

A photograph of the Abbeydale Picture House, a grand, curved building with a prominent dome. The building features a balcony with ornate balustrade and a sign that reads "CINEMA". The text "The Abbeydale Picture House" is overlaid in red. The name "Mike Higginbottom" is also overlaid in red at the bottom of the image.

**The Abbeydale
Picture House**

Mike Higginbottom

Preface

I only once saw a movie at the Abbeydale Picture House – *Oh! What a Lovely War* in 1970.

In the 1980s, when the building was a showroom for A & F Drake Ltd, office-equipment dealers, the manager, Ian Humphries, allowed me to bring Nottingham University continuing-education groups to visit the Picture House as part of architectural history evening courses.

After Phil Robins bought the building in 2012 my neighbour Hendrika Stephens ran a series of weekend Vintage Markets at the Abbeydale, and enlisted me to provide history tours of the building.

Everything I knew then about the Picture House rested on the research of Dr Clifford Shaw, which is why this book is dedicated to his memory.

Several chance collaborations enabled me to pursue new research avenues. Tim Knebel at Sheffield Archives turned up previously undiscovered material, and Professor Guy Brown at Sheffield University arranged for a research student, Holly Dann, to interview ten individuals who contributed reminiscences about the Abbeydale, either as staff or patrons, back to the 1930s. These and others who have contributed to my knowledge are listed in the Acknowledgements on page 53.

Despite exhaustive enquiries, it's proved impossible to trace all the copyright owners of the available historic photographs, which in the absence of definite provenance are credited "© unknown".

During the period when the Picture House was leased, first to Hand Of and later to CADS (Creative Arts Development Space), I ran building tours for Heritage Open Days and for private groups.

Now that the Abbeydale Picture House is under new ownership, the True North Brew Co director Kane Yeardley has committed to a full restoration so that the building can survive on a commercial basis.

This won't happen overnight, so this historical account of the Abbeydale Picture House sets the scene for a new and exciting chapter that promises at last to bring the building back to life.

Mike Higginbottom
September 2025

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Abbeydale Picture House north-east façade and roofscape (2023)

© Simon Hollis



Abbeydale Picture House auditorium (not dated)

© J Wrigley



Abbeydale Picture House Revival (2015)

© Scott Hukins

The Abbeydale Picture House

Sheffield's premier suburban cinema

The Abbeydale Picture House was always the most splendid of all Sheffield's suburban cinemas. Designed as a theatre and operated from the start as a cinema, with a ballroom and billiard saloon below the auditorium and a café above the foyer, its distinctive white faience exterior has been a landmark on the Abbeydale Road since 1920.

Despite a shaky start in the years after the First World War it became a popular entertainment centre for the suburbs south of the city centre from the 1930s until the 1960s, and survived to be the third last suburban cinema in the city to show movies. After it closed in 1975 its successive owners maintained the building and, forty years after the auditorium went dark, film returned in July 2015, when Sheffield's finest remaining cinema became once more accessible to the general public.

Structural problems led to legal difficulties which closed the building until a change of ownership in January 2025 gave hope of a further revival.



The building is a local landmark which makes the most of its imposing site on the Abbeydale Road. Its white faience façade catches the light in any weather, and the main entrance, originally divided by a single Ionic column, is crowned by an imposing dome skirted by a length of balustrade (brought down by a gale *circa* 2007 and awaiting restoration). The elevations disregard the orthodox rules of classical architecture., with Ionic pilasters and swags around circular window-apertures and curved pediments at roof-level. On the Abbeydale Road frontage there was an elegant marquee to shelter the queues, and a further small marquee sheltered the ballroom entrance.

The site attracted people from thriving communities with little nearby competition. There were concentrations of cinemas at Heeley – the **Palace**



Abbeydale Picture House ballroom (not dated)

© J Wrigley

Fred Turley recalled that “the tone of this instrument was of high quality, but suffered because the full sound did not reach the auditorium in sufficient volume...with the screen in position a somewhat muffled effect was produced”. Harold Coombes’ successor, Douglas Scott, complained that “the volume was poor, due to the fact that the organ chambers were placed as far back as possible on the stage and...at least 20% of the sound went through the stage roof. The screen and tabs took their toll of sound and when the safety curtain was lowered nothing could be heard in the theatre.” Douglas Scott played at the Abbeydale until 1940. The organ fell into disuse and was broken up after the war.

The new stage facilities first came into use on Monday December 31st 1928 – “OPENING OF NEW STAGE!! ENORMOUS ATTRACTION!!!” Charles Hutchins presented the Q’s, “a new-style Episode Show” from the London Coliseum, with “a cast of 10 Brilliant Burlesquers, headed by Mabel Sylvester and Charles Hutchins” – along with the feature film, *A Woman on Trial* starring



Abbeydale Picture House: original 1920 proscenium arch behind 1950s
widescreen successor (2017)

© Mike Higginbottom

Pascal Stienlet (1879-1950)



Pascal J Stienlet

© V Stienlet

The architect of the Abbeydale Picture House, Pascal Joseph Stienlet, was descended from a Belgian ship's chandler who set up business in North Shields in the mid-nineteenth century. Between 1894 and 1897 he was articled to the Newcastle architect William Hope (1862-1907) who specialised in theatre designs. He began professional practice in North Shields and Newcastle in 1906 and qualified as a Licentiate of the Royal Institute of British Architects (LRIBA) in 1911. He worked with a succession of partners – Henry Gibson 1904-1916, Herbert Selwyn Dixon 1918-1921, Joseph Charlton Maxwell 1922-1930 and his son Vincente G Stienlet 1932-1950.

He was the architect of at least a hundred cinemas, mostly in the North-east. His biggest design, the **Majestic Cinema, City Square, Leeds** (with Joseph Charlton Maxwell, 1922), still exists, though internally rebuilt after a fire in 2014. Pascal Stienlet returned to Sheffield in 1927 and with J C Maxwell designed the **Manor Cinema, City Road**, also with a basement billiard hall on a steeply sloping site.

Pascal Stienlet was succeeded by his son and grandson, both called Vincente, and they successively built a reputation for designing modern churches. Pascal Stienlet, in partnership with J C Maxwell, designed St Edward's Catholic Church, Whitley Bay (1928, listed Grade II). Vincente Snr designed Our Lady and St Columba Catholic Church, Wallsend (1957, listed Grade II). The younger Vincente designed St Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, Sandygate Road, Sheffield (1989), which won the Sheffield Design Award in 1990.

Pascal Stienlet's great-grandson, Peter Vincent Stienlet, is a chartered civil engineer and was managing director of Patrick Parsons Ltd of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.



Abbeydale Picture House safety curtain (2013)

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