

On This Day – 11th March 1912

Bo'ness Hippodrome opens



The Hippodrome today

The Bo'ness Hippodrome is the oldest purpose-built cinema in Scotland. It was initially conceived as both a cinema and a circus venue for a local showman Louis Dickson, who wanted to place a screen his own films which he'd made of tropical locations and animals he had visited on his travels around the world, and was looking to move from the nearby Drill Hall which he was forced to share with a local army regiment. It's likely this is what contributed to the unusual circular auditorium (mimicking a big top tent), but circus aspect was shelved early on, and the

Hippodrome opened as a full-time cinema in March 1912. It was officially opened on 11 March 1912 by Provost Grant, and had a seating capacity of 1,004.

Designed by local architect Matthew Steele, it has a celebrated Art Deco and Early Modern-inspired design, and remains a well-known local landmark, especially considering its prominent location in the town centre and its pitched roof. The roof was only added in 1926, with a further addition of extra floor space to account for a new foyer being added ten years later. It was also originally fitted with an orchestra pit, which was removed in 1947, with the rise of the talkies making this part redundant.

Despite being a listed building from 1979, it was closed for a number of years, and also spent time as a bingo hall, before a regeneration project saw it reopened in 2009 as what is currently the oldest purpose-built cinema in Scotland still in operation. It hosts an annual Festival of Silent Cinema, the only one of its kind in Britain.

Matthew Steele designed several prominent buildings in Bo'ness, including the Masonic Hall and the offices of the Bo'ness Iron Company, both also located in the town centre. He later became involved in a short-lived plan in the 1930s to build a dam across the Forth at Bo'ness, with the aim of providing a crossing for cars, and prolonging the life of the town harbour, which was in terminal decline.

Louis Dickson, unlike many cinema owners of the time, did not try to build a chain, but remained focussed on Bo'ness, regularly making films of the annual Miner's Gala Day and staying on as the Hippodrome manager until 1960, all the time living in a house in the town he had jokingly named 'Hollywood'. He was also a prominent member of the Scottish branch of the Cinematograph Exhibitors Association.

More information:

[Detailed history of the changes made to the building over the years](#)

[Louis Dickson's partial filmography at the Moving Image Archive](#)

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