

Chapter 24

REJUVENATION THEN DISASTER

Back in Birmingham, after the BAES lease expired, a Bristol firm took over the hall in 1977, as David Bell reported in the *Birmingham Mail*.

Birmingham's ageing and dilapidated Bingley Hall is to be given a new lease of life as a centre for exhibitions and big pop and jazz shows. A year's lease has been taken out by the firm Halsbury Entertainments Ltd . . . Company secretary Stuart Read said that the company might be prepared to plough as much as £90,000 into badly-needed structural improvements at Bingley Hall if it decided to go for long-term lease. Halsbury acquired Bingley Hall while directors were seeking Birmingham venues for a national tour of the Big Youth Band – Jamaica's No 1 group. (1)

Halsbury's interest was not sustained and in the following autumn another Bristol-based firm, Bradkeyne, took over management of the hall. Their managing director was entrepreneur Tony Bullimore, who, some years later, would attract unsought world attention. His dramatic rescue from the trimaran "*City of Birmingham*", a vessel

sponsored by the City Council, which capsized during a typhoon whilst competing in *The Observer* single-handed transatlantic race, held the headlines for days on end. Bullimore had a personal link with Bingley Hall and in a nostalgic interview, he told the *Birmingham Mail* about youthful experiences there.

My dad had some selling pitches at Bingley Hall when it was used for circuses about 30 years ago. I used to help him clean up in the hall, so I was returning to a place I knew from my childhood, when we took it over in 1977. No one had cared for the building for years and it had become a real eyesore. But we could see the potential of the place – it occupied a fantastic position and, most of all, it had the tradition, the reputation of being a Birmingham show centre. (2)

Spending double the 1973 estimate of £100,000 for refurbishing the hall, Bradkeyne had transformed the interior. Ugly cladding had long hidden those antique pillars and girders, which, despite their railway provenance, were handsome early-Victorian ironwork. Other panels had obscured the glass roof. Now all this clutter had been removed. The *Birmingham Mail* approved.

The result is a cleaner, lighter and infinitely more cheerful Bingley Hall – and a list of organisations waiting to use it. The hall is booked for the next three years and,

ironically, it has immediately benefited from the disastrous fire which recently wrecked that other famous old showpiece, the Alexandra Palace in London. (5)

Inevitably, due to the age of Bingley Hall, many disadvantages remained. Particularly after animals had been displayed there the cost of restoring the interior to anything like an acceptable condition was very heavy. (6) Even so, the place hardly merited the vitriolic attack launched upon it by Ed Doolan in recent times. Lambasting someone who had written to the *Evening Mail* expressing the sense of loss genuinely felt by many Brummies after the demise of the building, this local radio pundit let rip.

It was a disgusting, pollution-blackened edifice . . . Have you ever been to Earls Court? . . . It is awful, but not so awful as Bingley Hall . . . I've been to public toilets that held a greater attraction. (7)

Evidently Doolan's loathing was not shared to any great extent by exhibitors in the 1980s. At the beginning of 1982, for example, the management of Bingley Hall Exhibition Centre, as it was now billed, was able to publish a healthy "*Calendar of Events*". (8) Some thirty bookings were listed, including a number of old familiars such as antique fairs and cat shows. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the ever-popular Ideal Home Exhibition was being produced there once again by *Birmingham Post & Mail*, after an absence of five

years at the NEC. There was also a mixed bag of other users, some organising such unusual events as a “*Semi-Conductor International*” – whatever that was! – and a “*Physics & Mystics Fair*”. As one would easily guess, “*Physics*” was a misprint. A poster that has survived advertising a repeat performance in May 1984 shows that it should have read “*Psychics*”. Unfortunately, the organisers were not sufficiently psychic to divine that their 1984 event would never take place.

*PSYCHICS & MYSTICS '84: A magical exhibition. Talks, performances and exhibits. May Day weekend. Yoga, Tarot, Astrology, Ch*****, Palmistry, Healing, Crafts. Special “Talking Plants” feature.*
(9)

The year was rounded off with a fortnight of entertainment provided by Sally Chipperfield’s Circus. Not bad for a large public toilet, Mr Doolan! His column would have been more balanced if, despite his loathing for the place, he had at least given some recognition to the important truth that Bingley Hall, during its long life, had consistently played a vital part in the promotion, not only of our local industries, but those of the whole nation too.

The “*Calendar of Events*” even featured a potted history of the Binges site. The unsigned article is surprisingly informative for such a short piece. Ignoring the ghost story it retails, it is remarkably accurate too, perpetuating few of the errors repeated again and again in press and other accounts over the years. The frontispiece carries an

excellent reproduction of that splendid view of Bingley Hall's pristine frontage that was engraved by Thomas Underwood in 1850, just after it was built. (Fig*)

The management, no doubt realising the vulnerability of the hall, commissioned an independent survey of its viability. The result entitled "*Bingley Hall: its economic and social contribution to Birmingham*", was published in December 1981. The report carries the following preface.

The following report has been prepared by the Joint Unit for Research on the Urban Environment (JURUE) of Aston University on behalf of the Bingley Hall Exhibition Centre. The report is designed to give an independent and realistic assessment of the contribution made by the exhibition centre towards the economic and social prosperity of the city. It has been commissioned by the centre at a time when there is some doubt over its future. As the decision as to whether the centre will be able to continue and indeed improve its contribution to city life rests firmly in the hands of the City Council it is appropriate that the wider benefits of its activities are taken into account. (10)

JURUE'S survey included detailed examination of such matters as "*the impact of visitor and exhibitor expenditure*" on the city's economy, the "*wider economic and community*

benefits”, “the rôle of Bingley Hall in the exhibition market”, and many other considerations. Their conclusions, highly favourable to the hall, were summarised as follows: (All emboldments appear as underlining in the original.).

*It is estimated that the activities of Bingley Hall during 1980 supported 244 full time equivalent jobs and generated an expenditure of some £4.6 million (at December 1981 prices). These figures may both have been exceeded in 1981 due to the increased number of exhibitions held. Because of the local and regional character of many of the events and exhibitions held at Bingley Hall a proportion of the annual expenditure generated represents a transfer payment within the region. **However, the presence of Bingley Hall Exhibition Centre concentrates expenditure and the jobs supported within the centre of the city, thus making a valuable contribution to activities and commerce within the city centre.***

The type of jobs supported by the activities of Bingley Hall are appropriate to the skills and employment needs of residents characteristic of inner city areas and less advantaged sections of the community. Bingley Hall has been able to support the activities of charities, the disabled, youth and religious groups without any drain upon public resources. The Hall is a unique

and important part of the Industrial Heritage of Birmingham and the Black Country. The plans for the refurbishment of the exterior of the structure would, if implemented, enhance the considerable historic interest in the Hall and contribute to improving the visual amenity and character of the Civic Centre area of Birmingham.

*Bingley Hall plays a complementary rather than competitive role in the exhibition market vis a vis the National Exhibition Centre. In the event of closure of Bingley Hall, few, if any, of the events that currently take place there would be transferred to the N E C. **Instead, several of the national events and associated expenditure and jobs supported would be lost to other parts of the country and many other of the events would be unlikely to occur at all.***

The availability of exhibition facilities of the type offered by Bingley Hall is of value to local firms. In particular, it is of value to small local firms who might otherwise not be able to exhibit directly or take advantage of the visits made to the city by the trade attenders at relevant exhibitions by, for example, organising factory visits. In present circumstances the Bingley Hall Exhibition Centre provides a suitable use for an important city centre site and historic building. The net expenditure

generated and jobs supported by the activities of the centre are likely to be higher than those associated with alternative uses of the site such as offices, hotels and retail uses. Each of these alternative uses may pose a threat to other traders, hoteliers or office landlords within the city and conceivably retard the likelihood of development on other major prestige sites in the city centre. (11)

Despite this favourable report, the worst fears of Bradkeyne, the Victorian Society and others concerned about the hall's survival, were soon to be fully justified. In March 1982, after scares cropping up frequently during almost half a century, its future began to look bleaker than ever before, as reported in the *Birmingham Post*.

Birmingham City Council's General Purposes Committee last night decided not to renew the lease held by Bradkeyne on Bingley Hall when it expires in 1983 . . . Councillor Wilkinson told the committee . . . "We need it for our own requirements. We want it for the purpose of increasing the convention business in the city". (12)

The construction of the International Convention Centre later in the decade eventually uncovered the deeper meaning of Clive Wilkinson's carefully chosen words. It then became evident that the Council's plans had been centred on the site of the hall, not on retaining the building itself. In fact

a feasibility study they commissioned in 1982 summarily dismisses that possibility. It states that Bingley Hall “*would be uneconomic to refurbish*” and suggests ways in which the hall’s normal clients could be catered for without it. (13) However, something drastic was about to befall the building that could hardly have been more favourable to their plans.

On Sunday 15 January 1984 a disastrous fire virtually ended over 130 years of history at Bingley Hall. Preparations had been completed on the day before for the opening of a Midlands Caravan, Camping and Leisure Exhibition. The weather was particularly cold so the security guard was given instructions to ensure that the heating was on fully, ready for the comfort of Monday’s visitors. A report in the *Evening Mail* told the whole sad story.

The fire began at 8-30 on Sunday when a night security man was lighting one of the dozens of large gas heaters in the hall . . . To light the heaters the security officer was using a lighted candle taped to a long piece of wood to reach the heaters which were around 15 feet above ground. Fire experts believe that the candle had burned low enough to light the sticky tape holding it to the wood or the wood itself . . . A fragment fell onto a tent and the hall became an inferno within minutes . . . A fire service spokesman said ; “We have no evidence that there was any malicious intent and all the fire regulations were adhered to”. (14)

The exhibitors lost practically all their display goods, hundreds of thousands of pounds worth. Mr Lamb, one of the hundred firemen attending the blaze, now retired, recalls that a state of the arts luxury coach, built primarily for continental touring, which had never yet been on a journey, proved impossible to rescue. Strenuous efforts failed to dislodge it from stands upon which it had been mounted, so, like so much else, it was burnt to a cinder. The coach, valued then at £100,000, was the most expensive single item to be lost. (15)

In the first few days after the disaster there was optimistic talk of restoration. For example, in the *Evening Mail* a couple of days later, Tony Bullimore was quoted as saying, "*We are determined to keep this place open*". (16) But the reality was to be otherwise, as revealed by the *Birmingham Post* in the following month.

Birmingham's Bingley Hall, seriously damaged by fire last month, is likely to have only temporary repairs, it was revealed last night . . . It is believed full repairs, which would cost up to £500,000, have been vetoed by the insurers on the grounds that the hall is due to be demolished within a few years. (17)

In March the bad news was confirmed in the *Mail*.

Bingley Hall is to close for good in May . . . The International Custom and Sports Car Show, which ends on April 24, will be the last exhibition to be held at the 133-year-

old hall . . . " I have fought to keep Bingley Hall open for years and its loss will leave a great void", said Mr Bullimore. A city spokesman said today that . . . when the Council, as freeholder, regained possession, he imagined they would demolish the building. (18)

Even at this late hour there was spirited opposition to the proposed demolition, notably from the Birmingham Group of the Victorian Society, under its chairman, Mr Joe Holyoak, and even from that famous judge of the day, Lord Denning, Master of the Rolls. An appeal to the Department of the Environment, stressing the building's historical and architectural importance, requesting urgent action, had already been made in January, immediately after the disastrous fire.

Bingley Hall is in the area designated for the proposed Birmingham International Convention Centre. The intention of the City Council is to demolish the building, together with several listed buildings, to make way for the new development. The Victorian Society considers that Bingley Hall is worthy of retention, and can functionally and architecturally be incorporated into the proposed development . . . A great civic tradition would thereby be continued in a new context . . . We ask you to consider urgently its addition to the statutory list. (19)

As mentioned above, in April there was one final event in the old hall, an International Custom & Sports Car Show.

Nothing came of the appeal to the Department of Environment and in June bulldozers moved in and completed the work of the January blaze. Before the summer was out the historic site had become just another pay-and-display car park, although only temporarily, as will be told in the next chapter. In the interim, as the *Birmingham Post* reported, a proposal was put forward to provide a replacement venue for large-scale exhibitions in the city centre.

Mr Peter Sharratt . . . is leading a consortium of five other Birmingham businessmen in a million-pound venture . . . They hope to raise sufficient capital . . . to buy the empty former ice-rink in Summer Hill Road . . . it would be developed into a 40,000 sq ft conference centre called New Bingley Hall. (22)

However, the scheme foundered and the former ice-rink became a car showroom instead, before being demolished in 1992. (23)