

Victoria Pavilion Winter Gardens, Marine Central Rd, Morecambe.

Dating from 1878, the original complex on Morecambe's seafront included The Oriental Ballroom, an aquarium, *'A splendid restaurant with first, second and third class excursionist departments'*, seawater baths and of course the extensive gardens which gave the Winter Gardens its name.

In 1896/7 the seawater baths were *"cleared away"* and The Victoria Pavilion theatre, one of the largest in Britain with almost 3000 seats was built as an addition to the existing Winter Gardens complex. On the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 the two halls were renamed the Kings Pavilion and The Empress Ballroom.

A sixpence' admission charge included entrance to the whole complex plus dancing to M. Jules Rivieries' band. (Probably about £2:00 in today's money)

In 1908 the complex was sold by auction, and the sale particulars tell us about the ballroom *'A handsome and commodious building the facade of which is Yorkshire Stone with two balconies overlooking the sea. The Ballroom is of lofty dimensions measuring 117 feet by 72 feet. The stage 42 feet wide and 20 feet deep has an imposing Proscenium Arch, Commodious refreshment bar, Ample cloak rooms, Lavatory accommodation, Store rooms etc. There is a 15 foot wide balcony round 3 sides of the Ballroom , plus a loggia overlooking the sea extending the full width of the building.'*

And a basement which included a

'commodious billiard saloon with 6 billiard tables. A large store room which during the busy season can be used as an additional refreshment bar.

With separate entrance are Boiler House, Engine and Dynamo room, Engineers office and store room.

The whole of the Ballroom, Pavilion, Billiard Saloon etc are lighted by ELECRCITY generated on the premises. Steam is generated by a Lancashire Boiler 30 feet long and 8 feet in diameter feeding four Direct Coupled High Speed Engines and Dynamos'.

A 1909 map shows the layout of the Winter Gardens in some detail for the first time, including the extensive gardens, bowling green, open air dancing board and funfair, with a helter skelter and switchback rides. (*Switchback is a roller coaster which goes both forwards and backwards during the course of the ride.*)

The 1930s and 40s were undoubtedly the 'Golden Age' of the Winter Gardens with the big bands of Jack Hylton, Jack Payne, Roy Fox, Billy Cotton and Geraldo. By 1937 the gardens at the rear of the Pavilion were replaced by a large car park. During the war years Morecambe was considered a safe area so the car park was used for drilling thousands of RAF recruits.

A wartime ban on indoor entertainment lasted only ten days and the complex was reopened quickly with musicals, plays, opera and ballet, and popular variety shows.

In 1953, Moss Empires Ltd, the largest live show organisation acquired a controlling interest in the theatre, ballroom and restaurant, the land which was occupied by the fairground and car park. Val Parnell was Managing Director of the Company and the Winter Gardens became part of a huge entertainments chain. Moss Empires then leased the property to Trust House Forte (Leisure) in 1968.

In the film "The Entertainer" starring Lawrence Olivier there is a scene filmed in the Empress Ballroom.

When the populations of the Lancashire and Yorkshire industrial towns and cities started to go to Spain for their holidays Morecambe quickly became “a cemetery with lights” as Eric Morecambe called it.

In 1969 the ballroom was converted into the Dixieland Palace Showbar and Coral Reef Bar. This was done by inserting a low false ceiling, cutting off the balcony and first floor levels from public use.

In 1977 the show ‘Holiday Showtime’ lost £14,000 over its 13 week run and the theatre closed at the end of September.

The Winter Gardens was closed and the complex fell into dereliction.

The amusement park closed in 1986 and the poor old place stood forlornly in the middle of waste ground neglected but intact.

The decline has been blamed on less than competent management and a general lack of structural maintenance with both the internal and external appearance of the buildings run down and shabby.

A shock report on the building in the September of 1977 ensured closure, and the ballroom, now the Dixieland Bar was closed in April 1978. Trust House Forte proposed demolition and the building of a new complex on the site. In 1979 the old ballroom was declared beyond repair and it was demolished in February 1982, but a decision on the theatre was deferred.

In 1986, the Friends of the Winter Gardens were formed, and in 1987 English Heritage declared the theatre to be of ‘Outstanding Architectural or Historical Interest’ for grant aid purposes and the building was Grade II Listed. In 1992 English Heritage and Lancaster City Council upgraded the building to Grade II* Listed, as being of outstanding national importance.

In 1995 Building at Risk Trust acquired the building and in October 1996, restoration work got underway. A year later, Friends of the Winter Gardens changed their name to Friends of the Victoria Pavilion and were granted charitable status. The restoration project is underway and has received substantial funds.



AFTERTHEFINALCURTAIN.NET

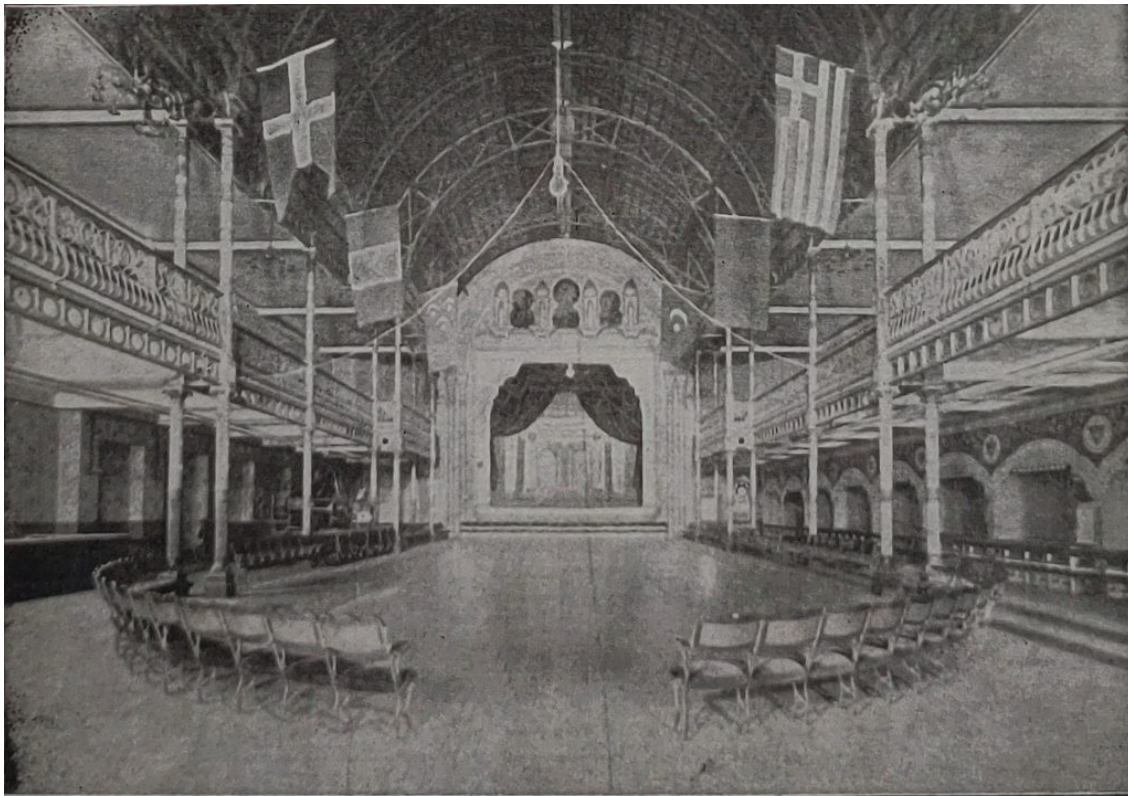
The Pavilion Theatre



Winter Gardens, Morecambe - 9528



Winter Gardens with the Ballroom nearest



View of Interior of Oriental Ballroom.

Circa 1908



*Ebb: The End of the Peoples' Palace:
demolition of the Winter Gardens Ballroom 1982*



The ballroom before the theatre was built

