

Happy 90th birthday to the Phoenix!

"Don't mention the Multiplexes", warned Peter Bailey, leaning back and aiming an imaginary cross-bow at me. Chief projectionist and a walking piece of British film history, Mr Bailey - who has been a projectionist at the 'Phoenix' for forty years - was protective of his cinema which was opened as the 'Picturedrome' in 1910 and is now the oldest purpose-built cinema in Britain. He is rightly protective. This is royalty amongst film-houses, a cinema that itself features in films such as 'Interview with a Vampire', 'Mr Love' and the forthcoming Neil Jordan premiere 'End of the Affair' with Ralph Fiennes.

It is true that by the time the Phoenix, later renamed the 'Coliseum' and then known as the 'Rex' from the 1930s until 1975, was sold to the current Trust in the mid-80s with the help of GLC funding, its audience was in serious decline. Yet it has since undergone something of a renaissance. It is not to say that, according to trustee Lawrence

Lewis, the cinema is anything other than 'holding steady' financially. It still must make films pay - sometimes difficult with huge distributors' hire charges - and it certainly must compete at every level of service with the Multiplexes. This is not a cinema at the forefront of technology. The only major developments have been the raking of seats in 1972 and the introduction of new projection cameras in 1980 and 1986.

But in the hands of proactive and responsible trustees, and with careful management by Oasis Cinemas, the Phoenix appears to have struck that difficult and fine balance between art-house/repertory and commercial film-showing.

There are many elements to its success. Its philosophy, in part a follow-on from the increasing number of European films shown over the years, is that it is a cinema rooted in its local community. As testament to this it shows a diverse range of films from a variety of nationalities

and ethnic groups. It has hosted Jewish and Indian film festivals. It also screens GCSE films for schoolchildren and big-screen video. It therefore plays a vital educational and cultural role. It also has its own Saturday children's club called 'The Phoenix Freddie's' which provides screenings and activities for six to twelve-year olds, and a Friends' Scheme with benefits that include four free tickets a year, priority booking and special presentations. The cinema has and will again be showing films from the silent era with orchestral accompaniment. With its 90th birthday coming up, the Phoenix looks like having a particularly busy schedule, beginning with a hot premier on 30 January 2000 - Neil Jordan's 'End of the Affair' with Ralph Fiennes and Julianne Moore - and likely to continue with films from the cinema's first nine decades.

The cinema's finances are in a reasonable state. Compared with the Multiplexes, the Phoenix has low staff costs and generally modest film hire overheads. That allows it to charge a commercial ticket price that is still far lower than those of the chains. The Trust is also working hard towards

lottery funding that will follow listing status which is likely to be granted by English Heritage.

With this additional funding, service provision is set to improve still further. The mono sound will likely be updated with the very latest in acoustic advances. The coffee area will have a face-lift, seats will be replaced and disabled access improved. It is hoped that an arrangement can be reached with London Transport to use the parking space at the station and relieve the local congestion that occurs at showing times.

When therefore you next visit the Phoenix, remember that you are not just going to your local. The Phoenix is a treasure, an institution. More than that, it is a success story. This is a cinema that shows a huge variety of films - not just the blockbusters - and calls them films, not movies. It is a place where buckets of popcorn are unknown, yet it is also a place, above all, which embraces the very best in film-making. Mr Bailey need not worry. For this sprightly ninety-year-old at least, the bingo hall is likely to be a long way off.

DANIEL ROBINSON



It was almost too cold, but not quite, for Eva Jacobs her grandson Alexander and a good number of other residents who answered the call of the Friends of the Suburb Woods to plant seedling oak trees in Bigwood on 19 December.

The Holly and the Ivy

Mince pies and mulled ale in a winter garden party laid on by Events Committee Chair Samantha Ambrose in her Denman Drive garden awaited the party of about 40 who had enjoyed a walk through Bigwood and a

talk from Barnet's countryside officer Mel Lloyd entitled, 'The Holly and the Ivy'. Mel was very entertaining and had a story to tell about many of the tree varieties found in the wood as well as the seasonal holly and ivy.



Big brother or Suburb guardian?

"It's ironic," said the estate agent. "People spend such huge sums to buy their property, you'd think they could do what they wanted with them. But they can't. Big Brother or what?" he added, mysteriously. He was of course referring to residents' attempts to develop their properties. And I could see his point. You can't even put in a tiny dormer window in your attic or install a satellite dish without the blessing of the Suburb Trust Architect.

But that is also missing a rather bigger point. It is only by virtue of rigid enforcement that the Suburb's uniqueness can be maintained.

The characteristics that make the Suburb exceptional today were central right from the cutting of the first sod at 140 Hampstead Way in 1907. Then, its founding 'father', Dame Henrietta Barnett, had visions of an area that was the antithesis of London's East End where she had performed philanthropic acts for the urban poor, and aimed to rebuild a suburb that, like Bourneville, Letchworth and Port Sunlight was "free from monotony and inertia".

Attempts to preserve this uniqueness have been a recurring theme over the life of the Suburb. By 1960 all land that now constitutes the Suburb was owned outright by the Trust, let on long leases and was held in shares by four charities. In 1962 the Trust sold all assets to

Suburb Leaseholds Ltd (formerly Copartnership Tenants Ltd). Concern over re-development led to an unsuccessful Appeal by the National Trust. Suburb Leaseholds Ltd in turn sold on the land in 1969 to Ashdale Land & Property Co. Ltd, who held the same until 1988, and to Freshwater.

Perhaps more important than this was the Leasehold Reform Act 1967. This allowed many long leaseholders to buy their freeholds. The impact on the character of the Suburb could have been immense since, without landlords' covenants there could have been a wave of re-developments. A number of measures have so far preserved the position against the new freeholders, however. Firstly the 1962 Middlesex Development Plan recognised the need to preserve the particular characteristics of the Suburb. In 1964 the Ministry of Housing & Local Government designated the first batch of many buildings as listed. In 1968 the London Borough of Barnet recognised the Suburb as a Conservation area and in 1977 part of the Suburb was designated a 'Conservation Area of Outstanding Architectural or Historical Interest' such that development was rigidly controlled by the local authority. In similar vein, the 1967 Act also allowed the establishment of Schemes of Management and the Scheme for the Suburb came into force in 1974. It was applied for by the New Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust whose Articles required it "to do all things possible to maintain and preserve the present character and amenities..." It is worth adding that the Trust's new powers have been financially underwritten by investment income, income from Freshwater and Ashdale's properties prior to 1988, annual charges from the increasing number of freeholders since 1987 and a steady growth of planning application fees.

DANIEL ROBINSON



Eddie Caplin accepts a framed 1937 map of the Suburb and some rare books on the architecture of the period at the Trust's Christmas luncheon in December following his retirement as Chairman. Tribute was paid to his chairmanship by Dr Mervyn Miller and RA Chairman Richard Wakefield who said "it has been a pleasure to work with him and I must say that his calming influence and infinite patience have been an example for us all to follow".

Too many cables



A Cable and Wireless representative admitted that nearly 1200 large black boxes had been installed all over London with no planning approvals on any of them.

This was during a site inspection arranged by Chris Kellerman, Trust Manager, following widespread protest at the sudden appearance of a number of unsightly and very badly sited telephone junction boxes. They were joined by officers from Barnet, RA Chairman Richard Wakefield and Denis Ross from the RA's CONSAM Committee. Some residents joined in a chorus

of protest that left Cable and Wireless in no doubt that this was no way to treat a conservation area or indeed any other district.

The upshot of the tour was that Cable and Wireless agreed to resite the offending boxes and to use a less unsightly design.

Note: Guardian Readers will have noticed that Cable and Wireless have enjoyed relentless criticism of their inept handling of a stream of complaints from customers or would be customers in what seems to have become a regular weekly column!

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