



We're back!

Phoenix Cinema chief executive Paul Homer reveals more about the reopening and the attractions to follow.

When you read this, The Phoenix should have re-opened its doors, or very nearly. As I write in mid-August we are due to re-open on Friday 10 September, but who knows what could happen in the next four weeks!

The restoration project has been amazing, stressful, exciting, exhausting and all-consuming. It has also been very worthwhile and rewarding. It's a fantastic feeling that by completing this project on time and on budget, which is pretty much the case, we're giving East Finchley and Phoenix customers a landmark building, a wonderful cinema and a great café. I'm just delighted that I could be part of it.

As we stand on the cusp of our first centenary it's wonderful to think that the cinema might still be here in another 100 years, serving the East Finchley community. I wonder what the cinema will look like then.

And so we get back to the business we do best, showing films. Our first film is, like The Phoenix, a British independent: *Tamara Drewe*, directed by Stephen Frears and based on the popular comic strip by Posy Simmonds. We're sure it will prove popular with our Phoenix audiences.

Outside of main features we have a free programme of tours and archive shows,



Paul Homer photographed by Diana Cormack

kicking off on 12 September with films from the 1910s, the first decade we were open. On 19 September we have guided tours from 10am as part of Open House and from 2pm we have the first in our From the Archives screenings, looking at Cinema Architecture.

We're delighted to welcome you back to The Phoenix. Our box office is on 020 8444 6789 or visit www.phoenixcinema.co.uk

One hundred years of cinema

Conceived in 1910 as The East Finchley Picturedrome, the Phoenix is probably the oldest purpose-built continuously serving cinema in Britain. In that time, it has never been a bingo hall, snooker club or gone 'dark'. It has adapted to survive and, as it reopens following a major upgrade, David Hobbs looks back at the changing fortunes of the Phoenix and British cinema.

Although the initial plans date from 1910, a series of delays meant that the Picturedrome did not open until May 1912. Avoiding the usual classical style, it opted for a 'Moorish' look and was significantly different inside to today's cinema. It had the barrel-vaulted ceiling, but the screen was at the High Road end and there was a refreshment lounge above the entrance.

In the pre-World War One, pre-Hollywood era there was a thriving British film industry, there was even a studio in East Finchley in this period. The 1920s was the high point of the silent cinema and a time of competition between the local cinemas, each aiming to serve their local area. The New Bohemia in Church End opened in 1920 and heavily promoted its ten-piece orchestra, and the Picturedrome, which was renamed The Coliseum in 1924, also offered its live shows alongside the films.

The Coliseum stole a march on the other local cinemas when sound arrived and on Monday 22 July 1929 proudly announced that it was the first local cinema equipped to show the new talking pictures.

The mid-1930s saw the second wave of cinema building as the big picture palaces with over a thousand seats opened. However, for the Coliseum things did not look good. Middlesex County Council carried out safety checks on all cinemas over 20 years old and the Coliseum was told in April 1937 that if it had not achieved the required standard by November 1939 it was unlikely to keep its licence. Faced with this

ultimatum, in 1938 the cinema changed hands again and the new owners set about transforming it.

The cinema closed for ten months while extensive work was done. In addition to replacing the Moorish frontage with an Art Deco design, the auditorium was reversed and remodelled with the screen moved to the other end, new wall panels with a bronze and gold colour scheme installed and the capacity increased to 549 seats. New projectors and an RCA sound system were fitted and the cinema was given a new name, the Rex. Now it was able to compete with the picture palaces.

Wartime and its immediate aftermath saw a boom in cinema, but the post war years saw audiences decline dramatically. The Rex survived by avoiding mainstream programming showing foreign language and independent films. In addition it showed 'X' certificate films at a time when the Rank Organisation, who owned both the Odeon and Gaumont chains, would not. In 1970 a new, young manager, Steve Wischhusen, arrived and began showing art house films, helping establish the Rex's reputation as an innovative independent cinema.

The year 1974 marked the end of the Rex as an independent cinema as it was taken over by Granada who replaced the art house programming with mainstream films, to the dismay of local cinemagoers. There was a negative effect on admissions, a local petition and sufficient local opposition for Granada to think again and in 1975 they sold the cinema to Charles Cooper's Contemporary Films.

Contemporary Films were a groundbreaking distribution company who specialised in foreign and independent films. They changed the name to The Phoenix and promptly restored the previous innovative screening policy.

By the 1970s, audience patterns had changed so much that many of the grand picture palaces were going dark and 1984 saw cinema audiences reach their low point, down to 3% of their peak in 1946. By now, Contemporary Films felt that running their own cinemas was no longer viable. In addition, Charles Cooper wanted to retire. In 1983, a property company applied to Barnet



The changing face of the Phoenix over 100 years.

Council for planning permission to replace the Phoenix with an office block. The council approved the plans, but the GLC rejected them. After a public enquiry, planning permission was finally granted in 1984 and that looked to be curtains for the Phoenix.

They say that a phoenix is a mythical bird that rises from the flames and, presented with the likely end of the local cinema, the local community decided to fight back. Spearheaded by actress Maureen Lipman, local people organised a massive petition and lobbied the GLC to save the cinema. In its dying days the GLC offered a grant to buy the cinema and in December 1985 the Phoenix Cinema Trust bought the cinema and adjoining land from Contemporary Films and the Phoenix was saved. This was one of the last cheques the GLC wrote before Margaret Thatcher abolished it.

Since then the trust has made a number of changes including enlarging the foyer, installing new projection equipment, fixing the heating and gradually restoring the cinema to its former glory. The Phoenix's future was safeguarded in 2000 when it was made a Grade 2 listed building, ensuring that both the facade and the auditorium were protected. It may be the oldest cinema in continuous use in the country, but it has outlasted its competitors and has a bright future ahead of it.

A friendly welcome awaits you

EAST FINCHLEY METHODIST CHURCH

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**Sunday service at 10.30 a.m.
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Win the brand new Phoenix history

Enter our free competition and you could win a copy of the complete story of the Phoenix, courtesy of the cinema.

Gerry Turvey's book *The Phoenix, a Century of Film in East Finchley* is a must-read for all film fans and Phoenix-goers. The book is available from the Phoenix at £15.

To enter our free prize draw for a complimentary copy, send your name, address and telephone number to the-archer@lineone.net or The Archer, PO Box 3699, London N2 8JA. A winning name will be chosen at random from all email and postal entries after the closing date of Friday 24 September. Good luck.

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