

Southampton Film Theatre

Historical Notes

The original film society was formed in London on Sunday, 25th October, 1925, when the first performance occurred at the New Gallery Cinema, Regent Street, London. Progress in setting up further societies was slow and by the time Southampton Film Society's inaugural meeting was addressed by the famous documentary film director, Paul Rotha, on 14th October, 1931, there were still only societies in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Birmingham and Leicester. The meeting was held at Price's Café, 98 Above Bar, (later the site of the Classic Cinema).

Despite the election of the Mayor as President, the Society was refused permission to show films on a Sunday, which meant they could not use an empty cinema and were obliged to present silent films only. The first showing was on Wednesday, 9th December, 1931 in the Central Hall. For the second and subsequent shows of the first season, the venue moved to the Avenue Hall. In subsequent seasons the Society use The Picture House, The Atherley at Shirley and the Regal (later the Odeon). The last seasons before the war were at the Regal, ending on March 5th, 1939.

The Society re-opened for business at the Regent, Shirley on March 10th, 1946. This remained the venue every Sunday afternoon until the mid fifties. In 1949 the normal winter and spring seasons were extended into May and June using 16mm facilities in the Physics Lecture Theatre of the University College. (Later, St. Boniface Hall, Shirley was also used for this purpose.)

The next move was to The Atherley and then as audiences dwindled in the sixties the Society used 16mm facilities at the University (Nuffield Theatre, then Physics Lecture Theatre A).

In 1967 the BFI set up a Regional Film Theatre in Southampton under the title of Southampton Film Theatre. The SFT was jointly sponsored by the City of Southampton, Hampshire County Council and the British Film Institute with the active support of the Southampton Film Society. (Indeed the assistant Treasurer of the Society was also the Membership Secretary of the SFT). The initial Music Hall programme took place on 13th March, 1967 and the plan was to show 'art films' for six days on one week of each month at the Classic Cinema. Of the shows, the one on Thursday night was to be a Members Only show so that unusual or uncertificated material could be shown.

During the ensuing couple of years the membership of the film society moved across to the new SFT, but by 1970 the arthouse cinema in Southampton was on the move again. On October 13th, 1970 the SFT moved to the Mountbatten Theatre of the Southampton Institute (the called Southampton Technical College). Films were shown on Tuesdays and Wednesdays with some Sunday shows at first, but later shows settled on Monday evenings with a second presentation on Tuesday if it was felt the film would be popular enough to support it. It was hoped this would be the permanent home of the SFT, who had been in difficulty sharing the Classic Cinema (and once or twice the Essoldo at Holbury!). For a number of years the SFT appeared to be settled, although rising charges for venue hire caused problems as time went by.

In the late seventies government funding of the BFI was reduced and as a result it was decided they would support only those Regional Film Theatres capable of drawing an audience throughout the week. Those, like Southampton, who could only show on one or two days would be abandoned financially. Where local people were keen to continue on their own the BFI offered free advice on setting up a limited company (to protect the organisers from personal financial loss) and assistance in booking films. (In fact Southampton also received some financial help until 1981).

On 5th June, 1978 seven local people signed a Memorandum of Association to form the new company called Southampton Film Theatre. On 23rd January, 1979 three new members were elected to the Council of Management and it was suggested that the former members of the old executive committee should be asked to join them. The film showings continued at the Mountbatten Theatre as before.

By the middle of 1984 costs relating to the Mountbatten venue had risen to such an extent that the Autumn season had to be cancelled. The SFT was on the point of bankruptcy. Despite no films being shown, an appeal to our members led to 100 renewing their subscriptions as a matter of faith. It was apparent that we could not continue at the Mountbatten Theatre and a claim was made against the College for return of money expended in assisting them to install projection equipment for our joint use. A claim for loss of goodwill and compensation for their showing film in competition with us on nights we did not use was also made. Against that claim we still owed the College £1602 and with other outstanding bills needed a total of £1801. The College offered to refund the cost of projection equipment to the extent of £2151. The offer was accepted.

During the time SFT had ceased trading, a small group of enthusiasts based at the Central Electricity Generating Board premises in Marchwood had formed their own club to show films on 16mm. They now approached the SFT with the offer of a merger as they had received permission to run a trial season at La Sainte Union College in the Avenue. The season started on 7.2.85 under their name - The Phoenix Film Society.

The amalgamation was successful, though the search continued for a more permanent home. Over the next few seasons just about every venue in the city was visited, from Oaklands to the gas showrooms without success. All were too small or unavailable. In the meantime the joint unit was confirmed by the election of seven Phoenix members to the SFT Council of Management on 5.8.85. On 17.9.85 two half-seasons were introduced to persuade the undecided to join the new organisation. The seasons were successful, but the venue search became more urgent. Consideration was given to sharing dates with the Gantry, but the number of days they were licensed to show films was insufficient.

On 10th September, 1987 a meeting was held in Seminar Room No. 2 at the Boldrewood Complex in the University of Southampton to allow Council members to assess its viability as a venue. Originally contact with this venue had been made in the Mountbatten days, but the discussions had been unsuccessful. In the meantime the University Staff Club Film Society had failed and wished to gain some expertise by an amalgamation similar to that between the Phoenix and SFT. Eventually an agreement for the SFT to operate in conjunction with the University Staff Club, under the name of the Phoenix, was signed on 21.4.88. The opening event at Boldrewood was on Friday, 30th September, 1988.

At first the venue was offered free of charge to ensure a good start to the project, but after a few seasons the SFT was financially sound enough to pay hire costs. As a result of the University support it was decided to purchase 35mm projection equipment and this was undertaken with a first test showing on Monday, 17th February, 1992. Regular 35mm seasons followed although there were occasional problems with the equipment which was very old.

The Phoenix (SFT) continued to go from strength to strength and on Saturday 11th March, 1995 received the supreme award as Film Society of the Year at the National Viewing Sessions in the National Film Theatre in London. (It had received a runners up prize for its film selection in 1989).

As our support increased and our projectors aged further a project for major refurbishment has been undertaken and new

projectors were included in the scheme. A National Lottery grant was submitted but was not successful.

Our projectionist discovered that BP were demolishing their 35mm preview theatre in Hemel Hempstead and were happy to let the Phoenix have their two projectors simply for the cost of taking them away. These were successfully installed and first used for the 1999 season. Boldrewood is a much larger venue and it became clear that the lamps needed upgrading. The summer 2000 showings commenced with the new 3phase-powered Xenon lamps.

Good contacts with the cinema trade enabled the Phoenix to upgrade its sound to Dolby SX in January 2001. Again, the system was second hand from a closing private cinema. So, at last, The Phoenix had reliable film exhibition capability as good as many commercial cinemas.

On 9th December 2001 The Phoenix celebrated its 70th Anniversary with a special day featuring three films. This included "Berlin, Symphony of a Great City" (1927, silent) which was the first film that the Society showed. The celebration was attended by one of its original members from 75 years ago, Kathleen Smith, who has since served on Phoenix Council for several decades.

The Society could not be complacent and was mindful of the risk of having to move again. As part of its development, the University planned to build a new office block on University Road. This was to include a large, raked lecture theatre on the ground floor. The Phoenix was fortunate in being able to make suggestions for its suitability for film presentation during its design, even though there was then no hint of a move.

In 2006 the University made a major strategic decision to redevelop the Boldrewood site. Thus, in 2007 The Phoenix had to leave pending the demolition of its theatre block. So moving to the newly-opened Building 32 became a real option. This proved affordable (just), with some encouragement from the University. So, once again, the Phoenix has survived. It has had a very successful first year in its new venue in the heart of the University's main Highfield campus.

JAP

30 July 2008