

Curatorial recommendation to de-accession the Century Theatre

Proposal to de-accession the Century Theatre (L.T62.1996.1) and retain as a Leicestershire County Council asset

Background:

The Century Theatre is a prefabricated original mobile theatre with 225 seats and was intended to take plays to towns which had lost theatres in post-war austerity Britain. It was developed and built in Hinckley between 1948 and 1952. Dubbed 'The Blue Box' because of the colour of its paint, it first took to the road in 1952. It toured Britain until 1975 when it became permanently sited in Keswick, Cumbria. It was purchased by Leicestershire County Council from the Century Theatre Co. Ltd in 1996 and relocated as part of the museum offer at Snibston in Coalville. The acquisition and re-siting of the theatre was supported by a grant from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (Heritage Lottery Fund).

The portion of the theatre that is an accessioned museum object is:

The four trailer units which contain the auditorium, stage, backstage and technical areas.

When the theatre was moved to Snibston in 1996, experts from the original theatre team were of the opinion that it was unlikely that the theatre could be dismantled and moved again. This effectively makes it a fixed structure with the accessioned parts fixed between later additions (foyer, toilets and dressing rooms etc.).

Current Position

Since the closure of Snibston Discovery Museum in 2015, the Century Theatre no longer delivers some of the original objectives for its acquisition and retention as an accessioned museum object as detailed in the Report of the Director of Museums and Arts to the Arts, Libraries and Museums Committee of Leicestershire County Council (10 September 1996).

These include:

- Part of the Snibston visitor experience
- As a venue to support Snibston's programme of activities and events, e.g. Snibston science shows and museum lectures
- A venue for the delivery of the Snibston Museum Learning offer

It does, however, fulfil the roles of a medium scale venue for professional touring companies, multi-media use (cinema) and a general community resource.

The theatre is currently managed as a commercial operation by the Heritage Team, part of the Communities and Wellbeing Service of Adults and Communities Department. Advice and guidance on the historic nature of the accessioned parts of the theatre is given by the Museum Collections Team within the same service area.

Curatorial Recommendation

It is our recommendation that the Century Theatre is de-accessioned from the museum collections for the following reasons:

1. That the original theatre elements (auditorium, stage and backstage) are only understandable and accessible in their current state as part of a fixed structure.
2. It is unlikely that the mechanisms for de-mounting the theatre into its four trailers are still operable.
3. The museum service does not have the expertise to de-mount the theatre and there are no surviving members of the original team who supervised the siting in 1996.
4. There is no adequate storage space within Leicestershire County Council collections centres to accommodate the four trailers if the theatre was demounted.
5. The theatre is no longer operating within the context of a museum venue.

We believe that the important historic nature of the theatre is best preserved and made accessible as a working theatre venue rather than as an accessioned museum object.

The proposed redevelopment of the Snibston site ensures that the theatre remains a community venue for performance and cinema.

Following de-accessioning, the theatre should remain an asset of Leicestershire County Council which will continue to protect its historic nature.

This object was acquired with external funding and is of considerable significance locally and nationally.

Decision required

- The governing body to approve the recommendation to de-accession the Century Theatre