

Sleeping Beauties: British theatres have been left to rot

by [Maddie Drury](#)

Two parallel communities fight to save their forgotten theatres. From bingo to backstage toilet buckets, both theatres have a rich history that may well just save their future.



Doncaster Grand Theatre. Credit: Margaret Herbert



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PART 1: Curtain Up

“Positions, ladies!” An anxious giggle erupts from the thirty dancers packed into the dressing room at Doncaster’s Grand Theatre. Margaret Herbert takes the costume for her role in the chorus off a low hanging peg. She pulls the red satin dress over her head, the white fur lining tickles her skin. A large petticoat for act two dangles invitingly on a second peg above it. She takes one look at the emergency bucket in the corner of the room, before making a dash for the toilet. The line for the solitary cubicle backstage snakes the length of the stairs. Eighty other performers have had the same idea. Margaret remembers the emergency bucket illuminated by the dressing room's mirror lights and shudders at the inevitability that she will need to use it. She decides against it, instead finding comfort in the darkness of the stage right wings. The strings begin to play, and the curtain rises. The year is 1949 and Doncaster Grand is a buzz for the opening night of the operetta *Rose Marie*.

Doncaster Theatre is in Margaret’s blood. Her grandparents had attended the very first performance in 1899, she was an audience member in her youth, and she defended the building when it was threatened by the bulldozers in 1995. It had been left to rot when the final tenants, Mecca Bingo, departed the site. She joined forces with a group of passionate locals to create the Friends of Doncaster Grand and successfully obtained 60,000 signatures to prove the community appetite to save the historic building. They eventually secured an all-important grade two listing order meaning that consent must be granted if alterations wish to be made in the future. Now owned by the Frenchgate Centre, who also runs the shopping centre next door, it has been left empty only to be occasionally occupied by daring trespassers looking to gain hits on YouTube.

The overflowing audience that Margaret remembers has not stepped foot in the theatre for 57 years and large crowds of this size in Doncaster are now only likely to be found in the bustling high-speed railway station. On Trip Advisor, one of the highest-rated attractions is the departure lounge of Doncaster's small airport. When walking through the quiet streets of this former-mining town investors could be forgiven for overlooking this empty building when the high street itself is in need of a cash injection. "We've had a meeting with the Frenchgate Centre," Margaret says optimistically, "We're all sort of singing from the same hymn sheet now because retail has gone through the wall." She sighs, creating a crackle over the microphone on the call. She is in week four of self-isolation at the hands of the coronavirus and is coping with the death of two of the community's key members. "It's a real big upset what with the virus going on." Margaret is desperate to see the theatre open once again, so that at last Doncaster can enjoy the success of West End shows when they go on tour. The Cast theatre has been open in the area since 2013 but does not have the capacity to accommodate large scale touring productions.

The skeleton of Doncaster Grand had once housed some incredible scenes. A visit from Queen Victoria in 1882 sparked its beginnings as the adjacent road required widening for Her Majesty's visit; Doncaster's streets were not yet ready for the flag-waving crowds in their thousands. After the reconstruction, some of the attached land was no longer needed and instead sold for £1,315 to architect Frederick William Masters. He built a Circus Hall where the Grand now stands, and is credited for the building's current structural soundness, on account of his decision to make the base walls six feet thick to take the weight of the travelling elephants.

In 1899 the Grand opened its doors as one of the first theatres in the country with electric lights, designed by renowned theatrical architect Frank Matcham, who could also put his name to London's iconic Palladium. A sold-out crowd flooded the auditorium and the National Anthem reverberated through the congregation. Doncaster's MP Sir Fison delivered a characteristically short speech and the French opera *La Poupée* commenced. The crowd marvelled as a group of penniless monks attempted to craftily obtain some money from a rich relative, which 'kept the house in a constant state of delight', noted the theatrical magazine *The Era*.

Doncaster was to face a turbulent few years ahead, 'UNPARALLELED SCENES OF EXCITEMENT!', the Gazette read on the eve of war. In World War One the theatre was commandeered by military authorities for living quarters and a production of the play *Australian Nell* was interrupted when two members of the cast were deployed as Army Reservists. They emerged after the Second World War having survived a bomb blast; the only casualty was the shattered glass canopy over the entrance, which was pierced by a falling statue. How could a theatre that had survived two world wars and the weight of one of the world's largest mammals fall from grace? Bingo.

PART 2: Death by Bingo

In the midst of the baby boom, bingo emerged as a game to give women freedom from the shackles of the kitchen sink. It was hugely popular because of its extravagant prizes and social atmosphere, "We wish we could do it every day, we love it!" One woman told the BBC cheerily in 1963. Bingo was actively promoted by

the state as part of the broader welfare system; pro-gambling politicians defended the game as a harmless leisure activity which would help alleviate stress and poverty for working class women. This meant that taxes on bingo halls were significantly reduced compared with casinos. By 1967 bingo had swallowed theatres original rival, claiming 260 million admissions, translating to ten million more customers than cinemas. However, cinemas faced a battle of their own. Now competing with a rise in TV sets from 1 million in 1951 to 13 million in 1964, thanks to the Queen's televised coronation, people gradually got their screen fix at home. Theatres up and down the country had replaced the box office with bingo balls.

The musical hit *Showboat* took the final bow at Doncaster Grand in 1963. Margaret watched as Doncaster Operatic Society raised the Grand's curtain for the final time, "It was fantastic, but very sad." What was left of the theatre's regular audience watched the lives of those aboard the fictional Mississippi River Show Boat unfold. As soon as the keys to the Grand were reluctantly handed over to the bingo giants, the walls were slapped with garish pink and sickly pastel blue paint, complete with gold trim.

But bingo peaked in 1995. Mecca Bingo up and left, and the threat of the bulldozers loomed large over the Grand. "They left it in quite a good condition." Margaret's mouth forms a smile, "They just walked out and left everything - including a dozen eggs!"

PART 3: The Show Must Go On

A red bus speeds down Streatham High Road, slowing down to release passengers from its sweaty insides. These Londoners amble past Streatham Hill Theatre which has been decorated with billboards that beam, 'Cashino Gaming', with all the effort of a sticking plaster on a bruise. Here lies a familiar story. On 14th November 1962, the theatre became the biggest bingo casino in the country. A local campaign tried to stop the bingo bandwagon - "Big business", local activist Evelyn Lane complained, "is to deprive the district of the last vestige of cultural and live entertainment." The 36,000 signatures obtained from a petition to save the space did not equate to bums on seats and the theatre handed over their keys to Beacon Bingo in June 1962.

It all began one cold evening. On 20th November 1929, a sold-out audience wrapped up in their finest mufflers to watch the opening performance of *Wake Up and Dream!*, a songbook from the celebrated American composer Cole Porter. The local press was optimistic about the arrival of Streatham's answer to the West End, "Nobody can doubt that a theatre...will add considerably to the comfort, enjoyment and welfare of the inhabitants of South London. It is an ambitious scheme and deserves success."

In the backdrop of the 1929 Wall Street Crash there was a scattering of objections from local residents, "In this age of 'Robotism' this all-pervading commercial spirit is fast-absorbing the beauties of nature", complained one naysayer. Perhaps they were referencing the emergence of television, which some feared would erode people's relationship with the natural world. But most of the audience were not discouraged by the sight of unfinished concrete, an army of loose planks and semi-complete

staircases that awaited guests only three days prior to opening night. The unfinished theatre from 1929 does not look too dissimilar from its abandoned appearance today.

Penned by historian Jerry White as ‘the world’s most unmissable target’, London was not quite as lucky as Doncaster in the Second World War. A large crater groaned from the side of the theatre and bricks lay scattered like bowling pins following a flying bomb attack on 3rd July 1944. London had become ‘the moon’s capital’, poet Elizabeth Bowen mused in 1945. During the Blitz, the city began to crumble at the seams. “There was no such thing as theatre.” Recalled one woman from the East End, “We all finished working, the sirens went, we had some tea and went straight to the shelter.” The theatre hesitantly produced pantomimes all five years of the war, despite worries that with most children evacuated, there would be no audience. The infamous George Formby came to perform in 1943, solidifying Streatham’s reputation as ‘the West End of South London’.

The theatre remained in a state of limbo for six years. South London required rebuilding and naturally the theatre was not a priority - until one magical Christmas Eve in 1950. Streatham’s MP Duncan Sandys opened the first performance of *Cinderella* with a gag imagining Cinderella behind the Iron Curtain with Comrade Molotov. As Brits became worried by the Communist threat from Russia, mocking this Soviet politician provided relief, “I know how much Streatham has missed this theatre”, he joked.

The post-war optimism did not last and the 1950s marked the end of an era for theatre. Bingo was not the only culprit. With classical British actors and playwrights having died in the war, and the sudden death of King George VI, culture was changing. A new commercial appetite for the screen led many actors to seek work in television, meaning stage productions shrank in size; in 1960 there were 90 productions in the West End, of which only seventeen came to Streatham.

PART 4: The Final Curtain

Beacon Bingo took over the theatre on 14th November 1967, becoming the biggest bingo casino in the country. They have slowly stopped their operations, saving only a few weary machines round the back of the stalls. This white brick building still bears the wounds of London’s industrial past as black smog drips down its steadfast pillars. A performance has not played in its 2500 seat auditorium for 58 years.

The Friends of Streatham Hill Theatre formed in 2018 to reclaim the forgotten giant. It is late January and a small crowd gathers in the foyer where bunting is draped from the ornate copper bannisters, “Happy 90th Birthday!”, they read. The chairman of the group, David Harvey, announces the launch of a crowdfunding campaign to commission a study on how the building might be used in the future. He stands in front of a cake, raising a knife aloft, “Is this a dagger I see before me?” The crowd chuckles. If successful, the community group plans to return the theatre to its former glory as an intimate performance space. For a place that has been tarnished following a terrorist incident in February, Streatham would undoubtedly benefit from a good news story.

58-year-old Gill Pearson joined the group despite living 25 miles West of Streatham in Surrey. The theatre has left a mark on her life that pushed her to campaign for its reopening. Nearly sixty years ago, her father Dennis Herriot had strolled down Archer Street, a Wall Street for musicians looking for their next job. He was followed by his eldest daughter Jacqueline who was carrying a lump of cheese, a bargaining tool in exchange to stay quiet. With his wife at home pregnant with their second child, he was anxious to land a job. On that fresh Autumn day in 1961, Dennis was to be in luck.

Streatham Hill Theatre became his home. He held his violin to his chin, the lights went down and the overture for *Jack and Jill* began to ring through the auditorium. Just three days into the pantomime's run, Dennis returned from a performance with a new baby girl waiting at home. Having a sister four years older called Jacqueline, "my Dad decided fate had taken a hand and named me Gillian - so we would also be 'Jack and Jill'." The story behind her name was to be held in family folklore for years to come, an everlasting reminder of Dennis' love affair with the stage. "I love telling people, 'Did you know I'm named after a pantomime?' Very apt."

Dennis' employment at Streatham Hill Theatre kept the family alive, as well helping Gill leave a legacy for her donor conceived children, "What I've come to realise is that a lot of what you pass on has nothing to do with genetics." Gill pauses, "That theatre is part and parcel of my story."

Gill stresses that the number of theatres at risk has a knock-on effect:

"For most people in that industry it's not just a job, it's a passion and the love of their life."

Gill continues to fight for the preservation of the venue with The Friends of Streatham Hill Theatre. They fear owners Pollmount Limited, whose lease expires in 2028, may have plans for redevelopment, "It could be used with a bit of imagination!" Gill says brightly.

PART 5: Last Bows

Silence has descended upon theatres across the country for the foreseeable future. Cultural venues have been forced to close by the British government with fears that mass gatherings during the coronavirus outbreak will lead to the spread of the pandemic.

The Theatres Trust oversees the rescue of these sleeping beauties. Every year they compile a register of theatres at risk of being forgotten, to raise awareness of the local community groups supporting them. Since 2006, 80 out of 177 theatres on the register are on the path back to full operation. Theatres from Portsmouth to Swansea are battling the bulldozers.

Whilst some theatres face a difficult financial year for the first time in their history, other spaces have been left to rot a long time ago. Streatham's social media presence is polished, and their valuable London location makes for an attractive proposition. Doncaster does not enjoy the same luxury. Its plans for a boxing venue

and conference centre are unique and offer something fresh to the town, but with the Cast theatre already established in the area, the Grand has competition. As the second most deprived district in South Yorkshire, Margaret understands that a new theatre needs to address accessibility and argues the Cast theatre does not currently address the needs of the community, “It is very, very expensive. It’s not big enough for touring companies.” Despite their similarities, these two cases prove that there is a strong cultural divide between the North of England and London.

Both communities deserve a local theatre to experience the joy of live performance and share in the success of West End performances when they tour, but Streatham may find it easier to make an economically viable case than Doncaster.

These fascinating buildings are teeming with history from the area, and as more venues become at risk, locals lose out. A working theatre plays an important role for the community by creating identity and sustaining the economy; by securing the future of these buildings, we will preserve history and keep these magnificent venues safe. Margaret and Jill are proof that behind every threatened theatre, a strong community group waits in the wings.

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