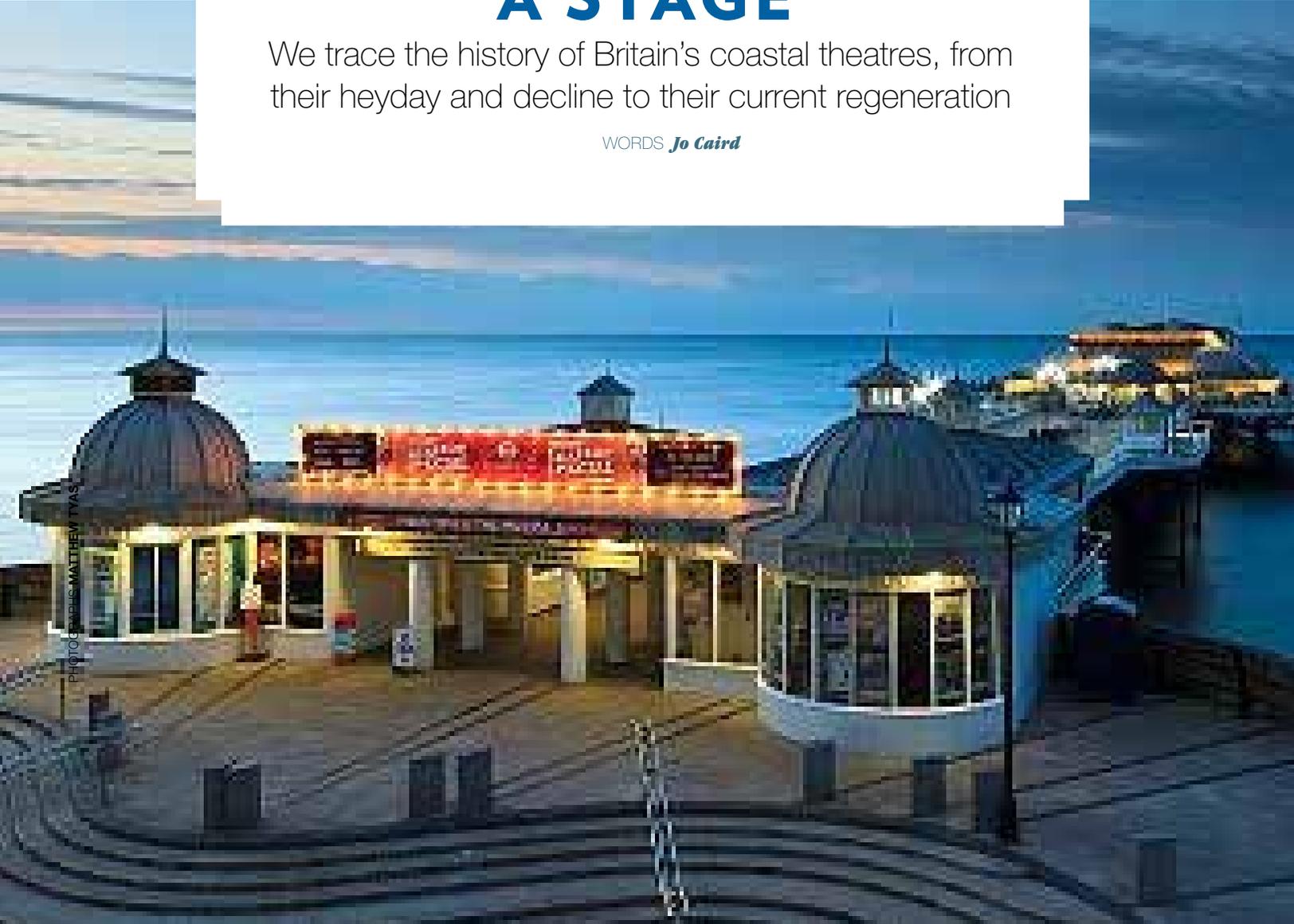


ALL THE COAST'S A STAGE

We trace the history of Britain's coastal theatres, from their heyday and decline to their current regeneration

WORDS *Jo Caird*





There's something magical about old seaside theatres. One minute you're strolling along a promenade, the wind in your face, the sky and sea stretching away to the horizon, gull calls and the shouts of children in your ears. Step inside and you're confronted with another world altogether, an environment of refinement and grandeur where plasterwork and gilding vie for attention with trompe l'oeil panels and lavish chandeliers.

The opulent décor is only part of it: take a seat in an historic seaside theatre, whether in Margate or Morecambe, Bridlington or Brighton, and you'll find yourself surrounded by stories. There's the drama about to be played out on the stage, and beyond that there's the unique collection of tales these theatres have to tell of the artists who performed there and the audiences who watched them, of the challenges these buildings faced as holiday habits changed and the triumph of their survival today.

PALACES OF ESCAPISM

No two seaside theatres are the same, but many of our most precious buildings have a common history, dating back to the Victorian era, when coastal resorts first began attracting working class holidaymakers in their droves, thanks to the arrival of the railway. The Blackpool Grand, which opened in 1894, is a case in point. The resort was still in its infancy when entrepreneur Thomas Sergensen

commissioned architect Frank Matcham to design 'the best, cosiest and prettiest theatre possible' on Church Street, a couple of minutes' walk from the increasingly busy promenade. It's just as pretty today, says Linda Tolson, archivist at The Grand. 'It's one of the most intact of all Matcham's theatres. If he walked into it today, he would recognise it as his work.'

The holidaymakers needed entertaining and theatres were the obvious choice, explains Tolson. 'Everybody knows that it can rain quite a lot in Blackpool, so it was far better to build places where people could go inside.'

The Grand is still remarkable today, but it would have been even more awe-inspiring for the factory girls and boys attending plays and variety performances in the early days of the theatre. 'If you were living in a little Victorian house with smoky chimneys and it's cold and damp, these were the palatial escapist environments that you needed,' says Mark Foley, an architect with London-based firm Burrell Foley Fischer, who specialises in restoring historic theatres.

BRIGHTON'S HIDDEN GEM

This architectural jewel was just one of many lavish performance venues that opened in popular seaside resorts during this period. Some, like the Morecambe Winter Gardens and The Spa, Bridlington, dating from 1897 and 1896 respectively, were built as part of sprawling entertainment complexes. Some were

CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE **The Pavilion Theatre** on the end of North Norfolk's Cromer Pier has been in operation almost continuously since 1912; the entrance **the Cromer Pier**; one of the most impressive features in **The Blackpool Grand** is its elaborate ceiling

built far out into the sea, like the Pavilion Theatre on the end of North Norfolk's Cromer Pier, which has been in operation almost continuously since 1912.

Some venues were converted from other uses. The Brighton Hippodrome, for example, first opened in 1897 as an ice rink, before being transformed into one of the most spectacular circus and variety theatres in the world in 1901. Also designed by Frank Matcham, the building held as many as 4,500 people. You can't see a show at the Hippodrome today. You can't even go inside. After nearly seven decades entertaining holidaymakers, hosting acts as varied as Sarah Bernhardt and The Beatles, the venue fell victim to factors impacting theatres at resorts up and down the UK. Television, the rise of bingo and cabaret clubs, and the lure of foreign travel made times increasingly tough.

After closing as a performance venue in 1965, it operated first as a TV and film studio, then as a bingo hall. In 2007, the bingo moved out and the Grade II*-listed building has been boarded up and empty ever since. Local campaigners fighting plans to redevelop the site as an eight-screen cinema complex want to see it returned to use as a theatre. Restoring the Hippodrome would cost more than £15 million, but campaigners say it's worth it, not just for the sake of this unique building, but for Brighton and Hove's entertainment offering, too.

David Fisher of the Our Brighton Hippodrome campaign says: 'Given the opportunity, we envisage that most of the programming will be of major touring productions. The Hippodrome will assure the city's aspiration for the future as the cultural and entertainment hub of the South East.'

A CHANGE IN FORTUNES

The Hippodrome may be under serious threat but at least there's a chance that this sleeping beauty could one day be revitalised. Many other seaside resort theatres have suffered worse fates. The Winter Gardens, Rothesay, a former entertainment complex on the Isle of Bute dating from 1895, closed for good in 1972. The domed auditorium of the former theatre, now home to the Isle of Bute Discovery Centre, is an impressive sight to this day.

The increasing popularity of the staycation, however, has breathed new life into many threatened or flagging seaside resort theatres. In most cases, considerable investment is required: today's audiences have very different expectations than their Victorian and Edwardian equivalents when it comes to comfort, safety and access, and technological advances mean backstage areas need adapting, too.

Following a major renovation between 2006 and 2008, The Spa, Bridlington is now running its own reparatory season each summer, as well as showing



films and hosting visiting bands, comics and dance companies. General manager Andrew Aldis believes the revitalised complex is helping put the Yorkshire resort back on the map: 'The venue benefits from its key asset, which is being on the sea shore,' he says. 'It's becoming one of the draws of people to the town.'

Evelyn Archer, chair of the Morecambe Winter Gardens Preservation Trust, is hopeful that such a process could take place on her side of the Pennines, too. 'In the 1950s when I was growing up in Morecambe, we had eight cinemas, five theatres and two piers. The only things we've got left now are the



Midland Hotel and the Winter Gardens,' she explains. 'So the Winter Gardens is very important to the regeneration of the town.'

This beautiful theatre closed to the public in 1977. Having campaigned for it since 1986 – including getting herself elected as an independent councillor in order to 'fight on the inside' – Evelyn is delighted to be able to open the Winter Gardens for all manner of events, from pantomimes and comedy nights to wrestling matches and Christmas markets. 'We can never use it as a 2,000-seater again – that's how it closed – so we use it multi-purpose,' she says.

The Winter Gardens Preservation Trust is currently putting together a business plan and a funding application to raise money to continue refurbishing the building: having restored the façade, auditorium and dressing rooms, next up are the bar and foyer. It's been a slow and painstaking process but Evelyn is determined that one day the theatre will be returned to its former glory.

Times have changed. Holidaymakers are spoilt for choice – both in terms of where to go and what to do when they get there – and it would be naïve to pretend that British seaside theatres could ever again exert the sort of pull they once did. But even after decades in the shadows, these magical buildings still have the power to amaze and delight – and with a touch of modernisation and reinvention, the show can go on.

ABOVE No longer able to hold an audience of 2,000, the Morecambe Winter Gardens is now used to hold pantomimes and wrestling matches
OPPOSITE The former theatre in Rothesay, on the Isle of Bute, closed in 1972

SEASIDE THEATRES A POTTED HISTORY

1843 The Theatres Act enabled local authorities to grant theatre licences, thereby breaking the monopoly of 'patent theatres', such as the Theatre Royal Margate, to present works of drama. Thousands of theatres spring up during the reign of Queen Victoria and on into the Edwardian era.

1854 Frank Matcham is born in Newton Abbot. Of the 200-plus theatres he built or renovated over the course of his extraordinary career, only around 20 remain today. The Blackpool Grand and Brighton Hippodrome are two of the most spectacular.

1899 Theatre impresarios Edward Moss and Oswald Stoll join forces to create Moss Empires. With variety theatres and music halls all over the country (up to 50 at one point), the company was a touring circuit in itself.

1976 The Theatres Trust is set up to 'promote the protection of theatres for the benefit of the nation'. The trust's advice and support has been instrumental in safeguarding seaside theatres across the country.

2011 The Localism Act introduced new rights and powers to allow communities in England and Wales to take part in local development. Community groups concerned about the future of a theatre can now nominate it as a 'community asset'. If the nomination is successful, at the point at which the asset is put up for sale, the group will have six months to put together a bid for it. For details, visit locality.org.uk.