

# Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/2221

09 December 2021

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**Application:** DM/0965/21/FUL & DM/0966/21/LBC

**Site:** Empire Theatre 50 Alexandra Road Cleethorpes North East Lincolnshire DN35 8LE

**Proposal:** Partial change of use of ground floor to create retail unit and entrance to first floor, change of use at first floor to create multi-function room including bar / restaurant, change of use at second floor to create apartment with various internal and external alterations; &

Listed building consent for the partial change of use of ground floor to create retail unit and entrance to first floor, change of use at first floor to create multi-function room including bar / restaurant, change of use at second floor to create apartment with various internal and external alterations

## **Remit:**

The Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. We were established through the Theatres Trust Act 1976 'to promote the better protection of theatres' and provide statutory planning advice on theatre buildings and theatre use in England through The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015, requiring the Trust to be consulted by local authorities on planning applications which include 'development involving any land on which there is a theatre'.

## **Comment:**

This application for planning permission and listed building consent has come to the attention of the Trust because it is seeking alterations and changes of use at the former Empire Theatre. This is to facilitate a function and entertainment use to the first floor and a self-contained residential unit to the second floor.

The Empire was built in the late nineteenth century, opening between 1889 and 1896 as the Alexandra Theatre. It hosted seasons of variety which likely coincided with holiday periods along with year-round repertory and occasional opera. It was jointly operated with the Theatre Royal (now demolished) with the Empire reportedly having the bigger and more popular shows; it was

## **Theatres Trust**

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Interim Chair Paddy Dillon Director Jon Morgan

Trustees Richard Baldwin, Paul Cartwright, Annie Hampson, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Jane Spiers, Truda Spruyt, Katie Town

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part of a well-established national seaside resort circuit. In 1913 it was re-named to Empire Theatre. In 1922 it was adapted for cinema use although live shows by big stars such as Tommy Cooper continued until the summer of 1959. Cinema continued until 1964 and like many cinemas and theatres during this era it converted to bingo use until 1984. It was then converted to an amusement arcade which continues today.

The Empire is a Grade II listed heritage asset. Its Victorian exterior has little changed since its theatre days, a central gable flanked by pillars with sets of windows at both upper levels with decorative frames and a full-length pavement arcade to the front and a brick fly tower to the rear. There are however unsympathetic modern shopfront frames to the ground floor. Inside the volume and significance of its auditorium with ornate plasterwork have been interrupted by false ceilings and partitions with decorative features masked. Nonetheless the upper volume of the auditorium and proscenium can be viewed and appreciated above the false ceiling, with many visible features of decorative significance although with some in damaged or deteriorated condition.

The Design & Access Statement/Heritage Statement suggests modernisation for the existing arcade has led to original walls and features being removed. This should be clarified, as our understanding (and that of the Historic England listing description) is that many have been masked which is quite common with such conversions. Images within the document clearly show other original features to remain.

Parts of the ground floor front area are to be partitioned to create an independently accessed retail unit and an entrance lobby for the first floor function suite with lift and re-oriented staircase. The staircase follows the route of the original staircase from the foyer to balcony thus reinstates an element of original layout. Externally the elevation plan shows the double doors to the new function entrance are to be replaced with traditional panelled double doors with their location shifted to be central under the canopy arch with poster board alongside. Whilst we are supportive of this approach we suggest there should be a consistent approach with other doors and openings along this level to avoid contrasting appearances which harm the significance of the Empire and detract from its setting within the conservation area.

Similarly there will be alterations to layouts and division within what may have been the upper foyer area on the first floor. This area is envisaged to be utilised as a bar. This provides a heritage benefit as the windows will be reinstated along with balustrading to the balcony which will enhance significance and setting at higher levels. Plans state that details are to be agreed with the Council's Conservation Officer and this is an approach we would support. Internal features will also be retained and restored or replaced, again there should be a condition seeking details of methodology.

The primary alteration at first floor level is the removal of the existing false ceiling and replacement with a stronger steel structure to infill the void between the respective galleries. This could compromise future reversibility and will require careful detailing to ensure that the infill can be easily and cost effectively removed at a future date thereby not precluding

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the Empire from returning to its original full volume and usage should the demand arise. We request that further information regarding the specific detailing of the proposed infill including how this affixes and of any harm that will be caused to the surrounding historic fabric be sought from the applicant. In principle however we are not opposed to a reversible alteration to this area because the level of harm must be balanced against the public benefits of reinstating an element of performance use as part of the proposed function suite, restoring features of significance and providing public access.

In terms of the use of this space, a function hall can be considered compatible with the building's original purpose so we would be supportive of the change of use. The applicant will need to consider some practical matters to ensure the facility can operate successfully and sustainably. There is no reference to any soundproofing or mitigation which may require further alterations beyond those indicated. Arcades can be very noisy giving the potential for acoustic bleed which could disrupt events and performances. There could also be bleed of sound from the bar. Furthermore we would question whether a residential use above is appropriate given the potential level of disruption from noise and vibrations that could be generated.

There is no backstage provision indicated and little opportunity to provide any dressing room or storage space for performers and their equipment. This must be considered. It should also be ascertained whether there is sufficient means of egress to support the capacities within the venue the applicant needs to make the function space operationally viable.

Images within the Design & Access Statement show there to be historic decorative paintings and murals at second floor level, which we consider to be quite unusual. It is important that these are retained and fully conserved for the future. Further information regarding the approach to the conservation of the paintwork should be sought. The proposed use of this area is as a private residential flat for which we have some concerns over appropriateness. The flat will not have independent access. We would also question whether it would be able to deliver appropriate living conditions, given the potential for noise and disturbance from the function suite below we have already cited. The scheme would benefit from reconsideration of this space and how it could be used to support the needs of the function space below. The images of the old gentleman's smoking room suggest there may be options for public use of this space, perhaps as a further bar or private hire area.

To conclude, we have significant reservations as to the appropriateness and compatibility of residential use. For the rest of the scheme we are supportive in principle and could support the granting of planning permission and listed building consent, subject to the clarifications and conditions we have set out. The function and event space reverts the Empire back to something approaching its original function and will help sustain and enhance this asset in line with paragraph 197 of the NPPF (2021). We are keen to see the disused and deteriorating parts of this building restored to active use, and welcome proposals to reinstate key elements of the building's frontage. This will afford greater appreciation of this significant heritage asset for Cleethorpes and enhance its contribution to the setting of the conservation area.

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Please contact us if you wish to discuss these comments further.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T Clarke". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tom Clarke MRTPI  
National Planning Adviser

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