Electric Cinema 100 Years
As Head of Cinema for the Soho House Group, one of the most important (and interesting) aspects of my job is programming — along with Clare Binns of City Screen — the Electric. And while perhaps not matching the glory days of the 70s, the 2000s have seen a new era of cinema-going, with the Electric at the forefront (well, we like to think so!).

When I first saw the Electric, I was struck by the beauty of the place, the fire buckets still hanging on the walls — evidence of the years of history the cinema possessed. The opportunity to run and programme one of London’s oldest, purpose-built cinemas, whose reputation reaches across the globe — Norway, New York, Australia — doesn’t come around often.

Researching the cinema’s history has been fascinating, but what has made it such a gratifying experience are the people who have contributed to this magazine, sharing their stories and memories of the Electric and helping to put together the rich tapestry of its programme one of London’s oldest, purpose-built cinemas, whose years of history the cinema possessed. The opportunity to run and programme one of London’s oldest, purpose-built cinemas, whose reputation reaches across the globe — Norway, New York, Australia — doesn’t come around often.

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Researching the cinema’s history has been fascinating, but what has made it such a gratifying experience are the people who have contributed to this magazine, sharing their stories and memories of the Electric and helping to put together the rich tapestry of its history. The cinema has been, and I hope always will be, a resolute and popular part of the very fabric of Portobello Road: it has survived two world wars (and a bombing), garnered world-wide recognition for the phenomenal programming in the 70s, and was saved from being turned into a Bingo Hall. May it’s next 100 years be as eventful as the last.

A big thank you to all who have contributed and played a part in the Electric Cinema’s centenary year, from the exemplary programming team at City Screen Virtual to our print designers Mwmcreative and Will at Livewire Design for the website, to all the regulars who have made the Electric Cinema such an enduring and special place over the years and especially to the current staff, who won the 2011 Mynottinghill Best Venue Award, a testament to their hard work and dedication.

Mandy Karen

INTRODUCTION

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BIRTH OF A LEGEND
1911–1939

The accepted opening date is February 27, 1911 — records can be sketchy, and one theory has it opening on Christmas Eve, 1910 — when the Portobello Road’s most famous inhabitant threw wide its doors and patrons first flooded in. In one shape or another, barring closure in the 80s and 90s, the famous building (the road’s only cinema) at number 191 has been a beacon of filmgoing ever since. The first film to be shown on that wintry day? Henry VIII starring Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree as the titular monarch.

In 1910, architect Gerald Seymour Valentien received a commission to create a purpose-built cinema on the site of a timber yard in Notting Hill. Enthusiasm for ‘electric theatres’ was on the rise throughout London, and the Portobello area was already justly proud of its street lighting. What better than its own cinema?

The grand exterior featured brick with a terra cotta facing, ionic pilasters, and the famous tower and dome of galvanised zinc (cut off square at the back so as not to overlap the roof of the auditorium). Beyond the fairground-styled box office booth, the interior had the flavour of an Italian baroque church: pillars, high ceiling, and a proscenium arch (featuring a map of the world). What a place of worship for cinema-lovers.

During the silent era the cinema flourished, except for an awkward moment during WWI when the manager, German by birth, was said to be signalling to Zeppelins, leading to the doors being stoned and the poor fellow interned in a camp. The chances are it was foul rumour put about by rival cinema managers.

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The Electric Cinema was retitled the Imperial in 1919, and by 1922 it was attracting four thousand people a week. During WWII the manager was said to be signalling Zeppelins from the roof!
Under the grand title The Imperial Playhouse, the Electric weathered the initial wartime order for cinemas to close in fear of gathering crowds during the Blitz. As London grew resilient to the raids, the day-to-day life of the cinema carried on. Indeed, if air raids commenced during a showing, an announcement would calmly flash onto the screen and the audience would head for the nearest shelter collecting a refund on the way out. Records recall that both Old Mother Riley Captures A Quisling and Thunder In The City were rudely interrupted by German bombers.

The Imperial Playhouse, one of a chain of eight at the time, was still not classified as a first-run cinema, instead renting films from a variety of distributors, mixing a pair of news reels with second-run classics-to-be such as Grapes Of Wrath and His Girl Friday. The rapid change over of films hinted at a policy of quantity over quality. Government legislation also required a certain percentage of British films occupy screens. This led to the rapid production of local films, quantity once again ruled quality, and they were dubbed the “quota quicky”.

Even as postwar austerity dented cinema audiences, the Imperial Playhouse defied trends and blossomed. Local servicemen, returning from the war hungry for entertainment, were likely drawn to Portobello Road’s cheap prices. There was also the plush décor. Most memories from the era recall the lustrous tip-up seating, scarlet carpets, and a commissionaire dressed in a florid uniform.

Shortly after the armistice, there is record of a fire. Hurriedly written in the day-books, beneath the day’s screenings of Prison Without Bars and Exile Express, is the note “Closed 4.15pm due to fire.” No tickets were sold for three months. But the Electric rose again...
While the Electric, still known as the Imperial, kept to its task of bringing cinema to the good people of Notting Hill, the leafy London district was about to go through a period of upheaval. Youth culture, in all its abrasive forms, and large-scale immigration would radically transform the area, bringing violence, drugs and new forms of culture, particularly musical, to the cinema’s famous doorsteps.

In the late 50s, fuelled by racial tensions, the area was dogged by rioting gangs, often defined by their musical tastes and characteristic haircuts. Colin MacInnes set his famous novel Absolute Beginners against the backdrop of this clash of cultures, later to be filmed by Julian Temple. As windows were smashed along Lancaster Road and Oxford Gardens, milk bottles a frequent missile, teddy boys posed for TV cameras right outside the Imperial.

As the 60s began, Notting Hill was perhaps more notorious as one of London’s chief hash-dealing neighbourhoods than famed as a Mecca for cinema-lovers. Then manager of the Imperial Peter Brown, talked of hash dealers openly walking Portobello Road. The whole district was going downhill: “it really was sleazebag” reported local magazine Friends.

Unsurprisingly the ‘bughole’, as the Imperial was dubbed, fell into disrepair. But as the outside mood began to soften into a more bohemian vibe, the cinema happily joined in, boasting its own “Electric Cinema hippy doctor” in Sam Hutt: a genuine medical practitioner who went on to turn himself into successful country and western performer Hang Wangford.

Exactly how he served the cinema patrons is sadly lost to posterity.

By now, at the tail end of the 60s, Notting Hill had found its cultural feet again, drawing on the positive aspects of a more settled multicultural scene to offer an alternative form of cinemagoing. The Imperial was rechristened the Electric, with new manager Peter Howden famously installing Winston Churchill’s old projectors.
The Electric Cinema Club first formed under cover of darkness, using the Imperial for late night alternative shows on Friday and Saturday evenings, commencing with Luis Bunuel’s The Criminal Life Of Archibaldo De La Cruz. So popular were these midnight showings, taking more than a whole week’s admissions, they expanded to fill the cinema. In 1970, the Club took over the whole premises, refurbishing the building to the tune of £50,000 and creating one of the finest independent repertory cinemas in the world. Curiously, when they replaced the screen, they were delighted to discover the original 1911 screen, painted on the wall.

It was a heyday fondly recalled by both staff and customers alike. A place where film lovers gathered to watch and talk film, soon to be known as London’s friendliest cinema. Intimacy was the keyword, as the staff got to know their regulars for good and bad. Geoff Andrew, who worked at the Electric throughout the 70s, hilariously recalls the nicknames given to the more eccentric of their customers. Usually with the prefix Charlie, they included Charlie Dirty Hands (who wore gloves), Charlie Greasy Hair, Charlie Big Gut, Charlie Actor and Charlie Trousers (no one can recall what was significant about his trousers). Charlie Pork Pie (down to his hat) would come in every day for years, cut to the front of any queue, and fall sound asleep in whatever film he’d paid for. He turned out to be stone deaf.

These were the easygoing ones. Blonde Johnny was another sleeper, often in the aisles, but if awoken would begin a barrage of swearing and offers of violence toward the staff. On one occasion he even threatened to burn down the cinema. Catching him at the box office became a necessity.

Sudden downpours could also be a bane of the staff’s life, with the cinema’s notorious plumbing creating treacherous floods of sewage in the basement, and the fire brigade regularly arriving in the nick of time before the Electric’s electrics were blown.

Yet it was, as David Puttnam later hailed it, “a temple of cinema”. Here was the full breadth of cinema (even if a silent season nearly bankrupted them!), and any talking would be met with a sharp shush! A chance to see extraordinary double bills: Battle Of Algiers with Duck Soup, Hitchcock’s Psycho with John Huston’s Freud. They were the first to show The Texas Chain Saw Massacre uncut. They sought, without pretension, to educate people in film history.

ELECTRIC ART

The famously out-there programmes designed by Oscar Zarate

An Argentinian arts student, Zarate turned up at the cinema one day in the early 70s and simply asked manager Peter Howden if he could design the cinema programmes. His enormous talent and love of film were prevalent in his designs, creating iconic brochures, and unsurprisingly he went on to become a comic-book artist.

The Electric Cinema Club 1970s

It became known as London’s friendliest cinema.
CLINT THE CAT
The cinema-loving feline

He just appeared one day, this lone black cat, wondering into the cinema in the 70s to become a regular. Not that he was very approachable. "He was pretty vicious but always around," says Rob Small. "He would sit on the step outside and when someone tried to stroke him they got clawed! He’d wander around inside during films too, people often came out to say ‘did we know there was a cat in there?’" When the Club finally closed, Clint was rehoused with Electric stalwart Geoff Andrew, and the cine-literate cat, named after the movie’s most famous loners, lived onto 22 years of age.
REBRANDING AND CLOSURE

1980s

With a preservation order obtained in 1972, the future of the Electric seemed assured, but the 80s would bring a period of turmoil. Firstly, inspirational manager Peter Howden decided it was time to lend his talents elsewhere and moved onto the Everyman. Without its figurehead, an offer was accepted from Mainline Pictures to buy the cinema, beating out a last-ditch offer from a co-operative of staff hoping to keep the spirit of The Electric Cinema Club alive.

In 1983, Romaine Hart of Mainline took charge and set about renovating the building, intent on returning the auditorium to its former glory, and adding such modern comforts as air-conditioning, as well as a new screen and Dolby stereo sound. At first, audiences were impressed at such newfound luxury. The spruced-up cinema was rebranded as the Electric Screen.

But as smart as the cinema facilities were, the change from repertory to single-run programming proved too austere for the regulars. The Electric Screen lost its personality as a second-run and rep house, trying to compete with the first-run arthouse cinemas of the West End. By 1987, with box office revenue faltering, it was clear Mainline wanted to sell. Worse still, in the words of the managers, the potential new owners had “no intention of keeping the building as a cinema”.

Thus began the Campaign To Save The Electric, mounted by staff, local residents and many passionate celebrities. Alas, in the meantime, Central Properties took ownership of the building, and despite assurances the cinema would be kept open, the Electric closed on May 6, 1987, with an appropriately edgy double-bill of Michael Powell’s Peeping Tom and Nicolas Roeg’s Performance.

As Mainline’s unsuccessful attempt to turn the Electric into an arthouse cinema ended in 1987, and closure loomed, local residents and staff began a campaign, spearheaded by Box Office manager Karen Smith, to save their beloved cinema. The intention was to buy the cinema from Mainline using a trust fund and pressures from local MPs.

“I worked as a cashier when it was owned by the Screen group,” recalls Jojo Smith, “and we got local councillors involved — Labour and Tory. I even managed to get a housing trust flat out of it!”

A petition was mounted, gathering 10,000 signatures, including some famous names in British film: Audrey Hepurn, Tom Conti, Frank and Margy Clark, Anthony Hopkins, Alan Bates, and Julie Christie. With directors Stephen Fears and Nicolas Roeg publicly expressing their concern. Rumour had it, it was going to become an antiques market.

In the short term, their efforts came to nothing, but the campaign placed the Electric back onto a public stage, ensuring the return of the cinema. Its destiny remained to prevail as one of London’s most beloved cinemas.
Various reprieves came and went in the early 90s. Alison Davis recalls her husband Martin coming home, and announcing “I have bought a cinema!” to open, naturally, with Cinema Paradiso, as well as holding a splendid 40th birthday party for him in the auditorium. Amid the flux, in 1992 Pedro Almodovar stumbled across a double bill of his work at the Electric. The Spanish auteur was spotted by the avid movie fans “in the company of a micro-skirted blonde of dubious gender”. Naturally, they demanded he introduce the screenings.

Pedro Almodovar took to the stage and rambled incoherently about the film and his love of London, apparently his second home, before announcing to a perplexed crowd: “I love New York!”

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OWNER OF THE TRAVEL BOOKSHOP, BLENHEIM CRESCENT
Sarah started The Travel Bookshop in Kensington in 1979 and moved it to Blenheim Crescent in 1981. A truly specialist bookshop for the literary traveller, The Travel Bookshop has been a mainstay in the local community as the Electric was her 50th birthday party in 1997 when they took out all the seats and had a rave on the rake.

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In 2001, its colourful history dwindling into the past, the Electric looked set to become another anonymous retail outlet, with only the Grade II listed exterior remaining as a reminder of its glory days. But when the neighboring shop became available, a plan was mooted to create a luxury cinema and restaurant, a new lease of life for the Electric dream.

The £2 million cost of redevelopment was funded by local resident and entrepreneur Peter Simon (the founder of Monsoon), and following a brief period being run by City Screen — and once the restaurant was ready — leased to the Soho House Group for its next incarnation: the Electric.

The ‘bughole’ of old has been transformed into one of the world’s most lavish and user-friendly cinemas. “When you board a plane everyone wishes they could turn left (into business class) instead of right — with the Electric we offer film-goers that option,” says Nick Jones of Soho House. “The key to the success of the refit was the hi-tech screen.”

With the original arch surrounding the screen protected by English Heritage, an ingenious expanding monitor was designed so visitors can see Cinemascope movies. And with personal comfort in mind, the seating was reduced to 98 leather armchairs, and keeping the wry tradition of two-seater sofas at the rear. Alongside the cinema is the Electric Brasserie, and upstairs a private members club.

Harkening to the famous past, the cinema now programmes a healthy mix of current releases, re-runs, cult and classic films.

NICK JONES
CEO SOHO HOUSE GROUP
“I love the Electric: I moved into the area to be closer.”

CLARE BINNS
DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMMING CITY SCREEN VIRTUAL
“I have been going to see films at the Electric for the last 50 years and took over programming the cinema in 2002 when it reopened with the Soho House Group. The Electric has been integral in defining my film knowledge and taste over the years and I’m delighted to be involved with the cinema and join in its centenary celebrations.”

SASHA GEBLER
GEBLER TOOTH ARCHITECTS
Electric Cinema refurbishment in 1998 & 2002

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Without the tireless help of Dave, Katrina and Tim in the Local Studies section of the RBK&C Central Library, who hauled box after box of Electric related documents and photos upstairs for us to trawl through, photocopy and scan, the whole year’s worth of information and indeed this magazine would not have been possible. Thank you. We salute you!

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Simon Ward
Lisa Fong
Charlie Kane

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