

# Former Saville Theatre

## Official list entry

Heritage Category: **Listed Building**

Grade: **II**

List Entry Number: **1271631**

Date first listed: **30-Jun-1998**

Date of most recent amendment: **26-May-2023**

List Entry Name: **Former Saville Theatre**

Statutory Address 1: **Odeon Cinemas, 135-149 Shaftesbury Avenue, London, WC2H 8AH**

This List entry helps identify the building designated at this address for its special architectural or historic interest.

Unless the List entry states otherwise, it includes both the structure itself and any object or structure fixed to it (whether inside or outside) as well as any object or structure within the curtilage of the building.

For these purposes, to be included within the curtilage of the building, the object or structure must have formed part of the land since before 1st July 1948.

[Understanding list entries](https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/understanding-list-entries/) (<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/understanding-list-entries/>)

[Corrections and minor amendments](https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/minor-amendments/) (<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/minor-amendments/>)

## Location

Statutory Address: **Odeon Cinemas, 135-149 Shaftesbury Avenue, London, WC2H 8AH**

The building or site itself may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

County: **Greater London Authority**

District: **Camden (London Borough)**

Parish: **Non Civil Parish**

National Grid Reference: **TQ 29980 81145**

## Summary

Cinema converted from theatre, built 1930-1931 to the designs of T P Bennett & Son in collaboration with the theatre architect Bertie Crewe with sculptural frieze and roundels by Gilbert Bayes.

## Reasons for Designation

The former Saville Theatre, 135 Shaftesbury Avenue, London Borough of Camden, is listed for the following principal reasons:

Architectural interest:

- \* for the quality of the architectural composition, its restrained and carefully proportioned form specifically designed to integrate the purpose-designed sculptural work by Gilbert Bayes;

- \* for the distinction of Bayes' integrated sculptural work, most notably the 'Drama through the Ages' frieze, which is an especially fine example of this leading sculptor's work that serves to clearly proclaim the building's designed purpose.

Historic interest:

- \* as a major theatre built for the impresario A E Fournier during the inter-war West End revival, designed by T P Bennett & Son in collaboration with the veteran theatre architect Bertie Crewe;

- \* for the lively historical pageant of theatrical performance displayed in Bayes' frieze, an important example of

integrated public sculpture which is redolent of the period in its stylised composition and depiction of famous actors, celebrated plays and theatre-goers of the inter-war era.

## History

The Saville Theatre was built for theatre impresario A E Fournier, with designs produced by T P Bennett & Son working in collaboration with the specialist theatre architect Bertie Crewe. Plans were drawn 1929-1930, with construction by Gee, Walker & Slater of London & Derby carried out in 1930-1931. The theatre was one of the largest in the West End when opened, designed to accommodate a total capacity of 1,530. As originally configured, the Saville's three-tiered auditorium comprised a stage and orchestra pit to the north-east end, with stalls, a dress circle with flanking boxes, and an upper circle ascending back to the west, each level with its own bar and facilities, notably including a large salon with hotel-style showcases for luxury goods and mural paintings to several public spaces. Externally, the 40-metre frieze to Shaftesbury Avenue, entitled 'Drama Through the Ages', was created by Gilbert Bayes, commissioned as part of the T P Bennett & Son design. A section of Bayes' sculptural work was displayed at the Royal Academy in April 1931, before being installed.

The Saville opened in October 1931, with a successful inaugural production of 'For the Love of Mike', starring Arthur Riscoe, Viola Tree and Bobby Howes. From the 1930s through into the early 1960s, the Saville staged many celebrated plays, revues and musicals. Throughout the Second World War, theatrical productions continued, despite the theatre sustaining damage during the Blitz in 1941. The interior of the theatre was completely redecorated to the designs of Laurence Irving in 1955, and at the same time John Collins created a new mural for the stalls bar.

In the 1960s, Brian Epstein, manager of The Beatles and leading figure in the promotion of popular music in Britain, acquired the Saville. It was opened in November 1966 as a combined theatre and music venue, being principally used as a rehearsal space in the week and for concerts at the weekend. On 4 June 1967, Jimi Hendrix topped the bill at the Saville and opened with the title track from 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart Club Band', released only three days earlier. Paul McCartney, who was in attendance with other members of The Beatles, later described this as "one of the great honours of my career" (Paul McCartney: Many Years From Now).

The Saville benefitted from its close proximity to Denmark Street, which became a centre for the rock music industry as the UK's 'Tin Pan Alley' at this time. Between 1966 and 1969 the Saville showcased major international artists, including Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones, the Four Tops, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Pink Floyd, the Bee Gees, Elton John and the Who. The Beatles 'Hello Goodbye' promotional film was filmed at the Saville Theatre on 10 November 1967.

Following the death of Brian Epstein in August 1967, the Saville continued as a music venue, staging occasional revues and theatrical productions. The final play to be staged was 'Enemy' by Robert Maugham, which opened in December 1969, though this only had a short run owing to the acquisition of the theatre by EMI who began work to convert the theatre into a twin-screen Cinema in 1970 for their ABC Cinemas chain. The 1970 conversion gave impetus to the 'Save London Theatres' campaign that led to the creation of The Theatres Trust by Act of Parliament in 1976.

The conversion of the Saville Theatre was carried out by William Ryder and Associates, the scheme remodelling the principal public areas and splitting the auditorium into two screens, ABC1 and ABC 2, seating 616 and 581 respectively. The new ABC Cinema opened in December 1970. It was subsequently acquired by Cannon Cinemas as part of a takeover in 1986, which then folded into the MGM chain in 1992. Odeon took over the Saville in 2001, reopening the cinema as 'Odeon Covent Garden' following a remodelling of the public spaces and further subdivision of the former auditorium to provide four smaller cinema screens.

## Details

Converted theatre, built 1930-1931 to the designs of T P Bennett & Son in collaboration with the theatre architect Bertie Crewe for the theatre impresario A E Fournier. Original sculptural frieze and roundels by Gilbert Bayes. Adapted to serve as a two-screen cinema by ABC in 1970 and later remodelled by Odeon in 2001 and further subdivided to give four screens.

**MATERIALS:** steel-framed structure with facing brick, embellished with Portland stone dressings. Steel-framed windows to the secondary side and rear elevations. The frieze to Shaftesbury Avenue is executed in cast concrete, produced from a mould modelled by Bayes.

**PLAN:** irregular, parallelogram-shaped plan occupying an island site that fronts to Shaftesbury Avenue with the main entrance off-set to the left (south-west end). Secondary elevations front to Stacey Street, New Compton Street and St Giles Passage, respectively to the south-west, north-west and north-east sides.

**EXTERIOR:** the Shaftesbury Avenue façade is asymmetrically composed with a tall, arched window with a wide architrave and keystone off-set to the south-western end of the facade above the main entrance, this featuring stylised Art Deco figurative detailing. The arch originally featured a bronze metal frame with fretwork that was 9 metres high and 5 metres wide, this was either removed or covered in 1970, with the present metal-panelled infill in its place. The rest of this southern elevation is restrained in its composition with a strong horizontal emphasis, reinforced by the channelled rusticated brickwork raised on a black granite plinth and applied ashlar stone at street level. At parapet level there is a continuous stone cornice with dentil detailing. The secondary elevations to

Stacey Street, New Compton Street and St Giles Passage are simply composed, with a blind brick elevation to St Giles Passage (the stage end) and with stripped brick detailing to Stacey Street and New Compton Street. The decorative stone cornice of the Shaftesbury Avenue façade continues around the at parapet level to each of the elevations. The building has five storeys at the rear, rising to six at the north-eastern end with the fly tower with a haystack lantern structure to the roof, which is largely screened from view from the street. Window openings to the upper floors of Stacey Street and New Compton Street have subdivided window openings with original steel-framed windows, expressed with channelled brickwork in these elevations. The door openings at ground-floor level are mostly replacements or post-1970 insertions, added following cinema conversion. To St Giles Passage (north-east), an opening for central taking-in door for scenery and props remains.

The main feature of the façade is the sculptural work by Gilbert Bayes, principally the 40 metre frieze entitled 'Drama through the Ages', which takes the form of a historical pageant of characters taken from celebrated plays. The shallow-relief frieze runs the full length of the Shaftesbury Avenue elevation, folding around the corners to Stacey Street and St Giles Passage. Various performers and theatrical scenes are depicted, including Sybil Thorndike as St Joan from Bernard Shaw's play of 1923, a Greek Chorus, the Chester Players, Bacchanalian dancers, a Harlequinade in Commedia dell'arte costume, Shakespearean characters, and a First World War soldier from Herbert C Sargent and Con West's 1924 play 'Khaki'. The far end of the frieze, to the junction with St Giles Passage, represents the twentieth century with theatre goers of the 1930s and a line of chorus girls. At high level, five overlapping pairs of roundel plaques modelled in shallow relief by Bayes are set within the rusticated brickwork. These depict art of various periods and cultures. From the left, these are: Egyptian and Assyrian; Roman and Grecian; the Italian Renaissance and Medieval period; Elizabethan and Georgian; Pompadourian and Victorian. A band of render runs beneath the frieze, where the continuous lighting-trough that originally lit Bayes' frieze from below once ran; this was removed together with the original canopy above the entrance. The applied fascia, fixed signage and poster boards all date from the 2001 Odeon conversion.

INTERIOR: the arrangement of the building internally principally consists of four cinema screens divided across the building, with a modern foyer, box office and retail space at ground-floor level (all formed as part of the 2001 remodelling). The walls of the cinema screens are covered with concrete render and draped in full-length curtains, with banks of modern cinema seating (all post-2001) fitted in each of the four screens. There are some surviving elements of the theatre's original fabric and layout internally, though this is principally limited to the back-of house areas, with no evidence of the original Bennett & Son interior design for the foyer, auditorium or bars, or the later Laurence Irving and John Collins decorative work of 1955. The one area which may have retained some concealed decorative work of the 1930s is beneath the present suspended ceiling, in the narrow portion of the existing foyer that corresponds to the original foyer, though opening-up of one small section has revealed that the ceiling here is covered by a render dating from the 1970 remodelling. There is little cohesive sense of the spatial form of the original entrance foyer, auditorium, salon or stage, owing to the extent of

subdivision in carried out in 1970 and 2001. The original stage and each of the tiers of the auditorium have been lost, though it is possible that steel trusses associated with the former dress circle and upper circle may be concealed within the roof of screen four and beneath the floor of screen two on the basis of their alignment, though this cannot be confirmed.

The original perimeter staircases and sections of the corridors survive to the north-east corner of the building (to all floors), in the centre of the north-west elevation (from the first floor to the fifth), and additionally to the basement and ground-floor in the south-west and north-west corners. An original central set of stairs connecting each of the levels of the auditorium on the north-west side of the building has been removed and replaced with WCs and other ancillary rooms. The retained 1930s stairs are utilitarian in form, of concrete with steel rails, with some steel staircases to basement level. There are several dressing rooms and ancillary rooms along the north-west side of the building and to the upper levels on the south-west side, some retaining original two-panel doors with fixtures, though nothing of note beyond this. There has been some reorganisation of the configuration of the rooms, with the opening-out of the former dressing rooms at first-floor level, giving two enlarged rooms where there were originally four, for example, and the loss of a corridor that connected smaller rooms on the third-floor to the north-eastern corner.

The original bars that served each level of the auditorium were set at the south-west side of the original plan. These have either been lost to the enlarged cinema screens (as at first-floor level) or reconfigured entirely to be subdivided into multiple spaces (as on the third floor). Only the stalls bar at lower basement level remains legible in its spatial form, though the adjacent salon as shown in original plans has been cut across by one of the inserted banks of cinema seating. This basement bar was remodelled as part of the 1970 conversion though has been boarded off since closure of the ABC. It retains many of its features from this time, including the bar counter, wallpaper, part-glazed veneer doors, 'soldier' tilework, some signage and a section of upholstered bench seating, albeit in a dilapidated state.

To the north-eastern end of the building, the stage house retains some of its structural components and original stage equipment, most notably the fly tower and suspension grid with its counterweight pulleys (marked 'Frank Burkitt'). This is serviced by a loading gallery and a ladder stair between the grid levels. The ventilation plenum plant room survives adjacent to the grid. At lower basement level there is a room that originally served as a props room, stage left, and another that was a scene dock, stage right. Severed suspension trusses for parts of the auditorium ceiling are visible behind the cinema screen at basement level to the north-east end, along with some glazed brick and floorboards associated with a former electrical workshop at this level. Above this is a steel ladder to the former stage level, along with an opening for a scenery taking-in door from St Giles Passage and an inset platform, which marks the position of the 'crossover', used by performers to move between the wings backstage.

# Legacy

The contents of this record have been generated from a legacy data system.

Legacy System number: **477977**

Legacy System: **LBS**

## Sources

### Books and journals

Cherry, B, Pevsner, N, The Buildings of England. London 4: North, (2002), 317

Miles, Barry, Paul McCartney: Many Years From Now, (1997)

Hayes, Ruth, 'The Saville Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue' in Camden History Review, , Vol. 30, (2006), 30-36

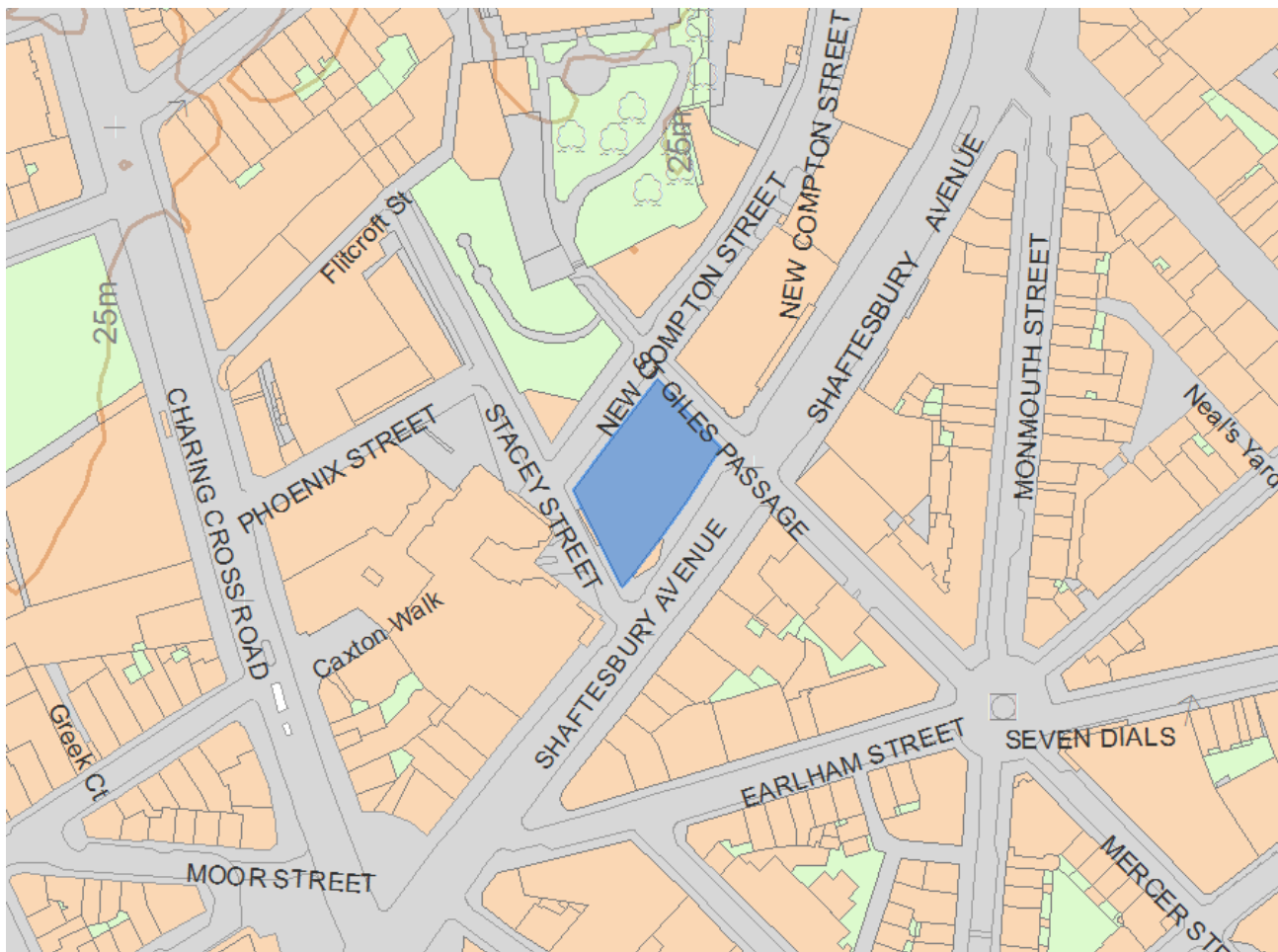
### Websites

Arthur Lloyd: The Saville Theatre, 135 -149 Shaftesbury Avenue, Holborn, London, accessed 8 February 2023 from

<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/SavilleTheatre.htm> (<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/SavilleTheatre.htm>)

## Legal

This building is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as amended for its special architectural or historic interest.



## Map

This map is for quick reference purposes only and may not be to scale.  
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