

HISTORY & HERITAGE

3.0

3.1 SITE HISTORY

Shaftesbury Avenue & St Giles

The historical area surrounding the site on Shaftesbury Avenue, rooted in the formation of St Giles, unfolds a narrative that spans centuries, reflecting the evolution of London’s urban landscape.

St Giles, established in the medieval period, initially served as a rural village on the outskirts of the city, gradually transforming into a pivotal intersection as London expanded. The area’s significance heightened with the construction of St Giles-in-the-Fields Church in the early 18th century, anchoring it as a focal point for religious and community activities.

As London burgeoned into a metropolis, the transformation of the West End became emblematic of the city’s cultural and commercial ascendancy. Shaftesbury Avenue itself, inaugurated in 1886, played a pivotal role in shaping the area’s character, cutting through a district previously characterized by narrow alleys and densely populated streets.

The subsequent establishment of theatres, including the iconic Palace Theatre, solidified the region as the epicenter of London’s theatrical and entertainment landscape, earning the moniker of the West End.

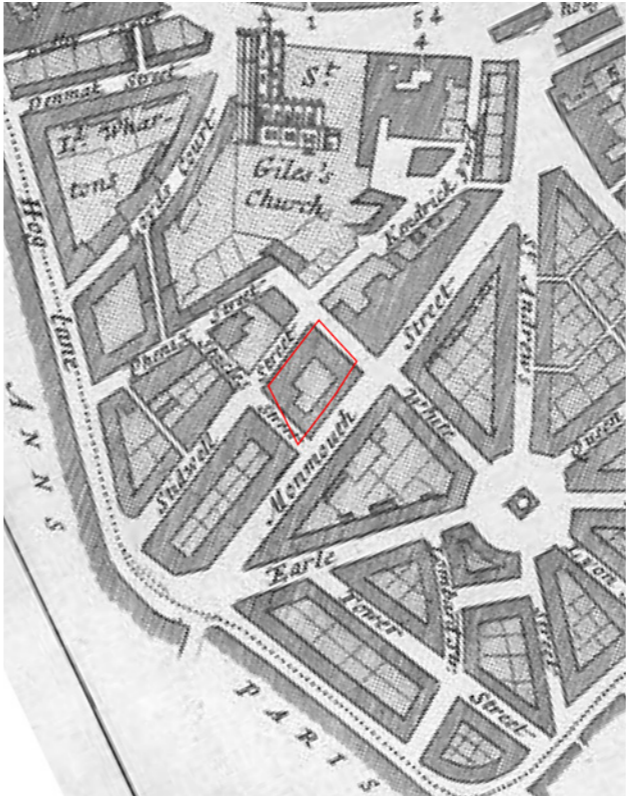
The 20th century witnessed the consolidation of Shaftesbury Avenue as a premier destination for entertainment, with the Saville Theatre becoming an integral part of the cultural milieu.

The area’s architectural heritage, marked by a blend of Victorian and Edwardian structures, now stands as a testament to the confluence of historical roots and contemporary vibrancy that defines the West End.

Today, the surroundings of the Saville Theatre encapsulate the dynamic interplay of London’s history, cultural richness, and the enduring legacy of its urban development.



17th Century



18th Century



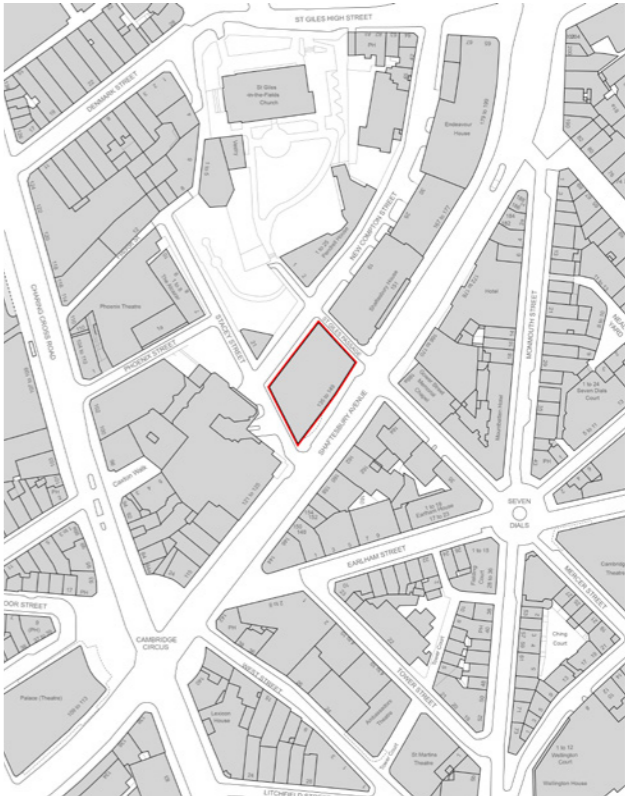
1840s - 1860s



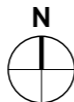
1893-1895



1947-1964



2024



3.2 SAVILLE THEATRE

Origins & Design

The Saville Theatre, situated on Shaftesbury Avenue in London, emerged as a significant cultural landmark with its formation and original design deeply rooted in the mid-20th century. Commissioned by the distinguished theatrical impresario Sir S. R. Newsome and designed by renowned architect Sir Thomas Bennett, the theatre opened its doors to the public in 1931 with a seating capacity of around 1,400.

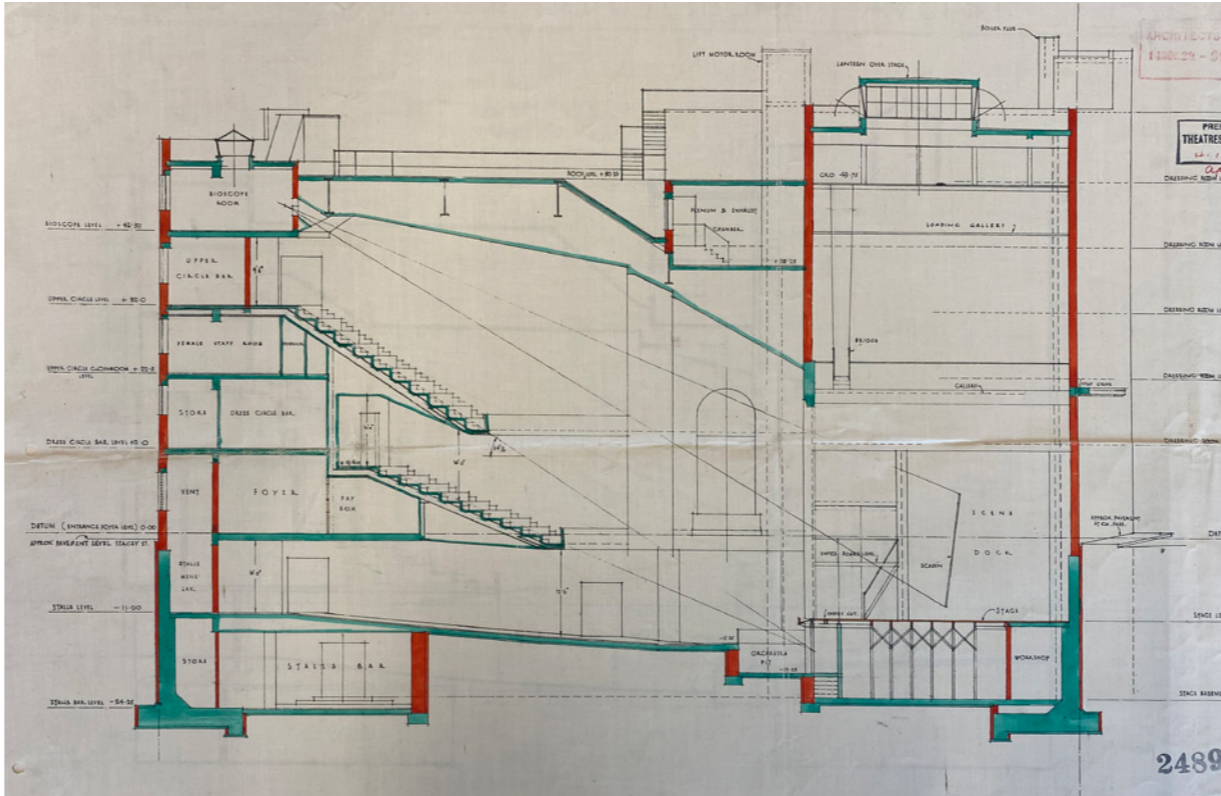
The Saville Theatre was conceived during a transformative period in British architecture, where Art Deco sensibilities and modern design principles were gaining prominence. Bennett’s architectural vision for the Saville Theatre encapsulated this zeitgeist, resulting in a structure that harmoniously blended contemporary aesthetics with functional efficiency.

The original design of the Saville Theatre bore distinctive Art Deco features, showcasing streamlined forms, geometric patterns, and a sleek, modern façade. The interior, marked by a sweeping staircase and elegant foyer, reflected the theatre’s commitment to providing a luxurious and immersive experience for its patrons. The auditorium, with its carefully designed sightlines and innovative seating arrangements, epitomized the architectural advancements of the time. The Saville Theatre, both in its formation and original design, stands as a testament to the synergy between architectural innovation and the evolving cultural milieu of mid-20th-century London, underscoring its role as a pivotal institution within the city’s theatrical landscape.

The Architect

Sir Thomas Bennett, a distinguished architect of the early 20th century, left an indelible mark on the architectural landscape of Britain through his prolific and influential career. Born in 1887, Bennett commenced his architectural journey at the turn of the century, apprenticing under renowned architects such as Sir Aston Webb. His formal education at the Royal Academy of Arts further honed his skills, and by the 1920s, Bennett had established his architectural practice. Notably, he served as the principal architect for the London County Council, overseeing numerous projects that significantly contributed to the capital’s urban development during the interwar period.

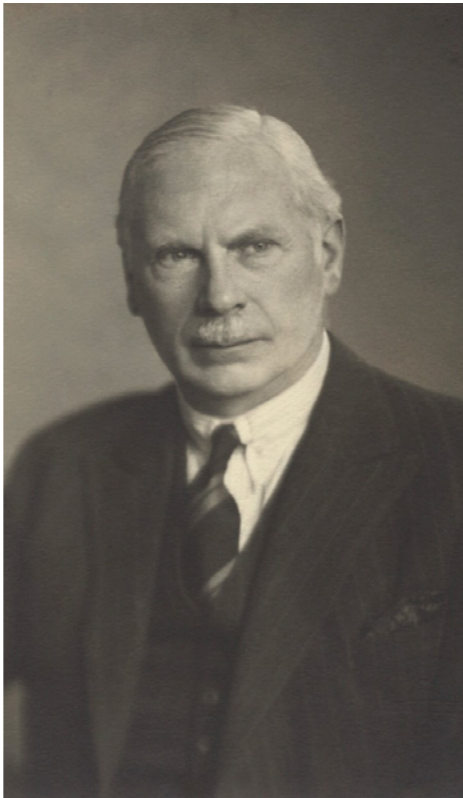
Bennett’s architectural oeuvre is characterised by a commitment to classical principles and a meticulous attention to detail. His designs exhibit a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity, showcasing a deep understanding of architectural history and an adeptness in adapting classical forms to contemporary needs. Some of his notable works include the iconic Dorchester Hotel on Park Lane and the expansive Victoria Embankment Gardens. Bennett’s influence extended beyond individual structures, as he played a pivotal role in shaping urban spaces, contributing to the post-World War I reconstruction efforts and influencing the architectural discourse of his time. Sir Thomas Bennett’s legacy endures as a testament to his enduring impact on the architectural fabric of London and his dedication to elevating the built environment through a synthesis of classical elegance and functional design.



Architect’s Drawing for the original Saville Theatre Layout



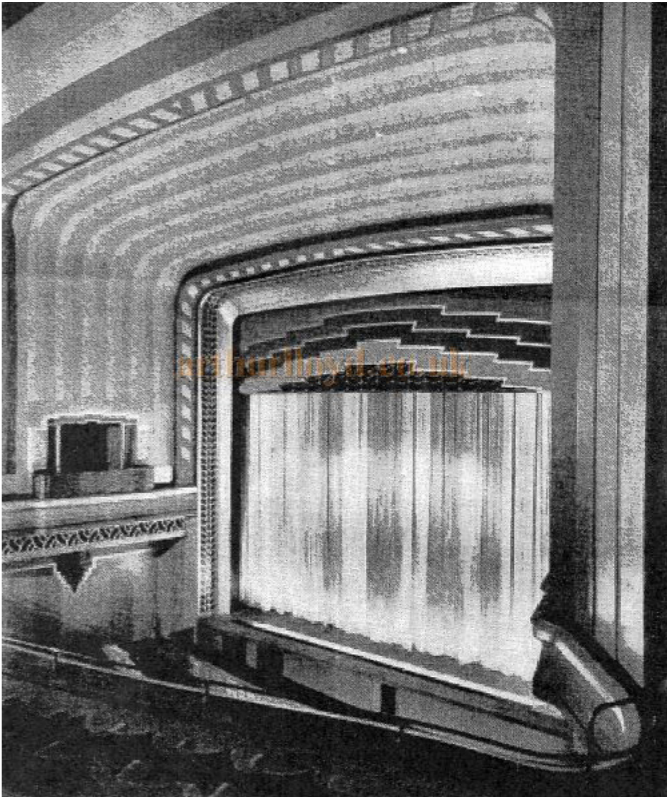
Original Foyer to the SAVille Theatre



Sir Thomas P Bennett



Architect’s Vision for The Saville Theatre Facade



The Original Saville Theatre Stage

3.2 SAVILLE THEATRE

A Rich Architectural Heritage

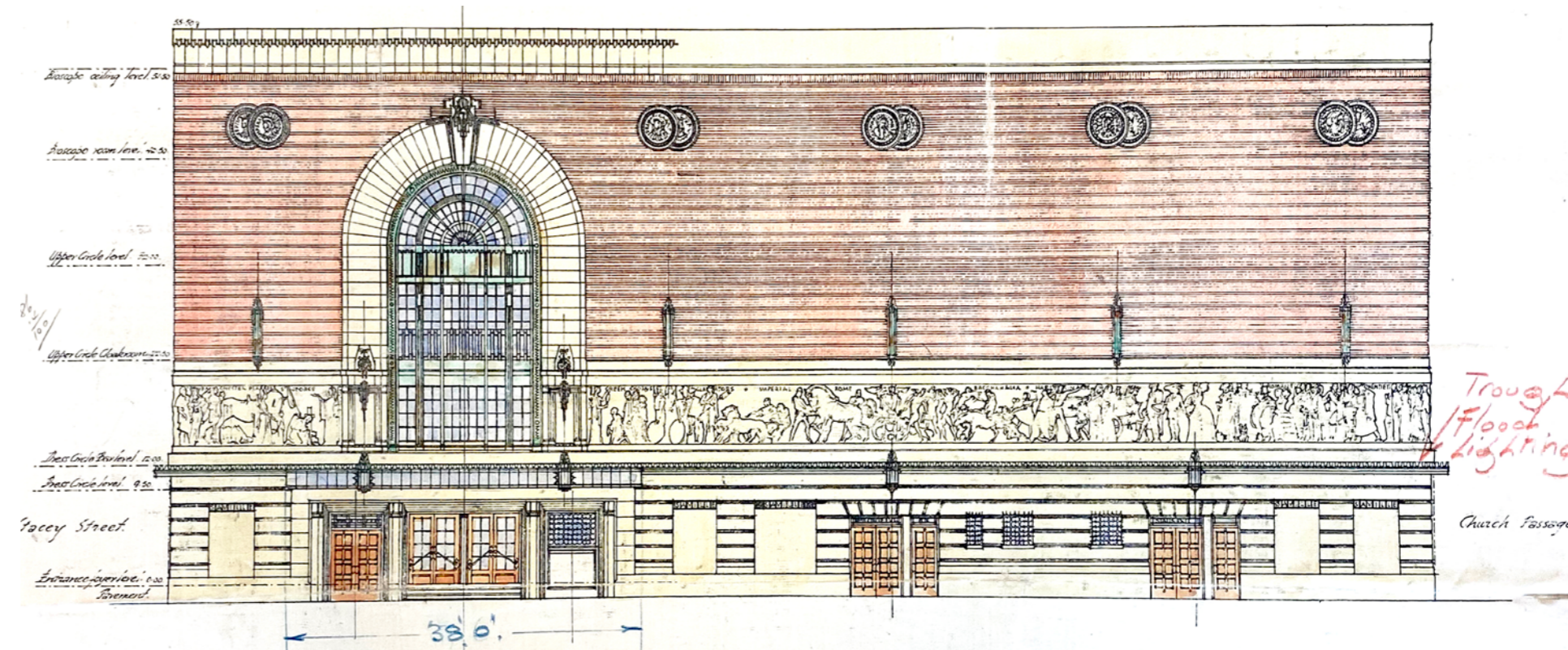
The Saville Theatre encapsulates a rich tapestry of historical and cultural significance. Erected in 1931, under the architectural guidance of T.P. Bennett and commissioned by the influential impresario Sir Charles B. Cochran, the theatre reflects the prevailing design aesthetics of the Art Deco movement, emblematic of an era marked by artistic innovation and modernist sensibilities. Its location in the heart of London’s West End further underscores its pivotal role in shaping the city’s theatrical landscape.

Central to the preservation of the Saville Theatre’s architectural integrity is its designation as a Grade II listed building by English Heritage. This accolade, bestowed upon structures of national importance, serves as a testament to the building’s architectural merit and historical significance. Historic England, in particular, recognizes the Saville Theatre as a crucial heritage asset due to its exemplary representation of 1930s theatrical architecture. The building stands as a poignant reminder of a specific period in London’s urban development and entertainment history, contributing significantly to the city’s cultural heritage.

The Grade II listing is conferred based on several factors that deem the Saville Theatre worthy of preservation. Architecturally, the theatre exemplifies the streamlined aesthetics of the inter-war period, with its distinctive facade and interior spaces showcasing the hallmarks of Art Deco design. Furthermore, the theatre’s historical relevance, having hosted a plethora of influential productions and performances, enhances its significance as a cultural repository.

A notable feature enhancing the Saville Theatre’s aesthetic allure is the frieze adorning its exterior, an exquisite creation by sculptor Gilbert Bayes. This sculptural masterpiece, characterized by its intricate detailing and allegorical motifs, adds an additional layer of cultural richness to the building. Bayes’ frieze not only complements the overall design of the theatre but also serves as a visual narrative, intertwining the venue with the broader artistic and theatrical heritage of London.

In essence, the Saville Theatre is more than a mere edifice; it is a living testament to the architectural evolution and cultural vibrancy of London. Its Grade II listed status and the recognition bestowed by Historic England underscore its pivotal role in preserving the city’s heritage.



Architect's Vision for The Saville Theatre Facade



Sections of the Gilbert Bayes Frieze

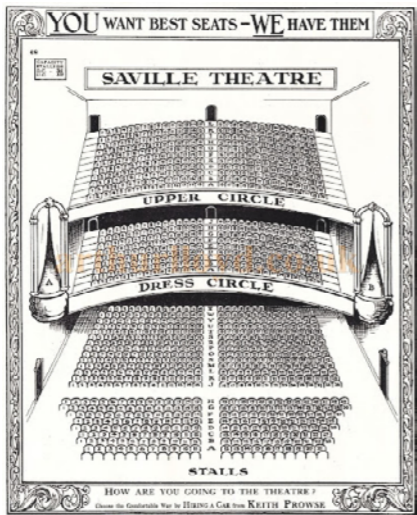


The Original Saville Theatre, shortly after completion.

3.2 SAVILLE THEATRE

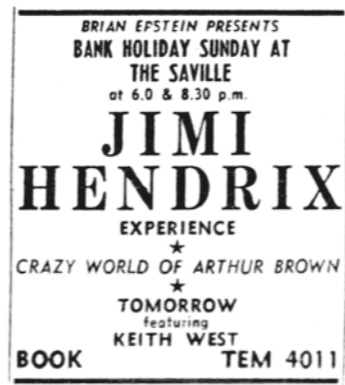
01 The Saville Theatre

The Saville Theatre hosted a myriad of significant programmes and West End shows during the period spanning 1931 to 1965. Under the direction of its founder, Sir S. R. Newsome, and later under the ownership of impresario Emile Littler, the Saville Theatre became renowned for its diverse and high-quality productions. Notable performances included groundbreaking plays, musicals, and variety shows. The Saville Theatre thus played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural landscape of London’s West End, showcasing a range of innovative and influential works during its influential four-decade existence.



02 The Epstein Years

Under Brian Epstein’s management from 1965 to 1967, the venue experienced a transformative period marked by significant cultural events. Epstein, renowned as the manager of The Beatles, infused the Saville Theatre with a progressive and eclectic programming ethos. The venue hosted ground breaking performances, including plays by renowned playwright Harold Pinter, and featured influential musicians such as The Who, Cream, and Jimi Hendrix. Epstein’s vision for the Saville Theatre reflected a commitment to fostering diverse artistic expressions, contributing to the theatre’s legacy as a hub for avant-garde and experimental works in the heart of London’s West End during this dynamic period in the late 1960s.



03 Cinema Conversion

The Saville Theatre underwent a significant operational shift in 1970 when it transitioned from a live theatre venue to a cinema. Initially purchased by EMI and rebranded as the ABC cinema, the establishment retained this identity until it was subsequently acquired by the Odeon Cinemas chain. This transformation marked a notable shift in the venue’s historical trajectory, transitioning from a storied theatre associated with live performances to a cinematic space, reflecting the changing dynamics and preferences within the entertainment industry during the latter part of the 20th century.



3.3 THE SAVILLE DURING THE BLITZ (1939-45)

The Saville Theatre was damaged in the Blitz of 1941 during the show run of 'Up and Doing' which had opened at the Theatre in 1940.

The damage partly destroyed the corner of the building fronting Shaftesbury Avenue and Stacey Street including the entrance and canopy whilst exposing part of the basement.

Despite the damage, the Theatre was patch repaired and operating again with the same production of 'Up and Doing' which reopened the Theatre and continued its success, achieving an overall run of some 603 performances.

Many buildings surrounding The Saville were either damaged beyond repair or wholly destroyed during the Blitz making way for what is now known as Phoenix Gardens.

Post war work of The Saville in 1955 remodelled part of rear façade, alterations of the rear elevation are evident today through the changes of the original window pattern and replacement brickwork. The 1955 refurbishment of the building included the replacement of some of the original 1931 interior.



3.3 INTERNAL EVOLUTION

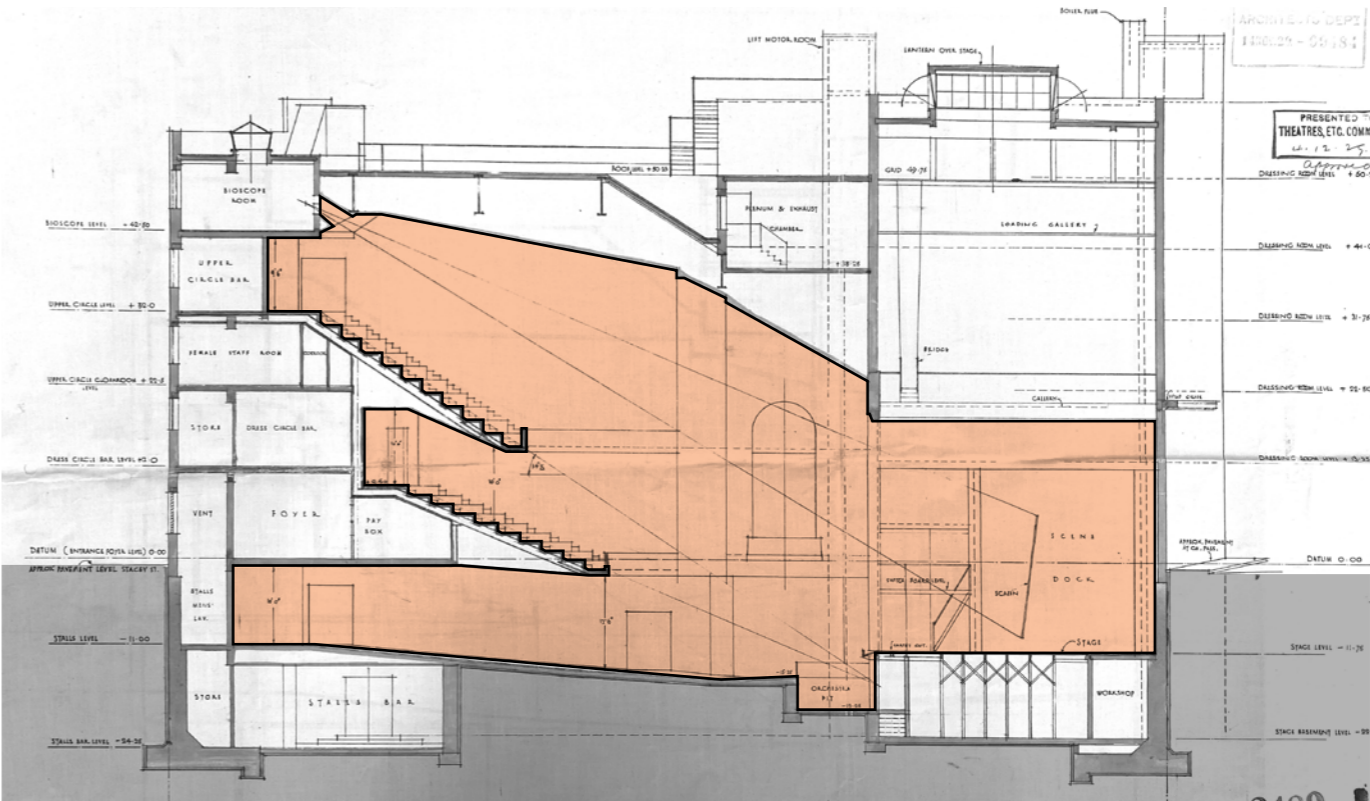
1931: Saville Theatre

Originally opened in 1931, the theatre was designed by architect Sir Thomas Bennet as a 1,426 capacity Theatre, split over three levels (Stalls, Dress Circle and Upper Circles). The Saville was known for it's opulent interiors and comfortable lounge and bar offer. It was one of many theatres operating in the Theatreland cluster consisting of locations at St Martins Lane, Charing Cross Road, Covent Garden, The Strand, Covent Garden North and Shaftesbury Avenue.

Bernard Delfont took over the Saville Theatre in 1946, putting on 'Here Comes the Boys' in April that year, which starred Jack Hulbert and Bobby Howes, this was reasonably successful, but after this the Theatre had less success for several years until Delfont put on Ivor Novello's 'Gay's the Word' in February 1951 starring Cicely Courtneidge. This was a big hit and ran for nearly two years. In 1955 the interior of the Theatre was completely redecorated to the designs of Laurence Irving and at the same time John Collins created a new mural for the Stalls Bar.

From 1965 onwards, the theatre was leased out by Brian Epstein (former manager of the Beatles) who presented a combination of theatre plays and rock and roll concerts. Most famously, the Saville was known for it's Sunday night concerts which became notoriously rowdy. Esteemed artist of the time which played at the venue include The Beatles, Jimmy Hendrix, Pink Floyd, Chuck Berry, Cream and the Bee-Gees. Brian Epstein died in 1967 and with him went his ambition to operate the Saville as a Theatre.

In 1969 a new Producer, Cameron Mackintosh, in association with David Dein and Guilford's Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, put on what was to become one of the last productions at the Saville Theatre in its final year of being a live venue. The show was a revival of 'Anything Goes' but closed after only two weeks and the fate of the Saville theatre as a live performance venue was sadly fast coming to an end.



The 1931 Saville Theatre Volume



The 1931 Saville Theatre Stage



The 1931 Saville Theatre Volume. Stairs highlighted in green indicate the only original internal fabric that remains today

3.3 INTERNAL EVOLUTION

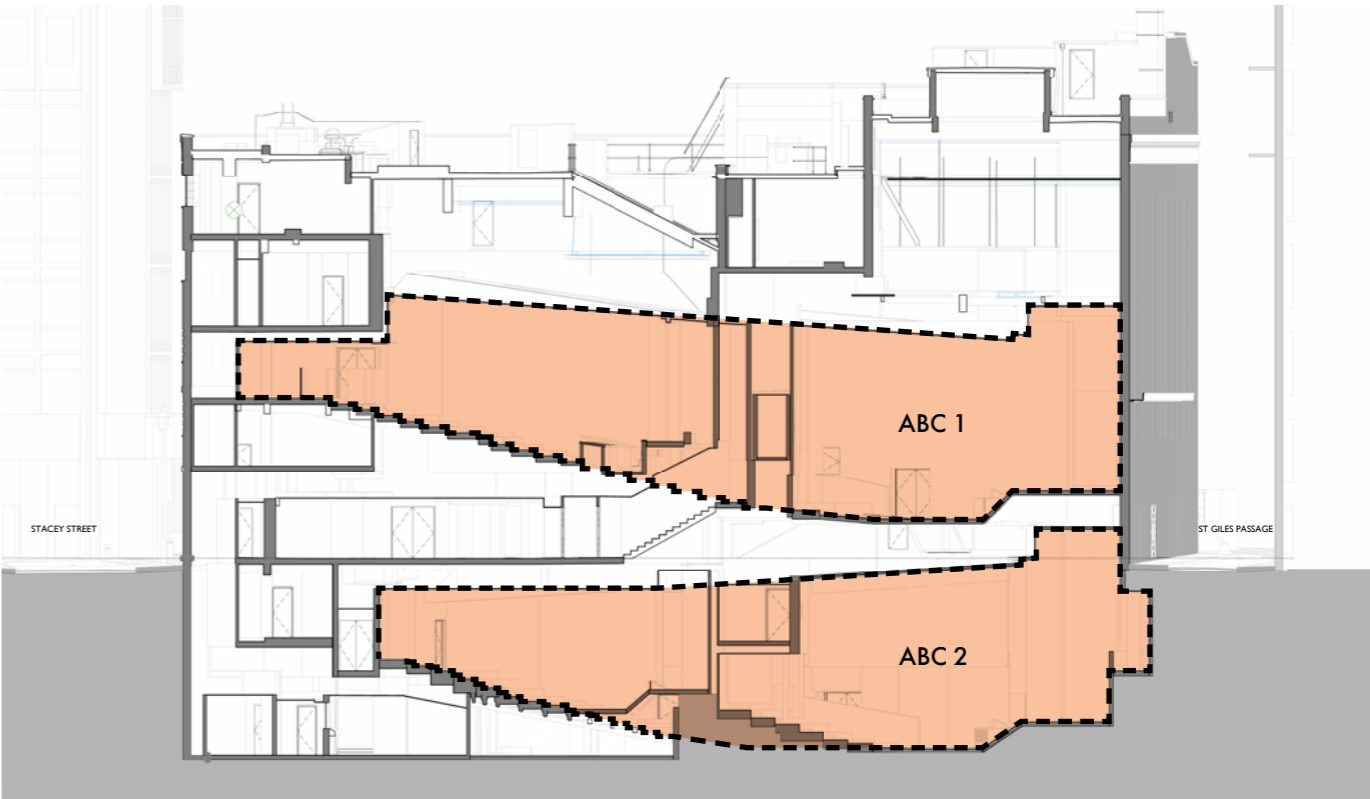
1970: ABC Cinema

The proposals would return the building to its original use and reverse the unsympathetic works that converted the building to a cinema in the 1970s and early 2000s.

The cinema conversion (which took place before the building was listed in 1998) removed the original theatrical interiors completely and very little of its significance is derived from the fabric inside the building.

The ABC conversion of the Saville Theatre into a Twin Screen Cinema was carried out by William Ryder and Associates, and the new Cinemas, ABC1 and ABC2, which could seat 616 and 581 respectively, opened on the 22nd of December 1970.

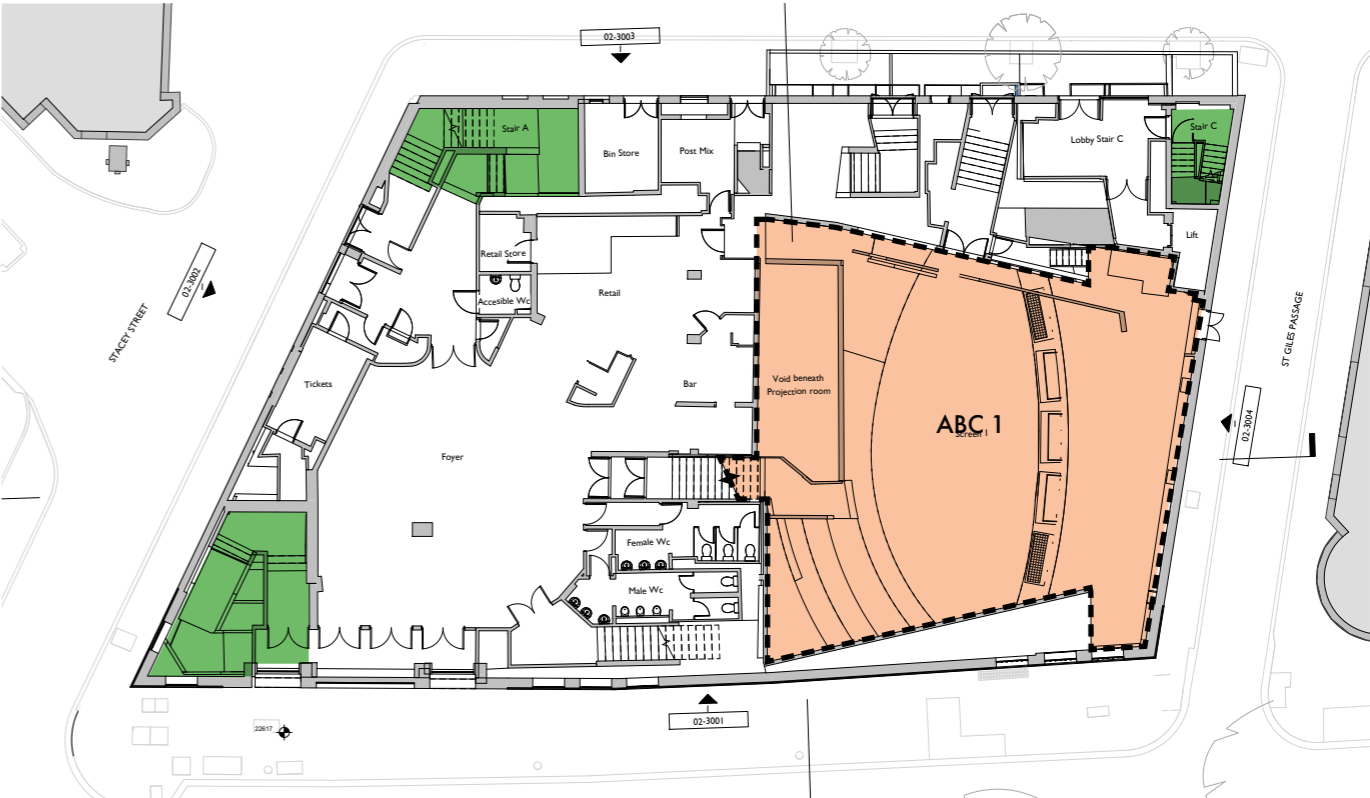
The conversion from a live performance space with a large internal volume into a dissected series of much smaller spaces meant that the stage was also converted. Internally, the original architecture and decoration were removed and any appreciation of the original intended function of the building was lost.



The 1970 ABC Cinemas Superimposed over todays Cinema Layout



Above: The Interiors of ABC 1 and ABC 2 Cinemas



The 1970 ABC Cinemas Superimposed over todays Cinema Layout. Stairs highlighted in green indicate the only original internal fabric that remains today

3.3 INTERNAL EVOLUTION

2001: The Odeon Cinema

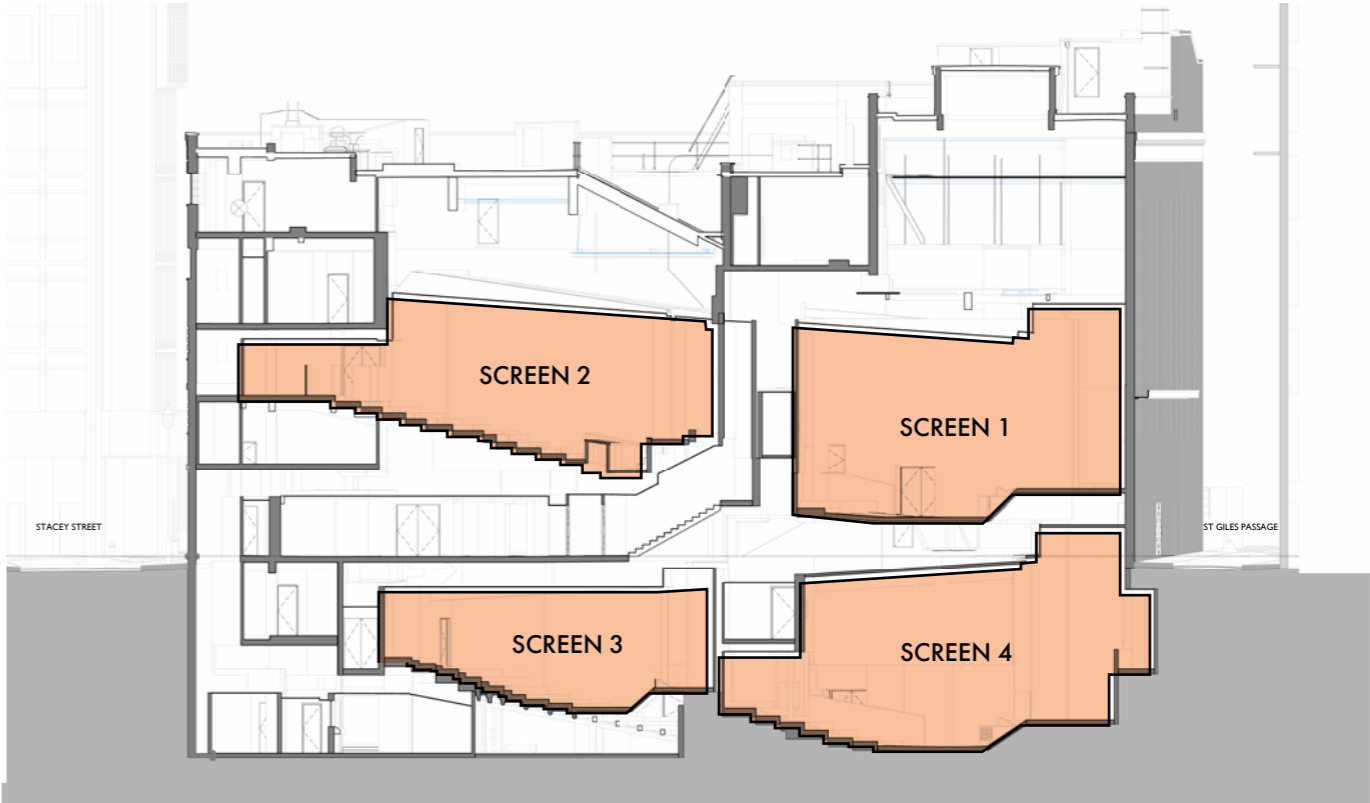
The ABC Cinemas were not that successful and when the building was taken over in 2001 by Odeon, the Theatre was renovated and sub divided even further, this time into four screens, and reopened as the Odeon Covent Garden.

The former Saville has stayed with this poor configuration since 2001 with the external building fabric rapidly deteriorating and in need of repair and stabilisation following the discovery of Regent Street disease within the structure.

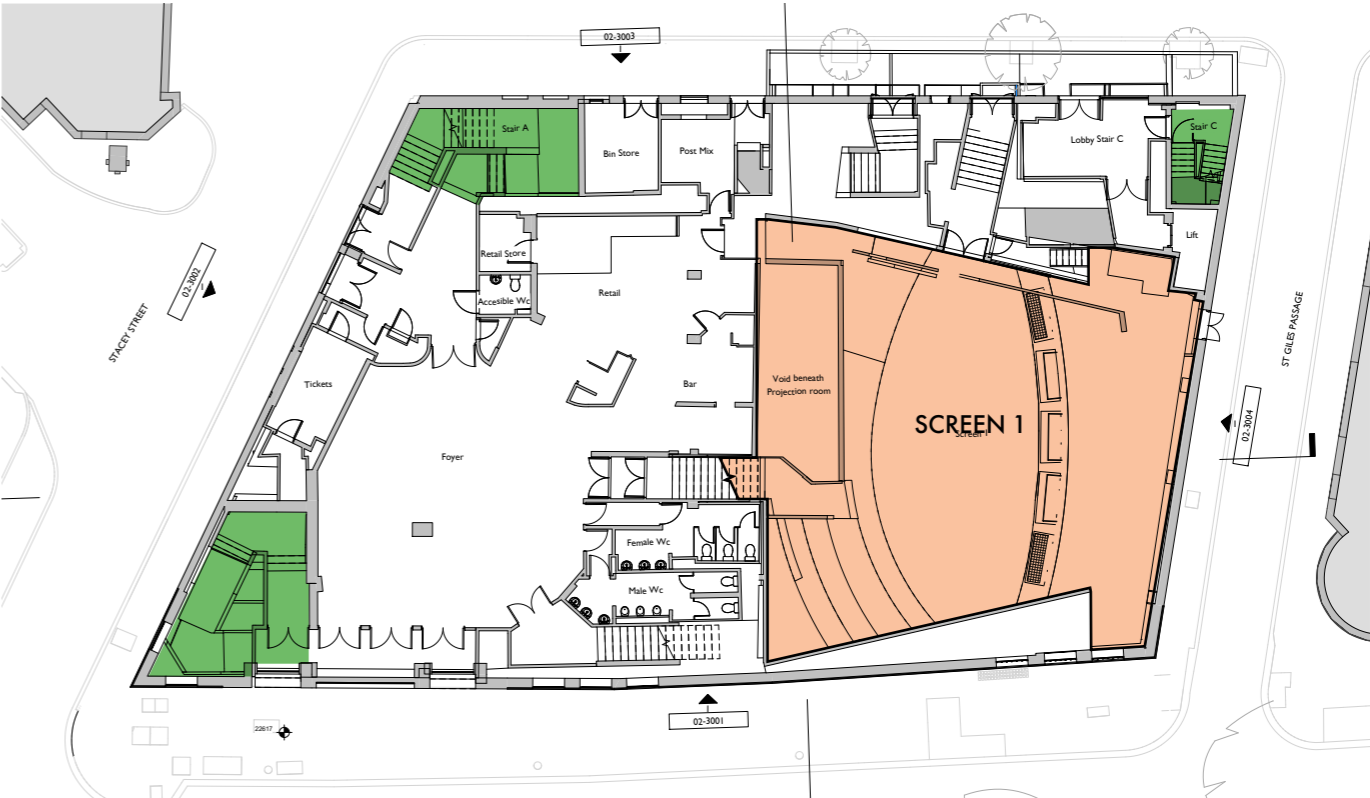
The proposals have been prepared in light of this context and a full understanding of the building’s surviving historic fabric has informed the scheme which is underpinned by the ambition to reinstate a world class performance venue back within the Saville Theatre for the first time in over 50 years.



Above: The Interiors of the Odeon Screening Rooms



The Existing Section: 2001 Odeon Cinema layout



The Existing 2001 Odeon Cinema layout. Stairs highlighted in green indicate the only original internal fabric that remains today