

A visit to the PPT museum at Bletchley Park



Small is beautiful ... Mark Trompeteler reports on a compact museum, packed with cinema gear of all shapes and sizes

Conserving our history

At this time of increasing cinema digitisation and the scrapping of so many film projectors, the preservation and recording of so much previous projection heritage is increasingly important. Mark Trompeteler recently visited The Projected Picture Trust at Bletchley Park and reports on his visit.

It is a fortunate accident of chance that an important collection of cinema technology history has ended up situated within the now famous site of Bletchley Park, near Milton Keynes, in the UK. Bletchley Park was the former historic site of secret British codebreaking activities during WWII and the birthplace of the modern computer. For a former site of such secrecy Bletchley Park is remarkably easy to access from many different directions, from the Midlands, from further south if you circumvent London, and it is a pleasant 50 minute train journey from central London.

The previous Labour government designated

it a place of national importance and visitor numbers to Bletchley Park have doubled in the last three years. The Projected Picture Trust's Museum of Cinema Technology is in one of the small buildings at the Bletchley Park site. It is worth pointing out that it is quite a small museum, it has nothing like the space available in places like The London Film Museum or The Cinema Museum in Kennington, London – but it is, as some might say, “small but beautiful”. For any reader of CT it is well worth a visit, even more so if combined with a visit to other parts of Bletchley Park.

The work of the PPT

As cinemas are rapidly converting to digital the Projected Picture Trust (PPT) is an increasingly important and relevant national organisation concerned with preserving the history of the projected moving image. It largely does this through collecting, restoring and conserving film projectors, associated equipment, spare parts and documentation.

Formed in 1978 by a few preservationists it consists of volunteers who fulfil a whole variety of work – not least is the practical renovation, repair and the running of film projectors. Today the PPT has a national membership with regional co-ordinators in various parts of the UK who hold regular meetings to ensure the continuity of information to all members. Ireland and EU countries are covered by a co-ordinator in Ireland, and international members are covered by a co-ordinator in Canada.

Cinema room

The central focus and headquarters of the trust is based in and around the museum at Bletchley Park. Visitors can taste the cinema viewing experience in the museum's small aptly named Enigma fully working cinema room. It is more screening room size rather than cinema size and has 43 classic cinema tip up seats which came from Studio 7 at Pinewood and the Granada Harrow. Towards the front is a small classic electric organ that can be played





Views of the projection room. 1. Dick Gardner at the rewind bench. 2. Kalee 21. 3. Cinemeccanica Victoria 10. Bottom: Two views of the equipment room, absolutely packed with projection kit of all sizes

to bring back the atmosphere of cinema going in the past. Despite the relatively small size, quite a number of interesting and fine examples of cinema projectors flank both sides of the cinema. Included (pictures below) is a BTH Sound on Disc Projector, circa 1929, consisting of a Kalee Model 11 picture head and Kalee Model HL arc lamp. The projector and its twin were still in regular use at The Palace cinema in Bridport, Dorset in the 1960s – a tribute to the English manufacturer British Thomson-Houston. The 16 inch (40.5cm) shellac record was synchronised with the picture mechanically and the record was played at 33 & 1/3 rpm. At the start of the reel the needle was placed on a mark at the centre of the disc, lined up with a mark on the film in the gate and lasted 8–10 minutes.

Also on show is a Westar series 2000 projector – a “rock and roll” machine, from No.3 Dubbing Theatre at Pinewood. It is known as a “rock and roll” machine because it could be run in reverse and then re-run again forwards without re-lacing the film, unlike conventional cinema projectors that run in the forward mode.

A fine example of a Ross Projector is also

displayed (below) made by Alfred Ross and Co. of Clapham in London, Ross projectors became known as basic but hard working projectors. They were very much favoured by John Maxwell founder of the ABC chain of cinemas, then the largest chain in the UK. Sadly relatively few Ross projectors have survived to the present day.

Projection room

The projection room that services the cinema room features lots of display and exhibition material around its edges – just as the cinema room does. Here in the projection room are displays about the anamorphic process, carbon arc lamps and the type of old analogue



/ mechanical cinema automation that used to be effected from a projection room. The working projectionists’ area is raised and defined by a small gated barrier and visitors can safely see the projectionists and projectors working during a show. I was told that visitors often enjoy the short shows that are screened at weekends and really enjoy being able to watch and talk to the volunteer projectionists about film projection. The three projectors on the raised projection area consist of two outer Kalee 21s with AEI Xenon lamphouses – one is a 1949 model which formerly saw service in the Royal Festival Hall, and the other was originally the right eye one of the pair that showed 3D films on the South Bank during the Festival of Britain and beyond. The two Kalees have to work on “changeovers” if a feature screening is considered, because of the very limited space. The very impressive middle projector is a Cinemeccanica Victoria 10, formerly at the Odeon Leicester Square. Complete with format changeover kit the Vic 10 can show both 35mm and 70 mm film. It also has a six track magnetic reader for 70mm film and a four track magnetic reader for 35 mm film. The Vic 10 can take larger spools. Dolby stereo and surround sound can both be played out from the Vic 10 through the sound system. A Fumeo 16 mm projector sits in the corner and can be wheeled near a porthole and projected into the cinema via a periscope. A digital video projector can screen DVDs in the cinema. Realising that such an impressive range of facilities on such historic fully working equipment is safely squeezed into very small premises repeatedly re-enforced my view of how the museum is “small but beautiful”.

Equipment room

Providing a balance to the two rooms dedicated to professional cinema projection there is a room which is devoted to the narrow gauge formats in projection history. There is a very impressive display of narrow gauge projectors. Again a lot of equipment and information is very effectively displayed in a very finite space but the use of display cabinets at various levels, comprehensive captioning and good lighting again admirably solves the space versus quantity dilemma that the PPT faces. For those that might remember the days of using 16mm film in the services, education, government agencies, film societies and in industry – there is a good selection of the old stalwarts of portable 16 mm projection. Some other film and cinema equipment is also exhibited in this room.

Curator, Team & Trust

For such a small museum to so effectively house and display so much information and equipment is a tribute to the volunteer team behind it. The museum’s curator is Ken Draper who lives not too far from the museum and has been its curator for some thirteen years. Many readers may recall he was awarded the Frank

The Projected Picture Trust

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To all those who have, or had, some interest in projected moving images, past and present.

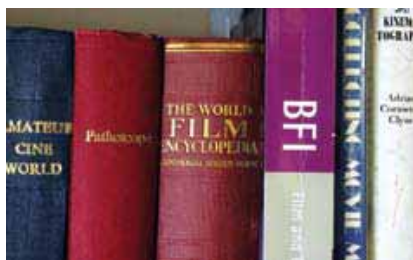
Perhaps you're already connected with today's cinema, technical or otherwise, but have an interest in vintage equipment, or you have been retired from the business so long, you would wish to revisit "the good old days".

Take heart and consider joining **The Projected Picture Trust** and help preserve the magic of cinema. Apart from equipment restoration, the Trust provides help and assistance to non-commercial community cinemas and museums exhibiting film related artefacts.

The National Museum of Cinema Technology has perhaps, the largest collection of all types of film equipment in the U.K. The Data Archive within the museum holds over 3,000 items including technical manuals, film related documents, press cuttings etc. Membership of the P.P.T. will give you access to these amenities as well as the collections within the Trust's regions.

JOIN US TODAY by contacting either of the following addresses or by post direct to the NMCT above.

contactppt1@googlemail.com
www.ppttrust.org



Top: The PPT archive and data bank has around 3000 records, including magazines and instruction manuals, and there are many spare parts for projectors, carefully stored away in drawers.

Above: Teamwork - L-R: Ken Draper (Curator), Peter Allen, Derek James

Littlejohns' Award by the BKSTS in 2008 following a long and full career both on the exhibition and production sides of the industry and his more recent invaluable work at the PPT and its museum. The wonderful thing about the PPT and this museum is that it is not just a collection of precious static objects. The small Enigma cinema is getting known as a local amenity and by prior arrangement gives shows to local youth groups and other organisations during the week. Not far from the working Enigma cinema and museum, in a nearby building, is a workshop and stores where volunteers come in on arranged weekday work days and work on projectors and equipment and undertake the various tasks of running the PPT. There is also some storage on site which sadly does resemble a "projector graveyard" but inevitably houses as yet unexploited interesting heritage items and spare parts.

The trust has an archive and a data bank or around 3000 records covering everything from instruction manuals, projector diagrams, sales material, news clippings, photographs, lamphouses, sound equipment etc. The trust also provides support, involvement, operation services and personnel to a number of commu-

nity cinemas and has expertise and consultancy on offer to community organisations. The trust has a very strong presence at the Curzon Community Cinema in Clevedon, Somerset and at the Astra Cinema (the old camp cinema) at the Imperial War Museum, Duxford. Sadly the trust's operation at The Wirral Museum, Birkenhead, which involved a partnership for running a 250 seat cinema in a former Birkenhead hall ceased in December 2009 due to local council decisions. This facility featured regular feature film presentations with a 35mm Westar 2000 projector, a platter, century sound red readers and Dolby stereo .

Ongoing support

At Bletchley Park the PPT Museum of Cinema Technology is open every weekend and every bank holiday to Bletchley's visitors from 1:30pm, and screens short film shows during these afternoons.

I am convinced that as many of us as possible, individuals and companies, should support organisations like the PPT. The day I visited, on a weekday by prior arrangement, two officers of BECTU were also visiting, following a small contribution from the union to the museum.

It would be wonderful if more commercial companies could give similar support.

Individual membership and volunteering is also very much needed support. For an annual membership of eighteen pounds benefits include the excellent PPT magazine "Rewind", a monthly newsletter, regional meetings and activities, access to the data archive, access to the museum on weekdays by prior arrangement, volunteering opportunities in projection, projector renovation and other PPT areas including the trust's educational charity aims of educating and informing of cinema's technological past and future. There has never been a more relevant time to either join or support the PPT, its activities and its museum.

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Thanks to Ken Draper and the PPT volunteers who made me so welcome on the day of my visit.

Relevant Websites: www.ppttrust.org
www.curzon.org.uk/collection/index.html

Please see top left of this page for PPT contact details.