

Friends of the Alexandra Theatre

Friends of the Alexandra Theatre (FAPT) was set up in 2002 to support the board of trustees in its efforts to maintain, restore and bring back into use the Victorian theatre in the north-east corner of the Palace. Its constitution gives it a remit from the board to do this and a member of the board is delegated to sit on the FAPT committee.

The group's establishment followed the completion of work to rebuild the floor in the theatre foyer and so allow proper access the theatre auditorium once again, more than 65 years after it was closed to public use, and after many years of dereliction.

The theatre was built as part of the second Alexandra Palace which opened in 1875, after the first palace burned down after. It escaped the fire of 1980, along with rest of the eastern end of the palace, although the green rooms and other backstage facilities were destroyed. These were not rebuilt in the 1985 redevelopment.

In the late Victorian age it saw intermittent use, along with the rest of the palace, but was most successful with its spectacular pantomimes, which produced dramatic effects using the mid-Victorian stage machinery. This works from beneath the stage and from the fly towers at the sides, and not from above the stage, as become standard in late Victorian times. It was the rare survival of this machinery that played a key role in Alexandra Palace becoming a listed building in 1996,

After 1900, when the palace was taken over by a consortium of local authorities, the theatre had its most successful period as a kinematograph - an early cinema. Because of the fire hazard of the early film stock, the upper circle of the auditorium was removed. In the first world war the palace was used as a refugee and internment camp. With the reparations paid by the government, the theatre was refurbished in the early 1920s, with side aisles added for safety.

But it was not a success, and after amateur use and as a rehearsal space for Gracie Fields revues, it was taken over in the mid-1930s by the BBC, which set up its new TV service at the palace. It was used mainly as a storeroom until the BBC finally left in the mid-1970s, after which it became increasingly derelict. In the 1985 development plan it was earmarked to become a recording studio, but the overspend meant that this was never realised.

After 1996, work was done by the AP trust, with English Heritage support, to make the theatre wind and watertight, pin the ceiling, remove the asbestos safety curtain and make good the floor and stage. One of the traps has also been restored to working order.

The Friends have worked to maintain interest by promoting and lobbying for the theatre, and by putting on small events to demonstrate its usability and widen interest. Events include a silent film show, several music performances, a play reading, an opera by the respected company Tete a Tete and a sound installation.

The development process, and ensuing collapse of the Firoka deal, made activities and improvements harder. And since summer 2009, the auditorium has had to be closed for safety reasons, making the challenge of restoring the theatre to regular use even harder.