

# MARKET HALL CINEMA, BRYNMAWR, BLAENAU GWENT

## SUMMARY

- Name of Organisation/ Parent Organisation: Market Hall Cinema and Arts Trust
- Start Date: 2013
- Number of Employees: 5 P/T
- Number of Volunteers: 10
- Structure: Registered Charity
- Turnover: £273,000
- Website: [www.markethallcinema.co.uk](http://www.markethallcinema.co.uk)

## PRODUCT/SERVICE

Market Hall Cinema is a community operated cinema located in the centre of Brynmawr in Blaenau Gwent. Known by local people as the 'Grand Old Lady' of Brynmawr, it is the oldest cinema in Wales, having continued to operate in some form or another since it opened in 1894.

Now managed and operated by a committee of local trustees, with the support of paid staff and volunteers, the cinema prides itself on being more than just somewhere to 'watch a film', offering a range of associated events and opportunities for local people such as outdoor cinema nights, all night seasonal and genre specific film marathons, regular autism friendly sessions, film-making workshops and art exhibitions. The cinema has a unique feel and retains a sense of history. According to Chair, Beth Watkins, it offers a cinema experience, rather than simply 'going to watch a film'.

The cinema has a significant local following of over 12,600 Facebook followers and attracts support from all over the world, particularly from individuals whose families originated from the area. When the cinema was threatened with closure in 2016, due to an asbestos scare, the community came together to once again step in and support the cinema with a successful crowd-funding campaign. During an enforced 6-month closure that followed, the plight of the cinema gained the attention and support of Welsh Oscar-award winning actor Michael Sheen, who is now a patron of the Cinema Trust.

### HISTORY

The Market Hall Cinema is the oldest cinema in Wales to have functioned continuously as a cinema since it first showed flickering images shown by travelling showmen. This was the case even during its time as a Market Hall, with local people apparently having memories of watching films in the same space as where the market had been held earlier in the day, often accompanied by the wreek of old cabbages!

In later years it had been owned and operated by the Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, but in 2013 the decision was made to close it due to funding shortages. For some time, the cinema had been run at a loss, with just one film being shown each day.

A group of local community members with a strong emotional attachment to the building, wanted to save it for future generations, and decided to come together to form the 'Save the Cinema Group' campaign, leading local protests at the Market Square, outside the cinema.

The campaign drew attention to the plight of the cinema and many older community members, some well into their 90s, got in touch to tell the group about their memories. According to founder member (and current Chair) Beth, this helped to further strengthen their determination, feeling that 'someone' could surely have a go at making the building a viable cinema once again.

The local authority complied, and the community group was successful in taking over the cinema, having no experience or funding in place. They in fact clubbed together some of their own money, to buy stock for the cinema shop, and asked a previous staff member to help with the technical aspects of showing a film.

The Cinema and Arts Trust was formed and from the start it attracted lots of community support as local people flocked to the cinema to see the latest releases. The cinema attracted some key volunteers, two of whom had a passionate interest in the technical aspects of projection and sound and have been key in helping the cinema to run. Both volunteers have a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and have now become paid employees. The cinema continues to attract a range of volunteers who also have autism and they now specialise in offering autism-friendly viewing sessions.

This success has meant they have been able to employ 5 permanent staff members to operate the cinema, as well as create volunteering and casual staff positions for local people. Volunteers have ended up becoming long-term and highly valued members of the team, which has the feeling of being a cinematic 'family', according to Beth.

Both duty managers came to the cinema as volunteers and have progressed into valued staff members, indicating how the cinema is supporting local economic and social regeneration.

### ACHIEVEMENTS

The cinema has received much attention as it is a rare example of a historic cinema that still operates in a similar way as it always has done. Beth says that although it has received a number of grants, the business model has proven to be financially sustainable since relatively early on, with a focus on providing films at a low cost, making it very affordable for local families. Likewise, the costs of popcorn, sweets and drinks are kept very low, making a trip to the cinema a viable option, even for the many local families who are on low income.

Beth (a manager of child poverty programme, Flying Start, in Monmouthshire), talks about how there are regular weekly customers in their 80s and 90s that attend the cinema, some by taxi. They are met at the doorway, offered a cup of tea and shown to their seat. Similarly, staff and volunteers have got to know the children that come to attend the ASD-friendly film showings, making sure that any personal needs and preferences that make it easier for the children are attended to.

It is this level of friendliness and personalisation, she believes, that helps to elevate the experience beyond just going to see a movie and has helped to build a foundation of local support amongst families and people of all generations.

The appeal and success of the cinema has been recognised at a national level, when in 2014 the cinema won 'UK Cinema of the Year' It also 'Best Cinema Experience' at the Welsh Hospitality Awards in 2016 and again in 2019. In 2019, the team of trustees were also awarded a Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations (GAVO) Trustee of the Year Award.

### CHALLENGES

In 2016, Blaenau Gwent County Council issued a prohibition notice to the cinema forcing it to close due to there being "potential for exposure to asbestos containing materials". This led to the cinema being closed to the public for 6 months which according to Beth, resulted in a loss of approximately £150,000 in income, from which the cinema was at risk of never recovering.

Additionally, she says that there have been ongoing delays to the process of community asset transfer of the building to the Trust, although this has been in negotiation since 2013.

There is also the threat of an external proposal for a multiplex cinema in Ebbw Vale, which would create a further question mark over the future of the cinema.

### SUCCESS CRITERIA

Beth says that the fact that the cinema has had long-term and local trustees has been key to its success. Those trustees are passionately committed to the cinema and are willing to 'muck in' and work as a team to achieve shared goals. Their involvement stems from their passion and excitement for the cinema, which has helped to keep the momentum going in face of some major obstacles along the way.

She feels that the building itself is a critical success factor - the heritage connection is a vital part of its appeal to the community, as it has formed a backdrop to their lives. The nostalgia it evokes was a major part of why the community wanted to save it, and the building is imbued with a strong sense of social history that is felt by people when they walk through the doors. The emotional connection that people have with the building is part of what has made its revival such a success.

The high levels of customer service are also a major part of its success, according to Beth, and the way in which the trustees, staff and volunteers engage with the public at every level. This is on a practical level with customers attending the cinema, but also through its communications on social media. Beth (and her mother) have been responsible for building the 12,600+ Facebook audience, through responsive and friendly interactions with those that post on their page, and they frequently have Facebook chats with their followers, extending the feel of the 'cinematic family' that has been created around the cinema.

*"Love this place. So welcoming and friendly. Proud and lucky to have you on the doorstep, a real asset to Brynmawr town. Thank you for a wonderful experience every time we come to the cinema."* Local cinema goer

