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## HERITAGE STATEMENT

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In respect of

**The Albany Theatre, Albany Road,  
Coventry**

On behalf of

**The Albany Theatre Trust**

**AHC REF: 10166**

**Date: February 2023**

[www.assetheritage.co.uk](http://www.assetheritage.co.uk)

Annexe Offices, Linton Road, Oxford, OX2 6UD T: 01865 310563

Registration No: 07502061

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 This report has been written by Sarah Watt MCIfA, Director of Asset Heritage Consulting, on behalf of The Albany Theatre Trust, a registered charity. Its purpose is to assess the impact of proposals for an extension to the Albany Theatre building on Albany Road in Coventry. The building is on the Council's Local List.
- 1.2 The application site does not lie in or adjoin any conservation area and does not contain or adjoin any designated heritage assets.
- 1.3 The proposals comprise Phase 2 of a wider project to improve the efficient operation of the theatre and thereby to secure its long-term future in use. Phase 1 of the work, which proposed new build and reordering of the interior to enhance the visitor experience, providing a new foyer and studio spaces, was approved in November 2020 and works on site are underway. Phase 2 addresses the inadequacy of the theatre's current back-stage provision and the need to redesign and refurbish the auditorium.
- 1.4 The report first sets out the history of the theatre and College of which it was a part; this is important context for understanding the long history of the theatre as part of the cultural heritage of the city. It then goes on to consider the building's heritage significance. These sections form the basis against which the assessment of the impact of the proposals is made in the second part of the report.
- 1.5 This two-part approach of properly understanding significance, and then evaluating the potential impact of proposals on it, is in line with good conservation and planning practice advocated in English Heritage's Conservation Principles (2008) and Historic England's Good Practice Advice in Planning Notes 2 and 3 and Advice Note 12, and formally expressed in the government's policies on conserving and enhancing the historic environment set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and supported by the Planning Practice Guidance (PPG). Specifically, the report conforms to paragraph 194 of the NPPF, which requires that applicants describe the significance of any heritage assets affected by their proposals.
- 1.6 It is also in accordance with Policy HE2 of the Coventry Local Plan 2011-2031, which requires that '*Proposals likely to affect the significance of a heritage asset or its setting*

*should demonstrate an understanding of such significance using currently available evidence.'*

- 1.7 The assessment of the impact of the proposals is considered against Policy HE2 of the Local Plan and paragraph 203 of the NPPF. Policy HE2 says that '*development proposals will be supported where they conserve and, where appropriate, enhance those aspects of the historic environment which are recognised as being of special historic, archaeological, architectural, artistic, landscape or townscape significance.*' This includes Locally Listed buildings.
- 1.8 The policy also states that, '*Development proposals involving heritage assets...should acknowledge the significance of the existing building and the area by means of their siting, massing, form, scale, materials and detail.*'
- 1.9 Paragraph 203 of the NPPF says that, '*The effect of an application on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset should be taken into account in determining the application. In weighing applications that directly or indirectly affect non-designated heritage assets, a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset.*'

## **2.0 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE PROPOSALS**

### **2.1 Origins of Coventry Technical College**

- 2.1.1 The larger building which houses the Albany Theatre was originally built as the Coventry Technical College, in 1933-35.
- 2.1.2 The city's first Mechanics Institution, with a library, reading room, classes and lectures, was founded in 1828 in a house on Hertford Street. In 1855, the Institution was re-formed as the Coventry Institute, with a programme including courses in the sciences, modern languages, agriculture, textiles, animal physiology, building construction, hygiene, botany, mathematics, shorthand and horology (watchmaking had been an important industry in Coventry since 1720). It also aimed to provide an elementary education to adults without any formal schooling.
- 2.1.3 In the 1880's Coventry's industrial revolution saw it become a major centre of engineering of products such as bicycles, motor vehicles and machine tools. In 1896, the first motor car was produced in the city, manufactured by Daimler Motor Syndicate (later Jaguar). In 1902, the manufacture of Triumph motorcycles began, and Courtaulds textiles was formed in Foleshill in 1904.
- 2.1.4 As the technology required for the new types of engineering became more complex, the manufacture of machine tools became more specialised, and a trained workforce was needed. A new Technical Institute was thus opened in 1888 in an old textile warehouse in Earl Street, which local benefactor David Spencer had dedicated to the City Council on the condition that it be used for technical schools and a school of science. The Institute was so successful that an additional block of buildings, including a large lecture theatre, was built at a cost of £5,000.
- 2.1.5 By the early 1900s, the Institute's premises had become unsuitable. In the early 1900's, plans were thus drawn up for demolishing and replacing it on the same site, but this proved too expensive. Various other city centre sites were considered before Pool Meadow, on the north-eastern side of the city centre, was decided upon because of its central location. The design of the new building was selected by a competition in

1913, won by local architect, A.W. Hoare (LRIBA). However, the outbreak of the First World War meant that these plans were put on hold.

- 2.1.6 At the end of the war, 937 students were enrolled at the Institute and it was apparent that the Pool Meadow site would be too small. In 1919 a Junior Technical School was also founded and accommodated in rooms in the Institute, and there were 80 apprentices taking part-time day courses. In the same year, the City Council acquired three acres of land at the corner of Albany Road and Butts Road south-west of the city centre, as a larger site for the new building. A.W Hoare produced a new design for the new site.
- 2.1.7 The land acquired was, in 1903, an undeveloped strip against The Butts, with a cricket ground adjoining it to the south-west and a cycle track to the west (**Fig.1**). To north, east and south were networks of terraced houses, with St Thomas's Church to the south-east on the opposite corner of Albany Road. The Coventry & Nuneaton Branch of the London & North West Railway curved around the western boundary of the cricket ground and cycle track, beyond which, to the west, lay largely undeveloped fields on the edge of the city, except for the suburb of Chapel Fields which lay to the north-west. By 1912 (**Fig.2**), the cycle track encircled a football ground and the agricultural land west of the railway was under extensive development with streets of terraced housing.
- 2.1.8 In 1926, the Institute (still operating from its old premises on Earl Street) qualified as a Technical College and changed its name accordingly. Coventry led the country in day-release apprenticeships, with 500 registered in 1931, and provided courses for every level up to final honours degree.



*Fig.1: 1906 OS map (surveyed in 1903-4)*



*Fig.2: 1914 OS map (revised in 1912)*



## 2.2 The new College building

- 2.2.1 After a delay of 14 years, the City Council agreed to build the new College with a loan of £142,228 and work finally began on site in August 1933 by Garlicks Ltd. of Coventry (a time capsule was buried under the front steps by the workmen, and rediscovered in 1995). On 10<sup>th</sup> July 1934, Edward, Prince of Wales, visited the building under construction, and the College was formally opened on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1935 by his brother, the Duke of York (later George VI). Two bronze plaques commemorating these occasions are located inside the main entrance to the building on Butts Road.
- 2.2.2 Classes began at the new College in September 1935 under the principal, Mr. D.R. MacLachlan. There were 3,332 students enrolled, and 1,400 students under 16 attending the Junior Evening Schools taking preparatory courses leading to the Technical College courses. In 1936, Mr J Wilson became principal, in which role he continued until 1947.
- 2.2.3 The OS map revised in 1937 and published in 1939 (**Fig.3**) shows the new 'Technical College' in place, built on a site that encroached onto the former cricket ground; this latter now had a bowling green, tennis courts and a 'Hall' against the railway embankment.
- 2.2.4 The College itself is shown as two separate blocks, connected by a narrow glazed link. The large 'reversed E' shape block is the building which still stands today, depicted with a semi-circular driveway approaching the central front entrance from Butts Road. Between the three 'arms' of the 'E' were narrow open-sided structures and, at the rear, to the south-west, was a smaller rectangular range, the gymnasium. The other large building immediately north-west of the 'E'-plan building, comprised north-lit engineering workshops.
- 2.2.5 By this date, the development of terraced streets to the west was complete and Chapel Fields had also been extended to the north-west.



*Fig.3: 1939 OS map (revised in 1937)*

## **2.3 The Second World War and the rise of the College theatre**

- 2.3.1 The construction of the College had been stymied by the First World War and was now, not long after opening, to be affected by the outbreak of the Second World War. During this time, trenches were dug on the adjoining Butts sports ground and the College ran special courses in fuel efficiency, economical bread production and the making of wartime gym shoes. It also ran special classes for the armed forces on radar and vehicle electrical equipment, and gave instruction to coppersmiths and other tradesmen. Staff and students made gauges for Bofor guns and welded parts for electrical equipment for the General Electric Company Limited. The iron railings fixed to a low concrete plinth that enclosed the building against the street (and which had cost £600) were sacrificed, along with the gates (for only £30) to support the war effort.
- 2.3.2 The College remained open throughout the war. Army field kitchens were placed on its roof for emergency feeding. Although it was bombed, it survived with little damage

and, in the aftermath of the notorious heavy bombing raids on Coventry in November 1940, accommodated hundreds of homeless citizens.

2.3.3 However, the war was also to be a catalyst for the growth and flourishing of the College theatre.

2.3.4 The space now used as the main house or auditorium for the Albany Theatre was originally built as a lecture theatre, known as the Great Hall, and located in the central 'arm' of the 'E'-plan building. During the war, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) used this space to entertain the public with concerts and other events. CEMA (later brought within the umbrella of the Arts Council) appointed 'music travellers,' mostly women, to tour the UK, encouraging local music-making and art, with the support of the Carnegie Foundation UK. These 'travellers' were often dispatched at short notice to bomb-damaged cities to provide musical consolation in the immediate aftermath of air raids.

2.3.5 The use of the space as a theatre (the College or Butts Theatre) continued and thrived after the war. The Annual Report of the Arts Council for 1946 says:

*'In October, 1945, a small cinema in Salisbury, which had been used as a garrison theatre during the war, was opened by the Council and renamed the Arts Theatre. It now has a resident company which plays there for ten days in every month and uses the theatre as a base from which each production can tour the smaller towns of Hampshire and Wiltshire. During the rest of the month, the Salisbury Arts Theatre is let for amateur activities and for concerts, or it presents other small touring companies under the Council's auspices. Then in March, 1946, a similar centre was opened at the Coventry Midlands Technical College, which had been a regular "date" for CEMA tours throughout the war. The system here is the same. This company will eventually be linked with another, based on a beautiful old theatre in Kidderminster which has been acquired and restored by an enterprising group of citizens with some assistance from the Council. There are plans for still other centres and for variations of the system in many small towns where promising buildings are available.'*

2.3.6 The theatre was used both as a professional and local amateur venue. It had a resident company, the Midland Theatre Company - one of the few repertory theatre

companies formed (in 1946) by the then new Arts Council in England after the war. After playing for a week at the College Theatre, the company would tour each play to theatre-less towns in the wider district, returning to Coventry a month later with a new play. The company was resident at the College until it moved to the Belgrade Theatre when that opened in 1958 (built as part of the reconstruction of the city after the war).

2.3.7 Between 1946 and 1957 the Company presented nearly 200 plays before it moved to the Belgrade. Some of the City's biggest stars began their careers at the theatre and, throughout the 1950s, many famous names are listed as appearing, including Alan Bates, Wilfred Brambell, Patrick McGoochan, Joss Ackland, and Anthony Newlands.

2.3.8 Workers at car factories like Morris Motors organised amateur play performances, arts societies organised drama competitions, musical theatre societies thrived, dance companies and schools used the theatre, as did students studying at the College. The theatre was also mentioned in Michael Green's *The Art of Coarse Acting*, first published in 1964, from when it was home to several drama festivals.

## **2.4 Post-war changes to the College**

2.4.1 The 1944 Education Act led to the gradual separation of the College's education of children and adults. A College of Art Technology and General Education, to become Lanchester College of Technology in 1961 (named after the engineer and car manufacturer Frederick W Lanchester, and now Coventry University) was established in the same building. The Lord Mayor's horse was also stabled on the premises. With increasing pressure on space, the children's courses moved to Woodlands School.

2.4.2 An aerial photograph taken on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1946 ([raf 3g tud uk 65 vp5 5338 - Aerial Photo | Historic England](#)) shows the site and its environs much as they appear on the 1939 OS map, but with additional structures to the rear of the main buildings. The theatre block in the centre can be seen to terminate at the south-western end with the taller fly tower, and four large skylights can be seen, two in each side of its pitched roof (the rest of the 'E'-plan building has flat roofs).

- 2.4.3 Aerial photographs dated 17<sup>th</sup> November 1948 ([raf 58 154 v 5067 - Aerial Photo | Historic England](#)) and 10<sup>th</sup> May 1949 ([raf 541 256 rp 3206 - Aerial Photo | Historic England](#)) show further expansion of the separate workshops to the rear of the main building. Another photograph from 15<sup>th</sup> March 1962 ([raf 543 1698 f22 0186 - Aerial Photo | Historic England](#)) shows further expansion in this area, with the buildings to the rear surrounded by parking areas.
- 2.4.4 The College of Technology relocated to new premises in 1961 but the 'original' Technical College stayed at the Butts with 12,000 students under its new Principal, Mr R.A. Arculus. The 1960s brought a new diversification of subjects, keeping in step with the rapid development of new industries and technologies. The College established a reputation as a centre for technician education and new colleges were built to cater for the demand, including Henley College in Bell Green (1964; catering) and Tile Hill College (1969; motor vehicle engineering). The three colleges remained part of the Local Education Authority until incorporation in 1993.



*Fig.4: 2002 OS map, showing late 20<sup>th</sup>-century addition across the rear*

## **2.5 Later history and redevelopment**

- 2.5.1 In the late 1970s/early 1980s, a large four-storey block (providing additional classroom and office space) was erected across the rear of the main 'E'-plan College

building, parallel to the Butts Road frontage block, enclosing the two courtyards at the rear between the arms of the 'E'. This block was recessed from the Albany Road frontage block, leaving the three ashlar-faced bays of the latter's south-western end exposed (**Fig.4**). It was attached to the three rear wings of the existing College building (the current single-storey flat-roofed dressing-room block attached to the end of the theatre wing is a surviving remnant of this addition).

- 2.5.2 In the late 1980s, the College theatre underwent major refurbishment with the construction of a counterweight flying frame and powered flying winches.
- 2.5.3 The College building as a whole (including the engineering workshops block, now demolished) was added to the Council's Local List of Buildings on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1990.
- 2.5.4 During the 1990s the Technical College faced acute financial pressures. In 1991 it came to light that c.£3 million had been 'lost' in its accounts, perhaps due to the problems of adapting to new funding arrangements. The Principal and senior management team resigned. The future of the College theatre came under significant threat and its then manager, Keith Wood, fought to prevent it from being converted to accommodate computer suites, strongly supported in his campaign by local amateur theatre groups. This campaign was aided by the opposition to the proposal by the Further Education Funding Council, which recognised the value and unique nature of a Further Education College having its own full-size theatre.
- 2.5.5 Although Arts Council England awarded a substantial lottery grant of £365,000 in 1997 for the 'Refurbishment of Community Theatre' (which allowed the rewiring of the lighting and the installation of Zero88 Contour dimmers, a projector screen and upgrades to the sound system), the threat to the theatre's survival continued.
- 2.5.6 In the late 1990s, the southern courtyard area at the rear (between the theatre wing and the Albany Road frontage block) was roofed over to create a seated dining area and exhibition space, along with conference catering, a foyer and bar for the theatre and a new box office and WCs. The ground-floor rooms adjoining this space were intended to be 'practice salons' for the Hair & Beauty department of the College, with mock shop fronts opening onto the courtyard, but lack of funds meant this work was never undertaken.

- 2.5.7 By c.2000 it was recognised that the best route forward was for the Technical College to merge with Tile Hill College; this took place in February 2002, resulting in the establishment of City College Coventry. It was also recognised that the college needed to slim down to a single site. In September 2007, the first new college building was opened at the Swanswell Learning Quarter. Courses continued at the original building on Butts Road until December 2008, when the second phase of the works was complete, and the College finally closed its doors on the Butts Road building.
- 2.5.8 The Butts building and wider site was subsequently redeveloped as Earlsdon Park by Midland & City Developments Ltd (MCD) with new residential and office buildings and a multi-storey car park, facilitated by the demolition of the engineering workshops immediately north-west of the main building. The main building was retained and converted to new uses (including a Premier Inn hotel), although the roofed-over space within the southern courtyard was demolished, as was the early 1980s' four-storey block at the rear, leaving behind the part of its ground floor that was attached to the end of the theatre wing. The ends of the other two wings to which it had been attached were rendered over. Behind the main building, an Extra Care Retirement Village was developed.
- 2.5.9 A passionate campaign to save the theatre was mounted, led by Alan Biddle and the Coventry Musical Theatre Consortium, which persuaded the Council to impose a Section 106 condition on the planning permission for the site's redevelopment (granted in July 2007) requiring the theatre to be saved for the community, including £950,000 of financial support to refurbish its facilities (half of which would be needed to create a foyer/bar, box office and temporary studio space, behind the Albany Road frontage).
- 2.5.10 The S106 (revised in March 2010) required the site's new owners (and successors in title) to establish 'the Butts Theatre Trust' (a charitable trust that would operate the re-opened theatre) following the appointment of a Theatre Development Manager. The Albany Theatre Trust (ATT) was thus formed in 2012 and set about bringing the theatre back to life. In June 2012, access was allowed to a group of volunteers who undertook repair and development works, leading to a formal re-opening of the auditorium on February 1<sup>st</sup> 2013.

- 2.5.11 For more than a year, the theatre was entirely volunteer-led and managed, but it became increasingly clear that this was not sustainable; for the theatre to grow to the point where revenues comfortably exceeded core costs, it had to employ some paid staff. Whilst this would increase costs, it would also increase the capacity to bring in events to generate revenue. A full-time, paid theatre manager was therefore employed in June 2014.
- 2.5.12 The S106 agreement that had saved the theatre included plans for the demolition of the rear of the building, which would significantly restrict the ability of the theatre to accommodate anything other than small-scale productions. The plans did not either make any formal allowance for a foyer/bar area. The solution to this was to lease an additional 10,000 square feet of undeveloped ground-floor space, in return for which the existing footprint at the rear of the theatre could be retained for redevelopment. Once this space was secured, the Trust developed a new 'vision' for the theatre and set out to increase the range and quality of events presented. The Theatre manager role was replaced by a team of paid staff directly supported by Executive Directors.
- 2.5.13 The new owners were in place by June 2015, and by mid-August they had accepted the Trust's proposals in principle, on condition that the Trust secured the support of a guarantor to underwrite the lease. This was to be the City Council and, in May 2017, the lease was agreed and the future of the theatre was secured for the next 50 years. The leading theatre design consultancy, Charcoalblue, was thus engaged in 2018 to draft a comprehensive proposal for the transformation of The Albany into a multi-purpose community arts venue for the city.
- 2.5.14 The proposals were refined into two phases: Phase 1 gained planning consent (ref: FUL/2020/1892) on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2020 and includes the erection of a single-storey glazed entrance lobby and terrace to the Albany Road elevation together with access ramps and landscaping, and a single-storey infill extension to the yard area at the rear of the building (between the block facing Albany Road and the central 'arm' of the 'E'-plan which contains the theatre auditorium) to create a second new performance studio and two further multi-use spaces, dressing rooms and an extended bar area together with associated external alterations creating a key internal link to the existing theatre.



2.5.15 Work on site is currently ongoing on the Phase 1 scheme. Phase 2 is the subject of the current application and is discussed below in Section 4.0 in terms of its impact on the heritage values of the building.

### 3.0 DESCRIPTION AND ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

- 3.1 As George Demidowicz notes in his *A Guide to the Buildings of Coventry* (The History Press, 2003, p.106), the neo-Classical style of architecture continued to be popular in Coventry, as elsewhere, in the inter-war period, and this is aptly reflected by its architect A.W. Hoare's design for the Technical College in this *oeuvre*, first made in 1919 and retained despite building work not starting until 1933.
- 3.2 Demidowicz describes the building's detailing as being '*stripped down to basic forms such as the cornice and the pilasters which divide each window bay*', a view echoed by Pickford and Pevsner in their 2016 volume on Warwickshire (Yale University Press, 2016, p.274) who describe the exterior of the building as '*conservatively classical with a big portico, but entirely functional where display ceased*.'
- 3.3 The building (constructed on a steel frame, encased in brick and faced on its principal elevations with Clipsham stone) is an imposing landmark on account of its prominent position, set back from the corner of Butts Road and Albany Road; its large scale; and its long linear frontage of 27 windowed bays to Butts Road. Here, it presents a robust Classical symmetry with three central bays breaking forward to form a portico beneath a triangular pediment bearing the inscription 'COVENTRY TECHNICAL COLLEGE' and supported on four pairs of Doric columns forming a giant order. An entrance porch projects further and has a parapet bearing the inscription 'AD 1935' flanking the city's coat of arms (**Plates 1-4**).
- 3.4 The elevation is book-ended by three-bay end blocks (or corner pavilions) differentiated from the nine bays between them and the central block by solid shaped parapets and lighter colouring to the window aprons. The façade throughout has a rusticated ground floor, uniform rows of small-paned, originally metal-framed windows (since replaced), decreasing in proportion through the three storeys, and a balustraded parapet at the top, which fails to conceal the recent addition of a flat-roofed fourth storey set back from the main building plane. At the northern corner of the building are the broken remains of a stone arch that once linked it with the former workshop building.

- 3.5 Sculptural detailing is confined to a series of small roundels on the frieze and between the windows of the second and third storeys on the portico (**Plate 5**). The four roundels on the frieze contain the symbols of Coventry's industries: from the left, a rotary saw, a watch escapement, a micrometer and a ball-bearing race. The three lower roundels are larger and more complex; that to the left symbolises the city's involvement with car and aircraft building, with an eagle and an aeroplane propeller, a hypoid gear, a comet, a steering wheel and a laurel plant. The central one bears symbols of telecommunication, represented by the winged head of Mercury, the messenger of the gods, with stylised waves emerging from his mouth and ear, and a telephone handset in the foreground. The roundel to the right has a circle of bicycle chain enclosing a micrometer, an eye, a hand with a pencil and three drills, all symbolising Coventry's engineering industries.
- 3.6 Walter Ashworth (1883-1952), principal of the Coventry Art College and sometime chairman of the Coventry and Warwickshire Society of Artists, was commissioned by Hoare to design the roundels. He was best known as a watercolour artist who exhibited several works at the Royal Academy and acted as a war artist in Coventry during the Second World War.
- 3.7 It is possible that the 'grand' scale and imposing nature of the building (and its wide internal corridors) reflects an original intention that it would become Coventry's university. This possible future fell away after the Second World War and the damage caused by the Blitz, which freed up land for the building of Lanchester College (later to become Coventry University) around Priory Street and Cox Street. Nevertheless, the ambitious scale and design of the building is an important element of its architectural and historical interest.
- 3.8 The front boundary against the street on Butts Road retains the stumps of former wrought-iron railings, which were set in a low concrete plinth and divided by concrete piers, some with iron lamps.
- 3.9 The building's second main frontage is to Albany Road (**Plates 6 & 7**), which follows a similar pattern across 19 bays, with the articulation here provided by slightly projecting three-bay end blocks with shaped solid parapets and an elongated seven-bay version of this in the centre (the central parapet also inscribed with 'COVENTRY

TECHNICAL COLLEGE'). The symmetry is broken only by the understated entrance in the 16<sup>th</sup> bay. Again, the recently added fourth storey can be seen above and beyond the original parapet.

- 3.10 Here too there are missing railings against the road and gate-less concrete piers opening onto an access to left of the building to the rear. As noted at paragraph 2.3.1 above, the railings and gates were taken to support the war effort, although a short stretch of railings still exists on Albany Road (**Plates 8 & 9**); these appear to be original as the pattern of fixings to the plinth – spaced for a fixed railing every six, and punctuated by three closely-set fixed railings forming a decorative pier-like section – corresponds to the pattern of fixing holes left in the plinth on Butts Road. It is not clear why this section was left here.
- 3.11 Previously, this view through the access was terminated by the four-storey late 20<sup>th</sup>-century rear addition to the Albany Road wing, but since the demolition of this structure there are now open views onto the less attractive elements of the rear of the building, including the single-storey remnant of the same structure that is attached to the theatre wing, and 'scarring' on the brickwork of the southern elevation of the fly tower block from the removal of the upper floors above it, and alteration of openings (**Plates 9-13**). The view today also reveals the new Earlsdon Park development rising up beyond the theatre building.
- 3.12 The rear elevations are much more plainly treated than the street-facing elevations, faced with Fletton brickwork laid in English Garden Wall Bond (**Plates 14 & 15**). The theme of rows of large windows is also present here, and there is survival of more decorative leaded windows lighting stairwells in the rear elevation of the main range and larger windows with stained-glass motifs of educational and civic insignia in each side of the linking section between the front range and the theatre block (**Plate 16**).
- 3.13 The theatre block itself, of lower height than the three-storey flanking 'arms', is distinguished by the tall round-arched metal-framed windows on both long elevations (blocked internally) (**Plates 17 & 18**). At its south-western end is the fly tower, with flat roof and parapet higher than the ridge of the pitched roof of the rest of the wing. Wrapping around the tower is a three-storey brick element, which has been extended to the south-west with a later 20<sup>th</sup>-century brown-brick bay.

- 3.14 Extending from this is a single-storey rectangular-plan flat-roofed concrete-built block faced with white-painted brickwork and roofed with what appears to be the type of felt used for covering garden sheds. This, as mentioned above (at paragraph 2.5.8) was originally part of the ground floor of the late 1970s/early '80s four-storey addition and was left in place to serve as site offices for the developers, MCD, when the rest of that building was demolished. The temporary sheeting or rainscreen against the end of the fly tower above it covers the 'scar' resulting from the demolition of the upper three storeys (which were attached to the fly tower).
- 3.15 In 2012, when access to the theatre was granted to a group of volunteers, the retained space was converted to use as dressing rooms and green room, and an access was created from it through into the back-stage area. The building is quite evidently of no heritage interest (**Plates 19-22**).
- 3.16 As also mentioned above (at paragraph 2.5.8), the canteen, etc. created by roofing over the southern courtyard in the late 1990s and latterly used as a foyer space to the theatre auditorium, was also demolished in c.2010, leaving the theatre without a foyer.
- 3.17 Inside the building, the original main atrial central foyer remains with original Art Deco-influenced detailing in the form of cream-coloured tiled fluted columns and stone-tiled floor, with rectangular decorative lantern light overhead, above a balustraded upper gallery. In the tiled lobby area that opens into the foyer from the main entrance are the original reception windows set into a tiled Art Deco architrave with the lettering 'ENQUIRIES' (this was used as the theatre box office between 2013 and 2017, with the atrial foyer serving as the theatre foyer – now separated from the auditorium by a partition wall). The main stairways are finished in stone with Art Deco influenced steel balustrades and bronze handrails. The rear stairs are finished in concrete and have plain balustrades with timber handrails.
- 3.18 The Albany Theatre is approached via the entrance through the Albany Road elevation where a ramp of scaffolding poles was erected following permission in 2017 (ref: FUL/2017/1995), essentially as 'enabling works' to facilitate the operation of the theatre in the interim before the full scheme for planning was developed. This opens into an open space where the box office, bar and café currently operate from, divided

off by a partition wall from the space to the south-west which is being converted to use as new studios.

- 3.19 The theatre auditorium (**Plates 23-25**) has a barrel-vaulted ceiling with the principal panelled and painted ribs dividing five bays that are further compartmented by slimmer ribs. Along the central line is a series of large tripartite openings filled with Art Deco-influenced glazing. These are flanked by further smaller such glazed openings and by decorative vents with circular convex bronze-coloured grilles with red-painted surrounds. The principal ribs cross the vault to meet pilasters rising through the walls to divide the bays of tall round-arched windows, beneath which the walls are panelled in unpainted wood. The general colour scheme is cream, red, black and bronze.
- 3.20 At the back of the auditorium is a seating balcony with panelled fascia. Two sets of double doors open from the back wall onto the gallery, with two further sets directly beneath opening onto the main raked seating area. The tip-up seating itself is not original, but believed to be of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century date. It was certainly in place by 1977 and, as there were originally 720 seats, it is thought possible that it may have been brought here in the 1960s from a large cinema such as the Empire in Hertford Street, or possibly the Astoria in Albany Road. The proscenium arch has fluted jambs, a decorative dado course and panelling (**Plate 26**).
- 3.21 Beyond the fly tower and bay which wraps around it, the rest of the back-stage area is of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century date, comprising the remnant of the early 1980s' building that was retained as site offices in 2010 and in which a green room and dressing rooms were formed with stud partitioning in 2012. (**Plates 27 & 28**).
- 3.22 The building was assessed for statutory listing in 2010 but was not deemed of sufficient special architectural and historic interest to merit inclusion on the list. The Historic England assessment report concluded that:

*'While this building is a local landmark, and is recognised as such by its local listing, its architectural treatment, although well-handled, is common to a building of its type and date. While some interwar college buildings are designated, such as Stafford College (Grade II), the criteria for designation requires buildings of this date to have a high level of architectural quality or intactness. The relatively modest architectural accomplishment of the design of City College Coventry is not*

*supported by a high level of intactness within the building and, therefore, it does not meet the criteria for designation and cannot be recommended for inclusion on the list.'*

- 3.23 Nevertheless, the building remains a non-designated heritage asset, recorded on the Coventry Historic Environment Record (no. MCT282) and included on the Local List, and its value as a local landmark is recognised. This and its architectural value primarily derive from its principal elevations to Butts Road and Albany Road, which express the neo-Classicism common to inter-war civic and institutional architecture. The rear elevations are of much less interest, although the theatre wing is distinctive for its tall round-arched windows.
- 3.24 The theatre itself retains much of its original character and decorative treatment and also has a high degree of 'communal value,' defined in 'Conservation Principles' (English Heritage, 2008) as '*the meanings of a place for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory,*' and social value, defined as being associated with '*places that people perceive as a source of identity, distinctiveness, social interaction and coherence...They may have fulfilled a community function that has generated a deeper attachment..*'
- 3.25 The theatre has been an established and thriving part of the city's cultural heritage since the Second World War and this contributes to its historic significance. It is well-supported by professional and amateur theatre groups, as well as its audiences, as evidenced by the various successful campaigns to save it in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.
- 3.26 The Albany Theatre Trust's Annual Reports document a challenging and inspirational trek over the last eleven years. Having started literally with nothing, other than goodwill, passion, dedication and hard work, the Trustees, led by the relentless determination of David Meredith and with the support of volunteers, have built a successful and thriving professionally managed community arts venue. It attracts increasingly well-known stars, such as (from Strictly Come Dancing) Vincent Simone, Anton du Beck, Camilla Dallerup, Ian Waite, Kristina Rihanoff and, annually since 2017, Giovanni Pernice, and other renowned celebrities such as Marti Pellow, Emily Atack, Jasper Carrott and Francis Rossi (of Status Quo).

- 3.27 The arrival of Kevin Shaw, award-winning Artistic Director and CEO, formerly of Oldham Coliseum, at the start of 2020, was the final piece in the jigsaw that persuaded Coventry City Council to award a capital grant for the Phase 1 works that will secure financial stability. Kevin Shaw has developed and extended the Albany's programme, with acclaimed in-house productions and increasing numbers of community events, including delivering the community-based elements of the City of Culture year. The Albany is established as a key legacy of City of Culture for the city.
- 3.28 A key priority is providing opportunities for the development of local talent. The Albany has supported new organisations, including Ascension Dance, Godiva Academy of Performing Arts (GAPA) and CV Folk and introduced its own multi-age youth theatre. There is also a strong focus on children and young people: over 4,500 perform on the Albany stage every year, and tens of thousands experience shows, many for the first time. The development of the BTEC in Technical Theatre aimed at communities that are under-represented in this area (see paragraph 4.32) creates the only offer of its kind in the country.
- 3.29 The Albany is embedded in the local community and provides a unique service and environment for the city. It offers not only an extensive and growing range of theatrical performances but social and community cohesion and wide-ranging opportunities for those who become involved with it. Since 2016, 24 paid interns and apprentices have gained experience and subsequently developed their careers in the arts industries.
- 3.30 Critical to The Albany's success is its reliance on over 100 volunteers who support the small team of full-time paid staff (currently 12 full-time). The volunteers provide all the services – box office, show management, bar, kiosk, ushering – required to deliver live events. They also support the paid team, for example with marketing and administrative tasks. There are many examples of people entering or re-entering work after volunteering; thriving in a supportive environment as they recover from mental illness, and finding confidence and friendship. The Albany awaits the outcome (in November 2023) of a nomination for the King's Award for Voluntary Service.



## 4.0 THE PROPOSALS

- 4.1 The Phase 2 proposals comprise the remaining works necessary to deliver the Trust's vision of a multi-purpose community arts venue for the city, and are focused on the stage and back-stage areas of the theatre wing.

### The Phase 1 proposals

- 4.2 The Phase 1 works (already approved, with works currently underway) include an enhanced Albany Road entrance to the theatre, so that it is fully identifiable in the streetscape, and the infilling of the southern yard with a new structure providing new accommodation and a direct link from the theatre entrance into the theatre itself without the need to negotiate the external yard, alongside internal refurbishment to create an enhanced hospitality area and new studios. The form of the new structure (which uses a north-light style roof profile in order to expose the existing tall round-arched theatre windows within it) reflects that of the north-lit roofscape of the original engineering workshops demolished as part of the redevelopment of the site in 2010, providing a visual link to the building's heritage as a technical college.
- 4.3 In consultation on the Phase 1 proposals, the Council's Conservation Officer noted that when dealing with applications affecting a non-designated heritage asset, paragraph 197 (now paragraph 203) of the NPPF is engaged. This says that,
- 'The effect of an application on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset should be taken into account in determining the application. In weighing applications that directly or indirectly affect non-designated heritage assets, a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset.'*
- 4.4 The Officer's Report noted that the Conservation Officer welcomed the proposal *'as an opportunity to revitalise the heritage asset, and the bold entrance is well considered in terms of its proportions and siting...Whilst there are some areas of detrimental impact (e.g. removal and/or infill of original windows), they are comfortably outweighed by the positives of the scheme. Notable is the capacity to bring public benefits through sustaining and enhancing the building's status as a civic amenity, achieving its optimum viable use and ensuring continuity of a key element of its heritage*

*significance. Balancing all factors, positive and negative, the proposals are considered to represent net "enhancement" to the significance of the heritage asset. As such, the proposal complies with planning policy for the historic environment at both national and local levels.'*

#### The current Phase 2 proposals

- 4.5 In my view, a very similar conclusion can be drawn in respect of the Phase 2 proposals, albeit that I do not identify any detrimental impact arising to the existing building as a result of these proposals.
- 4.6 The Phase 2 works are complementary to the Phase 1 works and are focused on enhancing the 'service' facilities to enable the full functioning of the theatre. They are to include:
- the demolition of the single-storey concrete remnant of the four-storey 1970s/80s extension at the rear of the theatre, which currently houses the green room and dressing rooms, and its replacement with a new four-storey building which will provide much-improved green room and dressing-room facilities, as well as studios, offices, and a large workshop for set-building;
  - the raising in height of the existing fly tower and the provision for it of a new end wall (currently unprotected except for a temporary rainscreen since the demolition of a link building after 2009); and
  - the refurbishment of the main auditorium, with new services and seating, and an enlarged proscenium arch, with modification of the stage to allow the installation of an orchestra pit.
- 4.7 As already noted in the previous section of this report, the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century elements at the rear of the theatre wing are of no heritage interest and add nothing to the experience of the building; indeed, they detract from the quality of the existing building and reinforce a functional character.
- 4.8 The single-storey element (a retained fragment of a substantially larger four-storey building) contains a green room and four dressing rooms, each accommodating three to four people. All have been formed in recent years with the insertion of stud partitioning and do not provide a high standard of accommodation. There is a direct

link to back of stage, but if the theatre is in use or closed, access is via a separate door and is not linked to the main hospitality/front of house or studio areas. In addition, there is currently no workshop facility, which means there is little possibility of building stage sets other than on the stage. This limits the theatre's ability to create in-house shows, hampering the development and delivery of their artistic vision. Suitable facilities are critical to the future development of The Albany.

- 4.9 In essence, the existing back-stage area is no longer 'fit for purpose' and does not support the theatre in generating revenue and sustaining its future.
- 4.10 The proposal to demolish this element of the building will not result in any loss of historic fabric. The original end wall of the structure around the fly tower was affected in an irreversible way by its physical attachment to the four-storey building erected in the late 1970s/early 80s, with further damage done when the structure was removed in 2010 (leaving only the ground-floor fragment in place). The proposal to now remove the ground-floor block, rebuild the end wall of the fly tower and connect the proposed new extension to this elevation will not affect any existing significant character or appearance.
- 4.11 The replacement building will stand on the footprint of the existing retained fragment comprising the dressing-room block, but will also extend further south to enclose the yard to be infilled under the Phase 1 scheme with the new foyer and studio spaces, so that the whole of the theatre, its service, studio and audience spaces are connected and function as one fully integrated unit.
- 4.12 The building will be of four-storey height with a flat roof at a level below the parapet line of the main ranges of the original College building, and one storey below the top floor of the hotel that has been constructed on its roof. While the roof of the proposal will be slightly higher than the ridge of the pitched roof of the theatre wing, it will be separated from this by the existing fly tower; it will be just below the parapet of the existing fly tower and significantly below the top of the proposed extension upwards of the latter. The extended fly tower will thus mediate the heights to either side of it.

- 4.13 This central wing of the original building is the only one that already offers any variation in height and roofline (because of its specific purpose), and this aspect will simply be continued.
- 4.14 The large floor-to-ceiling height of the theatre wing allows the proposed extension to span four floors despite its incorporation of 6m high workshops/studio space on the ground floor of the building. This taller ground floor, with its full-height window openings, is both functional and aesthetic; it will allow plenty of light into the workshop space while complementing and tying in with the verticality of the existing long elevations of the theatre wing with their tall windows, as well as connecting visually with the colonnade-like design of the approved new front entrance structure, with which it will be seen in context in some views from Albany Road.
- 4.15 The proposal is contemporary in style and materials, which will clearly differentiate existing from new, while also mediating between the existing building and the recently erected retirement apartments adjoining the site to the south-west. It will be constructed on a steel frame and clad with an insulated render (intended to harmonise in colour with the stone facing of the existing building), with bronze-coloured metal spandrel panels and cladding to the top storey. This cladding will also be used for the extension upwards of the fly tower, linking the two structures together visually and providing clear differentiation between old and new work. The bronze colouring will connect to the interior decorative treatment in the auditorium.
- 4.16 The massing of the new building is broken up by the use of this cladding, by the setting back of the top storey to form an external terrace in front of it, with glazed balustrade, and by the lower (two-storey) height of the southern element, with external terrace behind the parapet on its roof.
- 4.17 In direct views from Albany Road along the access drive, in which the proposed extension will be seen in context with the main Albany Road block of the original College building, the new building will be deeply recessed from the frontage (more so than the larger four-storey block which previously stood here) and will terminate the view with a well-designed building that replaces the functional appearance of the rear that is currently visible, and will screen the Earsldon Park development that looms up above and beyond the former College building.

- 4.18 This view has been opened-up in recent years by the demolition of the previous much more substantial building that stood here until c.2010, but the opened-up view does not reflect a historical scene – the other College buildings that stood opposite the rear of the main building are long gone and the extension of the backstage area of the theatre wing has intruded into the view.
- 4.19 The new building will provide an attractive terminus to the view that adds to the presence of the theatre in the streetscape in a non-dominating way; it is intended as a back area with the new (Phase 1) entrance structure announcing the main entrance to the theatre and the Phase 2 building reinforcing its presence.
- 4.20 The building will have Albany Theatre signage that clearly connects it visually to the new entrance structure on the road frontage, while the recession of the building behind the frontage, and its contemporary design and materials, will ensure it does not compete with the prominence of the existing building in the streetscape, while nevertheless clearly signing the presence of the theatre.
- 4.21 There is precedent for a much more substantial building in this location, but that building comprised an uncompromising solid and dominating four-storey mass which closed off the entirety of the rear of the building. The current proposal is carefully massed and articulated so that it will appear subservient to the original while providing a modern and functional back-of-house area to ensure the efficient running of the theatre into the long-term future.
- 4.22 In summary, it is my considered view that the Phase 2 proposals will enhance the non-designated heritage asset that is the Albany Theatre, and former College building as a whole, sustaining and enhancing its contribution to the cityscape.
- 4.23 When considered against paragraph 203 of the NPPF, my view is that the effects of the scheme will be beneficial; that there is no harm to significance arising and no loss of significant historic fabric. The balanced judgement required is therefore fully weighted in favour of the proposals.
- 4.24 Notwithstanding this view, if the Council should consider that there is a limited degree of less than substantial harm, it is clear to me that this balanced judgement would

conclude, as with the Phase 1 scheme, that the very significant public benefits '*comfortably outweigh*' it.

- 4.25 The public (and heritage) benefits are substantial. The most important overarching benefit is that the proposals will supplement the Phase 1 scheme in ensuring that the theatre can remain in its 'optimum viable use' - here, that use is, remarkably, the use in which it has been for virtually its entire lifetime (a desirable situation for any heritage asset, designated or non-designated) - and will ensure that this use can be sustained in the long term.
- 4.26 This secures the future of the building as an important civic amenity and ensures the continuation of its role as an important and long-established contributor to Coventry's cultural heritage.
- 4.27 The ways in which the proposals facilitate these important benefits are through the provision of facilities that more fully support the existing use and its income-generating potential, which is key to the survival of the theatre in the longer term.
- 4.28 For example, there is currently no provision of workshop and paint facilities: the proposals will provide the necessary workshops that will raise the potential for the Albany Theatre to become a producing house, creating shows that then go on tour, as well as ensuring that there is a dedicated space where this work can take place, thereby freeing up stage time for more productions, leading to a greater ability to generate revenue, and in turn sustain the theatre in use. In addition, the improvements to the stage and back-stage area will enable larger-scale productions, with an improved ability to manoeuvre large props and sets.
- 4.29 The proposed scheme will also sustain and enhance the building's intrinsic heritage significance. While the refurbishment and improvements to the existing theatre interior do not require planning permission or, of course, listed building consent, the granting of planning permission for the Phase 2 proposals will provide the Trust with the certainty it needs and the ability to seek sources of funding to progress these works, which will provide an important enhancement of the heritage asset.

- 4.30 The importance of the existing form and interior decorative treatment of the auditorium, and the contribution it makes to the character of the theatre, the experience of being in it, and its connections to the war-time cultural heritage of the city, is fully recognised and this will all be retained and refurbished and repainted as necessary, alongside the installation of new services. The seats are coming to the end of their working lives and require replacement, and facilities for wheelchair users will be improved.
- 4.31 The improvements are intended to make the stage more versatile and easier to access so that the theatre can host larger-scale and a greater variety of productions, and to create an orchestra pit to facilitate live musical accompaniment to performances.
- 4.32 The Albany Theatre plays an active role in the cultural life of the city and the fully realised proposals will allow it to better support its Learning and Outreach work, in particular the BTEC course in Technical Theatre being developed in partnership with Coventry College, and which is focused on attracting young people from communities and backgrounds that are under-represented in theatre and the wider arts. Coventry College was a 'child' of the original Technical College; its current principal, Carol Thomas, is also a Trustee and Director of the Albany, which rather neatly reconnects the theatre with its origins, embedded in the city's well-established tradition of technical education, and underpins the significance of what the Trust is trying to achieve in the community.
- 4.33 The benefits set out above are both 'public' and 'heritage' benefits because they contribute to sustaining the heritage asset (the theatre) in use. Other, wider public benefits are set out in the Planning Statement accompanying the application.
- 4.34 In summary, it should be clear that the public and heritage benefits are many and significant, and will be facilitated by what in my view is a well-designed and appropriate new building that complements the existing building and enhances its significance.

## **5.0 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

- 5.1 This report has assessed the potential impacts of a proposed scheme of works to improve the facilities of the Albany Theatre in Coventry, including the construction of a new extension to provide much-needed improved back-of-house facilities. The theatre is incorporated within a larger building comprising the former Coventry Technical College on the corner of Butts Road and Albany Road in Coventry. The building as a whole is on the Council's Local List and is therefore classed as a non-designated heritage asset.
- 5.2 As the proposed scheme affects a non-designated heritage asset, it falls to be considered under Policy HE2 of the Coventry Local Plan 2011-2031 and under paragraph 203 of the NPPF.
- 5.3 For all the reasons set out in detail above, I am of the view that, in line with Policy HE2, the proposals will conserve the significance of the Locally Listed building of which the theatre is a part, and will enhance the ability of the theatre to contribute to the cultural and artistic heritage of the city. The scale, massing and materials of the proposed new extension all sit comfortably in relationship to the existing building, as discussed above.
- 5.4 I do not identify any harmful impact on the building arising from the proposals. Indeed, it is my view that the proposals will lead to significant public and heritage benefits. These benefits, discussed at paragraphs 4.25 to 4.34, include:
- supplementing the Phase 1 scheme to secure the building in its optimum viable use for the long term;
  - securing the future of the building as an important civic amenity;
  - the provision of facilities and service accommodation to allow the full functioning of the theatre, sustaining its future in use;
  - sustaining the building's intrinsic heritage significance (the works will allow the refurbishment of the auditorium to proceed – the surviving original decorative treatment is an important contributor to the interest of the theatre);



- providing improved facilities for disabled visitors, with better wheelchair access (which also enhances the sustainability of the theatre in use);
- increased versatility to allow for larger and a greater variety of stage productions (again, enhancing the sustainability of the theatre in use); and
- enhancing the ability of the theatre to continue contributing to the cultural life of the City and sustaining its links with Learning and Outreach programmes.

5.5 Other wider public benefits are set out in the Planning Statement, but in my view the 'heritage' benefits alone mean that the balanced judgement required under paragraph 203 falls firmly in favour of the proposals.

5.6 In summary, it is therefore my considered opinion that the proposals can be justified in heritage terms and therefore comply with the advice on conserving and enhancing the historic environment contained in the NPPF and relevant local policy.



**Plate 1: Art-worked image of the new Coventry Technical College**



**Plate 2: Aerial photograph of the College taken on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1963 (Coventry Telegraph)**



**Plate 3: The front elevation of the former College building today**



**Plate 4: Corner view of the former College building (Albany Road to left)**





**Plate 5: Detail of front pediment and roundels**



**Plate 6: The Albany Road frontage**



**Plate 7: Entrance to the Albany Theatre from Albany Road (temporary arrangement while new entrance is constructed)**



**Plate 8: Detail of surviving boundary railings on Albany Road**





**Plate 9: Google Streetview image from November 2010, looking along the access to the rear of the building from Albany Road, prior to the demolition of the four-storey block added to the rear in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century**



**Plate 10: Google Streetview image from November 2010, looking from Albany Road towards the south-western elevation of the four-storey late 20<sup>th</sup>-century addition to the rear of the College**



**Plate 11: Current view looking from Albany Road north-west past the rear of the former College building, with retirement apartments development to left**



**Plate 12: Current view looking from Albany Road north-west past the rear of the former College building, with Earlsdon Park development rising up behind (white-painted single-storey building is the retained remnant of the four-storey building that was demolished)**





**Plate 13: Current view looking from Albany Road north-west past the rear of the former College building, with Earlsdon Park development rising up behind**



**Plate 14: Looking into the southern rear courtyard between the theatre wing (left) and Albany Road wing (right)**





**Plate 15: Looking into the northern rear courtyard, theatre wing to the right**



**Plate 16: Detail of decorative window at north-eastern end of theatre wing**



**Plate 17: North-western elevation of theatre wing**



**Plate 18: South-eastern elevation of theatre wing**



**Plate 19: South-eastern elevation of fly tower and back-stage dressing-room block  
(remnant of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century four-storey building)**



**Plate 20: North-western elevation of fly tower and back-stage dressing-room block**





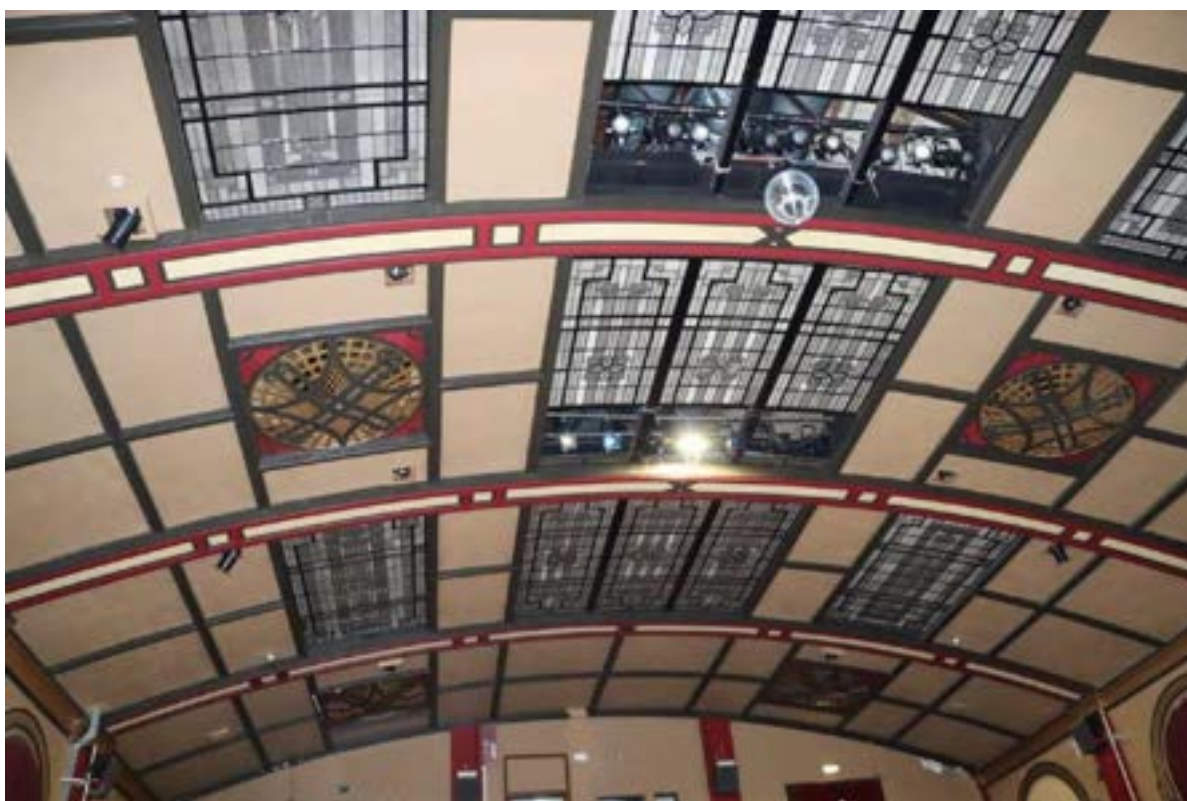
**Plate 21: Late 20<sup>th</sup>-century dressing-room block (remnant of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century four-storey building)**



**Plate 22: Late 20<sup>th</sup>-century dressing-room block (remnant of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century four-storey building)**



**Plate 23: The theatre auditorium**

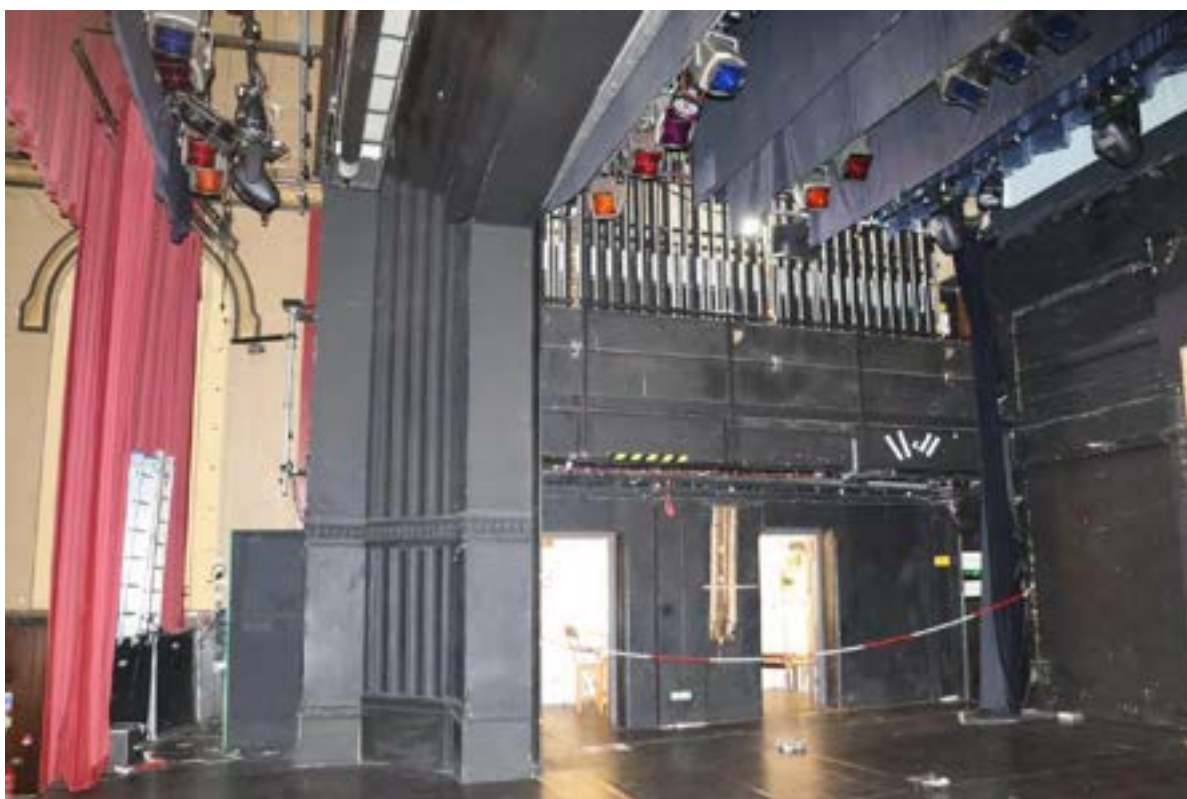


**Plate 24: Detail of ceiling in auditorium**





**Plate 25: Detail of auditorium**



**Plate 26: Stage and proscenium arch**



**Plate 27: The Green Room in the dressing-room block (remnant of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century four-storey building)**



**Plate 28: Example of a dressing room block (remnant of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century four-storey building)**