

Press release: Embargoed until 6pm Wednesday 5 December

Friends group buys 'Theatre at Risk' Burnley Empire

Burnley Empire Limited, Theatres Trust and National Trust are delighted to announce that **Burnley Empire** has been bought by **Burnley Empire Limited**. **The Empire** is the sole survivor of five variety music halls in Burnley and the **only purpose-built Victorian theatre** of its kind in East Lancashire. Today, it is in very poor condition, but the new ownership means it could once again become a vibrant community venue in the heart of Burnley.

Burnley Empire Limited is a company formed by the friends group **Burnley Empire Theatre Trust (BETT)**. BETT was established three years ago and has been working tirelessly to revive the theatre.

Burnley Empire has been on the **Theatres Trust's Theatres at Risk register** since the list began in 2006. The Duchy of Lancaster had offered the group the Empire for £1 in 2015, but it was not then in a position to take on the large-scale project. It was feared the building might be lost as it was due to go to auction this week.

However, thanks to support from the **Theatres Trust, National Trust** and **David Wilmore** at historic theatre consultancy, **Theatresearch** – and the generosity of an anonymous donor – **Burnley Empire Limited** has been able to take up the Duchy's original offer, which it kindly honoured.

The group also has the backing of **Burnley Borough Council** and has received support of offers in-kind from local businesses.

Theatres Trust, along with other interested parties will continue to help **Burnley Empire Limited** to realise its ambitions for the theatre. The next steps are to carry out a full condition survey and fundraise for any immediate repair works and the longer-term restoration project.

The restoration project will take an incremental approach focusing on making the building wind and water-tight and working towards a longer-term ambition to restore and reopen the building for the benefit of the local community.

With support from **Theatres Trust** and **Burnley Borough Council**, viability studies commissioned in 2016 and 2017 demonstrated that the building has a future as a performance venue. Other stakeholders included BETT, Burnley College, Burnley and District Civic Trust and the University of Central Lancashire.

Sophie Gibson, Director of Burnley Empire Limited says 'We are excited to finally own the building that we all care about so much. It has been a hectic couple of weeks as there were lots of things to put in place to enable us to take on the building. We'd like to thank everyone who has supported us so far, in particular the Theatres Trust, National Trust, David Wilmore, Burnley Council and the Duchy of Lancaster.

We have a lot of hard work ahead of us, but we believe that **Burnley Empire** has a bright future. We'd urge any local individuals or businesses who want to support the project to get in touch. Together we can make this a venue that the whole town can be proud of'

Claire Appleby, Architecture Adviser at Theatres Trust says 'As Burnley's only surviving music hall and Grade II listed theatre, **Burnley Empire** is a magnificent building with a high level of architectural interest and a fascinating history. But it is much more than that. It is a building that offers real potential for its local community and the new student population of

Burnley. In Burnley Empire Limited, it has found an owner that can unlock this potential. We have been working with the group since 2015 and are delighted that we have been able to help them on the journey to achieving their ambition. We will continue to support the group.

Today's good news has come about because of the collaboration between the friends group, the local authority and other organisations with a shared vision. It is an approach we'd like to see taken more often where there are theatres at risk.'

Mike Innerdale, Regional Director, North England, National Trust says 'This is really exciting news for Burnley. That a local community group have taken on the significant challenge of turning around the Empire Theatre is fantastic. The National Trust looks forward to helping in any way we can, but the Empire Theatre will need many helping hands over many years and we look forward to being part of that coalition.'

Councillor Asif Raja, Executive Member for Economy & Growth (Burnley Borough Council), says 'We welcome the news that Burnley Empire has been bought by Burnley Empire Limited. Returning the building back into use will make a positive contribution to Burnley town centre'.

A spokesman for the Duchy of Lancaster said: "We congratulate Burnley Empire Limited on its commitment to saving the Burnley Empire Theatre. We are delighted that it will now be returned to local ownership and brought back into use for the people of Burnley to enjoy."

Media contacts

Justine Harvey, Marketing and Communications Manager, Theatres Trust, 020 7836 8591
justine.harvey@theatrestrust.org.uk

Sophie Gibson, Director, Burnley Empire Limited, saveme@burnleyempiretheatretrust.co.uk

Images for press use can be downloaded here

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/izurgdmqt247xy3/AAAu3EC0l_tgd-hrA47BVfiHa?dl=0

Note to Editors

Burnley Empire is a 1,200-seat venue built in 1894, with the auditorium reconstructed in 1911 by Bertie Crewe. It is Burnley's only Grade II listed purpose-built Victorian theatre. It has a high level of architectural interest, the principal feature being the Crewe interior. The theatre has been empty since 1995, when bingo moved out. By 1997, the disused upper level showed signs of fairly significant water penetration. More recently, the building has been subject to unauthorised access rendering it vulnerable to further damage and risk of arson.

Burnley Empire Limited is the company formed by Burnley Empire Theatre Trust (BETT). BETT was formed in late 2015 to raise public awareness in this historic building and undertake the steps necessary to preserve and renovate it, with the involvement of the local community, higher education institutions and local government bodies high amongst its priorities.

Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. We believe that current and future generations should have access to good quality theatre buildings where they can be

inspired by, and enjoy, live performance. We champion the future of live performance by protecting and supporting excellent theatre buildings which meet the needs of their communities. We do this by providing advice on the design, planning, development and sustainability of theatres, campaigning on behalf of theatres old and new and offering financial assistance through grants.

[**National Trust**](#) is a charity founded in 1895 by three people who saw the importance of our nation's heritage and open spaces and wanted to preserve them for everyone to enjoy. More than 120 years later, these values are still at the heart of everything we do. We look after special places throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland for ever, for everyone.

[**Theatresearch**](#) is the UK's leading historic theatre consultants, specialising in theatre restoration. Formed on Christmas Day 1985 when the Tyne Theatre and Opera House suffered a major fire which severely damaged the fly tower and the theatre's historic stage machinery – 30 years later we are now involved in historic theatre restoration projects throughout the British Isles.

[**Theatres at Risk register**](#) is the Theatres Trust's campaign to highlight and support theatre buildings under threat of closure or demolition. Theatres can be at risk for a variety of reasons, including loss of funding, lack of maintenance, or neighbouring development. Any number of these can have an adverse effect on the venue and its ability to operate. Each of the theatres on the list have a viable future as performance space and the potential to play a vital role in their local communities.