1945.

This destroyed all but the front and foyer, and postwar restrictions on the use of scarce building materials left cinemas a long way down the list for repairs.

It remained a ruin for 14 years, but reopened on 21 July 1958, when a contemporary account notes the guests of honour were stage stars Donald Sinden “in a white dinner jacket”, and Anne Heywood “in a low cut evening gown with sequinned bodice”. Its first film, *Run Silent, Run Deep*, starred Clark Gable and Burt Lancaster. In the intervening

years, televisions had become common, boosted by the 1955 launch of ITV, and cinema attendance was in decline. Accompanying variety shows were now a rarity.

A nondescript door gives onto the ghostly world of the cinema’s variety era. Guided by Mr Redding’s torch, one can see doors still labelled “chorus”, “organist” and “band room”, the stairs that once led from this netherworld to the auditorium, and a lethal-looking ladder down which the organist would go to sit at the Wurlitzer before rising before the audience.

The cinema was renamed the Odeon in 1962 and, as the small screen continued to take away the big screens’ audience, it was subdivided into three cinemas in 1973 and later into the present eight, which vary in size between 72 and 330 seats, seating a total of 1,599 people.

Subdivision makes it hard to imagine the Odeon in its 1938 heyday, but Mr Redding says, roughly speaking, screens 1 and 2 are in the old circle, screens 4 and 5 are in the old stalls, screen 3 takes up the former restaurant, screen 6 is part of the original screen space and screens 7 and 8 are in the backstage area.

It’s still a cinema of

considerable size but the surprise as Mr Redding guided the *Journal* around is the disused space.

The tower at its north end on the Holloway Road side is almost entirely empty, but that on Tufnell Park Road is in use. An empty manager’s flat is halfway up the staircase and the tower gives access to projection rooms and the roof, where equipment is in place to raise and lower the Odeon’s flag.

There is also a trapdoor here down which technicians would once have descended to haul up chandeliers from the foyer when bulbs needed replacing.

Mr Redding has managed the Odeon on and off since 1999 and one of the major changes he has seen is the conversion of the cinema to all-digital screenings in November 2010.

The equipment for 35mm films remains, though. Screens 1 and 7 have 35mm projectors, and machines to splice lengths of film together and form them into reels remain available, though none has recently been used.

However modern its films, the cinema’s facade and the foyer are grade II listed and a reminder of times when cinemas were main landmarks in their communities and vied with each other over the splendour of their decoration. ■



Top: 1938 interiors; below: laying the foundations in 1937 to completion in 1938; above: chorus room, bakelite equipment and band leader’s room; left: the Gaumont and its souvenir programme

Historic pictures: Odeon

