

# No room for ballroom

Britain is in the grip of dance fever, so why is there such a dearth of quality ballroom spaces? **Marianka Swain** investigates

Two years ago, London's iconic Rivoli Ballroom was on the brink of destruction. Saddled with the period building's high running costs, the Rivoli's owner was contemplating offers from developers keen to replace it with blocks of flats, and it was only after a fierce campaign by loyal dancers that English Heritage stepped in and gave the building a Grade II listing.

"It's fantastic that it's been listed, as it means the building won't be altered, but it doesn't guarantee it for the ballroom under future ownership," notes Jacky Logan, who DJs at the Rivoli's monthly ballroom social night ([www.londonrivoliballroom.co.uk](http://www.londonrivoliballroom.co.uk)). "We're still living in fear of it being taken away from us."

The Rivoli is by no means solely reserved for ballroom at the moment; it frequently plays host to film, music video and magazine shoots, and corporate events. Similarly, Birmingham's Tower Ballroom, which was also saved from destruction by a local campaign, is now as likely to house pop bands and boxing matches as waltzing couples. Sadly, there are many venues

that have moved away from their ballroom roots altogether, such as the Carlton in Rochdale, which pioneered rubber buffer springs under its maple floor back in the 1930s, but eventually became more popular as a bingo hall in the 1970s, and is now used for club nights.

"The problem is that these big spaces are very expensive to maintain, and lots of local councils can't afford to do it," explains Jacky. "Many of them have put the hire prices up, and that knocks ballroom event organisers out of the market. Mr Wonderful had to stop holding ballroom socials at Chingford Assembly Hall when it got too expensive, and it was only after enormous local pressure that the council

relented and let him come back at a more reasonable price."

"Having a mix of activities is key to such places' survival," comments Stephen Clews, curator for Bath's Historic Buildings. "Period dance halls have very high operating costs, and many couldn't survive used purely for their original purpose. The cost and maintenance of an old building often exceeds the potential income from it."

Jenni Kravitz of Simply Dancing Partners ([www.simplydancingpartners.co.uk](http://www.simplydancingpartners.co.uk)) fears that this leaves dancers with limited options: "When I first got into the business, I was amazed that there's so little catering for all these people who love learning to dance, particularly after ballroom

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Photograph by Carole Edrich







Left, dancing at the Waldorf. Photograph by Carole Edrich, Right, the iconic Rivoli Ballroom. Photograph by Geny Caloisi

Ballroom – it has a proper sprung floor, and as we own it, we don't have to worry about hire costs or compromising on space and facilities. It would be great to have more places like that."

"The trouble is that so many ballrooms have been turned into hotels and conference centres," observes Jacky, "and, tragically, they've carpeted over the lovely original floors. It's a shame that the last government never intervened. They launched all these fitness campaigns, and we know that ballroom is fantastic for fitness, so why didn't they subsidise spaces for dancers or fund new venues? Let's hope the new government does something about it."

Jenni would also love to see more funding, but until that happens, "individuals have to take the initiative. Right now, I'm making a call for ballroom spaces, be they disused basements, offices, halls, nightclubs that are empty on Sundays, rooms in private houses... People may not realise that they have a great space for dancing, and that they could make regular money by renting it out. It doesn't matter if you're not into ballroom or not sure how to run an event. You bring the real estate: I'll bring the expertise! Ballroom dancing is such a joyous, wonderful thing to do, and it will be an absolute travesty if, in ten years' time, there's nowhere for people to do it."

If you would like to get in touch with Jenni Kravitz about potential ballroom spaces, telephone her on 020 7736 4493 or email her at [jenni@simplydancingpartners.co.uk](mailto:jenni@simplydancingpartners.co.uk)



has grown so much in popularity these past few years. The few suitable central-London spaces are unbelievably expensive, and if you're an individual running a social night, you have to rely on enough people turning up to cover your hire costs – otherwise you're stuck with a hefty bill."

Jacky agrees: "The problem is that you need a lot of space for ballroom so that couples can travel around the floor, so you can't fill a 600-seater town hall with more than about 200 dancers – and then you have to charge a ridiculous sum for tickets to break even. I don't want

to exclude people from social events on price."

Melina Hamilton normally uses Fulham Town Hall for her monthly Stardust Ball socials ([www.stardustball.co.uk](http://www.stardustball.co.uk)), but it's been closed for the past few months for refurbishment. "It's been a huge challenge finding a reasonably priced replacement venue," she says. "We don't want to raise the ticket price too much, so then we're relying on getting in more people to cover our costs – but that leads to difficulties, as the dancefloor gets too crowded. It's a real dilemma!"

Jenni thinks that the solution

is to either find or create more ballroom spaces. "Everyone kept telling me that the Waldorf used to do tea dances, so I asked them why they don't any more," she says. "They explained that the event declined over the years when people got into disco rather than ballroom, and now, there isn't anyone who wants to run it. I told them I'd do it – all they had to do was get in the tea, and I'd do everything else."

"Now, they have a tea dance every couple of months, and it's a seriously hot ticket. The nice thing is the range of people that go, from young dancers who

got into ballroom at university or through watching "Strictly" through to couples in their seventies who remember the original Waldorf tea dances."

"The enthusiasm is definitely there," agrees Melina. "I'd love

to be able to recommend more places for my students to go – once they get the dancing bug, they can't get enough of it! I was thrilled to find a space in Oval a year ago that we could turn into our new studio, Stardust



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