

Brighton & Hove

Few places in England played a greater role in the early development of moving images, writes *Holly Black*. While overleaf, the artist *Ben Rivers* reflects on the influence they've had on his life and work. Illustrations by Toby Morison

The crucible of British film



Left: Booth Museum of Natural History. Right: Hove Museum & Art Gallery

SPOTLIGHT

The Regency splendour of Brighton and Hove has a certain film-set quality. No surprise then that both places have had roles to play in many movies, from the classic noir Graham Greene adaptation *Brighton Rock* to The Who's *Quadrophenia*. But the city's contribution to the development of moving pictures has been more than merely use as a backdrop, as is illustrated by the exhibition at **Hove Museum & Art Gallery**.

Its film galleries tell the story of the Brighton School, a group of technical visionaries who initiated various groundbreaking moving-image experiments at the end of the 19th century. Among them were the pioneering William Friese-Greene – inventor of the Biophantic Lantern, which could show several slides in quick succession, and later the ‘chronophotographic’ camera,

which used an early form of perforated celluloid – who had a studio in Brighton; the photographer Esmé Collings, who made a series of films in the city; George Albert Smith, who lived and worked in Hove; and Alfred Darling, an engineer whose revolutionary inventions included the Biokam – one of the world's first film cameras for use by amateurs – and special-effects cine-cameras that offered reverse motion and close-up shots.

Several of these early cameras are on display here, as is a selection of magic lanterns, zoetropes, flick books, daguerreotypes, plate cameras and historic footage, much of it a legacy of Brighton's reputation as a popular holiday resort with a huge entertainment industry. Demand for new ‘animated pictures’ was high, and it soon came to rival London as

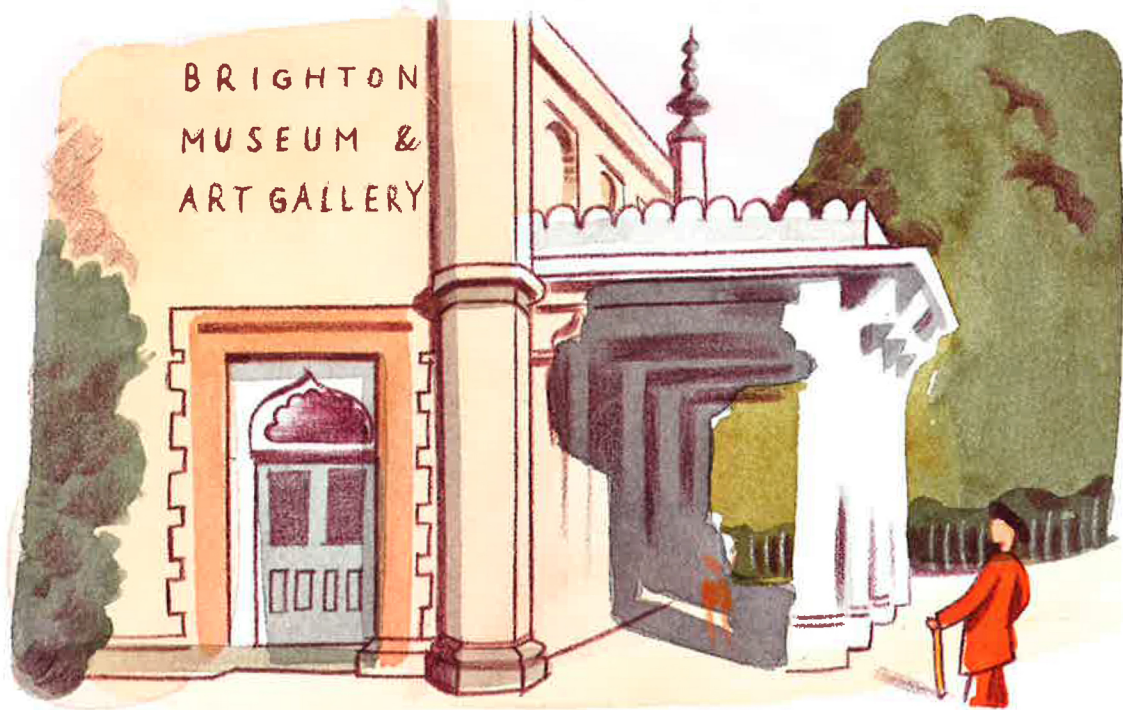


a centre for 'pictures palaces', one of the earliest of which, the Duke of York's Picturehouse on London Road, is reckoned to be the oldest continuously running cinema in Britain.

The presence of the Jaipur Gate, which has stood in the garden of the Hove Museum since the 1920s, might also put one in mind of a soundstage. Funded by the Maharaja of Jaipur and crafted by a team of Indian craftsmen, this extraordinary timber-and-copper creation was designed by two Englishmen, Colonel Samuel Swinton Jacob and Surgeon-Major Thomas Holbein Hendley, for the entrance to the Rajputana section of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition held in London's South Kensington in 1886.

It is one of many monuments to Orientalism, the most celebrated realisations of which are the Royal Pavilion and Brighton Museum & Art Gallery, which occupies part of George IV's extravagant stable complex, the first building in Brighton to be modelled on the sort of Indo-Saracenic architecture one more readily associated with Rajasthan.

Since the 1960s, however, Brighton Museum has focused its collecting on modern and contemporary design, much of which it displays in room sets, juxtaposing furniture with paintings and ceramics such as Grayson Perry's vase *Difficult Background* (acquired with support from the Art Fund in 2001), which is show alongside an idiosyncratic collection of figures and vessels gifted to the museum by one of its founding fathers, Henry Willett, in 1903, who grouped them under unusual titles such as 'crime', 'conviviality and teetotalism' and 'domestic incidents'.



Brighton Museum & Art Gallery

Willett also bequeathed a significant gift of 60 paintings, the most prized of which is Jan Lieven's *Raising of Lazarus* (1631), currently undergoing restoration, a painting that so impressed Rembrandt it once hung in his home.

Immediately south of Brighton Museum stands the Royal Pavilion, an exotic confection of cupolas and minarets built in the late 18th century by the Prince of Wales, latterly George IV, who spared no expense in conjuring an Oriental fantasy.

Among the most lavish of its interiors is the Banqueting Room, a creation of Robert Jones, who covered every wall with murals and suspended

a gigantic crystal chandelier – ostensibly supported by an enormous dragon – above the dining table. In terms of extravagance, the Music Room runs it a close second, with 293 mythical beasts adorning its walls. The more superstitious of the room's stewards will tell you that the inclusion of both dragons and serpents on the walls has upset its feng shui, hence the catalogue of misfortune that has beset the room, which was badly damaged in an arson attack in 1975 and again in the hurricane of 1987, just weeks after its restoration had finally been completed.

If the Royal Pavilion is the best known of Brighton's museums, it should not eclipse what the post-punk

What to see in and near Brighton & Hove

Foredown Tower This Edwardian water tower was originally built to serve an isolation hospital, but has since been converted into a viewing gallery designed to house the largest operational camera obscura in the South East. The optical device offers 360-degree views of the surrounding countryside and coastline, while the lower gallery regularly features exhibitions by local artists and photographers.

● portslade.org/foredown-tower

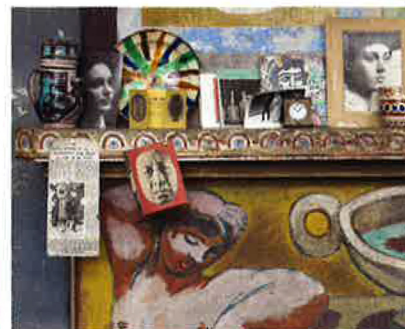
Free to all



Charleston Once owned by the artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, this farmhouse served as the country retreat of the Bloomsbury Group, who filled it with frescoes, painted furniture and ceramics, as well as works by Renoir, Picasso, Sickert and Delacroix. The house's painted surfaces are due to be completely restored in March 2016, thanks to crowdfunding through Art Happens.

● charleston.org.uk

Free with National Art Pass (£11 standard)



Pierdom: Photographs of Britain's Piers by Simon Roberts In 1900, more than 100 piers extended from the British coastline. Less than half survive. Roberts spent three years photographing them with a large-format 'Victorian-style' camera. 'It's slow... But when you produce the print, a lot of information is revealed. I like the small narratives they contain.'

● Brighton Museum, to 21 February 2016. brightonmuseums.org.uk

Free with National Art Pass (£5 standard)



author, musician and Brighton resident Nick Cave has called ‘the world famous’ **Booth Museum of Natural History**, which is dedicated to the life and work of the Victorian naturalist Edward Booth.

Booth’s ambition was to obtain an example of every bird found in the UK and exhibit them stuffed in dioramas showing them in their natural habitats, grouped in flocks or in flight, in vitrines stacked to the ceilings that have more than a hint of Hitchcockian menace. Accessed via an internal gallery displaying various skeletons, the museum’s crowning glory is an enormous and horrifying tableau showing a colony of seagulls viciously working over a dead sheep, whose eye they have already pecked out, and poised to attack its cowering lamb.

The museum runs an imaginative programme of activities for children of all ages, including taxidermy workshops for eight- to 15-year-olds, and, indeed, adults. But perhaps the most compelling of Brighton’s museum-driven events is **WLTM/ake**, a monthly meeting for artists, designers and those working in technology intended to inspire collaborations that fuse art with science and technology – for how else would film, video and digital formats have developed?

Another new initiative that aims to marry art with science – ‘to inspire us to think creatively about our relationship with the natural world,’ in the words of its founder, Laura Coleman – is the **Onca Centre for Arts and Ecology**, with a gallery space in a converted shop and a new hub for creative start-ups.

As this technological creativity flourishes, so **Brighton Digital Festival** expands. Now five years old, it invites artists, filmmakers, musicians and coders to produce new work in unorthodox as well as conventional spaces. Its most recent project, *The Waiting Wall* by Free the Trees (the collective name used by technologists Alan Donohoe and Steven Parker), for example, was inspired by Alain de Botton’s notion that ‘an electronic version of The Wailing Wall [in Jerusalem]... would anonymously broadcast our inner woes’, to which end it broadcast anonymous confessions of various commuters from a giant advertising screen in Brighton Station. Evidence that even in an age saturated with digital media, gigantic motion pictures still provide a spectacle like nothing else. Free the Trees and William Friese-Greene may have more in common than merely an affinity with Brighton.

Holly Black is assistant editor of Art Quarterly. She grew up in Brighton and still spends a lot of time there.