

CINEMAS HEADINGLEY



HYDE PARK PICTURE HOUSE 1914 – Present Day

The **Hyde Park Picture House** has survived for more than a century, a little gem in Leeds' cultural heritage. Its building (**Grade II listed**) preserves features of national as well as local historical significance and, uniquely, it belongs to the city, as part of the **Leeds Heritage Theatres** charity, alongside the Grand Theatre and the City Varieties. The building closed in 2020 for a major refurbishment project following the award of a £2.3m National Heritage Lottery grant, but work has inevitably been delayed by the pandemic. A grand re-opening is planned for **2023**, after what is called a '**transformational redevelopment**' of the building.*

Beginnings

Here history repeats itself, for the Picture House originally came into existence in 1914 following an **earlier transformation: rebuilt and repurposed from a social club**, where billiards and cards took centre stage, into one of the new-fangled picture houses which were then proving so popular and making an appearance all over the city. It opened at a critical moment in history, in **November 1914**, just after the start of the Great War, though the significance of that date could not have been foreseen when it was planned. Its story originates in a long battle over 'the demon drink'.

The area we now think of as **Hyde Park**, south of Victoria Road and west of Woodhouse Moor, developed rapidly in the late nineteenth century as speculative builders snapped up land on offer in a series of sales, mainly from the **Cardigan/Brudenell estate**. Green fields vanished beneath grey streets lined with terraces, initially through-houses with small gardens – homes for the new Leeds middle class, ‘careful thrifty people’ who wanted a quiet life. The major builders and landlords in the area were brothers **Benjamin and William Walmsley**, committed Primitive Methodists, temperance reformers and founders of the Mission Hall and Orphanage (gone now) which stood on the corner of Brudenell Road and Hyde Park Road.

The potential of this growing residential area caught the eye of young **Harry Child**, from a nearby family well-known in the Leeds pub and hotel trade: with his father he ran the handsome Mitre Hotel in Commercial Street, and his brothers managed the Central Station Hotel, the Packhorse, and the Central Billiards Café in Briggate. Harry Child purchased a prominent villa site on **the corner of Brudenell Road and Queen’s Road** for £400 and announced in **1899** that he was planning to build a ‘palatial hotel’ there, to be called ‘The Paragon’, for which he applied for a provisional alcohol licence. A pub in disguise? There was immediate formidable opposition from the residents, from the Walmsleys and other local house builders, from chapels and church: a public meeting was organised and petitions signed. The magistrates listened: they refused the licence, and over the next seven years they continued adamantly to reject Harry Child’s repeated, determined applications.

In **1907** Harry Child admitted defeat and commissioned the architects **Thomas Winn & Sons** to design a building on the site for a private club - registered clubs were permitted to sell alcohol to their members so here was a possible loophole. **Thomas Winn**, who had worked his way up from beginnings as a bricklayer, was well-known for his work on hotels and public houses, including Harry Child’s own **Mitre Hotel**, the **Adelphi** in Hunslet Road and the flamboyant **Jubilee Hotel** facing the Town Hall. Plans were approved in **1907** for a handsome gabled Club building, its main frontage to **Brudenell Road**, with an entrance hall, a large billiard hall on the ground floor with a bar etc, rooms for cards, reading and meetings on the first floor, a caretaker’s flat at the top and a basement for storage. The Club, **the Brudenell Road Social and Recreation Club**, was open by **1908**, billiards a big draw and close to Harry Child’s heart – he was a leading light on the Yorkshire Billiards Committee. The Club became well-known for its billiards team but had strong competition for members from the older **Hyde Park Recreation Club** in nearby Ash Grove, which could boast a large sports ground.

A New Venture

In **1913**, whether because of the competition or simply a taste for the new, Harry Child decided on a drastic change of direction: to cash in on the Club’s prime corner site and move into the exciting new market for cinema, following **the Lyceum** nearby in Cardigan Road (1913) and the **Headingley Picture House** further out in Cottage Road (1912). He closed the Brudenell Road Club in **December 1913** and commissioned Thomas Winn to alter the building into a picture house – a radical change which effectively meant the **demolition of the Club building**. (He may well have had a hand in the founding at the same date of the licensed **Brudenell Social Club** in the newly developing Royal Park area further down Queen’s Road – still thriving today.)

Thomas Winn planned the new picture house to take full advantage of its corner site, extending the footprint of the demolished Club building, though keeping the existing basement. He created a striking slanted entrance, with columns tiled in bright white **‘Marmo’ from the Burmantofts Pottery** contrasting with the red brick of the main building; a matching frieze with distinctive terracotta lettering for the name; and above that, an elaborate Dutch gable which featured some of the original decorative stonework from the Club. Just up the steps stood a

neat, angled ticket kiosk, and inside, a handsome dividing staircase led from the entrance hall to the balcony, with a feature stained-glass window above. The raked auditorium, with barrel-vaulted ceiling, could seat 520 in the stalls and 150 in the balcony, all with a good view of the screen (no curtains) and the orchestra space in front. The plans, with later amendments including some decorative flourishes, were **approved by the Leeds Watch Committee in October 1914** and a licence for cinematography and instrumental music was granted.



Elevations of the proposed Hyde Park Picture House, 29 April 1913 © WYAS

The Opening

The Picture House opened on **Monday 2 November 1914**, described in the press as ‘equipped on a most lavish scale’, and advertising itself as ‘smart and cosy, with the best and steadiest pictures, and orchestral music’. The music was provided by **a trio: pianist, violinist and lady cellist**. Seat prices were 2d, 3d, 6d and 1s (old money), the 2d seats (reduced in 1917 to 1½d) especially low-priced. Chocolates, cigarettes and programmes were on sale. There were two houses each evening except Sunday, running continuously, a change of feature film mid-week, and matinees twice a week. The opening programme, silent and black-and-white, reflected the fervent patriotic mood of the moment, featuring the British film *Their Only Son*, a drama with scenes of ‘Germans pillaging and looting’ and ‘Troops at work in the Trenches’,

Picture house lovers in the Hyde Park district should not fail to pay a trial visit to the Hyde Park Picture House, recently opened. Not only is it one of the cosiest places of amusement in the city, but the decorations are on a most beautiful and lavish scale. The pictures so far shown are in keeping with the high-class tone of the house. “Their Only Son,” shown for the last time to-night, is a patriotic drama in which a mother’s affection is intermingled with many exciting incidents and hair-breadth escapes. “An Englishman’s Home,” the star film for the rest of the week, is also a topical drama brimful of interest. There are other excellent pictures.

Yorkshire Evening News, 11 November 1914

followed later in the week by *An Englishman’s Home*, based on a play by Guy du Maurier, its storyline powerfully encouraging enlistment. Patrons were greeted on arrival and departure by the manager, **Joe Hardy**, in immaculate evening dress. (He used later to slip off for a drink while the film was showing – the projection speed could be slowed down if he was late back.)

The daily logbooks

Very unusually, **the daily logbooks of the Picture House have survived up to 1958**, providing a unique insight into the running of the cinema – audience numbers, takings, the films being screened, the weather (which no doubt affected turn-out), with occasional added notes. The logbook shows good audience numbers in the **Picture House's first week**, with almost a full house on the Saturday – no Sunday performance of course, though in early 1915 it was allowed to open on two Sundays for 'sacred concerts' in aid of the Lord Mayor's Fund for the Belgian Refugees. It's clear from the logbooks that the Picture House continued to thrive as the war progressed, like most of its competitors. With shops closing early and streets blacked out, people flocked to cinemas to escape the long dark evenings, find relief from the daily lists of casualties and losses, and watch the newsreels which brought news from the Front, even if belatedly, and morale-boosting stories of local war efforts, in vivid moving images. The programme at the Hyde Park featured a wide variety of American and British films, alongside short comic films like **Charlie Chaplin's *Making A Living*** and cliff-hanging serials like ***The Exploits of Elaine*** which ran for 14 weeks in 1916. Public holidays like **Whitsun** and the **Woodhouse Feast** helped to boost audience numbers.

Joy – and Tears

When the War finally came to an end on **11 November 1918**, electric lights were hastily strung up outside the Picture House to celebrate and the Manager ordered the whole of the National Anthem (instead of just the usual first verse) to be played in the middle of the programme that night, alongside a slide of the King – a gesture of loyalty rather spoilt when the slide shattered from the heat of the long exposure. The significance of the day is stamped in capitals in the logbook: 'ARMISTICE SIGNED'; were the tickets stamped too? Later highlights – the surrender of the U-boats and the German fleet – are noted. But alongside the joy and celebrations another threat was already looming, also noted in the log: in Armistice week there is an entry '**Soldiers and children barred – influenza epidemic**'. A fortnight later it reads 'Soldiers and children admitted. **Influenza still bad**'. Over a thousand people were to die in Leeds in this October/November outbreak following other deaths earlier in the summer, and hundreds more died in continuing outbreaks in early 1919.

Harry Child

According to the memories of the young projectionist at the time, owner **Harry Child** took a very personal interest in his Picture House: it was his pride and joy. He visited once or twice a week, insisted on the regular cleaning of the large crystal chandelier in the entrance hall and the daily polishing of the brass rods on the stairs and the glass in the projector ports (even using his handkerchief for an extra clean), and always dealt personally with his staff there. He remained its owner into **the 1920s** but moved on then to devote himself to his very successful **Mitre Hotel** in Commercial Street (closed now, though the handsome building can still be identified). By the 1930s a separate company had been formed to run the Picture House.



Yorkshire Evening Post, 5 October 1909

The 1930s

In **1930** the Picture House was adapted for sound, for the newly-arrived ‘talkies’. There had been doubts whether this was just a flash in the pan, doomed to be forgotten, but in the end the Picture House had to move with the times, just as later it had to adapt to colour and other technological advances. **The 30s** also saw the first connection between the Picture House and the growing interest nationally and locally in independent and foreign film. The **Leeds Film Institute Society**, founded in **1937** with some 400 members, began in **1938** to use the Hyde Park for its public screenings of foreign and ‘Art’ films. Its post-war successor, the **Leeds Film Society**, moved its shows to the Headingley Picture House at Cottage Road, but this early connection of Hyde Park with independent and art cinema was to be revived very successfully later in the century.



Hyde Park Picture House, Brudenell Road, 1935

World War 2

In **March 1939**, as the threat of another war hovered, the Hyde Park like several other cinemas was used for a recruitment talk on National Service by the distinguished Leeds JP and former suffragette **Leonora Cohen**, urging volunteers to enlist in the armed services (conscription not yet compulsory) or join essential voluntary services like the **ARP** (Air Raid Precautions) and **auxiliary nursing**. When war was declared on **3 September** all cinemas were required to close but this command was almost immediately rescinded as the value of cinemas was recognised in providing entertainment and boosting morale, as well as conveying government propaganda. The Hyde Park reopened after two weeks, on **15 September**, with a light-hearted Western musical starring Nelson Eddy. American films were to dominate the programme through the wartime years, with cinemas providing a magical escape from air-raids and wartime restrictions, as well as picture news from around the world. They were also places for public meetings – in **March 1942**, in the thick of war, the Hyde Park was used by the Leeds Council for Christian Action for a meeting with the poignant theme: ‘**The hope of a new world**’.

Survival – and Rescue



Post-war, like many cinemas, the **Hyde Park Picture House struggled to survive** against increasing competition from city-centre and multiplex cinemas and from TV and video, alongside changes in the surrounding area and its demographic. The management tried hard: an eye-catching publicity stunt in 1959 featured an elephant from Billy Smart’s circus on Woodhouse Moor brought over to the Picture House to advertise the action-packed documentary *The Big Hunt*, in which elephants played a leading role.

Efforts were made to attract new audiences, for example with a ‘Bollywood’ season, with some success. But the future looked bleak: many suburban cinemas like the nearby Lyceum were closing and the Hyde Park itself had a couple of temporary closures. Happily, in **the 1980s** when it looked as though it might have to close permanently, a band of enthusiastic and talented supporters came to its rescue, forming **the Friends of Hyde Park Picture House** in **1984**, organising the listing of the building and the lamp post outside, and making it a home for independent cinema. In **1987** it was a base for the first **Leeds International Film Festival**, marking the start of what has become a long and outstandingly successful Festival series. In **1989**, again with strong and persuasive support, the Picture House was taken over by the city council as part of what is now a separate charitable company, **Leeds Heritage Theatres**, and it remains in its care today.



Programme artwork, Hyde Park Picture House, July 1950

Preservation and Transformation

During its long life the Hyde Park Picture House was never taken over by one of the big cinema chains but remained independent: a blessing in disguise. As a result, no major changes were made in the fittings and decoration of the interior. **Most of the original internal features were preserved:** the separate ticket kiosk, the tiled hall floor, the ornamental plasterwork in the auditorium, the barrel ceiling, the painted screen (hidden behind the later screen), the gas ‘modesty’ lights, intended to provide low lighting during the performances and prevent any misbehaviour: all have survived. Even the old brass fire hydrant is still there, a reminder that in the early years fire was a major hazard, requiring a fire warden to be employed throughout the performances. Outside, the glass canopy which is said to have run along the building to protect the queue was removed at some stage, but otherwise **the exterior too remained mostly unchanged**, together with the decorative iron **lamp post**, originally lit by gas, that stood on the corner, visible from all sides, marking the entrance.

Some refurbishment has taken place over the last decades, including replacement seats inherited from the **Lounge cinema** which closed in 2005. Now it is about to be transformed and reborn: more spacious, more accessible, refurbished, with modern facilities, but with its unique character and features preserved and restored, so that the pleasure people felt when they first stepped into that ‘smart and cosy’ auditorium in 1914 can be enjoyed again by a new generation of filmgoers.*

Eveleigh Bradford

Local Historian, December 2022

*More details of the Lottery funded renewal project can be found at <https://www.thepicturehouseproject.com/>. The cinema is due to re-open in April 2023.

See the gallery for the other [Cinemas in Headingley](#).