

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Subject: THE HIPPODROME CINEMA, BO'NESS
Meeting: ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE
Date: 14 FEBRUARY 2006
Author: DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to summarise developments concerning the Hippodrome Cinema over the past 18 months and make a series of recommendations for the building's end use and the implications of this proposal on other aspects of the museum service in Bo'ness.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The successful restoration of the Hippodrome Cinema in Bo'ness is the critical project in the Bo'ness Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI); the THI is a multi-agency funded project of environmental improvements and conservation works designed to bring buildings in the heritage core of the town back into economic use.
- 2.2 The Hippodrome is an A-listed building designed by local architect, Matthew Steele and completed in 1911. It is a rare example of pre-art deco cinema architecture. The building and its immediate surroundings comprise the focus of the old settlement of Bo'ness.
- 2.3 The building has been standing vacant since the late 1980's and there have been a number of attempts to find an appropriate end use.
- 2.4 The building is currently owned by Scottish Historic Buildings Trust which is committed to the faithful restoration of the building combined with a sustainable end use.
- 2.5 Identifying a sustainable end use has been constrained by a number of factors: the building's unique shape and structure, the extremely small footprint, its acoustics, A-listing and available budget (capital and revenue).
- 2.6 A number of uses have been suggested for the Hippodrome since it closed as a bingo-hall in the late 1980's: youth centre, fitness club, pub/restaurant. All of these proposals required significant changes to the interior of the building and consequent loss of character and none generated an effective business case.

- 2.7 In January 2004 Falkirk Council approved the management of the Hippodrome by Community Services following restoration. In December 2004, cinema consultant, J. Ron Inglis, was appointed to undertake a study on the Hippodrome's potential as a multi-purpose facility. The study made clear that in order for the venue to function effectively, its end use had to be refined. To operate as a cinema for the C21st, it should offer: an 'exemplary in-theatre experience' and a high quality fit out.
- 2.8 An acoustic appraisal undertaken in June 2005 suggested that with some acoustic intervention would make the auditorium suitable for cinema but this would compromise other uses originally planned for the building.
- 2.9 A review of existing Cultural Services provision in Bo'ness (Bo'ness Town Hall and Kinneil Museum) revealed that Kinneil Museum attracts only 3500 visitors per year and the Hippodrome offered the opportunity to develop heritage interpretation work which would have a significant impact on heritage visitor numbers to Bo'ness. To this end, an imaginative end use for the Hippodrome is proposed.

3. PROPOSED END USE

- 3.1 The completed Hippodrome will have two connected functions:
- 3.2 As a bespoke small cinema by night screening a mix of classic films, popular/art house, silent movie nights with live music and special themed programmes to link into local events such as SRPS' nationally-attended Steam and Diesel Days, the Bo'ness Fair, etc. The overall effect will be to recreate and experience the golden age of cinema-going within one of one of Scotland's first purpose built cinemas (1911) using C21st technology.
- 3.3 By day, the Hippodrome will be a heritage interpretation space complete with full ICT/audio visual/display facilities to create an imaginative interpretive space which utilises screenings of archive footage and sound (effects, dialogue and music) in addition to more conventional exhibition panels. The interpretation will be the subject of further community consultation but may include interpretation of the Hippodrome itself and its architect, Matthew Steele, the history of cinema, the social and economic history of the town. This will make the Hippodrome of significant interest to both local people and visitors.
- 3.4 The success of the project lies in Falkirk Council's ability to create a distinctive cinema experience and the ability to make clear links to other Cultural Services functions and the wider regeneration of Bo'ness.
- 3.5 The funding package for the first phase, external and internal restoration, is almost complete and the project is timetabled to go out to tender at the end of March 2006; it is anticipated that the fit-out programme will commence in May 2007.

- 3.6 Work in the coming months will focus on developing the end-use concept in consultation with relevant national agencies and local organisations and individuals.
- 3.7 This option is based on closing Kinneil Museum and transferring its budget and part of its interpretive function to the Hippodrome; the Roman interpretation would be transferred to Callendar House. The net cost of running the Hippodrome is estimated to be in the range of £50-70k per year depending on opening hours/staffing numbers/income generation.
- 3.8 The proposed end use and closure of Kinneil Museum will be the subject of a consultation and engagement programme in Bo'ness: local people will have the opportunity to explore memories of the Hippodrome alongside discussion of the building's role in future of Bo'ness. There will be local involvement in defining the character of the space. It is proposed that this process will begin with a short presentation to the Bo'ness Area Forum in March.

4. ADVANTAGES

- 4.1 Kinneil Museum currently attracts only around 3500 visitors a year; moving the museum/heritage interpretation function into a more accessible and visible town centre location will enable the service to significantly develop audiences.
- 4.2 There will be opportunities to link both the heritage interpretation and cinema functions closely to tourism development in the town, including the Scottish Railway Preservation Society steam railway and exhibition.
- 4.3 There will be opportunities to interpret the ongoing regeneration of Bo'ness.
- 4.4 There will be a synergy between the daytime and evening use of the building by incorporating existing archive footage as part of the interpretation experience as well as commissioning new moving image work.
- 4.5 The Service already has the expertise to manage both elements of the proposed programme: planning and programming film shows and interpretation and exhibition development.
- 4.6 The relocation of the Roman interpretation from Kinneil Museum to Callendar House will establish a closer link to the Antonine Wall and, with an Education Officer in situ, there will be more opportunities for increasing the number of school visits and workshop activities.

5. IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Financial
The closure of Kinneil and the transfer of its revenue budget is the most cost-effective solution for the viable end use of the Hippodrome. Further work needs to be done to identify a future use for the building. The revenue budget (including staffing costs) would be transferred to the Hippodrome.

- 5.2 Policy
The proposal is in line with Heritage Strategy in reviewing level and quality of current heritage service in the Bo'ness area. The proposal also meets the objective of increasing geographical, physical and intellectual access to arts and cultural activity for all sections of the community set out in the Strategy for the Arts.
- 5.3 Personnel
Existing staff from Kinneil would transfer either to Callendar House or the Hippodrome. Additional venue specific staff would be recruited following Council recruitment procedures. It would be likely that the Venue Co-ordinator would be recruited approximately 6 months before the opening of the Hippodrome to allow for early promotion and programming.
- 5.4 Legal
There are no legal implications on closing Kinneil Museum. However, its setting within the curtilage of Kinneil House increases the importance of the museum building in conservation terms. The museum building is one of a group of C18th estate buildings around the entrance to Kinneil House; it is Category C(s) listed. In the complex there are two privately owned cottages and a further cottage, currently owned by Community Services. Given the sensitivity of the location, Development Services are in discussion with Historic Scotland on the implications of alternative uses for the building.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 **It is recommended that the Environment and Heritage Committee:**
- i) **notes the proposed end use for the Hippodrome and implementation of an appropriate programme of community consultation;**
 - ii) **notes the proposal to transfer of the museum function from Kinneil Museum to the Hippodrome from May 2008 (subject to scheduled opening date of Hippodrome) and further work to be undertaken on consultation on possible future uses for the museum building;**
 - iii) **refers the report to Policy and Resources Committee.**

.....
Director of Community Services

Date: 26th January 2006

Contact Officer: Lesley O'Hare, Cultural Services Manager extn. 0942

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

Nil