

UK's Last Surviving Bomb Damaged Building

The remains of The National Picture Theatre in Hull, widely recognized as the UK's "last surviving civilian, bomb-damaged building" from World War II, recently reopened on 16 September 2026, as a memorial garden and history centre. Left derelict for 85 years following a direct hit during the Blitz, the site on Beverley Road has been meticulously restored to serve as a community hub and educational space honouring civilian resilience.

The Fateful Night of 1941



On the evening of 17 March 1941, approximately 150 people were inside the cinema watching Charlie Chaplin's anti-Hitler satire, *The Great Dictator*. When the air-raid sirens sounded, the audience was unable to reach external shelters and instead crammed into the building's entrance foyer.

Moments later, a Luftwaffe bomb tore through the auditorium, reducing the main building to a hollowed ruin (*above*). Incredibly, every single audience member survived without major injuries. Their survival was credited to two large structural beams running across the gallery that held up against the blast and prevented the foyer from collapsing.



The Restoration Project

Following a dedicated 20-year preservation campaign led by the volunteer-run National Civilian World War II Memorial Trust (NCWW2MT) and collaborative funding from Hull City Council, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the site (*left*), has been stabilized and transformed:

- **Preserved Blitz Scars:** Local contractor Hobson & Porter carefully ensured the site "remains a bomb site," conserving the raw, historic damage.
- **Traditional Workmanship:** Artisans used original 1914 design specifications, utilizing hand-selected period bricks reclaimed from other buildings in Hull to reconstruct supporting columns.
- **Structural Safety:** A massive new steel beam was carefully installed via drone-monitored engineering to securely stabilize the newly constructed roof over the main entry structure.

Features of the New Space

The footprint where the grand auditorium once stood has been re-imagined (*below*), as an open-air community asset.



- **Botanical Memorial:** The memorial garden features wildflowers planted in tribute to Hull-born botanist Eva Crackles, who famously spent the post-war era charting the unique wild flora that naturally flourished across the city's bombed ruins.

- **Tribute to the Fallen:** Plaques lining the walls bear the names of the more than 1,200 civilians who lost their lives in Hull during WWII air raids.
- **Civilian Education:** The site acts as a home-front tribute to the contributions of ordinary citizens—including air-raid wardens, firefighters, rescuers, and caregivers.

Moving forward, the council has confirmed the venue will host scheduled educational visits, local history exhibitions, and outdoor community events.

Restoration on Blitz-bombed cinema

A five-month restoration project started on the Grade II listed National Picture Theatre which was hit during a Luftwaffe raid on the nearby docks in March 1941, and had remained derelict ever since.



Designed by Runton and Barry, the cinema was built in 1914 and had more than 1,000 seats across the stalls and balcony. Local contractor Hobson & Porter, which recently revamped Hull's historical Guildhall and has delivered other heritage projects in the city, replaced the period windows, carried out stabilisation works, restored the red brick facade and installed new lighting, (*above*).

The works uncovered several artefacts buried under the rubble, including a child's pram hood, shoes, a local milk bottle and pieces of interior design materials.

The space where the auditorium once stood will be used as an educational and community events area, where visitors can learn about civilian life in the Second World War in Hull. There will also be a memorial to the more than 1,200 people who died during air raids on the city.

The National Civilian World War Two Memorial Trust, a local charity dedicated to sharing the impact that the war had on civilians in Hull, has long campaigned for the project.

The port of Hull was raided in March, May and June 1941 and the whole of the riverside quay was devastated by fire. A total of 450 people were killed and 10% of Hull's population were made homeless because of the bombings.

Although 150 people were inside the National Picture Theatre when the raid happened on 18 March 1941, there were no casualties. However, the interior of the building was destroyed entirely and only the frontage survived, standing derelict for over eight decades.

Hull City Council issued a compulsory purchase order in 2015 after the building owner, a private property developer, failed to repair it. The venue was advertised for auction by online property platform Rightmove in June 2015, under a guide price of £40,000-£45,000. It failed to sell and further attempts at auctioning the site off by the owner were also unsuccessful.

The building was eventually acquired by the council in 2018 after a land-swap agreement.

Hobson & Porter's managing director, Richard Hunter, said:

Having been based in Hull since 1971, we have seen the cinema sadly fall into a sorry state and feel hugely proud to have been chosen to restore such a significant, historic landmark in the city.

In recent years we are proud to have worked with Hull City Council on a number of heritage projects in the city including the recommissioning of the iconic Guildhall time ball, the refurbishment of Beverley Road baths, and the repurposing of the former city archives at 79 Lowgate.

The National Picture Theatre restoration project was funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, Hull City Council and the National Civilian World War II Memorial Trust.

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