

Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

FIVE THEATRES IN LANCASTER & MORECAMBE

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 34

It is unusual for a relatively small district to have five theatres, as Lancaster and Morecambe do. The Grand Theatre, the Dukes, the Nuffield Theatre, The Platform and the Winter Gardens provide between them a wide range of live performances.

The Grand Theatre

The Grand is the oldest of the three; indeed it is the third oldest continually operating theatre outside London, having opened in 1782.

Its construction was funded by selling shares to keen local people and that community effort is still evident today as the theatre is run by Lancaster Footlights, a voluntary group.

They put on their own amateur dramatic productions, and have a wide programme of plays by professional companies, dance, comedy, and events for and by schoolchildren.

Today the theatre has 460 seats with stalls, a circle and two boxes facing a traditional stage and proscenium. This is the Edwardian style of theatre that was rebuilt in 1908 after a serious fire destroyed Frank Matcham's redesign of 1897. The rich decor reflects that era of theatres.

However, in its nearly two and half centuries the theatre has had seven changes of name and several extensions, re-modellings and refurbishments as its owners have sought to provide a public venue that would meet the changing standards, fashions and tastes of Lancaster as it expanded and evolved.

At various times it has been a cinema, bingo hall, lecture theatre, dining club, music hall and concert hall, and it has housed a museum.



Today the theatre is a charity, owned by a Trust since 1951, which has plans not only for improvements to the existing building but also for an extension to one side that would enhance the theatre's programmes and facilities (see the artist's impression below). Fundraising has begun. The redevelopment of the surrounding area (The Canal Quarter), which threatened to sweep the theatre away in 1959, may be an opportunity to reach their target.



Proposed new foyer for the Grand Theatre, Lancaster

The Grand Theatre is on St Leonard's Gate, the postcode is LA1 1NL and their website is https://lancastergrand.co.uk

The Dukes

The building is based around St Anne's Church (built in 1796) and, after this was closed, it was converted and enlarged into The Duke's Theatre (now The Dukes), which opened in 1971. There are three spaces within the building. The Rake seats 313 people facing a stage (see the photograph below). The Round holds 240 in a flexible area of seating and performance space. The Centre for Creative Learning takes 112 and is used mostly for work with young people.



The Dukes has a very active independent cinema programme and it hosts its own plays and travelling groups, and music, comedy and other events. The Dukes is known for challenging theatrical offerings and for its extensive work with young people. Most summers since 1987 the Dukes has put on an outdoor promenade performance in Lancaster's Williamson Park (see the photograph below). The Dukes also has a gallery and café/bar.



The Dukes is run by a Board of Directors, mostly local people, and is supported by Lancaster City Council. It is situated on Moor Lane, the postcode is LA1 1QE and their website is https://dukeslancaster.org .

The Nuffield Theatre

The Nuffield Theatre was built in the late 1960s as part of Lancaster University's Great Hall complex. The Nuffield Foundation contributed to the cost of the building. The theatre is run by Lancaster Arts which is in turn a department of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lancaster University. Their events are open to all including the general public.

Architecturally the Nuffield is best described as a large black box, which can be configured in many ways to suit different types of performance. The capacity is around 220 people.

The Nuffield specialises in experimental theatre, contemporary dance, live art and innovative performance. The theatre is used by the university's students and by visiting professional companies. New works are commissioned and summer schools are run.



The Nuffield Theatre is part of Lancaster University at their Bailrigg campus, the postcode is LA1 1YW and their website is https://www.lancasterarts.org.

The Platform

The Platform on Morecambe's Marine Road central was the town main railway station after 1907 when it was opened by the Midland Railway, being across the road from the original Midland Hotel on the seafront.

The railway station was relocated in 1994 and The Platform opened in 1997 as a multi-purpose entertainment venue with a busy programme of events, principally reusing the station concourse as a flexible operating space. The building also houses Morecambe's Visitor Information Centre.



The postcode is LA4 4DB and their website is
https://www.lancaster.gov.uk/sport-and-leisure/the-platform

The Winter Gardens

Also on Morecambe's Marine Drive Central is The Winter Gardens. Originally the building was the Victoria Pavillion, which was attached to the Winter Gardens. When the latter was demolished in 1982, the Winter Gardens name was transferred and that is how it is known today.

The building is impressive at the front, with red brick and terracotta and an elaborate facade. There is large fly-tower at the back.

In between is a huge auditorium for 2500 people with an impressive barrel-vaulted roof and exuberant decoration. Frank Matcham was the design consultant. It was opened in 1897 and has operated as a music hall, theatre and concert hall.

In its heyday it attracted the cream of international and British entertainers. The decline of Morecambe as a holiday destination led to the building's closure in 1977.

A very active Friends group and a Preservation Trust are now working hard to improve the structure, renew facilities and get the Winter Gardens to re-open as an entertainment venue once more. Guide 58 provides more detail on the building.



The postcode is LA 4 4BU and their website is https://morecambewintergardens.com

Text – Gordon Clark. Photographs – the theatres.
Published by Lancaster Civic Vision (© 2022).
Lancaster Civic Vision is the trading name of Lancaster Civic Society, registered charity no. 258434