



Hiding in Plain Sight: City Centre Audio Tour

Transcript

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Track 1: Introduction & News Theatre

Welcome to the Hiding in Plain Sight Leeds City Centre Audio Tour, presented by the Hyde Park Picture House, as part of our heritage lottery funded engagement project.

During the tour you will visit the sites of historic cinemas located in Leeds city centre, and we encourage you to look in detail at the buildings, as many of the cinema's features still exist amongst Leeds' surprising diversity of beautiful Victorian and Edwardian architecture.

As you enjoy the tour, please be aware of your surroundings and of other pedestrians, and please be careful of traffic.

The tour will take roughly 1 – 1 ½ hours and is at ground level throughout. As we tour around the city centre, there are many places to stop and have a break if you wish.

Let's go and visit our first cinema!

You should now be standing just inside Leeds Station entrance to the south side of City Square, next to the doors at the very end of the main concourse, by the News Theatre.

At one time there were over 60 different cinemas in central Leeds. Due to the decline in cinema attendance, driven by economic pressures and changes in how we enjoy culture and films, most of those cinemas have now been demolished.

A few of our historical cinemas though, such as the Hyde Park Picture House, still entertain audiences across Leeds today. But traces of the lost cinemas from the past can still be found. They have been absorbed back into the fabric of the city, hiding in plain sight...

The art deco hall in which you are standing, was opened in 1939, and is noted for its tall, panelled ceiling, square skylights, and stylish lighting pendants. It was closed in 1967 and used as a car park until it reopened in 2002, after undergoing significant rebuilding and refurbishment.

On your left, just inside the station doors, you will see the entrance to the News Theatre. On the tiled step into the doorway, you can still see the original brass plaque naming the cinema, and on the left-hand column, a carved dedication to the opening of the concourse itself.

If you now leave the station exit and turn immediately to your right, you can see between the station entrance and the Queens Hotel, the boarded up main entrance to the News Theatre. ~~{slight pause}~~ In contemporary pictures, there was an obelisk-type pinnacle above the entrance, which still existed up until the late 1990's.

The News Theatre opened in 1937, a year after the Queens Hotel itself, and housed approximately 290 seats. It was designed by the famous cinema designer Cecil Masey and initially operated as a newsreel service. In 1966 it was renamed the Classic, and then shortly afterwards to the Tatler Film Club.

A contributor to our Hiding in Plain Sight website remembers having a holiday job at the Classic: "I remember the stale-smelling, mustard uniform we wore, using a torch to show the customers to their seats while trying to avert my eyes to what else was going on in the dark, and that hearing the music Colonel Bogey would mean the place was on fire!"

In the 70s and 80s, although many cinemas were turned into bingo halls, many others, like the Tatler, became notorious venues for watching erotic films, and the Tatler was frequently raided by the police.

At some point the cinema was briefly named the Screen on the Square, and in 1979, it reverted to the Classic. It became a night club when the cinema closed in the late 1980s, and was variously called High Flyers, Planet Earth (which featured a revolving dancefloor), and finally the Bondi Beach Bar. It has been boarded up since 2007.

We will now turn around and cross the road to our second location outside the Majestic Cinema.

Track 2: The Majestic

You should now be standing on the west side of the city square in front of the largest, and one of the grandest of all Leeds historic cinemas – The Majestic.

The Majestic was Leeds' first super cinema, with a huge auditorium seating about 2,500 people. It had an in-house symphony orchestra conducted by Francois Grandpierre, a restaurant, and also a ballroom in the basement, which hosted tea and evening dances. The large domed ceiling of the auditorium was 84 feet wide and was decorated with a great frieze depicting chariots and horsemen.

The cinema was designed by architects Pascal Stienlet & J.C. Maxwell, and built for Leeds Picture Playhouse Ltd. on the site of the former recruiting office for First World War troops. It opened in June 1922, with a screening D.W. Griffith's "Way Down East" and The Majestic proved incredibly popular, with over 50,000 people attending in its first week of operation.

The cinema changed hands several times while it was open, screening classics including 'South Pacific,' which enjoyed a huge 38 week run. The Majestic was particularly impressive around this time, due to the installation of 70mm projection and stereophonic sound. But in 1969 it was closed by the Rank Organisation (who had bought the Gaumont-British chain) and the building was transformed into Majestic Bingo. The final film screened at the Majestic was The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly.

In 1993 the building became infamous as The Majestyk night club, which itself closed in 2006. In 2014 the majority of the building was destroyed by fire, including the roof, which put the building beyond use for some time. The current outside shell is all that's left of the former building. However the two statues and decorative urns you can see on top of the building are copies of the originals.

The building is now protected with a Grade II listing and one of its heritage features is the white 'Marmo terracotta' tiling of its facade. These tiles were manufactured by Leeds Fireclay of Burmantofts. This same tiling was also used in the construction of the Hyde Park Picture House.

As you can see, the Majestic building has recently been refurbished and is now home to Channel 4's Northern headquarters.

Track 3: City Cinema, Wellington Picture House & Interlude 1: Louis Le Prince

If you now turn towards the east of City Square, you will see the grey Park Plaza Hotel, which is the site of the City Cinema, built in 1916 and closed in 1964.

This 550-seat cinema was a J. P. Crawford design. Crawford was an architect who designed at least 14 cinemas in Leeds. In 1925 its name was changed to the Savoy, then to the Academy, and finally the Tatler in 1936. In 1965 the entire site was replaced by a tower block called Royal Exchange House.

Just before the walk to our third location, we'll quickly mention The Wellington Picture House, situated on Wellington street, which runs down the left-hand site of the Majestic building. This short-lived cinema, that opened in November 1920, was designed by Leeds based architect G. Fred Bowman and seated 693 people. It closed in 1941, possibly due to bomb damage during World War II, and has since been demolished.

We now have a 6-10 minute walk, past the Park Plaza Hotel, east along Boar lane and turning left onto Briggate, to Location 3. As you go, keep listening to discover Leeds claim to be the birthplace of cinema.

A historical cinema tour around Leeds City Centre would not be complete without a mention of Louis Le Prince, who pioneered moving pictures as we know them today.

Whilst Thomas Edison is credited with the invention of cinema in America in 1894 and the Lumière Brothers exhibited films commercially in Paris in 1895, and the UK 1896, French inventor Louis Le Prince was experimenting with moving images many years before this, which culminated in footage shot in October 1888.

This work is also likely to have been slightly in advance of the inventions of contemporaneous moving-picture pioneers such as the British inventors William Friese-Greene and Wordsworth Donisthorpe.

Le Prince was born in Metz in 1841 and moved to Leeds in 1866. He had studied physics and chemistry, was experienced in photography, and also established the Leeds Technical School of Art in 1874, with Lizzie, his wife, which they ran from their townhouse in Park Square.

One of their specialties was fixing colour photography to enamel, ceramic and glass, for which they won awards at the Paris exhibition of 1878 and their portraits of Queen Victoria and Gladstone were included in a time capsule placed beneath Cleopatra's Needle, when it was erected on the Embankment in London.

Using his own single lens camera which he developed in his workshop at 160 Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, Le Prince shot footage of family members in his father-in-law's garden in Roundhay and his son Adolphe, playing the accordion. Both surviving films are only a few seconds long, but they represent a milestone in cinematic history.

Later in October 1888, using the same camera, Le Prince filmed another short sequence of traffic moving across Leeds Bridge. Only 20 frames of this footage now survives. The film was shot from what was then Hicks the Ironmongers, at 19 Bridge End, where there is now a blue plaque dedicated to his work. Although not part of our main tour, we've marked this Leeds Bridge location on our map so you can visit it if you wish.

Whilst there is some mystery surrounding Le Prince's sudden disappearance in 1890, it is most likely that he died by suicide, due to financial problems. His original cameras are currently on display at the National Science and Media Museum in Bradford.

Track 4: Briggate Picture House

You should now be standing outside the Marks & Spencer department store on Briggate, site of the Briggate Picture House.

Opened in 1911, the Briggate Picture House could seat around 600 patrons. Initially it hosted stage plays as well as 'cinematograph' presentations. After a change of ownership in 1927 it became known as The Rialto, which finally closed in 1939, perhaps due to tough competition of the many other cinemas around Briggate, which you will visit shortly.

The Briggate Picture House was advertised as 'The most luxurious cinematograph theatre in Yorkshire', and featured two tea lounges: one decorated in a Wedgewood style for the use of 'ladies', the other in a Jacobean style for 'gentlemen'.

After the cinema closed, Marks & Spencer purchased the plot to build their large store. The imposing black granite frontage that you can see was designed by Robert Luytens, specifically for the company. With the outbreak of the World War II, the new building was taken over for use by the Ministry of Works, but the store finally opened in 1951.

Marks & Spencer was founded in 1884, just one street away in Leeds Kirkgate market, which also features a wonderfully ornate Victorian ironwork roof, and is well worth visiting.

We'll now head up Briggate and turn right, down Kirkgate, to our next location.

Track 5: Theatre de Luxe

You should now be standing the middle of Kirkgate, at the junction of Central Road, in front of the Theatre de Luxe building.

As befits its name, this cinema started out as a theatre, as many did in the first decade of the 20th century. The building was designed by Leeds architects C.S. Nelson & G. Birkinshaw and was run by National Electric Theatre.

The Theatre de Luxe opened as a small luxurious picture theatre in 1910, with just 383 seats, it only had a short life, and closed in May 1934, with a screening of British musical 'Going Gay'. It has been used as a retail outlet ever since. Photographs taken in the early 1930s show the theatre sandwiched in between Lipton Grocers and Alexandra Cafe Tea Rooms.

You can still see the original ornate terracotta detailing and Marmo tiles of the façade. Once again, this was supplied by Burmantofts Pottery and Brickworks, based in East Leeds.

Around 1900, Burmantofts developed a pale version of this ceramic tiling, an imitation of white marble, which was extensively used in Art Deco stylings of local cinemas and shop fronts across Leeds.

We will now return the way we came, turn right up Briggate and then left onto Albion Place, to our next stop at the site of the Scala.

Just before you turn right though, opposite you at 46 Commerical Street, was the site of one of the strangest architectural curiosities linked to the history of cinema in Leeds. In 1894, Henry Child, the owner of the Mitre Hotel and his architect Thomas Winn, together with a local baker, created a huge commemorative archway made out of over 1500 loaves of bread, to celebrate the visit of George V and his wife to Leeds. Interestingly, Henry Child was the very same businessman who commissioned Thomas Winn to build the Hyde Park Picture House. We've marked this site on the map, where you can see a photo of the arch in all its glory!

Track 6: The Scala

You should now be standing in the middle of Albion Place. On the right-hand side, halfway up the street, you can see a small brown arched doorway, and immediately to the right of that, a larger arched doorway, which was the entrance to The Scala.

The Scala was designed by Birmingham-based architects Essex & Goodman, who also designed the Birmingham and Liverpool Scala cinemas. The cinema opened in June 1922 with silent film *The Game of Life*.

The building was designed in a grand Beaux-Arts style, with seating provided in stalls and circle levels, with the circle extending along the side walls. It also contained a ballroom with its own house band, led by Charlie Marcus.

The upper floors that you can still see are original, but the main arched entrance is a later addition. The smaller brown arched doorway however, is original.

In 1928 the Scala was taken over by the Gaumont company and continued to be a very popular venue. After changing hands to the Rank Organisation, the cinema was closed in August 1957, with a screening of British thriller *Across the Bridge*.

If you now continue up Albion Place and turn right into Lands Lane, you will be able to see, above the shops on the right-hand side, the original red brick and decorations of the Scala cinema and ballroom, opposite the site of the Theatre Royal.

Track 7: Theatre Royal

As you can see, the site of the Scala has now been split into retail units, which cover the entire corner of Albion Place and Lands Lane, where you are standing.

It's a huge area of 35,000 square feet of space across basement, ground, first, second and third floor. 'Scala' was a popular name for cinemas in the 20th Century and the Scala in Leeds was built for Sol Levy, a successful operator of super-sized cinemas in other cities. It opened in the same year as the Majestic, which was a 'year of super cinemas' for Leeds, although the Scala had fewer seats at 1,692.

Opposite the Scala, behind you on Lands Lane, is the site of the Theatre Royal, which itself was built on the site of the Royal Amphitheatre, that burnt down in March 1876. Whilst it was mainly used for plays and pantomimes, the theatre also screened short films (apparently as early as the 1890s), as part of its extensive variety programme. It was demolished in 1957, the same year as the Scala.

We are now going to retrace our steps, and turn left, back onto Briggate, to visit our next cinema.

Track 8: Empire Palace Theatre

You should now be standing opposite the main entrance to Harvey Nichols, which is the site of the Empire Palace Theatre.

This large theatre opened in August 1898, as a 1,500-capacity music hall. It was one of many variety theatres in the UK operated by Moss Empires Ltd and the auditorium was decorated in a Moorish style.

The theatre screened films as part of its variety programme, and the hall was then converted in 1931 to be able to show 'talkies', with the first feature film being Charlie Chaplin's City Lights. Films continued to be screened at the theatre until about 1933, but unlike many of its peers, the Empire Palace also continued to host variety acts until the 1950s.

The auditorium was demolished in 1962 to make way for a new retail arcade, however a rear entrance remains visible to this day. Again, above the shop level, the façade and detailing around the windows are all original features. The theatre is part of the now Grade II listed County and Cross Arcades, which were designed by theatre architect Frank Matcham in the Flemish style, featuring more faience from the Burmantofts Pottery, several mosaics and plentiful use of marble.

The Victoria Quarter, comprising the arcades, was built at the turn of the 20th Century, as part of the clearance of a delapidated area of the city centre called The Shambles and Bazaar: rundown alleyways of butchers' shops and slaughterhouses.

If you now follow the outside of the building round to the right, and turn left onto King Edwards Street, you can enter the Cross Arcade, which is about halfway up the street on the left. If you look up, you'll be able to see the original carved Empire Palace doorway sign, on the left above the rear of Harvey Nichols. [slight pause]

Now we'll continue through the decorative splendour of the Victoria Quarter and turn left, back outside onto Briggate, where we'll take a short walk up to the main road, and the Paramount Theatre.

Track 9: Paramount Theatre

You should now be standing at the top of Briggate at the junction of the Headrow, where you can see the site of the Paramount Theatre opposite, on the right-hand corner.

Opening in February 1932 with a staggering 2,556 seats and a grand Wurlitzer organ, the Paramount Theatre was a glamorous addition to the Leeds cinemascape. Many people remember the venue for its luxurious interior, deep carpets, and fancy staff uniforms. The music you can hear in the background is organist Cecil Chadwick playing his signature tune on the Paramount's Wurlitzer organ.

The first film screened was the *Smiling Lieutenant* and the Paramount was extremely popular, with over 1.2 million people visiting in its first year of opening. In the 1960s, the Paramount also staged many large concerts including Roy Orbison, Dionne Warwick, The Beatles, and The Zombies.

The building is Grade II listed, made of red brick and Portland stone, and topped by a balustrade with crowning urns. It changed its name to The Odeon when the cinema chain, founded by Oscar Deutsch in 1930, bought all seven UK Paramount Theatres in 1939.

If you look on the corners of the building, just above shop level, you can still see the original black ironwork hooks that once supported the canopy advertising the films above the entrance.

The cinema had various alterations while it was an Odeon. Its auditorium was twinned in 1969, and in 1978 a third screen was added, using space that had been the Paramount bar and restaurant. In 1988 the Odeon was refurbished and made into a 5-screen cinema, but it finally closed in October 2001.

We will now cross over the Headrow and continue up New Briggate to see three more cinemas.

Track 10: The Plaza

You should now be standing opposite the Grand Theatre & Opera House on the right side of New Briggate, where there are three old cinemas next to each other, which we will look at from right to left.

On the right-hand end of the building on the corner of Harrison street, you can still see the grey carved entrance to The Plaza, which is now the Box Office for The Grand Theatre.

The Grand Theatre's Assembly Rooms were built as a concert hall, opened in 1879, and could seat an audience of 1,100. A newspaper at the time quoted that The Assembly Room was open for 'bazaars, concerts, public meetings, miscellaneous entertainments, and even on occasion, dramatic performances.'

Until the cinematograph act was enacted in 1910, there was no restriction on the showing of films, so as theatres were already well developed for audiences, this is how many cinemas got started – and evidence of this can be seen around Leeds city centre. That said, according to cinema historian Robert Preedy, the first public cinema shows in Leeds took place in Stead's former pork shop on Briggate.

After the advent of the motion picture, when New Century Pictures began to lease the venue, the Assembly Rooms were substantially changed by the architect to suit its functioning as a permanent cinema in 1911, and in 1923 it also survived a fire which broke out in the projection box. From 1958 it was known as The Plaza and was latterly renowned for screening erotic films and other outré content, such as *School for Sex*, *I am Curious Yellow* and *Mondo Cane*.

However, the Plaza also showed a programme of classic films, as recalled by one of our Friends of Hyde Park Picture House - Rosemary Doble: "For me it is the 'Nouvelle Vague' French films I remember. These were Saturday morning treats for sixth formers doing modern languages from grammar schools around Leeds.

My contingent from Lawnswood High School was accompanied by our French teacher, Miss George to whom I shall always be grateful for introducing me to interesting films like Renoir's 'La Grande Illusion', Jacques Tati's 'Monsieur Hulot's Holiday' and Truffaut's 'Les quatre cent coups' & 'Jules et Jim' and many more. The atmosphere was exciting with the whirring sound of the projector and the shaft of light from the projection room at the back of the auditorium.

These films showed us a different exciting world which seemed cool and sophisticated when compared to the overhang of drabness from wartime austerity which still persisted into the late 1950s & early 1960s. "

The Plaza continued to present films until its closure in 1985 and is now the Howard Assembly Rooms.

Track 11: Grand Theatre & Opera House

If we now move slightly up New Briggate to the left, you can't miss The Grand Theatre itself, which we've included because it also screened moving pictures, including DW Griffith's racist epic *Birth of a Nation*, in 1917.

The Grand Theatre was opened in 1878, with a performance of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and was designed by local architects James Watson & George Corson, in a mixture of the Italian and Gothic revival style. It comprised the Grand Theatre, a selection of shops and the Assembly Rooms.

The Grand was closed for six weeks in 1895 when improvements were made to the plans by architect Thomas Winn. Thomas Winn was also the architect who designed and built the Hyde Park Picture House, which is now part of the Leeds Heritage Theatres company, which also comprises The Grand Theatre and the City Varieties Music Hall.

The Grand Theatre continues to be an extremely popular venue, hosting touring productions and ballet, and is also home to Opera North.

Track 12: Tower Cinema + Interlude 2: Two Lost Cinemas

Lastly, if we continue up New Briggate to the corner of Merrion Street on the right, we have The Tower Cinema, which was located on the left-hand lane of the Grand Arcade.

The Grand Arcade was originally built by the New Briggate Arcade Company in 1897, in a renaissance style, with Art Nouveau detailing. You can still see these beautiful details above the arcade entrances.

Also known as the Tower Picture House, the cinema opened in 1920, with seating for 1,188 people. It was created by converting the existing left-hand side of the Grand Arcade, with designs supplied by Harehills-based architect, J. P. Crawford. It closed in 1985 and has been used ever since as a nightclub and bar.

We will now head up Merrion Street behind us for a 6-10 minute walk to our final location at The Coliseum.

As we do, you'll hear about the other two cinemas in Leeds City Centre, traces of which have completely disappeared, but are still fondly remembered.

Behind the Grand Arcade and the Tower Cinema, on what is now a vacant site on Vicar Lane, was the Ritz cinema.

The Ritz opened in November 1934, with a screening of *Those were the Days*. It originally had 1,950 seats and was designed in an Art Deco style, featuring painted panels on the sidewalls, depicting vistas of cypress trees and temples. The cinema changed its name to ABC in 1959, when it was modernised with new cladding and a lightbox display sign.

Following the trajectory of the many UK cinemas in the later part of the 20th Century, it was twinned in 1970, and then became a triple screen cinema in 1974. In 1987 it became the Cannon Cinema, then the M.G.M. and finally reverted to the ABC in 1993. The cinema was finally closed in 2000 and demolished in 2006.

Our walk also takes us around the outside of the Merrion Centre, site of the Merrion Centre Odeon.

When it first opened, the Merrion Centre was seen as a glamorous open-air development. It was claimed as the biggest shopping centre of its kind, although it was quickly eclipsed by Birmingham's Bull Ring centre which opened later the same year.

In the early 1970s the Merrion House office block was added, which was occupied by Leeds City Council. The centre was also enclosed with a roof and the cinema was accessed through a set of doors on a balcony above the ground floor shopping level. The entrance to the cinema was situated opposite what is now the entrance to Morrison's supermarket.

Integral to the Merrion Centre development, the Odeon opened the same year in 1964, but closed only 13 years later in 1977. It had 900 seats and could also screen 70mm film prints. It was a very modern and luxurious single screen cinema compared to others in Leeds at the time, and when it was built the Odeon was the first new cinema in the city for 30 years.

There were two Odeon cinemas in Leeds at this time, the other being the former Paramount on The Headrow, which we visited earlier. They were both part of the Rank cinema chain, who also owned The Majestic.

Despite its closure, for many years afterwards the boarded-up entrances could still be seen from within the Merrion Centre atrium. Much of the cinema's interior remained intact, hidden away from the public, apart from at the occasional Heritage Open Day event, but the old cinema fittings have now been removed and the site is ready for a new development.

After you've walked around the outside of the Merrion Centre, you should cross the main road opposite the side entrance to Morrisons and then turn left down Vernon Street. Walk down to the end of this small side road to our last stop at the Coliseum.

Track 13: The Coliseum & Outroduction

We are now at our final tour location, standing at the end of Vernon Street, with the entrance to Leeds Arts University behind us and in front of us, on Cookridge Street, the grand façade of The Coliseum.

The Coliseum was another theatre, which like the Assembly Rooms, was turned into a cinema in 1905 by New Century Pictures. Film pioneer Sydney Carter hired the theatre for a short season, then transferred his operation to the Assembly Rooms. Moving pictures were so successful that Carter then bought the freehold of the Coliseum, and according to Robert Preedy, turned it into Leeds' 1st full time cinema to be licensed.

The grand gothic revival styled Coliseum originally opened in 1885 as concert hall with a capacity of over 3,000. After being converted for film screenings with a reduced capacity, the Gaumont organisation took it over in 1938, and made further changes to the building. The cinema finally closed in 1961 and was used for film, TV, and then inevitably, opened as a bingo hall.

We're not sure what happened to the building during the 1970s and 80s, but it was back in action as a concert venue known as the Town & Country Club between 1992 and 2000. It was then renovated in 2001 as a music venue and nightclub and has remained so ever since.

We have now completed our audio tour of Leeds lost cinemas.

We hope you enjoyed the tour, and if wish to donate to support the Hyde Park Picture House, please visit hydeparkpicturehouse.co.uk/donate. You can also buy postcards, posters and other merchandise featuring the wonderful the drawings of Leeds cinemas lost and found, created especially for this project by local artist Adam Allsuch Boardman.

In addition to the Leeds city centre cinemas covered in this tour, our Hiding in Plain Sight website hosts information and photographs of the historic cinemas located outside of the city centre, where you can add your own movie-going memories. We also list the sources used to create this tour, if you wish to investigate their history further, and you are also welcome to contact us directly.

This audio tour was voiced by author SJ Bradley.

If you wish to return to Leeds train station where we began the tour, it's about a 15 minute walk. Simply head left down Cookridge Street, then straight on, down Park Row to the City Square and the station opposite.

Thank you for joining us on our tour and we hope that you'll visit us to see a film at the Hyde Park Picture House soon!

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