During the nineteenth century, as leisure time increased, Sheffield’s entertainment environment rapidly developed to cope with the demand. Shows, fairs and circuses opened in the city centre. In the early 1800s, one popular venue, the Angel Inn, welcomed the original French Giant, and a second French Giant appeared at the Haymarket in 1865. Travelling theatre companies such as Sheffield locals the Hodgson Family provided portable entertainment for melodramas, recitals and popular sensational stories such as the Life of Charles Peace. Throughout the nineteenth century larger sites were needed for the purveying of entertainment and a range of new venues were utilised alongside the more traditional theatres such as the Theatre Royal. The Sheffield Institute, a three-storey building constructed in 1847 at a cost of £7,000 was the setting for the visit of General Tom Thumb, aka Charles Stratton who, in November 1857 gave three shows daily for one shilling.
SHEFFIELD'S FAMOUS FAIRS

Sheffield has a long and important association with the travelling fairground community both as a place of business and also for winter quarters. Modern fairs are held almost weekly within the city boundaries, but historical fairs such as Crookes Feast and Sheffield Christmas Fair no longer exist. Up until the 1930s, Sheffield's great Christmas Fair held on Black Street was one of the most prominent travelling fairs in the United Kingdom. Famous show-families such as the Lings, the Pullens, the firm of John Farrar and Son, the Waddingtons, the Holmes and the Whitings have all been part of the city's entertainment fabric for many generations. In the early 1930s, a dirt track race left Owlerton Stadium to become a Wall of Death rider with the Wizards on the Wall. For three years Sheffield's own Captain Billy Bellhouse toured Europe on his speedy Indian Scout motorcycle alongside Rotherham's finest Skid Skinner and Captain Harris who travelled with Pat Collins. By the 1940s these dare-devil riders were amongst the main attractions at fairs in Sheffield and beyond.

SHEFFIELD'S GREAT CHRISTMAS FAIR

Large variety palaces started to become part of the Sheffield landscape in the 1890s, in addition to theatres and music halls. Within a few years, three of these modern palaces were constructed: the Attercliffe Palace and the 2000-seater Frank Matcham designed Empire in 1895 and in 1897, W.G.R. Sprague's Lyceum which still stands today. The Empire was part of the Moss Empires group, a factor in its attracting many of the leading names in variety and entertainment such as Marie Lloyd, Harry Lauder and the Vesta Tilley. One of the most popular acts in Sheffield during this golden age was Professor De Lyle whose conjuring show included magic lantern recitals and early cinematograph performances. Born Arthur George Fox in 1871, the inspiration for his stage name came from the famous Lyle's treacle. His daughter Winnie was a ventriloquist who started performing aged nine alongside her father. Based on Ecclesall Road, they were a familiar and popular sight to the people of Sheffield. Both father and daughter entertained wounded soldiers during the Great War, a tradition that Wynne continued during the Second World War.

SHEFFIELD'S ENERGETIC FAIR

From 1895, many of the famous names from the Golden Age of Magic began to delight audiences at the Empire. Harry Houdini appeared there on seven separate occasions and his final visit was in 1920. In 1911 he performed his famous Milk Churn Water Escape act as vividly captured on the poster from the time. The great American magician Chung Ling Soo appeared in 1913 with his famous capturing a bullet trick, which went fatally wrong in 1918. Sheffield's Circle of Magicians was inaugurated in 1920 with the motto True Art is to Conceal Art; its first honorary President was David Devant. Subsequent Presidents include Russell Hall, one of the largest dealers of magic in the North of England and proprietor of Sheffield Magic Shop. Sheffield-born magician Hamilton Kaye combined a career in industry with a lifelong love of magic and performing. Working as a dealer, collector and entertainer, he served as President of the British Ring of the International Brotherhood of Magicians in 1972.

VARIETY FOR ALL

ELECTRIC SHEFFIELD

Sheffield has one of the richest heritages in early film in the country thanks to early film pioneer Jasper Redfern and Frank Mottershaw's Sheffield Photo Company. Local optician Jasper Redfern emerged as both film-maker and exhibitor during the late 1890s and by 1899, both the filming of events and the exhibition of films were a regular feature in the city. Another important local film exhibitor was photographer Fred Holmes, who had worked for Redfern. By 1905 Holmes was managing the Central Hall shows, perhaps the earliest permanent early cinema show venue in the city, and by 1912 he was sole proprietor and manager of the Heeley Electric Palace until his retirement. The Sheffield Photo Company was founded in 1900 by Frank Mottershaw and by 1905 was one of the pre-eminent film companies in the country. Mottershaw specialised in production rather than exhibition and the company is credited with many innovations in early fiction films, all of which were made in Sheffield. One notable survivor of their extensive output is the film of King Edward VII opening the University of Sheffield in 1909.