



**50 giving stories shared as part of
The Marketors' Trust's 50th Anniversary celebrations in 2026**

No 28: The birthplace of British film that its town refused to lose



Inside the Cecil Hepworth Playhouse today, a 160-seat theatre run for and by its community.

In 1899, the film pioneer Cecil Hepworth built one of Britain's very first film studios in Walton-on-Thames. Within a year it was turning out more than 100 films annually, powered, remarkably, by two captured German U-boat generators, and by 1914 it was one of the three largest studios in the country. The building at the heart of it still stands today, as the Cecil Hepworth Playhouse.

Films were made on the site until 1961, and the Playhouse has been a theatre since the 1920s. Today, under the banner "Theatre for the Community", it enriches Walton-on Thames through performances, workshops and educational opportunities, a hub of creativity and community life with activities designed to be genuinely accessible to all.



A British Plaque Trust plaque marks where Cecil Hepworth built his studios in 1899.

In early 2023, that community nearly lost it. When the local council proposed closing the theatre, thousands of residents protested. Rather than let a piece of British film history go dark, they formed a charitable trust, took over its management in April 2023 on a 15- year lease, and reopened it as a registered charity run by volunteers.

Saving a much-loved venue is one thing; filling 160 seats, night after night, is another. In 2023 The Marketors' Trust stepped in with a Charity Marketing Grant to raise the theatre's profile and show off the full breadth of what it offers. In practical terms that meant the everyday tools a busy venue lives by: reusable banners, event leaflets, pop-up displays, permanent signage and point-of-sale frames, all of which lifted its visibility at community events and, the theatre reports, its audience numbers. Then came an unexpected twist. One of the new signs, installed on the front of the theatre with the grant, caught the eye of the producers of the Netflix series *Geek Girl*, and in May 2024 the Playhouse appeared on screen in Episode 9.

There is something rather lovely about it. A place where British film was born, saved by the people who grew up with it, given the marketing to fill its seats, and, fittingly, put back on screen. £50 for 50 is a campaign about the next fifty years; here, the Trust helped preserve the last hundred. Fifty years of giving, in the belief that good marketing can help good causes be seen.



Website: cecilhepworthplayhouse.co.uk

How to give

Every gift, at whatever level, helps secure the Trust's grants, awards and care for the next fifty years.

To give, go to: <https://www.marketors.org/the-marketors-trust/support-ways-to-give>

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