

# Restoration Of An Opera House

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As built by Matcham the Wakefield Theatre Royal and Opera House was a typical touring theatre on a tight sight. Backstage was a scene dock directly off the side road and minimal dressing room accommodation stacked on the side. No workshop or other facilities whatsoever.

Front of House the auditorium occupied almost all the remaining site area. Pit, Dress Circle and Gallery each had its discrete entrance with no connection between them. Entrance foyers were non-existent. Each level had one small "saloon" about 25'-0" x 10'-0" and toilet facilities were woefully inadequate. Luckily there was the auditorium. Typical Matcham; elaborate fibrous plaster work, very coarsely detailed, wrap around circle and gallery, two strange but delightful little boxes, all with good sight-lines and above all that marvellous relationship between audience and stage of which Matcham was the master.

Hemp lines served the flying system with a grid height at 40'-0". There had obviously been stage bridges but these must have been removed a long time ago and the only remaining evidence was the sinking to accommodate them in the understage floor.

The main entrance facade to Westgate was in fair-faced brickwork with decorative details in hard cast concrete. Coarsely detailed—the circle level windows look as if replaced by some cheap jobbing carpenter but they are as original—the overall street effect is in scale and pleasant.

When the theatre was converted into a cinema in 1954 the projection box was built in the gallery. It had to be of the usual strong fireproof construction and it was necessary to considerably alter the gallery rake structure in order to support the r.c. floor of the box. Eventually the cinema closed and that saviour of so many theatre buildings, Bingo, was operated until 1982. Major structural changes for that use involved the building of a "first floor" at circle level on the stage, carrying through into the scene dock, the necessary vertical circulation which that

required and the formation of new toilet facilities in what had been dressing room accommodation. Over the mezzanine floor over the stage a ceiling was suspended between the fly galleries. The iron curtain had been removed. The front of the stage was altered and the front half of the stalls floor levelled. Doorways had been knocked through walls, a cheap but extensive heating system had been spaghetted around but essentially the auditorium was reasonably intact and recoverable. Most of the fibrous plaster work was, like all else dilapidated, but still in existence.

Externally the original main entrance facade to Westgate had had its original cast iron and glass pavement canopy removed and replaced by a flat horror in appalling taste and, whatever were the original Matcham entrance details below it, they had been obliterated under dreadful yellow tiles and aluminium doors in a quite incompetent attempt to satisfy the Local Authority's proper requirement for the doors to open outwards. Above the canopy the whole elevation had been sprayed with a thick, grey plastic film; clearly someone's idea of improvement. The human mind is enigmatic.

When it was known that the Bingo operation was to close a group of theatre enthusiasts formed a Trust committed to acquiring and re-furbishing the Opera House.

In 1982 TACP Design were commissioned as architects, theatre consultants, engineers, quantity surveyors and interior designers by the Trust to that end.

The operation has been wholly a private operation by the Trustees and the fact that the Theatre is in operation today is due wholly to a singleness of purpose and ener-

getic application by them, and particularly by the Chairman, Rodney Walker.

The Arts Council, with its usual great wisdom, was not able to provide any funds at all at any stage. It has of course been a period in which Local Authorities have been strapped for cash. Nevertheless, the Wakefield City Council has given considerable assistance and servicing support. The saving of the project was the Metropolitan County Council which shortly before abolition found the funds to enable completion. Not just the shortage of funds but also their availability only as a slow drip has made the project quite extraordinarily difficult.

It is pretty easy to carry out such a job with funding of £8,000,000 or £2,000,000.

The Wakefield Theatre Royal & Opera House is a delightful theatre, in operation and an asset to the City at a contract cost of some £600,000.

Apart from straightforward refurbishment certain additions and alterations were essential:

The mezzanine floor over stage and workshop to be removed. New dressing rooms built on a small site available behind the stage back wall. New public toilet facilities to be formed. Cinema projection box removed. Internal facilities produced in the small available areas.

High priority was attached to altering the entrance arrangements so as to provide one entrance to all three auditorium levels.

The scheme as produced incorporated a thin, 10'-0" wide property adjacent to the theatre which had been a hairdresser's forming the corner of the site. A new entrance here and remaking the circle and gallery stairs solved the access problems. Shortly after, it became obvious that funds were not going to be available to carry it out. Re-design left the entrance to the gallery separate from stalls and circle.

The area of the hairdresser's shop on the corner and the old stalls saloon space were re-built completely to provide an entrance and cafe, doubling as stalls refreshment area. The shop front itself has been com-



*The refurbished Wakefield Opera House has been returned to its old glory with much improved backstage facilities including a new stage lighting system and Gemini memory control.*

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