

The George Bingo Hall in Bath St, Portobello - A Brief Study

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Author - Ian Campbell BA Hons, MA, DPhil, FSA (Scot.),

Professor of Architectural History and Theory, University of Edinburgh

The George Bingo Hall in Bath St, Portobello, began building as the County Cinema in autumn 1938 and had a grand opening on 30 March 1939. Renamed the George in 1954, it continued operating as a cinema until 1974.

It was the last ‘supercinema’ to be built in Edinburgh, designed by one of Scotland’s leading cinema architects Thomas Bowhill Gibson, and was, both inside and out, one of the best examples of Art Deco architecture in Scotland. The name ‘Art Deco’ arose from the Exposition Internationale des Arts- Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, held in Paris in 1925, to describe a simpler more geometric successor to the pre First World War Art Nouveau style. Its alternative name, Style Moderne, reveals its intention to express modernity in architecture and interior decoration, in a less austere manner than the doctrinaire Functionalist ‘Modern Movement’ of the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier. An important aspect of the style was designing buildings to be seen as much at night as in daylight, by exploiting the possibilities of exterior electric lighting, for which the Germans, coined the technical ‘Night Architecture’. Cinemas, purpose-built to house the most cutting edge form of mass entertainment, were the building type par excellence to adopt Art Deco, as expressing the spirit of the Interwar age, as Charles McKean’s classic book, *The Scottish Thirties* (1987) makes clear.

Bowhill Gibson’s best-known work in Edinburgh, the Dominion Cinema in Morningside is also Art Deco, but its interior has largely been lost with its division into three separate screening spaces, while the use of sandstone on the façade goes against the Moderne aesthetic. By contrast, the façade of the County exemplified it perfectly, faced with cladding panels made of ‘Shockcrete’, an innovative type of pre-cast concrete, invented in the Netherlands in 1931 (there known as Schokbeton). Although used extensively on the Continent, very few examples are known in Britain, making the County/ George an important example in terms of Construction History, especially as the blocks, originally painted two shades of light blue, appear to be extant, albeit now under a surface of white harl. The two outer drum towers originally framed a central glass tower which rose 10 metres, with internal lighting which changed colours, while uplighters on the canopy bathed the façade with soft illumination and neon strip lighting framed the top edge. The effect must have been stunning when first completed, giving Portobello its most futuristic building. Although the central tower was demolished after it became a bingo hall, which accounts for its being listed only at C(S) grade, it could be restored relatively easily.

The Art Deco interior is equally fine and better preserved. A technological upgrading in 1954, making it the first cinema in the east of Scotland to be able to show widescreen films with four-track stereo, was intended to allow it to be a venue for the Edinburgh International Film

Festival. Fortunately, the alterations were sympathetic to the original aesthetic, including wall mirrors on the balcony lounge etched with a panorama of the Firth of Forth. The interior still retains most of its Thirties and Fifties décor, despite the loss of the original seating, some remodelling of the foyer after 1974 and the horizontal division of the auditorium by a suspended ceiling. All these features are reinstatable without too much effort to restore what could and should be again one of the most stylish Art Deco buildings cinema in Scotland.

Besides the architectural value of the County/ George, we should also remember its importance in terms of social history. Cinemas were the most popular form of mass entertainment between the 1920 and the 1960s, and the buildings played a critical role in bringing people together, especially in the depths of the Depression. Portobello at one point boasted five cinemas but the County was by far the largest and most luxurious, which accounts for its survival long after the others closed. Many Portobello residents still remember fondly seeing films there. Since its closure they have been forced to go into Edinburgh or now Fort Kinnaird or Ocean Terminal to see films, apart from the odd screening in church halls or pubs, which inevitably can only seat a small audience.

Restoration of the County/ George would provide contemporary residents of Portobello, many of whom moved there because they value its strong sense of community, with an auditorium on their doorstep, capable of showing films, as well as other live events, to much larger audiences, strengthening that sense of social cohesion.

To conclude, the County/ George is a major asset to Portobello and Edinburgh in terms of its Art Deco aesthetic, largely intact outside and in; the survival of the very rare Shockcrete façade; and as potentially the largest venue for cultural events in the east part of Edinburgh.

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