

## History of the Empire Theatre, Consett

The Empire Palace, as it was originally named, was built in 1912 as a cine/variety hall, leased by Mr. Hugo Robertson and managed by dedicated comedian, pantomime artist and pioneering showman Lloyd Clarence (real name John W. Hunt). At this time, the Empire was designated a 'Class A' cinema, with its capacity audience recorded as being 878. In 1921, with the addition of a new circle, records show this to have increased to 1207.

In the 20's, and for some years following, the Empire was owned by Consett Theatres Ltd.; in 1936 it was operated by Consett Electric Theatres; and at some future point was run by Consett Cinemas. During this time the programme was taken up almost exclusively by film, but, because of the growth in popularity of the game, in 1966, the building was converted to accommodate bingo lovers as well as those preferring cinema. In the early 70's, with dwindling audiences and the building in disrepair, the Empire closed to the public for a short while. However, its future brightened in 1975 when it was taken over by Derwentside District Council who carried out a massive rebuilding and restoration programme on the building in 1977.

On 11th July, of that same year, the Empire first floor was returned to the people as a new building, since when it has been used consistently by local theatre, dance, choral, and music organisations. Alongside this activity the Council has continued to provide a programme of live professional entertainment as well as film. Despite earning a place in the hearts of the community and gathering audiences from several neighbouring areas, twenty five years on, due to constant use and its exposed location on the edge of the North Pennines, ever increasing repair bills forced the Council to give consideration to the continued operation of the Empire for a second time. In early 2002, this became a priority when it became apparent that major structural work needed to be carried out if the building was to have any future at all. Despite, funding problems, but given: the popularity of the building; the support offered by the Friends of the Empire; a deep tradition for amateur theatre and other forms of entertainment in the locality; and developing audiences, the Council decided it was right to undertake a complete refurbishment of the building and the Empire closed its old wooden doors to the public on 30th June.

The venue re-opened very recently, on 20th March 2003, having benefited from many improvements. Not least of these has been the relocating of the small upstairs bar to the ground floor and the addition of a new portico front, providing much needed space in what used to be a very cramped entrance lobby. All seating, floor coverings, public toilets and fixtures and fittings within the building have been renewed and it now complies with new legislation regarding access for people with a disability - not only from an audience basis but being one of only a handful of theatres in the country to have a dressing room for use by the same. The venue now offers meeting space and there are plans to develop new activities such as a daytime coffee bar. Having re-opened to the public once more, the Empire now has mixed use again, offering film alongside a varied programme of live entertainment making the venue, one of only a few remaining facilities in the country, to have consistently offered cinema from first opening. Apart from this the venue also boasts the biggest cinema screen in the North East!

Considering its position as a provincial theatre, the Empire has a very large stage. This is slightly raked, dressed with an ornate proscenium arch and measuring over 11 metres in width, 8 metres in depth and over 6 metres in height. It is for this reason that very recently, the venue has been able to include the Moscow Ballet La Classique on its programme Nutcracker, in particular, brought over 30 superb extremely athletic Russian dancers onto the Empire's stage, too many for most theatres of similar standing to accommodate.

Since the 20's, due to the modernisation programmes, for the comfort of the audience, and in compliance with legal requirements, the number of seats in the venue has reduced dramatically. Before the recent refurbishment 535 people could be seated, however the building now has 514 seats but can accommodate at least 6 wheel chair users.