

Brief History of Film

Over its lifetime, The Phoenix has changed a lot, including its name. But its ability to adapt is what has kept it open. To celebrate its 100th year, the cinema has received another make-over and is one of London's favourite independent cinemas.

The cinema was built by Premier Electric Theatres in 1910 as part of the first nation-wide wave of cinema construction but it didn't open for 2 more years as Premier Electric went bankrupt. It finally opened as The Picturedrome in May 1912 with a film about the loss of the Titanic ocean liner. At this time, the cinema looked very different with exterior towers and domes. Inside, the auditorium was longer with the screen at the entrance end and an orchestra pit below it as silent films were accompanied by live music. Plus, there were 428 seats, nearly twice the number of seats as today.

The cinema's name changed to The Coliseum in 1924 and in 1929 it became the first in the area to start showing sound films or 'talkies'.

In 1938, the building was refurbished to compete with the new spectacular super-cinemas of the 1930s, such as the Odeon, Gaumont and ABC chains. The front of the building was redesigned in the fashionable Modernist style. In the auditorium, interior designers Mollo and Egan added Art Deco panels along the walls making it more exotic and luxurious. Seating was increased to 549 places. Finally, it was renamed The Rex.

Thankfully, this cinema was mostly unaffected by World War II (1939-1945). It was on a list of places for refugees to stay but this never happened. Like all cinemas at that time, it was a place for people to come and escape the horrors of the war for a few hours. In 1946, British cinema audiences peaked at 1.64 billion, with many working-class people going 2 or 3 times a week.

Over the following decades, the cinema went through more changes. Owners came and went, technology moved on and the building was improved further.

The cinema has always tried to provide the best possible audience experience. In the 1950s, widescreen was introduced to offer something different to TV. Dolby Surround Sound was installed in 2000 and a digital projector was purchased in 2005. In 2000, access to the building was improved and the facilities were modernised. The cinema was refurbished again in 2010 and the new café-bar was added.

In 1970, at a time when many cinemas were closing because they couldn't compete with TV and other leisure activities, this cinema changed its programming policy. It moved away from mainstream Hollywood movies and began to show art-house films, such as independent, classic and foreign films. This quickly became popular. Since then, the cinema has specialised in these types of films.

The cinema was bought by Charles and Kitty Cooper in 1975, who renamed it The Phoenix. Under them it was much loved, screening many of the foreign-language films that their company Contemporary Films distributed in Britain. Even so, in the 1980s The Phoenix's audience declined and there were plans for the cinema to be replaced by an office block.

The local community reacted by campaigning to save the cinema. After many petitions, protests, stops and starts, the Greater London Council paid a grant to the newly established Phoenix Cinema Trust to buy the cinema from the Coopers. So in December 1985, the Trust took over and made it the community cinema it is today.

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Films shot here include 'Interview with the Vampire', 'The End of the Affair', 'Nine' and 'Nowhere Boy'.

