Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

THE WINTER GARDENS, MORECAMBE

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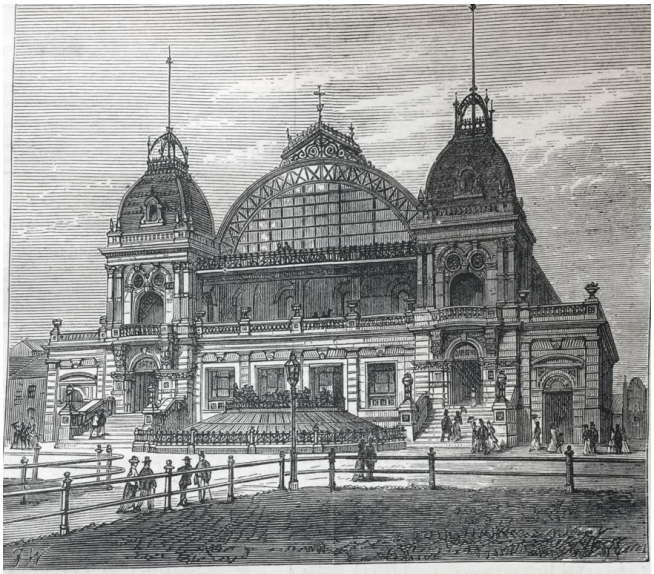
The Winter Gardens on Marine Drive Central in Morecambe is one of the last major reminders of the extensive range of all-weather entertainment that was provided in Victorian and Edwardian Morecambe for the many visitors to the resort. The piers and early cinemas and theatres of that era have mostly succumbed to fire, storms, redevelopment or changing tastes.

The building started as the Morecambe Baths and Winter Gardens Company in 1876, which was founded by business people from Bradford to provide bathing facilities and all-weather gardens for visitors.

Opened in 1878, there was also an aquarium, gallery, dance hall, three restaurants and a fernery (see Figures 1 and 2). It was also called the People's Palace. The competitor resorts of Southport and Blackpool already had Winter Gardens.



WINTER GARDEN AND AQUARIUM AT MORECAMBE.

The present building known now as the Winter Gardens was opened in 1897 as the Victoria Pavilion Concert Hall and Variety Theatre. It was built by Mangnall and Littlewood of Manchester – they also built the Empress Ballroom and Second Opera House in Blackpool - who used the noted theatre designer Frank Matcham as their consultant.

It lay next door to the original complex: both are shown in Figure 3. These two buildings widened the range of entertainment that the site provided at its key position on the Promenade. The original capacity of the two buildings was in excess of 6,000 people with the Winter Gardens Theatre capable of holding 2,500. From 1897 onwards it played host to large musical concerts including the Hallé Orchestra, the Morecambe International Festival – including Elgar between 1903 and 1905 – and stars of stage and screen.



Figures 1 and 2 The original Winter Gardens – courtesy Morecambe Winter Gardens Preservation Trust

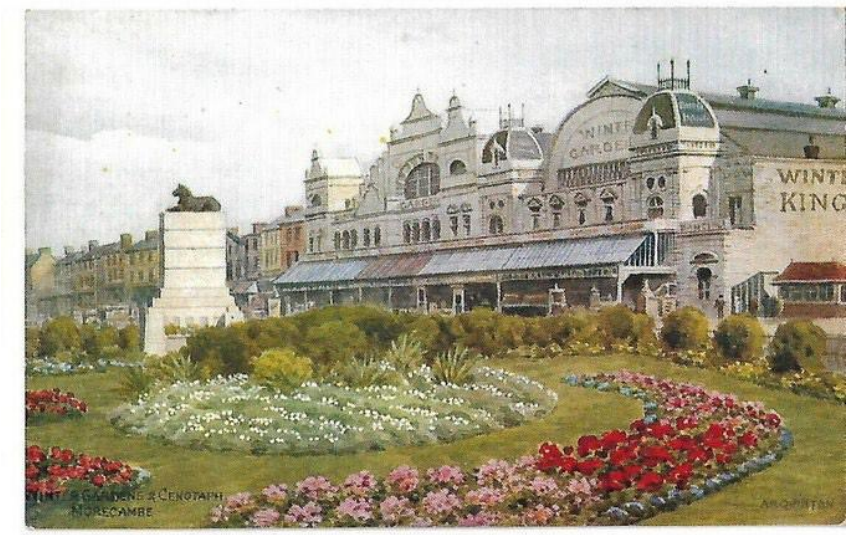


Figure 3 Courtesy Morecambe Winter Gardens Preservation Trust

But tastes changed. Morecambe, like many British seaside resorts, suffered from declining numbers of visitors. The whole site closed in 1977 and the original part was demolished in 1982. That left the Victoria Pavilion section to carry forward the Winter Gardens name (Figure 4).

The building is Grade II* listed. The frontage is in striking red terracotta and red Ruabon brick (Figure 5). There is a glass canopy along the front – a 1997 replacement for the 1909 original – protecting retail units each side of the main entrance.

The interior decoration is extraordinarily lavish with Italian terrazzo floors, tiles by Burmantoft, elaborate plasterwork and painted and gilded ceilings by Dean & Co. of Birmingham. The interior design was overseen by Dean & Co of Birmingham who worked extensively with Mangnall & Littlewood on both the Morecambe and Blackpool Winter Gardens.

There are two levels of balconies with seating (Figures 6 and 7). The rear of the building was originally white plaster with the large inscription Morecambe Winter Gardens visible from the train station.

The building today is on the verge of a new beginning with recent grants from Historic England and the Coastal Communities Fund bringing much needed investment, but it still needs further support (Figure 6).

The Winter Gardens Preservation Trust Limited who own and operate the building with the help of the Friends Group are actively fundraising to secure its future. This will allow the building to find a new use, generate its own income and contribute to Morecambe's revival. The building is often open to the public to view and it is very well worth a visit.



Figure 4 The frontage of the Winter Gardens – courtesy Alun Bull, Historic England



Figure 5 Detail of the frontage of the Winter Gardens, brick and terracotta. (Source: Gordon Clark)

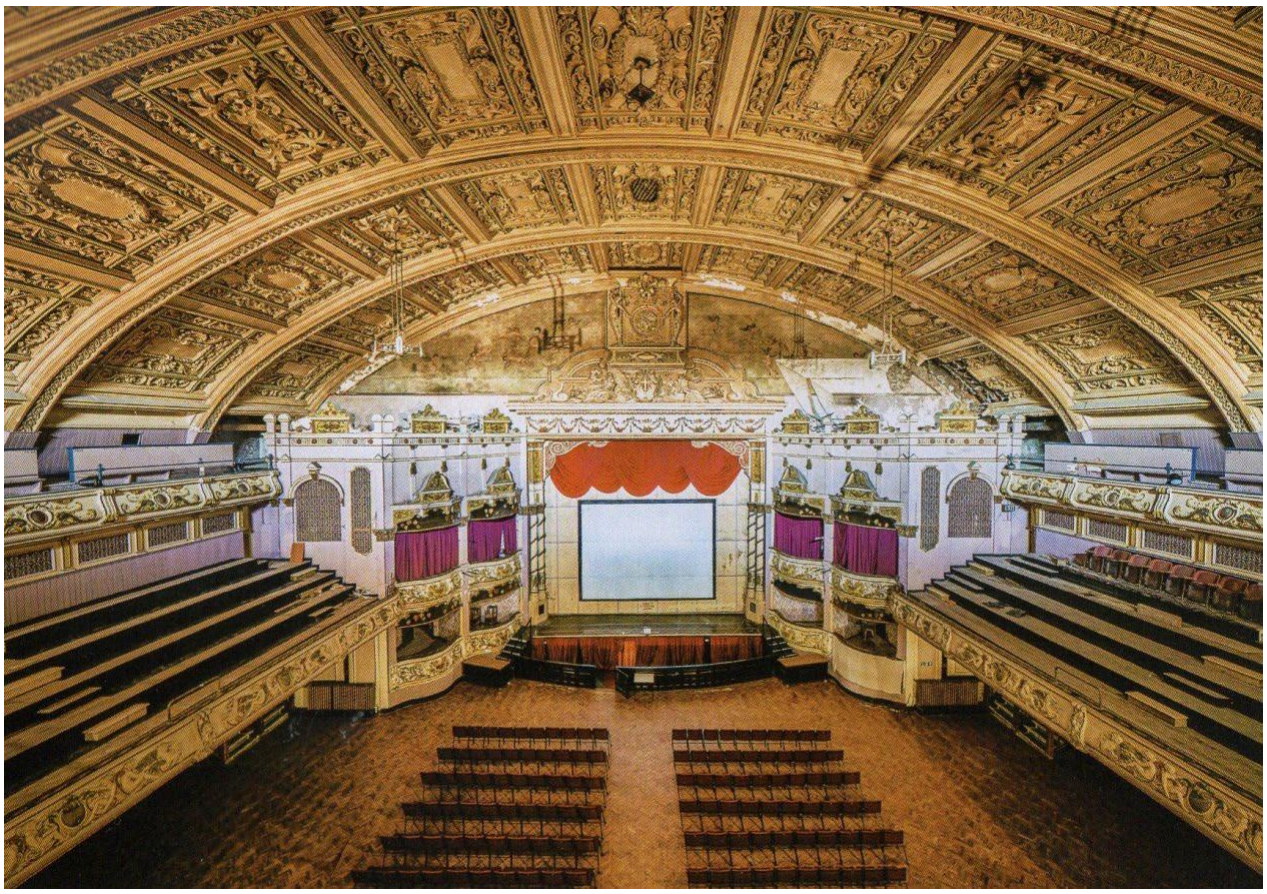


Figure 6 Interior of the Winter Gardens. (copyright: Damien Rose)



Figure 7 Roof detail of the auditorium (Source: Gordon Clark)

Reading

P. Wade *Gothic and Exotic: the Victorian and Edwardian Buildings of Morecambe.*

More information about Morecambe can be found in Guides 12 and 13 of this series on *Morecambe – Along the Prom* and *Morecambe – the Station to the Sea*.

Morecambe Winter Gardens – Events Venue in Morecambe

Text: Gordon Clark and Professor Vanessa Toulmin. Photographs - as noted.
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